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The Undoing of Identity in Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

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.

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