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"Meaning-Making for a Leader: How a traumatic experience shapes a leader' s post-trauma

leadership identity?"

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Meaning-Making for a Leader: How a traumatic experience shapes a leader' s post-trauma leadership identity?

The purpose of this study was to explore leaders' processes of meaning-making after a traumatic event. The study entailed of a qualitative narrative inquiry with participants to explore how a leader's meaning-making of their traumatic experience influences their post-trauma leadership identity. The research question was "How does a leader's meaning-making of their traumatic experience influence their post-trauma leadership identity?" The interview questions, as seen in Appendix A, pertained to the identification of a sense of meaning in the traumatic event, the leader's identity and role before the traumatic event, the effect of the traumatic event on the leader's current leadership identity, the meaning that was made that contributed to the leader's growth, and the influence of the meaning on the leader's leadership. The study provided the participants with an opportunity to voice their liminal journey through trauma, leadership, and beyond. The theoretical framework for the research was Burke's (1991) identity control theory and Hogg and van Knippenberg's (2003) social identity theory of leadership.

Identity in the Context of a Leadership Role

Within identity control theory, individual's use their identity to create meaning (Burke, 1991, p. 574). One's identity is the result of one's values, experiences, and how they view themselves (Baltes & Carstensen, 1991, p. 258). In the process of developing their identity, individuals may seek congruence between their input and perceived output into the environment through a continuous, self-adjusting feedback loop (Burke, 1991, pp. 837, 840). The input to the identity development process is perceived self-meanings, and the output reflects meaningful behavior (Burke, 1991, p. 840). According to Burke (1991), "identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or a situation defining what it means to be who one is" (p.

837). The identity system works to modify the output to the social situation by attempting to control the input (Burke, 1991, p. 837). For example, when a person who identifies as being submissive receives feedback from someone who perceived them as dominant in a situation, they may act more submissively in the next situation to maintain congruence (Burke, 1991, p. 839). People experience stress when they receive feedback that is incongruent with their self-perceived identity (Burke, 1991, p. 839). In the case of the participants of the current study, the participants experienced stress in the form of traumatic events, thus changing the way they viewed themselves as leaders.

An individual's self-identity also influences their goal regulation by directing them to focus on specific behaviors and goals (Wu et al., 2018, p. 294). So, "one acquires an identity standard by being socialized into the expectations that exist for a person in that position" (Burke, 1991, p. 574). Within the social identity theory of leadership, leaders not only lead the group, they are a members of the group; and prototypical leaders are perceived as more effective than less prototypical leaders (Hogg et al., 2012). The ingroup prototype is not stored in memory but is a representation of the ideal abstraction of group features that distinguishes the group from other groups such as beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behavior (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123). Trauma disrupts a person's previously known state of reality and self (Cann et al., 2010, p. 19), so the leader may not feel as if they are prototypical member of the group following the trauma.

A core human motivation is to reduce uncertainty about subjectively important matters, such as beliefs, attitudes, and one's perceptions and feelings about their place within the social world (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 124). The prototype reduces uncertainty for group members because it is relatively consensual and provides moral support and validation of one's self-concept (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 124). Certainty within the group also gives one's existence

meaning and confers confidence on how one should behave and what to expect from their physical and social environment (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 124).

Participants

The criterion for interviewee participation was that the individual had suffered a traumatic event while in a leadership position and had since returned to a leadership position, including the same position they held before the traumatic event. Because the time allotted for this study was limited, the use of non-statistical sampling assisted in obtaining a close representation of leaders who have survived traumatic events. Specifically, convenience sampling is a technique employed to select a sample from a population based on accessibility and ease of selection (Groebner, 2014, p. 15). The following section presents a rationale for the choice of each participant. The researcher has changed the interviewees' names to protect their identities.

P. Miles

P. Miles is a technology executive at a large financial services firm, and he leads a team of 12 people. P. Miles' mother suddenly passed away in May 2019, and then his father suddenly passed away in August 2020. Over 15 months, P. Miles lost what he referred to as his "foundation." P. Miles continued to lead his team while taking little time off.

D. Smith

D. Smith formerly worked as a marketing executive at a small manufacturing business, leading a team of more than 20 employees, and currently owns a security services business. During his tenure as a marketing executive, personal issues arose with his wife. They decided to divorce. D. Smith and his ex-wife have two young children. D. Smith continued to work and lead his team throughout the divorce proceedings.

D. Roberts

D. Roberts has owned his successful concierge business for 20 years. The company had a tumultuous beginning 19 years ago when D. Smith and several of his employees were robbed at gunpoint and physically assaulted. After some time, D. Smith continued to run his business, despite the traumatic event.

S. Taylor

S. Taylor is a special friend to the researcher because she also lost her infant child. S. Taylor was a human resources manager at a leading U.S. airline, responsible for a division of 300 employees, at the time of her daughter's death. After taking a leave of absence, S. Taylor returned to work.

J. Smith

J. Smith is a PsyD student concentrating on strategic leadership. She owns a small consulting firm, where she conducts training on organizational development and diversity, equity, and inclusion. She is also a leader in her community, where she volunteers at many non-profits focused on helping women and children. In her previous role, she experienced an intense amount of discouragement and negativity from her direct supervisor, which led her to resign.

M. Williams

M. Williams is a former U.S. Army captain and business owner. During his time as an Army officer, he led several platoons in Ramadi and Fallujah, Iraq. He then led a manufacturing company with more than 300 employees. In a single two-week period, two years before M. Williams and his partners sold the company, the company lost its largest client, which accounted for 90% of its revenue; one of the partners left the company, which caused financial distress; and new government regulations impeded the company's ability to expand.

Preliminary Impressions from Interviewees

Bazeley (2013) suggested that when researchers conduct interviews, they should avoid premature closure by reflecting on the interviews and their preliminary impressions of the interview data (pp. 102−103). Initial thoughts on the current interview data include three significant points: (a) each interviewee survived – they made it through their traumatic event and continued in their leadership role; (b) most interviewees noticed having more empathy towards their followers following the traumatic event; and (c) most interviewees believed strongly in the separation between work and home life before the traumatic event, but their opinions differed following the traumatic event.

Bazeley (2013) also suggested that researchers understand the participants' perspectives and review their assumptions to further shape their data collection (p. 101). Two of the participants were not far removed from their traumatic events, so their perspectives were those of a leader who is still working to understand their post-traumatic leadership identity. P. Miles' father passed away less than four months before the interview. He was still processing this loss. D. Smith finalized his divorce in June 2020, only five months before the interview. D. Smith changed companies soon after his divorce, so his employees at the new company had not experienced his leadership before the traumatic event. The other four participants were able to discuss their traumatic events from a more distanced perspective, since they had many years to process the event.

The foundational assumption underlying the present study's research question was that a leader's life events provide them with a meaning-making system from which they can act authentically and interpret reality in a way that gives their leadership actions a personal meaning (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 396). Another assumption is that trauma disrupts a person's

previously known state of reality, which can be an internal or external reality disruption (Cann et al., 2010, p. 19). Cann et al. (2010) stated that when an individual faces a stressful situation, they may experience an abrupt disintegration of their known inner world, which can also affect fundamental assumptions about their external world (p. 19). Another assumption underlying the research question was that people can make cognitive changes to accommodate the highly stressful experiences that follow a traumatic event, in a process known as post-traumatic growth (Cann et al., 2010, p. 19).

First and Second Cycle Interview Coding

Coding is the process of organizing data into categories and using words to represent each category of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193). The initial stages of coding include identification and labeling using a priori codes and deductive coding (Bazeley, 2013, p. 126). Miles (2020) suggested the use of Emotion Coding or Values Coding when the research focuses on understanding a participant's values, perspectives, and life conditions, as is the case in the current study (p. 67). Emotion Coding is particularly appropriate for studies that explore participants' interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. Values Coding helps the researcher code and reflect on the values, attitudes, and beliefs that represent a participant's worldview (Miles et al., 2020, p. 67). The current study also utilized In Vivo Coding, which employs short phrases or words from the participant's own interview data; and Concept Coding, in which the researcher assigns a macro-level of meaning to the data, for example, by means of short phrases that symbolically represent a broader item or action (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65−66). The text below presents one excerpt from each interview in order to clarify the context of some of the codes, which are provided after the excerpts.

I drew a very, a very firm line between my personal life and my work life and so, you know, for the most part, other than a few handfuls of people here and there, um, you know, I may have had pictures of Teresa and the kids on my desk, but other than that, I did not really talk about my personal life much. When I was at work, it was about work. My associates did not have an idea of where I lived, much less what was going on in my personal life. (P. Miles, personal communication, November 16, 2020)

It [the traumatic event] has allowed me to become more empathetic to other people, because I would preach, I would come into the conference room and say, "It's called work, not happy fun time, even though we are blessed with a job that is so much fun, it is still work, I understand we all got something going on, but when you walk through the front door, you're supposed to drop that baggage and come in here and work." I would preach that, but I understand… now…, that it's not that easy. (D. Smith, personal communication, November 18, 2020)

It was fight or flight after that, from a leadership perspective. It was like when we would run from lions and tigers generations ago. I took the flight; I shut down for six months. My mind did not work all that well; I was surviving. I was not there for my employees. There was a lot of black and white. Now I pay better attention to my people, I am there for them, I take the time to listen to them, I am present, but that all happened maybe like seven to ten years later. (D. Roberts, personal communication, November 16, 2020)

Now I look into things more and try and get more feedback from individuals. Prior to losing Eleanor, I was very confident, I carried myself well, and I was well-spoken in front of people. I did not have an issue with leading people or being seen as a leader and then, um, once we lost her, for over a year my confidence was just gone in myself. The unimaginable had happened, and I was not comfortable in my leadership position, I was not comfortable leading others. (S. Taylor, personal communication, November 17, 2020)

I was like, you know what, that was a lot, let me take a step back and reflect, and not lead right now, because I know how much I personally am going to want to invest in the next leadership opportunity, but I think it [the traumatic experience] made me want to lead and create safe spaces for people, and model leadership, and focus on leadership, because I knew what my experience had been in an organization that had really ineffective leadership at the time. (J. Smith, personal communication, November 17, 2020)
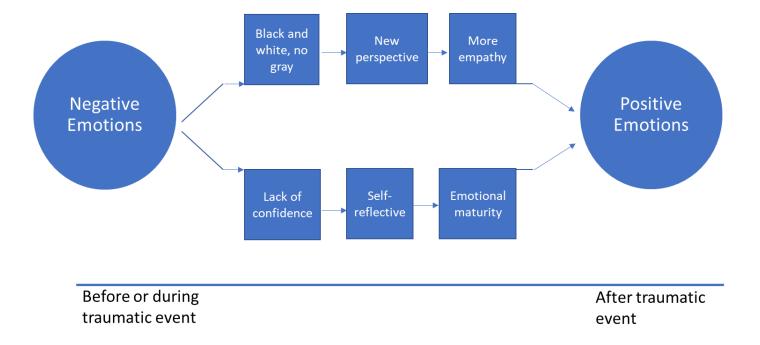
No matter how hard you try to control something, no matter how good you are as a leader, there can be external events that can make it so that no matter how good you are, you cannot get to the desired outcome. I know it seems obvious, but in my thought process before, I thought nothing could stop us, and it didn't matter what was going to happen externally. I was very confident. (M. Williams, November 18, 2020)

In the first cycle of coding, a number of initial codes emerged from the data. These initial codes were "lacked empathy," "more empathy," "trauma," "separation of work and home," "had everything under control," "relationships," "authentic connections," "team," "black and white, no gray areas," "nervousness," "self-reflective," "confidence," "lack of confidence," "fight or

flight," "uncertainty," "emotional maturity," "awkward," "care," "humanness at work," "this is

happening to me," "focus on work," "safe place," "family," "manage expectations," "new

perspective," "leadership," "servant leadership," and "meeting needs of followers."

As Bazeley (2013) suggested, following the first cycle of coding, the second stage of

coding should further refine the interpretation of the data and produce higher-level categories (p.

126). The higher-level categories in the second cycle of coding are Pattern Codes (Miles et al.,

2020, p. 79). Pattern Codes are explanatory codes that help the researcher elaborate a cognitive

network by condensing large amounts of smaller categories into themes (Miles et al., 2020, p.

79). The Pattern Codes from this research were "negative emotions," "positive emotions," "work

processes," "followers," "journey," "leaders," "home life," "meaning," and "identity." Below is a

network display of the "negative emotions" and "positive emotions" Pattern Codes that

illustrates the coding and describes the process of the interview participants' transformation over

time (Miles et al., 2020, p. 84).

Figure 1

A Network Model of Negative and Positive Emotion Transformation

Before or during traumatic event   After traumatic event

Note: This figure demonstrates the elements of a network model of negative and positive emotion transformation.

Interpretation of the Data

Based on the coding, one could infer that all participants experienced post-traumatic growth in different ways; however, the growth and development only occurred after years of self-reflection and finding new ways to serve others. Many of the participants felt their leadership identity evolved. They started out as transactional leaders. Transactional leaders focus mostly on the exchange process between leaders and followers (Furtner et al., 2013, p. 437). Following their traumatic experience, they grew into authentic leaders who care deeply about their followers and create authentic connections with all of their co-workers. An authentic leader has a strong sense of purpose and clear ideas about the right thing to do, establishes trusting

relationships, demonstrates self-discipline, acts on their values, and is empathetic to the plights of others (Steffens et al., 2016, p. 727).

The researcher noticed that the evolution from transactional to authentic leadership was consistent for those who suffered a traumatic event outside the workplace. For the two participants who suffered a traumatic event that was a result of their work or working conditions, the researcher noted that while these participants experienced growth, they characterized their growth as leading to them being more cautious in their leadership and dealings with peers and partners. They matured emotionally to deal with issues in the workplace. Therefore, one could assume that workplace trauma can result in a leader exercising more restraint and caution when leading than they did before the traumatic event, while trauma suffered outside of the workplace can lead to more empathetic and authentic leadership as learned from the other four interviewees.

While one participant, D. Roberts, recalled that he "shut down" (D. Roberts, personal communication, November 16, 2020) for six months and was emotionally unavailable to his employees and co-workers following the traumatic event, all of the other participants recalled resuming their leadership duties relatively quickly. S. Taylor said that she took a three-month leave of absence following the death of her infant, but her unavailability was apparent, because she was not physically in the office with her employees. D. Roberts was in the office for the six months of his "shut down" (D. Roberts, personal communication, November 16, 2020), but was technically unavailable. The other participants worked in their leadership roles throughout their trauma, signifying that humans can be resilient. They each spoke of their initial awkwardness and nervousness upon returning to work, but they conquered their fears.

No interview question asked the leaders specifically how they emerged from their grief and conquered their fears, but it can be inferred from their answers to the other questions that

they held closely to meaning-making processes. A leader's life events provide them with a

meaning-making system from which they can act authentically and interpret reality in a way that

gives their leadership actions a personal meaning (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 396). One

participant described a tattoo that he had gotten due to his traumatic event that read "It is just a

moment" in Braille. One participant donated breastmilk on behalf of her loved one and decided

to be a point of contact in her workplace for those dealing with grief and loss. Another donated

their hair to children with cancer, and another decided to "double down" (D. Roberts, personal

communication, November 16, 2020) on their relationships with employees and set a goal to

"build authentic loyalty" (D. Roberts, personal communication, November 16, 2020). They all

realized that they had to manage the expectations of their superiors, peers, and followers

differently than they had before the traumatic event, and that expectation management would

require emotional maturity at a time when one's emotions can feel out of control. Their

realization of their new identity within the group aligned with aspects of the social identity

theory of leadership.

Each participant talked about the concept of control. They spoke about having control,

not having control, wanting control and realizing they did not have it, not wanting control

anymore, and learning what they could control, which was very little. A person who comes to an

unwelcome realization, for example, that they do not have as much control over situations as

they thought they had, may find themselves additionally traumatized by mental conflict and

stress. When a person has such an experience, they often experience cognitive dissonance, which

Christensen (2020) defined as "an internal conflict caused when a person's beliefs and

assumptions are challenged or contradicted by new information" (p. 7). When the interviewees

were able to resolve the state of dissonance by altering their thinking around control, they were truly able to move forward in their leadership.

Conclusion

An individual's own identity has crucial implications for their growth as a leader and their leadership identity. It seems that leaders who experience traumatic events also experience developments in their leadership identity and thus development in their leadership approach. The leaders in this study all suffered traumatic events in which they experienced sadness, depression, reduced self-esteem, and loss to varying degrees and for different amounts of time. However, they all eventually embraced their resilience and ability to make meaning from the traumatic event, which contributed to their development of an authentic leadership approach that they did not employ before the traumatic event. Following their traumatic experience, they cared deeply for their followers and were able to express compassion at work. The participants experienced positive changes in their self-perception through emotional growth and shifts in their life philosophy over time.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions and Justification

1. Have you been able to find some meaning from a traumatic experience while serving in a leadership position?

   - Bryman (2016) suggested researchers begin an interview with introducing questions and initial open-ended questions (pp. 473, 475). The above question allows the interviewee to introduce themselves by reflecting on their traumatic experience from a high level. It also addresses the assumption in the research question that the interviewee has indeed made meaning of their traumatic experience.

2. How would you describe how you saw yourself as a leader before the traumatic event occurred?

   - The purpose of this question (and its position in the sequence of interview questions) is to gain an understanding of the individual's identity as a leader before the traumatic event occurred so one can truly understand the differences in the individual's previous leadership identity and their leadership identity following the traumatic event. This type of question follows the *oral history interview method*, in that the interviewer asks the interviewee to reflect upon specific past events or periods (Bryman, 2016, p. 487). This question has a disadvantage, namely the possibility of the interviewee's response being biased due to memory lapses or distortions on their part (Bryman, 2016, p. 488).

3. Describe the negative effects the traumatic event in question has had on your current identity as a leader.

    - Bryman (2016) referred to a question such as the above one as a direct question (p. 473). In a direct question, the interviewer explicitly introduces the research topic and its dimensions (Bryman, 2016, p. 473). Researchers should ask direct questions later in the interview, after the interviewee has given their own descriptions and has indicated which parts of the research phenomena are of interest to them (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 161). Neo-positivist conceptions of the interview emphasize that the interview dialogue discloses the interviewee's "true self" and the essence of their experience, thus providing the researcher with dependable data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 172). Therefore, this direct question asks about both the positive and negative effects of the traumatic event to allow the interviewee to reveal their true self with as little bias as possible.

4. Describe the positive effects the traumatic event in question has had on your current identity as a leader.

    - Refer to justification on question 3.

5. Describe the influence this traumatic event has had on your desire to be a leader.

    - Question five is what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe as a *critical question*. The interviewer does not take everything the interviewee has said at face value and uses questions to test the interviewee's reliability and validity (p. 195). The critical question will check question four's logical consistency, which is the research question of the present study.

6. Describe how the traumatic event affected your relationship with your current followers.

- According to Bryman's (2016, p. 473) description, the above question is a *follow-up question* to question three. Question three asks how the leader's subordinates would describe the leader's identity before the traumatic event. This question asks about the leader's relationships with their followers after the traumatic event.