

‘Here we go again’ Autoethnographic investigation of leadership and identity work

Salla Lehtonen (salla.lehtonen@utu.fi); University of Turku, School of Economics, Finland;
Satakunta University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Address: University of Turku, School of Economics, Pori Unit, P.O. Box 170, 28101 Pori, Finland

eMail: salla.lehtonen@utu.fi

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Summary

This autoethnography studies leadership identity work through a practice lens. The focus of this paper is on the identity struggles that, especially the expectations for heroic leadership, cause to the identity work for a manager who tries to leave behind the individual, heroic notions of leadership and sees leadership as a collective accomplishment located in practices. More specifically, this paper studies identity work through a leadership-as-practice approach. This paper contributes to the rarely explored topic of the struggles that leaders face in their attempt to take a collective, processual view on leadership. The paper also makes a methodological contribution to autoethnography on how it can be used for studying identity through a practice lens, where the influences of practices and socio-materiality play a central role in identity work and where the identity work may also influence the practices.

Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

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Introduction

'Oh, no! Here we go again. What have I done now? I was astonished that so many people came to congratulate me on my new position today and wanted to hear what I would now change. How do I get the people to understand that, in reality, this is mainly just an administrative role? In my mind, leading in the sense of determining the direction of our actions is something that we all do together on a daily basis. My appointment to a managerial position did not make me a strong leader who would know all and tell everyone what to do. Or is this just me feeling again to the same trap as the first time I was ever appointed as a manager when I was truly surprised by the difference in people's reaction to my comments after the appointment. To me, it was just so surprising to see how seriously people suddenly took what I had said. I somehow thought that as the context was so different, the reactions would have been totally different as well. My initial thoughts were that I need to take a distinctive approach, since the context is so different from the last time. However, is this only in my head or just a fact of life to which I need to adjust myself?'

The above is a passage from my diary from the day I was promoted to a managerial position as a head of teaching at a university of applied sciences. A bit earlier, as a PhD student, I had also discovered and became very interested in collective, postmodern views of leadership and was keen to take ideas from those as a guiding star for my new role.

The purpose of this paper is to autoethnographically study the identity work of a manager aiming to view leadership through the processes and practices of a collective rather than what they can achieve individually. The focus of the paper is on the identity struggles that role expectations (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2010), especially expectations for 'heroic leadership', cause that affect identity work, and how these expectations come from the subordinates, peers, top management, the organization in general and – alas, from myself.

In this article, I follow Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) definition of identity work as 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (p. 626). In particular, this article aims to study identity work as an interpretive activity that transforms one's self-identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015), possibly requiring 'identity undoing' (Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). More specifically, I am investigating identity work through a practice lens based on leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2016). L-A-P takes a post-modern view of leadership, in which leadership is viewed as emerging in a practice involving a collective of human and nonhuman artefacts situated within a particular context (Carroll et al., 2008; Kempster et al., 2016; Youngs, 2017). Thus, this paper adopts a practice approach to identity work, where the interpretive activity is not internal but requires a constant dialectic between self and social structure as a starting point and considers identities to be mediated through social structure and self, mutually and simultaneously, making the identity complex and constantly under construction (Carroll, 2016; Ybema et al., 2009).

This paper will have two contributions. First, the paper contributes to the rarely explored topic of the struggles leaders face in their attempt to take a process view of leadership (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018; Schweiger et al., 2020). Second, the paper makes a methodological contribution to autoethnography on how it can be used for studying identity through a practice lens, where the influences of practices and socio-materiality play a central role in identity work and where the identity work may also influence the practices.

The final article will be structured as follows. First, the article explores the literature on heroic notions of leadership in managerial identities and L-A-P and L-A-P's view on identity. Second, the methodology for the paper is introduced before the analysis of the autoethnographic material. In the

analysis, the personal stories that offer the reader an evocative experience (Andersson, 2006) and provide deep descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011) are connected to the theoretical insights from the existing literature to recognise the meaningful interplay of the lived experiences and theory (Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019). The paper ends with a discussion and a conclusion, where the contributions are summarised and future research topics introduced are identified.

Leadership-as-practice and identity

The L-A-P approach can be viewed as a postheroic theory of leadership because it decentres the role of individual leaders by concentrating on collective accomplishments (Crevani et al., 2010; Raelin, 2016; Sergi et al., 2021). Leadership happens in ‘the space between’ individuals (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) and emerges from interactions within the context (Sergi, 2016).

L-A-P takes a process perspective on leadership and defines it through the future and accomplishment of direction (Crevani, 2018; Crevani et al., 2010; Kempster and Gregory, 2017). To find leadership, the flow of practices must be investigated to identify interactions that prompt a change in the trajectory of activity or turning points in the flow of practice (Raelin and Robinson, 2022; Robinson and Riddell, 2022). Materiality can play a significant role in these practices (Case and Sliwa, 2020; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Sergi, 2016), either by constraining or enabling behaviour (Sergi, 2016; Willocks, 2022).

Influences the practices and socio-materiality have on identity work are central aspects when studying identity based on L-A-P. Simultaneously, identity work may influence leadership practices.

Methodological choices

Why autoethnography?

Autoethnographies are well suited for both identity and L-A-P studies. Rather than universal truths, the L-A-P research tends to use interpretive forms of enquiry, such as discursive, narrative, ethnographic and aesthetic approaches, to capture and ‘understand’ the subjective lived experiences of participants and their practices in all their complexity and ambiguity (Parry et al., 2014; Raelin, 2020). Ethnographies, and more specifically autoethnographies, are oft suggested methods (e.g. Kempster et al., 2016; Raelin, 2020). Even generally, in L-A-P studies, the researcher is not seen as an objective observer, but as someone who is an active participant in the situation and who is ready to make oneself vulnerable by questioning one’s own biases (Raelin, 2020). Recent autoethnographies have demonstrated that the method is especially well-suited for revealing the embodied experiences and vulnerability of the researcher (e.g. Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019; Porschitz and Siler, 2017). Learmonth and Humphreys (2012), therefore, demonstrated how autoethnographic studies provide scholars with case studies of identity work.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) described autoethnography as a research and writing approach that seeks to describe and analyse personal experiences to understand cultural experiences. It aims to produce evocative and meaningful research that fully acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and the influence of the researcher. (Lincoln and Denzin 2011, p. 266). Autoethnography is closely linked to the post-modern view of ethnography that criticizes the classic ethnography of false neutralism and claims that instead of concentrating on understanding the others more fully, field

workers should aim to gain a deeper understanding of themselves by uncovering their prejudices, ideologies and tacit knowledge (Gobo, 2008).

Autoethnography in general provides specific, complex and nuanced knowledge about particular experiences or relationships rather than generalised information (Adams et al., 2014, p. 22). By describing personal experiences, the aim is to describe the flow of thoughts and meanings that people have in their intermediate situations. It has been argued that we can only study our own experiences directly; all other experiences can be studied only through the representation of the experiences. (Lincoln and Denzin 2011, p. 417). Thus, in this approach, the researcher becomes the research object. Spry (2011, p. 497) defines autoethnography as ‘a critically reflective methodology resulting in a narrative of the researcher’s engagement with others in particular sociocultural context.

The context of the study

The study takes place in a Finnish University of Applied Sciences. This makes the context an interesting one. As a public university, the school operations are quite bureaucratic and leaning towards traditional leadership roles and positions. At the same time the school is located in Finland, where in general new ideas on leadership such as L-A-P are gaining wider acceptance.

The university recently had an organisational restructuring, where two new positions; heads of teaching and heads of research were introduced. I was appointed as head of teaching in a faculty where not only the two other heads of teaching and head of research were new on their positions, but also the dean of the faculty had been recently appointed.

The study process

In L-A-P-based studies, the importance lies in ensuring that the data collection is aimed at revealing the change in trajectory in the flow of practices (in other words, what L-A-P considers leadership) and what happened there, and why and how, rather than revealing what the informer considers leadership. Similarly, rather than interviews or collecting other narratives on what the study subject believes to be leadership and identity, Carroll (2016) suggests studying identity from an L-A-P perspective as ethnographies. In other words, the researcher observes the study subjects in their mundane routines, gaining an understanding of ‘the moments of leadership’ and involving human and non-human participants, embodied movements and negotiations of structures. Also, the researcher engages in ongoing conversations with the subjects on their deliberations on who they are and what they do in breaking down expectations and realities to understand how identity is formed and reformed between agentic and structural realities. In this research, I mimic this approach in an autoethnographic format by writing diary notes on and after the routines. This includes ‘ongoing conversations’ I have with myself when working with the material, in other words, doing the ‘headwork’ (van Maanen, 2011) of an autoethnography.

As in all the studies and autoethnographies, researchers need to bear their own biases in mind. To avoid the necessity of making judgements on leadership on the spot, the diary notes for this study concentrate more generally on everyday routines and reflections, regardless of whether I perceive leadership at that point in the routine. The interpretation of the leadership moments is done reflexively in the headwork phase.

Also, I am taking notes on the situation around the investigated routine, since L-A-P sees leadership as a situated process that is exceptionally dependent on the context. Similarly, L-A-P recognises the importance of emphasising both situation and context in identity research on fragmentation in identity work. This has two implications for this paper. First, the context will be discussed in the methodology section of the final paper. Also, in the findings section, the passages from the diary will be followed by a description of a more detailed situation in which the writings are from before discussing the matter in the theory.

What next?

By the conference I will work further on the theory part especially concentrating on the inter-relations between the L-A-P and identity work and on methodology. In the conference the focus of the paper discussion will be on two things:

1. conceptual framing: inter-relations between the identity work and leadership-as-practice
2. methodology: further insights to the research process and context will be presented. Also ethical issues will be discussed as a key factor of organizational autoethnography.

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