Children’s Stories as a Foundation for Leadership Schemas: More Than Meets the Eye

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“Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians” (Lattimore, 1961). Thus begins the first and greatest epic in Western literature, the *Iliad*. Since the beginning of time, mankind has told stories to communicate a shared understanding of what is right and wrong, to give a sense of order to the chaotic and unknown, and to give individuals a sense of their place in the world (Doty, 2000). The past can help to make sense of the present and to make the future seem less uncertain. Tales of fantasy were told and retold in many ways not just for entertainment, but because the ideas communicated were essential for building and maintaining a common culture and sense of community (Hanson & Heath, 1998). Stories of heroes remind us that extraordinary challenges need to be met with extraordinary courage and perseverance (Doty, 2000).

Homer begins his tale with the story of a soldier, Achilles, who has been wronged by his leader and how, because of his unwillingness to fight, this is causing great hardship for his companions. Throughout the story, the author communicates lessons about not only right and wrong, but about leadership, followership, and loyalty that still resonate to this day. Homer juxtaposes the selfishness of King Agamemnon with the quiet dignity and humility of King Priam, the preening narcissistic Paris with the deeply-held sense of obligation of Hektor, and the petulance of the demigod Achilles sulking at his ship with the courage of the mortal Aias who alone stands between the Trojan army and their ultimate victory over the fleeing Greeks. These, and the countless tales of morality that followed, have formed the foundation of the modern understanding of what it means to be a good person, which values we should instill in our children, and the types of behaviors that society should scorn. More specifically, it informs our
understanding of what it means to be a good leader and a good follower and of the appropriate balance between the two.

Why do these stories resonate? Perhaps because we are primed to think in terms of stories. We attach deeper meaning to narratives (McAdams, 1995) and more readily recall and integrate stories of morality into our cognitive schemas (Antes et al., 2009; Mumford et al., 2008). In the present paper, we examine how the stories we tell children shape our understanding of what it means to be a leader and a follower. Specifically, we examine the narratives and characters in the popular children’s show Transformers (though there have been many iterations of the Transformers we focus on the so-called “Generation 1” cartoon series which aired from 1984 – 1987 and the 1986 animated feature film associated with it). This show not only approximates the conflict-driven narratives of the past in terms of pitting good against evil, but it is also unique in that the company behind the show provided data as to the personality and skill sets of each of the characters. Thus, it is possible to empirically examine the implicit models of leadership and followership being communicated.

**Television as a Source of Leadership and Followership Schemas**

Childhood experiences have long been considered important in the formation of later adult character (Hill & Roberts, 2010; Westen, 1998) and of leadership styles and skills in particular. In the most recent edition of the Bass Handbook of Leadership, Bass (2008) notes that factors ranging from birth order and family to the level of intimacy with parents and the way that they modeled leadership can come to shape how individuals believe leaders should behave. For example, there is some evidence that having parents who have high moral standards and are invested in a child’s schoolwork is positively associated with transformational leadership in later
life (Avolio, 1994). More recent models of early childhood experience and the development of a leader identity have argued that biological factors, parenting styles, and early learning experiences in working and playing in groups all play important roles (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). That said, most studies of childhood experiences and leadership focus on the development of leadership skills rather than schemas of leadership and followership. Moreover, most academic literature on this topic laments the lack of empirical research (Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005; Murphy & Johnson, 2011) and, as a consequence, many of the models of early leadership development are mostly speculative in nature. Even so, it is very surprising that reviews of this literature (e.g. Murphy & Reichard, 2011) make no mention whatsoever of the potential role played by television as a potential factor in shaping perceptions of what leaders, followers, and the relations between them are meant to be like.

A robust literature has developed around the idea that the messages presented on television to children can influence their development (Seels, Fullerton, Berry, & Horn, 1996). Much of this literature has surrounded the development of gender stereotypes (Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995) and aggression (Seels et al., 1996; Singer & Singer, 1983). Much of this research is based on the principles put forward in Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1971) that suggest that children learn and embrace patterns of behaviors that they witness being performed by role models, both real and imaginary. Put another way, children can watch how individuals in various social roles interact with one another and encode their behaviors as normative. When the children are put in similar situations, they tend to reproduce the behaviors that they have witnessed. For example, analyses of the motivational themes in children’s stories and textbooks have proven to be predictive of societal-level outcomes many years later. These outcomes include negative events such as wars and
violent protests as well as positive outcomes such as entrepreneurship and other indices of creative output (McClelland, 1961, 1975, 1984).

Because of the sheer amount of time spent by many children in front of the television (Seels et al., 1996), it can be expected that children’s programming is a major antecedent of the schemas they develop to understand societal norms. In particular, superheroes and other fantasy characters may come to be embraced as idealizations of particular values that promote the societal good while villains are seen as representing a simplified form of evil to be shunned or destroyed (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). Although these stories can take many forms, the basic understanding of the hero as fundamentally good, virtuous, and antagonistic to evil is pervasive across time and across cultures (Campbell, 2008; Doty, 2000).

Product-based television programs aimed at children may be particularly influential in the development of schemas. This is because young viewers are not only able to witness the interactions of characters and learn vicariously at a distance, but they are also able to purchase toys with which to play and actively engage in role-playing as heroes and villains or as leaders and followers. Thus, the characters become much more real and the viewers become much more emotionally engaged because they can watch, recreate, and even create their own storylines. One need look no further than the recent success of the Transformers movie franchise to see how pervasive these experiences are and how long their effects can last. If one were to ask males in their mid-30’s which television program best fit this profile for them, many would answer that Transformers, a fantasy world based on shape-shifting robots was instrumental in shaping their perceptions of what it meant to be a good leader and that one of the most emotionally-wrenching events of their childhood was the death of the protagonist, the Autobot leader Optimus Prime, in the 1986 movie.
Transformers as Leadership and Followership Prototypes

To provide a brief summary for those unfamiliar with this particular television series, the *Transformers* storyline pits two robotic factions against one another. The “peace-loving” Autobots are led by Optimus Prime while the “brutal” Decepticons are led by Megatron. Because of resource scarceness on their home planet of Cybertron, both factions are forced to take their war to the planet Earth to gather the energy needed to finally overcome their rivals. Through their many battles, viewers can witness how both “good” and “bad” leaders engage in problem-solving and how they interact with subordinates. Thus, viewers are provided with many opportunities to develop elaborated models of what it means to be a good or bad leader as well as a good or bad subordinate.

Many other children’s programs could be argued to present an image of leader-follower dynamics. For example, it has been suggested that *Thomas the Tank Engine* presents the workforce as consisting of a strong leader, a child-like group of middle managers, and a nameless mass of ill-mannered, low-level workers where the central characters are primarily concerned with being “really useful” and the greatest sin is to cause “confusion and delay” (Wilton, 2009). However, we would argue that to really gain a deeper understanding of how societal values are transmitted through television media, one must be able to provide not merely anecdotal evidence to support one’s arguments, but optimally to provide concrete empirical data as well. In this regard, we believe that the *Transformers* television show and the associated toy products represent a unique example where the product designers provide clear empirical evidence of their mental frameworks when creating their characters. Because these characters operate in organizations with clear hierarchies and well-defined attributes, we can extract the
implicit schemas underpinning the content of the show and attempt to align those results with current models of leadership and followership in the academic literature.

As noted above, there are a number of ways that *Transformers* represents a unique instance of the transmission of values via television storylines. First, because Transformers was intended to air in multiple countries at once (primarily the U.S. and Japanese markets), we can assume that the designers attempted to display relatively universal values that would be acceptable and meaningful across cultures. Further, because the series aired before the Children’s Television Act was introduced in the U.S. in 1990, we can assume that the designers were better able to create a program that appealed to their audience without regulatory demands for educational content. Thus, the messages conveyed in the show would be relatively unfiltered and designed to arouse particularly strong emotions in order to create greater attachment to the products. Finally, and most importantly, the toy designers included a profile of characteristics on a scale of 1-10 for each of the characters (see Figure 1 for an example). No other toy product or television show that we are aware of has done this before or since.

Each of the *Transformers* characters were rated on nine characteristics: Strength, Intelligence, Speed, Endurance, Rank, Courage, Firepower, and Skill. Although these characteristics are not the same as we would normally use to describe leaders and their followers in the workplace, they are intended to reflect the most important attributes for describing robots in a perpetual state of conflict. Two of these characteristics, intelligence and skill, are highly correlated with one another (r = .63) and reflect cognitive abilities. Another two of these characteristics, endurance and strength, are also highly correlated (r = .59) and reflect physical ability and size. For reasons of parsimony, we combine these factors under the labels of cognitive and physical in the present analysis. The remaining characteristics can reflect both
abilities and character. For example, although courage can be interpreted directly as a personality characteristic, firepower should be thought of as a proxy for dominance or aggressive tendencies while speed can be interpreted as representing an energetic character. Rank itself does not reflect character so much as simply the position of the individual in their faction. Consequently, it is the variable of most interest when investigating schemas surrounding leadership.

**Leader Schemas in the Transformers**

When considering the models of leadership presented in a television show like *Transformers*, it should be kept in mind that the intended audience for this show was children. Consequently, the leadership styles presented were not overly complex and generally reflect the contrasting paternalistic styles of authoritarian and authoritative leadership (Pelligrini & Scandua, 2008). Specifically, Megatron, the leader of the Decepticons, reflects an authoritarian style whereby he seeks to rule via threats and violence (see Figure 2; note the motto, “Peace through tyranny”). Because his faction is defined by rule of the strongest, he can never fully trust his subordinates as they all represent potential threats to his rule. This is juxtaposed with the Autobots’ leader, Optimus Prime, who is known for benevolence, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness (see Figure 1; note the motto, “Freedom is the right of all sentient beings”). Optimus Prime is also notably willing to delegate decisions and responsibilities to his subordinates so that he can focus on higher-order objectives (Chang, 2010). Their differing attitudes to followers is perhaps no better illustrated that in a verbal exchange during one of their battles when Optimus Prime notes that Megatron’s followers are in danger of being destroyed by a river. Megatron retorts “Warriors are expendable! The most important thing is I get what I deserve! And I always do” (*The immobilizer*).
One consequence of their differing leadership styles is the willingness of each leader to share power within their faction. Simply put, Optimus is more willing to delegate to his trusted lieutenants while Megatron is much more likely to distribute blame when his plans fail. This is, no doubt, meant to reflect the idea that good leader-follower relations are essential to successful organizational functioning. More specifically, there is a long-standing literature suggesting that organizations where subordinates get a say in decisions are more effective and cohesive (Gastil, 1994; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, & De Cremer, 2004). To illustrate this, we used the relative distribution of rank scores to evaluate how vertical or flat each faction was. Figure 3 displays the boxplots of rank for each faction. This plot shows that individuals holding the highest ranks within the Autobot faction are not notable outliers, but high ranks are outliers within the Decepticon faction. Additionally, we conducted a Bayesian analysis that allowed both the mean rank and the standard deviation of rank to vary between the affiliations. The mean difference was 0.39 with 95% Bayesian posterior interval (-0.15, 0.94) and the difference in standard deviations was -0.09 with 95% Bayesian posterior interval (-0.60, 0.41). Generally, this means that the differences in both mean and standard deviation between factions is quite small, but that the Autobots have slightly higher rank, on average, and the Decepticons have very slightly lower variability in rank (these results are descriptive, with posterior intervals presented only as indicators of the precision that these effects are estimated with). In other words, members of the Autobot faction are accorded more dignity and respect and their leadership ranks are not perceived as being substantially different in status to their followers. On the other hand, the Decepticons have a relatively homogenous base of low-level followers dominated by an elite cadre of leaders. These results broadly reflect that the Autobots, the faction we are meant to emulate, tend towards a more distributed organizational
structure while the Decepticons tend to concentrate power in a single, flawed individual. This is further illustrated in Table 1, which shows that the Autobots have multiple individuals accorded with elite (rank = 10) status while the Decepticons have only one. Thus, it is more appropriate to consider Optimus Prime to be *primus inter pares*, the first among equals, while Megatron is clearly a tyrant.

Despite the obvious differences in their motivations and leadership styles, Optimus and Megatron are actually quite similar in that they are both rated as being superior to their subordinates on most, if not all, of the characteristics provided by the designers. As seen in Figure 4, Optimus Prime is rated as being higher than the average scores of both the average Autobot followers and his primary lieutenants (Jazz, Ironhide, and Ultra Magnus). Similarly, Megatron is either superior or equal to his underlings on nearly all characteristics with the exception of speed (see Figure 5; lieutenants were Soundwave, Shockwave, and Starscream).

That the leaders of the Autobots and Decepticons are exceptional in terms of their skill sets is not particularly surprising. Trait approaches to leadership tend to assume that certain individuals emerge as leaders of groups when they possess extraordinary endowments of attributes deemed valuable for leadership (Organ, 1996). The primary reason for this is that having leaders with superior knowledge and skills making decisions should benefit the group as a whole (Van Vugt, 2006; Van Vugt & Ronay, 2013). Although a large number of characteristics have been associated with distinguishing between which individuals attain positions of leadership or not, the preponderance of evidence suggests that one of the most important characteristics for attaining leadership positions is intelligence (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Stogdill, 1948). Consequently, we would expect both leaders to be particularly high in intelligence relative to their followers.
There is also a long-standing literature (e.g. Stogill, 1948; Judge & Cable, 2004; Lindqvist, 2010) showing that physical factors such as weight and height are associated with leader emergence. As with intelligence, it has been argued that this is because such physical factors are signals for the ability to contribute to the group’s survival as well as evidence of prior success in attaining the resources necessary to grow strong (Lukaszewski, Simmons, Anderson, & Roney, 2014; Van Vugt, 2006). This is particularly true in young children where differences in physical size are excellent proxies for differences in maturity and skill levels. Consequently, we would also expect each of the leaders to be larger than their followers.

Similar arguments could also be made for the advantages of possessing the other traits provided by the producers of Transformers. And, in fact, prior evidence has demonstrated that characteristics like courage, dominance, and energy are all positively associated with attaining leadership positions (e.g. Lord et al., 1986; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Stogdill, 1948). That said, although each of the characteristics mentioned has been previously associated with leadership, there is no prior research that has investigated the relative contribution of these particular traits to perceptions of leadership. Based on the work of Lord et al. (1986), a safe assumption is that implicit schemas surrounding which individuals are more leaderlike are heavily weighted towards intelligence. In order to evaluate this, we entered each of the characteristics into multiple regressions in order to establish the relative contribution of each characteristic as a determinant of rank within each faction. We also conducted relative importance analysis (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011) in order to more clearly reflect the contribution of each characteristic to rank. The results for the Autobots and Decepticons can be found in Table 2 and 3 respectively.
As can be seen in the tables, the characteristics in the data provided explained slightly more variance as antecedents of rank for the Autobots (54%) than for the Decepticons (49%). Most striking though is the relative weight assigned to intelligence as an antecedent of leadership rank. For both factions, this was not only the most important characteristic, but it was more important than all of the other characteristics combined. There are instances in the show where such sentiments are made clear. For example, when his leadership is challenged by Starscream, a chronically disloyal subordinate, Megatron retorts that “Power flows to the one who knows how. Desire alone is not enough” (*More than meets the eye, Part 2*). Later, Megatron makes it even clearer why he does not believe Starscream is fit for command. “It's just such ignorance which forever relegates you to the ranks of underlings, Starscream!” (*More than meets the eye, Part 3*). Thus, we see in both the data and the dialogue that intelligence is being highlighted as a particularly important characteristic for leadership within the context of the *Transformers* show.

Like many stereotypes, the size of the relationship between intelligence and leadership is grossly exaggerated compared to real-life studies, but it nonetheless closely matches the relative importance of intelligence for implicit schemas of leadership in prior studies (Lord et al., 1986).

In terms of the other characteristics, none particularly stand out other than to note that the Autobots seem to value physical ability slightly more than the Decepticons while the Decepticons place slightly more weight on Speed. To some degree, it is surprising that courage was not weighted more heavily for the Autobots side. Recall that they are originally non-military robots that have been forced into combat. This fact is often noted in the show as a potential liability for their faction since they are, more often than not, on the defensive or forced to protect innocent third-parties. For example, during a discussion on whether they should give up defending Earth and retreat back to their home world, one of the Autobots exclaims “But
we’re not fighters like they are, Prime!” (More than meets the eye, Part 2). Optimus responds that this is why courage is essential; that they must learn to conquer their fears. To be fair, the Autobots are more courageous, on average, than the Decepticons (Autobot mean = 8.45, Decepticon mean = 7.23, t = 3.70, Welch df = 89.14, P-value = 0.0004) and 19 Autobots achieve the maximum courage score (10) compared with 4 Decepticons. It is just that courage plays relatively little role in determining which Autobots achieve high rank, not that the Autobots lack courage.

On the whole then, what messages about leadership are being conveyed by Transformers? As seen in our results, the television show seems to be conveying the message 1) organizations are more effective when power is shared and not used for selfish goals of a single individual, 2) that leaders, in general, tend to be exceptional individuals, and 3) that intelligence is a particularly important attribute for a leader to possess. Each of these messages aligns quite well with our current understanding of what kinds of individuals come into positions of power and what styles of leadership are most effective.

Follower Schemas in the Transformers

Unlike the well-developed models of leadership and the decades of well-documented research on leadership antecedents and outcomes, there is comparatively less known about the nature of followership (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Uhl-bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Although scholars have been discussing the nature of followership for nearly a century, there is very little empirical research establishing the antecedents and consequences of different followership styles or even much agreement on what those styles might be. For example, the earliest typology of followers was provided by Pigors (1934). He argued that there were four basic types of followers: constructive, subversive, routine, and impulsive. Constructive
followers actively tried to help the leader and the team. Subversive followers acted in their own best interests. Routine followers were those who passively followed leaders without contributing. Impulsive followers were not necessarily helpful, but were likely to be emotionally attached to leader a way that made them unpredictable. Several later models followed a pattern of continuing to distinguish between proactive and passive followers (Carsten et al., 2010; Kellerman, 2008; Kelley, 1988; Zaleznik, 1965), but little of this work was firmly grounded in empirical data. A turning point in the literature was the development of higher-order model of implicit followership that elaborated on several dimensions of positive and negative followership (Sy, 2010). One crucial finding of this work was that positive forms of followership tend to be highly related to one another while negative forms of followership tend to be largely independent. Sy’s (2010) model postulates that there are 3 positive forms of followership and 3 negative forms. Although there is no data available to test these ideas in the dataset provided by the designers, we will attempt to show that these followership dimensions can be seen in the followers of both factions and that effective or ineffective followership is not necessarily a response to the leader’s own style.

*Positive Followership*

The first dimension of positive followership is Industry. Sy (2010) suggests that individuals high on this dimension of followership are hardworking, productive, and tend to go above and beyond in the service of their duties.

"Fear not, Megatron. Cybertron shall remain as you leave it."

—Shockwave (*More than meets the eye, Part 1*)
Shockwave is a notable example of an industrious follower in the Decepticon faction. When Optimus Prime’s Autobots and Megatron’s Decepticons left Cybertron, it was nearly depleted of energy. These Transformers were rendered inert in the crash of the Autobots’ spaceship for four million years. After being reactivated, Megatron eventually establishes contact with Shockwave back on Cybertron, and the status quo is pretty much in place as Megatron left it. Shockwave was also strikingly loyal to Megatron, continuing to attempt to communicate with him for those four million years. When they re-establish communication, Shockwave’s inventive genius proves valuable to the Decepticons. For example, he has proactively built a space bridge that allows the Decepticons to transport their energon cubes (and themselves) back and forth between Earth and Cybertron.

On the Autobot side, many subordinates would likely be considered industrious. Three notable examples are Ratchet, Wheeljack, and Perceptor, who serve as the faction’s medics, engineers, and scientists. They often engage in additional work outside of their direct duties, such as when Wheeljack and Ratchet built the Dinobots (*S.O.S. Dinobots*).

The second dimension of positive followership is Enthusiasm. Sy (2010) suggests that individuals high on this dimension of followership are characterized by being outgoing, excited, and happy.

Jazz is a good example of an enthusiastic follower. He is a popular figure among the Autobots, and takes an enthusiastic approach to Earth culture, especially music and slang. He is a trusted lieutenant to Optimus Prime, and serves in the role of chief of special operations. When given the order to assemble a strike team to fight the Decepticons at an oil rig, Jazz readily includes himself for the combat mission (*More than meets the eye, Part I*).
On the Decepticon side, a good example of an enthusiastic follower is the cassette Rumble. Rumble is one of the smallest Decepticons, but takes extreme joy in destruction. He is a loyal follower to Megatron, who indulges his need to crush and destroy things. Rumble can transform his arms into piledrivers that cause earthquake-like shocks, which he uses to create tidal waves and other massively destructive effects (More than meets the eye, Part 2).

The third dimension of positive followership is Good Citizen. Sy (2010) suggests that individuals high on this dimension of followership tend to be loyal, reliable, and team players.

“As you command, Megatron.”

---Soundwave (Transformers: The Movie)

Soundwave was incredibly loyal to Megatron. He, along with his cassette tape minions, Ravage, Laserbeak, Frenzy, Rumble, and Ratbat, were generally some of the more competent Decepticon troops, whom Megatron could generally rely upon for communications, espionage, and even combat. When Megatron was badly injured following his confrontation with Optimus Prime in Autobot City in 2005 (Transformers: The Movie), he requested that Soundwave not leave him behind, to which Soundwave responded with the quotation above. His cassette minion, Rumble, also retrieved Megatron’s arm cannon at this time.

Although many Autobots could be considered good citizens, a prime example is the towering Omega Supreme. Omega Supreme is primarily motivated by his desire for revenge on the Constructicons, who millions of years ago on Cybertron tricked him into abandoning the city he was supposed to protect, and destroyed it in his absence (The secret of Omega Supreme). Omega pursued the Constructicons across space until they were reunited with Megatron on Earth. Despite his driving motivation for revenge, Omega Supreme accepted Optimus Prime’s orders to transport an alien creature off of the Earth, which meant forgoing his best chance at
revenge. When push comes to shove, Omega Supreme chooses duty over revenge (*The secret of Omega Supreme*).

**Negative Followership**

The first dimension of negative followership is Conformity. Sy (2010) suggests that individuals high on this dimension of followership are easily influenced, tend to follow trends, and are softspoken.

The Decepticons present at least two strong examples of conformist followers. First, there is the triple-robot known as Reflector. His three robot bodies combine to form a single alternative mode, a single lens reflex camera (which oddly printed out an instant photograph on at least one occasion). Reflector is rarely seen doing anything other than executing Megatron’s orders. He speaks little, eventually becoming an essentially silent presence among the Decepticon ranks.

The second major example of the conforming follower among the Decepticons are the Jets, barring their leader Starscream. There are a wide number of these characters, who seem to serve as the primary shock troops for the Decepticons, although only six get any significant development. Even so, they are presented largely interchangeably and with limited personalities. In general, they execute orders but are cowardly and not very intelligent (although, they are *slightly* smarter than the Decepticon average, with a mean of 6.5 versus a mean of 6.46).

The Autobot faction is not known for this characteristic. Though the Autobots are generally “good soldiers” and follow orders from Optimus Prime and his lieutenants, they are presented as having unique interests, viewpoints and thoughts on the tactics and strategy their faction employs.
The second dimension of negative followership is Insubordination. Sy (2010) describes individuals high on this dimension as being arrogant, rude, and bad-tempered.

“My time will come, Megatron.”

–Starscream *(More than meets the eye, Part 1)*

Starscream is noted for his legendary levels of duplicity and treachery. He is shown to be plotting to or attempting to overthrow Megatron three times in the first television episode alone. This theme persists throughout the series with Starscream openly telling Megatron he will replace him as leader, publicly calling into question Megatron’s judgments and character, and willfully ignoring his orders. In one of the most notable instances of insubordination, Starscream builds the Combaticons, a group of robots made out of old military equipment who can join together into a powerful but dimwitted giant robot called Bruticus, in an attempt to depose Megatron and become the leader of the Decepticons *(Starscream’s Brigade)*.

At one point, Starscream legitimately assumed control of the Decepticons, while Megatron was presumed dead after an accident with the space bridge *(Transport to oblivion)*. His leadership was generally considered inept, leading to a bad defeat in the Decepticons’ first battle with the Autobots under his command *(Roll for it)*.

In the end, Starscream chose to eject the injured Megatron into space after the Decepticons’ retreat from Autobot City *(Transformers: The Movie)*. This was in spite of Megatron’s protests, “I still function!” To which Starscream callously replied, “Wanna bet?” He then sought to regain the leadership of the Decepticons.

Amongst the Autobot faction, the only generally insubordinate followers are probably the Dinobots. It is possible this can be attributed primarily to their comparatively low intelligence,
short attention spans, and impulsive, destructive natures. We elaborate on these points in the next section.

The third dimension of negative followership is Incompetence. Sy (2010) argues that individuals high on this dimension tend to be uneducated, slow, and inexperienced.

The Dinobots are a fine example of incompetence on the Autobot side. However, this only applies to them as followers, not soldiers, because they aren’t really that good at following, just fighting. We illustrate this using the following excerpt of dialogue:

**Sparkplug:** The Autobots are dying, and only you can save them.

**Grimlock:** No care about Autobots! Me Grimlock Dinobot!

**Spike:** If you don't help, the Decepticons will get all the Cybertonium they need.

**Grimlock:** Cybertonium? Cybertron! Okay, us do it!

**Slag:** No! Us no want to.

**Sludge:** What he say?

**Grimlock:** Me Grimlock. Me leader! Me say us do it!

—Grimlock uses charisma and unassailable logic to convince the Dinobots (*Desertion of the Dinobots*, Part 1)

The Dinobots are physically powerful, but often prove so simple-minded as to be difficult to work with. They tend to follow orders, when those orders allow them to indulge in carnage. For example, in *Transformers: The Movie*, when Optimus arrives at Autobot City with reinforcements, he orders, “Dinobots, destroy Devastator!” to which they readily comply. Later in the movie, however, Ultra Magnus, now in command of the Autobot forces following the death of Optimus Prime, attempts to evacuate Autobot City during another Decepticon attack,
they actively resist Kup and Hot Rod’s attempts to load them into an escape shuttle.

Starscream is, again, illustrative of this point for the Decepticons. His most important act of incompetence results in the primary conflict of the television show (*More than meets the eye, Part 1*). The Decepticons are revived on Earth and they plan to plunder its resources. In a rash act, and against orders, Starscream begins to fire his lasers at the volcano the Autobots’ ship is buried under, from which the Decepticons have just emerged. These blasts cause Optimus Prime to be revived, who in turn, revives the rest of the Autobots, and renews the conflict that began on Cybertron. Later (in the same episode, no less), Starscream wastes energy the Decepticons have just collected pointlessly blasting away with an energy weapon. His continued attempts to usurp control of the Decepticons allows Autobot victories, such as when the Decepticons are escaping Earth with their haul of Energon cubes, his assassination attempt on Megatron provides the distraction that allows the Autobot Mirage, who had invisibly stowed away on the Decepticon spaceship, to disrupt its flight and crash it into the ocean (*More than meets the eye, Part 3*).

**Conclusion**

It would be understandable if leadership scholars reflexively argued that children’s cartoon shows are not a worthy topic for the study of leadership and provide little insight into the modern workplace. We would disagree. While certainly not as epic or influential as foundation narratives of western literature such as the *Iliad*, the *Transformers* continue in that same tradition of using fantasy-based storytelling. The *Transformers* were, and remain to this day, a major cultural force worldwide as it continues to shape the minds and values of children through reruns, newly launched cartoon series, and the movie franchises. In particular, the *Transformers* provide a window into how popular culture might influence children’s perceptions of leadership.
and followership. The factions’ leaders, Optimus Prime and Megatron, illustrate two different, though largely paternalistic, styles of leadership: authoritative and authoritarian, respectively. Such a presentation of leadership is likely to resonate with children, especially, since these styles are reflective of parenting styles, too. The television show explicitly presents the central conflict as one between good and evil. Optimus Prime is presented as an archetype of fatherly wisdom and courage, whereas Megatron is presented as almost demonic. This is especially clear in the movie, where Megatron cruelly shoots the already critically injured Ironhide to death with the offhand comment, “Such heroic nonsense,” and Optimus Prime is presented as an almost Messianic figure, arriving with reinforcements to change the course of the battle at Autobot City, and paying with his life.

In addition, the series provides a variety of perspectives on followership. We see evidence of positive and negative followership prototypes in each of the factions. Perhaps more importantly, the show clearly indicates the positive and negative consequences of followership for an organization’s success and survival. For example, even evil leaders need competent and loyal followers in order to be successful (Wilson, 2012), but Megatron’s ambitions and plans are repeatedly undermined by the incompetence and disloyalty of his followers. The Autobots are almost always on the defensive and fighting at a disadvantage, but are shown to continually triumph over the obstacles they face largely because of the loyalty and initiative of both their leaders and followers.

Much is made of the potentially negative effects of television viewing for child audiences and of product-based programming in particular (Seels et al., 1996). Yet, far from being damaging, these programs can be instructive and their lessons can be carried forward into the business world. The children of yesterday are the business leaders of today and the moral
lessons found in the *Transformers* have no doubt played some role in changing our understanding of how organizations should function and our implicit schemas of leaders, followers, and the relationships between them.

In terms of practical implications, we believe that the present results are illustrative of the positive effects of play and role-playing in particular in the development of leadership for both children and adults (Kark, 2011). We also believe that the present analysis may be of some use in engaging leaders and followers in training programs. The popularity of *Transformers* for the past three decades has meant that the storylines and characters are well-known across cultures. Moreover, because these characters are typically encountered when one is a young, impressionable child, leaders such as Optimus Prime can serve as attachment figures (see Bowlby, 1982; Harms, 2011). Consequently, they may have particularly strong emotional connections to them even in adulthood. Providing training in adulthood using *Transformers* as illustrative examples may be more likely to be recalled, internalized, and acted on. Without trying to be sacrilegious, managers may be more inclined to treat their followers with respect and dignity if they are trained to ask themselves “What would Optimus do?” We also believe that references to popular culture figures may make leadership concepts more accessible to student audiences much in the same way that recently introduced textbooks have employed cartoons and manga in order to engage their readers (Romal, 2008; for examples see Gonick and Smith, 1993; Irwin, Conrad, & Skoble, 2001; Takahashi, 2008). Further, we hope that the analyses provided here can be used as a foundation for such training.

On the whole, we are very optimistic that taking account of the stories that shaped the mindsets and cultural values of children can tell us a lot about how they come to see the world as adults. In the present analysis, we exploited a truly unique example of this, the *Transformers*, a
television program that had broad and lasting appeal with clear lessons about leadership and followership but which also had hard data concerning the mindsets of its producers available to explore. We hope that this chapter can serve as a starting point for a new literature surrounding the influence of popular culture on leadership and followership and as a touchpoint for the development of engaging leadership development programs. Though the messages in such children’s cartoons can seem overly simplified, we hope that we have been successful in illustrating that when it comes to shaping cultural mindsets surrounding leadership and followership, there is more than meets the eye.
References


Figure 1. The Character Profile of Optimus Prime.

![The Character Profile of Optimus Prime](image1)

Figure 2. The Character Profile of Megatron

![The Character Profile of Megatron](image2)
Figure 3. Boxplot of rank by faction.
Figure 4. The Average Characteristics of the Autobots at Different Ranks.

![Autobots Graph]

Figure 5. The Average Characteristics of the Decepticons at Different Ranks.

![Decepticons Graph]
Table 1. Crosstabulation of rank by affiliation.

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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Autobots</th>
<th>Decepticons</th>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>8</td>
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Table 2. Predictors of Leadership Rank for Autobots

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<th>Raw Relative Weights</th>
<th>Relative Weights as a % of $R^2$</th>
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<td>.057</td>
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<td>Firepower</td>
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N = 74.
Table 3. Predictors of Leadership Rank for Decepticons.

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