

Narrative Approach to Leadership Identity Development Through Family Storytelling

Abstract

This project explores emerging leaders identity development by applying a narrative framework through retrospective family storytelling. Emerging leaders have different experiences and come to a new awareness of themselves in a leadership context in a variety of ways. By using a narrative/storytelling framework, participants told stories of family history events and invoked the life stories of other family members (i.e. parents and grandparents). Themes of agency and communion were salient among the participants' stories. Application of these themes on identity may help students understand who they are as leaders and recognize the process of their leadership identity development. Furthermore, leadership educators may use narrative/storytelling as a method of best practices for teaching leadership identity development.

Introduction

In order to develop future generations of leaders it is important to understand the influences of leadership identity development. One way to understand our identity is through storytelling. Family members share in creating stories together as a way to construct individual and family identity and family culture (e.g. Koenig Kellas, 2005; Stone, 2004; Thompson, et al., 2009). Family storytelling becomes important to identity development, specifically in emerging adults (McAdams, 1997). As children develop into adolescents and adulthood they begin to establish their own motivational patterns. These patterns of desire are reflected thematically in their personal myths (McAdams, 1997). The interest of this project is to explore how or if retrospective family stories influence individuals values and motives that construct approaches to leadership.

Background

Leadership scholars have examined how leader's biographies are influential to followers and important to leadership styles (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005). Sharmir and Eilam (2005) used life stories as a way to examine the development of authentic leadership. They suggest "leaders acquire these [authentic] characteristics by constructing, developing and revising their life-stories." (p.396). Sternberg (2008) presents an acronym WICS (wisdom, intelligence and creativity synthesized) which is used to show "how successful leadership involves the synthesis of three qualities." (p. 360). Sternberg's approach includes a storytelling component when discussing creativity. He asserts, "leaders generate stories that appeal in various degrees to their followers." and these "stories provide much of the content of creativity in leadership." (p.362).

Brungardt (1996) conducted a review of literature to explore what was known about how leaders are developed, educated, and trained; he found two main areas of focus when looking at the development of leaders: leadership development constructs and learning leadership theory. The foundation of leadership development is supported by early childhood and adolescent development, the role of formal education, professional experiences, and specialized leadership education. Brungardt (1996) explains, "'leadership development' refers to almost every form of

growth or stage of development in the life cycle that promotes, encourages and assist in one's leadership potential.” (p. 83).

Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella and Osteen (2005) argue the majority of leadership development focuses on skill-building and short term programs, “rather than on the process of how leadership capacity or leadership identity is created or changes over time... understanding the process of creating a leadership identity is central to designing leadership programs and teaching leadership” (p. 594). Understanding identity development is beneficial for leadership educators and leadership program designers in developing emerging adults as future leaders.

To add to the field of leadership education and narrative research, this project explores how family stories aid in leadership development for future student leaders. Rather than looking at the leader's personal story, this project looks deeper into the family culture to see if certain stories resonate as having a leadership message. Specifically, the purpose of this project is to explore how or if certain family stories shape an individual's awareness of their own leadership identity. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ: How, if at all, do family stories aid in constructing individual leadership identity?

Methodology

Two participants were recruited from an introductory leadership course. The focus of the course is on interpersonal leadership skills and developing emerging adults as leaders. The course serves to meet a university wide-general education requirement and is open to all students across the university. Two additional participants were recruited from a doctoral program in Human Sciences with a specialization in leadership studies. The four participants offered a diverse perspective on leadership by exploring undergraduate students with little leadership theory and two graduate students with a more complex understanding of leadership theory and education.

Participants were first given a short explanation of the project goals explaining they were to think of a well-told family story (with a beginning, middle and end) that made them think of leadership. Next, there was a short discussion of leadership and its focus for the project. For the purposes of this project leadership is defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” (Northhouse, 2013, p. 5). This definition is broad and indicates anyone can have leadership characteristics if they exert influence on others. Third, participants engaged in a semi-structured interview designed to elicit a family story that helped shaped their approach to leadership. Participants were given the prompt: *Can you recall any stories in your family (preferably told to you) that help you construct your approach to leadership?* Follow up questions included: *Was this story told to you? By whom? When? Why has this influenced your leadership identity?*

The interviews were audio recorded and listened to multiple times for analyzing the content of the family stories to establish themes that constructed leadership identity. First, the situation or event of the story was analyzed to identify what types of family stories elicit a leadership theme. McAdams (1997) defines a story theme as, “a recurrent pattern of human intentions” (p.67). Next, McAdams' imago types were used to see if there were common characters in the personal

stories that resonated with leadership identity. “Imagoes give voice to individual and cultural values.” (p.129). McAdams explains a person’s identity is a story regarding certain imagoes.

Results

Participants told family history events and invoked the life stories of other family members (i.e. parents and grandparents). In invoking the life story of their parents or grandparents the participants used common character types described by McAdams (1997) of *agentic* and *communal* imagoes. Agentic types are described as ambitious, adventurous, clever, courageous, daring and resourceful; agentic characters “tend to proceed vigorously through the world.” (p.134). Communal types are “characters who act, think, and feel in communal ways.” (p.148). These character types relate to constructs of leadership by their drive for power and achievement (agency) by having a relational focus (communal).

Agentic Characters

According to McAdams (1997) these characters “experience challenges and obstacles as being manageable.” (p.135). A participant shared her father’s life story describing how he ‘stepped’ up into different positions and roles even though he was not trained for the specific job. “Dad didn’t have the experience to be a principle but stepped into that role because it was needed. It’s interesting to me that he was willing to step up and be the principle which he never really had any training in administration.” The participant describes how this story influences her leadership identity. “When I think about that story I just think that, uhm, for me personally, it’s a lot about you might not have the perfect training to do certain things but you need give things a try. You may just be an able body, or people look to you for leadership and you don’t really know it or think that your capable of it but that it’s worth giving it a try.”

Another example of agentic character type was the *warrior imago*.

My dad told me a story about my grandpa. When my grandpa was like 13 years old his dad passed away. And a couple months later his mother died so my grandpa was left with two sisters when he was thirteen. And then his family rejected them...and so, like the family, took all the wealth that my grandparents had, so the kids were left by themselves. And so my grandpa was like, I’m the oldest, and I have two sisters, and I have nobody to take care of us, no family, so I just have to do my best to raise my sisters. And he did what he could like going to the farm and working for other people doing just any kind of job so he could have food on the table for his sisters. So it was really difficult. Once his sisters are old enough to marry he goes back to school, now he wanted to take care of himself too. So, he goes back to school to enroll, and they ask him his birth date. He’s like, I don’t know what my birth date is and he didn’t even have anybody to ask since his parents died and his family rejected him so who knows when he was born? And then, he as kind of clever, so what he did, he went to see his dad’s friends to find out when he was born. They didn’t know the exact date but they knew around the time he was born. He knew the year but didn’t know the month and date so he just made that up. And he went back to school; he got his nursing degree and became a nurse.

In hearing this story the participant has incorporated in strong and independent identity in terms of her approach to leadership. “And so I think the whole story has helped me like to be strong and independent, like no matter what comes...just be strong and don’t depend too much on other

people. Just knowing everything my grandpa faced he was still motivated to be able to go to school and get his degree. So he had a goal and he perused his goal with the obstacles that come.”

Communal Characters

Other themes there appeared resonated with the *caregiver imago*.

Let me think about this, my parents are from the south of Vietnam and it was during the Vietnam War and they were part of the boat people. So uhm, part of my family, my dad’s family went to Holland, they like split off and my dad came to California first and then they had camps there and then they moved to Lincoln later. I just know they had to wait a while and his family; his siblings were his first responsibility. Making sure they know what to do and taking care of them, I guess during the transition with school and jobs it was really difficult for him to get a part-time job and I guess the language for school was very difficult for him. He’s always like I know I’m not the smartest and brightest person but it takes a lot of effort to try to get through it and just be there form family especially.

Another participant recounted a story told by his dad about his military experiences. The influences of his father’s story resonated with the family member in looking out for and serving others in leadership roles. “And so for me it’s always been about, whether something impacts me or not isn’t as important as to whether it impacts, negatively the people that are subordinates too. And so that has always resonated with me when it comes to being in leadership roles, your main priority is gunna be the people who report to you. It’s always been a thing in my family that your job is to look out for those who can’t look for themselves.”

Conclusions

In exploring the research question, how, if at all, do family stories aid in constructing individual leadership identity, participants were able to share a family story that influenced leadership in some way. Participants invoked the life stories of parents or grandparents focusing on narratives about overcoming challenges and adversity, serving others and stepping up into roles. The imago character types most salient in the family stories were agentic and communal. Research in the field of leadership studies has mainly focused on how leaders’ stories affect their leadership style or influence followers. This project aimed to dig deeper into how leadership identity is first established by examining retrospective narratives told in the family.

Research on leadership development has supported early adolescent development, educational programs, and adult experiences aid in the development of leadership identity. However, the gap in leadership literature is empirical research that explores how emerging adults develop a sense of leadership identity through their family culture. By using a retrospective storytelling method scholars and educators may gain a deeper understanding into how family stories help emerging adults create and make sense of their identity as a leader.

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