

Total recall? Using episodic and autobiographical memory to better understand leadership narrative identity.

ABSTRACT:

The problem we seek to address is the difficulty managers have in recalling and understanding experiences that shape their leadership narrative identity. We draw on extant theorising of memory, specifically episodic memory (EM) and autobiographical memory (AM), to frame our research question: How can EMs and AMs be recalled to enhance an understanding of leadership narrative identity? Through a complementary use of artefact story-telling and timelines in leadership development we show how EM and AM can be accessed in tandem to enable managers to explore their leadership narrative identity. We offer a conceptual framework to outline this dynamic. Total recall of experiences is problematic. By connecting EM and AM a more rounded recall of leadership narrative identity can be formed.

Keywords: Leadership development, experiential/student-centred learning, active learning, management training/education/development, professional development.

BACKGROUND

This work is partly empirical and largely conceptual in style. It is empirical to the extent that we report on field research that we have done in the area of Management Education and Development. It is conceptual to the extent that we suggest ways in which managers might develop an enhanced appreciation of their leadership narrative identity. This paper builds upon the work of Watton and Parry (2016) and Kempster (2009) which describes using artefacts, storytelling and timelines as processes to discover and critically to develop new leadership narrative identity insights.

In this paper we consider combining the use of these two management education activities. We are interested to find out that if by using the combined approach we are able to enable participants to increase the meaning-making around their leadership narrative identity. We have found that activities that utilize both **episodic** and **autobiographical** memory empower people with leadership ambitions to anchor these experiences more permanently. These activities will also help people to make sense of these experiences, in particular when linked to personal goal attainment (Conway, 2001).

Episodic memories (EM) are defined as ‘specific events and experiences associated with particular times and places’ (Bauer, Stewart, White and Larkina, 2016:244). Both Bahrck (1974) and Bellezza (1983) revealed the importance of spatial location in the construction and subsequent recollections of past events and experiences. Conway (2001) affords that episodic memories are short experiences that typically last for minutes and hours. This brevity he concluded means that they are not sustained beyond 24 hours on average, unless connected to more enduring autobiographical memory knowledge structures. He proposed that only those EMs linked at the time or secured later remain within reach to become part of autobiographical memories.

Autobiographical memory (AM) is used to describe specific or indeed repeated events that an individual has personally experienced (Conway, 1992, 1996). Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) expand further the notion of autobiographical memory being hierarchically situated with three levels of organization, ‘lifetime periods’, ‘general events’ and ‘specific events’. Greenberg and Rubin (2003) propose that general AMs can be characterized by abstract information whilst specific AMs often contain more imagery. This recollection therefore connects with similarities with episodic memory retrieval (Addis, McIntosh, Moscovitvh, Crawley and McAndrews, 2004). General event AMs are frequently connected to objects, scene recognition and potentially semantic memory (Addis, McIntosh, Moscovitvh, Crawley and McAndrews, 2004). Haque and Conway (2001) concluded that general events are typically accessed before specific AMs. Our AMs of past experiences can frequently be triggered instinctively perhaps through a new encounter. However, at times AM retrieval requires more exertion to respond to a specific question about our past (Addis, Knapp, Roberts and Schacter, 2012).

In relation to both EMs and AMs and of particular interest from a management education perspective is Conway's work on 'goal hierarchies' (2001:1375). His findings illustrated that a core aim of human memory is to preserve knowledge on the achievement of personal goals, the hierarchy of goals he describes as the 'working self' (2001: 1375). Of significance to our activity analysis is Conway's notion that EMs and AMs are located in different sections of the brain and therefore their memory retrieval is accessed independently. Linked to this is the notion that these personal memories are of events that actually occurred rather than an imagined or desired experience. Conway (2001) goes on to propose that an individual's EMs and AMs become a way of restricting what goals an individual can continue with and potentially achieve. Furthermore, an individual has a tendency to promote some memories over others in relation to goals that are compatible with the self, and in some instances Conway (2001) found that memories may be misremembered to fit or if a memory is particularly significant made more readily accessible for future recollection i.e. vivid or flashbulb memories (Brown and Kulik, 1977). Brown and Kulik (1977) define flashbulb memories as events that are surprising, consequential and/or emotionally arousing. They go on to articulate typical memory recollections comprise place, event, informant, affect in others, effect on self and aftermath (Brown and Kulik, 1977).

We will now consider aspects of *identity*. Gecas, (1982) proposed that identity incorporates the understanding of self; comprising values, experiences, and self-perceptions (Baltes and Carstensen, 1991). Building upon this Day and Harrison suggest that *leadership identity* is 'the sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader' (2007:365). DeRue and Ashford explore the complexity of leadership identity over identity theory due to the dynamic and evolving phenomenon of leadership itself and the relationship between leaders and followers. In a sense they see it as a malleable, inter-related process of claiming and granting. DeRue and Ashford highlight the lack of research around collective construction of leadership identities between individuals. For the purposes of this paper we wish to focus in particular on *narrative identity theory* and in particular, leadership narrative identity.

Narrative identity is an individuals adopted and continually evolving life story (McAdams and McClean, 2013). It encompasses both the reconstructed past and an imagined future to offer to

individuals partial unity and purpose in life (McAdams and McClean, 2013). It is this ability to construct and subsequently attribute meaning-making that psychologists term a narrative identity (Singer, 2004). McAdams and McClean infer that this life story then becomes a way for ‘people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future’ (2013:233). Singer, Blagov, Berry and Oost (2013) in their work on clinical psychotherapy put forward a case for building narrative identity through a dual memory system of episodic and autobiographical memory. This then is helpful in creating validity to our proposal for building leadership narrative identity through leadership development activities.

We were thus interested, through the management education programmes and activities that we design and deliver, in maximising opportunities for managers to extract a fuller insight and meaning-making into their leadership narrative identity. Our research questions are therefore:

RQ1: How can EMs and AMs be connected through a complementary leadership development design?

RQ2: How can artefact and timeline activities be designed to enable this to occur?

RQ3: How do managers have an enriched understanding of their leadership narrative identity by these activities?

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP NARRATIVE IDENTITY

We shall now consider the leadership development activities we have used on programmes. We reflected on our own sense-making connecting the process, the typical outcomes and the relationship with episodic and autobiographical memory.

Artefact and story-telling. The artefact and story-telling activity has been used on leadership development programmes by the authors over a number of years and across multiple programmes and modules. Watton and Chapman (2017) describe in some detail how to set up the activity and some of the benefits they perceive in using it to develop trust within newly formed groups. In brief, the activity requests participants to select an artefact that holds leadership significance for them and to share the story behind the artefact with other programme participants. Over the last 15 years Emma has seen and heard the stories of more than 400 artefacts from leaders on

a range of leadership development programmes. Watton and Parry (2016) alluded to the leadership identity insights that are frequently generated as a result of this activity, an increased understanding of self as a leader, observing and understanding leadership through others and an increased sense of the significance of personal values and beliefs.

Leadership timeline. Similarly Steve's use of a leadership timeline activity has been utilised extensively on leadership development programmes by all three authors over several years. Steve has himself used this activity since 2003 and has heard and read the accounts of timelines from more than 200 leaders. With this activity a four step process is enacted by participants which captures both an annotated illustration and through a verbal dialogue descriptive influences of significant people connected with an individual's leadership learning. For a fuller explanation of the activity and its associated benefits please see Kempster (2017).

The artefact/story-telling and leadership timeline activities share a number of common elements. Crucially, they both connect narrative and story-telling. We believe one of the reasons they are so powerful is that participants are able to 'follow a well-practiced structure, that of telling a story – particularly one that they are familiar with' (Kempster 2009:111). Story-telling and story-listening are equally compelling, and Gabriel (2000) describes the likely components of 'plots and characters, entailing risk, aimed at entertaining, persuading, and winning the audience over' (Parry and Hansen 2007:283). Stories have been seen to be closely linked to action and decision making both in the past and present (Boje, 1995, Czarniawska, 1997 and Weick, 1995).

Furthermore, both activities create a deeper process of meaning making connected to leadership learning. They have a distinctive ability to tap into previously unconsidered tacit knowledge and provide a structure by which participants can organise their thoughts. We feel, these processes, create a depth of reflection and a richness that is extremely difficult to achieve through questioning and interviews alone (Kempster 2017). This hyper reflexive process in understanding oneself better from a position of inquirer and respondent is significant as observed by Cunliffe (2001) and Kempster and Stewart (2010).

It is perhaps helpful at this point to provide some examples of typical recollections that are shared through the artefacts and timeline activities. For the artefacts there is a pattern of trigger events

that have created a powerful emotion within the participant. Examples include feats of personal endurance *'I chose this object because of an incident in which sustainability met leadership for me on the bike. The event was a fundraising bike ride from London to Paris'* (Watton and Chapman, 2017: Chapter 9); or a family connection to a place *'this map holds many significant memories for me, whenever I look at the map and the place names I can remember the stories that took place and the people involved'* (Watton and Chapman, 2017: Chapter 9). Oftentimes participants recall their first incident of being a leader themselves and this is represented by the artefact that has been chosen and with these stories a realisation of the significance of this lived experience *'One of my first leadership experiences took place in St Buryan...when I went on an expedition... [We] had to each take turns at navigating and leading the group for a day. This was a valuable and interesting exercise for a fifteen year old'* (Watton and Chapman, 2017: Chapter 9).

These trigger events can be linked to episodic memories anchored in places and objects and in some cases flashbulb memories through a pioneering experience. However, due to their significance they are also embedded into a participant's autobiographical memory and lived experience. In contrast the timeline activity typically highlights the significance of prominent people and an opportunity to have been able to observe leadership (good or bad). It is often a childhood family experience that a participant is able to conjure up in immense detail *'most notable was the prominence of my grandfather. He had been a dispatch rider in the First World War, running messages back and forth from the commanders to the front line'* (Kempster, 2017: Chapter 8). Similarly, the significance of leaders from a participant's early career are common *'so I chose jobs with certain must-haves working with people I respected because of their ability to be good doctors – the sort of doctor I wish to be and learn the variety of skills needed'* (Kempster, 2009:143). The use of notable people over a participant's lifetime aligns to autobiographical memories and Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000) notion of the hierarchy of memory organization signifying 'lifetime periods', 'general events' and 'specific events'.

We will now consider the implications of using and combining these activities during a module or programme and the increased opportunity for leadership development this brings.

Discussion: Experiences and gaps

The artefacts and timeline activities are provocative and insightful when used in a leadership development programme or module. All three authors have engaged with them to varying extents over a number of years. However, over the last year in particular Emma and Steve sought to discover the power of combining both activities in their teaching. This happy coincidence had been facilitated by an institutional request to have similar teaching of the Lancaster Executive MBA Leadership module across multiple cohorts and in multiple locations internationally. Emma and Steve set out to achieve this by comparing what components they typically included in the module, for Emma crucial was the use of the artefact/story-telling activity and for Steve leadership timelines were highly desirable. It was decided that they would include both the artefacts/story-telling and leadership timeline activities as both taught and assessed components in their modules. As module moderators of one another's assessments they were also able to have a sense of what the students wrote about post module. Typically, we use the artefact/story-telling activity first, perhaps the afternoon of the first day of the module. This is then quickly followed by the leadership timeline activity, perhaps on the second day. The artefact/story-telling activity can be initiated as part of the module briefing (Watton and Chapman, 2017). For the leadership timeline activity participants are afforded a relatively large amount of time to spend constructing, reflecting and discussing their timeline in pairs or threes (Kempster, 2017). However, both activities can be positioned as valuable in terms of assignment foundations and as such students are readily committed to engage in them.

The combining of the activities is valuable in eliciting slightly different outcomes. For artefact/story-telling it is often a quicker memory response through a significant event, thus capturing the episodic or flashbulb event. Selecting an object becomes a catalyst for the recounting of the experience, often as a metaphor for a participants leadership practice (Watton and Parry, 2016). The objects and stories told are almost always positive, in a sense, presenting and communicating an impression of oneself to others (Gauntlett, 2007). Building from the artefact selection by moving onto the timeline activity enables this trigger event to be captured as part of a larger, autobiographical memory process. As Conway (2001) alluded to, it then creates a more permanent memory pathway and specificity for future recollection, meaning making and goal attainment. Singer *et al* (2013:570)

suggest that episodic memories from a narrative identity perspective are a ‘working self’ and when these memories move into our life story they can be categorized as ‘long-term self’, we feel this is what the combined activity process helps to create.

The leadership timeline activity draws richly upon autobiographical memories by its nature. However, the prior reflection during the artefact/story-telling activity is useful in opening up the value of objects and places to supplement recollections of people that are more typically accessed through this process (Conway, 2001).

Combining these activities would appear then beneficial in terms of reflection and meaning making. As discussed earlier if EMs and AMs are represented in different brain regions (Conway, 2001), using both activities enables different recollections to be accessed but complementary to one another when focused through a lens of leadership narrative identity. In a sense we suggest a deeper understanding can be extracted by this combined activity design. We found that the artefact/story-telling activity had the greatest impact upon triggering episodic memory; and that the timeline activity had the greatest impact upon triggering autobiographical memory. These findings are presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

Conway (2001) acknowledges that AM covers multiple purposes. In his work he focuses on ‘grounding the self’ (2001:1376). This notion is connected to goal success and goal setting. In part, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) suggest memories are selected that are consistent with the goals we set ourselves and potentially can restrict the potential of self. This selection might enable participants to have increased reflection, dialogue and meaning making of EMs and AMs, and is helpful in terms of exploring what goals and goal setting are desirable for managers and more widely within organisations.

The use of the activities as we describe including a written assignment is an important aspect affording further leadership reflections, construction, inquiry and shared meaning making post classroom dialogue (Jackson and Parry, 2011 and Kempster, 2017).

In a sense through these activities we can maximise a participant's ability to construct their leadership narrative identity and as Day and Harrison suggest for it to become 'more salient and crystalized' (2007: 365). This will then in turn enable the development of leadership skills and the ability to develop the link between aspects of self to the role of leader (Hall, 2004). We link this to the leadership narrative identity and opportunities to build identity as proposed by Day and Harrison 'developing more inclusive conceptualizations of self might also be an important pathway to developing broader leadership and leadership capacity in teams and organizations' (2007: 362).

CONCLUSION

Our research questions have not been fully answered. Rather they have set up our process for inquiry. Our Figure offers up a tentative framework. It seems from our experience plausible, but further research is needed to test and elaborate the relationships between the various variables.

It is recognised that people are never able to recall everything with complete accuracy. We might forget some finer details, perhaps remember others through rose tinted spectacles, and so in a sense we typically achieve partial recall. However, we suggest from a leadership practice perspective accessing both EMs and AMs is more likely to achieve a fuller picture of our lived experience than through one access stream alone, not then total recall but a more rounded recall. A more rounded recall can greatly help managers appreciate aspects of the experiences that have shaped them and enable greater agency to author their sense of their narrative identity.

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Figure 1

