

# Between the assessment centre and reality: how and why biographical psychology makes human resource management more effective

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The article makes a conceptual contribution to the substantiation of the foundations in personnel management for the development and decision-making in personnel assessment based on the biographical method.

**Design/methodology/approach** – When substantiating the scientific direction, a comparative analysis, a comparison of the theoretical provisions of leadership and the methodology of personnel assessment, a critical appraisal of the assessment centre and biographical method were used.

**Findings** – Modern science contains information about effective leadership and few grounds for objective selection for leadership positions. Why do some individuals become leaders in the churches, while others become leaders of business corporations? The accepted assessment tools allow obtaining information about the candidate, but do not have a scientific basis for making a decision about leadership in recruiting. Biographical psychology brings together leadership theories and assessment tools; it allows to establish a connection between developmental psychology, social, applied and organizational psychology and provides the integration of various directions in science. It allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between a person's biographical facts and his/her suitability in the profession to justify the reasons for leadership, as well as the grounds for selection for managerial positions.

**Originality/value** – Substantiation of biographical psychology will allow in the future to legitimize the conduct of such studies, to come closer to the truth in the selection for leadership and not only positions, to understand the connection between the biography of leader and organizational culture. Biographical psychology will contribute to the creation of scientific basis for recruiting. To consider biographical factors more significantly (gender, age, sexual orientation, differences in personal development, and not just executive experience in the resume), this will reduce the economic costs of introducing and supporting costly procedures in organizations, as well as increasing the objectivity of the assessment and selection of personnel in organizations.

**Keywords** Leadership, Recruiting, Assessment centre, Biographic method, Biographic psychology

**Paper type** Invited paper

## Introduction

Leadership is the most studied and obscure phenomenon to date. Leadership theories have various conclusions about good governance – shared leadership (Pearce *et al.*, 2000, 2009), values promotion (Casson, 2000), leadership behaviours' influence on the voice behaviour of



the best-performing employees (Detert and Burris, 2007), servant leadership (Liden *et al.*, 2008), leadership styles focused on people and relationships and tasks only with connection of with job satisfaction (Cummings *et al.*, 2010), transformational leadership and corporate social responsibility (Groves and LaRocca, 2011), shared and vertical leadership, team composition in terms of honesty and empowerment (Hoch, 2013), decreased employee engagement with unethical leadership (Sharif and Scandura, 2014), creativity of employees with a high power distance and benevolent leadership (Lin *et al.*, 2018). The native effect of team cohesion negatively affects the moral leadership and its collective efficiency and positively on collective effectiveness and organizational commitment (Chen *et al.*, 2019). When studying the leadership of priests, it is indicated that they have a deep understanding of the organizational context and values (Grandy and Sliwa, 2017). In the 21 century, an organization must be sustainable and this requires leaders of extraordinary ability (Metcalf and Benn, 2013). Such leaders are those who understand and predict complexity, through demanding tasks, engage groups, adapt to organizational change and manage their own emotions associated with challenges in problem-solving. Leadership is seen as a practice (Bohl, 2019), and leaders are empowered regardless of their depth of knowledge, legitimate authority, or mastery of data. The success is based on collaboration, that is, social phenomenon. The most influential studies are about transformational leadership, and most prominent is about regarding collective leadership types (Tal and Gordon, 2016). The reason for this is the structure of Western transition which has transitioned from the industrial era to the era of knowledge and other phenomena like - democratisation, globalisation, and the complexity of the world. However, as Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) emphasize, the most commonly used tools to measure charismatic transformational leadership are not valid in feeling that they cannot reproduce the dimensional structure given by theory, and cannot confirm other empirically proven aspects of leadership, and cannot determine cause-and-effect relationships.

Furthermore, the competence-based approach, assumes that leaders must have a set of competencies, like social intelligence (Boyatzis, 2008) or soft skills (Succi and Wieandt, 2019), which make a shem to succeed in the 21st century. The competence-based approach bears echoes of the theory of traits because, since the set can be endless, and it is extremely difficult to find a person corresponding to all the criter.

Moreover, there is a hypothesis that democratic leadership should generate more “leadership” organizations (Pinnington and Tourish, 2009). In recent years, management theory has changed its views on the problem of leadership as an alternative to the understanding of transactional and transpharmacy concepts—servant leadership (2017), Distributed Leadership (2018), Authentic Leadership and Followership (2018), Leadership and Role Modelling (2018), neocharismatic leadership (Angawi, 2021). A special type of business has been singled out – the family business – where the family is considered as the leader (Tobak and Nábrádi, 2020).

In each of these theories, leadership is associated with different behaviours of leaders. In one case, service and submission define the essence of the person, the community and the world. In another case, collective intelligence and thought systems, patterns of joint optimization of shared visions, values and ideals among all actors in group are in focus, rather than individual interests. These are the self-consciousness of leader, gender, psychological capital and purposefulness. Leadership is associated with altruism, vision, empathy, self-awareness as well as ownership, management, control, generations and the intention to pass the business down as an inheritance within the family.

However, it is unclear whether every leader is capable of serving, if it is possible to be productive, to abandon one’s own interests in order to achieve goals and whether self-change is always positive. In a family business, the problem of loyalty and demotivation of personnel, and the lack of clarity in human resource management systems are important.

Any business is created to derive material benefits, but money is not an end in itself. Research on leader-follower dyads in North America and the United States showed that although there was evidence of differential association (performance of the subordinate on a role basis and ethics of the subordinate as assessed by the leader; virtuous leadership and happiness of the leader based on self-esteem; the relationship between happiness and life satisfaction as leaders, and followers in transformational leadership), many hypotheses remained unconfirmed (Nassif *et al.*, 2020).

There is emerging research on the relationship between excess human resources and profitability over time (Agusti-Perez *et al.*, 2020) or accumulation of knowledge for innovation (Ode and Ayavoo, 2020); however, the studies do not consider the role of leaders.

None of the research on leadership contains data on leaders – people who may be identified as having characteristics of effective leadership. Currently, the most effective tool for assessing personnel is testing and assessment centre. In 2008, a three-modal assessment approach was proposed - result-oriented tests, behaviour-based modelling and biographical information (Schuller, 2008). Today, leadership theories are divorced from the methods of personnel assessment, and the conclusions on leadership are not linked, which complicates the assessment procedure. In addition, individual studies and approaches have not been developed, although the results stemming from them were obtained by more valid methods, in particular, the biographical method, the meaning of which will be shown and disclosed later in this study. There is evidence of the relationship between biographical facts and suitability for the job – examples are police officers (Tidwell, 1993), camp leaders (Miller, 1981), women education administrators (Dickson, 1988). People with basic medical education change careers more often and more diversely, compared to people with technical education (Hudyakov and Mashoshina, 2016). Economic studies show that the inclusion of non-executive directors on the board of directors and overinvestment can lead to risks for the business (To *et al.*, 2020), was made to a psychoanalytic approach to understanding the mechanism of newly created organizations creating (Metallo *et al.*, 2021), deepening knowledge both in the field of personnel assessment and leadership and the need to substantiate biographical psychology as a scientific direction.

### Methodology and analysis

When substantiating the scientific direction, a comparative analysis, a comparison of the theoretical provisions of leadership and the methodology of personnel assessment, a critical appraisal of the assessment centre, and biographical method were used. Comparison of personnel assessment methods shows that the different types of testing used in recruiting – cognitive assessment, performance testing, achievement test – have merits. In particular, they allow the assessment of how well a person is able to process, acquire, retain, conceptualize and organize sensory, perceptual, verbal, spatial and psychomotor information, is able to act in a certain area of cognitive, psychomotor or physical functioning, and how much knowledge or skills he/she has acquired. However, the assessment through tests contains some degree of error. There is no recommendation on guidelines for using the personality data obtained to make hiring decisions, as results can vary and the range of job profiles is wide. Moreover, it is noted that hiring associated with poor-quality use of tests leads to significant costs associated with turnover and replacement of bad employees, productivity losses associated with ineffective employees negatively affect efficiency and increase the cost of operations (Boylan, 2014).

An individual approach is often used to assess specialists, while a group approach is used for leadership positions. In a group approach, interaction with people, communication style and how a person solves problem together with other people are assessed, and these are most often necessary for effective work in leadership positions.

In particular, the 360-degree method can be used as a tool for internal recruiting (Rogers, 2001) from a mid-level position to a higher one. Its purpose in the candidate selection procedure is the development of criteria (positions) by managers for measuring the effectiveness of work, the use of scientific research results on labour efficiency in specific position, the development of assessment criteria based on the positions of management and scientific data, and the assessment of employees by their managers, colleagues of equal status and subordinates from departments that they are in direct contact with based on hierarchy of the organisation. However, the results of using this approach show that performers devoid of individuality fall into places of leaders. The British Civil Service Commission first adopted the simulation for first non-public use in the public sector, followed by the United States Strategic Services Administration (1948). Although the method has not been documented, India has used the selection system based on behavioural responses since 1941. This approach allows to see how a person acts when encountering certain conditions, which is important when making decisions on who to nominate for leadership positions. Among the activities noted by human resources specialists are observable behaviour (“hands-on tasks”, group discussion, role plays and presentations) and vivid personal experience. However since the Assessment Centre is a non-psychometric instrument, it does not allow the prediction behaviour in situations of uncertainty. In addition, the requirements for the Assessment Centre are quite steep: work analysis; behavioural classification; assessment methods; multiple ratings; modelling the work of appraisers; evaluation training; written recording of behaviour; assessment; and data integration. It requires using a large amount of resources, both for its construction and for use in practice. Unlike the Assessment Centre, biographical research refers to qualitative research. Obtaining biographical material is a laborious process from establishing trusting relationships with the respondent, to constructing a life path, the most significant people and events in the life of a leader.

### **Biographical psychology – history, development and future**

Biographical methods are most often understood as methods of research, diagnosis, correction and the design of a person’s life path. They are also associated with the description of lives. We find the origins of biographical psychology in ancient times (Momigliano, 1971) - 10 books by Diogenes Laertius “On the life, teachings and sayings of famous philosophers”, written in the third century before Christ, “Parallel Lives” by Plutarch, “The Life of the Twelve Caesars” by Suetonius and in the Renaissance - “Lives of Great Artists” by G. Vasari, which reflects the biographical facts of Italian art’ figures.

The scientific approach to biography was developed in the 1920 and 1930s, and then rethought in the 1970s, receiving the general name “psychobiography”. It is defined as the way of creating a biography and creating a psychology—one whole human being or one life in time (Elms, 1994).

G. Murray was the first to try the creation a biography through science. He denied eclecticism, moving towards motivational analysis and collections of life combined with standardized autobiographies. Subsequently, this made it possible to lay the foundations for the study of holistic individuality. Russian psychologist Sergei Rubinstein in the 30s of 20th century drew attention to the fact that a person develops not only as biological organism, but also has his own history (Rubinstein, 2015).

In the 1970s, a thesis on Biographical History in Social Studies (Johns, 1974) was defended in Stanford University. In this study, steps were taken—from the biographical method used in research and the study of individuals’ lives—to the connection of persons’ biographies with their role in history. Subsequently, the interpretation of the personality structure appeared, carried out from the perspective of life history.

Kronik and his inner circle (Kronik and Golovakha, 2008) distinguish five layers of life: compositional, which consists of core of significant memories and 5–7 events, a reserve of experience and expectations about 15 events, and the periphery of life, which is the most mobile and less significant layer. All these three layers form the layer of values: an unconscious layer that forms the “*T*” (creative core). Depending on the temporal affiliation, the authors distinguish three types of inter-event connections: realized, actual, and potential, determined by motivation of the individual. In this case, it is not so much connections that are important as the course of life.

Despite the fact that biographical methods are disputed as contingent on the uncertainties of experience, biographical psychology has undeniable advantages:

- (1) Vitality, a higher level of validity in comparison with experimental and test methods;
- (2) Consideration of the person in natural dimensions, based on the history of personality formation, which includes - the past, the present (current experiences), life situations and the future (plans, predictions, expectations, dreams);
- (3) The study of humans lives as a whole, not just simple sensory systems.

In this regard, biographical psychology has more complicated foundations and requires a more complex explanation. For example, difficulties in achieving success are attributed to poverty from generation to generation and education as a predictor (Nestor, 2015).

An analysis of interviews with leaders of organisations in Russia shows that there are events in their lives that determined the success and position they achieved. In one case, participation in a village in the collection of medicinal herbs for pharmacies, and trading for scarce item of clothing for women and its subsequent sale in the city, which led to a leader’s creation of a trading company. In another case, visiting slums in Latin America and Asia lead to the foundation of a beauty company. In particular, the author of the article cannot drive, since at age of 12 he was the victim of a road accident resulting from car brake failure. In other words, individual events become, on the one hand, factors pushing for leadership, and on the other hand, the reasons for determining human behaviour in the future.

In none of the latest interpretations, leadership is viewed as forming one’s own path in the world based on life events and their influence on leadership choices—the leader’s own mission. There are many studies that use the biographical method, but not enough predictive studies. In this is the future of biographical psychology.

### **Critical appraisal of the assessment centre and biographical method**

The Assessment Centre itself is considered a flexible method and can vary depending on the types of simulations and exercises. However, in practice, assessment methods are called assessment centres, but the requirements are not met—which leads to the term’s misuse and a large number of errors in the assessment and selection of personnel. In addition, knowledge is important for experts appraisers, since the choice, and subsequently the future of the organisation, depends on their qualifications. For example, experiments with several groups outside the organization in another country where the language, culture and customs are different and three experimental groups of builders, teenage schoolchildren and Church youth showed that the most important factors in management are proxemics (use of personal space), facial expressions, head actions/eyes, gestures/touch and smile (Colbert, 2007). Smiling, head actions and gestures were weak signals when considered individually. However, smiling accompanied by posture or eye contact was a strong indicator of mutual understanding, which is important for leadership and management results. Smiling was communicated primarily when drafting a highly declarative statement about relationships, such as intercultural interactions trying to convey friendship. Furthermore, observation of

individuals has shown that friendliness alone does not provide leadership. In particular, the following observations of behaviour were recorded: unfamiliarity with the environment, aggression when approaching people, knowledge about the agenda, combine with lack of attention to others in a meeting, hypersocialism to the point of being invasive, taking to people who are involved in conversation with others, and introducing topics, as if they should be included in every conversation, constantly violates the personal space of other people. However, only a few people possess such expert knowledge.

In addition the lack of social intelligence, which is the ability to accurately determine the behaviour of others when limited information is provided about people who have been convicted, or lower accuracy in evaluations due to lack of clinical judgment skills, can be impediments to assessment ([Problems and solutions in human assessment: Honoring Douglas N. Jackson at seventy, 2000](#)).

An analysis on a sample of 15 leading Russian actors, actresses and singers showed that their biographies contains the fact of fatherlessness. This phenomenon is what I call « father identity disorder». The biographical fact of father's identity disorder does not mean that a person will be good actor or singer in the future, but it does indicate a greater likelihood of a person's aptitude and success in the profession. In addition, it was revealed ([Chirkovskaya et al., 2019](#)) that the system-forming component of the personality is the scale of thinking, which includes expert readiness, actual readiness, readiness for self-development, self-governing competence, and expert competence, and act as factors of success in all spheres of life. The use of the biographical method showed that people with these characteristics were not necessarily successful in school.

Furthermore, the hallmark of personality is the presence of one's own history, talent, character, worldview, and philosophy of life; individuality as a whole cannot be understood without the biography of the personality and, therefore, without the use of the biographical method ([Loginova, 2001](#)).

## Conclusions and discussion

Modern science contains information about effective leadership and few grounds for objective selection for leadership positions. For instance, why some individuals become leaders in the churches, while others—become leaders of business corporations. The accepted assessment tools allow obtaining information about the candidate, but do not have a scientific basis for making a decision about leadership in recruiting.

Biographical psychology brings together leadership theories and assessment tools—it allows the establishment of a connection between developmental psychology, social, applied and organisational psychology – it provides the integration of various directions in science. It allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between individual's biographical facts and heir suitability in the profession—to justify the reasons for leadership, as well as the grounds for selection for managerial positions.

The main limitation of the study is that the methodology for assessing the biographical material has not yet been developed in science in general, and not just in relation to this research. The study conducted using the biographical method remains, as before, the subject of manual and interpretative work, which does not obey the system of rules and regulations, and can only indicate its character. This requires the researcher to have disparate professional skills—motivation to study a holistic personality, empathy, analytical skills, and the art of interpretation. A key factor in biographical research is trust in in-depth interviews, as general directors of commercial organisations are reluctant to talk about their life paths. This is contrary to the opinion about the ease of biographical research based on the support of the respondent's egoistic interest in the story about oneself.

Substantiation of biographical psychology will allow the legitimisation of the conduct of such studies in the future, to come closer to the truth not just about the selection for leadership

positions, but also to understand the connection between the biography of leaders and the organisational culture.

The adoption of new international standards in relation to the assessment centre will have a significant social impact on society and politics in the strengthening of biographical psychology as a personal assessment tool (possible only for official use and for use by professionals).

Biographical psychology will contribute to the creation of scientific basis for recruiting; that is, biographical factors should be considered more significantly (gender, age, sexual orientation, differences in personal development, and not just executive experience in the resume). This will reduce the economic costs of introduction and supporting procedures in organisations, as well as increasing the objectivity of the assessment and selection of personnel in organisations.

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