

Self-awareness and self-leadership in a Swedish cross-contextual personal development course: a qualitative study on perceived personal development

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33

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to explore the subjective personal experiences of individuals that have chosen to take a personal development course focused on increased self-awareness and self-leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – A phenomenological study was performed. The data included self-reported reflections collected during an educational course and a focus group interview two months after course completion. This included data from 14 individuals, 6 men and 8 women, working in various civilian contexts.

Findings – Self-awareness and self-leadership behaviors were identified with main and subsequent subthemes. Self-awareness included the following main theme: (1) Role of reflection, including the following subthemes: (a) tool for understanding one's own needs, (b) creates awareness of change needed, (c) tool for problem solving and (d) creates awareness of avoidance behaviors. Self-leadership behaviors included the following main and subthemes: (1) changes in private life including: (a) changes for others, (b) conscious presence in private relationships, (c) increased compassion for oneself; and (2) changes in working life: (a) increased acceptance of others, (b) courage to speak up and (c) selectivity over work tasks.

Research limitations/implications – A qualitative approach was used; thus, limiting generalized findings.

Practical implications – The findings highlight individuals' perceptions over their development process and what role the course had in the process.

Originality/value – The main contribution of the current study is outlining how and in what way individuals perceived a course on self-reflection and self-leadership influenced their self-development. The results outline specific areas of commonality that individuals believe the course contributed to change despite various work backgrounds. Opportunity for time to reflect oneself and in small groups with individuals unrelated to one's usual background may be beneficial for offering a unique way to gain awareness of areas of meaningful change in individuals' private and worklife.

Keywords Psychology, Reflection, Self-leadership, Self-awareness, Personal development, Work/private life balance, Compassion

Paper type Research paper



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Leadership is generally seen as a process between external parties, where one individual influences others to achieve a specific goal (Yukl, 2008). A less traditional perspective of leadership relaxes the requirement of influence being directed from one individual toward external parties and directing the ability to influence toward one-self. This perspective of leadership focuses on how individuals have the power to cultivate direction and goals innately, and thereby, lead themselves (Neck and Houghton, 2006; Stewart *et al.*, 2019). Thus, self-leadership is the individual's ability to alter behaviors, attitudes and outcomes deemed important within one's own life through influencing oneself and not others (Knotts *et al.*, 2022).

To develop one's self-leadership, self-awareness is described to be an important part of the process (Carden *et al.*, 2022). Research has demonstrated that both better decision-making and team performance improves when self-awareness increases (Dierdorff and Rubin, 2015). In addition, individuals indicated improved self-regulation, attention to other peoples' needs and less stress and anxiety (Donald *et al.*, 2019; Goldsby *et al.*, 2021; Rasheed *et al.*, 2019). Low self-awareness has an impact on people's self-protection mechanisms such as denial, withdrawal and self-aggrandizement, but also fear of failure (Wohlers and London, 1989). When an individual becomes more self-aware, the person becomes more resilient and develops an increased capability to analyze uncertain, stressful situations and to identify possible solutions (Park and Park, 2019).

Theoretical overview of self-awareness and self-leadership

Self-awareness is a prominent concept in psychology and leadership studies, often regarded as a critical factor in personal and professional development. Broadly defined, self-awareness refers to the ability to recognize and understand one's emotions, thoughts and behaviors, as well as how they affect others (Goleman, 1995; Zahavi, 2005). This cognitive and emotional ability enables individuals to assess their strengths, limitations and values, forming the basis for understanding relevant behavioral change for personal development.

Self-awareness plays a crucial role in self-leadership, a process through which individuals influence and direct their own behaviors, thoughts and motivations toward achieving personal and professional goals (Neck and Houghton, 2006). It is described as encompassing strategies such as self-regulation, self-motivation and constructive thought patterns, all of which require a deep understanding of one's internal state (Manz, 1986).

Self-awareness is a fundamental aspect of human cognition, encompassing the ability to introspect, recognize oneself as an individual distinct from the environment and understand one's thoughts, emotions and behaviors (Gallagher, 2000). It plays a crucial role in various psychological processes, including self-regulation, social interaction and personal identity formation (Carver and Scheier, 1998). The concept has been explored across multiple disciplines, leading to diverse theoretical perspectives.

In psychology, Duval and Wicklund's (1972) self-awareness theory posits that individuals become self-aware when they focus attention on themselves, leading to self-evaluation based on internal standards. In contemporary cognitive science, self-awareness is often classified into different levels, including minimal self-awareness (a basic sense of self in time and space), reflective self-awareness (the ability to think about oneself) and narrative self-awareness (the construction of a coherent personal identity over time) (Zahavi, 2005). Moreover, it is described that an important part of developing self-awareness is gained through attention training toward the self (Carden *et al.*, 2022). Self-awareness is described as momentary and fleeting, thus, an important step in gaining self-awareness is to initiate self-focus, which is often achieved through initiating self-questioning (Laske, 2006;

McCarthy and Garavan, 1999). First one must become *self-aware*, though focus and attention, then development can occur through an ongoing process over time with repeated practice (Feize and Faver, 2019; Rasheed *et al.*, 2019).

The theory of self-leadership is largely derived from self-management and self-determination theories. Self-management focuses on behavioral strategies such as goal-setting, self-reinforcement and self-monitoring (Manz and Sims, 1980), whereas self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and autonomy in directing one's actions (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Together, these perspectives inform the self-leadership framework, which includes strategies such as constructive thought patterns, self-observation and intrinsic reward strategies (Houghton *et al.*, 2004). It encompasses a range of cognitive and behavioral strategies that enable individuals to take initiative, maintain motivation and effectively manage themselves without external control or reinforcement (Neck and Houghton, 2006).

In addition, several theories highlight the connection between self-awareness and self-leadership. For example, social cognitive theory describes that individuals actively shape their behavior through self-reflection and self-regulation, processes that are rooted in self-awareness (Bandura, 1986). This includes self-awareness as a concept as happening internal and external of the self. Internal self-awareness includes one's own thoughts, emotions and beliefs and external self-awareness is how one can see one's own interaction in interplay with others (Zahavi, 2005). Similarly, emotional intelligence theory, emphasizes self-awareness as the foundation for effective self-management, social awareness and relationship management, all of which contribute to successful leadership (Goleman, 1995).

Previous research

Research suggests that self-leadership is linked to various positive outcomes, including increased job satisfaction, innovation and workplace performance (Stewart *et al.*, 2011). In an increasingly complex and dynamic work environment, self-leadership has gained prominence as a crucial skill for employees and leaders alike, fostering adaptability and resilience to handle quickly changing environments (Neck and Houghton, 2006).

Empirical research further underscores the importance of self-awareness in leadership effectiveness. Studies suggest that individuals with higher self-awareness demonstrate greater adaptability, ethical decision-making and interpersonal effectiveness (Carden *et al.*, 2022; Gardner *et al.*, 2005); thus, reinforcing its role in long-term personal and professional success.

However, it is also argued that there may be a dark side of self-awareness; possibly resulting in an individual becoming too self-centered and introspective. Some negative characteristics have been associated with high self-awareness, such as aggression and narcissism (Chon and Sitkin, 2021; Walsh and Arnold, 2020). Some research indicates that self-awareness may result in increased self-centeredness, contributing to increased narcissistic tendencies, with lower interest in how others see them, thus, resulting in dysfunctional self-awareness (Chon and Sitkin, 2021; Leary and Tate, 2010). Thus, more research is needed to map out in what way self-awareness development appears to influence an individual.

In addition, there has been an increasing focus on context-specific research in leadership development the past 15 years (Hambrick *et al.*, 2005; Yammarino, 2013), which gives further insight into context specific leadership motivations and challenges. However, regarding motivation for developing one's leadership skills, there may be many similarities that cross-contextual borders. Recent research has pointed for the need to continue to perform cross-contextual psychological research in leadership to illuminate unique insights

into resemblances in leadership factors despite various working contexts, further congealing the field of leadership (Wagstaff, 2019). Moreover, these insights could be transferable to a broader range of leaders operating in various settings. Furthermore, most of the previous research in the area of self-leadership development has been conducted in American contexts. Therefore, there is a need to understand the specific cultural nuances that may be found in European contexts.

Self-development courses are one way an individual can explore their self-awareness and self-leadership processes. Research is rather divided regarding the usefulness and effectiveness of self-leadership courses (Goldsby *et al.*, 2021). Some argue that self-leadership courses are momentary and do not lead to actual behavior change after the course has ended (Stewart *et al.*, 2019). However, others argue that the outcome of behavioral change is less important than the insights that the individual takes with them since behavioral change typically happens gradually over time. Specifically, the process of insight and direction is the most important, often leading to self-awareness in aspects the individual believes is meaningful to change in their life (London *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, most of the current research on self-leadership development has been quantitative research, leaving less focus on more exploratory processes to map-out the personal experiences and reflections of individuals during their developmental process (Knotts *et al.*, 2022). We have little insight into the processes that contribute to individuals' self-awareness and self-leadership development, nor what commonalities individuals have regarding their self-development goals and how it is perceived to affect their lives. A qualitative perspective can increase our knowledge on an individual's reflections, including if and how an educational experience may influence individuals' self-awareness and self-leadership process, relating to both their work and private life.

The aim of this study was to explore the subjective personal experiences of individuals that have chosen to take a personal development course focused on increased self-awareness and self-leadership, including the following research question:

- RQ1.* how and in what way did an educational experience possibly influence individuals' perceived self-awareness and self-leadership development?

Method

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted. Phenomenological research strives to identify common experiences about a phenomenon described by participants (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon in this study is related to individuals' interpretations and experiences related to the development process of self-awareness and self-leadership.

The research was considered to use an abductive approach since previous, broad concepts on self-awareness and self-leadership helped form the research questions and areas to be explored. However, the data analysis was inductive, allowing for the specific themes identified in the analysis to be formed by the participants experiences regarding their educational experience and how it possibly influenced their perceived self-awareness and self-leadership development. An inductive, reflexive thematic analysis method according to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020) was used.

Context description

The (Swedish Defence University for blind review) offered a course designed to develop individuals' self-awareness and self-leadership in areas that participants have identified as important for their personal and professional growth. This three-day course was followed by

a follow-up session held approximately two months after the course. The research was conducted with the individuals enrolled in the course to track their perceived development in self-awareness and self-leadership throughout the course duration.

The primary goal of the course was to increase self-awareness and facilitate the development of self-leadership in participants' daily life. The course was taught by two qualified instructors from the University, both with education and experience in the subject area.

Course structure and timeline:

- *Day 1*: Participants begin by reflecting individually on key themes in their lives, including personal relationships, work relationships, physical activity and health, as well as performance and development in their careers.
- *Day 2*: Participants engage in small group discussions (three to four individuals) to share and explore their individual reflections from Day 1.
- *Day 3*: The third day is spent in a group setting, where participants engage with theory on self-awareness and self-leadership. They make connections between their personal reflections and theoretical content and create a personalized development plan based on their own identified needs moving forward.
- *Follow-up* (approximately two months later): Participants reconvene in their small groups to discuss their progress, revisit their development plans and offer mutual support for achieving their goals.

Selection of informants

A purposive sampling technique was used, as it is particularly effective when the goal is to explore a specific context, and when the individuals within that context are considered the most knowledgeable or relevant informants for understanding the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2013; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2002). This approach was well-suited to the current study, which aimed to capture the experiences of individuals undergoing a self-awareness and self-leadership development course. All course participants were invited to participate in the study, and all agreed to do so, both during and after the course. This resulted in a final sample of 14 participants, including 6 men and 8 women. The study participants worked in various working settings, offering a cross-contextual perspective. Three were self-employed and the remaining were employed within higher education or various government agencies.

Data collection

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted with data collection on two occasions to capture participants' perspectives and experiences both during and after course completion. The course took place in November 2023. The first round of data collection occurred on the final day of the course in order for the participants to be able to reflect on the whole process and their perspectives on working independently and in a group. Data were collected through individual written reflections where participants responded to open-ended questions regarding their experiences during the course.

The second round of data collection took place approximately two months later during a course follow-up, in February 2024. The data was collected through observations held by the primary researcher who listened and observed to the group discussions and made notes on the participants reflections and through a focus group interview, held digitally via Microsoft Teams and lasting approximately 40 min. With participants' consent, the interview was

recorded for later transcription. The focus group interview was led by the primary researcher and followed a semi-structured interview guide to ensure structure within the interview, while also allowing for follow-up questions to gain flexibility to explore participants' experiences in greater depth.

The use of mixed data collection forms (individual written reflections and a focus group interview) allows for both individual and group reflections regarding participants' experiences. The use of a focus group in this qualitative study was chosen for its ability to generate rich, in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, while allowing for interaction between participants during the process (Creswell, 2013; Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). This interaction enables participants to elaborate on each other's perspectives and often leads to the emergence of ideas and themes that may not surface in individual interviews (Krueger and Casey, 2015). In addition, focus groups are effective in exploring collective experiences within a specific context, making them suitable for studying group-based educational or developmental processes (Bloor *et al.*, 2001), as was the setting for the current study.

Ethical considerations

All participants were treated in accordance with the human research principles formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2024). All participants were given full information regarding the aims of the research project, how the data was intended to be used and stored and regarding their individual rights as participants, according to current general data protection regulations. The researchers informed the participants about the sensitive topics that would be addressed. All participants gave informed consent to participation in the research conducted. The research project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr: 2023-06166-01).

Analysis

All data collected were analyzed inductively using the reflexive thematic analysis method according to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020). Both the written reflections collected at the first data collection and data included at the two month follow up, including notes from the research observation and data from the focus group interview, were used as data sources. The recording from the focus group interview was transcribed in its entirety for analysis.

The analysis began with an initial familiarization with the data by reading all of the participants' perspectives before beginning the breakdown of the data for the coding process. The interviews were discussed by the authors to have a holistic perspective of the studied phenomenon and context and to increase interrater reliability (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Second, the systematic data coding began by breaking down interview data into meaningful units of data to be analyzed for codes. The first author performed thematic coding and theme generation to maintain a systematic way of working through the data. The codes chosen to represent the data were kept similar to the language used by the participants to keep the data representative of the informants that participated. The coding process was first done in a word document by breaking down the transcribed interviews and written responses, then the codes were printed and cut out individually to have each code separated from the others. Afterwards, sorting of the codes transpired by on a working table so that the author could group the codes manually together to see emerging patterns in the data.

The third phase included generating initial themes from coded and collated data. By grouping the codes manually together, the authors had a rich understanding of the data and were able to work iteratively, back and forth between codes to determine relevant patterns and emerging themes, thus, improving the trustworthiness of the data results (Nowell *et al.*,

2017). The fourth phase included developing and reviewing the emerging themes. During this phase, the codes were grouped into initial themes. The fifth phase included refining and defining the identified main and subthemes identified in the data. The final step included writing the findings and finding relevant citations to illustrate the themes. As described by Braun and Clarke (2020), the analytical process included a recursive way of working with the data to identify the relevant main themes, meaning that the steps were not always sequential, especially in the final phases of analyses when the refinement of the main and subthemes took place. The guiding principle was to complete the analysis process when the finalized themes reflectively answered the research question, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Results

The thematic analysis, according to the two categories self-awareness and self-leadership behaviors, resulted in two main themes. Each main themes included two to three subthemes. See Table 1 for an overview and more detailed descriptions of the identified themes.

Self-awareness

Regarding reflection on individuals' *self-awareness*, this topic was mainly discussed directly after the leadership course and was seen as a first step to achieving self-leadership goals. The participants reflected more over their self-leadership behavior at the two-month follow-up since they have more time to actively make the changes that were defined in their individual plans.

Reflection time. All participants agreed that reflection time in their daily life was integral to give clarity to their self-leadership goals. This process was described as starting during the leadership course and all participants reported a continuation of this process after the course ended, which was described in the two-month follow-up. Reflection time included four subthemes, including:

- (a) tool for understanding one's own needs;
- (b) creates awareness for what changes are needed;
- (c) tool for problem-solving; and
- (d) creates awareness of avoidance behaviors.

Tool for understanding one's own needs. This subtheme included the participants' reflections regarding what reflection time provided for them. One of the main descriptions included the ability to gain more awareness of their own needs in their day-to-day life, which was often described as being overlooked. Many described that their schedule was generally so planned and full that there was little down time for reflection in their daily life. As one participant described:

The time to myself during the course gave me the insight of how important it is for time for reflection [...] especially the first day when I was on my own and I discovered that I had missed time away from electronic devices, and constant input from the outside world, that was a big insight for me.

This contributed to trying to continuously catch up with the demands from their private and work-life, with little time or practice of thinking of their own health needs or desires in their life.

Creates awareness for what changes are needed. This subtheme included thoughts regarding the preparatory work that reflection time provided for making useful changes in

Table 1. Generated main and subthemes from analysis

Category	Main themes	Subthemes	Descriptions of subthemes
Self-awareness (during course and 2 month follow up)	(1) Role of reflection time	(a) tool for understanding one's own needs (b) Creates awareness for what changes are needed (c) Tool for problem solving (d) Creates awareness of avoidance behaviors	Time for ongoing reflection for one's own needs and desires. Areas of self-improvement and regarding one's own needs Space to reflect on what changes the individual believes they need Created space for one to think how one could approach challenges differently Time to see what difficulties in one's life one has avoided
	(1) Changes in private life	(a) Makings changes for others (b) Increased conscious presence in private relationships (c) Increased compassion for oneself	Changes in one's personal life based on increased self-awareness Becoming more present in the time one spends with their family and friends Changes in self-expectations
Self-leadership (2 month follow-up)	(2) Changes in working life	(a) increased acceptance of others' behaviors and needs (b) Increased courage to speak up (c) Increased selectivity over activities that one engages in	More empathetic understanding of other's situations Increased ability to communicate at work regarding opinions, ideas and setting boundaries Increased clarity and decisiveness regarding activities one wanted to engage in at work
Source(s): Authors' own work			

one's life. Most of the participants described ongoing reflection time as being useful for creating space for personal inventory over what changes are needed in one's life and for space for proactive decision-making based on their own needs or needs that were expressed by others that the individual shared their life with, typically a spouse or children. As one participant described "I have thought a lot about what others want from me. I think I have gained a better understanding of ways to handle my family situation."

Tool for problem-solving. Receiving tools for problem-solving was a third subtheme under self-awareness. Reflection time was also described as an opportunity to problem-solve in different areas of one's life, as described by a participant "Having time for myself let me zoom out and see how to do things another way." This time allowed for flexibility of how to organize one's time, what areas of one's life should be more and less prioritized and different ways to solve problems that occur, thus, making the individual more aware of their different choices and decision-making processes.

Creates awareness of avoidance behaviors. This subtheme is characterized by the participants' descriptions of how reflection time created awareness of areas of their life that they have avoided, and which needed further exploration. This included areas such as avoiding conflict with others, avoiding starting behaviors that they thought they may not continue with due to time constraints and avoiding speaking up or taking space in social contexts, both in work and private life. One participant described reflection time as a way to notice areas that need to be addressed in their life and time to plan on how to make necessary changes:

The practice of reflection time that I learned here [...] I think that I have accepted everyday challenges in another way due to the training I have gotten here [...] I dare to take care of things that maybe I blocked away in some way. So, I take care of problems in another way than I did earlier.

Most participants concluded that by becoming aware of their avoidance behaviors they increased the likelihood of handling the problem directly instead of pushing it away.

Summary. The key findings regarding self-awareness point to the importance of regular reflection time in daily life, both individually and with others, to point out areas that the individual would like to make changes regarding.

Self-leadership behaviors

The second category identified included reflections regarding *self-leadership behaviors*. This included the two main themes, *Changes in private life* and *Changes in working life*, with respective subthemes which are described below.

Changes in private life. The main theme regarding changes in individuals' private life included three subthemes:

- (a) making changes for others;
- (b) increased conscious presence in private relationships; and
- (c) increased compassion for oneself.

Making changes for others. A few of the participants described that reflection time gave more awareness regarding the changes needed to prioritize requests that family and friends had requested of them in their private life, as described by one participant:

I think more about what others ask of me in my private life. I am more aware of how to take more responsibility and do my part in my home life.

This included taking on more responsibility in home life, listening to the needs of others, when they previously did not know how to make necessary changes that were requested of them.

Increased conscious presence in private relationships. This subtheme included the change that many described as important to increase the quality of time spent with their family and loved ones. One participant mentioned that “I have found a way to be more present with family and give more of myself to them.” Several participants realized during their reflection time that time with their family and friends was often disturbed by work engagements.

Increased compassion for oneself. This subtheme described individuals’ process through self-reflection and changes in lifestyle due to increased empathy and compassion for oneself in their daily lives. One participant described it like “I have discovered that my (previous-author’s comment for clarification) self-leadership was too hard [...] that I need to be nicer to myself.” Many described self-sacrifice that they generally did previously for others’ needs and a tendency to have high expectations on themselves to live up to others’ needs. The increased reflection time contributed to a higher awareness and acceptance of their own needs along with behavioral change of increased communication of these needs to those around them in their private life, and one participant said:

I think that this experience has been positive for me to start to communicate my need for time and reflection, to communicate it to others so that it isn’t just that I leave for a walk like I previously did without explaining why.

And as another described “It has been clearer to me what my needs are and my need to say it to others.” Sometimes this compassion also included syncing the demands and expectation that were high in the individual’s work life with their private life to make sufficient time and energy for re-cooperation, prioritizing health activities such as training and time for private relationships.

Changes in working life. The second main theme regarding self-leadership behavior pertained to changes deemed relevant in the individuals’ work life, including the following subthemes:

- (a) increased acceptance of others’ needs;
- (b) increased courage to speak up; and
- (c) increased selectivity over activities that one engages in.

Increased awareness and acceptance of others’ needs. This theme included the participants’ description of changes they have made after increased awareness regarding others’ needs and/or behaviors at work. This included an increased awareness to the overarching needs of the organization and less aggravation regarding how this personally affected the individual in their day-to-day work. Many described that they became more accepting of decisions that were different than they had hoped or expected and an increased tolerance/empathy for others’ behavior, for example:

I have become more reflective over others’ behaviors at work [...] I’ve thought more about the support I can give my boss in situations [...] like, how can I help this process go forward?

This process of acceptance was seen as a way to help motivate their own behavior to help with processes at work.

Increased courage to speak up. Another change in behavior described was the tendency to give one’s own thoughts and opinions at work. Many described this as becoming more courageous in the working environment but also due to an increased awareness of their own

opinions and values related to matters discussed or decision-making processes due to increased reflection time, as described,” I think I have been clearer in my ability to express what I want, intentions and opinions at work or in work situations”. Participants also described an increased engagement to work processes based on curiosity as “I have been better at questioning why we do things in certain ways.”

Finally, a few participants described an improvement in their ability to speak up regarding their own work situation, “I’ve become better at setting boundaries regarding my work and not letting others walk all over me”. Overall, the changes described included the ability for the individuals to increase their own presence and perspective at the workplace.

Increased selectivity over activities that one engages in. Several participants described important changes they noticed in their work-life. This included more consideration and thought through decision-making over what activities to become involved in and which ones to decline in working life, to help create a clearer path for what the individual want to spend their time doing, as demonstrated in the following:

Now I have dared to say no to things that do not line up with my goals. It has been courageous to do that as a small business owner [...] I feel really happy about it, it has been a strong effect of the days here.to have the courage to stay in your own reflection of your goals and dare to say no.

This was particularly important to sustain time for value-based activities, in both private and work-life. Regarding working life, it allowed for a heightened sense of control over work tasks and stress levels. This also coincided with how much time and energy individuals felt they had to do activities outside of work related to their health and relationships.

Summary. The key findings regarding self-leadership point to the importance of taking time to see others’ perspectives on things and making changes in relation to interactions with others based on wider perspective taking. In addition, individuals noted that they became braver in their actions and organized one’s life according to activities that are valuable to oneself in private and working life.

Discussion

The aim of the qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of what individuals perceived they gained through a course regarding self-awareness and self-leadership during and two months after course completion. In particular, the research explored how and in what way an educational experience possibly influenced individuals’ perceived self-awareness and self-leadership development. The key findings will be discussed below.

First, regarding self-awareness, the results indicated how important the practice of reflection time was in the participants’ daily lives. Pertaining to “how” the course contributed to the participants self-development process, reflection time was scheduled during the course, both individual and in a small group and the course included specific goal setting for each individual to reflect and determine what was relevant for them. The majority reported continuing this practice on their own after the course was finished. The results indicate that undisturbed time for self-reflection acts as an important tool for creating awareness of one’s own needs, and what needs to be changed in one’s life. This has similarly been pointed out in previous research on self-awareness, where the individual needs to first become self-aware, before developing self-leadership (Feize and Faver, 2019; Rasheed *et al.*, 2019; Zahavi, 2005).

Regarding what way reflection served a purpose, our research indicated this time allowed individuals the ability to point out their own avoidance behaviors they often did in their daily lives and even find ways to approach situations differently after the avoidant behaviors became more apparent. The use of avoidant strategies is a common behavior that individuals

typically engage in during daily life, as it often gives a quick solution for an uncomfortable or stressful situation (Chao, 2011). However, as previous research has indicated, avoidance strategies can negatively affect individuals' long-term goals by avoiding situations that individuals need to approach to gain steps toward their long-term goals. Similar to Park and Park (2019), this study indicates that individuals appear to be more resilient when they are given time for finding tools for alternative long-term solutions for stressors. The current study points out the importance of reflection time on one's own and in small group as key in attaining this ability.

In sum, the current research highlights the importance of the use of structured time for reflection and setting goals for oneself is important for creating awareness for changes deemed necessary in one's own life, plus specific goal setting. It appears that daily life regularly impedes individuals' natural ability to regularly reflect. For many, situations that give routines for regular reflection, discussion and goal setting is an important practice for self-leadership development. The findings of this research align with previous theories of self-reflection. As Carden *et al.* (2022) described, developing self-awareness is largely dependent on focused attention toward the self and is often initiated through self-questioning, which allows individuals to give focus inward (Laske, 2006; McCarthy and Garavan, 1999). Despite this need, our research indicates that reflection time is often neglected in our fast-paced society. This underscores the importance of creating space for reflective practices, such as structured courses or creating daily routines, to cultivate self-awareness practices.

There were several self-leadership behaviors that the participants reported changing after the course was completed. Regarding private life, most of the changes included the need to change their interactions with others. This included making changes in behaviors that others had previously pointed out to them as being important for improving the relationship quality. An individual's ability to alter, for example, behaviors or attitudes are connected to self-leadership and may improve self-regulation and attention to others depending on their self-leadership (Goldsby *et al.*, 2021; Knotts *et al.*, 2022; Rasheed *et al.*, 2019).

It also included making efforts to allow for more time, space and priority for engaging in their private relationships outside of work. This was often attained by gaining better boundaries between work and private life and allowing for more qualitative time engaged in private relationships. Boundary management between private and work life has previously been indicated as important for aiding individuals in attaining more balance in their life, preventing stress and engagement in more activities that aid in recovery (Wepfer *et al.*, 2018).

Another important self-leadership behavior individuals reported included improving the relationship one has with oneself. This included having a more compassionate approach by including more positive self-talk and more realistic expectations for oneself in working life. The concept of self-compassion has indicated to be important factors in decreasing stress and improving self-esteem in therapy settings (Neff, 2023) and has recently been acknowledged as important in self-leadership by minimizing self-critical thoughts and helping individuals create a growth mindset (Breines and Chen, 2012). Previous theory has described that there are various levels of self-awareness that one may reach, including minimal self-awareness, reflective self-awareness and narrative self-awareness (Zahavi, 2005). In our study, the respondents seem to indicate levels of at least minimal and reflective self-awareness. In addition, our results add to previous theory by pointing out that reflection can be regarding oneself in relationship to several aspects in one's life: environment(s) one engages in, relationship with others and the relationship with oneself. These various aspects may be important to explore further in future studies.

Our study confirms similar findings similar as Neck and Houghton (2006) and Manz and Sims (1980) regarding how individuals have the power to cultivate direction and goals innately, ultimately leading themselves in directions that the individual determines to be of value. Specifically, reflection contributes to self-leadership by promoting individuals to bring to light competing values and life-goals and allows for more intention with which goals to prioritize and pursue.

Regarding self-leadership in work life, the participants reported greater clarity on what their work goals/ambitions were and the ability to act according to these goals after the course ended. This included the ability to take action by speaking up more, setting boundaries and increased selectivity in the work activities that one engaged in so that they were more clearly aligned with long-term career goals. These activities were perceived as decreasing stress levels. This is in line with previous research that indicated that improved self-awareness can reduce perceived stress (Donald *et al.*, 2019; Goldsby *et al.*, 2021). However, the current study contributes by mapping out what the participants perceived they changed to reduce stress in their work-lives.

Of particular interest, both self-awareness and self-leadership behaviors described by the participants included aspects related to awareness of their own need of change for improved relationships with others and not only their own needs. Thus, the study results indicate that the awareness and changes reflected upon are not in line with some previous findings regarding a tendency for hyper focus of one's own needs, which may increase egocentric aspects in the individual (Chon and Sitkin, 2021; Walsh and Arnold, 2020). The current study highlights that individuals are capable of reflecting on and acting upon changes deemed necessary in social relationships and, thus, is important for relationship development. This confirms previous research that indicates that self-awareness is an important step for interpersonal relationships and an important foundation for employees' learning and growth throughout their career (London *et al.*, 2023). This appears to be the case despite the fact that participants did not receive direct feedback from meaningful others during or directly after the course.

The main contribution of the current study is outlining how and in what way individuals perceived a course on self-reflection and self-leadership influenced their self-development. The results outline specific areas of commonality that individuals believe the course contributed to change, despite various work backgrounds.

Methodological aspects

Similar to most studies, the current study has some limitations that should be mentioned. Given the chosen qualitative method, the current study findings cannot be generalized. In general, concepts derived from qualitative data are of a sensitizing rather than defining character (Blumer, 1954). Thus, the suggested themes and subthemes should be interpreted as preliminary and in need of further investigation in additional contexts and in larger samples. However, the intention of qualitative research is not to generate generalizable results, rather, the intent is to create narratives that are rich in detail and exhaustive (Polit and Beck, 2010).

It should also be pointed out that the use of qualitative analysis is a sensitive process that may be affected by several aspects, including the individual meanings contributed by the researchers involved. Given that the head researcher is a psychologist, it should be pointed out that the theoretical derivations were influenced by this perspective. However, the analysis was carried out in a systematic way, which is advocated by many, including rigor and transparency in all processes in an attempt to offer reliable results (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The analysis may also have been impacted by the small sample size,

educational and working backgrounds of the participants, given that it was a relatively homogenous sample.

Future research

Further research on this study's findings could include testing the specific themes in a quantitative way, to see if they are generalizable in a larger sample. In addition, future research could include pre and posttest measurements of self-leadership behaviors and follow individuals' processes over a longer period of time to see the patterns and progression. In addition, further research could include exploration of internal and external self-awareness concepts and how individuals reflect on their development of both types of self-awareness and how these potentially relate to each other. Future research should include more varied contextual settings and larger sample sizes.

Practical implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the development of self-leadership through increased self-awareness. Particularly, the results suggest that carving out dedicated time for self-reflection, both individually and in small group settings, plays a crucial role in enhancing self-awareness and contributing to personal development processes. These findings imply that organizations offering self-leadership development programs, or encouraging employees to engage in regular scheduled reflection time may help individuals learn more about themselves in relation to their environment and help them to take action for behavioral change that may be beneficial for approaching how they work, such as what tasks to engage in, delegating and prioritizing tasks, interaction with others, setting reasonable expectations and improved boundaries between personal and private life.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of goal setting for improved self-leadership development. By helping individuals articulate personal development goals and aligning them with organizational goals, individuals can focus their actions on behaviors that they believe may improve their work-life. Thus, organizations should consider integrating goal-setting exercises and discussions around self-leadership practices in their training and development programs to help facilitate increased autonomy for self-development processes. However, it is important that organizational goals are aligned with the process and that the results are followed over time to see how and in what way self-leadership development correlates to performance and organizational outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings from the current study can serve as a basis for identification of how and in what way a course can possibly affect an individual's self-development process in self-awareness and self-leadership. In addition, the findings contribute to the growing body of research on self-leadership by providing a nuanced understanding of how structured self-reflection can increase self-awareness around one's personal and private life and possibly contribute to self-leadership behaviors.

The results emphasize the significance of reflection time for increased self-awareness. In particular, the research underscores the ability for individuals to make meaningful changes in both their personal and work life once given the opportunity to reflect on their everyday needs and interactions, which were described as often overlooked in everyday life. Behavioral changes included improved boundary management between work and private life, improved quality of relationship with oneself and with others, more realistic expectations, increased compassionate views of oneself and interpretations of others' behaviors and increased intentional selectivity over the actions one engages in.

Although the study has limitations, including its small sample size and qualitative nature, it offers valuable insights into how self-leadership development can be fostered through educational experiences. Future research should further investigate the long-term impact of such programs, incorporating larger, more diverse samples and considering cultural nuances to better understand self-leadership abilities and behaviors.

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