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The power of self-love in the evolution of leadership and employee engagement

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to shine a light on the relatively unexplored phenomenon of self-love, and to create a conscious understanding of what it is and the powerful role that it could play at the heart of leadership, particularly in improving employee engagement. In offering a contribution that may help leaders to evolve their leadership, this work seeks to show leaders that it is possible to enhance their leadership with the energy of love, by bringing in love to the self first. This research was exploratory and qualitative in nature using a hybrid interpretive-phenomenological and social constructionist approach. Self-love was defined and deconstructed based on an extensive literature review and semi-structured interviews with 24 cross-functional leaders and leadership advisors, psychologists and coaches. Self-love was found to be fundamental to leadership and organizations by 100% of the participants, with a pervasive impact that includes the structure and quality of decision-making, the ability to inspire high levels of commitment and productivity from employees, and the ability to foster a culture of innovation. In addition, self-love is found to be at the heart of authenticity, servant leadership, empathy, care for employees and the ability to listen which link to leadership traits that have been found to encourage employee engagement. A definition of self-love and Constructs of Self-Love Model emerged from the research. Self-love is a rare, but vitally important, phenomenon, with a need for greater understanding of the concept.

Keywords: self-love, love, authenticity, narcissism, selfishness, decision-making, leadership, self-knowledge, self-acceptance, employee engagement, servant leadership.
JEL Classification: M10, M12, M14.

Introduction

It is the context of an increasingly turbulent world that bears witness to challenges ranging from environmental to socioeconomic which gives birth to space for the consideration of fresh perspectives and that allows for a concept like "love" to enter the realm of leadership and management theory, moving away from old mechanistic systems of thinking. Against this context, the need for employee engagement as a sustainable source of organizational competitive advantage, grows ever more relevant and challenging, spurred on by changing work trends that include different intergenerational needs and wants; the challenge of engaging the Millennial generation; greater employee desire for work life balance, happiness and meaning at work; increasing emphasis on greater productivity in the face of fewer people, larger roles; increasing reliance on virtual communication versus direct human interaction; and the evolution of the psychological contract between employees and employers from traditional transactional models to relational partnerships (Lockwood, 2007; Erickson, 2010; Gratton, 2010; Richman et al., 2008; Schullery, 2013). How can leadership evolve to effectively meet these challenges and harness employee engagement in such a dynamic context? This paper seeks to show that the answer lies within each leader in the form of self-love.

Far from being a desperate attempt to clutch onto an obscure form of leadership theory, love has been suggested as an evolutionary vehicle for humankind by wise philosophers, psychologists, spiritual sages, sociologists and poets spanning ancient and contemporary ages, across East and West, such as Plato, Erich Fromm, Maslow, Thomas Aquinas, Paramahansa Yogananda, Sorokin, Dr. Scott Peck, Kahlil Gibran and Jalaluddin Rumi. The belief of love as the highest form of evolutionary energy was held by both Russian sociologist Sorokin and French palaeontologist and religious writer Teilhard (King, 2004), and was also explored by Restivo (1977), based on the theory that love is the bedrock for self-actualisation as alluded to by psychologists Fromm (1957) and Maslow (1968), who described love as a need to be fulfilled before self-actualization could be achieved. The suggestion of love as an evolutionary force by Western texts is also found in Eastern wisdom. Singh (2005, p. 226) unfolds the Eastern Vedic philosophy of love from the ancient Narada Bhakti Sutra which describes the "drive in love in one" as a seeking for "elevation" from lower to higher states of existence.

If this is true, then should love not be thoroughly explored as a possible leadership mechanism to guide humanity to happier, more evolved levels of existence? What, after all, is the ultimate purpose of leadership? If love is at the heart of our basic human "beingness", with either the presence or lack thereof within ourselves shaping *what* we do, *why* we do what we do, and *how* we do what we do, then it stands to reason that love plays a significant role in leadership. Ferris (1988, p. 41) expresses the belief

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that "the manifestation of love is the secret to increased productivity and organizational effectiveness", while Cooper (2001) describes the most vital attribute of leadership as being the ability to find practical ways of raising energy through mind, body, heart and spirit.

Employee engagement, defined by Kahn (1990, p. 700) as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional) and active, full role performances", is characterized by high energy levels, mental resilience, enjoyment, absorption, dedication, the ability to find meaning in work and the expression of one's full potential inter alia (Lockwood, 2007; Cowardin-Lee & Soyalp, 2011; Bakker, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2008). Many examples of both practitioner and academic research (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane & Truss, 2008; Schullery, 2013; Corporate Leadership Council, 2004) found that leadership and the way in which people are managed has a significant impact on employee engagement with McBain (2007, p. 19) asserting that "high levels of manager engagement can help to 'create electricity around engagement'". To effectively engage employees, leaders themselves need to be engaged.

But leaders are human beings foremost and cannot strip that out of themselves. What then engages human beings? Fromm (1957) declares that it is love, at the heart of which, lies self-love. Self-love is the "deepest of all the currents that drive man onward, upward and forward", not the experience of pleasure as professed by Freud, nor the will for power as expounded by Alfred Adler, nor even the will to meaning as professed by Viktor Frankl (Schuller, 1969, p. 18). Schuller asserts that all these other drives are "symptoms, expressions or attempts to fulfil that primal need for personal dignity" (1969, p. 18), and explains that the tragedy of the human search for power and influence lies in the lack of realization of true intent, which is that in searching for power and influence, humans hope to be known. In hoping to be known, they hope to be loved by people, ultimately so that they may love themselves (1969, p. 19). Humans do not realize that what they really want to experience is self-love, which might explain why many leaders in positions of power and influence, still feel a sense of lack or unhappiness and are unable to effectively engage their employees. Maslow (1970, p. 3) describes the human need for love as "sacred" and expresses the view that the Aristotelian focus on reason alone is incomplete.

Ferris (1988, p. 50) presents an exposition of what it means to lead with love, asserting that self-love is critical to leadership because trust from followers is inspired by a sense of "wholeness" and "objective independence", which are the fruit of loving yourself. Although contemporary literature on the link between love and leadership is slowly emerging such as Bryant's (2010) 'Leading with Love in a Fear Based World', the problem is that there is limited academic research around the concept of *self-love* and leadership, with Bryant even going on to suggest that the success of leaders comes from caring about others more than themselves, which could be misunderstood to mean that one's own needs are not important. Academic literature is largely silent on the attribute of self-love as a fundamental leadership trait, focussing instead on concepts like authenticity (Guignon, 2004; Lombard, April & Peters, 2012; Wood, Maltby, Baliousis, Linley & Joseph, 2008) and servant leadership (April, Peters, & Allison, 2010; Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Spears, 1995; Greenleaf, 2003). There is also a lack of research on the role of self-love in leadership and employee engagement, although low self-esteem and self-worth has been found to correlate to low levels of employee engagement through high levels of workaholism and burnout instead (Kular et al., 2008; Maslach, Wilmar & Leiter, 2001; Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris & Schreurs, 2012).

Although academic research on self-love as a stand-alone concept is scarce, there is a plethora of research around the nemesis concepts of narcissism (Brown & Bosson, 2001; Campbell, Finkel & Foster, 2002; Robins, Tracy & Shaver, 2012; Resick, Weingarden, Whitman & Hiller, 2009) and selfishness (Fromm, 1939; Le Morvan, 2009; Marques, 2007; Stebbins, 1981). Self-love is sometimes used interchangeably with the these concepts, creating confusion. This may explain why the concept of self-love is often cloaked in guilt and shame (Fromm, 1957; Schuller, 1982). Many people do not know what self-love really means or how to nurture it.

1. The meanings of love and self-love

In understanding self-love, an understanding of love first needs to be obtained. The most common interpretation of love from contemporary literature reviews appears to be love as it is experienced in the interpersonal and largely romantic sense, categorized by emotion, intent and psychological state (Levine, 2005), and encapsulated by the six love style Greek groupings theorized by Lee (1976) as cited by (Levine, 2005; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Campbell, Finkel & Foster, 2002) as *eros* (passionate love); *storge* (friendship love); *ludus* (ego game playing love); *mania* (erratic possessive love); *pragma* (practical love) and *agape* (selfless unconditional love). Although these are described as

the different forms of love, they represent a narrow interpretation of the concept. A review of the various sociological theories of love by Berscheid and Walter (1974), Blau (1964), and Sternberg and Grajek (1984) conducted and cited by Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) all reveal a propensity to define love in one limited aspect only, namely the romantic, microsocial, interpersonal sense, and do not consider love for the self or spiritual love.

Although C.S. Lewis broadened his discussion of love from the tapered realm of romantic love relationships to include friendship and love for God, he too, does not mention love for the self (Lewis, 1960). Lewis, while not attempting to define love, describes love not as an emotion but as a "Divine energy" (1960, p. 53). The most holistic theory of love from the literature reviews appeared to be that discussed by Fromm, who described love as an "attitude" or "orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not towards one object of love" (Fromm, 1957, p. 36). Using this definition, a full typology of love was presented by him which encapsulates *brotherly love* (Biblical inclusive love for all beings), *motherly love* (the altruistic love for a growing child), *erotic love* (romantic love or an exclusive need for union with one person), *self-love* and *love of God* (Fromm, 1957). Fromm's theory of love as an inner orientation of character, rather than an interpersonal object-related concept, is commensurate with Eastern philosophies. For example, Eastern Buddhist philosophy as expounded on by Hanh (2007) describes love as comprising character traits known as "The Four Immeasurable Minds (*brahmaviharis*)" of love, compassion, joy and equanimity, and Indian Vedic philosophy describes love through the concept of "*bhakti"* as being an "attitude" which includes traits such as reverence and devotion (Singh, 2005, p. 223). Both Fromm (1957) and Thomas Aquinas in his elucidation of love in the *Summa Theologiae* (as cited by Pope, 1991, p. 386) depict proper love as involving "conscious knowledge and deliberate choice" in addition to "natural and sensitive inclinations" which supports the view that love is not a passive phenomenon.

Self-love, far from being an alternative to loving others, actually *enables* the capability to genuinely love others. The Biblical adage to "love your neighbour as thyself" (Holy Bible New Living Translation, 1997, p. 72) implied that one could not love others without loving one's self (Fromm, 1939; Trobisch, 1976; Aquinas as cited in Pope, 1991; Horney as cited in Berger, 1952). Love, according to Fromm (1957, p. 46), "is indivisible as far as the connection between 'objects' and one's own self is concerned", going on to assert that "most people see the problem of love primarily as that of *being loved*, rather than that of *loving*, of one's *capacity* to love" (Fromm, 1957, p. 1). Maslow (as cited in Restivo, 1977, p. 236) proposed that self-love and love are inextricably entwined. Studies showing negative and positive correlations between love styles and self-esteem levels suggest that people with lower self-esteem are unable to truly give love to others in relationships (Hendrick & Hendrick 1986; Campbell, Finkel & Foster, 2002).

1.1. Self-love is not narcissism and selfishness. Yet self-love has been subject to much misunderstanding and confusion, fuelled by opinions that propate self-love as being selfish, sinful and prohibitive of one's ability to love another by both Calvin, who described self-love as a "pest" and Kant (as cited by Fromm, 1939, p. 2). Freud, too, treated self-love as an inseparable concept from narcissism (as cited in Fromm, 1957; Wallwork, 1982).

Fromm (1957) argued strongly against the interchangeable use of the concepts of narcissism and selfishness with self-love, stating that both narcissism and selfishness, far from being indicators of an excess of self-love, are diametrically opposing concepts to self-love caused by the very lack thereof – a view that is supported by various authors including Trobisch (1976). Pope (1991, p. 386) expressed his frustration at the muddled portrayal of self-love when he wrote: "The excessive narrow construal of self-love as the pursuit of isolated self-interest or the gratification of arbitrary and idiosyncratic desires constitutes a substantial impoverishment of the concept". What then distinguishes self-love from narcissism and selfishness?

Firstly, narcissists appear to lack self-esteem while the presence of self-love in a person implies a sense of inner security derived from strong self-esteem (Campbell, Finkel & Foster, 2002; Fromm, 1957). Various literature reviews on narcissism (as cited in Campbell et al., 2002; Robins, Tracy & Shaver, 2012; Resick, Weingarden, Whitman & Hiller, 2009) revealed an association of narcissism with feelings of shame and worthlessness, a high need for power, praise and attention, high displays of grandiosity and low correlations to love and empathetic ability. "Narcissists need power to inflate their self-image, which would collapse like an empty balloon without it" (Lowen 1983, as cited in Robins, Tracy & Shaver, 2012, p. 234). Displays of self-aggrandizement from narcissists are in reality a "counter mechanism" used by narcissists to

regulate their fluctuating self-esteem (Morf and Rhodewalt as cited in Robins, Tracy & Shaver, 2012). The view that narcissists experience both high and low feelings of self-esteem is supported by Brown and Bosson (2001) who found that narcissists experience high self-esteem on a conscious level, but low esteem on an unconscious level, which might explain how narcissism may be confused for self-love.

A higher correlation of narcissism with self-competence and lower correlation with self-liking was also a finding, which Brown and Bosson (2001) theorized may be the reason why narcissists appear to have a shaky foundation for self-worth, deriving their self-worth from self-competence, an external source of respect. The strong presence of egoism displayed by narcissists studied by Paulhus and John (as cited by Campbell, Finkel & Foster, 2002) is another difference between narcissism and self-love, where narcissists need to use others as a "mirror" to obtain a sense of self-worth, implying separateness between self and others, while self-love does not.

Marques (2007) argued that selflessness, understood as self-denial, cannot exist because ultimately everything is done with reference to the self. She describes selfishness as being split into *constructive selfishness*, for example where one performs a charitable deed or a noble choice such as forgiveness and experiences a good feeling about the self, and *destructive selfishness* where actions are performed at the expense of others which ultimately leads to self-destruction through the loss of peace of mind. This view was shared by Ayn Rand in her work *The Virtue of Selfishness* (as cited in Stebbins, 1981, p. 84) where Rand defines selfishness as "concern with one's own interest", virtuous in the consciousness that the exploitation of others can never lead to happiness. It is this distinction around furthering self-interest but not at the expense of others (Stebbins, 1981), which common definitions fail to acknowledge leading to the interchangeable use of self-love and selfishness. Trobisch (1976) perceived the distinction between self-love and selfishness as the presence of self-knowledge and self-acceptance in the former, while Fromm (1939) stipulates that it is the quality of greed in selfishness arising from a mindset of lack which is the differentiating attribute.

Ferris (1988, p. 50) expounded that self-love involves having respect for one's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health, and comprises the following tenets: self-knowledge; choosing to let go of the past to live in the present; spirituality; clarity of intention; and non-judgement from self-acceptance and interconnectedness. Although Maslow (1970, p. 199), in identifying the ability to love as a corresponding trait in self-actualizing individuals does not explicitly discuss self-love, it is implied through his description of self-actualized individuals as possessing "a healthy selfishness, a great self-respect", self-acceptance, self-esteem and the ability to "remain themselves" in relationships. Fromm (1957, p. 16) also alludes to authenticity in his description of "mature love" which he defined as "union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality", a love which unites man with others, yet "it permits him to be himself".

2. The constructs of self-love model

Based on the synthesis and deconstruction of the meaning of self-love from the literature review, five constructs of self-love were formulated, namely: *Self-Knowledge*, *Self-Acceptance*, *Self-Being*, *Self-Transcendence and Self-Renewal.*

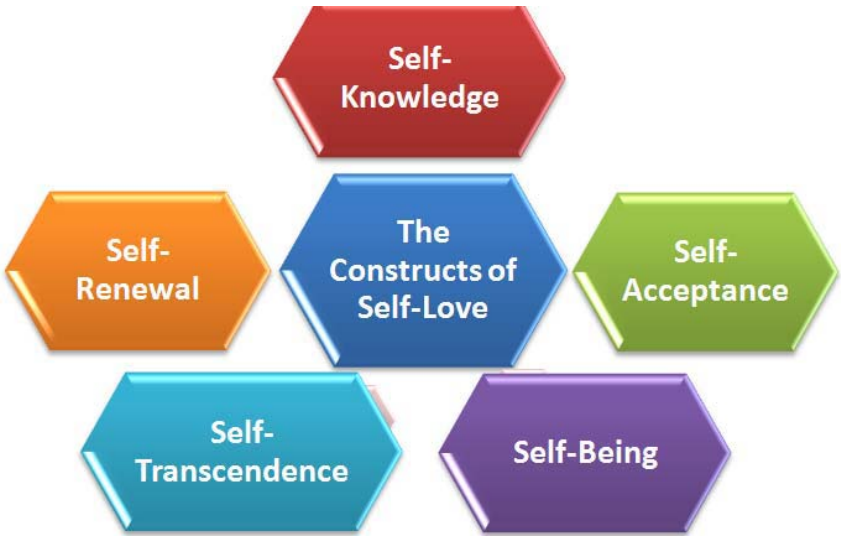

Fig. 1. The constructs of self-love model

The constructs are shown in a circular beehive format with no lines or arrows, denoting their equal importance in forming the essence of self-love. A non-linear relationship is depicted, showing that self-love emerges from a continuous, dynamic interplay between all the constructs, rather than from a series of consecutive steps.

2.1. Self-knowledge. The ancient wisdom which advises humans to "Know Thyself", more famously known from Western sources such as the Oracle of Delphi and Aristotle (Tolle, 2005; Ryff & Singer, 2008), has also been expounded on for centuries by the ancient sages of the East (Saraswati, 1976; Mehta & Mehta, 2006; Krishnapada, 1996). What perhaps, is not as well understood is: What is meant by the "self" in this aphorism and how does one go about uncovering self-knowledge? Although simplistic interpretations tend to be personality-based, ancient philosophers suggest that self-knowledge involved a deeper level than this. Norton (as cited in Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 17) in his exposition on the Hellenic concept of *eudaimonia* described Athenians as believing that self-knowledge involved knowing and living in accordance with the truth contained in one's spirit or *daimon.* This understanding of self-knowledge transcending the body and personality to encompass the inner soul is shared by the Eastern sages who describe the true Self as the indwelling spirit or *Atman*, "the image of God within" (Yogananda, 1995, p. 1000; Tolle, 2005), and Meister Eckhart (Radler, 2006). Knowing yourself within enables and requires true self-love, not the selfishness and self-obsession which results from searching for one's identity externally as exhibited by the mythical Greek story of Narcissus who gained his sense of self from a reflection (Trobisch, 1976).

2.2. Self-acceptance. Healthy self-acceptance, according to Maslow (1970), is a necessary characteristic of self-actualizing love. Maslow (1968) describes self-actualized individuals as enjoying higher levels of self-acceptance than the average person, which enables them to be less afraid of the world and external judgements, and more spontaneously expressive with their thoughts and actions. Two main themes were identified from the literature reviews, being an acceptance of both the dark and light aspects within one's self (Maslow, 1968), and non-indulgence in self-criticism (Hay, 1999). Fromm (1939) described self-criticism as a trait common to people prone to self-dislike along with the need for perfection as a means to secure approval.

2.3. Self-being. Self-being involves the ability to let go of the need for social approval and to overcome the fear of separateness and originality, which Sartre (as cited in O'Dwyer, 2008) and Fromm (1939) argue as being the greatest obstacles to freedom, and, therefore, self-love. Self-actualization, according to Maslow (1970, p. 46) represents the highest need in individuals and is about becoming "everything that one is capable of becoming" which by definition will vary from individual to individual depending on inherent talents. Aristotle, in his doctrine on virtue (as cited in Homiak, 1981) was a proponent of the belief that true lovers of selves display a love for rational planning that result in activities that are expressions of themselves and their potentialities. This links into personal engagement as defined by Kahn (1990, p. 700) who refers to engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self'. Self-being is essentially the root of authenticity, defined by Marshall and Heffes (as cited in Lombard, April & Peters, 2012, p. 76) as "being your own person; having your own unique style" and "owning up to what you are at the deepest level" (Guignon, 2004, p. 163).

2.4. Self-transcendence. Self-transcendence was defined by Le and Levenson (2005, p. 444) as "the ability to move beyond self-centred consciousness, and to see things as they are with a clear awareness of human nature" and which includes "a considerable measure of freedom from biological and social conditioning". Self-transcendence is discussed as comprising two main elements: transcending the ego; and enjoying a sense of connectedness to others. Maslow (1968) describes self-actualized people, as being the ones who were most easily able to transcend the ego and he later placed self-transcendence at a higher level than self-actualization (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). It must be noted that self-transcendence is a different concept to that of masochism or the giving up of one's self, the dissimiliarity lying in the level of inner security or centredness in a person (Fromm, 1939). Self-love enables neighbor love which then leads to the sense of connectedness that is essential to the innate social spirit in man (Pope, 1991). Self-love in effective leadership calls for "loving oneself in the context of the greater whole" (Ferris, 1988, p. 50), and it is here that the African concept of *Ubuntu*, or *"I am because you are"* as expounded on by Nussbaum, Palsule, and Mkhize (2010) come into play.

2.5. Self-renewal. Self-renewal is also about ensuring physical, mental, emotional and spiritual nourishment and growth (Ferris, 1988; Covey, 2004). Autry's (1992, p. 17) five guidelines on management, include "Care about yourself" as the one that a good manager would begin with, stating that "you can't jumpstart anyone unless your own battery is charged". Self-love is a journey that invites and evokes continuous, conscious growth (Peck, 1978).

3. Methodology

The research is exploratory and qualitative in nature as it involves "preliminary investigations into relatively

unknown areas of research" (Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, p. 44) by exploring insights and perspectives from leaders on their understanding of self-love and their experiences with this phenomenon in relation to leadership. It is based on a hybrid phenomenological and social constructionist approach (Bryman & Bell, 2003) which enables an appreciation for the meaning and context of phenomena from the perspective of the participants, offering opportunities for fresh interpretations to arise (Maxwell, 2005), and also seeks to show the role that language and social thought leadership have played in shaping interpretations of self-love as a concept (Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Leedy and Ormrod (2010, p. 141) define a phenomenological study as "a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation".

"Social constructionism can be defined as an approach to human inquiry, which encompasses a critical stance toward commonly shared assumptions" (Sahin, 2006, p. 59) and Gergen (as cited by Sahin, 2006, p. 60) "characterizes social constructionism as a movement, whose aim is to redefine commonly used psychological constructs (i.e., mind, self, and emotion) as socially constructed, rather than individually constructed processes". This approach is particularly relevant in exploring the link between perceptions of self-love and social influences. The social constructionist school of thought claims that there is no objective reality and that phenomena are based on perceptions and assumptions which are shaped by social influences and filtered by language (Sahin, 2006). Therefore, the phenomenological aspect of the research seeks to understand *what* the prevailing beliefs, assumptions and interpretations of self-love are from a leadership practitioner perspective, while the social constructionist aspect seeks to explore social influences from literature reviews to understand *how* and *why* these perspectives have been shaped the way that they have, and to define the concept of self-love through identifying its constructs.

Data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews as a primary data source. The reference to leadership for the purposes of this research was applied in the broadest sense, following the exposition by Ferris (1988, p. 43) that true leadership is not so much a function of formal designation as it is a function of the "circumstance, motivation, skill and the perceptions of others". Using this definition, leadership embraces not just corporate executives, but community leaders, political leaders, spiritual leaders, academics and leadership advisors such as executive coaches and leadership psychologists. Therefore, the interview data sample of 24 participants comprised leaders (58%) and leadership advisors (42%) drawn from diverse spheres of influence to include CEOs, senior corporate executives, entrepreneurs, spiritual leaders, social entrepreneurs, NGO leaders, executive coaches, leadership psychologists and leadership academics. The main criteria for participant selection was diversity of leadership experience, seniority of position and obtaining a mix between leaders and leadership advisory experts. Some leaders had held dual positions as both senior leaders and then leadership advisory consultants, which enhanced the richness of the sample. Less emphasis was placed on specifically obtaining a gender, religious and age mix, although by virtue of the seniority of leadership positions held, all participants were older than 26 years of age and 71% male spanning gender and religious beliefs in addition to vocation. The interview questions were open-ended asking participants to describe their understanding of self-love, narcissism and selfishness; whether they felt self-love to be relevant to leadership and to describe the impact and behaviors of leaders with abundant and deficient levels of self-love; to identify what they thought the constructs of self-love are and lastly to describe how they thought self-love could be cultivated. Although drawn mainly from a South African context, generalisability was not felt to be a limitation, due to the universality of the phenomenon of self-love (Fromm, 1957). Coding and categorization was conducted through the use of ATLAS/tiComputer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software.

4. Results and findings

4.1. The rarity and meaning of self-love. All participants (100%) felt self-love to be a rare phenomenon citing reasons that included:

- misperception and lack of understanding of the concept;
- societal influences which included the need to consume, compete and achieve to feel worthy, and beliefs of separateness;
- misapplication of religion; and
- parenting and the schooling system.

An international funds management company director said: *"I don't think many people have self-love, I think the majority of people don't have self-love. If I was to put a number to it…I would say less than 5% of people I know, maybe even less than that, have genuine self-love and self-acceptance for themselves. I think they portray themselves to be self-loving, but I think that the deeper definition is very few and far between…and I include myself as one of those nine hundred and ninety-nine people that do not have self-love. I think people like myself, and there are others, most people battle with their misgivings and their shortcomings, weaknesses and*

have questions as to why, which is not very accepting of themselves. So I think it's widely known, widely confused, but not genuinely a part of people's psyche".

What was interesting was that many participants felt that there would be resistance to this concept from other leaders, yet every single leader that was interviewed was open to and supportive of the concept of self-love, showing an internal acceptance but wariness of misperception and judgement from others. Many leaders who were interviewed felt that they lacked complete self-love and that self-love was not an easy path to walk. *"It's not about being there, it's about trying always to work at it. I find in my life the concept of self-love is something that comes and goes. Sometimes I feel it very strongly and other times I feel completely lost"* (Participant 14).

In distilling their understanding of the meaning of self-love, 42% of participants drew distinctions between self-love, and self-esteem and self-confidence, describing self-love as being a deeper, more "higher energy" concept with self-esteem and self-confidence described as "living inside" self-love. Sixty-three percent of participants felt that acceptance of self, particularly around the flawed elements of one's self, was a significant part of what self-love meant to them. *"For me, self-love, is almost synonymous with self-acceptance and it's not a sort of grudging acceptance. It's true acceptance of yourself; almost like celebrating the fact that you are like a unique little snowflake with your flaws, warts and all, but also with your strengths and with the best aspect of your soul like your valour and your honour, and all of the other ideals that you might hold high"* (Participant 10). Self-love was felt to be inextricably linked to caring for others by the majority of participants (83%) and was also described as knowing one's self (63%) and the ability to be who you are (63%). Participant 23 described it as *"being at peace with your own objectives in life, understanding your vision, your purpose. Knowing what your purpose in life is. And I think if you create your personal mission and you're living toward that mission, you're living your purpose and that's about more contentment than self-love. I think contentment is you're only content if you love yourself. And you cannot possibly love anybody else if you haven't got that inner contentment and satisfaction of your own self".*

Forty-two percent of participants described self-love as being about a sense of presence, stillness and wholeness. Participant 4 said: *"For me, self-love is a much deeper internal process. It's about being grounded, being fully aware of what's going on, it's about being switched on. So you're not running through life numb, or blind or half-awake. You're fully awake. There's definitely a sense of presence and awakeness that comes with self-love.* Far from seeing self-love as a passive concept, participants also described self-love as being about self-improvement, growth and positivity (46%).

All participants (100%) described narcissism and selfishness as being distinct from self-love, citing ego; comparison and competition; pure self-focus with no empathy for others; dependence on external perception for sense of self-worth; insecurity and lack of wholeness as differentiating themes. Participant 8, founding partner of a leadership advisory firm said: *"And you know if you just measured levels of narcissism in organizations, you will measure levels of no love. And we know from the data, most corporate people are narcissists. I think corporates really like taking in these conditional lovers as it were. The conditionally loved. They come in because they're driven. They do what they're told because they're hooked into strokes. They're compliant, easy to control. Easy to control. And that's why they like them. It really works to have people who don't love themselves. It works for advertising. It works for the whole world".*

The phenomenological participant accounts on the meaning of self-love corresponded to the Constructs of Self-Love Model with 100% participants agreeing that all the constructs were relevant to the meaning of self-love. Forgiveness was suggested as an additional construct but found to be encompassed by self-acceptance and excluded as a separate concept supported by studies by Wohl and Thompson (2011) which show self-forgiveness to have a dark side in promoting unhealthy behaviors of complacency. This is opposite to the intent of self-love which is about growth and improvement. Based on the constructs, self-love was then defined as follows:

Self-love is the sense of wholeness born from knowing who you truly are; the courage to accept yourself in light and shadow; the joy to be who you are; the spiritual understanding of the inter-connectedness of creation to transcend yourself to love others; and the wisdom to continue to evolve through growth and development.

4.2. Deficient self-love: leadership behaviors and organizational impact. When asked whether they believed that self-love had a role to play in leadership and organisations, all participants (100%) felt that self-love was highly relevant in this regard but observing self-love to be a largely deficient attribute in leadership and organisations. Participants were asked to describe leadership behaviors typical to those with both a deficient and abundant sense of self-love, together with the organizational impact. These are shown and discussed below.

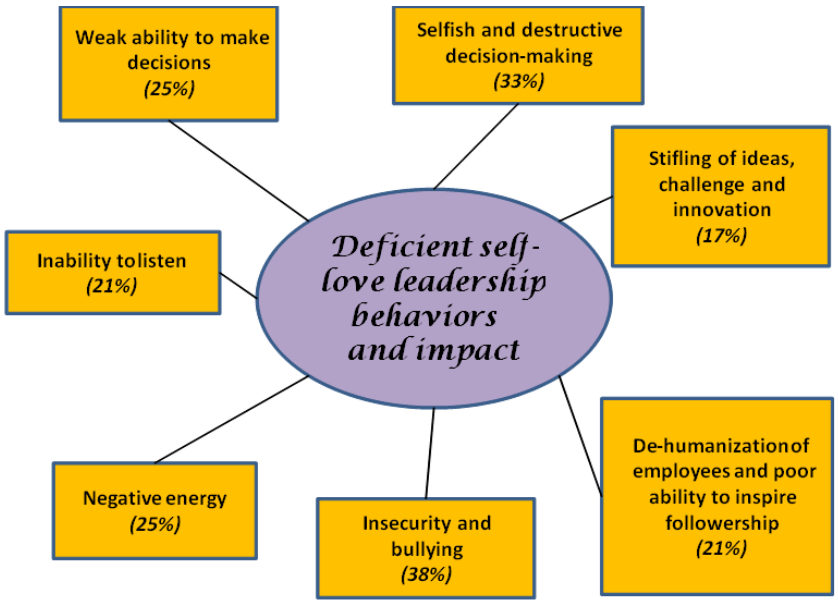

Fig. 2. Behaviors and impacts of self-love deficient leaders

4.2.1. Detrimental decision-making: weak ability and selfish intent. Fifty-eight percent of participants felt that self-love has a significant impact in terms of both the ability and quality of decision-making by leaders. Many felt that leaders who lack self-love display indecisive behaviour because their insecurity, lack of trust in themselves and lack of conviction around who they are, inhibits them from taking a stand. This was described as manifesting in organizations in the form of leaders who are swayed in different directions by different people, who blame others when things go wrong and who are inconsistent in both their behavior and their decision-making. The described consequence was a lack of clarity in the organization around strategic intent and direction which then leads to poor results.

4.2.2. Stifling ideas, challenge and innovation through insecurity, bullying and a poor ability to listen to others. Another finding was that leaders who lack self-love tend to suppress any challenge to their ideas and opinions or quell any great innovative ideas from others as a result of their own insecurity and unwillingness to be perceived as being showed up or outdone. Participants felt that this insecurity also shows itself in a need to have all the answers and not listen to others, and that followers who experience this sort of leadership consequentially tend to withhold their ideas and opinions to the detriment of cultivating an environment of flourishing innovation and diversity of ideas. Leaders who lack self-love were also found to be less likely to develop their people due to their own insecurity and fear which contribute to a negative impact on innovation, motivation levels, employee engagement and growth of the organization. Participants cited the other extreme manifestation of insecurity from a lack of self-love as bullying by leaders who derive their sense of self-worth by overpowering others.

4.2.3. De-humanization of employees, negative energy, and poor ability to inspire committed followership. The results from the literature review and field work displayed consistent agreement that people who lack self-love are unable to love others. In leadership, participants found this to be apparent in the form of de-humanization of employees through treating humans like machines with no empathy or authentic care for their well-being. The impact of treating employees in this manner was described as leading to a culture of fear which impacts performance and a lack of loyalty from employees. Participant 12 observed that our entire capitalist society seems to be structured around the principle of de-humanizing people if we look at accounting standards and systems and how value is measured, saying: *"…even something like accounting is built on that principle, people are expense items on most financial statements but your photocopier is a depreciating asset. It reveals something about our valuing system. I think that our valuing system is built on a foundation where self-love is absent. Because if it was built on a system where self-love was present, then would you have this kind of a perspective of a human being where a human being is a sort of a commodity?"*.

Participants also felt that leaders with a scarcity of self-love tend to project a negative "vibe" or energy and this, together with the mindset of de-humanization, contributes to a very poor ability to inspire followership.

4.3. Abundant self-love: leadership behaviors and organizational impact.

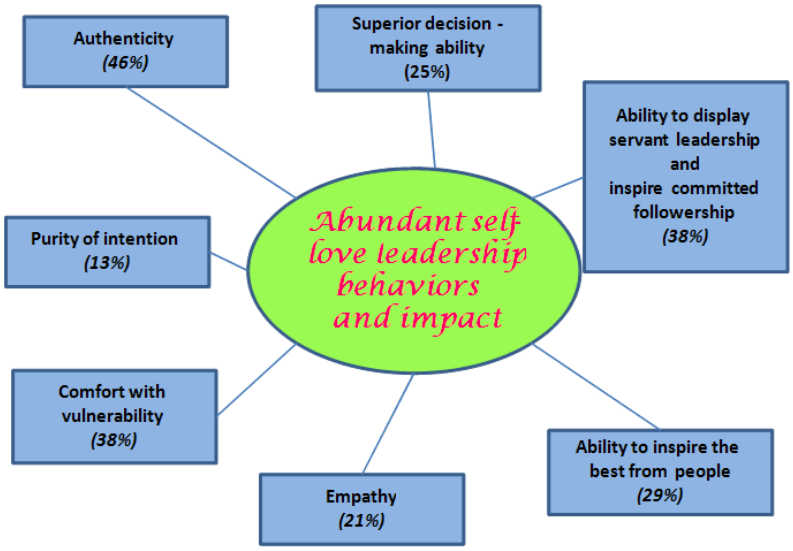

Fig. 3. Behaviors and impacts of self-love abundant leaders

4.3.1. Ability to display servant leadership, authenticity, empathy and comfort with vulnerability thereby inspiring high levels of commitment and productivity from employees. Thirty-eight percent of participants felt that leaders with an abundance of self-love are able to love others which enables them to embrace a servant leadership approach. These leaders were felt to be empathetic and also secure in their self-knowledge and self-acceptance which enabled them to be comfortable with vulnerability and authenticity. Participants felt that these traits inspire high levels of commitment and a willingness to go the extra mile from employees, because they feel a genuine energy of love and care from such leaders. Self-loving leaders were also found to build and sustain high performing teams because they inspire their followers and are not afraid to listen to input and criticism. Key stumbling blocks to authentic leadership include contingent self-esteem, conforming to the expectations of others, inability to be true to self and seeking approval from others (Lombard, April & Peters, 2012) which could be argued as constituting symptoms of the lack of self-love. Self-love in leadership is important for creating relationships of trust with followers which inspire greater productivity.

4.3.2. Superior decision-making ability enhanced by purity of intention. Many participants felt that an abundance of self-love in leadership harnesses a superior ability to make decisions rooted in a strong sense of self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-being, which enables leaders to have the confidence to make firm, clear decisions with integrity. The quality of decision-making was also felt to be enhanced by the constructs of self-transcendence and self-renewal which help such leaders to make decisions with consideration for the broader impact on society and the sustainability of the organization, i.e., the ability to look beyond themselves. Self-renewal or the desire for personal growth and improvement was felt to strengthening both the ability and quality of decision-making, honing the primary decision-making tool, being the leader. Self-love was also felt to inspire inner trust, which helps one to develop and trust intuition, a skill that is growing in importance and relevance as an advanced decision-making faculty for leaders. Leaders felt that the willingness to be vulnerable and comfortable in not knowing all the answers also gives employees permission to contribute with their expertise which can generate richer decision-making.

4.4. How to cultivate self-love. Given the rarity of self-love, how can it be cultivated? The research participants listed various methods but the most popular way to cultivate self-love cited related to practices of self-reflection and self-analysis. This included reflecting every night on events, behavior and reactions, trying to analyze where and why one might have erred with the intention to improve through self-knowledge and self-mastery. Participants felt the desire to develop personally this way to be an act of self-love. Meditation and the study of spiritual literature were also cited as self-love practices along with caring for others and setting the intention to be of service in all interactions rather than on using the other for self-gain. Other self-love methods included practising deep gratitude, having the courage to be who you are, celebration and affirmation of self and others, self-acceptance and having positive role models. Leaders can help employees to cultivate self-love through platforms such as coaching which assist in self-knowledge, self-renewal and self-acceptance.

5. Discussion: what self-love and leadership mean for organizations

With results that show self-love as having a pervasive impact on the ability of leaders to inspire committed and productive employees, what does this mean for organizations? Discretionary effort, energy and commitment inter alia are characteristics of employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008), which various studies show to contribute significantly to the success of an organization through yielding measurable benefits such as cost savings, customer loyalty, employee retention and greater productivity (Lockwood, 2007; Cowardin-Lee & Soyalp, 2011; Piersol, 2007; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Lockwood (2007) cites studies that show that higher levels of employee engagement results in employees displaying a 20% improvement in performance and an 87% reduced likelihood of leaving, while Mirvis (2012) cites studies that show correlations between employee engagement and financial performance, revenue increase and share price growth.

Leadership has been observed to be the most influential driver of employee engagement with trustworthy managerial behaviors including consistency and an attitude of care, protectiveness and benevolence toward employees cited as playing a significant role in fostering feelings of psychological safety in employees which promotes a willingness to go the extra mile at work (May et al., 2004; Corporate Leadership Council, 2004; Serrano & Reichard, 2011; Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane & Truss, 2008). Fostering employee engagement can only happen if the leaders themselves are engaged (McBain, 2007). A leadership psychologist who was interviewed said: "*The term love is so misunderstood. No one has the guts to talk about love. They think it's a soft concept. It's not common in corporate speak. Self-love is fundamental to leadership because you can't lead others if you are not whole. It is absolutely fundamental. This word love doesn't even come up in psychology theory. We talk about self-esteem, we talk about all of these wonderful concepts but nobody has the guts to talk about love, but it influences just about everything. It's a massive part of leadership that goes missing when that self-awareness incorporating self-love is not there*". Based on the findings, how does self-love then play a role in ensuring leaders who are themselves engaged, and therefore able to engage employees?

Self-esteem[1] and therefore arguably self-love, has been found to be associated with high levels of engagment along with other personal characteristics including self-efficacy[1]; authenticity and resilience[2] and certain psychological conditions (Maslach, Wilmar & Leiter, 2001; Saks, 2006; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2007; Kahn, 1990). Furthermore, studies show a link between low self-esteem, and burnout which is the antithesis concept to engagement (Maslach et al., 2001). Unlike the findings in this research which identified self-love deficient leaders as creating cultures of fear and suppressed innovative thinking, it was found that leaders of high-engagement workplaces do not create fear or blame cultures where employees are reluctant to express their ideas or exercise their initiative (Kular et al., 2008). One participant said: *"Leaders who do not have self-love usually have teams who work either out of fear of losing their position, or people quietly disrespect them and only stay for their pay cheque. Should another offer come up they will usually strongly consider accepting it, either inside or outside their current employment"*, which suggests that self-love deficient leaders are not only ineffectual at inspiring employee engagement but might actually foster disengagement.

Additionally, research by International Survey Research (as cited in Kular et al., 2008) showed that organizations who invest in assisting their employees to develop new skills, expand their knowledge and express their full potential, inspire a reciprocal investment of their people in them. Therefore, based on the research findings, if leaders who are self-love deficient are identified as displaying a reluctance to train, develop and care for their people, this would adversely impact employee engagement and a willingness by employees to offer extra discretionary effort. Research on intergenerational engagement show that Millenials expect to experience meaning, challenge and learning from their organizations (Schullery, 2013). Leadership and direct line manager impact, therefore, will continue to grow in significance for fostering employee engagement with Tulgan (2009 as cited in Schullery, 2013, p. 258) asserting that exceptional performance from Millenials will be unlocked by leaders who "guide, direct, and support them every step of the way".

A multi-national FMCG country CEO who was interviewed said: *"Great leaders have to become greater beings first and foremost. Leadership is a subset of what being a human being is and therefore you focus on who human beings are and where they are in the stages of development. So if self-love is*

[1] "(a) Self-esteem, that is, beliefs about one's overall self-worth; (b) internal locus of control, or beliefs about the causes of events in one's life; (c) generalized self-efficacy, that is, beliefs about how well one can perform across situations" (Resick, Weingarden, Whitman & Hiller, 2009, p. 1367).

[2] Resilience is described as "persistence on work tasks despite challenges" (Serrano & Reichard, 2011, p. 178).

linked to higher order stages of development of a human being, then in order to become a better leader, that is what you need to work on".

Participant 12 extended his view of the importance of self-love to encompass institutions as a whole saying: *"I think sustainable development for any institution is rooted in self-love. For me it is a foundational pillar. That is my sense. And because that pillar is missing, I think our institutions are quite shaky. So I think it's of primary importance".*

Conclusion

This research offers an original contribution to human social science and leadership theory by shining a light on the meaning of self-love through and its relevance to leadership and organizations. The results show that self-love is a highly relevant phenomenon, one that is of extreme importance to humankind and its leaders, with a pressing need for clarity and consciousness around the concept. The significance of this work extends to encompass leadership academia, life coaches, psychologists, teachers and parents, and anyone who wishes to become a happier and more effective person or is in a position of influence to guide others accordingly. The findings may be particularly useful for organizations that seek to adopt a deep-rooted approach to improving employee engagement through the personal development of its leadership.

In light of the scarcity of research into self-love both as a stand-alone phenomenon and around its relationship to leadership, the opportunities for future research are vast. It is hoped that the Constructs and Definition of Self-Love, together with the other findings from this research, may prove useful in awakening a consciousness around the imperative of self-love and its fundamental role in leadership. If this phenomenon is fundamental to the growth, health and happiness of humans, then its relevance and application to leadership is even more important because leaders, by the very nature of their influence and stewardship across all walks of life, are at the forefront of shaping our future world.

The research results show that self-love lies at the heart of leadership. It is the foundation on which leadership principles such as authenticity, servant leadership and the ability to inspire engagement, productivity, commitment and happiness from employees are built. How can true authenticity or the ability to be vulnerable ever be cultivated without self-love at its core? Without self-love as the guiding platform, authenticity is unlikely to be authentic. The research results also show that self-love is a necessary foundation to enable empathy, care and love for others, which then enables a mindset of servant leadership. Without understanding this, how can a leader ever cultivate servant leadership in an authentic way to unlock employee engagement? One could argue that knowing that it is self-love which is at the heart of all these attributes and understanding what it means and how to cultivate it may assist in alleviating an awful lot of stress for many leaders, who strive to be what they think they should be without knowing how, being swayed this way and that by each new piece of management theory advising yet another trait that leaders should adopt. "Let yourself be vulnerable, learn to show authenticity, adopt an attitude of servant leadership", say leadership theories. These theories are very valuable but without being grounded in the foundational phenomenon of self-love, there is a real risk of confusion, misinterpretation and mis-application by leaders who are unable to genuinely and sustainably live these concepts.

The beauty of self-love as a fundamental phenomenon for leadership is that it creates cohesiveness between the different leadership traits. It is the common anchor which enables a holistic approach. This is important because what good is a leader who is authentic but unable to be of effective service to employees, the organization, shareholders, consumers and society, or who displays servant leadership but is a poor decision-maker? The encouraging thing is that leaders are beginning to realize this for themselves already. Given the closet nature of the concept of self-love in leadership, the research results proved astonishing in that *every single participant*, leaders, followers, leadership advisory experts and coaches, felt that self-love was extremely relevant and in fact, fundamental to effective leadership. If we then look at the research results around the impact of deficient and abundant self-love on leadership, we can understand why. With results that show self-love to impact the quality and ability of decision-making, the ability to foster a culture of innovation, and the ability to inspire employee productivity and commitment, one can see that the impact of self-love on leadership is pervasive. It lies at the heart of everything. There is enough research and evidence showing positive correlations between good business decision-making ability, employee engagement and productivity, flourishing innovation and inspirational leadership ability to sustainable growth in business results, to show why leaders and organizations should then care very deeply about self-love as a fundamental leadership concept.

A multi-national conglomerate subsidiary chairman who was interviewed said: *"I think you've touched on something that's quite more serious than what you realize. I wish that someone could have told me 20 years ago that something like this exists. I would have loved business leaders or inspiring entrepreneurs or*

MBA graduates to have said 'Listen, here's something that's really important'...I think it's one of the most essential things that need to be discovered in business, I really do".

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