Leadership and the Zombie Apocalypse: Images of Leaders in *The Walking Dead*

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In American culture, episodic television is a mode of cultural production that carries significant meaning for the study of leadership. Media effects research proposes mediated experiences have a greater influence on shaping beliefs about the social world (Slater, 1990) as viewers may likely internalize those effects in ways that bring greater cognitive and emotional understanding of the human condition (Oatley, 1999). Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock (2008) observe, "not only are certain works of fiction 'better' than academic or policy research in representing central issues relating to [leadership] development but they also frequently reach a wider audience and are therefore more influential" (p. 198). The study of fictional television series opens a space where dialog and reflection on leadership practices can emerge. In particular, narratives that explore extreme crises, as when the social system has collapsed, can illuminate the obstacles and challenges leaders face.

This paper explores images of leaders in the television series *The Walking Dead* to discuss emergent leadership and the challenges of leading in times of crisis. Primary consideration is given to the main characters of Deputy Rick Grimes and the Governor to examine the tensions of follower conferral of leadership and expectations, the dangers of a charismatic paradigm, the reluctance and desire to hold power, and competing needs per Maslow's hierarchical motivation theory.

Science fiction narratives, which can include zombie stories, though not all scholars agree, serve a particular social function exceedingly applicable to the study of leadership. My thinking is highly influenced by Roberts (2006) and his perspective of science fiction narratives mediating the tension between our rational and spiritual natures, while identifying our hopes and fears for the future. Particularly within these narratives when there is a societal collapse, we find

those who accept the responsibilities of leadership during a crisis to be caught in the dichotomy

of rational decision-making for survival against their empathetic and ethical obligations toward

followers and Others. Reconciling these dual natures is the foundation for leadership actions that

cause much of the conflict essential to a good story – whether within the narrative itself or within

the reflective engagement of the viewer. As seen in *The Walking Dead*, a considerable amount

of conflict does not concern the fight against zombies, but the relationships of the individuals

within their reactions to the crisis.

Crisis Leadership

In my continued reflection on crisis leadership, I am discerning a threefold perspective.

Starting from the position that the goal of crisis leadership is the restoration of order within the

boundaries of community, I suggest three leadership paradigms that achieve this goal. The first

consideration is the yearning for a reactionary status quo, where the leadership vision is a return

to the pre-crisis past, seen as a seemingly utopian state, and often impossible to achieve as a

result of the crisis events. The second concept is the restoration of order closely aligned to the

past, but social roles may be reversed and those who were previously powerless fill the power

vacuum created by the crisis and bring an order that mimics the past, but provides personal

advantages that do not necessarily serve the community. The third paradigm is one in which

order is restored through redefining what constitutes order and community, where leaders

emerge and provide a vision for a beneficent future with a clear sense of the reality faced within

the context of the crisis. For leaders, this paradigm is neither reactionary nor self-aggrandizing,

but seeks to provide for the well-being and self-determination of the community within an

untested model that upholds values either poorly enacted in the past or newly cherished as a

result of the crisis. The conflict present in fictional narratives stems from the leader's choice of paradigm for what constitutes order.

In *The Walking Dead*, we see two emergent leaders who make different choices about a future vision. The Governor chooses to create a cultural meme of the past through a picture book small town environment that protects his followers, but primarily serves to help him retain the power he did not enjoy pre-crisis. Former sheriff's deputy, Rick Grimes, moves toward a redefinition of community and what constitutes order, though his path toward that understanding is non-linear and most often shaped by his followers.

Follower Conferrals of Leadership

A basic tenet of leadership is that one cannot be a leader without followers. Within the context of a *transboundary crisis*, where the physical and social infrastructure is destroyed, the causes of the crisis are unknown or ambiguous, and legitimate authority is absent (Boin, 2009), people seek to confer a leadership role upon someone. In particular, crises prompt followers to desire "someone who can offer them solutions, and that they would like to listen to someone who can tell them how to proceed" (Gordijn & Stapel, 2008, p. 395). In addition, Terror Management Theory reasons that the human biological need for survival comes into conflict with the human awareness of mortality, creating psychological terror (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004). Followers seek a leader who can increase their self-esteem and provide greater meaning to their lives to mitigate the effects of mortality salience (Cohen et al., 2004).

As legitimate authority is absent in an apocalyptic crisis, leaders emerge through their actions, knowledge, or competence. Emergent leaders can hold *referent power*, in that others identify with them positively due to their personality or other characteristics, or they can hold *expert power*, where they are seen as competent and have experience or knowledge others can

call upon. Followers assign qualities and traits so that "leadership is essentially in the eye of the follower" (Jackson & Parry, 2008, p. 46).

When combined with followers' imminent sense of mortality salience, the conveying of leadership can be rushed or ill-advised. Sinclair (2007) discusses how leadership can create an unhealthy dependency of the follower upon the leader; becoming obedient and relinquishing their accountability as they "project a confidence and certainty on to a leader as a way of managing their own anxieties" (p. 68). As leaders are expected to provide vision and inspiration, those behaviors can "create meaning to reinforce legitimacy…but may also be a device for manipulation" (Sinclair, 2007, p. 30).

In *The Walking Dead*, Rick emerges as a leader from his legitimate expert power as a sheriff's deputy. Interestingly, Shane, another deputy, has been considered the leader during the first few weeks of the crisis, yet when Rick arrives, he demonstrates other characteristics that cause the group to also assign Rick referent power. He just seems to be a "nicer" and more stable person. Through considerable interpersonal conflict, including Shane's duplicity and death, Rick becomes the de facto leader. Yet, it is not a role Rick covets. He feels duty bound to protect his family and the group, and considers his decisions to be well-founded, but a clear vision of the future eludes him as his own mortality salience is keen and he continues to seek the advice and consent of his followers at the beginning of his tenure.

For the Governor, we know little from the narrative as to how he emerged as the leader of his community. Certainly, it is apparent he is willing to take any action or make unpleasant choices to preserve the safe functioning of the town, such as gunning down National Guardsmen to obtain their supplies and transportation, as well as providing gladiatorial 'entertainments' for followers to release pent up energy and assuage their fears of walkers. These actions frame the

Governor within both referent and expert power, but the effect is an understanding that his followers are so psychologically terrorized by the threat of the walkers, they refuse to acknowledge the less savory elements of his leadership. They have become obedient and abdicate their responsibility to the Governor. Indeed, the Governor retains his power through presenting himself as the only one who can keep the community safe, thus feeding follower anxieties while offering to moderate them.

Maslow's Motivational Theory

Essentially, both follower groups expect their leader to keep them safe, provide for their basic needs, create a sense of belonging, and provide a vision for a positive future. Thus, Maslow's motivational theory of hierarchical needs is particularly germane. Within Maslow's theory, humans require certain needs to be met in order to not only survive, but also become motivated to achieve goals. These needs include: physiological needs, such as hunger, thirst, shelter, and sex; safety needs for security and protection from physical or emotional harm; social needs, which include affection, a sense of belonging, acceptance and friendship; esteem needs, which are internal factors such as self-respect, autonomy, and achievement, and external factors such as status, recognition, and attention; and, finally, self-actualization needs which drive personal growth, achieving one's own potential, and self-fulfillment (Robbins, 2005). During a zombie apocalypse, the ability of leaders to meet the basic physiological and safety needs of followers is paramount and exceedingly challenging.

Rick develops a structure where all members of the community are empowered to contribute to meeting these needs through weapons training and foraging, though it would seem the women are still responsible for domestic chores, such as washing laundry. Indeed, Rick is challenged by Andrea who wants a larger role in contributing to community safety through

weapons training and killing walkers. ~~Shane offers her this role.~~ By developing a fully collaborative structure within what Kurt Lewin might determine as interdependence of fate and interdependence of task (Smith, 2001), Rick also achieves a semblance of Maslow's social needs for belonging and friendship.

The Governor chooses a different structure for filling followers' needs through the establishment of an armed group that takes responsibility for safety by guarding the makeshift walls of the town and a smaller highly militarized group of trusted men who venture beyond the walls to take what the community needs. This ranked level of responsibility allows the Governor to maintain his power through protecting most of the populace from danger or lack of material goods, thus increasing their self-esteem and mitigating much of their mortality salience. Indeed, most of the townspeople live a quasi-idyllic life not far removed from the pre-crisis past where there are doctors and medical supplies, street markets with clothing and vegetables, solar power, manicured lawns, and "block-party" barbeques hosted by the Governor. The Governor is seen as a caring and competent leader who provides for safety, physiological, and social needs, so the townspeople can relinquish responsibility to him. In essence, the Governor is not simply an emergent leader, but demonstrates dangerous charismatic qualities.

Dangers of a Charismatic Paradigm

Max Weber's seminal model of charisma suggests charismatic leaders emerge during times of crisis (Eatwell, 2006). Several scholars note the relationship between crises and the emergence of charismatic leaders (Halverson, Murphy, & Riggio, 2004; Hunt, Boal & Dodge, 1999; Pillai & Meindl, 1998). Hunt et al. (1999) specifically make a distinction between two forms of charismatic leadership in times of crisis: visionary and crisis-responsive. A visionary charismatic links "followers' needs to important values, purposes or meanings through

articulation of vision and goals" (Hunt et al., 1999, p. 424) and move toward action, while "crisis-responsive charismatics start with actions to deal with the crisis and then move to new interpretive schemes or theories of action to support or justify the actions" (p. 425). Importantly, charismatic leaders are seen as having a mission that is fused with their sense of personal destiny. Jung and Sosik (2006) identify the virtuous qualities that define charismatic leaders as those of self-monitoring, self-actualization, motive to attain social power, self-enhancement, and openness to change. House (1999) notes impression management is a clear attribute for the definition of a charismatic leader. Yet seen in a different light, the effort to manage impressions becomes a dramaturgical process of "framing, scripting, staging, and performing" (Aaltio-Marjosola & Takala, 2000, p. 153), which suggests undertones of disingenuousness.

Particularly in times of stress created by external forces, follower need for increased identification can translate into an 'us and them' paradigm that can be shaped by charismatic leaders and used as a means for holding power. Beu and Buckley (2004) explain there are two types of power used by charismatics: socialized and personalized. Both types have a high need for power, yet socialized charismatics exercise restraint in using power, recognize follower needs, and communicate messages that meet follower goals; while personalized charismatics enjoy using their power, view situations as contests where they must win, and are motivated by their own needs (Beu & Buckley, 2004).

The Conger-Kanungo model of charismatic leadership is based on follower perceptions of leader behavior that include: desire to change the status quo; sensitivity to the environment and follower needs; effective articulation of a shared and idealized vision; actions that are self-sacrificial or personally risky, thus empowering followers and building trust; and, using innovative or unconventional means to attain goals and be seen as an expert (Conger et al.,

2000). Additional follower effects will be "heightened reverence, trust, and satisfaction with the

leader" and will be "positively related to followers' sense of collective identity, perceived group

performance, and feelings of empowerment" (Conger et al., 2000, p. 749).

In *The Walking Dead*, the Governor and Rick demonstrate these forms of charismatic

leadership. The Governor establishes purpose and meaning for followers through maintaining a

pre-crisis atmosphere, fully informed by the apocalyptic chaos outside the community's

boundaries. Conversely, Rick often chooses to respond to a crisis and then justifies his decision

afterwards to the group, as if he had thoroughly considered the consequences of his response,

such as any number of events where the group hunts down walkers. Both men demonstrate a

need for power, with Rick exemplifying socialized power and the Governor ensconced in the

personalized power of clear enjoyment of his position and overarching need for competition.

Key to Rick's socialized charismatic leadership is the abandonment of his position of power after

the death of his wife and determination to become a farmer to provide physiological needs, while

the group moves to a shared leadership model. The Governor, however, is obsessed with

overtaking the prison where Rick and his followers are living, even though there is no clear

threat. The thrill of the competition and the fundamental need to demonstrate his power drives

the Governor in this action

Power

What is found when juxtaposing Rick and the Governor is a dichotomy of reluctance and

desire for power in emergent leaders during a crisis. Rick clearly feels the burdens of leadership

and even abandons his leadership role after the death of his wife. The Governor takes whatever

action may be necessary to maintain his control over others and enact his own will.

The conferring of charismatic qualities onto leaders by followers is essentially a transfer of power, which provides legitimacy to the charismatic leader and increases their authority. As followers are attracted to charismatic leaders through identification with the message, values, and beliefs of the leader coupled with a need for mitigating existential fears, a hierarchical structure is formed that places followers in a subordinate role. Sinha and Jackson (2006) emphasize Burke's understanding of leader-follower dynamics that "distributes authority in an unequal way" and yet, allows for "mutual rules and services between the two" (p. 236). "Providing a legitimate basis for power differences not only makes individuals feel better about the inequality, but it also increases overall acceptance of and compliance with the existing social structure" (Smith, Jost, & Vijay, 2008, p. 361). Smith et al. (2008) add, "sometimes the sheer presence of an explanation is enough for people to accept power differences" (p. 361). Bellamy (2007) further characterizes legitimacy as depending on "the interplay of morality, legality, and political sensibilities within a given context" (p. 517) and that "acts are legitimate if they are justified in terms of common referents and if those justifications are validated by other actors" (p. 518). In other words, legitimacy, like personal charismatic attributes, is also bestowed by followers. Consequently, primary concerns about the 'dark side' of charismatic leadership involve the potential for exploitation, coercion, and the manipulation of impressions, messages, and situations in an effort to enhance follower dependence and bolster leader power.

Nonetheless, power, legitimacy, and authority are a relational construct between the leader and followers. Indeed, charismatic leaders are fully dependent on their followers to endow them with authority, and thus legitimacy, within a system. The irrationality of leader-follower relations in Weber's analysis of power lies at the heart of viewing charismatic leadership as potentially dangerous.

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