

A turning point: utilizing responsive interviewing and graphing as meaning-making techniques to develop leader identity

Responsive
interviewing
and graphing
in LID

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the current innovative practice paper is to introduce a technique to explore leader identity development and meaning-making that builds on the narrative pedagogical tradition. In this paper, we recommend a process for combining turning-point graphing and responsive (semi-structured) interviews to co-explore leadership identity development and meaning-making with college students.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper provides student feedback data on the effectiveness of the technique in improving understanding of leader identity and transforming meaning-making.

Originality/value – We hope practitioners can utilize this approach to build leadership identity development and meaning-making capacity in college students.

Keywords Leadership development, Leader identity, Turning-point graphing, Meaning-making, Narrative pedagogy

Paper type Technical paper

Introduction

There has been a trend in leadership research that considers leader identity to be a social and discursive construct (Clifton & Dai, 2020; Fairhurst, 2007). In this context, the understanding is that leader identity (like all identities) is constructed through talk (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Given that identity and meaning-making are so interconnected, researchers have recently become more interested in better elucidating the intersection of meaning-making and leader identity development (Orsini & Sunderman, *in press*). Given the importance of personal narratives to both meaning-making and identity construction (McAdams, 1993), leadership researchers have often turned to the research interview as a means of acquiring narrative data to better understand the leader identity development process (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Clifton & Dai, 2020; McCain & Matkin, 2019). Leadership educators have also relied on personal narratives as a powerful pedagogical tool in student self-discovery which has assisted emerging adults with their leader identity development (Armstrong &

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McCain, 2021; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Clapp-Smith, Hammond, Lester, & Palanski, 2019). Despite the prevalence of the narrative methods in leadership education and research, few studies have explored how the discursive interactions in research interviews influence leader identity development (Clifton & Dai, 2020; Ganz, Lee Cunningham, Ben Ezer, & Segura, 2023).

After completing two interviews, participants in a study on leader identity development and meaning-making were sent a follow-up survey to explicitly assess how the interview and turning-point graphing influenced their leader identity and ability to make meaning of their leadership experiences. The current innovative practice paper shares the survey results and provides recommendations for how to implement turning-point graphing and interviews in leadership education.

Background

The purpose of the current innovative practice paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of turning-point graphing and responsive interviews for building meaning-making capacity and developing leader identity in college age students through autobiographical reflection.

Leader identity and meaning-making

Leader identity, defined as “how one thinks of oneself as a leader” (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365), is critical to leader development (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Day & Harrison, 2007; Kragt & Day, 2020; Lord & Hall, 2005). Among college students, scholars regard leader identity as crucial to understanding the experience of leadership development (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Komives, Longerbeam, Mainella, Osteen, Owen, & Wagner, 2009), while meaning-making has been noted as imperative to leadership education by encouraging students to draw connections and make sense of experiences (Earnest, 2003; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Stuhr & Sutherland, 2013). Specifically, understanding how college students make meaning of leader identity is essential to fostering development (McCain & Matkin, 2019).

Leader identity development is grounded in meaning-making, which is defined as the process by which people understand experiences (Hammond, Clapp-Smith, & Palanski, 2017; Lord & Hall, 2005; Zaar, Van Den Bossche, & Gijsselaers, 2020). In the past, leader identity development has been described as a process of meaning construction that involves numerous contextual factors, such as relationships (Zheng & Muir, 2015). Chung and Personette (2019) discussed meaning-making, specifically reflection, as essential to leader identity development. Additionally, changes in meaning-making capacity have also been tied to leader identity development (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017). In sum, leader identity development and meaning-making have an established connection in that (1) leader identity development is an outcome of meaning-making and (2) leader identity development fosters enhanced meaning-making structures.

Leader identity is built through a personal narrative that develops meaning over time (Day & Harrison, 2007; Miscenko *et al.*, 2017). Research from various psychological fields suggests that a person’s evolving self-narrative influences current psychological functioning (Cox & McAdams, 2014). This functioning includes autobiographical reasoning, which is the active process of deriving meaning about the self from the memory of lived experiences (Cox & McAdams, 2014). The ability of a person to internally construct their own narratives and stories from which they derive meaning in their lives is inexorably linked to their epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal development (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994). These stages of development often take a critical leap in college age students, allowing

for the construction of life stories, through autobiographical reasoning, which allow for more complex identity construction (Erikson, 1968; Kegan, 1982; McAdams, 1993). For this reason, understanding meaning-making, especially through narratives, is essential to helping college age students understand and learn about their leader identity. Several researchers have suggested interviews as a tool for helping to assess meaning-making capacity (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007).

Interviews

Although some research has been done on the discursive construction of leader identity, to our knowledge, no studies have considered research interviews as a site of the construction of leader identity (Clifton & Dai, 2020). Structured interviews have been used in experiential learning pedagogy before, but almost always as a tool where the student uses an interview as a mechanism for interacting with some kind of experienced professional in order to integrate classroom learning with real-life experiences and to gain self-confidence in respect to their own knowledge. However, responsive interviews present an opportunity, within a social constructionist ontology, for meaning-making and internal transformation because they allow perspective-taking and non-judgmental engagement to deepen collective understanding (Way, Kanak, & Tracy, 2015). Although these perspectives are not well explored in leadership theory, cognitive developmental scholars have used the interview as both assessment and educational intervention for many years (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007).

Baxter Magolda and King (2007) and Kegan (1994) suggested that self-authorship was an important internal identity that allows a person to author one's own thinking, feeling and social relating and that it was critical to successful functioning as an adult. Previous research has suggested that this capacity for self-authorship and advanced meaning-making is critical to the development of college students' leader identity (Komives *et al.*, 2009). Designing educational interventions to develop self-authorship in students requires an assessment of their current epistemological, interpersonal and intrapersonal development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). Several prominent authors suggested that a responsive interview was the best form of assessment because it can tap into real-life situations and allow interviewees to choose content and context that connects with their unique manner of meaning-making (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Kegan, 1982). In addition, the interview itself allows for meaning construction because the interviewer and interviewee conversation also builds meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Kvale, 1996). Finally, responsive interviewing encourages the interviewer to ask probing questions about what the interviewee chooses to reveal, further promoting conversational meaning-making (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

Turning-point graphing

Responsive interviews in previous studies seeking to develop self-authorship in college students began with a prompt for participants to offer a summary of the previous year and to share experiences from that time that they felt were significant (Baxter Magolda, 2001). One method for providing this sort of autobiographical reflection is turning-point graphing. Turning points are major life moments that participants give meaning to as critical to their life trajectory (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). They are, "symbolic interpretations and evaluations of events that give meaning and definition. . ." (Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008, p. 28) to lived experiences. Turning-point analysis has been an established research method for many years (Horton, Hebson, & Holman, 2021). In this study, turning-point analysis was conducted by participants drawing graphs of their leader identity development over time during their first semi-structured interview.

Leadership theory and framework

In a scoping review on the intersection of meaning-making and leader/leadership identity development, [Sunderman and Orsini \(in press\)](#) put forward an integrated constructivist model for leader(ship) identity theory which suggests that any understanding of leader identity must consider a person’s underlying cognitive development, social identity and learning and meaning-making capacity (see [Figure 1](#)). Responsive interviews have been previously used to assess identity, cognitive development and meaning-making. Given that leader identity is a kind of social identity, it stands to reason that this technique would also be useful in helping student to construct and transform meaning around their leader identity.

Description of the practice

Participants engaged in a multimethod study which incorporated a phenomenological and narrative inquiry design to explore the phenomenon of meaning-making for leader identity in young adults. A phenomenological method describes the common meaning of lived experiences of those who have lived with or experienced a particular phenomenon ([Creswell & Poth, 2016](#)). In the current study, participants discussed the shared experience of leader identity meaning-making. A narrative inquiry approach following [McAdams \(1993\)](#) identity work was applied to explore the shared experiences of the phenomenon. Narrative methods allow researchers to meaningfully understand lived experiences in context by examining the dynamic and contextualized nature of stories, accomplished through qualitative inquiry ([Fivush, 2010](#)).

The study utilized semi-structured open-ended interviews (at two time points) and turning-point graphing to explore the phenomenon of leader identity meaning-making among college students. The two-part interview included a narrative inquiry approach to understand high points, low points and turning points ([McAdams, 2007](#)) of leader identity development from childhood through emerging adulthood, as well as a phenomenological exploration of meaning-making experiences and leader identity development ([Creswell & Poth, 2016](#); [Moustakas, 1994](#)). Interviews were conducted by undergraduate research assistants whom the primary investigators trained. Interview questions included the following:

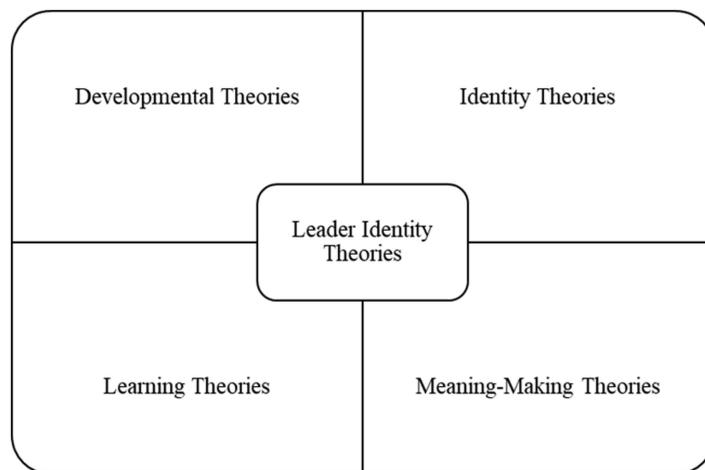


Figure 1.
An integrated constructivist model for leader(ship) identity theory

Source(s): Figure courtesy of Orsini and Sunderman (2022)

- (1) *Introduction question* – Please describe your view of leadership based on your previous experiences. What does the term leadership mean to you? what does leadership look like?
- (2) Please draw the graph of your leadership identity development throughout your lifetime. Leadership identity is defined as “how one thinks of oneself as a leader.” On the graph, leadership identity development is the *y*-axis and age is the *x*-axis. We’re particularly interested in hearing about a high point, low point and turning point in your leader(ship) identity development. We are interested in your life span in terms of your leader identity. Please reflect on memorable moments from childhood, adolescents, up to present day.
 - *High point* – Please describe a scene, episode, or moment that stands out as an especially positive experience.
 - *Low point* – Please describe a scene, episode, or moment that stands out as an especially negative or challenging experience.
 - *Turning point*: identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points – episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story as a leader.
- (3) Now that we’ve discussed the graph of your leadership identity development over time, think of your graph like the chapters a book. What would be the chapters?
- (4) Now we’re going to look through your graph together. We’ve talked about *what* was happening throughout your life in terms of your leader identity. As a reminder, leadership identity is defined as “how one thinks of oneself as a leader”. Now, I want us to think about *how* your leader identity was developing.
- (5) What other identities influenced the development of your leader(ship) identity and why?

Following participation in the two-part interview ($N = 26$), participants were invited to engage in a follow-up survey that posed questions to participants asking them to reflect on how participating in the interview and turning-point graphing influenced their meaning-making and leader identity ($n = 12$). The follow-up survey collected data to determine the perceived influence of responsive interviews on college students’ leader identity development and meaning-making.

Outcomes and results

Of the 26 students who participated in the original study, 12 responded to a follow-up survey asking them to assess how the interview process influenced their meaning-making and leader identity development (see [Table 1](#)). The follow-up survey responses were collected six months after the interviews to avoid the Honeymoon Effect, a frequent assessment challenge in leadership education that occurs when participants overestimate the impact of an intervention immediately after it concludes ([Rosch & Schwartz, 2009](#)). All 12 students either agreed or strongly agreed that sharing their leader identity story allowed them to reflect and make meaning of their leader identity and eleven also felt that sharing their story was a positive experience for making meaning. Eleven students also agreed or strongly agreed that the turning-point graph was beneficial for their leader identity development. Overall, nine students indicated agree or strongly agree to better understanding their own leader identity.

Although participants perceived that the interviews helped with meaning-making and understanding leader identity, some participants did not feel more confident in their leader identity or in their leadership ability after the interviews. Five participants selected disagree

Questions*	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
I better understand my leader identity because of sharing my identity story in the two interviews	0	0	3	8	1	3.83
Sharing my story was a positive experience for making meaning of my leader identity	0	0	1	5	6	4.42
Sharing my leader identity story allowed me to reflect on past experiences to make meaning of my leader identity	0	0	0	4	8	4.67
After sharing my leader identity story, I feel more confident in my leader identity	0	2	3	5	2	3.58
Sharing my leader identity story helped me better understand my leader identity	0	2	1	8	1	3.67
After sharing my leader identity story, I feel more confident in my ability to lead	0	3	1	6	2	3.58
Graphing my leader identity story with a high point, low point and turning point was beneficial for my leader identity development	0	0	1	3	8	4.58
Note(s): *1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree						
Source(s): Table provided by authors Orsini and Sunderman (in press)						

Table 1. Participant quantitative responses to post-interview questionnaire

or undecided on being more confident in their leader identity and four students were undecided or disagreed that they were more confident in their ability to lead. In addition to the quantitative questions, the survey also asked respondents to answer to open-response questions:

- (1) How, if at all, did your leader identity change as a result of telling your story? What contributed to the change?
- (2) After going through this interview process, what other aspects of your identity (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender identity, student status, sexual orientation, familial relationships, religion, involvements/organizations, etc.) do you think are most important to your leader identity?

Eight of the twelve students noted significant changes in their leader identity. Increasing awareness was one of the common refrains from these participants: “It made me more aware of everything that I have done that is considered leadership” One participant indicated that the interview process helped change how they view their leadership capacity:

I realized that I am a better leader than I initially envisioned myself as and am often seen as a leader by my peers. I dwell on negatives, but I need to recognize the positives I have as a leader. Vocalizing my leadership identity and journey helped me see these things.

Another participant reflected on how the process forced them to remember things they had forgotten and connect those things to their leader identity:

Telling my leader story resulted in a valuable time of reflection. I started to remember things that I had forgotten about, such as individuals who had a positive impact on shaping me as a leader. Additionally, I remembered things that I did long ago that didn’t seem significant at the time but now are a big part of who I am today and things that impacted the people around me.

One participant noted that the process made them reconsider how they thought of leadership, suggesting that the interviews were actively helping them develop a more complex understanding of leadership: “Before I thought of myself as a leader only in specific situations, but going through the interviews allowed me to better understand the characteristics that go into how I define myself as a leader.” Finally, participants also

noted that the turning-point graphing was helpful in making meaning of their leadership journey:

The graph of my leader identity over time forced me to reflect on when my leadership was at its best, but also where it could have been better. Being given the chance to reflect is always a great opportunity for me.

Finally, the interviews and turning-point graphing caused several participants to think about what influenced their leadership journey, and the most common responses were involvement and family. One participant noted that “I think my involvements most impacted my leadership identity. I had different opportunities and position in each organization that allowed me to develop as a leader and shape my leadership identity.” Another participant noted that the process made them reconsider how important family was to their leader identity and said,

I think the strongest part of my personal identity that affects my leader identity is my familial relations. A lot of how I perceive my leadership abilities stems from how I grew up and took care of my younger siblings.

Although participant responses to these questions were universally positive, four participants indicated no change or very little change in their leader identity because of the interviews. In one case, a participant indicated, “I was already very confident of who I was as a leader and what were the factors that drove my leadership.” Those participants who seemingly possessed a more advanced view of leadership also indicated little change from telling their story, with one noting “I personally do not feel like anything changed in my leader identity from telling my story.” This participant later explained, “I would say that involvement/organization is still one of the most critical aspects of my leader identity and I believe that stems from my opinion that leadership comes from practice, rather than being born.” One additional participant noted little change in their leader identity from the interview process, but then suggested that the process was reaffirming:

I think [the interview] reaffirmed to me how I want to be involved in developing the next generation of leaders after realizing how many people invested in me as a young leader and how that made such a positive impact on my journey.

Finally, one student suggested that although the process changed their identity little, it did change their perspective:

I became more aware of what my leader identity is. I don't think my identity changed much but I am definitely more aware of it. Thinking about the process of how I became the leader I am helped me recognize where I thought I was the best leader I could be and leading as my most authentic self.

Ultimately, the interview experience was viewed favorably, and all the students reported an increased awareness of their leader identity meaning-making.

Reflections and recommendations

Although the interview and survey process as described above took place in a research setting, there are clear implications for curricular and co-curricular settings which seek to utilize responsive interviews to help students make meaning of their leader identity development. Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. It is prohibitively time consuming for a leadership education instructor or student affairs professional to conduct responsive semi-structured interviews with all students. Our recommendation is to assign student pairs at the beginning of the course and have them work together as interview partners for the duration.

2. A series of three interviews is recommended:

- Interview One should include a highly structured interview designed to build trust between participants. [Way et al. \(2015\)](#) suggests that responsive interviews are more successful when a crafted (more structured) interview guide is used early in the process to develop a climate of mutual trust and understanding. We suggest questions that allow students to learn about each other. Personal history exercises used in team building could be useful in this setting. In addition, prompting the students to discuss effective interview techniques, which will involve concepts like probing questions and counterfactual prompting, may be beneficial, both to promote conversation interview process and also to build rapport.
- Interview Two should start with turning-point graphing where participants discuss high points, low points and turning points in their leader identity development. Participants draw the graph of their leader identity development throughout their lifetime with the y -axis as leader identity development and the x -axis as age. Interviewees are encouraged to be particularly interested in hearing about a high point, low point and turning point in the interviewees' leader identity development. Participants should be asked to reflect on memorable moments from childhood, adolescence and present day.
 - Example from current research: Please describe a scene, episode, or specific moment in your life that stands out as [emblematic of the topic of interest]. Please describe this scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment stands out to you now and what the scene may say about who you are as a person.
- Interview Three should include a phenomenological exploration of meaning-making experiences and leader identity development. The purpose is to look through the turning-point graph together. Instead of talking about *what* was happening throughout life in terms of the interviewee's leader identity, the interviewee should be prompted to think about *how* their leader identity was developing.

3. Following the three interviews, students are encouraged to complete a final reflection assignment that asks them to make meaning of the interview experience (e.g. "How, if at all, did your leader identity change as a result of telling your story? What contributed to the change?")

The current innovative practice paper outlines the development of a process to use responsive (semi-structured) interviews as a pedagogical tool to influence students' leader identity development and meaning-making capacity. The process described in this paper emerged from a larger research study; however, there are several methods (example above) to implement a similar approach in the classroom. When attempting to utilize this process in a formalized teaching intervention, there are several things to consider.

- (1) The interviewer plays a complex role in this process. The interviewer's primary goal is to explore how respondents construct themselves. This requires careful listening while also asking probing questions that locate the boundaries of the participant's assumptions about knowledge, self and relationships ([Baxter Magolda & King, 2007](#); [Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988](#)). Interview training may be required to achieve the maximum benefit from the process.
- (2) Responsive, semi-structured interviews require time and trust ([Way et al., 2015](#)). Trust needs to be built by spending time together. In addition, it is important to

consider the influence of power discrepancies and the impact of psychological distance (especially if the interviews are conducted online).

- (3) Level of development (and meaning-making capacity) of the interviewee, especially at the college level, can vary dramatically. Given that, it is important to consider that the process will have different magnitudes of influence on each student participant.

In sum, leader identity development is dynamic, complex and difficult to teach and assess. Using responsive (semi-structured) interviews as a tool to foster autobiographical reasoning in college students has been shown to be an effective practice in building understanding of adult development in college students (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). The same practice applied in a leadership context has preliminarily been shown to be an effective strategy for developing understanding of leader identity, raising self-awareness and encouraging meaning-making in college students. This practice provides leadership educators with a fresh approach for building narrative pedagogy in leadership curriculum. This practice contributes to the priorities outlined in the 2020–2025 National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA) that emphasize the need for leadership scholars to more effectively consider issues of identity in leadership content and pedagogy. We urge leadership educators to take advantage of the discursive properties of responsive interviews help college students further develop their leader identity through meaning-making.

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