SUMMARY OF THESES

Judit Mihalik

The representation of the leadership identity in the life story's narrative

PhD Thesis

Consultant:

Judit Sass
PhD

Budapest, 2016

Institute of Behavioural Sciences and Communication Theory

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Contents

I.   The aims and the methods of theses

As a professional and freelancer researcher I was working with leaders in the last 20 years. As a consultant I listened to my executive clients's self perception of the leadership. As a researcher I always interested those imprints and perceptions leaders left behind in others. Those experiences deeply affected my interest.

I started to study my topic six years ago. In the first five years I was studying different theoretical backgrounds and points and with the help of my pilot studies I could elaborate on my conception as well.

In the focus of my dissertation is the narrative construction of the leadership identity. My approach considers narratives as a communicative representations of the identity. Based on the theory of narrative identity I made a communication analysis on different types of narratives. During my work I researched Hungarian leaders' life stories and I also conducted different pilot studies regarding narratives, leadership and identity and cognitive reflections. I cleared my own point very carefully: using the methods and models of narrative identity theories, I fulfilled my research with a different aim. This aim is a communicative approach of leadership narrative identity. My dissertation offers useful elements for working out a new communicative leadership theory and also provides contribution to the communication sciences on theory of narratives.

My main goal was to describe the characteristics of the leadership identity in a communication meaning.

My main hypothesises are:

1. Leadership as an identity is an outstanding identity construction.
2. Comparing to other narratives of the personality, leadership identity narrative as a message has specific, particular features.
3. Leader identity obviously overwrites all the other identity narratives of the person.

As a theoretical background I reviewed the main trends of leadership theories, as well as the wide scale of interpretation of identity, narrative and the concept of narrative identity in social sciences.

My thesis paper includes five researches: four of them are pilot studies, the last one is the main research of my dissertation. As a method in the pilot studies I used interviews, sometimes followed by inquiries. Those researches are unattached, but all of them added a valuable contribution to my final aim.

In my main research I investigated life story narratives of Hungarian leaders. This empirical research was based on the analysis of 16 narrative life story interviews of two groups. Eight leader life story interviews have been compared with eight female life story interviews. For a thematic analysis, I have used Dan P. McAdams's *script model* (McAdams, 1988).

In this summary, I present main findings of my Ph.D. thesis. I do not explain my thesis as a whole: here I focus my researches. I explicate the guideline of my thoughts and the new knowledge I observed.

In the next part of this paper, I demonstrate my way to the main research. These pilot studies are different from each other in topic and method, but all helped me understand the ultimate meaning of identity, narrative and/or leadership. The core and most detailed section of this resume is the analysis of the narratives of leaders life stories and the Thematic Apperception Test.

II.   Findings of the pilot studies

1. In my first pilot study I investigated *perceptions on leaders.* I interviewed Hungarian executive coaches. My inquiry was about how they experience leadership values via their executive clients communication. The study proved that according to the participants leadership identity has some important patterns, which are not included in classic leadership theories. But it seemed those patterns are probably has high relevancies in a communication understanding. Those patterns are for example high but hidden demand of intimacy and acceptance.

2. In my second pilot study I researched *how leaders use their metaphors.* I asked executives for making a statement about the sport they do. I found those sport-metaphors are part of their meta-language. They seemed to have used competencies learned via sport activities in a very conscious way, as part of their leadership tools.

3. In my third pilot study *I applied my own method* - for a better understanding – *to the narrative of the life story.* Participants successfully divided the story itself and its cognitive reflection. This study helped me to set up my model for the analysis of the main research later.

4. In last pilot study a *duplicated introspective observation of the position of the storyteller* was examined. With one of my colleagues we both sat into the chair of life storyteller interviewee and we both noticed our experiences from the interviewee point of view. The most impressive finding of this study was a very first hand proof of the nature of a new social science research method: the storyteller incessantly reflects to himself/herself as a protagonist and to the plot as well.

III. Findings of the main research of theses

I conducted my research between 2012 and 2015, in Hungary's capital city, Budapest. All recorded face-to-face interviews had been typed up and this text material was used for the analysis. I made a manual coding for a qualitative research analysis.

The *eight leader interviewees* all held top (CEO) or equivalent senior executive position. Most of them are responsible for at least 200 employees within their organization.

The *eight women interviewees* are aged between 35 and 58, two of them are from the countryside, six from Budapest. Six of them have higher education degrees.

Four of the eight participating women storytellers still hold a senior position, or held a position of first or second line executive for at least ten years prior to the interview.

This mix of 8 + 4 + 4 samples allows a comparison of the leadership narratives with a different, and clearly defined group of narratives.

The method of the research based on the life story model of Dan P. McAdams. According to him, a person's identity is the same as his or her life story (McAdams, 1988, 1996, 2006a). A life story can be divided into four main components: Nuclear Episodes, Imagoes, Ideological Settings, Generativity.

McAdams added two reflecting clusters: one refers to the content (power and intimacy motivation). The other cluster reflects to the structure (narrative complexity).

In this research, I applied a short cut version of the model. I only present how those main components appear in the narratives I studied via life story interviews.

My goal is not to understand the whole complex personality: but to draw a shape of the leadership significances.

That's why I use terms as follows: *Episodes, Performers, Ideology, Generativity*.

Findings: an overview

In the narratives of women, descriptions of Episodes are disproportionately overweight.

This could mean that *women are in a much closer relationship with their stories*, and they may also think that it is important to see the episodes of their lives in close up, in a retrospective way.

But it may also mean that the *leader narratives are much more tightly constructed*, so the episodes do not stand alone, they are always shown in an interpretative context. This context is also stronger and wider than the episode itself - that's why the episodes themselves will ultimately have a smaller weight within the narrative.

The Generativity and the Episodes are in an inverse relationship in two groups.

The *leader interviews were generally characterized this way: my leader storytellers summed up the whole plot in a few words and in the rest of the narrative they interpreted themselves and their relation to leadership.*

We see a very similar phenomenon of we look at the data of ideological background, although the difference there is slightly smaller while the proportion of Performers looks quite similar.

While women are re-enacting their narratives, leaders rather create their narratives. In terms of narrative as a phenomenon of identity, it means the leader narratives are more conscious, more controlled and more focused.

In other words, women identity narratives contemplate the life stories, while leader narratives present them.

The following is a detailed assessment of individual text components, to support this conclusion.

Episodes

Episodes as components of narrative identity give us an account of our past.

They show how the memorable events of our lives, layered on top of each other, or even contradicting each other, necessarily led us to the presence.

If we look at the content of interviews as a written text, we see that the leader interviews give us a very poor base according to the biographical facts. From the stories told it is usually not easy to recover not only the private life journey, but it would be also difficult to see the stages of the career.

The leader interviewees usually did not start by telling a linear life story. When I asked "Please tell me your life story!" they started a synthesizing, summarizing narrative, instead of self-biographical storytelling. The core biographical elements came across only later, as illustrations of the Generativity they presented.

The Episodes of leader interviews compose a strange mixture with a socio-historical analysis. The listeners have an impression *that they are not listening to a person's life story, much rather the biography of an outstanding public figure written by an author.* As if storytellers feel we will not understand their story without a detailed description of the context – or we can't understand the meaning and the motivations of their actions.*The leader narrative is much more similar to a public speech or an oral history record than to a personal biographical narrative.*

The general pattern of women interviews is completely different. Episodes concerned in a long, chronological order almost only to the plot.

Performers

Performers are the human characters in the life story, mentioned by the storytellers without a specific inquiry. In this case, quantitative scaling of the length in the text is a good indicator of the weight of the Imago components. Performers have a really little, almost surprisingly little attendance in all interviews.

In leader life stories almost never show up family members. Mothers hardly ever or only marginally mentioned. They may appear in context: the parents are mentioned only in relations of the main episodes of their own childhood. They speak about their own kids mainly in connection with the future perspective of their life story and rather as part of their scenarios of generativity. Spouses, ex and new wives appear in the narrative only as allusions. Fathers are mentioned more often but only when they are determining in a positive or negative sense. Or, a father, idealized by a teenage girl, who became an influential leader afterward.

In leader life stories come up mentors and wits. They appear in almost each leader narrative and their role is always the same*: they are agents of change or incarnations of coveted ideals.*

However, sooner or later almost every interviewee bring their children on.

Leaders usually mentioned them as part of their future, or in relations of thinking of them as a masterpiece of their lives: children are part of their Generativity. They are interested how to transfer the ability of coping and motivation. How to find a balance between providing their kids as much as they need without saving them of desire for discovery. It seems that the *leader's main concern in relation to their children is a kind of secret wish of a continuance of identity.*

Ideology

I classified under this category all the narrative details which convey impressions to the listener that the storyteller steps out of the main narrative in order to see him-/herself and his/her world as it is in the present and it was in the past.

Ideology components perfectly verifies the gender-oriented approach of Carol Gilligan [Gilligan 1982]. I found, congruently with Gilligan's studies, that men's ideological habit is based on formal ethical principles and abstract ideas of law and justice, while women's ideology has empathy and emotional intelligence focus.

A female language: doubts and dilemmas rising about the men they love and the children they are responsible for. The *typical male leader Ideology basis is autonomy and responsibility for himself and those he cares about.* With no exception*, this imprint could be discovered in every male leader interview.*

As it appears *in the case of the Ideology component, leadership identity overwrites the gender determinations.*

Generativity

In leader narratives, we find an extremely high dominance of Generativity.

Six of eight leader interviews began and continued as well in the first 15 minutes with a Generativity pattern.

I believe this trend can be considered as a framework of narrative: it seems *the listener has been pre-oriented by the storyteller. It appears as an editorial prologue guiding us how we should interpret the narrative we are going to hear.*

Unlike leader life stories, in the two female groups, Generativity comes up separately from the plot, often only at the end of the story. It is very rare the whole structure of the narrative crosscutting version.

The *leader interviews, by contrast, are full of Generativity as a spider's web. They start their narratives with the generative introduction and continue with it, and it is difficult to separate this sort of reflexion from the other elements of the narrative.*

There are also *two very significant Generativity types of leader narratives.*

One is the *myth of origins*, which comes up at almost every narrative, implicitly or explicitly, according to the habit of the storyteller. Second is *the leadership itself, in a self-reflexive context.*

Thematic Apperception Test

In the main research I also applied Thematic Apperception Test as well with cooperation of the same leader participants. This test is part of McAdams's model which is suggested in order to study of intimacy motives in narratives. I used 10 pictures of the 21 of total of the original test, and I analysed 7 choosen inner motives and 5 outer effects.

At this part of the research I found that inquiered leaders have very high demand on intimacy, personal contacts and acceptance – as I also found it in my first pilot study.

IV.   Conclusions

Using McAdams method, my analysis verified my main hypothesises. Leadership narratives are specific ones, and its features, at most concerns, are valid for the majority of narratives I analysed. These features are the following.

The dominant component is Generativity. In leader narratives it has a great overweight comparing to the control group. Within the narratives Generativity exists as a spiders web. The *whole story is full of the fragments of this script*, mainly as a comment of Episodes.

The function of Generativity can be multiple. It comes up *as a framing, as a reflection, as interpretation, as internalization, and sometimes as a rationalization.* As a separate issue, we can see Generativity as a *myth of origins* or as a self-reflection fragment.

The picture screened by the leader narratives is very consciously compiled, designed, and framed. Outsider listener has the impression that this is rather a passionate, profound, although somehow subjective analysis or a colourful drawing of the society, than a singular life story. In addition, *the plot of leader narratives edited carefully, meanwhile, it gives a very little help to understand the life story itself.* On this stage there are very few Performers, and they are only mentioned by the storyteller, if they have a really important role in the evolution of the protagonist's leadership identity.

Ideological background of leader narratives has a masculine attribute and women leaders have similar gender characters. That means leadership as a role overwrites gender determination.

Trying to understand this phenomenon, it is imaginable more than one initiative that arguments come from.

Primary, leader identity as a personal identity is obviously linked to the social context, as it is a condition sine qua non. There is no leader without followers.

Secondary, dominance of Generativity and Ideology suggest another interpretation, too. Namely, l*eaders are not only challenged to control but also challenged to interpret.* Their messages are: I understand, so I'm able to control in a cognitive way, so I'm able to dominate.

Tertiary, an explanation could be based on the term of validity. Storyteller leaders seem to have (a perhaps unconscious) the assumption towards their narrative: they

don't stand on their own. As if its message would be the following that context is an integral, inseparable part of their narrative, and at the same time an incessant revision, restitution, redesign and reshape of the building of identity and walling the entire cognitive schema.

I conclude from the analysis that leader identity is an inflexible identity.
It strongly attached to the leadership role as its source. That implies to strong consistency in the narrative. *This identity does not let to see any other parallel identity at the level of life story narrative.* It is very strongly entrenched with many defensive tools and the interpretation of the narrative has a fixed horizon.
I think socialization is an immanent part of this topic.
Leaders learn they are chosen, empowered and the only further way for them going up and straight forward. It appears, *leader identity itself would be a part of a social construction, which is the source of legitimacy of rule.* It is also a strong determination, although the scope of my present research doesn't contain this topic.
As a paraphrase of Frye's model (Frye, 1963) I could define those interviews as an artwork of literature.
Leader interviews I would compare to heroic poems. We found, in the beginning, a proposition (sometimes narrative begins in medias res, namely with leadership mission statement). Protagonist fulfils his/her successful mission against enemies and helpmates.
Leaders tells stories on their own acts - while others tells stories happened to them.
Women group interviews remind me of novels. A self-reflective, full of stories, similar to an epistolary novel or even a picaresque novel alike.
At the end, in the light of result, I should mention the disposition of storytellers. Namely: is it possible, and what to extent that two types of groups of interviewee's disposition significantly influenced by the researcher's question? How storytellers affected by their own interpretation of the purpose of interviews? Is this context separable from narratives analysed? To answer these questions, I should return to have a look at the basic correlation between narrative and identity.
If I ask someone, "Please, tell me your life story!" He or she obviously returns a question: "In what sense you mean? "Because we all have a wide range of identity (e.g. parent, professional, woman), we have to select one of them to let it tell.

According to Peter T. F. Raggatt "The story you tell will probably be one story from a number of possibilities, and therefore, the life story could never be encompassed by a monologue. In what follows, I argue that the life story is really more like a conversation of narrators, or perhaps a war of historians in your head." (Raggatt, 2006, p.15.) In this regard when I asked my interviewees to tell their stories, I gave them an instruction in what sense they should tell it: as a leader - or as a woman. My question was a fingerpost how they should choose one story from many.

Yes, it's an intervention, but hopefully, I could prove, it is an unavoidable decision.

Recapitulating, I found that leadership narrative identity is a specific identity, in which the dominant component is *Generativity*. In this type of script, storytellers strongly reflect on themselves and the world around them, and this feature pervades the entire texture of the narratives. Generativity appears primarily as a genesis myth and *expressis verbis* it is also directly linked to the reflections of leadership identity itself.

Based on my analysis of these narratives, it seems that in the case of leaders, their aspiration to control things is inseparable from their urge to interpret these phenomena. Leader identity appeared as an inflexible identity, which was closely linked to the leadership role.

My dissertation, presenting the theoretical background and providing researches via multiple disciplines, verifies that leadership narrative identity is certanly worth to study from communication science's point of view.

With this treatise I came into a conclusion that the representation of the leadership identity is revealable.

According to my opinion this approach is a suitable framework for a communication based leadership theory to be worked out in the future.

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