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**A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO RESEARCHING LEADERSHIP AND
ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN A SMALL
BUSINESS CONTEXT**

By

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Abstract

This paper proposes a strategy for the research of leadership and entrepreneurial learning and development processes in a small business context. It is relevant to wide ranging local, national and European policies to develop SME entrepreneurial leadership practice and SME growth. Leadership is probably the most important factor to business success (Analoui and Karami 2003). Yet, as Rae and Carswell (2000) point out, a greater understanding is needed of the nature and the process of entrepreneurship in terms of how people learn to start and grow businesses, especially those that become high performing businesses. The authors argue that the life story approach is an industrious and valid method of researching entrepreneurial learning. It is noted elsewhere that empirical understanding of the informal processes of leadership learning of entrepreneurs is limited (Kempster and Cope 2010). Offering a solution in the field of leadership studies, Kuhnert and Russel (1990) propose biographical data can illuminate the development processes involved in life events. Biography as a methodology teaches us about life and human behaviour; it can help us to understand individual motives, personality, the people and conditions that influenced an individual in a way that brings their life and work to life. "Biography adds flesh to the bones of achievement; it adds human form to the spirit of ideas and emotions" (Jones 1998 p. 161). Howe (1982) suggests biographical data can draw out a person's uniqueness and provide insights into individual human development that reveal the relationship between earlier experience and later achievements. It has been argued that biographical research is equal to more traditional approaches adopted in the field of small medium enterprise, and can tap into the intangible nature of creativity, whilst also introducing creativity and imagination into the research process (Fillis 2006).

Methodologically, biographical research can involve a range of data-collection methods and analytical approaches. This research involves biographic narrative interpretive method interviews. These begin with a single initial narrative-inducing question. 'Minimalist-passive' (Wengraf 2000) interview techniques facilitate uninterrupted narration. Thematic questioning follows and finally non-narrative questions can be posed (Wengraf 2004). The sample is drawn from owners of small medium enterprises (SMEs) registered on a leadership and development programme known as 'LEAD Wales'. The programme is backed by funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) and Welsh Assembly Government.

The study forms part of a larger research agenda that will track the longer term effects of the intervention. A sample of 17 biographical interviews will form part of the initial study but this target will remain fluid.

Despite its scope, limited contributions to the literature on biography emerge from this field. This paper will explore the feasibility of biographical research in the context of LEAD Wales by critically reflecting on this work in progress and the potential contribution of biography as a means of exploring the temporal nature of the lived experience, and an appreciation in the self and representations of the self as an entrepreneur and leader.

Key Words: Leadership, Entrepreneurship, Learning, SME, Biographical Research.

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1. Background

In the western region of the British Isles, Wales typifies the overwhelming economic difficulties experienced in areas where the decline of traditional industries and subsequent reduced living standards has been felt most severely. This small population of fewer than 3 million, nearly 5% of the United Kingdom population, is proving to be resistant to imperatives to drive economic development. Small and medium enterprise (SME) is vital to the Welsh Economy, as these businesses account for more than half of all employment in Wales. In a small business context, understanding entrepreneurial leadership learning and development processes is key to driving economic development and imperative to the creation of a knowledge economy.

A situation of this kind is not unique to Wales. Across Europe SMEs are recognised as the backbone of the economy. Entrepreneurship is a major driver of innovation, competitiveness and growth in Europe. Yet many barriers exist for those hoping to create and grow their own business. Identifying the need to boost entrepreneurship, as one of the main objectives of the Lisbon Agenda in 2000, the European Union adopted the European Charter for Small Businesses. However, despite wide ranging initiatives little progress was made. Following extensive research, the green paper 'Entrepreneurship in Europe' (2003) raised key questions concerning two fundamental issues – 'How to produce more entrepreneurs' and 'How to get more firms to grow'. Subsequently, the 'Action Plan: The European Agenda for Entrepreneurship' (2004) set out strategic policy areas that include: fuelling entrepreneurial mindsets; encouraging more people to become entrepreneurs; and, gearing them towards growth and competitiveness, among other measures.

Similarly, at a more local level to the present research, the Welsh Assembly Government in its document 'One Wales' (2007) sets out its vision for a sustainable society that includes action to stimulate enterprise and business growth, particularly in the SME sector. By creating educational links with entrepreneurs it plans to enhance skills. Entrepreneurship as a driver of economic development is also seen in the Welsh Assembly Government document 'Wales: A Vibrant

Economy' (2005), and in a range of emerging programmes that aim to support SME development and stimulate business growth.

Initiatives to develop the leadership skills of the owner-managers of smaller enterprises include 'LEAD', a major UK leadership programme, developed by Lancaster University Management School. Following a pilot study, conducted with 69 owner-managers in 2004, funding from the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWRDA) enabled full roll out of the programme to a target of 1000 owner-managers between the years 2009 and 2012 in the northwest of England.

Building on this success, LEAD Wales emerged as a result of £8 million of funding from the European Social Fund and Welsh Assembly Government, with match funding from the higher education delivery partners – Swansea University in south Wales and Bangor University in north Wales. Between 2010 and 2015 the programme will deliver leadership development to a target of 700 SME owner-managers across West Wales and the Valleys Convergence region. Recognising the different needs of SME owner-managers the programme takes a detour from traditional higher education pedagogy by encompassing a range of reinforcing learning approaches that include taught, situated, enacted, and observation learning (Kempster and Watts 2002). Programme elements include an initial two day overnight bonding and management event, formal masterclass sessions delivered by speakers with expertise in leadership and management topics, business coaching, Action Learning, plus business shadowing and exchange. The present research forms part of a larger research agenda concerning LEAD Wales.

2. Entrepreneurial leadership

Interest in leadership development has grown with the recognition that this can create an important source of competitive advantage (Hirst et al 2004). Leadership capability is recognised as a key factor in SME survival and growth (Smith and Peters 2006). Recent theorising of the interface between leadership and entrepreneurship has deepened our understanding of the common threads and linkages that exist between the disciplines and the similar evolutionary paths they have taken. Most notably both fields have abandoned the preoccupation with distinguishing leaders and entrepreneurs through the identification of inherent personality traits (Kempster and Cope 2010). Cogliser and Brigham (2004) examine the intersection between leadership and entrepreneurship and point out the

entrepreneur is an enterprising individual that leads in extraordinary circumstances. Nevertheless, while conceptually the fields overlap, entrepreneurial leadership learning and development processes differ in fundamental ways.

It is understood that both leaders and entrepreneurs engage in an evolutionary and complex social process of 'becoming' located within particular communities (Kempster and Cope 2010). However, in the context of employed leadership, leaders typically operate in leader-follower dyads situated within higher level contexts, such as teams nestled within broader organisations (Schrieshaim et al 2001). The SME leader situation presents a different set of circumstances and opportunities for learning and developing leadership. Research suggests informal learning and learning through business networks is a key feature of smaller firms (Anderson and Boocock 2002). Learning triggers may include complex prolonged and traumatic critical events or 'critical incidents' – a concept credited to Flannagan (1954). Although the immediate impact of critical incidents can be negative, they can act as powerful crisis driven learning experiences (Cope and Watts 2000).

It is of significance to the context of the present study that research reported by Kempster and Cope (2010) suggests the entrepreneurs may associate 'leadership' with negative experiences and role models; consequently it is not altogether unexpected that for the nine entrepreneurs in their study leadership was low in relevance or aspiration. What is more, they had limited opportunities for leadership enactment and observation, and made few references to significant individuals or entrepreneurial peers who had strongly influenced their approach to leadership. By contrast, family experiences and parents appeared to play an important role in shaping leadership practice, whether through positive or negative influences. These findings mirror those of Perren and Grant (2001) who found entrepreneurs reported a range of informal mechanisms of leadership development that included observing family members and enhancing their skills in safe environments such as scouts.

However, Kempster and Cope (2010) note "conceptualisations of entrepreneurial leadership are still embryonic" (p.9). Recognising the limitations of their sample, they state there is "...considerable merit in conducting longitudinal research that examines how entrepreneurs may grow into becoming leaders" (p. 27). They recommend longitudinal research with participants on programmes such as LEAD, starting prior to commencement of the programme, at time points during its existence, at the end, and in the months and years that follow to understand the dynamic and processual nature of leadership development and how, or if, leadership

practices evolve as a result of interventions such as LEAD. It is proposed here that biographical research can provide rich insights into entrepreneurial leadership development and leadership practice prior to commencement of such interventions, and thereby complement quantitative longitudinal studies.

3. What can biographical research teach us about entrepreneurial leadership?

For simplification the term 'biography' refers herein to *autobiographical* narratives. However, biographical research as a methodology can involve a wide range of data collection methods and analytical approaches, although they share some common themes. Notably, the researchers' interest in people's lived experiences and an appreciation of the temporal nature of their experience, interest in process and change over time and in the self and representations of the self. Frequently, there is a desire to empower participants so that the respondent contributes to determining the most salient themes to emerge for discussion in the research, whilst researchers' of this creed are generally aware that they are also a narrator in the process (Elliot 2005 p. 6).

At the very least biographical research involves sensitivity to:

“... the connections in people's accounts of past, present and future events and states of affairs; people's sense of their place within those events and states of affairs; the stories they generate about them; and the significance of context for the unfolding of events and people's sense of their role within them. It is the ways that people organize and forge connections between events and the sense they make of those connections that provides the raw material of narrative analysis” (Bryman 2004 p. 412).

Despite its scope, limited contributions to the literature on biography emerge from the academic fields of leadership and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, those that have contributed include Rae and Carswell (2000). They suggest a life story approach is an industrious and valid method of researching entrepreneurial learning, while also facilitating learning in those that undertake interviews. In the field of leadership studies, Kuhnert and Russel (1990) explain biographical data can illuminate the development processes involved in life events related to the matter of research interest. They argue that it is possible learn about a leader's personal characteristics and behaviours or their underlying values, attitudes, motivation,

believes and environmental contexts. They propose previous life experiences influence present behaviour; leaders extract meaning from prior life experiences that shape subsequent behaviours and outcomes.

Yet biographical research is not without its critics. Despite arguing for the use of biography, Howe (1982) cautions that it should not replace traditional sources of knowledge obtained from “empirical research” (p. 1073). In doing so he reveals prejudices that serve to undermine biographical research and qualitative approaches in general. Nevertheless, recent theorising has led to calls for multiple methods. Politis (2005) suggests further and ‘intensified’ studies on the process of entrepreneurial learning, while Shane and Venkataraman (2000 p. 224) recommend a variety of methodologies to explore the topic of entrepreneurship. Recognising leadership is a multifaceted human undertaking Day and Harrison (2007) suggest incorporating an identity lens into leader and leadership development efforts to draw out relational and collective identities (p. 371). Additionally, Kempster (2010) puts forth a strong argument for qualitative research as the method of choice for leadership studies. On this topic of biographical research Fillis (2006) argues it is equal to more traditional approaches adopted in the field of small medium sized enterprise, and can tap into the intangible nature of creativity, whilst also introducing creativity and imagination into the research process.

4. Research methodology

The biographical research proposed herein forms part of a larger research agenda that includes a quantitative longitudinal study and smaller scale qualitative research to track the longer term impact of the LEAD Wales programme. The proposed methodology to be adopted follows.

4.1 Sampling

It is desirable that the sample, drawn from the LEAD Wales programme, is stratified by criterion such as gender and business maturity / experience. The time required for interviews factors in the decision to sample approximately 17 participants in the programme, although this target will remain fluid. Additional considerations include staffing capacity and the time required for intricate and labour intensive analytical procedures (Jones 2003). Although the sample is small,

data triangulation can be used (Fillis 2006), in this instance by triangulating the results with data gathered from baseline and exit questionnaires, focus groups, and other research data concerning LEAD Wales.

To qualify for the programme, participants must be the strategic decision maker of a company that meets the criterion for a SME or social enterprise. They should communicate a desire for business growth and innovation, plus a commitment to the principles of social learning with other SME leaders. Consequently, the individuals participating in LEAD Wales do not represent a random sample of SME owner-managers in the region.

4.2 Interviewing

The research draws on interview techniques discussed by Wengraf (2004), and biographical narrative interview techniques and analytical approaches developed of Schütze (1977). Reimann (2003) provides a detailed discussion of Schütze work and the biographical approach.

Reinmann (2003) recommends starting the interview by discussing the research and where the idea of asking for the respondent's life story arose in the first place. A Generative question should be prepared beforehand in a style that will elicit an extempore narrative. This stage also involves explaining the features of the interview to the respondent.

The interview involves three stages:

- *Stage one* begins with a single initial narrative-inducing question, described as 'Minimalist-passive' (Wengraf 2000 p. 10). The interviewee is asked to tell their life history, rather than certain passages. Once the respondent has approved the scheme of narration the main narrative unfolds without interruption. At this stage the interviewer can only provide non-verbal and non-committal responses, and must not intervene in any way until the story ends.
- *Stage two* immediately follows. Questions can be asked concerning the interviewee's biography but only on topics or themes already discussed by the respondent in their narrative. Thus one can explore points 'flashed up' in the narrative and fill in noticeable 'gaps' (Reimann 2003).

- *Stage three* involves more probing questioning non-narrative questions. For example, gaining further information about a person's retrospective evaluation, review and reflections on a topic of interest, such as what they would do differently today (Reimann 2003).

Stage one and two of the interview often merge together, whilst stage three may involve a follow up interview. Alternatively all three stages may sequentially blend into one interview. Interviews can take 45-60 minutes at stage one, and 30-45 minutes at stage two (Jones 2003).

4.3 Data Analysis

Analysis is concerned with both *what* people say and the formal features of the narrative concerning *how* their story is told (Schütze 1977 cited in Reimann 2003). Taking this approach, analysis involves a number of complex procedures where the narrative is explored. Schütze (2008) provides a helpful summary: initial text sorts explore differentiation in narrative, description and augmentation. A sequential structural description of the formal features of the narrative is prepared. The different elements of the interview are compiled in the form of topically related strings of text from the main story telling interview and question element. Analytical abstraction involves assembling an outline of the overall biographical structuring, and searching include remarkable, specific and universal features of the person's life history and the process mechanisms that shaped it.

Biographical process structures are the most important ordering principles of life history. The four main biographical process structures outlined by Schütze (2007; 2008) include: biographical action schemes, trajectories of suffering, institutional expectation patterns, and creative metamorphoses of biographical identity.

For instance, process structures emerge in the narrative in the form of different kinds of biographical action schemes, by which the person attempts to actively shape the course of their life. Additionally, unexpected and surprising developments may unfold. The concept of trajectories, influential in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1968), is explored in the narrative by taking account of intentional and symptomatic indicators. Reimann (2003) explains these may include references to hints that something difficult is about to be discussed or as an outcome of a change in the person's life story. The trajectory will be shaped by

certain conditions that forced events. For instance, these experiences may come to light in a commentary that suggests calming oneself in a deteriorating situation. The respondent, as narrator and story carrier, may engage in naive self presentation. Institutional patterns that occur during the life course include experiences of education, family cycles and career patterns. Finally, creative metamorphoses of biographical identity is characterised by signs that a new important inner development is starting in the person's biography.

The narrative will usually contain a combination of biographical process structures, but these typically occur sequentially in biographical dominance (Schütze, 2007).

A generalised grid structure of analytical categories is created. After case analysis, comparative analysis is undertaken using a principle of minimal and maximal contrast. This allows for the comparative analysis of cases between similar groups and contrast comparison between different groups. It is anticipated that by focusing analysis on a person's narrative, the researcher moves beyond what actually happened to explore how people make sense of what happened.

5. Assessing the feasibility of the study

It is imperative to the success of biographical research that the study makes sense and seems worthwhile to the respondent so that they develop an interest in co-operating in the project prior to interview. Developing a trusting relationship is critical to this process (Reinmann 2003), and endorsed by the British Sociological Society who state "research relationships should be characterised, wherever possible, by trust and integrity" (2002 p.2). Researchers enter into a personal and moral relationship with those that they study that requires careful consideration of research ethics. Most notably to ensure respondents are not adversely affected by the research. As a first step, the right to refuse participation in biographical research was clearly stated to avoid the possibility that it could be construed as a formal element of the LEAD Wales programme.

An investigation to assess the feasibility of the study involved discussions with participants at different stages in the programme. They were given the opportunity to learn about the purpose of the research, the interview process and expected research outcomes so that it did not give rise to unnecessary anxiety, false hopes or expectations.

The importance of developing trust, noted by Reinmann (2003), proved to be critical. Those at a more advanced stage in the programme had a working relationship with the researcher, and consequently expressed enthusiastic interest in the research. No one explicitly declined. However, it is of note that men were initially more willing to volunteer for interview than women. Nevertheless, over time the women participating in the programme became equally interested in the study. By contrast, tentative discussions with those in the early stages of the programme suggested they were not open to the idea.

A situation of this kind presents the researcher with a dilemma. Baseline biographical interviews prior to or early in the LEAD programme could provide a rich source of data regarding prior entrepreneurial leadership development processes and leadership practice at a point where leadership is less prominent in the thoughts of respondents. However, exploration of this option revealed that at this early point in the programme participants were not as willing to discuss the research, let alone undertake interviews. By comparison this was a welcome prospect for those at a more advanced stage in the programme. In light of the outcomes of the investigation, there is value in interviewing at a more advanced stage in the programme or at exit. After all, biographical research not only reveals the meaning individuals give to their experiences, it also enables the study of social reality in a way that allows us to understand how it continuously reinterpreted by social actors, (Chamberlayne 2004 p. 189).

The investigation with programme participants prompted some to share insightful reflections that share parallels with earlier research. Notably, the experiential nature of entrepreneurial learning and recognition of family background and parents in shaping entrepreneurial intention and leadership development; informal mechanisms of management and leadership; and, limited salience of leadership per say. This is perhaps surprising from individuals participating in a leadership programme, yet conceptual repertoires of personal leadership appeared limited and difficult to express, as noted elsewhere in the literature. Nevertheless, when prompted during the course of the programme to identify notable people that had influenced their leadership practice, many more parallels emerged with previous research. Notably, men identified male role models such as their father as influencing leadership practice. Some recalled experiences of prolonged 'bullying' at the hands of employers as triggering their decision to set up a business. Such experiences instilled a life-long conviction to positive leadership. Echoing the

findings reported by Perren and Grant (2001), some male participants in the programme noted membership to associations or clubs during youth as providing positive male role models. By contrast, women were more likely to identify with their mother or other notable female figures in the family.

Uncovering potential areas of further exploration, unique to the context of the present research, for men and women the Welsh culture and notion of community and rootedness in Wales appeared significant in shaping leadership practice and entrepreneurial leadership identity, thus adding support to the inclusion of an identity lens in leadership development efforts (Day and Harrison 2007).

6. Conclusions

The findings of this investigation add support to Reinmann's (2003) argument that building a trusting relationship is critical to the process of gaining co operation in biographical research.

Leadership is an important factor in SME business success, yet it is widely acknowledged that a greater understanding is needed of the nature and process of leadership development in an SME context. The investigation revealed insights into the potential of biographical research to the development of knowledge in the field. In due course, it is hoped that research findings will contribute to the theorising of SME entrepreneurship that is critical to the development of local, national and European policies concerning SME entrepreneurial leadership practice and SME growth. Additionally, there are implications for those with an interest in developing programmes to support SMEs. The setting for this research in a rural socially and economically deprived area of Wales is particularly novel and important.

Taking a biographical approach it is hoped that creativity and imagination is brought to the research process. Biographical interviews provide a unique opportunity for the interviewee to tell the story of their life. This can be an illuminating and empowering experience that can facilitate learning and self discovery, which is particularly relevant to LEAD Wales. In due course, biographical interviews will provide rich data to complement quantitative longitudinal research that will track changes over time in the leadership practice of those participating in the LEAD Wales programme.

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