

LEADERSHIP DURING A CRISIS: AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF *THE  
WALKING DEAD*

by

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## ABSTRACT

The AMC cable television series *The Walking Dead* has been massively popular since its premiere in 2010. The series presents a strong leader, Rick Grimes, who leads a group of survivors through a post-apocalyptic world filled with zombies. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Rick's approaches to crisis leadership and how they serve within the rhetorical process to translate into useful knowledge for audiences. This study examines crisis events Rick and his group encounter at the Centers for Disease Control, on the road after receiving an invitation to join the community at Alexandria, and at Alexandria when faced with a critical threat. During these events, this study reveals Rick's leadership approaches to be functional at the CDC, situational in the process of joining Alexandria, and transformational when dealing with the threat at Alexandria. These findings address RQ1 and RQ1a. To answer RQ2, this study applies ideological criticism to reveal the functions of the ideologies, finding that *The Walking Dead* focuses on elements of overcoming difficulties caused by false hope through strong crisis leadership. My analysis also revealed that the functions of the ideologies of *The Walking Dead* help audiences deal with their fears by trusting in strong leadership.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Henry Kissinger once said, “There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full” (GoodReads, 2017). Facing a crisis is a reality for many leaders in both public and private realms. Popular culture has capitalized on the drama associated with crises, often using them to elevate tension or add substance to the makeup of a character. Many true stories of crisis leadership have been turned into movies, such as *Apollo 13* (Grazer & Howard, 1995), *We Were Soldiers* (Davey, McEveety, & Wallace, 2002), and *Thirteen Days* (Bernstein, Almond, Costner, & Donaldson, 2000). In an article for *Real Business*, Shane Schutte (2013) gave examples of 12 fictional characters who exhibited valuable leadership traits, including Indiana Jones, James Bond, and Sherlock Holmes. These fictional leaders are household names and have been portrayed in books, movies, and television many times over. The AMC television series *The Walking Dead* provides a strong candidate for examining crisis leadership.

This chapter gives a brief description of relevant plotlines and characters in *The Walking Dead*. Following the description of the artifact, I explain the basis for the leadership approach to be used in the study. The introduction concludes with the theoretical background and methodology I used for analysis.

The television series *The Walking Dead* portrays a group of survivors in a post-apocalyptic, dystopian America after the emergence of a plague that reanimates recently deceased human beings, turning them into murderous monsters. Those that are left alive are forced to choose between joining a group of strangers or facing the horrors alone. *The Walking Dead* presents an ideal representation of crisis leadership through the character Rick Grimes, played by actor Andrew Lincoln. Before the collapse of society, Rick was a small-town sheriff's deputy. He brings a sense of authority to the group, resulting in his position as the leader. Rick also has a wife who is pregnant and a young son that he strives to protect through effective crisis leadership. While *The Walking Dead* plays into the narrative of a strong white male presiding over a group of subordinates, the series allows viewers to imagine life where everyone has the same basic goal: survive. The environment in the series thrusts people of all backgrounds together, challenging them to reinvent themselves for a greater chance at living.

### **Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to rhetorically analyze how AMC's *The Walking Dead* presents leadership and explains the degree of effectiveness leadership has in specific situations among followers. There are several defining moments of Rick's leadership throughout the series. The operational definition I used for crisis leadership, any instance where Rick made direct decisions on behalf of the group to address specific situations which potentially threatened the group, was developed according to leadership research from Hackman and Johnson (2009). This definition includes patterns of behavior, such as Rick being alert to danger, preparing the group for trouble, and responding in a fast, effective manner when a crisis breaks out. Furthermore, *crisis* was

defined as “any major unpredictable event that has the potential to damage an organization and, in extreme cases, to threaten its survival” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 403). This study examined the identified crisis leadership moments and approaches through the lens of ideological criticism, emphasizing leadership theories relevant to each leadership style. For situational leadership, Fiedler’s contingency model of leadership and path-goal theory was used. The functional approach included works from Chester Barnard (1938) and Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats (1948). Leader-member exchange theory was used in the examination of relational leadership. The transformational approach was based on James MacGregor Burns (1978) and his pioneering research on transformational leadership. This research contributes to studies on leadership, such as Uhl-Bien (2003) and Zorn (1991), to better understand what constitutes an effective leader during times of crisis. Using *The Walking Dead* as an artifact adds to the body of existing research on the massively popular television series, including research from Garland, Phillips, and Vollum (2016) and Wright (2017). This study offers a rhetorical approach to examine crisis leadership in a specific television series.

### **Description of the Artifact**

*The Walking Dead* airs on the cable television network AMC and has completed seven seasons. The idea for the series came from the comic book of the same name, created by Robert Kirkman in 2003. Noted television writer and director Frank Darabont developed the series for television and presented the pilot episode, entitled *Days Gone Bye*, to viewers in October of 2010 (Darabont, 2010). The episode drew 5.35 million viewers and was the most-viewed series premiere in AMC history (AMC, 2018). The show is centered around a group of survivors amid a worldwide zombie apocalypse.

Throughout the series, new characters are periodically introduced, while others are killed off. Each episode is unique, and can be action centered, plot driven, told through flashbacks, inclusive of many characters, or even restricted to the personal stories of one or two individuals. In an article based on the comic book, reviewer Josue Diaz stated that “perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *The Walking Dead* is the realistic portrayal of racism in America” (2007, p. 263). Adam Golub wrote, “the cultural resonance of television shows like *The Walking Dead* show that apocalyptic speculative fiction continues to have a firm grip on our popular imagination” (2015, p. 125). During the 2015 International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts, zombies were featured prominently, with at least one entire panel dedicated solely to *The Walking Dead* (Hall, 2015). From this panel, Hall (2015) described a noteworthy paper by Gerlach and Hamilton (2003). In explaining the Gerlach and Hamilton (2003) research, Hall (2015) stated that they “outline a new form of pandemic narrative arising in a post-risk society that has lost trust in the effectiveness of expert systems” (p. 401). These studies and explanations exemplify the depth of cultural relevance *The Walking Dead* possesses.

From the beginning of the series, Rick has been central to the plot. He woke up alone in a hospital after the apocalypse had begun and chose to seek out his wife and child. That quest led him to the group of survivors with whom he would quickly assume leadership. Throughout the course of the series, Rick leads the group to several areas that seem safe, such as a farm, a prison, and even a walled-off community. He guides the group through loss and heartache. Rick is forced to make difficult leadership choices that put the lives of his people at risk. There was even a time when Rick relinquished his leadership role to a council because he was failing as a leader. As a natural leader,

however, he soon reclaimed his position and saved the group from certain doom. Throughout the series, Rick's leadership was tested multiple times. This plotline provided an example of how leadership can be tested. My analysis took the entire series into consideration by selecting Rick's relevant crisis leadership moments from events in multiple seasons.

### **Leadership Framework**

A review by Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) posed the question of what exactly a communication-centered view of leadership is. One of the communication value commitments included in the article is that "leadership communication is alive with the potential for reflexivity, moral accountability, and change" (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014, p. 8). The study stated that reflexivity and moral accountability are focused on the role of introspection in ethical behavior (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). Leadership in action can be responsive and therefore opportunities exist for reflexivity and change to affect more ethical leadership (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014).

Another study on leadership focused on the transformational approach. This study by Len (2014) examined transformational leadership within the realm of public relations, but I found it a relevant contribution to my understanding of the approach used in crisis leadership. Len (2014) stated, "transformational leaders often engage in close interactions with their followers to understand and address their needs better" (p. 267). Len (2014) also explained that transformational leaders seek to empower their followers.

The study by Len (2014), along with Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), provided a framework for my analysis of crisis leadership in *The Walking Dead*. Each of these

studies, when applied to the context of *The Walking Dead*, pose relevant topics to examine in Rick's leadership ability to be reflexive, moral, and adaptable.

There are four leadership styles that this study considered to be applicable to define Rick's moments of crisis leadership. They are situational, functional, relational, and transformational leadership, and are detailed in Chapter Two. The situational approach to leadership is dependent on a number of different situational factors, including task and relational structure, superior-subordinate interactions, or the motivation of followers (Hackman and Johnson, 2009). Functional leadership examines the communicative behavior of leaders, such as assigning tasks, initiating action, giving support, and mediating conflict (Hackman and Johnson, 2009). As the name implies, relational leadership shifts the focus from the characteristics and behaviors of leaders and followers to the relationships among leaders and followers (Hackman and Johnson, 2009). The transformational approach to leadership goes beyond satisfying basic needs of followers and meets their higher-level needs by exchanging rewards or privileges for desirable outcomes (Hackman and Johnson, 2009).

### **Rhetorical Lens**

Ideological criticism was used as the rhetorical lens to analyze crisis leadership communication in *The Walking Dead*. Sonja K. Foss (2018) provided the methodology for implementing ideological criticism, as well as the definition for an ideology. Foss (2018) stated that an ideology is defined as "a system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group's interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world" (p. 237). Ideological theorist Stuart Hall (1989) and scholar Carl Burghardt (1995) were also used in developing the framework for ideological criticism in this study. Chapter Three explores

the contributions by these theorists and scholars in detail, as well as the complete methodology for ideological criticism used in this study.

The television series *The Walking Dead*, specifically the crisis leadership moments of Rick, provided a worthy artifact to examine leadership approaches. In order to accomplish my analysis, I used an ideological lens to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How does *The Walking Dead* exemplify different types of crisis leadership?

RQ1a: How is transformational leadership developed in *The Walking Dead*?

RQ2: What are the implications of the rhetorical processes used by Rick during crisis leadership moments?

### **Summary**

The first chapter of my thesis examined the problem and provided the rationale for my study. I described the artifact, indicated my theoretical focus, and gave a brief overview of previous research which has focused on *The Walking Dead*.

Chapter Two includes a literature review of existing leadership research, *The Walking Dead* as an artifact, and prior studies about the television series. Chapter Three explains my methodological approach.

In Chapter Four, I analyze examples of crisis leadership in *The Walking Dead* focusing on moments of crisis leadership. Lastly, Chapter Five includes a discussion of my findings, limitations of my study, and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter One introduced *The Walking Dead* and outlined the framework for this study. The next chapter expands the discussion of leadership styles and their theoretical framework, explores previous studies on both crisis leadership and *The Walking Dead*, and discusses *The Walking Dead* as an artifact in greater detail.

#### **Leadership Styles**

Hackman and Johnson (2009) identify three stages of a crisis: the pre-crisis stage, the crisis event, and the post-crisis stage. Periods of normalcy constitute the pre-crisis stage, where “leaders typically assume that the risks of a crisis occurring are low” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 403). During this stage, it is the responsibility of the leader to alert to warning signs, identify possible areas of trouble, develop a crisis management plan, and have enough legitimacy as a leader to maintain control (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). A trigger event signifies the start of the crisis, where harm is done to people, property, and the environment. During the crisis event, leadership should focus to damage control. “They initiate action, serve as spokespeople, engage in vigilant decision making, and connect to core values” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 411). When the immediate danger has past and the organization has been able to resume its normal operations, the post-crisis stage is in effect (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Leadership during this stage is concerned with restoring the organization to its pre-crisis

stage through learning and healing. Hackman and Johnson (2009) provide four distinct leadership styles which contribute to identifying crisis leadership in *The Walking Dead*. They include situational leadership, functional leadership, relational leadership, and transformational leadership.

**Situational leadership.** As Hackman and Johnson (2009) stated, “these approaches, often called contingency approaches, assume that leadership behavior is contingent on variations in the situation” (p. 77). Differences within situational leadership can be attributed to task and relational structure, superior-subordinate interactions, or even the motivation of followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). If an instance of Rick’s leadership style suggests a situational approach, it was examined through the path-goal theory. This theory is based on expectancy theory, which states that “followers will be more motivated to be productive when they believe that successful task completion will provide a path to a valuable goal” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 80). For Rick’s leadership to fall within the path-goal theory of situational leadership, two situational variables will surface as most influential. The first is the nature of the followers Rick is attempting to lead. These individuals change throughout the course of the series. The second variable is the nature of the task. Some tasks require more potential sacrifice from followers, therefore Rick would have to provide specific expectations for task assignments working for the greater good of the group.

Hersey and Blanchard first noted Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) in 1969. Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) define situational leadership as a practical model that can be used by a wide variety of people due to the adaptability of the theory to multiple variations in a given situation. According to SLT, leaders will be more effective

in influencing followers if the leaders can properly diagnose the situation, communicate accordingly, and maintain flexibility as the situation changes (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

**Functional leadership.** The functional approach looks at the communicative behavior of leaders (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). It suggests that leadership is determined by the ability to communicate like a leader. Based on the early work of Chester Barnard (1938), this approach was furthered by Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats in 1948. Benne and Sheats (1948) identified three types of group roles: task-related, group building and maintenance, and individual. As noted by the name, the functional approach suggests the necessary functions required by a leader. This approach provides “a useful framework for identifying communication behaviors that contribute to the exercise of leadership” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 89). For Rick’s leadership, the functional approach is exhibited when he starts to behave like a leader. If Rick assigns a task, initiates action, gives support, or mediates conflict, his leadership style could fall within the functional approach. Hackman and Johnson (2009) provide examples of functional leadership from ordinary people which surfaced during the events of September 11, 2001. Office workers carried injured colleagues down the stairs of the World Trade Center, while firefighters rushed up to help victims. Hackman and Johnson (2009) also state that ordinary people near Ground Zero pulled pedestrians off the street and out of harm’s way. These examples of functional leadership show that ordinary people began to act like leaders during the crisis of September 11, 2001 and therefore became functional leaders.

**Relational leadership.** While situational leadership focuses on the characteristics of leaders and followers, and functional leadership focuses on behaviors, the relational approach examines the relationships among leaders and followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Within this approach, the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provides the theoretical construct. LMX theory looks at the individual relationship between a leader and a follower (Uhl-Bien, 2003).

The early stages of LMX theory stem from the vertical dyad linkage model (VDL) developed by George Graen (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Graen found that leaders treat individual followers differently and that followers offered differing descriptions of the same leader (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). In *The Walking Dead*, different followers might view Rick's leadership styles in differing ways. Shane, for instance, went so far as to attempt to overthrow Rick as the leader. Conversely, Glenn was always ready to follow Rick's leadership and consequently viewed him much differently than Shane did. Hackman and Johnson (2009) go on to say that some followers indicated a positive relationship with their leader, resulting in high levels of trust and respect for the leader. For followers who perceived their leader more negatively, the importance of the work being done was lower (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). These two types of relationships with the leader resulted in followers being in the in-group or the out-group. Followers in the in-group are likely to be an assistant, lieutenant, or advisor to the leader, while the remaining followers consist of the out-group. Members of the in-group are given more freedom to develop tasks and are given more responsibility and influence in decision making (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

Authoritarian and task-oriented leadership communication is often evident in out-group exchanges (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

**Transformational leadership.** First outlined by James MacGregor Burns (1978), the transformational approach parallels Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Burns (1978) viewed leaders as either transactional, attending to basic human needs, or transformational, a more complex and fulfilling version of a leader. Subsequent researchers, however, have suggested that in order to be a transformational leader, one must first be a transactional leader. Ted Zorn (1991) found a relationship between the complexity of a leader's communication system and the tendency to exhibit transformational leadership behavior (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Zorn (1991) discovered those leaders with the most developed cognitive and communicative abilities were the more likely to be perceived as transformational by their followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). When Rick was considered as applying the transformational approach, he exhibited five primary characteristics: creativity, interaction, vision, empowerment, and passion.

### **Crisis Leadership**

In a textual analysis of 52 articles, Littlefield and Quenette (2007) explored media influence on how crisis responses are framed. The study centered around Hurricane Katrina and examined reports on the military, the Department of Homeland Security, President Bush, and both local and federal government (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007). Littlefield and Quenette (2007) relied on the definition of crises provided by Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003). Seeger et al. included "high levels of uncertainty, confusion, disorientation, surprise, shock, and stress" (2003, p. 125). Littlefield and Quenette (2007)

also explained that it is the responsibility of those in positions of authority to exhibit crisis leadership to restore order. In the case of Rick in *The Walking Dead*, he is in a position of authority, and therefore, is responsible for leading the group through instances of crisis.

The Littlefield and Quenette (2007) study led to my examination of the Seeger et al. book *Communication and Organizational Crisis* (2003). Seeger et al. stated that “crisis planning reduces uncertainty by putting as much relevant information and as many resources and contingencies in place as possible” (2003, p. 16). This is accomplished through effective crisis leadership, which includes pre-planning and forethought as to what potential crises may arise. Seeger et al. (2003) also discussed the strategic response to a crisis. Leadership may be questioned depending on the extent of the crisis, so post-crisis responses “seek to answer questions and provide adequate interpretations and plausible explanations for the crisis” (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 16). My examination of Rick’s crisis leadership considers what attempts he made to plan for potential crises. Some crises are unpredictable, but steps can still be taken to be as prepared as possible to maintain order. Also, I examined Rick’s post-crisis response to identify how he was or was not able to answer questions about his legitimacy and effectiveness as a leader.

A study by Boin, Kuipers, and Overkijk (2013) examined the framework for leadership performance in times of crisis. Boin et al. defined crisis management as “the sum of activities aimed at minimizing the impact of a crisis (2013, p. 81). The impact of a crisis for Rick is measured in terms of damage to people and loss of resources. Rick’s leadership before, during, and after a crisis has a direct influence on the impact. Boin et al. (2013) explained that effective crisis management saves lives. Throughout the

moments of crisis within *The Walking Dead*, Rick is often faced with leadership decisions that put lives at stake. Boin et al. (2013) listed three dimensions through which the effectiveness of crisis management can be assessed: making things happen, getting the job done, and fulfilling a symbolic need for direction and guidance. This is relevant to my examination of Rick's crisis leadership ability and style because Rick frequently attempts to accomplish all three of these dimensions. If he is effective in making things happen, he will implement actions that minimize the impact of a threat. In order to get the job done, Rick must be able to find creative solutions when a crisis goes in an unanticipated direction. Considering the world of *The Walking Dead*, Rick may also need to fulfill a symbolic need for direction and guidance to lead the group through crises in a manner consistent with leadership styles people were accustomed to before the fall of society. Boin et al. (2013) went on to explain the importance of communication between citizens, or the group of Rick's followers and organizations, or Rick acting as the leader. "It is also one of the main sources of problems, as means of communication often break down or become overloaded in the midst of a crisis" (Boin et al., 2013, p. 85). During instances of crisis in *The Walking Dead*, communication between Rick and the group is important not only to maintain the safety of the group, but also to establish how Rick's crisis leadership is perceived. Because the scope of my research extends to Rick's crisis leadership moments throughout the entire series, his ability to learn is a significant factor. Boin et al. (2013) noted that crisis management requires the ability to improvise, discover, and experiment. Rick noticeably evolves, or in some instances devolves, throughout the series. As different crises are presented to the group, Rick's ability to adapt and evolve as a leader is an important consideration.

## **The Walking Dead**

There are existing studies on both *The Walking Dead* AMC television series and the comic book series of the same name. This literature review includes both versions of the story, as the AMC television series relies heavily on the original characters and plot details first produced in the comic book. Previous research has explored various aspects of *The Walking Dead*, such as gender portrayal and television violence, however few scholars have explored the show from the perspectives of crisis leadership. My project contributes to the apparent gap in crisis leadership research in *The Walking Dead*.

One example of prior research of *The Walking Dead* is a study by Garland et al. (2016). The study explored gender roles within *The Walking Dead* comic book and how gendered violence is portrayed. Garland et al. (2016) used a combination of a content analysis to examine the cover images of the comic book and a narrative analysis of various story arcs. The content analysis yielded data that supported an essentially male-dominated cover art portfolio. “Women were more likely depicted as part of a group, family, or male-female dyad” (Garland et al., 2016, p. 8). A finding relevant to my study is that Rick, the designated patriarch, is typically portrayed confidently holding a gun or shielding someone with his body (Garland et al., 2016). He is always portrayed as the protector. Although challenging to gender equality, the fact that Rick is consistently seen in this manner reinforces my claim of him as a leader. A portion of the narrative analysis from Garland et al. stated that women in *The Walking Dead* are “portrayed as submissive and needing protection” (p. 15). This assertion is taken into the context of determining Rick’s leadership approach among the individuals in the group. The information from

Garland et al. (2016) provided an important consideration for how women are portrayed in the world of *The Walking Dead*.

A study which focused on *The Walking Dead* television series by Wright (2017) argued that “the television series stages a debate between tyrannical and democratic philosophies of political and moral governance” (p. 149). Wright (2017) noted that Rick attempts to serve as a reluctant leader in some instances, but there are also instances of him exhibiting a commanding leadership style. The study also examined how Rick is portrayed as a leader in a Darwinian sense (Wright, 2017). Rick possesses valuable resources and is therefore a leader by natural selection. While I agree that Rick sometimes possesses valuable resources, I apply definitions of leadership that are counter to the Darwinian reality to which Wright (2017) subscribed to.

**Cast.** The cast of *The Walking Dead* is relatively large, partly because characters die off while others are brought in. This consistently happened over the course of seven seasons. Andrew Lincoln plays Rick Grimes, the subject of crisis leadership in my study. Lincoln, a British actor, was educated at Beechen Cliff School in Bath, and then the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London (imdb.com, 2018). He was cast in *The Walking Dead* in 2010 and has remained the lead character through Season Seven. Other significant cast members include Melissa McBride, who plays former battered wife turned survival expert Carol, Norman Reedus, who plays tough guy with a heart of gold Daryl Dixon, and Chandler Riggs, who plays Rick’s coming of age son Carl Grimes. Lincoln is credited with 115 episodes, followed by Reedus with 113, and McBride with 112 (imdb.com, 2018). To put those number into perspective, *The Walking Dead* has a total of 115 episodes through Season Eight.

There are other characters significant to Rick's leadership role who have either been killed off or have been brought in as the series progressed. The most noteworthy of these are Jon Bernthal, who played Rick's former partner, Shane Walsh, and Sarah Wayne Callies, who played Rick's wife Lori Grimes. Within the following plot summary and subsequent analysis, I acknowledge the cast member of any other character who surfaces as relevant to an example of crisis leadership.

The undead also represent a significant factor in the cast. However, they are played by extras and never credited for their performances. To clarify the terminology of the series, Rick and his group refer to the undead as "walkers", while other people they encounter throughout the series refer to them differently. Other names used include "biters", "roamers", and "lurkers". Robert Kirkman, who created the comic book series used as the source material for the television series, stated that the omission of the word "zombie" was done for a specific purpose. Kirkman explained that zombie lore is very popular and he did not want the characters of *The Walking Dead* to be able to rely on information from movies and television during the apocalypse (Hoffmeyer, 2016). Characters in *The Walking Dead* universe have no preconceived idea on what a zombie is or how to kill them. Kirkman stated, "We wanted to give you a sense that *The Walking Dead* takes place in a universe where zombie fiction doesn't exist" (Hoffmeyer, 2016).

**Plot summary.** Season Eight of *The Walking Dead* premiered during this research and is not included in my study. For a detailed plot summary of each season, IMDb.com (2018) provided the following relevant information.

Season One began with Rick waking up in a hospital to find the world overrun by the undead. Rick had been shot in the line of duty as a small-town Deputy Sheriff in

Georgia and was in a coma for several weeks. Alone and confused, Rick made his way to Atlanta. There, he was rescued by a group of survivors, which set the stage for Rick to assume his role as a leader for the rest of the series. One of the members of this group was Glenn Rhee, played by Steven Yeun. Glenn proved to be a resourceful and trustworthy aide to Rick. Atlanta was a decidedly unsafe place to stay because of the sheer numbers of the dead, so the group headed to the outskirts to lessen their chances of encountering walkers. At that point, Rick was reunited with his wife Lori, his son Carl, and his former partner Shane. Season One concluded with the group making their way to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta in hopes of finding answers as to what happened to the world. As it turned out, the only answer Rick found was that every human being carried the virus and would turn into a walker after death, regardless of how they died. By the end of Season One, Rick surfaced as the leader of the group, but that leadership would be tested in Season Two.

The group started out Season Two with a plan to head to Fort Benning, Georgia. Along the way, events transpired which resulted in them seeking refuge at an isolated farm in rural Georgia. Several characters were introduced, including the patriarch of the farming family Hershel Greene, played by Scott Wilson, and Hershel's daughter Maggie Greene, played by Lauren Cohan. Throughout Season Two, the group stayed at Hershel's farm, only venturing out for supplies when needed. Some of those supplies included a pregnancy test for Lori, which was revealed to be positive during the season. Rick's leadership was challenged when Shane began to protest decisions made by Rick on behalf of the group. Season Two concluded with an emotional confrontation between Rick and Shane over Rick's leadership role. Rick was forced to shoot Shane to preserve

his status as the group's leader. Shortly after the confrontation, the farm became overrun with walkers and the group was forced to abandon the farm.

After months on the run, Season Three began with the group finding refuge in a federal prison. A villain known only as The Governor, played by David Morrissey, was introduced and provided a formidable opponent for Rick and the group. The Governor led a walled-off community which was kept relatively safe from walkers. Throughout Season Three, the Governor displayed signs of evil driven by a desire for power and personal loss. Also, during Season Three, Lori was closer to giving birth. Lori, Carl, and Maggie became isolated from the group and Lori went into labor. The child was born with the help of Carl and Maggie, but Lori died while giving birth. After learning of Lori's death, Rick struggled to cope. He teetered on insanity as the pain of losing his wife began to wear him down. All the while, the group encountered the Governor and his group on several occasions, which built up to a climactic battle to end the season. Rick eventually regained his sanity and led the group to victory over the antagonizing forces of the Governor. Defeated, the Governor retreated to the open world, bent on revenge against Rick.

In Season Four, Rick decided to forgo his leadership role. The group formed a committee to make leadership decisions. As the season progressed, however, Rick was forced to reclaim his role as a leader when the Governor, complete with a new group of followers, launched a devastating attack on the prison. Rick and the group faced a new crisis as they were left scattered and devastated after the attack. Season Four concluded with a series of episodes which focused on the people of Rick's group, some of whom were alone while others were in pairs or small groups. The final episode of Season Four

showed the group reunited. They were together, but they were being held as prisoners of a cannibalistic group. Rick rallied the group through his leadership and viewers were left hopeful for Season Five.

Through Rick's leadership during the crisis at hand, the group started off Season Five escaping from the cannibals. They were once again without a safe place to stay, like they had at the prison and at Herschel's farm. The group roamed the open road in search of resources and shelter for the first half of Season Five. They ended up going north to Virginia. A new character named Aaron, played by Ross Marquand, was introduced. Aaron claimed to be from a walled-off community and eventually invited Rick and the group to join him in the safe environment. Skeptical from previous encounters with strangers, Rick initially resisted Aaron's invitation. Rick eventually decided to investigate the community because his group desperately needed solace. The community, called Alexandria, proved to be a legitimate safe-haven for the group. Alexandria was led by former congressperson Deanna Monroe, played by Tovah Feldshuh. As the group attempted to assimilate into life in Alexandria, Rick once again struggled with his leadership role. Deanna was the leader of Alexandria but had not witnessed the horrors Rick and his group had. Season Five ended with Rick challenging Deanna's leadership and consequently being proven that he was right.

With Rick at the leadership helm of both his group and the people of Alexandria, Season Six started out detailing Rick's plan to better secure the community. An outlying group attacked Alexandria, but Rick and his people fended them off. Later in the season, while on a supply run, Rick and Daryl encountered a new character claiming to be from another community similar to Alexandria. This character, who went by the nickname

Jesus and played by Tom Payne, explained to Rick that there were other groups of survivors who wanted to work together. Meanwhile, other members of Rick's group encountered a group of men who called themselves the Saviors. Tensions between Rick's group and the Saviors mounted throughout the rest of the season. At the Season Six conclusion, Rick and his group were lured into a trap set by the Saviors. This led to a daunting and life-changing confrontation with the leader of the Saviors, Negan, played by Jeffery Dean Morgan.

Season Seven picked up right where Season Six left off. Rick and his group were overpowered by Negan and his Saviors and suffered heavy losses by Negan's hand. Rick was still the leader of his group in Alexandria, however he worked for Negan. Rick was tasked with gathering supplies for Negan and subjected to random raids by the Saviors. Life became extremely difficult for Rick and his group during Season Seven. Another group of survivors was introduced during this season. They, like Rick's group, were under the thumb of Negan's brutal reign. As Season Seven continued, the groups began to formulate a plan to work together and defeat Negan's forces. The plan, however, did not work out the way Rick and the others had envisioned. Season Seven concluded with a declaration of revolt being made against Negan by Rick and his people.

**Reviews and awards.** The series premiered on October 31, 2010. The first episode was a success, garnering a Nielsen rating of 2.7 in the 18-49 demographic, which translated to 3.6 million viewers (Kenneally, 2015). The series peaked in Season Five with an average of 14.4 million total viewers (Kenneally, 2015). *The Walking Dead* saw a ratings record of 15.8 million viewers for the Season Five finale (Kenneally, 2015). Ratings for Season Seven declined, however, to end as the lowest-rated closing episode

for the series since 2012 (Otterson, 2017). The Season Seven finale posted a 5.4 rating in the adults ages 18-49 demographic and 11.3 million viewers (Otterson, 2017).

Throughout the series, *The Walking Dead* was nominated for 176 awards, taking home 63 wins. Nominations and awards included a wide range of categories. *The Walking Dead* won the American Film Institute Award for Television Program of the Year in 2010 and 2012. The series also produced an award win for Jeffrey Dean Morgan as Best Guest Performer in a Drama Series by the Critic's Choice Television Awards. *The Walking Dead* won five People's Choice Awards and two Primetime Emmy Awards over multiple categories.

**Fandom.** *The Walking Dead* inspired an after show called *Talking Dead*, where host Chris Hardwick talks with *The Walking Dead* cast members, writers, producers, and even interacts with fans via social media during the live broadcast. The hour-long program follows each episode of *The Walking Dead* to discuss the events of that episode, which in most cases has just finished airing. An example of the ratings for Talking Dead shows that the November 26, 2017 episode scored an audience of 3.2 million people (Patten, 2017). During this episode of Talking Dead, Hardwick conducted a live reveal of what character from *The Walking Dead* would be crossing over to the spinoff series *Fear The Walking Dead*. After Season Eight of *The Walking Dead*, Morgan will make the transition to *Fear The Walking Dead* to connect the original series to the spinoff series, which premiered in 2015.

AMC and *The Walking Dead* engage fans through contests and social media interactions. For instance, AMC offered a contest for fans to submit fan art for a chance to win tickets to the Season Eight premiere in Los Angeles in October. To enter, fans had

to create an essay, video, or a piece of artwork. Prior contests included a chance to win a “stagger on” role as a walker during a taping of *The Walking Dead*. Contestants were instructed to watch *Talking Dead* during the Season Three preview weekend. During the broadcast, a code was revealed for fans to enter online for their chance to win.

### **Summary**

This chapter focused on discussing the four leadership styles used in this study, as well as their theoretical framework. I examined previous relevant studies on both crisis leadership and *The Walking Dead*. Lastly, this chapter expanded the description of *The Walking Dead* as an artifact by detailing the cast, plot summary, reviews and awards, and fandom associated with the series. Chapter Three explores the key concepts of ideology and discusses the work of relevant theorists.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter examined leadership styles, explored prior research on crisis leadership and *The Walking Dead*, and described *The Walking Dead* as an artifact. This chapter focuses on ideological criticism, which is the method used for my analysis. Ideology is defined as a “system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world” (Foss, 2018, p. 237). The cultural perspective is discussed as well as the process for conducting ideological criticism.

#### **Cultural Perspective**

There are multiple ways to distinguish ideologies. For instance, social issues can result in ideologies based on evaluative beliefs, meaning that there are possible alternative judgements (Foss, 2018). Group values and beliefs are reflective of group beliefs in ideologies, as opposed to personal values and beliefs. Ideologies interpret and evaluate different sets of beliefs among groups and the relevant attitudes towards those beliefs (Foss, 2018). Critics working from the cultural perspective explore oppressive relations and the potentially liberating forces within the created culture (Foss, 2018).

An article by Rushing and Frenz (1991) explored how ideological studies have contributed to changing rhetorical criticism by developing an integrated approach to rhetorical criticism that attempted to rectify existing favoritism of external relations over internal realities. Rushing and Frenz (1991) stated that “the most profound contribution

has been the acknowledgement that discourses often function covertly to legitimize the power of elite social classes” (p. 385). By doing this, the social order is protected from change and seen as applicable to all cases (Rushing & Frenzt, 1991). *The Walking Dead* can be explored through ideological criticism to see how the upheaval of the elite social classes might affect humanity, although according to Rushing and Frenzt (1991), the critic must exhibit a moral commitment during the examination. For the critic to act as a moral agent, Rushing and Frenzt (1991) examined the contexts the critic can analyze the culture through the texts it produces, considered the ability of the critic to recommend cultural change, and explored the experience between the critic and the text.

Crisis leadership within *The Walking Dead* is a product of the culture created by the group of survivors based on survival and the struggle to maintain their humanity. Stuart Hall explained that culture is experience lived, experience interpreted, and experience defined (Hsu, 2017). Hall believed that cultural studies can reveal things about the world that more traditional studies of politics or economics could not. This study examines the culture of crisis leadership within a popular culture artifact, *The Walking Dead*. Hall also stated that ideology is “a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes rather than an intention of the agent” (1989, p.88). Ideological theory focuses on the effects of discourse and can therefore supplement the function of rhetoric to analyze public discourse.

According to Foss (2018), “ideologies often include attention to a core set of topics or concerns related to the group” (p. 238). Ten subjects are usually addressed in ideologies, including membership, activities, goals, core belief, defining event, sacred text, ultimate authority, values/norms, position and group relations, and resources. In

order for group members to actively participate in the group, the ideology must be clear. Ideologies help individuals act as part of the greater, collective group. Within the world of *The Walking Dead*, many different groups exist and vie for power, resources, and members to aid in their survival. For Rick's group, a hegemonic view of the world evolves as they progress throughout the series. The group sees themselves as a force for good, even electing to follow Rick's plans to help others in peril while putting themselves at great risk because it is who they are. Hall (1977) explained that ideologies are sets of rules which link certain things with a context and exclude others. In this case, even though the group appears to be acting altruistically, their ideology of being "the good guys" serves to exclude others as not part of the good. Rick's group does not always have more power than other groups in terms of people and resources, but because they are the focus of the series, they have the rhetorical power of being the main characters. Foss (2018) stated that "a hegemonic ideology must be renewed, reinforced, and defended continually through the use of rhetorical strategies and practices (p. 239). In doing this, the position of dominance is maintained by the group. There are instances in *The Walking Dead* when Rick's leadership is questioned. Those questions tend to be muted in order to preserve the hegemonic ideology of the group. Discovering what ideologies are muted is part of the process of ideological criticism.

### **Ideological Criticism**

Theorists involved with cultural studies believe that culture "consists of everyday discursive practices, with these discursive practices both embodying and constructing a culture's ideology" (Foss, 2018, p. 241). Meaning and ideologies surface through struggles of individuals within popular culture artifacts, therefore ideological criticism

was selected as the method to identify existing arrangements and the ideology behind them, call attention to them, and open the way to envision alternatives to create a better world (Foss, 2018).

With virtually any artifact being available for ideological analysis, I chose *The Walking Dead* due to its popularity and potential to reflect ideologies that audiences are not expecting to find in a horror genre television series. When conducting ideological criticism, Foss (2018) stated that the critic may choose to focus on certain aspects of the artifact. The entire series serves as the basis for establishing crisis leadership moments, which are the focus of my analysis. Foss (2018) provides four steps for critics to explore an artifact for the ideology it manifests: identifying the presented elements of the artifact, identifying the suggested elements linked to the presented elements, formulating an ideology, and identifying the functions served by the ideology.

**Identifying presented elements.** Clues to the ideology of an artifact are identified by focusing on the rhetorical aspects of the artifact. The critic seeks to identify the assumptions, presuppositions, or premises behind the artifact that constitute its ideology. Individual signs that point to ideological tenets in the artifact are examined, working back to the implicit ideology through the rhetorical content and form of the artifact (Foss, 2018). Coding the artifact for presented elements is an effective way to begin the process of identifying the assumptions that construct a particular ideology.

To analyze *The Walking Dead*, this research used the close textual analysis method described by Carl Burghardt (1995) which attempts to discover what makes a text function persuasively by examining the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and the relevant historical context. My analysis began by viewing the

entire series of *The Walking Dead* through Season Seven. No coding was done during this viewing, allowing me to experience the series as a traditional audience member. I then revisited the series, coding it for crisis leadership moments according to the operational definition of any instance where the group faced a specific situation with the potential to damage the integrity of the group or threaten their survival, and Rick made direct decisions on behalf of the group to address those specific situations. These observable instances of crisis leadership served as the presented elements of the artifact. Considerations for identification of the crisis leadership elements included major arguments, types of evidence, images, particular terms or metaphors, and physical features when visual aspects of crisis leadership were presented.

As the presented elements were identified, they were gathered and entered in an Excel spreadsheet. Each element was labeled by season, episode, and description of the situation in which the leadership moment took place. After the information was compiled, the presented elements within each crisis leadership moment were coded according to the specific leadership style as described in Chapter Two.

**Identifying suggested elements.** Foss (2018) explained that the second step of ideological criticism involves the critic “articulating ideas, references, themes, allusions, or concepts that are suggested by the presented elements” (p. 244). The identification of the meanings suggested by the elements serve as the basis for the ideological tenets (Foss, 2018). To accomplish this step, my research added ideas or concepts suggested by the connotations of each presented element documented in the spreadsheet. The data compiled at this stage were used to discover the ideology of the artifact. My analysis

transformed the key presented and suggested elements into an ideology, which is the next step in ideological criticism according to Foss (2018).

**Formulating an ideology.** During the third step in ideological criticism, I grouped the suggested elements into categories and organized them into a coherent framework. This framework constituted the ideology I suggested is implicit in the crisis leadership moments. To accomplish this, the data were coded according to the core set of ideological topics discussed by Foss (2018) and the corresponding questions to identify each subject. Answers to these questions will reveal the formulation of an ideology.

**Membership.** According to the ideology, who are the adherents to the ideology or members of the group that espouses the ideology? Where are they from? What do they look like? Who can become a member of the group?

Activities. What do those who espouse the ideology do? What is expected of them?

**Goals.** Why do those who are committed to the ideology do what they do? What do they want to accomplish?

**Core belief.** What one major idea best characterizes the essence of the ideology?

**Defining event.** What event, invention, time period, movement, court case, or condition had the most influence on shaping the ideology?

**Sacred text.** What document, book, or film best captures the commitments embedded in the ideology?

**Ultimate authority.** Who or what is the sanctioning agent or highest authority, according to the ideology? Is it, for example, a set of documents such as annual reports and stock indexes? Is it a method of rating such as best-seller lists or box-office receipts? Is it a deity such as a God, Great Spirit, or Mother Earth?

**Values/norms.** What are the main values embedded in the ideology? How do adherents to the ideology evaluate or assess themselves and others? What things should they do or not do?

**Position and group relations.** Who are the supporters of the group members? Who are their enemies or opponents?

**Resources.** What are the essential social resources the group has or needs to have? (p. 238)

After applying these questions and coding the data accordingly, I formulated an ideology based on further questions Foss explained help with the process. These questions included determining the preferred reading of the crisis leadership moments in, *The Walking Dead* what we are asked to believe, what arguments are commended, what values are present, what alternative interpretations exist, and what is unacceptable, negative, or marginal (2018, p. 247).

**Identifying functions served by the ideology.** After the ideology was constructed from the artifact, the task for the rhetorical critic involved discovering how that ideology functioned for the audience and the consequences it had in the world (Foss, 2018). The functions of the ideology were discovered by asking if it encouraged the audience to accept a particular position on a social issue, if it presented a view of a condition that is misguided or inappropriate, or if there was a marginalized perspective presented. Identifying the functions served by the ideology found within the crisis leadership moments in *The Walking Dead* reflected the audience's ability to trust in leadership, view the conditions of what style of leadership is appropriate in given scenarios, or if in-groups were prioritized over out-groups.

## Summary

This chapter provided background on the cultural perspective of ideological criticism used within the analysis. It explained the presence of culture within crisis leadership moments and theoretical contributions to cultural studies within ideological criticism. The chapter then provided the four steps outlined by Foss (2018) to apply ideological criticism to discover the dominant ideology within a chosen artifact.

The next chapter provides the critique of ideological criticism based on the method described in Chapter Three. Chapter Four analyzes the identified examples of crisis leadership in *The Walking Dead* and the implications of the ideology used by Rick through rhetorical processes during crisis leadership moments.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

Using the methodological approach explained in Chapter Three, this chapter applies an ideological perspective to *The Walking Dead* by analyzing three crises that exemplify Rick's leadership style. During these events, Rick exhibited functional, situational, and transformational leadership. The first observable instance of crisis leadership chosen for analysis takes place during Season One. The events take place at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, and are played out over the course of two episodes as immediate leadership decisions are forced to be made. The second instance of crisis leadership unfolds over the course of three episodes from Season Five. Rick and the group are demoralized from a series of difficulties and losses, but an offer from a stranger forces Rick to make difficult decisions that might put the group in danger. The last instance takes place in the first episode of Season Six. During this event, Rick must not only lead his group with a complex plan to ensure their safety, but also integrate another group into the mix who are new to Rick's leadership style.

Chapter Four discusses the presented elements of each of these events, connects the elements with what ideas they suggest or reinforce, formulates the ideology that has been created, and discusses the resulting functions of the ideology. I also identify the leadership styles employed by Rick as he deals with each crisis faced by the group of survivors.

## **Identifying Presented Elements**

**Crisis at the CDC.** The first presented element primarily comes from Season One, Episode Six, entitled “TS-19” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). Audiences are introduced to Dr. Jenner in Season One, Episode Five, entitled “Wildfire” (Mazzara & Dickerson, 2010), through a cut scene showing his ongoing research within the CDC, even though he is all alone. After losing his most prized test sample due to automated contamination protocols, Dr. Jenner says during a video log entry, “The TS-19 samples are gone. The tragedy of their loss cannot be overstated” (Mazzara & Dickerson, 2010). Dr. Jenner continues his video log and after assuming there is no one left to view his documentation, he casually says, “I think tomorrow I’ll blow my brains out. I haven’t decided. But tonight, I’m getting drunk.” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). Viewers get to see the bleak reality within the CDC, but to Rick and the group, it is still a viable possibility for solace. As Episode Five concludes, Dr. Jenner is alerted to the presence of Rick’s group outside of the locked-down CDC building. As walkers descend on the group, Rick notices a camera move. He pleads with whoever is on the other side of the camera to open the secure door to the CDC and let the group in, saying “you’re killing us” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). After stating to himself he wished the group would just go away, Dr. Jenner begrudgingly opens the door and lets the group in. As Episode Six begins, Dr. Jenner asks the group who they are and what they want. Rick answers, “A chance” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). Dr. Jenner replies, “That’s asking a lot these days” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). Dr. Jenner allows the group to fully enter the CDC and introduces himself to Rick. Dr. Jenner then allows the group access to hot food, beds, and even showers, amenities the survivors thought they would

never experience again. The group soon discovers that Dr. Jenner has no answers for them and that the CDC is not a sustainable safehouse. As a large timer counts down, the group uncovers the fact that once the timer reaches zero, the building will be sealed and automatically begin decontamination procedures by means of an explosion of over 5,000 degrees. Dr. Jenner cryptically says to himself, “You always think there is going to be more time. Then it runs out.” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). As the 30-minute mark approaches, Rick is the first group member to decide that they need to get out of the CDC as soon as possible. Dr. Jenner, who lost hope after TS-19 was destroyed, prematurely seals the doors and states that it is better for all of them to simply give up. Rick and several other group members attempt to break down the door, but it is impenetrable. Other group members continue to talk with Dr. Jenner, trying to reason with him to let them go. Rick joins this effort, stating that he “has to keep his group alive” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). Dr. Jenner continues to stay his course by saying it will be easier to die in the CDC. One of the other group members, Shane, loses his cool and tries to attack Dr. Jenner. Rick defends him, knocking Shane to the ground with a blow to the stomach. Rick then continues talking to Dr. Jenner, repeatedly asking him to open the door for the group. At this point, Dr. Jenner reveals that TS-19, or Test Subject 19, was his wife who volunteered to be studied after she had been bitten by a walker. As the timer continues to count down, less than four minutes, Rick and the group become desperate. Rick eventually convinces Dr. Jenner to open the inner door and allow the group a chance to breach the upper doors. At this point, Rick decides to use the group’s only hand grenade to blow out a window, so they can make their escape. The

other group members agree with this decision. Once the window is cleared out, the group runs to safety outside of the CDC just as the building violently explodes behind them.

This situation also illustrates Hackman and Johnson's (2009) stages of a crisis. The pre-crisis stage for this event was when Rick and the group decided to enter the CDC. At first, it gave the group a sense of normalcy. Rick was able to sit down, have a meal, and "assume that the risks of a crisis occurring were low" (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 403). The trigger event that signified the start of a crisis was the discovery of the timer counting down to the massive explosion. During this event, Rick focused on damage control, which is what Hackman and Johnson (2009) suggest is appropriate behavior for a leader. One example of this was when Rick subdued Shane while trying to reason with Dr. Jenner. The second example of damage control, or in this case not allowing any member of the group die, came when Rick decided to use the hand grenade to make an exit. The post-crisis stage was in effect when Rick and the group were away from the building as it erupted in flames.

During this observable example of crisis leadership, Rick used different strategies which fall into the functional leadership approach. The behaviors Rick exhibited during this phase are example of both verbal and physical functional leadership. His first attempt to lead the group to safety was to break down the door which led to freedom. Rick communicated to the group that he was willing to physically break down a door for them. When this strategy failed, he attempted to reason with Dr. Jenner and appeal to his sense of humanity. Rick used terms such as "alive" and "survive" when pleading with Dr. Jenner. As the leader of the group, Rick became the spokesperson to reason with Dr. Jenner. He even physically intervened and protected Dr. Jenner so he could continue the

verbal appeal. However, this strategy became just as futile as his first attempt, trying to break down a steel door with an ax. He was the primary communicator with Dr. Jenner and when Shane tried to apply force, Rick subdued him in a display of physical leadership. Finally, Rick's plan shifted to using a valuable asset, the hand grenade, to save the group from certain death. This stage of functional leadership was a combination of rationale and force. Rick was able to rationalize using the group's only hand grenade to force open an exit to save his followers.

**Alexandria.** As my analysis progresses to Season Five, Rick continued to be the leader of the main group of survivors. Some original group members died, while others were added. The evolving group to this point has faced several difficulties which served to shape Rick's leadership. As discussed previously, Rick and the group placed their hope and trust in the CDC, which ended up serving as a sense of false security. The group thought they had established a sustainable life at both a farm and an abandoned prison in Seasons Two through Four. Each instance proved to be false hope, just as the CDC did, however they lasted for longer periods of time. The group was driven from each of these locations through a combination of walkers and dramatic complications from other human beings. After being dispersed from the prison during Season Four, the group became separated into sub groups of two or three individuals. While trying to find the other members of the main group, each sub group independently decided to follow signs posted along railroad tracks. These signs led to a place called Terminus, which promised shelter and community for all who made it. Once the smaller groups arrived, they found the other members of the main group had also made it to Terminus. The promise of shelter and community offered by the signs leading to Terminus, however,

proved to be the most disingenuous. The people waiting arrivals at Terminus were cannibals who lured unsuspecting bands of survivors to their doom by promising shelter and community. As events unfolded, Rick and his reunited group managed to escape the horrific scene at Terminus, but Rick had become increasingly jaded by any possibility of hope offered by the new world. After Terminus, the group set out on the road with Rick firmly back in place as the leader of the group. They were together again, but they were in dire straits without a consistent source of food, water, or shelter. As Season Five progressed, the group became more and more desperate to survive. They were forced to eat dogs, siphoned potable water wherever they could, and eventually took shelter in an abandoned barn. It was there in the barn where a life-changing offer was presented to Rick and the group. At the end of Season Five, Episode Ten, entitled “Them”, a stranger who introduced himself as Aaron approached the group with an offer to join his community (Bellson & Ramsay, 2015).

Aaron claimed to be from a walled-off community called Alexandria. As he stood in the entrance of the barn, he explained to Rick that he had been watching the group to determine if they would be a good fit to include in Alexandria. Aaron even provided pictures of the walls in an attempt to prove the stability of Alexandria was real. During Season Five, Episode Eleven, entitled “The Distance” (Hoffman & Kondracki, 2015), Rick listened to Aaron’s seemingly miraculous offer, walked up to him, and knocked him out cold with a punch to the face. After Aaron regained consciousness, and the group had time to deliberate, Rick allowed a few group members to go with Aaron to see if he were telling the truth about having vehicles nearby to transport the entire group back to Alexandria. Weary of false hope, Rick tells Aaron, “Just because we’re good

people, doesn't mean we won't kill you" (Hoffman & Kondracki, 2015). The few group members who investigated Aaron's initial story returned to Rick and explain that what Aaron told them was true. Rick decided that they would indeed follow Aaron's directions and risk going to Alexandria. Once they arrived, Rick and the group found that Alexandria was exactly what Aaron had promised.

Throughout the group's journey from desperate road-weary survivors to citizens of Alexandria, Rick exhibited situational leadership. Rick's leadership style during this period of crisis can be attributed to his "contingent behavior on variations in the situation" (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 77). When Aaron first made himself known to the group, Rick did not trust him because of previous experiences the group had with strangers who promised hope. Hackman and Johnson also explained that situational leadership can be examined through expectancy theory, which stated that "followers will be more motivated to be productive when they believe that successful task completion will provide a path to a valuable goal" (2009, p. 80). In the initial stages of the Alexandria crisis, some group members believed that Aaron's invitation was worthy of investigating, while others were more skeptical. Through his use of situational leadership, Rick tasked out several group members to see if Aaron was telling the truth about the vehicle he brought to transport the entire group back to Alexandria in. The followers completed the task believing that if Aaron proved to be truthful, the group would have a potential safe place to go to. Rick's followers reflected his nature by being just as desperate as Rick was to find a viable place to stay through an investigation of Aaron's story. The nature of the task also coincides with Hackman and Johnson's (2009) explanation of situational leadership.

As the Alexandria scenario with Aaron developed, Rick continued to use situational leadership. He initially rejected Aaron's promise of a safe, secure Alexandria, but after the first stage of verifying Aaron's story, Rick altered his view based on the variation in the situation. Once Rick was satisfied that the first part of Aaron's story checked out, he agreed to formulate a plan to travel to Alexandria. Aaron presented a preferable route to Rick, but Rick, still not trustful of Aaron, decided to take an alternate route in case Aaron's route was a trap. This route proved to be more dangerous due to walkers, as Aaron attempted to explain, but that again was part of Rick's situational leadership approach. The task of taking a more dangerous route to Alexandria required more potential sacrifice from the group, but they were willing to attempt it in order to work for the greater good of the group. The group faced the challenge of fighting off walkers while they attempted to get to Alexandria. They succeeded in their efforts, regrouped, and continued the last leg of the journey to the gate of Alexandria. Once there, Rick's situational leadership style faced one last variation in the situation: the sound of children playing within the walls of Alexandria. The path Rick chose was not easy. His followers had to accomplish dangerous tasks to reach the valuable goal of entering Alexandria.

**The Plan.** Season Six, Episode One, entitled "First Time Again" (Gimple, Negrete, & Nicotero, 2015), sees Rick and the group battling walkers alongside residents of Alexandria. When they first came to Alexandria, Rick's group tried to assimilate with the survivors within the community. Some of the group made the transition easier than others. Rick was one who had difficulty lowering his guard. In the time between their arrival in Alexandria and "First Time Again," Rick was able to somewhat temper his

violent ways and again surfaced as a leader of the combined group. The people of Alexandria were led by Deanna, a former Congressional Representative in the world before the zombie apocalypse. She recognized that Rick and his group brought a new level of survival experience with them. The entire episode “Fist Time Again” centered on Rick’s plan to preemptively remove a large herd of walkers that had amassed near Alexandria before they were alerted to the community. Deanna told her people that Rick was in charge and they were to follow Rick’s plan. Some of the residents of Alexandria, particularly Carter, were not comfortable with Rick’s plan. One of Rick’s group members overheard Carter trying to convince other Alexandrians that Rick needed to be killed. Rick came upon the scene, disarmed Carter, and pointed a gun at his head. After Carter admitted his plot, Rick lowered the gun and asked Carter if he was willing to work with Rick’s group to try to survive. Carter agreed with Rick’s request and the combined groups began to implement Rick’s plan.

During this crisis leadership event, Rick exhibited a transformational leadership approach. To be considered a transformational leader, Rick must exhibit five primary characteristics: creativity, interaction, vision, empowerment, and passion (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Rick was creative in using what items the group had available to divert the herd of walkers. As the herd began to emerge from the quarry where they had gathered, Rick instructed the group to use flares to divert the walkers along the path Rick wanted. Throughout the episode, Rick interacted with members of his own group differently than he did with members of the group from Alexandria. Rick tried to get both groups to work together during the planned walker movement. He was more thorough in explaining the plan to the new group, knowing his old group already

supported him. Rick demonstrated vision by deciding something had to be done about the herd of walkers. Early in the episode while he addressed the whole group, Rick said, “We have to come for them before they come for us” (Darabont, 2014). While the combined group was preparing the route for the herd, Rick saw an opportunity for empowerment. A few of the group members from Alexandria were working on a wall when a few rogue walkers approached them. Rick told his group members to stand down and encouraged the Alexandrians to dispatch the walkers. Rick knew that the Alexandrians did not have much experience killing walkers, so he took the opportunity to teach them how to do it. The last characteristic of transformational leadership that Rick exhibited was passion. Rick motivated the entire group with a rousing speech before the plan was implemented. He was on the ground and took on several of the most dangerous tasks alongside group members. Rick knew the plan was dangerous, but he still managed to lead the combined groups in their effort to divert the herd away from Alexandria.

### **Identifying suggested elements**

**Crisis at the CDC.** When considering their options, the group decided that the CDC would be a logical place to seek out. The building was within their range of travel, although they would have to traverse the dangerous landscape filled with walkers. They thought the CDC would be a secure place and might also provide information on the state of the world beyond their immediate surroundings. Some in the group thought that if there were a cure, the CDC would be the most logical place to find it. As Foss (2018) explained, identifying the suggested elements is “the step at which you identify the meanings suggested by elements what will serve as the basis for ideological tenets” (p. 244). The first visual shot of the CDC showed it as almost a castle. The building looked

secure, safe, and in good order. This idea of a refuge, an oasis, among the death and carnage of the outside world pulled the group to the CDC. Dr. Jenner referenced the fact that prior to the current state of things, the CDC “protected people from horrible things” (Fierro, Darabont, & Ferland, 2010). The CDC as a presented element served as a potential wonderful place in a turbulent world. As the scenario unfolded, though, the CDC became part of a theme consistent throughout *The Walking Dead*: things are not always what they seem. In this instance, the CDC suggests an element of false security. Rick and the group were looking for anything that could help them make sense of the world around them and offer protection. The group knew the CDC from before the apocalypse as a source of information. The building provided protection. The group placed their hope in these aspects of the CDC, only to have them dashed once the reality of the state of the world surfaced.

Rick’s functional leadership during this time of crisis, once it was initiated, also served as a contributing factor to the recurring theme of overcoming false hope through strong leadership. This event took place early in the series. Season One focused on introducing characters, developing the story, and explaining how chaotic the new state of the world was. Up to the crisis at the CDC, Rick had been a reluctant leader mainly due to the fact that he was a sheriff’s deputy prior to the zombie outbreak. He also had a wife and son among the group, who he knew he had to protect as a husband and father. The events at the CDC gave viewers the first definitive example of Rick’s leadership. Through each phase of the crisis at the CDC, Rick proved to be the definitive leader of the group. The theme of Rick being a strong and capable was established during this crisis. The suggested elements in this case are false hope and Rick’s ability to lead the

group through a crisis resulting from false hope. On the surface, the CDC looked to be safe, secure, and sustainable. It proved to not be that, however Rick proved to be a trustworthy leader who was capable of saving the group when false hope surfaced.

**Alexandria.** Aaron brought the group news of another potential example of false hope. Rick did not trust him initially, but he was able to cautiously lead the group to Alexandria. The photographs Aaron provided the group of the walls at Alexandria recalled the similar hope of the CDC. Aaron became a suggested element of false hope because of the group's previous encounter at Terminus. Aaron was a stranger and Rick, at this stage, was not ready to trust anyone he did not know. These suggested elements on their own might represent how nothing in the world of Rick and his group were as they seemed. Aaron and Alexandria could both be further examples of false hope. As the road to Alexandria continued to develop, however, Aaron proved to be truthful. Alexandria was not false hope. Although Rick was slow to trust Aaron, he relied on situational leadership which allowed him and his group to be part of a safe colony. The concept of trust surfaces as a suggested element throughout the group's journey to Alexandria. Rick was slowly able to trust Aaron more and more as the journey went forward. Another significant idea that resulted from identifying the suggested elements of Alexandria was the sound of children playing within the walls. When Rick heard the children, he was finally able to relax his guard and even smiled.

**The Plan.** Rick's plan to relocate the herd of walkers away from Alexandria suggested an element of trying to eliminate false hope. Alexandria was a safe place for the time being, but Rick knew that it would be another instance of false hope if the herd migrated towards the community. The concept of taking action to protect others is raised

throughout this episode. Even Carter attempted to take action to protect his people, although Rick was quick to change Carter's mind. Rick's transformational leadership provided a strong suggested element from this episode. As newcomers to Alexandria, Rick and his group were unsure of how to integrate with the people of Alexandria. Rick had experienced things the people of Alexandria had not, so he was in a much stronger mode of survival, along with the rest of his group. When faced with the threat of a large herd of walkers threatening all of Alexandria, Rick assumed the role of transformational leader to incorporate both groups in solving the problem. The idea of a leader bringing everyone together suggested the greatness of Rick's leadership capability. He discovered the threat, formulated the plan, and brought everyone together to implement the plan.

### **Formulating an ideology**

As Foss (2018) described in the third step of ideological criticism, the ideology is formulated based on the suggested elements alone. In formulating the ideology, I discuss how the elements of membership, shared activities, goals, core beliefs, the defining event, the text that the group considers "sacred," ultimate authority, values/norms, position and group relations, and the resources they have establish the ideology.

**Crisis at the CDC.** The suggested elements of the CDC as false hope and Rick developing into the definitive group leader constitute the framework used to develop an ideology for crisis leadership during the CDC crisis. The CDC itself served as both hope and despair. Rick's emerging crisis leadership skills gave the group confidence in a chaotic situation.

**Membership.** Only one member of the group, Shane, was against going to the CDC for potential refuge and information. His idea of hope was to travel to Ft. Benning

in search of weapons. Being the only dissenter, he was forced to comply with the group's decision to travel to the CDC. Shane was also a sheriff's deputy, so he felt he had the same leadership qualifications as Rick did. Once the group reached the CDC, Shane accepted his role as a member of the group and initially agreed that it might indeed offer refuge. Once it became evident that the CDC held no answers or refuge, every member of the group adhered to the ideology of despair. The group members at this point still clung to pieces of who they were prior to the zombie outbreak. They all came from the same area of Georgia and were familiar with what the CDC could potentially offer.

Membership in the group that felt confidence in Rick's leadership was again held by the majority of the survivors. Shane did not overtly question Rick's leadership once they discovered the crisis at the CDC, but he did try to act independently by attacking the scientist while Rick was talking to him. The rest of the group quickly accepted Rick's crisis leadership strategy and fully supported both his attempt to reason with the scientist and his decision to use the hand grenade to force an escape route.

*Activities.* Those who espoused the initial ideology of the CDC being a beacon of hope showed their support by making the trip to the CDC. They knew the risks of travelling in zombie-infested lands, yet they still held on to hope. After the crisis became apparent, the group members were expected to comply with Rick's leadership decisions. A couple of them helped Rick to try to break down the door. They all remained quiet and let Rick speak to the scientist, except for the afore mentioned Shane. When Rick detonated the hand grenade and created a means by which the group could escape, each group member was expected to evacuate the building and find immediate shelter, which they did.

**Goals.** Those who were committed to the ideology of exploring the CDC in hopes of refuge and information did so because they wanted relief from the current state of the world. They wanted answers to why the zombie outbreak took place. They wanted to know if they were alone in the world. After the crisis started, the group members goal shifted to merely escaping the CDC to survive. In his leadership, Rick's goal was to facilitate the group's escape by any means possible.

**Core belief.** The one major idea that best characterizes the essence of the ideologies of hope, despair, and leadership during the CDC events is the idea of a better quality of life. The group believed that the CDC could provide that and when they realized it could not, they gained confidence that Rick could lead them away from danger and to a better situation.

**Defining event.** The event of the collapse of society shaped the ideologies during the CDC crisis. In the new chaotic world, group members needed both hope and confidence in Rick's leadership. With the apocalypse still relatively recent for the group, the defining event was the realization that the CDC was doomed. This event proved to be a highly significant disappointment for the group and served as an example that the world would never be the same.

**Sacred text.** There was an implied sacred text at the CDC which was based on the group's shared identification as American citizens before the apocalypse. Even though each group member came from different backgrounds, they all subscribed to the belief that the CDC was a place of information and protection. In modern America, the CDC is a key institution of the government to protect citizens from harmful diseases. When it came to Rick's leadership through the crisis, the group relied on the implied

sacred text of respecting law enforcement officers. Rick still wore his deputy uniform during this event, which the group could still associate with leadership and authority in America. The group members shared their preexisting knowledge of the CDC and law enforcement in America to subscribe to an implied sacred text which best captured their commitment embedded in the ideologies.

***Ultimate authority.*** The ultimate authority for all the group members adhering to these ideologies during this event is survival. Each member sees the CDC as a potential way to continue living and they see Rick as the leader who can get them through the crisis so they can survive another day.

***Values/norms.*** The main values embedded in these ideologies are working together as a group, following Rick's leadership, and making it to the next day. Group members see Shane as violating these values when he attacks the scientist. They do not ostracize Shane during the crisis, but they evaluate him based on his actions. The group members assess Rick's leadership by its success rate. He was able to lead them out of the deadly CDC and get them to freedom. To maintain these values, the group members must continue to follow Rick's leadership and contribute to the greater good of the group going forward.

***Position and group relations.*** Each member of the group supports the others. They are basically alone in the world and rely on each other to maintain success within the group. Shane is the only potential enemy of the group. His role as an opponent of Rick's leadership was mild at the CDC, but it might be an indicator of things to come.

***Resources.*** The essential social resources the group needs to have are to continue supporting Rick as the leader. They also need to overcome the despair of having the

hope in the CDC dashed after the crisis. Each group member brought different resources to the table and it was Rick's task to capitalize on those particular strengths to lead the group through the turbulent new world.

**Alexandria.** The framework used to develop an ideology for crisis leadership during the journey to Alexandria comes from the suggested element of trust. Betrayed on several previous occasions and understandably distrustful of strangers, Rick was able to slowly build trust in Aaron through situational leadership.

**Membership.** Every member of the group had issues with trust, but some were more willing to trust again than others. While on the road, the group encountered water left out for them by an unknown entity. It would later be revealed that Aaron left the water for the group, but at the time, they did not know the source of the water or if it was tainted in any way. Eugene, one of Rick's group members, began to drink the water because he was extremely thirsty. At that point, Eugene did not care where the water came from. Rick quickly swatted the water container out of Eugene's hand, exhibiting the fact that Rick did not trust anyone to kindly leave drinkable water out for them. When Aaron revealed himself to the group, Michonne, one of Rick's most trusted allies, suggested that Rick at least give Aaron a chance. Rick was the hardest case to begin to trust Aaron, but he eventually did. Every member of Rick's group, on differing levels, adhered to the ideology of not trusting strangers.

Aaron was the exception to what the group had faced up to that point. He bore the brunt of Rick's mistrust. Aaron acted altruistically and continually exhibited patience as Rick slowly established trust. Aaron not only sought membership into Rick's group,

but also wanted to help Rick and the group become members of the larger group at Alexandria.

**Activities.** The group members, who are weary of trusting strangers, are expected to behave by being distrustful of any outsiders. Maggie and Sasha first encountered Aaron, who approached them with his hands held up to show he meant no harm. Maggie and Sasha immediately drew their weapons and escorted Aaron back to speak with Rick. When investigating Aaron's initial claims, the group members acted very cautiously and only acted under the approval of Rick. Subsequent activities consisted of the group accomplishing tasks to verify Aaron's claims.

**Goals.** The goals of the group were to avoid ending up in life-threatening situations again by trusting the wrong people. As trust in Aaron built, the goal became to determine if Aaron could be trusted and if Alexandria was indeed what he said it was.

**Core Belief.** The major idea that characterizes the group's ideology of trust is having their trust repeatedly broken by disingenuous people.

**Defining event.** The defining event of the group's state of trust was their encounter at Terminus. They were already hurting and in need of help when the monsters at Terminus violated Rick and his group's trust.

**Sacred text.** Although the group had evolved, each member was still an American citizen before the apocalypse. The founding documents for the United States Government were something each group member remembered even though that version of government was no longer in existence. The implied sacred text at this point came from the United States Declaration of Independence. The group still believed in life,

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Aaron's offer to potentially regain those rights best captured the commitments of Rick and the group to investigate Alexandria.

***Ultimate authority.*** Rick was the group's ultimate authority for trusting other people. He was the one who made the decision to trust Aaron a little at a time.

***Values/norms.*** The values embedded in the group's ideology of trust are those of self-preservation and survival. Rick wants to protect his group from future hardships caused by mistrust.

***Position and group relations.*** Each member of the group supports the others when it comes to trust, but some are more prone to treat each situation independently. Some group members voiced their opinions to Rick on trusting Aaron. Ultimately, all group members supported Rick's leadership decisions.

***Resources.*** The essential social resources the group has to have are each other. The world proved to be a difficult place to survive in. Other people had started to prove to be a greater threat than the walkers, so Rick and his group were forced to rely on each other more and more.

***The Plan.*** Rick's evolution as a leader and taking action together for a common goal are the suggested elements which developed an ideology for crisis leadership during Rick's plan to relocate the massive herd of walkers away from Alexandria. Rick demonstrated his leadership versatility by leading a combined group of his people and the people of Alexandria to one goal. Taking action to protect others also surfaced as an ideology during this episode.

***Membership.*** Everyone in Alexandria eventually became part of Rick's transformational leadership during the episode, however Rick had to incorporate the in-

group with the out-group. Rick's group members who had been by his side prior to Alexandria were already firmly entrenched as members of the ideology of Rick as a transformational leader. Rick's original group was the in-group during this event. The out-group consisted of the Alexandrians, who had been relatively isolated from the horror of the world outside of the community. Everyone took part in taking action to protect Alexandria, resulting in a sense of commonality between the residents of Alexandria and Rick's group.

**Activities.** In order for people to take part in the evolution of Rick's leadership, they must actively participate in his directions. This also serves as the necessary activities for those who believe in taking action to protect others. As previously mentioned, Carter did what he thought was right to protect his fellow Alexandrians. Then after experiencing Rick's transformational leadership, Carter decided to get on board with the greater group's goal.

**Goals.** Rick leads the way he does because he knows he must get everyone to work together for the plan to work. The members of both groups follow Rick's leadership because they want to protect the sanctity of Alexandria to the best of their ability.

**Core belief.** The major idea that characterizes Rick's evolution to a transformational leader is experience. Already having leadership skills prior to the apocalypse, Rick developed his transformational leadership style through life experiences after the apocalypse, some of which were extremely traumatic. These experiences contributed to Rick's development to a transformational leader. Furthermore, a major

idea held by everyone involved with the plan was that Alexandria was worthy of risking their lives to protect.

***Defining event.*** The defining event of Rick's transformational leadership was realizing a massive herd of walkers was in danger of directly threatening Alexandria. After that realization, Rick's call to action was met with support from most of the combined group members. The lone dissenter, Carter, provided a defining event for Rick to showcase his transformational approach to leadership. Rick spared Carter's life and incorporated him into the plan in an attempt to teach Carter how to survive outside the walls of Alexandria.

***Sacred text.*** Rick is understood to be the ultimate leader and everyone who participates in his leadership style is willing to take action to protect others. The implied sacred text of acting on Rick's plan came from the shared belief that Alexandria provided freedom from fear. This belief was part of the collective mindset of Americans before the apocalypse and provided common commitments for the entire group to act on Rick's plan.

***Ultimate authority.*** Rick is the ultimate authority. His plan is what everyone followed. Rick's ultimate authority came from each person's individual willingness for self-sacrifice.

***Values/norms.*** The main values in the ideology of Rick's evolved leadership and taking action to protect others is helping fellow survivors have a better life. Rick used transformational leadership to incorporate both groups and convince them to take action to protect other people. These actions helped the group to preserve freedom and maintain Alexandria as a place of hope.

***Position and group relations.*** Rick supported all members of the group that he led. He supported the Alexandrians by thoroughly explaining what was needed of them and even attempted to help them learn survival skills by attacking walkers. Carter was a supporter of taking action to protect others, both in taking action against Rick and subsequently following Rick's leadership.

***Resources.*** Communication is an essential resource the group needed to have. Rick gave a rousing speech before the plan went into action. He communicated with his people and the people of Alexandria when explaining the responsibilities of everyone involved in taking action.

### **Identifying functions served by the ideology**

The preferred reading of the artifact is not simply to watch the episodes for entertainment purposes. While some view it in this manner, the episodes go deeper by asking us to believe in several things. First, they ask us to believe that hope exists within seemingly bleak situations. The CDC represented both hope and despair. These are two things people may encounter in their lives. The group of survivors felt a sense of relief upon entering the CDC. It seemed like the oasis they had been searching for. However, as the crisis unfolded, the group realized that the CDC was not the answer. Viewers are able to relate to the idea of being hopeful about something, but having it proven to be false hope.

The function of this ideology is to suggest to viewers about how to cope with false hope. It is important to trust in leadership. While not every institution has a leader like Rick, he is an example that leaders like that do exist and can help people get out of difficult circumstances. Trust is another ideology that can help viewers cope. People can be hurt by other people violating their trust, much like Rick and his group experienced.

Although we might become reluctant to trust, there is always the possibility that someone genuine can come into our lives. Those people, like Aaron, deserve to be trusted. The evolution of Rick's leadership also functions as a useful aspect for viewers. If they are not the leader, viewers can gain a better understanding of how transformational leadership can be effective in situations like Rick faced with his plan for the herd of walkers. Viewers might also be able to relate with one group or the other. Rick's group is a group that has continually taken action throughout the course of the season. They routinely do so to help protect their fellow group members and also people they do not know. Conversely, the group at Alexandria has not been forced into survival mode like Rick's group has, however they rose to the occasion to take action when Rick needed their help to protect Alexandria. Viewers might see themselves as part of either group, but through the ideology examined in Rick's plan, they might gain a better understanding of what it takes to come together and work with people from different backgrounds.

Another function of *The Walking Dead* is to allow viewers to deal with their fears. As they vicariously experience the threat of death through Rick's experiences, they are comforted because of his strong leadership skills and his ability to outwit death. In a time when there is such political division in the United States and the world, people long for a "safe" place, a world free of the threat of nuclear war and chemical weapons. In the fictional world of *The Walking Dead*, viewers not only create a safe place for themselves but give themselves hope—just as the children playing inside the walls of Alexandria give the survivors hope.

## Summary

Chapter Four investigated the ideologies present in *The Walking Dead*, applying the perspectives explained by Foss (2018) with a focus on crisis leadership moments in *The Walking Dead*. Three crisis leadership moments were identified: The Crisis at the CDC, Alexandria, and Rick's Plan. Each of these events was examined by identifying the presented elements, identifying the suggested elements, formulating an ideology, and identifying the functions served by the ideology. Chapter Five includes the discussion and conclusion of my research.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This analysis has used an ideological lens to examine crisis leadership in *The Walking Dead*. The series provided a strong candidate for analyzing crisis leadership in the character Rick Grimes. Throughout the series, Rick led a group of followers through many difficult situations. The group varied in size from a dozen at the CDC to close to fifty when Rick was in charge at Alexandria. Within each example of crisis leadership, the group was different and therefore Rick's leadership style proved to be different, too.

#### **Summary of Major Findings**

The leadership approach Rick used in various situations led to an ideological study of. The *The Walking Dead* research questions for this study were as follows:

RQ1: How does *The Walking Dead* exemplify different types of crisis leadership?

RQ1a: How is transformational leadership developed in *The Walking Dead*?

RQ2: What are the implications of the rhetorical processes used by Rick during crisis leadership moments?

In answering the first research question, three crises were chosen for analysis: the attack at the CDC, the arrival in Alexandria, and relocating the herd of Walkers. Because of the actions Rick took at the CDC, a functional approach to leadership emerges as he

mediates conflict and ultimately takes action to save the lives of the group. While in the example of the episodes that chronicled the group’s arrival in Alexandria, Rick’s leadership exhibited situational leadership as he responded to a variety of threats. Finally, through his efforts to relocate the herd of Walkers, Rick demonstrated transformational leadership. Rick first accomplished transactional leadership by allowing the group to enter Alexandria and attended to the group’s basic human needs of food and shelter. Once those needs had been met, Rick used transformational leadership to lead the combined force of his original group and members of the Alexandria group to accomplish the task of relocating the herd.

To answer the second research question, I used the lens of ideological criticism to identify the rhetorical processes and ideology that Rick promoted. Based on my analysis, this chart demonstrates what the presented elements signified and the leadership style that emerged:

Table 1

*Presented Elements and What They Suggest in “The Walking Dead”*

Presented Elements	Suggested Elements	Leadership Style
CDC	False Hope	Functional
Aaron	Hope	Situational
Alexandria	Refuge and Place of Defense	Transformational

To address RQ2, my research applied ideological criticism as described by Foss (2018). The process involved identifying the presented elements of the artifact,

identifying the suggested elements linked to the presented elements, formulating an ideology, and identifying the functions served by the ideology. The following discussion highlights some of the most relevant findings from each example of crisis leadership through the application of ideological criticism.

The presented elements during the crisis at the CDC began with audiences being shown an insight to the reality within the building. Dr. Jenner tried to continue his research on the cause of the apocalypse, but he lost a valued sample and showed signs of hopelessness. Rick and the group, however, did not know the situation within the CDC and viewed it as a source of safety and information. The building itself was presented as a strong fortress which the walkers could not penetrate. Once inside, the group got to have showers, food, and beds. The presented elements concluded with a crisis unfolding and Rick emerging as a functional leader. Suggested elements from the crisis at the CDC included both Dr. Jenner and the CDC building being representative of false hope. Dr. Jenner proved to be defeated and the CDC became a ticking time bomb. A major suggested element that resulted from the crisis at the CDC was that Rick had the ability to lead the group through an extremely difficult event.

Alexandria provided an important presented element through the character of Aaron, who offered Rick's group membership in a secure community. This offer led to the presented element of Rick having to decide if he would trust Aaron or not. Through the superior-subordinate relationship Rick had with some of his group members, Rick was able to investigate Aaron's offer step by step and used a situational approach to leadership. The suggested element of false hope once again surfaced during these events, however this instance would prove to be an example of truth. In addition to the CDC,

Rick and the group had experienced several instances of people or places that seemed to provide hope but ended up being deadly for the group. As a suggested element, Aaron was the personification of hope. Through his situational leadership, Rick's leadership proved to be another example of the suggested element that Rick was a leader capable of leading them to safety.

Rick's plan to relocate a large herd of walkers consisted of presented elements that demonstrated his transformational leadership style. Rick had to adjust to the differences between his old group and the new group members from Alexandria. Dissention by Carter, one of the group members from Alexandria, was a key presented element and contributed to Rick's leadership style by allowing Rick to include and empower Carter. Another presented element of Alexandria was its name, which comes from the Greek and means "defender of men." Alexandria was presented as not only a refuge, but also a place of defense. These elements suggested that Rick was able to once again adapt his leadership style to the needs of the group and keep Alexandria's status as a defensive refuge.

In formulating an ideology implicit in the crisis leadership moments, my analysis found that *The Walking Dead* focused on elements of overcoming difficulties caused by false hope through strong crisis leadership. The functions of the ideology help audiences to deal with their fears. Viewers are able to relate to the idea of something not working out as they had hoped. Rick's leadership gives audiences an example of someone who can overcome multiple crises in extreme circumstances. By doing this, *The Walking Dead* also helps audiences to trust in capable leaders. There will always be periods of uncertainty in the United States and the world, but audiences are able to experience the

potential of successful crisis leadership through the fictional world of *The Walking Dead*. As Rushton and Moreman (2011) note: “By examining the dark side that is the living dead we might come to recognize something of ourselves as the dying alive. We might even consider what it would mean to drop the adjectives altogether and simply live in the world” (p. 7). Viewers are also able to identify with either the in-group or the out-group in the example of Rick’s plan to relocate the herd. Sometimes people are in one or the other group, and this example allows people to understand how working together as a group under strong leadership can get them through a crisis.

Another finding of this study was the similarity of American citizenship within the examples of crises. The finding came through analyzing the sacred text of the group during each event. While there was no specific document, book, or film to best capture the commitments embedded in the ideologies, the implied sacred text came from American citizenship prior to the apocalypse. The group believed that the CDC, an institution of the United States Government under the Department of Health and Human Services, would provide information and security as it did for Americans prior to the apocalypse. Aaron’s offer to join the community at Alexandria allowed the group to hope for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as documented in the Declaration of Independence. Alexandria provided an implied sacred text which mirrored American patriotism. The group members were willing to fight and possibly sacrifice their lives to defend their home and preserve their freedom. Other similarities also surfaced during the analysis, such as the group’s survival and Rick’s leadership, however the effect of shared citizenship contributing to implied sacred texts was the most unanticipated finding.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to research on leadership through the application of ideological criticism by exploring how leadership theories are portrayed in a popular culture artifact. Research on *The Walking Dead* has not used ideological criticism to explore the examples and rhetorical implications of crisis leadership. The purpose of this study was to analyze Rick's approaches to crisis leadership and how they serve within the rhetorical process to translate into useful knowledge for audiences.

This study revealed that Rick was a strong candidate for examining crisis leadership. He exhibited multiple approaches to leadership in different crisis scenarios. Even though members of the group changed as the series progressed, Rick continued to successfully lead the group through difficult challenges. His leadership reached the transformational stage during the plan at Alexandria by incorporating both the in-group and out-group to work together. Rick also allowed his followers to focus on higher level needs by leading them to Alexandria.

As the series progresses, Rick appears to be in position to continue his leadership role. Season Eight concluded with Rick defeating a major enemy and uniting various groups of other survivors. Rick has exhibited an amazing amount of resiliency throughout the series, but he has lost both a wife and a son. Even in the fictional universe of *The Walking Dead*, Rick is still portrayed as a human being. It remains to be seen how long he can continue to function as a leader with all of the hardships he has faced.

Limitations for this study include the scope of *The Walking Dead* and the focus on Rick's leadership. *The Walking Dead* is still being aired on AMC, therefore all episodes could not be considered for this study. There are also multiple other examples of Rick's

leadership throughout the series. The examples chosen for this study were done so because of their significance to the plot of the series and were found to be pivotal events for Rick and the group. Other characters also demonstrate leadership. An emerging leader, Maggie, would be a valid subject for research on leadership in *The Walking Dead* due to her recent position as a leader of a major group. Rick and his group frequently encounter groups of other survivors and each group has a distinctive leader. This study chose to focus on Rick's leadership because he is the central character of the series and has been present in the show since the pilot episode.

As a recently discharged veteran, I was part of the audience that watched the pilot episode in 2010. *The Walking Dead* had the potential to reflect some of the experiences I had during my enlistment in the United States Army. Rick and his group of survivors were similar to my platoon in that both groups consisted of people from different walks of life working together to survive. I was fortunate to have excellent leadership during my combat deployments, and I was immediately able to draw comparisons to Rick's leadership with my own experiences.

The personal relationships within *The Walking Dead* have always interested me more than the gore of the zombies, however there are lessons to take away from the portrayal of the undead. As we contemplate the values emphasized in *The Walking Dead*, we might consider Rushton and Moreman's (2011) statement: "Zombies, as an abject reflection of our individual mortality, and harbingers of societal decay, force the viewer to consider the dark possibilities of meaningless existence. They can paradoxically offer us a glimpse of worlds that might be better if we were forced to fight for our survival" (p. 7).

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