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The Undoing of Identity in Leadership Development

Helen Nicholson

Leadership development theory and practice is increasingly turning its gaze on identity as a primary focus of development efforts. This thesis investigates the processes, practices, and tensions that participants experience when called to work upon their identity in the name of leadership development. It argues that current leadership development research focuses on identity construction, acquisition, and maintenance and therefore how identities can be enlarged, evolved, stabilised, and strengthened. This reflects a pattern found more broadly in organisation studies, where identity work is primarily theorised as involving construction, maintenance, and regulation. Whilst these are important insights, this thesis focuses on a collection of identity work practices that are underdeveloped in the literature: the deconstruction, unravelling, destabilising, letting go, and loss that can be experienced in the pursuit of work upon one’s self. I group these experiences, amongst others, under the conceptual term “undoing”. I position this term as a kaleidoscopic concept and describe seven different ways in which it manifests.

This thesis centres on an ethnographic study of an 18-month leadership development programme based in New Zealand. It draws on material gathered from face-to-face observations, written reflection assignments, and thousands of online postings recorded on a virtual learning platform. Informed by social constructionism, particular attention is given to the discursive analysis of interactions in order to explore the relational nature of identity undoing.

Whilst it may appear that this thesis proposes to refocus identity work research from construction to undoing, I instead encourage a dialectical understanding of the two in order to explore how they “inhabit each other” (Cooper, 1989, p. 483). This thesis concludes by deconstructing this binary opposition as well as two others (facilitator/participant and care/criticism) that are vital to the existence of undoing efforts in leadership development. As a result, I offer a range of theoretical and practical implications for leadership development and identity research.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Whilst this thesis bears the name of a single author, its creation and completion would not have transpired without the energy and support from a number of valued people. It is with much delight that I am able to recognise these relationships here.

To my extraordinary supervisors, Professor Brad Jackson and Dr. Brigid Carroll, whose untiring encouragement and belief have made this thesis journey as enjoyable and enriching as possible. Brad, thank you for the countless hours spent in coffee shops talking through the twists and turns of doctoral life. Thank you for having the selflessness to encourage me to visit other universities, for gently challenging my assumptions and frustrations, and for always making me feel like this was an achievable project. Brigid, for all the times when I felt isolated and misunderstood, you are the one who voiced what I wanted to say but did not have the words for. Thank you for providing me with a sense of place and community from which I could develop my own voice. As I embark on life-after-the-thesis, I hope to carry the curiosity, humility, insightfulness, and humour you both exemplify so strongly. I look forward to continuing to explore and discover with you.

This thesis would have borne a very different title if I did not meet the incredible scholars from the Lund University Management and Organisation Studies Group. Thank you for being such wonderful hosts every time I visited. I would especially like to acknowledge Associate Professor Stefan Sveningsson, Professor Dan Kärreman, and Dr. Charlotta Levay. To each of you, thank you for stretching my thinking, for inviting me so generously into your community, and most of all for your valued friendship. I look forward to working with you and the rest of the group over the coming years.
It is with much appreciation that I acknowledge the facilitators and participants from the leadership development programme I researched. I realise how incredibly fortunate I was to share your journey, and I hope this thesis goes some way towards reciprocating your generosity. In addition, my colleagues in the Department of Management and International Business have been immeasurably supportive of my development as a researcher and a teacher, providing me with many unique opportunities over the years. I am also thankful for the financial support I received from the University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship, which enabled me to finish this thesis within three years. Thank you also to my proof reader Mike Wagg who read this thesis in a way I never could.

I now turn to people outside the university context whose love and support mark each page of this thesis. To my family, who have always encouraged me to pursue my ambitions. Dad, I absolutely cherish our long chats over dinner. I have learnt so much from your perseverance, curiosity, attention to detail, and ingenuity. To Mum, thank you for sharing your many leadership stories and musings with me; you are without a doubt one of the most intelligent people I know. I hope this thesis somehow attains the level of insight you regularly share. Len, thank you for instilling in me the practice of questioning claims of truth and fact. To my brothers, Ian and Craig, your skilful ability to construct, create, and solve never ceases to amaze me. To Richie, whose love both “undoes” me and keeps me more together than ever before. Your example of discipline, persistence, and fortitude spurred me on in difficult times. Thank you for getting me outside of my head, and for showing me a world that escapes words. To Joe, may we continue to ride the highs and lows of this crazy life together, thank you my dear friend. Finally, to my exceptional girlfriends, Tiffany, Melissa, Nicola, Jacqueline, Joanna, and Jessica, whose love and laughter buoyed my spirit and fuelled the many pages the reader now turns to.
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