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Leaders and Heroes: Modern Day Archetypes

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Abstract

This paper explores the salience of archetypes through modern day idealization of leaders as heroes. The body of research in evolutionary psychology and ethology provide support for archetypal theory and the influence of archetypes (Hart & Brady, 2005; Maloney, 1999). Our idealized self is reflected in archetypes and it is possible that we draw on archetypal themes to compensate for a reduction in meaning in our modern day work life. Archetypal priming can touch a person's true self and result in increased meaning in life.

According to Faber and Mayer (2009), drawing from Jung (1968), an archetype is an, “internal mental model of a typical, generic story character to which an observer might resonate emotionally” (p. 307). Most contemporary researchers maintain that archetypal models are transmitted through culture rather than biology, as Jung originally argued (Faber & Mayer, 2009). Archetypes as mental models can be likened to image schemas, foundational mind/brain structures that are developed during human pre-verbal experience (Merchant, 2009). Such schemas are recurring within cognitive processes and establish patterns of understanding and reasoning. Archetypes can provide an operative paradigm or schema in which an individual can experience the world, be compelled to action, and provide a model for behavior. Maloney (1999) cites the growing body of research from several fields that support the premise that the mind is innately structured. Early knowledge persistently and consequentially shapes both subjective experience and behavior. With mental models, an individual has a framework with which to operate, understand, and explore.

Archetypes are expressed in a number of ways, especially through myths, cultural stories, and tribal lore (Jung, 1968). Archetypes are generic story characters, but often represent key roles in narratives, that possess familiar and consistent traits and converge around central life themes (Faber & Mayer, 2009; Jung, 1968). A study by Faber and Mayer (2009, p. 314) demonstrates that people can reliably identify individual archetypes in rich media sources. In addition, Maloney (1999) found that an individual considering a hypothetical long-term relationship with an archetypal image, including anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic images, can evoke affective responses, as was theorized by Jung. Such studies support the premise that an “archetype itself is never directly expressed in a symbol or image, but rather, it guides mental use of images and symbols to conform to certain themes or motifs that are found everywhere” (Hart & Brady, 2005).

Archetypal themes such as quests, attachments, and conflict are robustly relevant in adult cognition. There is a saliency to archetypal images that can elicit certain responses. The

recognition of, and affective and symbolic importance of, archetypal characters may derive from their long standing presence in a culture's history (Faber & Mayer, 2009). Further, it is possible that we may not respond well to specific images because they may represent a culturally externalized archetype form, such as the enemy or shadow. Although there are limitations to Maloney's (1999) findings, such as sample size and make-up (convenience sample as indicated on p. 104), they are consistent with the premise of an innate structure of the human mind produces apparent content which can in turn influence human experience and culture. Moreover, archetypes manifest in a variety of ways across culture; Hart and Brady (2005, p. 413) argue, "They stylize our stories, orient us towards the future, and frame ever-new meanings." As such, archetypes provide a framework with which to make assumptions, scan operating environments, make meaning, and promote understanding.

Archetypes act as a set of dispositions whose specific manifestations are shaped by culture and situation (Lindenfeld, 2009) thus variations of archetypal images are expected while the underlying meanings are retained. Archetypes may reduce the necessity to learn new information by providing a pre-existing framework of information, assumptions and responses similar to case-based knowledge (see Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron & Byrne, 2007). The production of such images can be seen as an adaptive mechanism that provides a set of understanding. In addition, on the issue of variation and how archetypes arise, Lindenfeld (2009) argues, "The point they are making is the same: the ego needs a means of magnification, of feeling connected to a meaningful whole beyond the individual to compensate for situations of life-threatening instability" (p. 227). Moreover, Lindenfeld (2009) states, "During eras of political, social, and spiritual disintegration, people were likely to compensate for this by turning to charismatic leaders and totalitarian ideologies as embodiments of 'larger-than-life' archetypes." Archetypes can serve as non-verbal structures and symbolic languages which embody our hopes, fears, dreams, and desires. Thus, depending on the circumstances, they can be both collective and individual, both objective and subjective (Veen, 1994). Hence, the allure of toxic leaders during times of crisis to create a sense of meaning and order in the individual or group.

The Hero Archetype

The word hero has connotations with adversity, challenges, honor, strength, and victory. Heroes provide a narrative for sensemaking in individuals and they perceive reality as a social construction. Sensemaking refers to an ongoing interpretive process that allows a person to rationalize and understand a series of events and experiences (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking describes the process of organizing and turning circumstances into an understandable framework, which then provide a springboard for action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2006). The hero's journey often seeks to bring order to disorder or make right situations that have gone wrong. Throughout the journey, knowledge and understanding is gained through the eyes of the hero. Heroes seem to have a supernatural talent to achieve set out goals and bend reality to their will. It is not a stretch to argue that many desire to emulate such mythic accomplishments and to possess such power.

Campbell's (2004) *Hero with a Thousand Faces* explores the hero's journey and provides rich mythological cross-cultural mythos from which parallels can be seen. Campbell (2004) further explores the concept of archetypes and the hero's journey. Heroes can be willing or reluctant. In many myths, the hero often engages in self-sacrifice and overcomes adversity and

hardship for others. The brave actions and sacrifices of heroes are retold within the affected community. The hero's journey involves many stages: living ordinary life; crossing the threshold; overcoming ordeals; embracing rewards; and returning home (Campbell, 2004). Ultimately, the hero faces a challenge which tests bravery and the integration of accumulated knowledge from the journey. If successful, the hero can return with an elixir, or panacea, to resolve problems of the community. Leaders play this role and undertake this journey.

The Leader as a Hero

Leaders fill the role of mythical heroes through actions such as, saving companies, championing causes for the poor or disenfranchised, and defending our closely held beliefs. Placed within a modern construct and environment, the hero archetype can be viewed through many different lenses such as, the CEO of a company or political contender running for public office. For example, when a company is experiencing a crisis or struggle, a leader must traverse the difficult operating environment. If recent courses of action were suitable, the company would not likely be in the current state. The leader has to navigate through the strange environment that is filled with change, confusion, and concern. The leader has to make sense of the situation and set a course of change, for the lives of many depend on success. If successful, the company will return to profitability and may remain intact albeit changed by the hero's journey. The politician has much of the same challenges and must lead the charge against political rivals. If the campaign is successful, he or she can usher in a new set of policies (the elixir) that benefit the people.

Heroes act as a semi-fluid archetype that we mold to meet our needs. The leader as the hero archetype can be viewed through many leadership models such as, charismatic, resonant or transformation leadership. It can be argued that the hero plays a pivotal role in sensemaking for the distressed party. The hero brings order to chaos and rights perceived wrongs. This can be likened to crisis leadership where the task of a leader is to return an organization to normal, or manageable, operating conditions. Shadraconis (2012) argues that effective leaders guide followers through the sensemaking process during periods of crisis. Moreover, transformational leaders help to bring order out of chaos and create shared meaning rather than intensify group disintegration. During this process, the leader can model the hero's journey, create a shared vision, outline necessary tasks, model behaviors, and empower others to act. Through their actions, leaders can become a symbol of righteous, create meaning, or provide something to believe in. Accordingly, individuals may conflate the image of the leader with the hero archetype.

Cultural Influence on Archetypes and Mental Constructs

Mass media sources may be unintentionally participating in performative discourse about leaders and heroes, thereby leaders. Every day, through a variety of mediums, information is constantly being relayed as to who heroes and leaders are and what they look like. Currently, television acts as a key storytelling medium relaying archetypal images. According to Signorielli (2004), "Television is the central and most pervasive mass medium in American culture and plays a distinctive and historically unprecedented role as our nation's most common, constant, and vivid learning environment" (p. 279). According to social cognitive theory, the media provides images and role models that viewers may use to develop cognitive schemas about

different types of people (Bandura, 2002; Signorielli, 2009b). Heavy exposure to such material may eventually cause viewers to consider the material as the authentic state of human affairs (Bandura, 2002). Thus, continued exposure to fantasized media images may reinforce such schemas into our perception of reality and our externalized images of archetypes. Moreover, in adults, once an association is learned, there is a tendency for the association to become stronger, even in the absence of supporting evidence (Lewicki, Czyewska & Schuller, 1990).

Cultivation theory contends that television is a collective, symbolic environment of messages possessing an underlying pattern or formulaic structure (Signorielli, 2009b). In addition, Signorielli (2009b) argues that, "Due to commercial constraints, television cultivates a common worldview and common stereotypes through a relatively restrictive set of programs, images, and messages" (Signorielli, 2009b). Television, or any rich media, arguably has the potential to prime our expectations and consequently shape our views. This can be further reinforced by our internal narrative of "reality," drawn from symbolic representations, even though it may be a flawed representation or model.

Media can act as a socio-cultural agent that shapes our attitudes and assumptions. Studies indicate that televised images and characterizations rarely contradict conventional ideological views and stereotypes about the roles and experiences of women and minorities in society (Maestro & Greenberg, 2000; Signorielli, 2009a). In the United States, Signorielli (2009b) found an emerging trend that broadcast prime time network programs between 2000 and 2008 were somewhat less racially representative than in the previous decade. It should be noted that the sample did not include cable networks, premium channels and other satellite services. However, broadcast prime time programming does provide valuable insight into the current programming even if it does not quite provide a detailed picture of racial and ethnic demographics. In addition, in the U.S. Hispanics, Latinos, and Asians continue to be unrepresented on television and are likely to appear in programs with racially mixed casts (Signorielli, 2009b). Rich media sources often portray powerful leaders and heroes as white males. Furthermore, women and minorities are not often cast in prestigious occupations or leadership roles. In addition, most men over the age of 50 are still characterized as vibrant and partake actively in all aspects of life, while women after 50 are seen in somewhat diminished capacities (Signorielli, 2004).

The predominant images garnered from the media shape the archetypal image of leaders and heroes. Rankin and Bagley's (2008) study may indicate the influence of this prevailing narrative. Rankin and Bagley (2008) found when naming heroes, women are not named or cited as often as men. This is interesting because the researchers developed a seemingly androgynous definition of heroism through combining risk taking (culturally masculine) and devotion to others (culturally feminine) (Rankin & Bagley, 2008). Rankin and Bagley's (2008) findings were consistent with the cultural association of heroism, public and private, with men and masculinity. Public heroes often occupied traditionally male dominated roles (e.g. rescuers, firefighters, police officers, politicians) that lend to a perception of heroism (Rankin & Bagley, 2008). Ultimately, Rankin and Bagley (2008) argue this indicates there is a lack of observation of women in heroic roles. However, Rankin and Bagley (2008) argue that as the divisions of labor continue to weaken, such disparities in perception may also weaken.

Archetypes have inherent meanings related to the issues they represent embedded within them. However, the externalized forms of archetypes are shaped by cultural images and narratives that are adopted into the archetypal framework. In the United States, the majority of media and television portrayals of leaders and heroes continue to be in line with stereotypical and ideological views (see Maestro & Greenberg, 2000; Signorielli, 2004; Signorielli, 2009b). In

mass media depictions, the dominant externalized cultural narrative of a leader is currently a white male with few deviations. Even mythical and fairy tale stories include images and language such as, “white knight,” and “prince charming,” who rescue a character or region from distress or danger. Beloved and continuously retold stories often portray women as being in need of rescue rather than assuming the hero role. As new stories are told and new myths are formed, this may change perceptions of heroes and thereby leaders. Although, the hero archetype may hold similar traits across cultures, it likely manifests through the pre-dominant image of leadership in the prevailing culture. Moreover, if the person in the leadership role does not match the image, there may be a sense of dissonance or at the extreme, a rejection of a person to fill the role of leader.

The Value of Our Relationship with the Leader as Hero Archetype

Identifying with Leaders

Identifying with heroes allows us to transcend thoughts of our own mortality and the limitations of our personal skills. This stimulates the belief of greatness, like mythical heroes, through tales of our actions and deeds. Bandura (1988) posits, “Seeing people who are believed to be similar to oneself succeed through sustained effort raises an observer’s beliefs about his/her own capabilities” (p. 285). This vicarious experience acts as a source of self-efficacy. Through social comparison, an individual can identify with another and in turn potentially increase his/her beliefs’ of capability. Observing a perceived similar individual overcome adversity can help an individual focus on success rather than dwelling on failure. Leaders provide an opportunity to represent our idealized selves that we believe that we can achieve. When we identify with leaders, we are able to see ourselves as being similar; in this sense, we can accomplish all that they can.

It seems likely that we would attempt to emulate heroes as they represent a cognitive schema and physical image of success. This effect can be readily observed in studies of women and the barriers they face in the workplace. Competence traits and physical stereotypes of male leadership include: aggressiveness, self-confidence, manner of dress, voice pitch, and attractiveness (Oakley, 2000). Some of the physical and competence based stereotypes can be addressed through impression management while competence based traits can be addressed by altering early gender-based socialized behaviors. As a result, women in senior positions can be observed using impression management and managing their appearance to downplay femininity and adopt traditionally male attributes such as short hair and clothing styles (Oakley, 2000). If women can be observed engaging in discursive identity behaviors such as, altering speech (adopting a “male” linguistic style) and downplaying femininity to address workplace barriers, it is only logical that men engage in similar behavior. Although the leadership literature may often focus on leadership competencies and skills, it is important to recognize that leadership also has a physical component.

The “True” or “Ideal” Self

There are several theories surrounding the domain of the self. For example, Self-discrepancy theory argues there are three basic domains of the self: the actual self; the ideal self; and the ought self (Higgins, 1987). The actual self represents the attributes you believe you

possess (Higgins, 1987). The ideal self represents the attributes that you would like to possess (Higgins, 1987). The ought self represents the attributes that another believes that you should possess (Higgins, 1987). When conflicts arise between the ideal self and the actual self, it creates a self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). People who experience this discrepancy to a greater extent than most are more likely to experience dejection related emotions, such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, or even depression (Higgins, 1987). However, the development of positive relationships can mediate the effects of self-discrepancies.

Markus and Nurius (1986) describe possible selves which are individual views of the self that are not necessarily confirmed by social experience. They argue that individuals often possess ideas about themselves that are not well anchored in social reality (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves serve an important function as incentives for future behaviors and offer an evaluative and interpretive context for the individual (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This interpretive framework provided by self-knowledge and possible selves are important to for sensemaking of past behavior and can communicate new or inconsistent information about the self and thereby, guide behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt and King (2009) focus on the true self-concept which is a person's avowed "true self" and its components. Schlegel et al. (2009) have defined the true self-concept as, "a cognitive schema representing those aspects of the self that are considered, by the person, to be most emblematic of his or her true nature" (p. 475). However, individual assessment of the true self does not necessarily coincide with the individual's "real" true self. The true self can reflect positive aspects of the self, or one's ideal self, and is often hidden during most daily life. Meanwhile, the actual, or public, self refers to how one behaves around most other people (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt & King, 2009). This definition of the true self concept has allowed Schlegel et al. (2009) to study the accessibility of the true self using re-action time and priming methods. Furthermore, Schlegel et al. (2009) demonstrated that accessibility to the true self-concept leads to enhanced meaning in life.

The Loss of Meaning

Efficiency has become a key driver of the modern organization and work life. To be successful in the new world of efficiency and technology, it requires some part of the self to be like a machine. Efficiency and specialization in organizations can often fragment work processes resulting in the disconnection of an individual from his or her work (Hart & Brody, 2005). This results in elimination of an individual being able to find or apply meaning to his or her work (Hart & Brody, 2005). Moreover, Briskin argues that the logic of efficiency has isolated human meaning and relatedness (as cited in Hart & Brody, 2005). There is now a greater severance of the relationship between work and identity than in the past (Hart & Brody, 2005). Furthermore, Caughey (1980) argues that many studies have overlooked the significance of connections between personal identity and social identity since there is a tendency to think of personality as being independent from social role. Although efficiency is extremely important for the modern organization, it seems important to compensate for this loss of meaning.

Haslam (2001) argues that individuals who share group membership are motivated to actively develop a sense of shared meaning. Part of the development of shared meaning occurs as organization members engage in social activities with one another and use shared language. The emphasis on efficiency can prevent individuals from developing a sense of meaning. The social construction of reality and role systems are built over time and reinforced in the minds of

the members (Weick, 1993). Social constructions and role systems can be a guiding force or influence over the actions of individual members (Weick, 1993). This can impact the way we believe and act. With this loss of meaning, it would seem that the individual would need to develop new methods of experiencing meaning.

There is a relationship between core elements of the self and the experience of meaning in life. Schlegel et al. (2009) argue, "Meaning is not obtained simply from performing well, but from feeling that one is in touch with and enacting goals that are expression of who one believes he or she really is" (p. 474). Expression of the self provides an important basis for experiencing meaning in life (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt & King, 2009). The true self serves as a source of meaning and its accessibility influences the experience of meaning in life. When primed with factors that represent our ideal selves rather than our actual selves, individuals report higher levels of meaning (Schlegel et al., 2009). Archetypes can act as activators to our true selves allowing us to experience more meaning in our lives. They can help to prime outcomes of our experiences. It has been demonstrated by Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimmons (2002) that individuals are more likely to demonstrate their ideal selves in online interactions as opposed to face-to-face interaction. The rise of technology and virtually has allowed for the increased employment of archetypes. Because the modern world has provided us with more opportunity to decide how we are to live our lives (Schlegel et al., 2009, p. 474), as opposed to being destined to for specific social roles, the salience of archetypes may be even more apparent. When identifying with leaders as the archetypal hero, individuals can experience a sense of meaning and fulfillment through sharing real or perceived successes.

Leader Idealization and the Development of Para-Social Relationships

The emulation and idealization of leaders does not end with physical features. Individuals may also project heroic qualities and idealized images on leaders such as strength, courage, and a strong moral compass. The development of para-social relationships with idealized leaders, or heroes, may address of the loss in meaning in work and allow individuals to connect with their true selves. Idealization is the process by which some object is removed of any negative features and comes to be "overvalued and emotionally aggrandized" (Laughlin, 1970, p.123). Brown and Starkey (2000) argue it "implies the exercise of an unrealistic judgment, and it results in the creation of a 'fantastic' and 'impossible' person, standard, or other entity" (p. 106). Idealized images of leaders can result in what amounts to be modern day hero worship. Leaders are often viewed as heroes and when leaders do not live up to our expectations, no matter how unrealistic, may elicit a disgusted response.

Individuals have a tendency to dissociate from loss, from failure, or unmet expectations (Cialdini, 2008). Cialdini et al. (1976) describes phenomenon is often referred to as "basking in reflected glory" individuals seek to gain acceptance or respect through association. In their study, Cialdini et al (1976) found that individuals utilize inclusive language when their sports teams win and dissociate from losses. It should be noted that the individuals do not actually have to be involved in the successful outcome. In addition, research demonstrates that individuals use indirect forms of self-enhancement when self-esteem is threatened called blasting (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). In an attempt to look good to observers, individuals may opt to publically blast the opposition (Caldini & Richardson, 1980). An arena where such behaviors can be readily observed is the political arena. Where preferred candidates are idealized and opponents are blasted.

A para-social relationship developed through the hero archetype and identifying with a leader can provide a method of accessing the true self and increasing meaning. Derrick et al. (2008) argue, "Given the benefits of relationship partners to self-discrepancies, it is not surprising that people seek out, are attracted to, and get along with people who are similar to their ideal selves" (p. 263). Para-social relationships present little to no threat of rejection unlike real relationships (Derrick et al., 2008). There exists a relationship that extends beyond the dyadic relationship customarily ascribed to leader/members. The para-social relationship may influence member exchange as it instills a new set of intangible rewards. Para-social relationships are psychologically real to the people experiencing them. Restak (1991) hypothesized that there is a part of the human brain that cannot quite distinguish between a real experience and one experienced through the media. Although his discussion focused on violence in the media, the concept can be extended to social experiences with heroes and celebrities (Stever, 2011). Individuals may conflate the image of the leader with the hero archetype and develop a para-social relationship with the archetype. This is similar to a fan who develops a para-social relationship with a celebrity to meet psychosocial needs. The para-social relationship may have become even more common with the 24 hour news cycle and rich media that is now available. For example, it would seem likely that with increased coverage of political discourse and rhetoric, individuals would develop para-social relationships with current political leaders and those running for office.

When heroes are employed as representations of the ideal self, individuals are likely to wish to want to maintain existing self-concepts through a variety of ego defenses. A degree of defense is psychologically healthy however, when taken to extremes it can result in negative contribution to psychological health (Brown & Starkey, 2000). When contrary information is introduced, individuals may fall prey to confirmation bias and rationalize all feedback as validity for a previously drawn conclusion (Wright, Van Der Heijden, Bradfield, Burt & Cairns, 2004). Furthermore, when leaders do fail or do not meet expectations, stories are often framed which omit or have a gross oversight of failures and moral shortcomings. Unfortunately, our expectations are not always met and we are often disappointed with leaders who we once believed in. This is only natural if heroes are romanticized and idealized images are projected upon them, whether or not they are congruent with actual behaviors or characteristics. It is not uncommon to idealize leaders as heroes and strip them of maladaptive behaviors, character flaws, and defects, often rationalizing behavior to be in line with expectations.

When idealized hero archetype does not meet the expectations of the individual, the individual may utilize ego defenses and ignore contrary evidence. This further refusal to accept contrary evidence can operate as a self-serving bias and ego defense. The individual may not accept contrary evidence as it may result in challenging one's one ability to discernment or make good decision, one's perceived ability to make good decisions. So the individual will follow course and continue to only admit partial information. This confirmation bias results in a lack of objectivity. This can be seen through the premise of dysrationalia where an intelligent individual does not act rationally for the situation at hand (Stanovich, 2002). Interestingly, Bargh et al.'s (2002) research indicates that individuals are more likely to demonstrate their ideal selves online as opposed to face to face. Bargh et al. (2002) posit that people feel more comfortable being who they really are over the Internet and that such interactions activate the true self-concept. It would seem that virtual interactions, such as para-social relationship, provide access to an individual's idealized or possible selves and a greater sense of meaning.

Conclusion

It was once commonly believed and still is by many, that great leaders were born, not made (MacGregor Burns, 2004). Like heroes, leaders may be born, forged, bred, or imagined. Like heroes, we often speak of great leaders as mythological or legendary figures endowed with great strength, knowledge, or keen insight. Through this view, it can be easy to see that the myth of the great man as leader arose from our appreciation or idealization of heroes. Nietzsche may have argued that we no longer need a superman, but we seem to enjoy engaging in the narrative of identifying with the archetypal hero. The focus on or logic of efficiency has resulted in a reduction of our identity invested in our work. Building para-social relationships with leaders can have an impact similar to real relationships. Cultural images of leaders have been continually influenced by media images. This results in cognitive schemas that influence our perceptions and has developed the stereotypical image of a leader. The desire to be associated with success can play an important role in leadership. Boen et al. (2002) observed that individuals will keep lawn signs out longer for political candidates. Bernhardt, Dabbs, Fielden & Lutter, (1998) found an increase in testosterone levels among men when affiliated teams were winning games. When placed upon the construct of an organization, leaders have the potential to not only elicit a psychological but also a physiological effect from followers. Leaders who embody the hero archetype can overcome some of the organizational challenges with disempowerment through understanding this information. Leaders can use this for positive ends or negative ends. Through filling the void, a charismatic or toxic leader can have disastrous results. Archetypes allow us to get in touch with our true selves, since they represent what we seek to be, which in turn accesses true self-concept and leads to enhanced meaning in life.

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