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Investigating a narrative based approach to leader development:  
Life stories, middle managers and the leader-follower paradox

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
postgraduate degree of

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Abstract

There is a small amount of emergent leadership literature recommending people incorporate a narrative based approach into their leader development. This approach involves the identification and reflection on experiences and events from ones’ life so a story can be told about who they are as a leader (life stories). To date, life stories research has yet to account for the fact leaders must also follow. Middle managers embody this paradox.

This study was an investigation into the potential for life stories to contribute to middle managers’ leader development. This study also looked at how life stories might contribute to middle managers understanding of themselves as followers and how they might use life stories in negotiating the leader-follower paradox. The overall aim was to make a further contribution to understanding the potential for life stories in leader development.

A case study of five Auckland New Zealand based middle managers was conducted. Life history interviews were thematically analysed using life stories as a sensitizing concept. Participants demonstrated little to no previous knowledge, skill or experience in life stories as a development process. They told stories as leaders that generally implied existing life stories self-development themes but they did not explicitly identify them. They told stories as followers that were
somewhat at odds with general opinions they held on following. There was little
correlation with existing life stories self-development themes. Overall,
Participants’ life stories base intrapersonal leader and follower self-narratives had
potential to be coherent, but were instinctive and under-developed.

Participants’ ability to draw on life stories to identify, discuss and negotiate the
leader-follower paradox matched their existing integration of life stories and
intrapersonal leader-follower identities. Overall, participants had potential to
produce a coherent and integrated leader-follower narrative, but this potential was
under-developed. More research is required. A narrative based framework for
further leader-follower life stories development processes is offered as a starting
point.
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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................ iv

Table of Contents ................................................................................ vi

List of Tables ......................................................................................... x

List of Figures ......................................................................................... xi

1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 1
  1.0 Chapter overview ............................................................................... 1
  1.1 Background .................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Statement of the problem ................................................................. 3
  1.3 Purpose of the study ....................................................................... 3
  1.4 Significance of the study ................................................................ 4
  1.5 Thesis structure ............................................................................. 5
  1.6 Chapter summary ........................................................................... 5

2 Literature Review ................................................................................ 7
  2.0 Chapter overview ........................................................................... 7
  2.1 Leaders .......................................................................................... 7
  2.2 Followers ..................................................................................... 9
  2.3 Middle managers .......................................................................... 11
  2.4 The narrative frame ....................................................................... 12
  2.5 Life stories ................................................................................... 13
    2.5.1 Background ........................................................................... 14
    2.5.2 Life stories in leadership research ........................................ 16
    2.5.3 Antecedents ......................................................................... 18
    2.5.4 Life stories .......................................................................... 21
    2.5.5 Crucibles of leadership ......................................................... 26
    2.5.6 Leadership formative experiences ....................................... 28
3 Research Methodology ......................................................... 40

3.0 Chapter outline ................................................................. 40
3.1 Approach and research strategy ........................................ 41
  3.1.1 Ontology ....................................................................... 41
  3.1.2 Epistemology ............................................................... 42
  3.1.3 Research strategy ........................................................ 44
3.2 Research design ................................................................. 45
  3.2.1 Level of analysis .......................................................... 47
  3.2.2 Multiple case study design .......................................... 48
3.3 Research methods .............................................................. 49
  3.3.1 Research participant selection process ....................... 50
3.4 Data collection ................................................................. 52
  3.4.1 The life history interview ............................................. 52
  3.4.2 Interview processes .................................................... 52
  3.4.3 Analysis ....................................................................... 55
3.5 Ethical considerations ....................................................... 56
3.6 Trustworthiness ................................................................. 57
3.7 Limitations ........................................................................ 58
3.8 Chapter summary ............................................................. 59

4 Analysis and Discussion .................................................. 61

4.0 Chapter overview ............................................................ 61
4.1 Case study one: Participant A .......................................... 61
  4.1.1 Life stories ................................................................. 61
  4.1.2 Leader themes ............................................................ 64
  4.1.3 Follower themes ........................................................ 66
  4.1.4 Paradox ...................................................................... 69
  4.1.5 Summary ................................................................. 71
4.2 Case study two: Participant B ........................................... 71
  4.2.1 Life stories ................................................................. 72
  4.2.2 Leader themes ............................................................ 74
  4.2.3 Follower themes ........................................................ 76
  4.2.4 Paradox ...................................................................... 78
  4.2.5 Summary ................................................................. 80
4.3 Case study three: Participant C ........................................... 81
List of Tables

Table 2–1: Antecedents for Developing Positive Leader Self-awareness 20

Table 2–2: Prototypical Taxonomy of Life Story Themes that Transcend Context .................................................................................................... 22

Table 2–3: A Guided Life Reflection Process (Leaders) .......................... 24

Table 2–4: A Summary of Crucibles of Leadership ................................. 27

Table 2–5: Sense-making Types of Leadership Formative Experiences . 30

Table 2–6: A Comparison of Life Stories Terms, Summaries, Themes and Descriptions in Authentic Leadership Literature ............................................... 36

Table 3–1: A Summary of Common Qualitative Research Designs ......... 46

Table 3–2: The SOGI Model ..................................................................... 47

Table 3–3: A Summary of Common Qualitative Data Collection Methods49

Table 4–1: A Summary of Featured Life Stories: Leader Development Themes .............................................................................................................. 111

Table 4–2: A Summary of Featured Life Stories: Follower Development Themes .............................................................................................................. 114

Table 4–3: A Modified Guided Life Reflection Process (Followers) ...... 117

Table 4–4: A Summary of Featured Leader-Follower Paradoxes ........... 118
List of Figures

Figure 2–1: A Conceptual Framework for Authentic Leader and Follower Development ................................................................. 19

Figure 2–2: Age at Which Reported Leadership Formative Experience Occurred .................................................................................. 29

Figure 2–3: First Leadership Formative Experience Sense-making ........ 31

Figure 2–4: Sense-making Per Emotional Valence ........................................ 32

Figure 4–1 A Suggested Illustration of Integrated Intrapersonal Leader-Follower Self-Concepts .............................................................. 120

Figure 4–2 A Suggested Approach to Further Leader-Follower Life Stories Development .............................................................. 121