

Telos, Chronos, and Hermēneia: The Role of Metanarrative in Leadership Effectiveness through the Production of Meaning

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***Abstract:** In this article, we argue for the existence of a relationship between metanarrative and leadership effectiveness that is mediated by personal meaning. After analyzing the relevant literatures, we present a model that attributes this relationship to the capacity of metanarrative to produce meaning through the interpretive frames of Telos (teleological context), Chronos (historical-narrative context), and Hermēneia (interpretive context). We begin with a review of the leadership effectiveness literature followed by a discussion of the theoretical foundations of the concepts of meaning and metanarrative. From this review, we derive a set of propositions that describe the nature of the interrelationships among the constructs of interest and present a theoretical model that captures the proposed relationships. We conclude by suggesting several streams of research designed to evaluate the proposed model and with recommendations for further study.*

***Keywords:** narrative, meaning, interpretivism, constructivism, life stories*

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Introduction

The study of leadership effectiveness has occupied a prominent place in the study of leadership and has been of longstanding interest to leadership scholars and practitioners (e.g. Bass, 1995; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Fiedler, 1967; Goldsmith, 2003; Gregerson, Morrison & Black, 1998; Hartman, 1999; House, 1971; Thach, 2002; Yukl, 2002). In most empirical studies of leadership effectiveness the construct has been used as a dependent variable with a wide range of variables serving as predictors. For example, Chemers (2002) asserts that the possession of multiple intelligences contributes to a crucial component of effective leaders—“leadership self-efficacy.” Leadership self-efficacy represents the leader’s self-perceived capabilities for the general leadership tasks of direction-setting, gaining followers’ commitment, and overcoming obstacles (Paglis & Green, 2002). Dumdum, Lowe, and Avolio (2002), in a comprehensive review and update on correlates of transformational leadership, report that over more than a decade, the correlations between transformational leadership and leader effectiveness have been consistently positive. From a different vantage point, Priest and Swain (2002) examine the relationship between leadership effectiveness and humor by asking male and female subordinates to recall particular good (effective) and bad (ineffective) leaders and then rate them on leadership effectiveness and humor. The researchers found that effective leaders were rated higher in humor, even after controlling statistically for other leadership attributes such as intelligence and physical ability.

Leadership effectiveness has been studied in many different ways, depending on the researchers’ definitions of the construct and methodological preferences. One line of research on leadership effectiveness, for instance, is derived from trait theories of leadership that focuses on the personal attributes of the leaders such as high energy, stress tolerance, self-confidence, socialized power motivation, emotional maturity, and personal integrity. Other perspectives examine leader behaviors such as goal attainment, group satisfaction with the leader or objective performance measures such as return on investment or market share. Still other theoretical approaches have emerged from transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) which has been the poster child of leadership theory for the last two decades. For example, Dumdum et al (2002), in a meta-analysis of transformational and transactional leadership correlates of leadership effectiveness, report that transformational leadership has been shown to correlate positively with performance outcomes

ranging from growth in church membership to the performance of platoons operating in near combat positions.

Regardless of theoretical underpinnings, Leavy (2003) suggests that leadership effectiveness at the highest level can be best understood in terms of three main elements: the context for leadership, the conviction of the leader and the leader's credibility over time and tenure. With regard to the first element, Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) argue that leadership and its effectiveness, in large part, is dependent on context, a notion that was earlier presented by Klenke (1996) in her book, *Women and Leadership: A Contextual Perspective*. She points out that contextual factors set the boundaries within which leaders and followers interact and determine the constraints and demands that are placed on leaders. More specifically, Klenke states

exercising leadership in the context of political systems where leaders are appointed or elected is different from practicing leadership in social movements where leaders often emerge as a result of a crisis or shared ideology. Evaluating a leading artist calls for a different set of criteria than evaluating a leading scientist. Religion, information systems, and formal and informal organizations are complex networks of relationships, each with its own set of contextual parameters. (p. 18)

These authors, among others, contend that leadership is embedded in context and socially constructed. In and from a specific context, where history matters, patterns of leader behaviors evolve over time that must be considered when assessing leadership effectiveness. For example, in the business world, leadership roles are shaped by both corporate history and the context of time, that is the *Zeitgeist* of a particular time with its unique socio-political climate. Consequently, as context changes so should the concept of leadership.

The leader's conviction is a primary force in leadership effectiveness because leadership that truly transforms is deeply rooted in values, convictions and principles of a more transcendent nature. The third element in this perspective is credibility. Effective leaders recognize credibility as the dynamic currency of leadership. Management guru Tom Peters calls leader credibility the cornerstone of corporate performance and global competitiveness. According to Kouzes and Posner (1993), leaders have credibility when they accept responsibility for their actions, openly admit their mistakes, apologize for harm caused by mistakes or failures and take actions to

correct the problems they may have caused. At the other end of the spectrum, the loss of credibility, as evidenced by recent corporate scandals, illustrates the importance of the effective selection of moral, values-driven and principled leaders.

Collectively, these are some of the perspectives and trends that explicate how leadership effectiveness has been viewed in both classical and contemporary leadership theory and research; these also resonate McCormick's (2001) evaluation of leadership effectiveness in light of self-efficacy, Chemers, Watson, and May's (2000) research on dispositional affect as a determinant of leadership effectiveness and Sogunro's (1998) work examining the personality characteristics of group members as antecedents of leadership effectiveness. These studies not only illustrate the breadth of interest in leadership effectiveness within the field of leadership studies but also speak to the methodological hegemony of the quantitative paradigm within the field.

Although leadership effectiveness has been researched in light of many variables, studies of leadership effectiveness and its relationship to metanarrative do not exist. This may be due in part to the fact that studies in leadership effectiveness tend to be quantitative in nature, as they continue to be largely rooted in the positivistic paradigm, whereas metanarrative studies lend themselves more to qualitative inquiry which is embedded in the interpretive paradigm. Perhaps it is fair to say that narratives and metanarratives arise out of a reaction to the prevailing social science paradigm that dominates leadership research. However, in leadership studies, as in many other disciplines, there is a growing concern with interpretation and context—an intellectual agenda shaped in part by the influence of post-structuralist thinking and critical theory.

Narrative inquiries, because of their potential for representing life experiences, deepening understanding, and connecting the individual story to social contexts (Goodson, 1995; Stake, 1995), have been used by noted scholars in fields such as anthropology (Crapanzano, 1980), psychology (Erikson, 1962), and sociology where individual narratives have been woven into community mosaics (Terkel, 1972). Denzin (1994) identifies several paradigms that influence the interpretation of narrative texts such as postpositivistic and interpretive approaches, more specifically a framework the author refers to as interpretive interactionism. This interpretive framework is particularly appropriate because narrative research takes hermeneutics one step

further by arguing that people understand and explain their lives through stories and that these stories feature plots, characters, times, and places.

In narrative research, stories are what the inquirer collects, retells and writes. Metanarratives include some of the basic elements of narrative inquiry but, as the word implies, go beyond. They can, for example, take the form of master stories for individuals that form, “a comprehensive explanation of all that exists and occurs” (Erickson, 2001, p. 273). Highly developed self-knowledge—which is characteristic of metanarrative in terms of the leader’s life story—organizes life events into a gestalt structure that establishes connections between those events so that the leader’s life is experienced as a coherent unfolding process (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). In addition, more intentionally than narrative, metanarrative requires the integration of historical, sociological, psychological, cultural and contextual perspectives. Moreover, metanarratives can also take the form of master stories for organizations—master stories which form the very cultural fabric into which new members are woven through the acculturation process. When employed at the organizational level, metanarrative responds to the repeated call in leadership research—qualitative and quantitative—for multiple levels of analysis (see, for example, Yammarino, 1998; Avolio & Bass, 1995; Dansereau, Yammarino & Markham, 1995) as leader-centric theories are beginning to lose their explanatory power. At both the individual and organizational levels, metanarratives carry with them inherent meaning and cultural values which serve as encoded standards against which the actions of leaders and organizational citizenship in general may be evaluated.

In view of these considerations, we present the definition of metanarrative offered by Klenke (2004):

Metanarrative is a qualitative method of inquiry which integrates historical, psychological, and cultural perspectives and offers a highly developed body of self-knowledge depicting the narrator’s self-interpretation that reflects the ontological integrity of meaningful experiences in the individual’s life. (p. 6)

Defining metanarrative in this fashion adds several new dimensions to narrative interpretation (such as integration of contexts, purposeful meaning making of lived experiences, multiple-level approaches), yet at the same time, retains the notion that from a hermeneutic point of view the

leader's life (and human life in general) is a process of narrative interpretation. By adding these dimensions, metanarrative—as defined here—produces meaning and allows for what Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) call the return of the “hermeneutical circle” or “circle of meaning,” which is a goal of interpreted social science.

In the current literature, several authors (Phillips & Zyglidopoulos, 1999; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Thompson, 1992; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) bring a postmodern critique of metanarrative from their respective areas of interest in the field of organizational studies, but none of these works have addressed the function of metanarrative in the life of an individual leader or the specific role metanarrative plays in the production of meaning and leadership effectiveness. We respond to this gap in the literature by presenting a model that focuses on the role metanarrative plays in leadership effectiveness through the production of meaning. To explicate the model, we provide (a) an overview of the concepts of meaning and metanarrative, (b) posit a set of propositions that set forth a framework describing the interrelationships among the constructs, (c) offer examples of qualitative research designs appropriate for testing and evaluating the proposed model, and (d) conclude with a set of recommendations for further study.

Conceptual overview

The peril and promise of metanarrative

The narrative paradigm which for us includes narratives, life stories and metanarratives as qualitative research methods falls into what Klenke (in press) called underutilized research methods in leadership research. Klenke, in an empirical analysis of qualitative leadership research over a period spanning 1982-2004, identified three studies that utilized this research method. Yet, as noted, narrative and metanarratives can play a much more significant role in the study of leadership—especially in regard to the production of meaning—particularly if they are situated in regard to major leadership, humanistic, and social science theories. Bruner (1990) noted that negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of narrative interpretation is one of the crowning achievements of human development in the ontogenetic, cultural, and phylogenic senses of that expression (p. 67). Hones (1998) explored the unique possibilities offered by narrative research for fostering “continued communication” between the self and

others while Polkinghorne (1995) argued that the narrative is “the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action” (p. 5).

Though the literature associated with metanarrative runs through several disciplines (for example education, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, history, literature, gender studies, theology, philosophy, and leadership and organizational studies), the study of metanarrative is largely associated with the dialogue between modernity and postmodernity. Identifying postmodernity as both a perspective and a historical period, Bloland (1995) acknowledges Derrida (1981, 1988) and Foucault (1977a, 1977b, 1979) as the two major pillars of postmodernism, a tradition consistent with poststructuralist thought. Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1983) point to postmodernity as a critical historical period. When Lyotard (1984) addresses postmodernity in this manner, he writes that, “our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (p. 3). Lyotard was the first to use the term “metanarrative” in his definition of “*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarrative” (p. xxiv). Consistent with Bloland’s observations, Foucault (1979) addresses the postmodern perspective by connecting, “the formation of knowledge and the increase of power as regularly reinforcing one another in a circular process” (p. 224). Embedded within the metanarrative dialogue between modernity and postmodernity lie both peril and promise when we consider its role in the production of meaning and leadership effectiveness. We turn now to a brief consideration of both.

Peril

Foucault’s above-cited statement regarding the circularly reinforcing connection between knowledge formation and the increase of power is rooted in Nietzsche’s will to power conceptualization. Sandage (1998) points out that Foucault and Derrida possessed a particular interest in the unmasking of power agendas that lurk behind authoritative social institutions and interpretations of texts. Citing Foucault’s focus on institutions such as prisons and hospitals, Sandage (1998) reiterates Foucault’s suggestion, “that modern institutions are shaped by power but disguise the power dynamics behind a humanitarian façade and claims to objective

knowledge” (p. 68). Moore (1994) uses the metaphor of power wearing a white coat and a professional smile when referring to this connection.

While some of those who are modernistic might quickly dismiss such a critique by labeling it as a postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion that is characterized by unrelenting negativity and skeptical deconstruction, it would be wise to not do so too quickly. As Sandage (1998) notes, “postmodernists are largely accurate in their suspicion of the power dynamics inherent in the human social structures” (p. 66). Those willing to take the proverbial honest look in the mirror are likely to say the very same thing as their own use of knowledge to gain power is exposed and owned.

Erickson (2001) argues that though metanarratives are not necessarily oppressive, “there is...a strong measure of historical truth in this contention” (p. 276). Within the critiques of Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard, the peril of metanarrative is identified and exposed. This peril of oppression must not be overlooked, for pre-modern, modern, and postmodern thinkers alike can learn valuable lessons from its examination and evaluation. Nevertheless, as Erickson observes, “The fact that this use is [even] frequently made of metanarrative does not mean that repression must invariably happen” (p. 273). As such, the peril of metanarrative must also be examined alongside its hope and promise.

Promise

Having acknowledged some of the perils of metanarrative, particularly its potential for oppression, we argue that at the same time metanarrative also holds out considerable hope and promise, especially for the production of meaning and its predicted effects on leadership effectiveness. Although there have been no studies to aid in answering the question of how metanarrative produces meaning in the life of the leader, Schwartz (1998), Domanska (1998), and Sandlos (1998) affirm the role of metanarrative in the production of meaning in the fields of education and history. Addressing the nature of oral narrative, ethics and environmental education, Sandlos (1998) argues that “to merely explain...relationships as just another series of facts [such as where food comes from] is to explain them away; to tell them as a story adds...an ordering principle and a structure of meaning that is, at its root, fundamentally moral” (p. 5).

Sandlos further notes that in the information age, which offers few narratives to encode the vast amount of information, people tend to communicate without context or meaning. Regarding the connection between narrative and meaning, Sandlos writes, “Narrative does not simply represent historical events and empirical facts; it also encodes these facts into a mode or structure of expression that not only conveys information but also produces meaning” (p. 6).

Schwartz (1998) also approaches metanarrative through the lens of history by analyzing the memory of Abraham Lincoln in late twentieth-century American culture and argues that postmodernity has eroded America’s historical metanarrative. Metanarratives have played a critical role in providing frames within which the meaning of the larger societal experience can be grasped. The author mourns the decline of metanarratives as “the single most distinguishing feature of postmodern culture” (p. 63), and Domanska (1998) and Schwartz, as well as Klein (1995), point toward the danger of a wholesale abandonment of metanarrative. Although postmodernity provides a buffer against allowing power to neglect and oppress the histories of those who have been neglected and oppressed, according to Schwartz, history without story becomes a history absent of meaning.

Beyond metanarrative as an anchor concept in postmodern thought and ideology, we also refer to metanarrative here more literally as the transformation of the leader’s narrative or life story beyond facts and overt events. Narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method involves generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies). Narrative inquiry also includes research in the form of autoethnography. Noted scholars in many fields have suggested that narrative and the study of individual lives over time are indispensable for social inquiry (such as Gardner, 1993). Polkinghorne (1995) points out that the narrative is “the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human action as situated action” (p. 5). In leadership research, there has been a growing interest in narratives, life stories and storytelling as both qualitative methodologies and vehicles for organizational change and transformation. For example, Phillips (1995) argues for the benefits of the use of short stories, plays, songs and poems as legitimate approaches to the study of organization. Similarly, according to Gardner (1993, 1995), effective leaders have stories that they embody or relate. These stories are about “themselves and their groups, about

where they are coming from and where they are heading, about what was to be feared, struggled against and dreamed about” (Gardner, 1995, p. 15). As Murray (1999) notes, for the leader’s story to fit the stories of the followers, it must be displayed on a larger canvas so that the followers can see where they have been and where they are going. Examples of such stories which are metanarratives are found at GE where Jack Welch exercised leadership by “storying around” or the “ivory places” story told at Proctor & Gamble that captures the company founder’s ability to turn adversity into great opportunity. Because of the potential of metanarratives to portray the leader’s life experiences and the meaning he or she ascribes to these experiences by connecting the individual story to societal contexts, they have powerful lessons for all of us.

March (1996) asserts that the basic technology of organization is “a technology of narrative, as well as a technology of production” (p. 281). The contested terrain of organization is seen as a terrain of meaning (p. 286). Organizational stories have been located in the “narrative mode” (Bruner, 1990) and the “narrative paradigm” (Fisher, 1985) as ways of expressing knowledge and understanding organizational processes (Rhodes, 2000). Whereas in logico-scientific epistemology, an explanation is achieved by recognizing an event as an instance of general laws, narrative knowledge tells of human projects and their consequences as they unfold over time, thus capturing the nuances of event, relationship and purpose that are often obscured in the traditional academic abstraction process (Czarniawska, 1998). From a narrative viewpoint, the traditional research interest in organizations as distinct entities gives way to a focus on the centrality of human beings as creators and interpreters of meaning in an organization and for narration and storytelling as valid and valuable parts of organizational studies (Wicks & Freeman, 1998).

Denning (2001) coined the term “springboard story” to refer to narratives that enable a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an event, organization, or complex system may change. Springboard stories are metanarratives. For example, Nike’s co-founder, Coach Boverman, after deciding that his team needed better running shoes, went to his workshop and poured rubber into the family’s waffle iron and that is how Nike’s famous “waffle” sole was born. It is a story about innovation, drive and out-of-the-box thinking, in short, it is a

metanarrative. Likewise, the story of artistic leader Toni Morrison is a metanarrative of the courage to create and the courage to lead (Murray, 1999). The Cinderella stories of women leaders described by Klenke (2002) of media mogul Oprah Winfrey, Brown University President Ruth Simmons, and CEO Mary Kay are metanarratives in the postmodern tradition. These women grew up in poverty, were mistreated and abused or suffered from devastating illness, yet turned their respective narratives into stories of hope, self-determination, rebirth and reconciliation. These women leaders serve as beacons and boundary spanners who established influence networks and sensitized their constituencies to critical social and environmental issues (Klenke, 2002). Although not officially identified as metanarratives, these stories embody some of the central elements of narratives, go beyond facts and life events and speak of metamorphosis and change. The cultural and organizational perspectives behind these stories provide powerful lenses through which we can assign meaning and value to ongoing events and activities in the leader's narrative.

The human longing for meaning

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of imprisonment in a concentration camp during WWII, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984), identified meaning as a central factor enabling people to endure torture and injustice. The will to meaning is the focal structure of Frankl's system of logotherapy according to which "man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives" (p. 121). Frankl (1992) also analyzes what he calls purpose-in-life (PIL). Of PIL, Sosik (2000a) writes, "PIL represents a positive attitude toward possessing a future-oriented self-transcendent goal in life. PIL can be described in terms of its depth (strength) and type (content) of meaning associated with the goal" (p. 4).

Sosik (2000a) defines personal meaning, "as that which makes one's life most important, coherent and worthwhile," and argues that self-concept is a source for personal meaning (p. 61). Similarly, Korotkov's (1998) definition of meaningfulness as, "the degree to which people's lives make emotional sense and that the demands confronted by them are perceived as being worthy of energy and commitment" resonates personal meaning (p. 55). The literature on personal meaning has expanded beyond Frankl's original will to meaning and recast as PIL, which has found a place in the contemporary leadership and organizational literatures. For example, Hodson (2002)

discusses the topic of meaning in relation to satisfaction at work and explores the role spirituality plays in offering meaning and purpose of work. Similarly, Sosik (2000a, 2000b) offers a treatment of personal meaning and leadership. The author notes that the leadership literature has identified personal meaning as a source of motivation for both charismatic and non-charismatic leaders (Sosik, 2000a). Not only do leaders benefit from personal meaning as a source of motivation, but followers do so as well. On this point, Eisenberg and Goodall (2001) write, “Employees want to feel that the work they do is worthwhile, rather than just a way to draw a paycheck,” and to see work as, “a transformation of its meaning—from drudgery to a source of personal significance and fulfillment” (p. 18). In a related study, Sosik (2000b) points out that numerous theoretical explanations of charismatic leadership highlight the importance of providing meaning to followers and calls attention to a number of benefits associated with the presence of personal meaning.

One of these benefits is the promotion of hardiness or persistence in challenging situations (Antonovsky, 1983). Psychological hardiness (Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982) or resilience, defined as “the motivational force within everyone that drives them to grow through adversity and disruption” (Richardson, 2002, p. 307), provides a protective shield that provides leaders with the cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity necessary to navigate difficult and uncertain situations. A leader’s sense of personal meaning provides him or her with the conceptual spine to endure in difficult circumstances. Related to hardiness and resilience is research that suggests that a sense of personal meaning also leads to the reduction of personal or collective stress (Wong, 1998). Finally, a sense of personal meaning has been related to the enhancement of group effectiveness (Conyne, 1998). If personal meaning indeed leads to enhanced group effectiveness and performance (and, by extension to increased leadership effectiveness), then the question of how personal meaning is produced in the life of a leader takes on special significance. We argue that the answer to this question is found in metanarrative, and more specifically, the capacity of metanarrative to produce meaning in the life of the leader, which is instrumental in facilitating and enhancing his or her effectiveness.

Metanarrative and leadership effectiveness

According to Yukl (2002) leadership effectiveness is often measured by the consequences of the leader's actions in reference to outcomes. Outcomes such as successful task performance, goal attainment, follower satisfaction or group effectiveness are often used as proxies of leadership effectiveness. Most of the studies investigating these variables have been conducted in the quantitative tradition. Metanarrative, on the other hand, offers a different approach to the study of leadership effectiveness. Denzin (1994) identifies several major research paradigms that influence the interpretation of narrative texts. For example, a constructivist interpretive perspective makes use of grounded theory as well as inductive data analysis and contextual interpretation. The constructivist paradigm offers a wide-ranging eclectic framework that accommodates a variety of qualitative techniques and several methodological options including interviewing and ethnography. Alternatively, Denzin's interpretative style involves organizing life histories around epiphanies using a poststructuralist interpretive framework which encourages personal stories that are thickly contextualized and connected to larger institutional and cultural contexts.

Based on the arguments presented by Schwartz (1998), Domanska (1998), and Sandlos (1998), we postulate that metanarrative not only plays a role in the production of meaning but also affects leadership effectiveness, thereby establishing a link between metanarrative, meaning and leadership effectiveness. Based on the literature reviewed, we posit that meaning mediates the relationship between metanarrative and leadership effectiveness as depicted in the model presented in Figure 1.

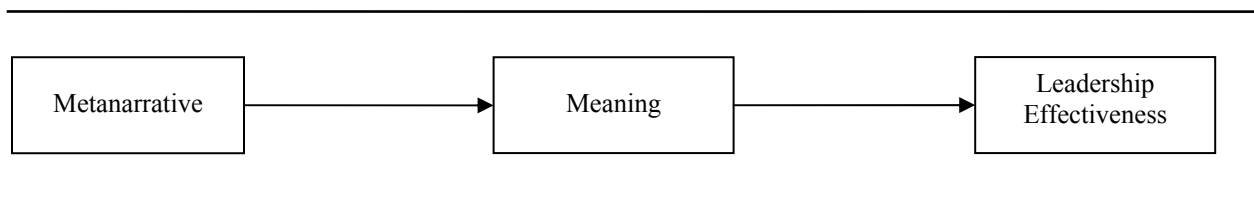


Figure1

In the absence of published studies which investigate the role of metanarrative in the production of meaning as well as studies which examine the direct relationship between metanarrative and

leadership effectiveness, we offer a series of propositions designed to delineate possible relationships between metanarrative and leadership effectiveness.

Propositions

Proposition 1: *There is a non-spurious relationship between leadership effectiveness and the presence of an integrated metanarrative in the life of a leader.*

Based on the reviews of metanarrative, meaning, and leadership effectiveness literatures, we propose that there is a non-spurious relationship between metanarrative and leadership effectiveness. This proposition is based on the assumption that a metanarrative must be owned and integrated in the life of a leader for this relationship to exist. The examples from the leaders' integrative narratives quoted earlier in this article attest to the power of metanarrative and, at least circumstantially, support this proposition.

Proposition 2: *The relationship between the presence of an integrated metanarrative in the life of a leader and leadership effectiveness is attributable to the capacity of metanarrative for the production of personal meaning.*

Schwartz (1998), Domanska (1998), and Sandlos (1998) argue that metanarrative possesses a unique capacity to produce meaning. Meaning or sensemaking refers to how leaders structure their world—linguistically, behaviorally, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Metanarrative data and structural methods of analysis do more than just mirror the social world of the leader. Leaders not only make sense of their world in narrative terms but proactively plan and enact metanarratives that are consistent with their expectations and values. Because leaders are used to telling and hearing stories as perhaps *the* primary sensemaking device for leading people (Shaw, Brown, & Bromiley, 1998; Weick, 1995), the narrative approach can be a powerful tool for bridging the traditional researcher-practitioner gap. From this perspective, leaders' metanarratives can be approached as “depositories of meaning” (Gabriel, 2000) and analyses are intended to discover those meaning. The data for such analysis comes from various sources: written biographies and autobiographies of leaders, interviews with the media,

interviews conducted for research purposes with leaders and followers, and observations of leaders' public appearances and other occasions in which leaders share their life stories with others.

Moreover, according to Heracleous and Hendry (2000), meaning making and sensemaking can be improved by exploring the deeper discursive and social structures, thereby establishing a difference between text and context. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) consists of attempts to integrate a new event into a plot (metanarrative), by which it becomes understandable in relation to the context of what has happened. "Thus, narratives exhibit an explanation instead of demonstrating it" (Polkinghorne, 1987, p. 21). The integrated metanarrative of an effective leader more intentionally incorporates explanation over description since it can, for example, analyze power and politics as explanatory constructs in leadership effectiveness. Leaders do not just tell stories; they enact stories, and stories provide legitimacy and accountability for their actions (Czarniawska, 1997). Based on these works of these authors, we propose that the role of metanarrative in leadership effectiveness is mediated by the presence of personal meaning that the leader ascribes to his or her experiences.

Proposition 3: *Metanarrative produces personal meaning through the moderating variable of Telos or the teleological context.*

Figure 1 suggests relatively simple, linear relationships between metanarrative, meaning and leadership effectiveness. However, the relationships between these constructs are not as simple as portrayed in this graphic representation. In Figure 2, we expand the model by suggesting three moderating variables that affect the relationship between metanarrative and meaning. The extended model depicted in Figure 2 seeks to answer the question of how meaning is created by metanarrative.

Telos, the Greek work for "end," is related to the area of philosophy known as teleology, which explains the future in terms of the past and the present based upon the study of purpose, ends, goals, and final causes. The role of *Telos* in the production of meaning is derived from the leaders' sense of having an ultimate purpose in life based on the metanarrative they embody in

their thoughts and actions. For example, Emmons' (1999) discussion of ultimate concerns addresses a concept similar to *Telos*. The author associates personal strivings as representative of "enduring concerns, in that they pertain to states of mind that persist over time and across situations" (p. 94). Ultimate purposes and concerns reflect the future dimension of time whereas 'current concerns' are present-oriented (Klinger, 1977). A leader's work that is based on an integrated metanarrative that is an all-inclusive "comprehensive explanation of all that exists and occurs" (Erickson, 2001, p. 271) provides a macro or master story that addresses the ultimate concerns and purpose necessary for leaders to contextually orient the events and circumstances throughout their lives.

Ultimate concerns and purpose are reflected in the leader's ability not only to think contextually but also futuristically. As Drucker (1998) notes, the future has already happened. Therefore leaders need to be able to anticipate probable and plausible alternative end states and create a vision for the future that makes sense to those they lead. Leaders can accomplish this by using scenarios as tools for ordering perceptions about alternative future environments in which today's decisions may play out. Scenarios resemble a set of stories, written or spoken, built around some carefully constructed plots. Whereas stories can express multiple perspectives on complex events, scenarios give meaning to those events. Within the organization, scenarios provide a common vocabulary and an effective basis for communicating complex, and sometimes paradoxical, conditions and options. Using scenarios is rehearsing the future—an important competence for today's leaders because they allow him or her to recognize warning signs of imminent change and to act accordingly. According to Peter Schwartz (1991), one of the most accomplished scenario builders of recent times, decisions which have been pretested against possible and plausible end states are more likely to stand the test of time, produce robust and resilient strategies for dealing with and adapting to rapidly changing environments, and create distinct competitive advantage.

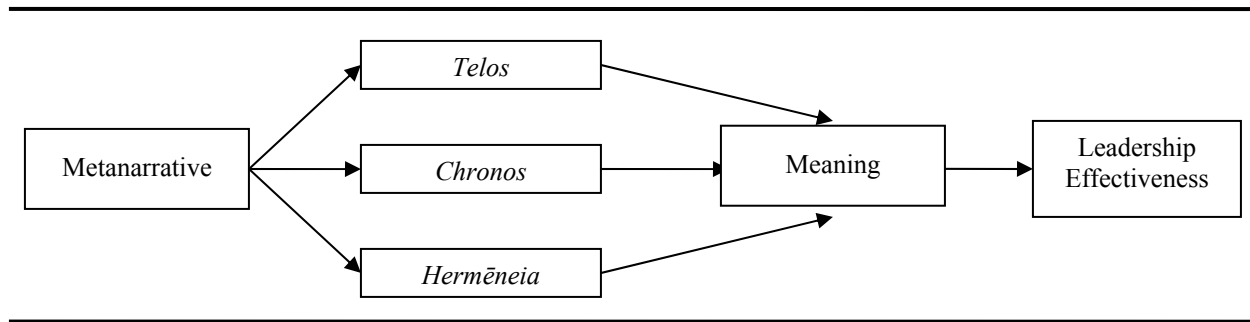


Figure 2

Proposition 4: *Metanarrative produces personal meaning through the moderating variable of Chronos or the historical-narrative context*

A second moderating variable to answer the question of how meaning is produced by metanarrative is *Chronos*, meaning “time” in Greek. Effective leaders are grounded in history and time, and they make history, although not always in circumstances of their own. They lead by taking into account the historicity of their own lives and those of their followers and make efforts to apprehend each phenomenon as it exists at a particular moment in time and in a particular context. It is the tacit network of potential meanings within a specific window of time that effective leaders make explicit for the followers. Effective leaders lead from an understanding of the past, not for the sake of the past but for what historical understanding can do in the present. Leading from an understanding of the past is also important vis-à-vis *Telos* because it can produce a new understanding of the present and the potential for a richer future.

According to Wacker and Taylor (2000), never before in history has time been so finely calibrated. Time is scarce and irrecoverable. Unlike salary, it cannot be deferred; unlike assets, a leader cannot invest time and make it grow. Time is particularly salient in contemporary organizations, not only because they have entered a new millennium but because the socio-technical developments of the late 20th century have significantly affected the relationship between time and work. For example, more and more, when given the option, it is time rather than money employees ask for as a perk. And it is the abuse of time that most strains loyalty to an organization. Perlow (1999), who studies—and bemoans—the encroachment of work on family life and the detrimental consequences of all-encompassing work lives, uses the term “time

famine” to capture the stress experienced by many employees in today’s society that results from having too little time for one’s individual affairs. The author also makes it evident that it is the culture of the urgent (or the importance of speed in contemporary American society) that is often reactive and makes the future seem unplanned and unstructured.

The role of *Chronos* in the production of meaning is derived from the capacity of metanarrative to provide a historical context for leaders. Churchill, who once said of a talented predecessor that he was unfortunate to have lived at a time of great leaders and small events, captured the historical context of the predecessor’s leadership. The model depicted in Figure 2 posits that leaders who lead from an integrated metanarrative and possess a historical framework which helps them to understand the events of their lives find that their organizations and world are more effective than leaders who practice their craft without either one of them. These leaders understand that a wide range of their experiences can be informed by time and are therefore sensitive to temporal dimensions in interactions with their followers. Moreover, the model implies that leaders who do not possess an integrated metanarrative may also lack the historical-narrative context of *Chronos* necessary to frame meaning. The historical-narrative context provides meaning for a leader by offering a frame of reference to interpret the current *Zeitgeist* in terms of past events and future expectations. For, as Schwartz (1998) argues, history without story becomes a history absent of meaning.

Proposition 5: *Metanarrative produces personal meaning through the moderating variable of Hermēneia or the interpretive context.*

The third moderator variable to provide an answer to the question of how meaning is produced by metanarrative is *Hermēneia*. *Hermēneia* is the Greek word meaning “interpretation.” The practice of hermeneutics dates to the 17th century biblical and theological textual interpretation and has followed a changing course from rationalism to romanticism, pragmatism to philosophy, and conservatism to radicalization (Grondin, 1994). *Hermēneia*, like *Telos* and *Chronos*, cannot be stripped of context and ventures into the contextual world of a word, considering “what is said, what is uttered, but at the same time what is silence (Grondin, 1995, p. x).

As Figure 2 indicates, not only does metanarrative possess the capacity to produce meaning through *Telos* and *Chronos*, but metanarrative also creates an interpretive framework in which the part may be understood in reference to the whole. The integration of historical, psychological perspectives to describe the lives of others (such as leaders and followers) allows for what Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) call the return to the hermeneutical circle, or “circle of meaning,” which is the goal of interpretive social science. Questions related to worldviews addressed by Walsh and Middleton (1984) are examples of interpretive framework or conceptual contexts. A leader’s integrated metanarrative possesses the capacity for answering questions related to worldviews. Detached from an interpretive context, leaders may find the events and circumstances of their lives and work divorced from answers to central existential questions such as “Who am I?” Eisenberg and Goodall (2001), among others, point out that employees want to feel that their work is worthwhile beyond the receipt of a paycheck. They note that beyond financial benefits employees want to see that their work offers “a transformation of its meaning—from drudgery to a source of personal significance and fulfillment” (p. 18). Given the tumultuous pace of change, competitive pressures and changing corporate purposes, employees are seeking work that brings meaning and enrichment to their lives. If leaders do not have an interpretive frame of reference which includes context and history to give the discrete activities of their lives and work meaning and significance, they will be seen as shallow, lacking conviction, principles and values.

Collectively, *Telos*, *Chronos* and *Hermēneia* form a holographic image. If the hologram is divided, each part, however small, shows the whole image intact. Likewise, *Telos*, *Chronos* and *Hermēneia* are component pieces of metanarrative, each representing the whole image from a different point of view. And when the pieces of the hologram are combined, the image becomes more intense.

Research designs for model testing

The models and propositions presented here are representative of the process of theory building, which is a central activity in leadership research. Because different paradigms are grounded in fundamentally different assumptions, they produce markedly different ways of approaching theory building. More specifically, paradigm debates are characterized according to the differing

fundamental assumptions about the nature of leadership phenomena (ontology), the nature of knowledge about these phenomena, and the nature of ways of studying those phenomena (methodology). Given that many leadership theorists are rather closely married to their own paradigms, they construct theories that are paradigm appropriate and few attempts are being made of juxtaposing or meshing alternative theoretical perspectives into a multifaceted theoretical vies of leadership.

Dubin (1976) outlines the traditional characteristics of a strong theory as having units (variables) with specified modes of interaction and boundaries, along with logical and true deductions that can be set out as propositions and can be tested empirically. To Whetten (2000), a strong theory has a small set of research ideas that are clearly and logically linked and have both simplicity and interconnectedness. We believe the models presented here reflect these elements of theory building. One approach to theory building that is particularly pertinent to this research is the use of narrative data and structural methods of narrative analysis in the construction of leaders' metanarratives. Narrative data can be collected from many different sources: stories told by leaders and followers, interviews, historical records or electronic databases (see, for example, Bal, 1985; Boje, 1991; Brown, 1998; Pentland & Reuter, 1994). Leaders not only make sense of their world in narrative terms but they proactively plan and enact narratives that are consistent with their expectations and values. As Pentland (1999) points out, process explanations that draw on narrative data are particularly close to the phenomena they purport to explain. Narratives become metanarratives when they carry meaning and cultural values and because they encode, implicitly or explicitly, standards against which the actions of the leader can be judged.

The next step is to move from theory building to theory testing by designing research that tests the proposition around which the two models presented in Figures 1 and 2 are constructed. At least three discrete parts of theory testing are necessary to evaluate the propositions through qualitative, quantitative or triangulated methodologies. First, it is necessary to confirm the relationship between leadership effectiveness and the presence of an integrated metanarrative in the life of leaders postulated in Proposition 1. As we noted earlier, metanarrative is both a philosophical construct rooted in postmodernism and a methodological strategy most often captured in the form of life stories (Sarbin, 1986). Life stories are means to describe the leader's

life span and experiences; they depict those aspects of the total sum of the leader's experiences and activities that are interpreted as being particularly meaningful and significant. Because of its retrospective-holistic nature, the life story strategy helps to capture the strivings, hopes, fears, vision, ambivalence and self-perspective of the leader that permeate the leadership experience.

A number of qualitative methodologies can be employed to uncover the existence of a leader's integrated metanarrative including structured and unstructured interviews and phenomenology. The data collected by life story interviews, for example, can be recorded, transcribed and analyzed by inductive methods directed toward the development of a grounded theory. Such an analysis would use complementary methods: a thematic analysis aimed at identifying central themes, particularly the powerful tropes the leader may employ to attribute causality to the relationship between metanarrative and leadership effectiveness and grounded theory in which open and axial coding of the data engender conceptual strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Alternatively, phenomenological methods are appropriate because phenomenology involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience. Understanding the lived experience marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method (Moustakas, 1994).

A second stream of research would focus on confirming the moderating variables of *Telos*, *Chronos*, and *Hermēneia* postulated in Propositions 3, 4, and 5. Case studies of historical (for example, Churchill, Mother Teresa) and contemporary (for example, Jack Welch, or former Girl Scouts' President Francis Hesselbein) leaders—intentionally selected from different contexts—are the preferred research strategy when the researcher has little control over the events being studied, when the object of study is a contemporary phenomenon in a real life context, when boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear, and when it is desirable to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). Leaders selected for case study can be chosen because their leadership reflects a strong sense of *Telos*, *Chronos*, and *Hermēneia* and can be designed in such a way to include a lexical analysis of the writings of these leaders and subsequent coding for words, expressions and phrases that are indicative to the leader's belief in *Telos*, *Chronos*, and *Hermēneia*, thereby combining case study and content analysis methods.

Third, research is needed that confirms the mediating role of meaning posited in Proposition 2. This may be accomplished by designing research that employs historiometry, a research strategy based on the analysis of biographical materials of prominent leaders by employing quantitative measurement such as the use of standardized instruments measuring personal meaning or values along with biographical works. Historiometry in the study of leadership, for instance, has been used to investigate presidential leadership motive profiles (Spangler & House, 1991), examine the dispositional basis for presidential greatness (McCann, 1992), establish a relationship between charisma and effectiveness (Simonton, 1988; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991), and verify a model of personality constructs predicting destructive charismatic leadership (O’Conner, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995).

Finally, mixed method studies may be used which triangulate on methods, theory, settings for data collection, and sources of data or different data collection methodologies. The concept of triangulation is not new. Advocates of using multiple methods to study a research problem include Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest (1966), Smith (1975) and more recently Creswell (2003). An example of a mixed method study in the context of this research would involve the use of semi-structured interviews to operationalize the constructs of metanarrative and meaning qualitatively and leadership effectiveness quantitatively using, for example, the Leader Effectiveness Index developed by Moss (1994).

Conclusions

Leadership effectiveness has been traditionally examined through the lenses of the quantitative paradigm with its emphasis on reification of verifiable data, utilization of reductionist research methods and postulation of a priori hypotheses that can be subjected to statistical analysis. For example, in Zaccaro and Klimoski’s (2001) comprehensive review of the nature of organizational leadership, not a single qualitative study is mentioned. Recently, a number of scholars (Conger, 1998; Bryman, Stephens & à Campo, 1998; Klenke, in press) have argued that qualitative research should play a more pivotal role in the study of leadership. Moreover, Klenke (2000a) pointed out that vis-à-vis the large number of qualitative research methods leadership scholars can avail themselves of, only very few have been utilized in empirical research.

Narratives and metanarratives fall into this underutilized category of qualitative research strategies.

Our intent with this article was to make a contribution to leadership theory and research by developing a model that pulls together concepts from different disciplines. We introduced and explored the concepts of metanarrative and meaning, because we think these concepts add value to both leadership theory and research. With regard to theory, we introduced a conceptual model that suggests that the presence of an integrated metanarrative in the life of a leader—one which has deep personal meaning—has a significant effect on his/her effectiveness. Moreover, the model presented in this paper posits that *Telos* or the teleological context, *Chronos* or the historical-narrative context, and *Hermēneia* or the interpretive context moderate the relationship between metanarrative and meaning. In other words, *Telos*, *Chronos* and *Hermēneia* define the boundaries within which meaning is created and interpreted. With respect to leadership research, we outlined several streams of research around issues that offer recommendations for future research in reference to metanarrative, meaning, and leadership effectiveness.

As the concepts of metanarrative and meaning have typically fallen outside the domain of leadership research, the model presented in this paper represents a synthesis of concepts from different disciplines such as leadership studies, philosophy and history in an attempt to provide a fresh perspective on the study of leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, this article expands existing work on narrative as a research method by offering metanarrative as an integrative research tool. We believe that applications of metanarrative concepts are particularly timely in leadership research in the aftermath of corporate scandals and September 11, 2001. For example, a fruitful stream of research using the metanarrative approach may be directed at the master stories of corporate executives whose unethical and dysfunctional behaviors resulted in the demise of the organizations they led. Likewise, capturing the significance of 9/11 using executives who describe their world as pre- and post 9/11 in the form of metanarratives is a research challenge since the attack was described and inscribed in every newspaper, broadcast and public media outlet and continues to occupy public discourse. We believe that taken together, the concepts discussed in this article and the linkages between them as delineated in the proposed model make a significant contribution to leadership theory and research by providing a

creative path for the study of leadership effectiveness. While the significance of our contribution to leadership theory has yet to be established, the proposed model provides a solid basis for future work and possesses both heuristic and applied value.

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