The Leadership Personality Evolution Model: Psychosocial Foundations of Leadership Orientation

Michael Ofosu Faakye
Southshore University College (affiliated with the University of Cape Coast), Ghana

m.o.faakye@gmail.com

Abstract: Leadership research has shown that leaders' personality is associated with effectiveness, derailment and the wellbeing of followers, yet it explains much less about how a leader's functional or dysfunctional orientation develops. This PhD paper presents the Leadership Personality Evolution Model (LPEM), a developmental framework proposing that leadership orientation is shaped by how leaders resolve six recurring leadership-domain psychosocial tensions: foresight, agency, competence, emotional regulation, decisiveness and adaptability. Drawing on Erikson's psychosocial theory, research on the bright and dark sides of leadership personality, and lifespan leader-development scholarship, the paper argues that the resolution of each tension is expressed as a leadership virtue and its non-resolution as a corresponding vice, and that these cluster into functional and dysfunctional orientations. The model is examined through a five-phase exploratory sequential mixed-methods design across organisational settings in Ghana and the United States: directed psychobiographical analysis of six historical leaders; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with 10 to 12 Ghanaian leaders; development and pilot testing of the leader-reported Psychosocial Conflict Resolution Scale (PCRS) and the subordinate-reported Leadership Personality Orientation Scale (LPOS); a leader–subordinate dyadic survey; and joint-display integration. Structural equation modelling and multigroup analysis will test whether PCRS profiles are associated with subordinate-rated orientation and whether the measures operate comparably in the two countries. Because the empirical phases are in progress, the paper reports the results of the conceptual synthesis: six defined tensions mapped to Erikson's adult stages, a testable model in which leaders and subordinates provide separate ratings, two hypotheses and one proposition, together with the selection rationale for each research site and case. It contributes a developmental and relational explanation of leadership orientation, a design that treats the transfer of Western theory to African settings as an empirical question, and a foundation for developmental coaching, mentoring and succession planning rather than employee selection or clinical diagnosis.

Keywords: Leadership development, Leadership personality, Psychosocial development, Destructive leadership, Mixed methods, Ghana

1. Introduction

Gallup (2023) estimates that low employee engagement costs the global economy about US$8.8 trillion a year and identifies managers as a central influence on engagement. Meta-analytic evidence shows that destructive leadership is consistently associated with lower follower wellbeing, satisfaction and performance (Schyns and Schilling, 2013), and that abusive supervision is linked to a wide range of negative employee outcomes (Mackey et al., 2017).

What is less well understood is where a leader's characteristic way of leading comes from. The personality–leadership literature largely treats personality as a stable input that predicts leadership emergence and success (Judge et al., 2002). Leader-development scholarship, by contrast, describes leadership as formed through experience across the lifespan (Day et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2021), and personality research shows that traits change in adulthood, partly in response to work and life events (Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer, 2006; Bleidorn, Hopwood and Lucas, 2018). These literatures have not yet been connected in a model explaining how repeated leadership experiences consolidate into a functional or dysfunctional orientation.

This paper argues that the missing connection lies in the way leaders resolve recurring psychosocial tensions that are specific to the leadership role. The argument grew out of the author's work with leaders in Ghanaian public and civil-society organisations, where leaders with similar training often behaved very differently under pressure. The paper presents the problem, aims, literature, the Leadership Personality Evolution Model (LPEM) and the methodology for testing it in Ghana and the United States, followed by the results of the conceptual synthesis, discussion, limitations and next steps.

2. Statement of the Problem

Organisations usually detect leadership dysfunction once it is visible, through engagement surveys, 360-degree feedback or turnover, and development programmes then target the behaviour; many fail to produce lasting change (Beer, Finnström and Schrader, 2016), plausibly because they address the expression of dysfunction rather than its origin. Three related gaps follow.

First, there is a theoretical gap. Trait and dark-side models describe which dispositions accompany effective or destructive leadership (Hogan and Hogan, 2001; Kaiser, Hogan and Craig, 2008) but do not specify how those dispositions form in the leadership role. Second, there is a methodological gap: much of the evidence relies on single-source, single-time self-reports, which inflate relationships through common-method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, there is a contextual gap. Leadership theory has been developed mainly in North American and European samples, and scholars caution against assuming it transfers unchanged to African organisations (Nkomo, 2011; Zoogah, Peng and Woldu, 2015). The field therefore lacks a developmental, relationally measured and contextually tested account of how leadership orientation forms. This study addresses that combined problem.

3. Aim, Objectives and Research Questions

The aim of the study is to develop the LPEM and to conduct an initial cross-context examination of whether leaders' resolution of six leadership-domain psychosocial tensions is associated with subordinate-rated functional and dysfunctional leadership orientation in organisational settings in Ghana and the United States. The objectives are:

- O1: To explain, from existing theory, how six leadership-domain psychosocial tensions may give rise to leadership virtues and vices.
- O2: To understand how Ghanaian leaders experience, interpret and resolve these tensions in their own leadership careers.
- O3: To establish whether the PCRS and LPOS provide reliable and valid measurement of conflict resolution and leadership orientation.
- O4: To determine whether conflict-resolution profiles are associated with subordinate-rated leadership orientation, and whether this association is comparable in Ghana and the United States.

These objectives lead to four research questions. RQ1: How can the six tensions be defined so that they are theoretically distinct and grounded in existing scholarship? RQ2: How do Ghanaian leaders describe the meaning and resolution of these tensions? RQ3: Do the PCRS and LPOS show adequate reliability, content validity and factor structure? RQ4: To what extent are leaders' PCRS scores associated with subordinates' LPOS ratings, and do the measures and associations operate comparably across the two countries? RQ4 is tested through two hypotheses. H1: higher PCRS scores will be positively associated with subordinate-rated functional orientation. H2: higher PCRS scores will be negatively associated with subordinate-rated dysfunctional orientation. Because the link from orientation to organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) is already established (Organ, 1988; Robinson and Bennett, 1995), it is retained as an exploratory proposition (P1).

4. Literature Review

4.1 Leadership Personality: The Bright and Dark Sides

Research on leadership personality defines what the LPEM seeks to explain. Judge et al. (2002) found that the Big Five traits had a multiple correlation of .48 with leadership emergence and .39 with effectiveness. Traits also appear to be integrated at a higher level: a General Factor of Personality (GFP) emerges across the Big Five (Musek, 2007; van der Linden, te Nijenhuis and Bakker, 2010), and high-GFP leaders are rated by subordinates as more effective and less abusive (Wu et al., 2021). The dark-side tradition adds that derailment-prone dispositions, such as volatility and excessive control, are distinct from low levels of positive traits and tend to appear under pressure (Hogan and Hogan, 2001; Kaiser, Hogan and Craig, 2008; Hogan et al., 2021).

This literature shows that leadership orientation is coherent, measurable and consequential. Its limitation is that it is largely descriptive: it shows what functional and dysfunctional orientations look like, not how a leader came to have one.

4.2 Leadership as Development across the Lifespan

A second body of work treats leadership as developed rather than given. Day et al. (2014) show that leader development is a longitudinal process shaped by experience, feedback and identity, and Liu et al. (2021) argue that experiences across the lifespan and in multiple contexts accumulate into leadership capacity. Learning agility describes leaders' ability to extract lessons from experience (DeRue, Ashford and Myers, 2012). Personality research supports this view: conscientiousness and emotional stability rise through adulthood

(Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer, 2006), and major life and work events can change traits (Bleidorn, Hopwood and Lucas, 2018).

This literature establishes that leaders develop, but it rarely specifies which recurring experiences matter or how their outcomes become stable dispositions. The LPEM addresses this by proposing a limited set of role-specific tensions and a resolution mechanism.

4.3 Erikson's Psychosocial Theory in Adult and Work Settings

Erikson (1950, 1968) proposed that development proceeds through a series of psychosocial conflicts, each of which, when resolved, leaves an enduring ego strength and, when unresolved, a corresponding vulnerability. His adult stages of identity, intimacy, generativity and integrity are particularly relevant to leadership, which involves self-definition, relationships, responsibility for others and judgement. Vaillant's (1977) longitudinal study showed that adult psychosocial maturity predicted later occupational functioning, and leader generativity has been linked to leadership success (Zacher et al., 2011).

Erikson's theory has two weaknesses for this study: its stages are tied to age, and it was formulated mainly in Western settings. The LPEM therefore adopts Erikson's mechanism of conflict and resolution, not his age sequence. It treats sustained exposure to leadership responsibility, rather than chronological age, as the condition under which the tensions arise, and it treats cultural transferability as something to be examined empirically.

4.4 Leadership in Ghanaian and United States Contexts

Cross-cultural research shows that the attributes associated with effective leadership vary across societies, although some are widely endorsed (House et al., 2004). African management scholars have criticised portrayals of African leadership as either deficient or exotic (Nkomo, 2011) and call for research on African institutions and resources on their own terms (Zoogah, Peng and Woldu, 2015). Ghanaian research documents mixed transformational and transactional patterns and the need for contextually informed models (Dartey-Baah, 2015). The United States, by contrast, is where much leadership-personality theory was developed and tested.

Comparing the two settings is not a ranking exercise; it asks whether a mechanism derived largely from Western theory, but grounded in Ghanaian experience, operates comparably in both.

4.5 Synthesis of the Literature

In sum, leadership orientation is well described, leadership and personality develop in adulthood, and Erikson offers a plausible mechanism, but these strands have not been combined or tested across contrasting contexts. The LPEM is proposed as that integration.

5. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The LPEM rests on one developmental claim: leaders repeatedly face six tensions intrinsic to the leadership role, and the way each is habitually resolved becomes a stable leadership disposition. Resolution produces a leadership virtue; persistent non-resolution produces a corresponding vice. Each tension is mapped to an Eriksonian adult stage: competence to identity, emotional regulation to intimacy and decisiveness to integrity. Generativity, which concerns responsibility for others and for collective outcomes, is the stage most closely aligned with leadership and is therefore divided into three tensions: foresight, agency and adaptability. This mapping is a theoretical proposition, not an established finding, and the qualitative phases are designed to test it. Table 1 defines the six tensions. Each pole is drawn from established literature, supporting content validity (Messick, 1995): the LPEM organises known virtues and vices around one developmental mechanism rather than inventing new traits.

Table 1: The six LPEM leadership-domain psychosocial tensions

Tension	Erikson anchor	Virtue (resolved)	Vice (unresolved)	Key sources
Visionary Foresight vs Reactive Drift	Generativity	Strategic vision	Short-termism	Boal and Hooijberg (2000); Kouzes and Posner (2017)
Purposive Agency vs Learned Helplessness	Generativity	Proactive ownership	Blame dependency	Bandura (1997); Seligman (1975)

Tension	Erikson anchor	Virtue (resolved)	Vice (unresolved)	Key sources
Competence Confidence vs Chronic Inadequacy	Identity	Developmental mastery	Controlling insecurity	Judge et al. (2003); Hogan and Hogan (2001)
Emotional Mastery vs Affective Dysregulation	Intimacy	Relational composure	Volatile toxicity	Goleman (1995); Gross and John (2003)
Decisive Clarity vs Chronic Ambivalence	Integrity	Judicious resolution	Paralytic indecision	Simon (1955); Mann et al. (1997)
Adaptive Flexibility vs Rigid Entrenchment	Generativity	Learning agility	Stagnant rigidity	DeRue, Ashford and Myers (2012); Hogan and Hogan (2001)

Source: Author's synthesis of the literature cited in the table, with Erikson anchors based on Erikson (1950, 1968).

Consistent with GFP research (Musek, 2007) and evidence that dark-side tendencies cluster (Kaiser, Hogan and Craig, 2008), the six virtues are expected to form a functional orientation and the six vices a dysfunctional one. These are treated as separate factors, because a leader may resolve some tensions and not others.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that the empirical study will test. The independent variable is the leader's conflict-resolution profile, measured by the PCRS. The dependent variable is leadership orientation as observed by a subordinate, measured by the LPOS. Organisational outcomes are dashed because they form a proposition; country is the context for multigroup comparison. The methods are explained in Section 6.

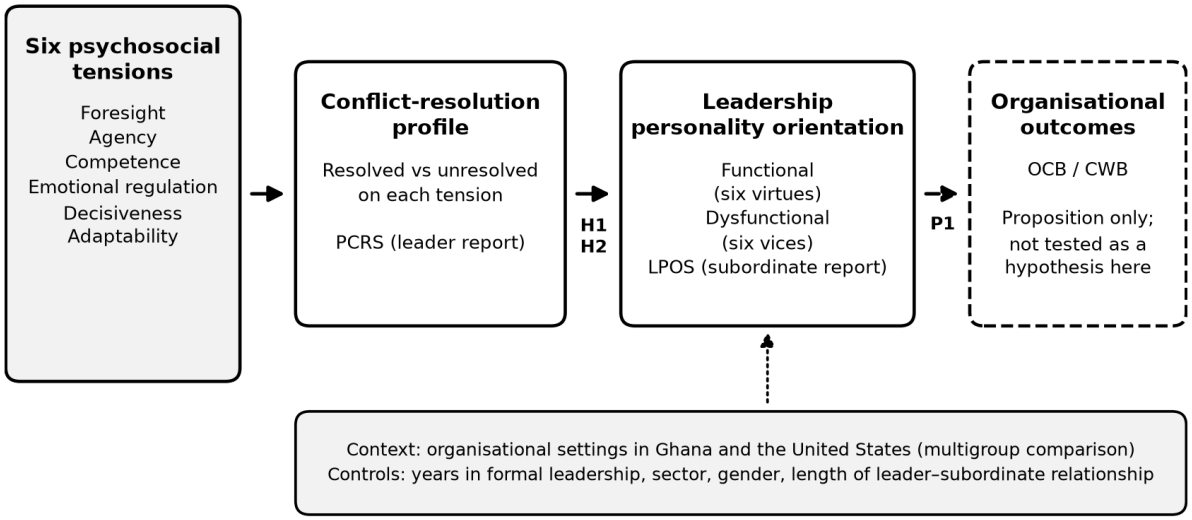


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the Leadership Personality Evolution Model (LPEM)

Source: Author's conceptualisation, informed by Erikson (1950, 1968), Judge et al. (2002), Organ (1988) and Robinson and Bennett (1995). PCRS = Psychosocial Conflict Resolution Scale; LPOS = Leadership Personality Orientation Scale; OCB = organisational citizenship behaviour; CWB = counterproductive work behaviour.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopts a pragmatist stance and uses a five-phase exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). This sequence is appropriate because the constructs and instruments do not yet exist in validated form, so qualitative work must define and contextualise the tensions before they are measured. Table 2 summarises the phases; each is explained below.

Table 2: Research design and analytic purpose of each phase

Phase	Data source and sample	Technique	Output
1. Psychobiography	Published sources on six historical leaders	Directed (deductive) coding against Table 1	Refined definitions; indicative item language
2. IPA	10–12 Ghanaian leaders, 3+ years in a formal leadership role	Semi-structured interviews; IPA	Culturally grounded themes and item wording
3. Instrument development	Expert panel; cognitive interviews in both countries; pilot of 30–50 leaders	Content validity review; reliability and item analysis	Pilot-tested PCRS and LPOS
4. Dyadic survey	Target of about 200 leader–subordinate dyads per country	CFA; SEM; measurement invariance	Tests of H1 and H2; exploratory test of P1
5. Integration	Outputs of Phases 1–4	Joint display	Revised LPEM specification

Source: Author's research design, based on Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

6.2 Entity under Study and Research Focus

The unit of analysis is the individual leader who has held a formal leadership role for at least three years, observed through his or her relationship with a direct subordinate. The three-year threshold follows from the age-decoupling argument in Section 4.3: it ensures sustained exposure to the leadership tensions. The research focus is the association between how leaders resolve these tensions and how their leadership is experienced by others.

In Ghana, the planned sites are the Ghana Education Service, the University of Energy and Natural Resources, World Vision Ghana, the Parliament of Ghana and the Ghana National Theatre. They differ in authority structure, mandate and accountability (bureaucratic, collegial, mission-driven, political and creative), allowing the mechanism to be examined across varied leadership settings. In the United States, the planned sites are the Elk Grove Unified School District and the Elk Grove Community Services District in California, which offer public education and community-service settings comparable to the Ghanaian public and educational sites. Participation is subject to institutional permission.

6.3 Phase 1: Directed Psychobiographical Analysis

Phase 1 examines published biographical and scholarly sources on six historical leaders: Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi (Erikson's own psychobiographical subjects, giving methodological continuity with Erikson, 1958, 1969), Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, Steve Jobs and Kwame Nkrumah. They were selected because each has an extensive scholarly biographical record and together they cover functional, dysfunctional and mixed trajectories across eras, sectors and regions, including Ghana. Sources will be coded deductively against the definitions in Table 1, following recognised good practice in psychobiography: using multiple independent sources, avoiding retrospective clinical diagnosis and documenting interpretive decisions (Ponterotto, 2014). The output is a refined set of definitions and indicative item language.

6.4 Phase 2: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Phase 2 uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because the tensions are lived experiences whose meaning must be understood from the leader's perspective (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Ten to twelve Ghanaian leaders will be purposively selected across the five sites and interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes about critical leadership episodes and their responses. This sample suits IPA's idiographic depth and the high information power of a focused aim and specialist participants (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). Rigour will be supported by a reflexive journal and an audit trail. The phase is located in Ghana because the transfer of Western constructs is least tested there; the lack of a parallel United States qualitative phase is a limitation.

6.5 Phase 3: Instrument Development and Pilot Testing

The PCRS is a leader self-report scale of about 30 to 36 items in six subscales. Items will be adapted from established measures: the General Self-Efficacy Scale for agency (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995), the Core Self-Evaluations Scale for competence (Judge et al., 2003), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross and John, 2003) and the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire for decisiveness (Mann et al., 1997). Foresight and adaptability items will be written from strategic-leadership and learning-agility scholarship (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000; DeRue, Ashford and Myers, 2012) and Phase 1 and 2 language. The LPOS is a 12-item subordinate-report scale with functional and dysfunctional subscales based on Table 1.

Development will follow established steps (Hinkin, 1998): item generation, expert review of content validity, cognitive interviews with leaders in both countries to check meaning, and a pilot with 30 to 50 leaders (Johanson and Brooks, 2010). Items will be retained where subscale reliability reaches at least .70 and item-total correlations are adequate. Pilot factor results will be treated as preliminary.

6.6 Phase 4: Dyadic Survey and Analysis

In Phase 4, each leader completes the PCRS and one direct subordinate independently completes the LPOS. A separate rater for the dependent variable reduces common-method and social-desirability bias, which is likely to be strongest among leaders with dysfunctional tendencies (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Where organisations allow, the subordinate will be randomly selected from the leader's direct reports rather than nominated, and responses will never be shared with the leader. The target is about 200 dyads per country; if the United States sample is smaller, the cross-country analysis will be reported as exploratory.

Analysis will follow a two-step approach (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Confirmatory factor analysis will assess the measurement model, including convergent and discriminant validity. Structural equation modelling in IBM SPSS Amos will then test H1 and H2, controlling for years in leadership, sector, gender and length of the leader–subordinate relationship. Fit will be judged against CFI of at least .90, RMSEA of no more than .08 and SRMR of no more than .08 (Kline, 2023). Before comparing paths across countries, configural, metric and scalar measurement invariance will be tested (Putnick and Bornstein, 2016).

6.7 Phase 5: Integration

Phase 5 uses a joint display that sets qualitative themes, instrument decisions and quantitative results side by side to identify convergence, divergence and needed model revisions (Fetters, Curry and Creswell, 2013).

7. Results of the Conceptual Synthesis and Anticipated Findings

No empirical findings are reported yet; fieldwork will begin after ethical approval and site permission. The results reported here are those of the theoretical synthesis, which (1) identifies six leadership-domain tensions with defined poles grounded in existing scholarship (Table 1); (2) specifies an Eriksonian mapping that decomposes generativity into three leadership-specific tensions and separates Erikson's mechanism from his age sequence; (3) produces a testable model (Figure 1) in which predictor and outcome are rated by different people, avoiding circularity; and (4) yields two hypotheses and one proposition.

If H1 and H2 are supported, leaders with higher conflict-resolution scores will be rated by subordinates as more functional and less dysfunctional. Invariance testing will show whether this holds in both countries, and the IPA phase may show culturally specific expressions of the tensions, for example through expectations of deference or communal responsibility.

8. Discussion

The LPEM complements rather than replaces trait models: trait research explains which dispositions matter (Judge et al., 2002; Hogan et al., 2021), while the LPEM proposes how they form. It also gives lifespan leader-development theory (Liu et al., 2021) a specific, measurable mechanism, and departs from Erikson by treating the leadership role, rather than age, as the developmental trigger.

A key risk is that the six virtues and vices might simply relabel existing traits. The design responds by measuring resolution and orientation separately, testing discriminant validity, and using qualitative evidence to check whether leaders experience the tensions as developmental struggles rather than fixed traits. For practice and governance, the model is intended to support coaching, mentoring and succession planning by identifying tensions a leader has yet to resolve, not employee selection or clinical diagnosis.

9. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The dyadic survey is cross-sectional, so it can show association but not developmental causation. PCRS responses rely on self-perception, and psychobiographical interpretation is necessarily interpretive. The Eriksonian mapping is conceptual and may be revised. A single subordinate may not represent a leader's whole team. Comparisons apply to the participating organisations, not to Ghanaian or American national culture. Neuropsychological variables from earlier versions were removed because they are not measured.

10. Conclusion and Next Steps

Leadership research describes functional and dysfunctional orientations well but explains their formation poorly. The LPEM proposes that orientation develops through the habitual resolution of six leadership-domain psychosocial tensions, and sets out a mixed-methods design to examine this claim in Ghana and the United States. The next steps are to obtain ethical approval and site permissions, complete Phases 1 and 2, pilot the PCRS and LPOS, and conduct the dyadic survey, using colloquium feedback to refine the design.

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Ethics Declaration: This paper reports a proposed design and a theoretical synthesis; no data from human participants are reported. Phase 1 uses only published sources about historical public figures. Ethical approval and organisational permission will be obtained before any interviews, pilot testing or survey data collection. Participants will give informed consent, and data will be anonymised and stored in line with institutional and data-protection requirements in Ghana and the United States.

AI Declaration: Generative AI was used to assist with restructuring the manuscript after review and with language editing. The research problem, argument, model, design and interpretation are the author's own, derived from his doctoral work. The author reviewed and revised all text, checked all citations against the original sources, and takes full responsibility for the content.

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