

Ms. J. Copier

PhD candidate, Faculty of
Philosophy, Theology and Religious
Studies, Radboud University,
Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

E-mail: j.copier@ftr.ru.nl.

Prof. C.A.M. Hermans

Radboud University, The
Netherlands; Extraordinary Professor,
Department Practical and Missional
Theology, University of the
Free State, Bloemfontein.

(orcid.org/0000-0001-9416-3924)

E-mail: c.hermans@ftr.ru.nl.

Dr. Theo van der Zee

Researcher, Titus Brandsma Institute,
Radboud University, Nijmegen,
The Netherlands; Deputy Scientific
Director of Verus (Society for
Catholic and Christian Education in
The Netherlands).

E-mail: Theo.vanderZee@titusbrandsmainstituut.nl

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SPIRITUALITY AND CONTINGENCY IN NARRATIVE BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEWS WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADERS OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN THE NETHERLANDS

ABSTRACT

There is a growing interest in personal biographies of school leaders as a source of their leadership qualities. However, it is unclear what aspects of the biography informs these qualities as a school leader. This article proposes to focus on experiences of contingency in biographies of school leaders. Previous research has conceptualised various modes of handling contingency experiences: denial, acceptance and receiving. The authors suggest a new definition of the mode of contingency receiving that overcomes the constructivist bias and encompasses both religious and non-religious interpretations. Based on a qualitative analysis of 35 narrative biographical interviews with school leaders, the authors show that all three modes of handling experiences of contingency are present in biographies of school leaders. The redefined category of contingency receiving can be understood as a spiritual experience that includes experiences of religious and non-religious people reporting transformations in their self-understanding, understanding of the world, and what is of ultimate meaning in life.

1. INTRODUCTION

School leaders should be able to envision an attractive future for their school community (Ancona *et al.* 2009; Avolio & Yammarino 2013; Bass 1996; Bass & Avolio 2004; Kelchtermans & Piot 2010) and deal with situations of uncertainty and uncontrollability in their schools (Bakker 2013; Biesta 2010; 2015).

Dominant leadership theory starts from a post-modern, constructivist perspective, suggesting that leadership qualities are mainly the result of a process of personal development and learning (Ancona *et al.* 2009:2; Bass & Avolio 2004:31; Van den Berg *et al.* 2013:269-272). We agree that there is an active and conscious process of learning and acquiring leadership skills, but these positions pass over the part of leadership that cannot actively be learned. Previous research has pointed to the personal biography of school leaders that is crucial for these leadership qualities (Ter Avest & Bakker 2016; Kelchtermans 1994). However, it remains unclear what aspect in the personal biography of the leader informs qualities such as future envisioning and dealing with uncontrollability and uncertainty in schools.

In this article, we examine experiences of contingency in the personal biography of school leaders, in order to get a better understanding of leadership qualities that cannot simply be learned. Contingent life events are understood as events that are not necessary, but neither impossible. These life events can be experienced as positive (winning the lottery, giving birth) and as negative (becoming incurably ill, losing a loved one). Various modes of handling experiences of contingency have been identified. More specifically, we focus on different modes of handling experiences of contingency, as proposed by Wuchterl (2011).¹

First, we elaborate on the theoretical concept of contingent life events and the various modes of relating to these events. From this theoretical framework, our empirical research questions arise. We present the design of the study and the results. In the last paragraphs, we summarise our findings and reflect upon the results with a view to the relation between the personal biography of school leaders and their professional leadership qualities.

1 According to Wuchterl (2011), there are different modes of "handling" experiences of contingency. In other research, this is identified as modes of "relating to" contingency (Kruizinga *et al.* 2016) and modes of interpretation of contingency (Scherer-Rath *et al.* 2012; Van den Brand 2016).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What do we mean by contingency in the experience of life events? Aristotle distinguished between events that occur by chance and those that are necessary (Aristotle & Barnes 1992). Modern life makes contingency even more complicated. In a world, in which people can control and design their own life to a large(r) extent, dealing with, and attributing meaning to uncertainty and uncontrollability have become a challenge for people (Luhmann & Bednarz 1995). Psychologists (of religion) have been studying unexpected life events and how people cope with these (often negative) stressors (Folkman 2010; Pargament 1997; Park 2010; Park 2005). Scholars of religion present contingent life events as the foundation for religious experiences; contingent life events can contribute to one's religious identity and show what is of ultimate meaning in life (Hermans 2015; 2019).

In this study, we place ourselves in the philosophical tradition of Wuchterl who theorises about contingency in, among others, his book *Kontingenz oder das Andere Vernunft* (2011).² Wuchterl (2011:33) discerns three characteristics for contingency. First, an event is contingent when it is ontologically contingent, that is, it could also have been different. The event cannot be explained by logic-scientific thinking based on explanations of causality. The occurrence of the event is possible, but not necessary and yet actual. Secondly, contingency is typically absolute; no human action could have influenced the ontological contingency. Nothing can be done to restore the logical order and, in doing so, turn the situation into a necessity. Wuchterl (2011) calls this second aspect, in line with Herman Lubbe, "absolute contingency". Thirdly, contingency is of existential interest for the person concerned. It does not concern all daily events, but only those that concern existential matters; life, death, happiness, and despair; the highs and lows in our biography.

How do people interpret and give meaning to contingent life events? Wuchterl (2011) proposes three modes of handling experiences of contingency, namely control, acceptance, and encounter. We elaborate on these three modes.

When a person controls or denies the contingency of a specific event ("*Kontingenzbewältigung*"), the non-necessity of an event disappears by referring to certain causes. A rational reason is given to the existential question as to why a particular event has happened (Wuchterl 2011). When contingency is accepted, it is acknowledged that there is no sufficient reason to explain the occurrence of the event ("*Kontingenzerkennung*")

2 Translated: "Contingency or the other of Reason".

(Wuchterl 2011). People express to be able to live with the inexplicability and uncertainty why this particular event occurred. They often pose existential questions why the event occurred to them. Wuchterl defines the third mode of handling experiences of contingency as encounter ("*Kontingenzenbegegnung*"). In this mode, the contingent life event is experienced as encounter with a transcendent reality that is other-than-reason. The mode of contingency encounter, according to Wuchterl (2011:41), is a religious experience. He understands religion as what goes beyond our human understanding and a space where what is entirely other can be encountered.

Wuchterl's definition of contingency encounter assumes *eo ipso* a religious point of view. By making the idea of the encounter with the transcendent Other central to this mode, it is exclusively accessible to those who believe in a transcendent being or reality. People who are not religious would only interpret contingency in terms of controlling or accepting it. Because, nowadays, only the minority of the Dutch population experiences or believes in a transcendent being (Berghuijs *et al.* 2018:20; Bernts & Berghuijs 2016:97-119), this third mode of contingency does not fit the experience of our research population. How do contingent life events reconfigure the lives of the non-religious? Empirical research into the various modes of handling experiences of contingency reflects this secularity. Van den Brand (2016) studied experiences of contingency among school teachers. Using Wuchterl's definition, he discerned three modes and found that only Christian teachers interpret contingent life events as an encounter with a transcendent reality. Non-religious teachers only deny or accept contingency (Van den Brand 2016).

Other studies have endeavoured to open up the discussion about contingency (and other anomalous) experiences to contemporary manifestations of religiosity. A receptivity scale has been developed for quantitative research into these kinds of experiences (Alma *et al.* 2004; Ganzevoort 2004; Hutsebaut & Neyrinck 2004), while qualitative research into contingency experiences of cancer patients, reflecting on their cancer diagnosis, shows that people rarely phrase experiences of contingency in terms of an encounter with a transcendent reality, but often in terms of *receiving* something from the contingent life event (Kruizinga *et al.* 2016:4). In the latter study, the researchers replaced the mode of *encountering* contingency by *receiving* contingency that is defined as:

Acknowledge the existential impact and inexplicable cause of the event. The person has gone through a process of accepting and can now receive new possibilities from this new reality, that which

transcends our human framework, and to derive new insights from that encounter (Kruizinga *et al.* 2016:7).

We view the new definition of the mode of receiving as a valuable contribution to Wuchterl's contingency theory. In this definition, the mode also becomes accessible to people who consider themselves non-religious. However, Kruizinga *et al.*'s definition of receiving deviates significantly from the philosophical contingency theory, by defining this mode as a "process of accepting", after which people can receive new possibilities. In addition, definitions of the other modes of handling experiences of contingency (in their terms: denying, acknowledging, and accepting) emphasise the process, character, and extent to which a certain life event is embedded into the life story (Kruizinga *et al.* 2016:7). In this instance, we enter a post-modern, socio-psychological and constructivist discourse on life events and coping that deviates from the fundamental understanding of ontological contingency.

For this study, we propose a new definition of contingency *receiving*, including both religious and non-religious interpretations, in order to avoid a bias towards religious categories.³ Philosopher Gert-Jan van der Heiden's ideas on contingency help us single out the contingency characteristics of the *event* and *actualisation*. First, Van der Heiden (2014:17) underlines that contingency is marked by (new) possibilities that manifest in the event: "The unexpected, and the unforeseeable ... interrupts something in our world or interjects something new in it". People receive or encounter a new possibility of meaning in contingent life events. The event introduces a new possibility into their world that was not there previously or was not urgent and real for the person concerned. The contingent event reconfigures our world. Besides this event character, Van der Heiden (2014:17) stresses the *actualisation* of these new possibilities, quoting Agamben:

In the actualization of potentiality, the potential not to ... is set aside. To actualize is a 'nullification' of the potential not to be, that is, 'when nothing in it is potential not to be and when it can, therefore, not not be.'

New possibilities manifest themselves as actual in the contingent event. Based on these characteristics of new possibilities and actualisation, we reconceptualise the mode of contingency receiving as "events in which a (new) possibility emerges as actual".

3 Wuchterl (2019:175) also refers to religious and non-religious interpretations of "the Other of Reason" in contingency experiences. "For Kant it is things in themselves (*Dinge an sich*), for agnostics it is the unknown, and for Christians the religious dimension of the encounter with God".

With this new definition, we start our empirical study. We describe the existential life events of respondents, using this (redefined) conceptualisation of contingency receiving. We also believe that this mode of contingency receiving is open to both religious and non-religious possibilities that emerge as actual. The new possibilities can refer to (an act of) a transcendent reality (God), but not necessarily.

In line with Hermans (2015:154), we define religious as connected to a transcendent being or superhuman agent such as God, angels, and so on. We now outline our empirical study in which we test this new approach.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHOD AND MATERIALS

While previous empirical studies have reinterpreted and operationalised the modes of handling experiences of contingency from a more social-psychological perspective, in this study, we would like to adhere to the philosophical interpretation of contingency and seek its empirical manifestation with school leaders. We want to gain a better understanding of the relation between the personal biography of school leaders and their professional leadership qualities. Our aim is to enrich the conceptual knowledge on the modes of handling experiences of contingency by new empirical data. We pay special attention to the religious dimension of the mode of contingency receiving. The following research questions have guided this study: *To what extent do school leaders experience existential life events as contingency denial, contingency acceptance and contingency receiving? To what extent are the possibilities that emerge as actual in the mode of contingency receiving religious or non-religious?*

We expect that all life events reported by our respondents can be categorised into one of the modes of dealing with contingency. The modes are formulated in increasing complexity and mutually exclusive. We thus expect that we can uniquely categorise life events in one mode and never in two modes simultaneously.

With regard to the second research question, we expect that both religiously and non-religiously interpreted (new) possibilities will emerge as actual. Unlike non-religious interpretations, religious interpretations refer to a superhuman reality as source of possibility that emerges as actual.

3.1 Data collection/materials

We collected 35 narrative biographical interviews with school leaders of Catholic primary schools in (the south of) The Netherlands. The average

age was 53 years, and 46% (n=16) were women. The school leaders formed part of a training programme on transformational leadership, and voluntarily opted to take part in the training programme. They were informed that the training programme includes a biographical interview. Although the experience of contingency is universal, we expect that this population will be able to articulate and interpret these experiences reflectively. At various moments in their career, school leaders are urged to reflect on their personal biography and how this biography informs their professional identity and leadership.

The design of the interview consists of an existing semi-structured protocol that has been used since 2008 for empirical and clinical research among primary school teachers, cancer patients, and others (Scherer-Rath *et al.* 2012; Schilderman *et al.* 2013; Scherer-Rath, 2013; Kruizinga *et al.* 2016; Van den Brand *et al.* 2013; Van Dalen 2019). In this interview protocol, interviewees were asked to draw a lifeline in which they depict the course of their lives and the ups and downs in their biography. The interviewees were then asked to reflect on the highs and lows in the line they drew and the events they represent. We assume that the events included as high or low in the lifeline are of existential meaning for the persons concerned (Scherer-Rath *et al.* 2012; Van den Brand *et al.* 2013).

3.2 Data analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed *verbatim*. For the analysis, all interviews were coded using the software program Atlas.ti. The first coding round consisted of a structural coding process (Saldaña 2009:67-70), in which the codes were derived from Wuchterl's theory on modes of handling experiences of contingency. The unit of analysis was the existential life events (n=93) that are analysed as expressing a certain mode of handling contingency. All life events were coded as one mode of handling contingency. No event was interpreted as expressing more than one mode of handling contingency. The codes were defined as follows.

- Contingency denial: Ignorance or denial of the ontological contingency of an event, by giving sufficient reasons for the fact that the event needed to happen as it has happened.

Explanation: People express that a particular event was necessary, by identifying a sufficient ground for a causality for the event. Or refer to the will/power of a transcendent entity as cause of a life event of which they are absolutely sure. Or refer to pure luck as necessary cause and exclude other explanations.

- **Contingency acceptance:** Acknowledgement of the ontological contingency of an event.

Explanation: People formulate the non-necessity of an event, realise that it could have turned out differently; yet it actually happened. They pose existential questions and realise that they do not have the answers for it.

- **Contingency receiving:** Acknowledgement of the ontological contingency of an event and expressing how a (new) possibility has become actual in or through the event.

Explanation: People formulate how new possibilities have manifested in the event and they express how these new possibilities have become actual. They experience the possibilities that have become actual as something they have received.

Thirty-five school leaders reported 93 life events. The following categories of events were reported: having children, the death of a loved one, finding and/or marrying a partner, illness of a loved one, getting (promotion in) a job, becoming ill yourself, dismissal, puberty, childhood, accident of a loved one, education, divorce, becoming a grandfather/grandmother, and miscarriage (arranged by degree of occurrence). All interviews were held in the fall of 2015 and the winter of 2016. They lasted between two and three hours and were conducted by the primary researcher.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The modes of handling experiences of contingency

To what extent do school leaders interpret these events as contingent? The three modes of handling experiences of contingency were operationalised into three codes, as demonstrated above. We found 33 cases of contingency denial, 46 cases of contingency acceptance, and 14 cases of contingency receiving. In answer to the first research question, we provide a qualitative description of each of the three modes.

4.1.1 Contingency denial

There are events of which the contingency is denied. In 33 cases, respondents found sufficient explanation for the occurrence of the event. They were convinced that the course of events could not have been different. We now discuss the various explanations we found in this category.

First, the “human” causes, the events caused by the respondent him-/herself or by other people to whom they are related; the respondent interpreted him-/herself as responsible for the event to happen. In the professional sphere, these explanations are formulated in terms of achievement or failure and include events such as not only graduation and job promotion, but also conflicts and dismissals. In the private sphere, people also encounter events for which they feel responsible themselves. In events such as childbirth, marriage and divorce, some respondents have a strong experience of contingency, while others rather emphasise how they consciously and actively made a choice at a certain point in their relationships. As an example: Evelien (d4, 41 years old) interprets her divorce as follows:

But, it has not totally been happening to me, because I also had the control myself. It was necessary that this would happen, yes, absolutely, yes, I do think so. And maybe we could have turned 100 years together, but then the quality of life would have been different. Yes, like that. I believe that I must take responsibility myself, that I have to be aware, that I should be in control myself. But that I also have to take care of my own happiness, but also of that of my children, and also that of my partner. So, I don't think you should run away from it, or leave it.

While other respondents interpreted a divorce as a contingent life event, Evelien emphasised how she consciously chose this situation and how she feels responsible herself for her own happiness.

When it is not the respondent him-/herself who has caused a certain event, others are often involved or even blamed: a father who decides to move to the other side of the world; parents who provided a specific upbringing or created a specific situation at home, and the school board who caused a conflict and, eventually, a dismissal.

Secondly, there are physical causes related to illness (of the respondent him-/herself or relatives) that are explained by a specific virus, bacteria, or genetic defect in the family. Just (d34, 62 years old) explains the death of his father away, by referring to a genetic defect that apparently happens to many people.

I know that many people died this way alongside my father. All people who were not ill and yet many acute cardiac arrests. And that is an aspect of health for them. There is something in the genes that makes all that happen. But I myself don't worry. I don't think; oh, later this will also happen to me.

This respondent does not agree with the ontological contingency of the event. He explains the death of his father by this genetic defect and this is sufficient reason for him to explain why his father died.

Finally, religious interpretations can also be used as a necessity whereby the life event needed to happen. In the data, we find cases where people refer to fate or destiny when they speak about why a particular event occurred to them. Others speak of a “path” that is outlined for them to follow and certain events were predestined on that path to happen to them. Hilda (d38, 60 years old) speaks about events in her adolescence:

Yes, well, I do believe in something higher, and I think that everything that happened to me has had a reason. And that remains the same. Yes, I have been able to learn my lesson, and I also think that this was not without a reason. Sometimes I do think: ‘Do I have to learn a lot more? How much then?’

For Hilda, the occurrence of events in her adolescence happened for a clear reason; she had to learn from these events; they needed to happen, so that she could learn her lesson. That is how she denies the contingency of the events.

In all cases of contingency denial, the event is not interpreted as contingent, since people have found sufficient reason to explain the causality of the events. The reasons that were found in the data can be identified as human causes, physical causes, and religious agents. These explanations rule out the uncertainty that the course of events could have been different.

4.1.2 Contingency acceptance

When respondents express the non-necessity and non-impossibility of an event, we coded the fragments as contingency acceptance. Contingency is formulated in various ways in these fragments.

We have found fragments in which people primarily pose questions as to the why and how of the event. When negative events such as illness and bereavement are discussed, a common reaction is:

Then I think so: how can you give that damn well to my mother? She still has to take care of a child, she still must take care of her own mother, she cares for a family of four. Not that you grant it to someone else, because you do not grant it to anyone.

In this instance, Mart (d29, 38 years old) phrases his anger and despair when he speaks about his mother experiencing breast cancer.

He cannot answer the questions and realises that it is inexplicable. These questions concerning the cause and meaning of a certain event show the acknowledgement of the ontological contingency.

In cases of contingency acceptance, respondents formulate that it could have been otherwise, that it should not have happened this way, and that the event unexpectedly occurred to them. In some instances, respondents phrase that there are logical explanations for the event, but that these are not sufficient for them. An example is the case of Job (d7, 59 years old) who speaks of the birth of his first child:

And then you also realize how special it is with everything that can go wrong, that there are just 10 fingers and 10 toes, and that everything is right and that everything is working, and that it even looks like you, and that it starts talking. Just madness. You cannot dismiss that as just biology, that is too short.

According to this respondent, there are rational or physical explanations for the course of the events. Nevertheless, the event is interpreted as non-necessary. In cases of childbirth, in particular, respondents express astonishment, wonder, and gratefulness. Often respondents mention that they are very well aware of the fact that getting children is not self-evident, especially when they have experienced fertility problems or miscarriages themselves or among their acquaintances.

4.1.3 Contingency receiving

Fourteen events are interpreted by respondents as situations in which a new possibility of meaning is received. The event is accepted as contingent (non-necessary and yet possible), but at the same time a new possibility emerges. When new possibilities are received in contingent life events, they show similar articulations of the ontological contingency, as noted when people accept contingency. In this mode of handling contingent experiences, a (new) possibility becomes actual; it emerges as something given to the respondent. In the data, we found articulations of various kinds of possibilities that have become actual; new and deeper self-understandings, insights about trust in life as being good, and insights about what is truly important in life.

Sandra (d36, 43 years old) shows how a contingent life event has led to a new self-understanding. She speaks about the pregnancy of her first child and how it turned her life upside down:

Well, I'm all about predictability and planning in life. Well, our daughter has shown that it doesn't work that way! Never has my life

been turned upside down as much as then. ... Since then I can really feel intuitively. That was really new to me. Until then, it was ratio, really only ratio. No, that really has, I really became aware of the deeper layer in me. The real feeling, the emotion.

This respondent stresses the unexpectedness, but also the shocking, life-changing impact of the pregnancy. If it would stop there, then it would have been a case of contingency acceptance, but a new possibility became actual in the event; a new self-understanding emerged as the result of her pregnancy and suddenly, she discovered a deep layer of being herself that she had not experienced previously, but that forced itself onto her during her daughter's pregnancy. A new possibility became actual and transformed her; she became a new and deeper self.

A second example of possibilities that arise in the contingent life events are insights into the nature of life itself. For example, Leontien (d19, 49 years old), who tells about the death of her brother when she was a teenager and how this has influenced her trust in life and ideas about getting children herself. During the pregnancy of her own first child, she did not allow herself to be happy, since this child could also easily be taken away from her, just like her own brother. However, at the moment of giving birth, the following insight came to her:

At the time of the birth of my first I knew: no, it does not work like that. It will not be happening to me like that. Or it felt that way, the fear was gone, just gone. And from then on, everything changed. Then, just in that delivery, a deeper knowledge came about: okay, no, it is okay like this. That was not about me, that was there, that was then. And actually, I was born again. So that is very special.

At the moment of birth of her first child, Leontien erased the fear of losing her child that she had been carrying since the loss of her own brother. In a rational sense, Leontien probably would have known how little chance there was that her own child would die, just like her brother. But it was not up until the moment of birth that this possibility of trust in life as good-to-her emerged to her as "real" (or actual). It is the actuality of the insight that forces itself upon the respondent. People realise the subjective or existential meaning of a particular insight for their personal lives.

A third example from the category of contingency receiving shows life events, in which a new or better understanding of what is important in life manifests itself. Respondents reported that they suddenly realise what life is all about and what their purpose is in life. Freek (d17, 63 years old) realised this when he left the church after his mother's funeral:

And I felt that very strongly ... at the funeral of my mother. The weather was fantastic. It was ... not very busy but there were quite a few people in the church. And we went outside. Great light, fantastic weather. And that moment when I walked out of the church. Yes. These are the moments that matter. That are important, that have a particular depth. Absolutely. Those are the moments when you know for yourself what you are doing. That is bliss for me and that is a very deep experience. That event has brought a favourable change to my thinking, feeling and perception. ... Then I knew again; I cannot live in superficiality. That is not possible. I cannot do that. That was what came up then very, very strong. ... when you experience it, it is a deep emotion. If you experience it, you can hardly tell it rationally, but it is a feeling, a deep feeling. A deep desire, also, for depth and bliss.

When stepping out of the church after his mother's funeral, Freek had this intense experience that made him realise what life is all about; profundity and bliss. He was overtaken by this feeling at that very moment (event) and it became actual and real for him.

4.2 Religious and non-religious interpretations of contingency receiving

To what extent are cases of contingency receiving interpreted as being religious? We defined religious as referring to a transcendent or superhuman agent or reality. Half of the 14 fragments coded as contingency receiving was interpreted as being religious and the other half, the actualisation of the possibility, was interpreted as an immanent matter. For the religious interpretations, we found cases in which the transcendent appears as a glimpse; for others, the events were the impulse for adherence to a transcendent world view and finally, respondents reported having received a specific message from a transcendent reality.

Not all events in the category of contingency receiving are interpreted as being religious. Half of the events in the category of receiving do not relate to a transcendent reality or being. One respondent, Evelien (d4, 41 years old) reported that she experienced the vocation of being the mother of a child with an autism spectrum condition:

Yes, you have of course made the choice to have a child. But that it also happens is also just luck, that it is given to me that I could have a child. There are also people who just have not been given that. ... If I ever felt a sense of calling, I felt it the moment we knew that (name son) was autistic. I thought; I get such a child because I can handle that. I always have thought that. I don't get such a child randomly. No, I know how to do this. If it has to be born, then by me. That's how I've always felt that. Yes, and I knew, even before he was a year,

I already knew it. It was such a special boy, and he needed such special things to be happy. As a very small boy already.

Although Evelien uses religious language when interpreting the autism spectrum condition of her son as a vocation, she does not refer to a transcendent being or reality that has given her this vocation. She becomes aware of the fact that it is her task in life, her vocation, to raise this child with special needs and she feels equipped to do so. She becomes a mother with a purpose in life: to raise this child with this autism spectrum condition, although this purpose has no transcendent meaning for her.

In the other half of the events coded as contingency receiving, people experience a transcendent or superhuman agent or reality in the new possibilities that become actual. Most often, this transcendent reality appears as a glimpse. Because of the ontological contingency of the event, the experience transcends the boundaries of normal life, in which the logical, rational laws of nature prevail, and they catch a glimpse of what is other-than-reason. As an example, Jasper (d28, 49 years old) talks about a specific life fragment:

And these moments, they are all just gifts. It comes to you, at these moments ... that is a very beautiful moment for me. Related to a low point, but high point in itself. It explains to me; there is no coincidence, there is something more than we think. That's where it's all about. You also do not have to explain everything. And it also brings up wonder, such a moment, I find that incredible ... I cannot explain that, but it's something that gives me a lot of energy and then I realize again; there is more between heaven and earth.

In this instance, the experience of contingency provides an awareness of a transcendent reality. In the case of Jasper, there is more between heaven and earth. He does receive a great amount of energy from this experience, of which he later states that it also gives him strength when he encounters difficult situations.

For other respondents, this awareness is the starting point of a search for, or even a conversion to a particular religious or spiritual tradition. The loss of a dear colleague in a plane crash started Ronda's (d10, 58 years old) search for meaning in the Japanese world view of Mahi Kari. Robert (d33, 47 years old) has become a follower of the spirituality of Eckhart Tolle after his son was born with a very rare mental and physical disability.

In two fragments, a respondent not only reports a glimpse of a transcendent or superhuman agent, but expresses having received a message from it. Luuk (d24, 63 years old) narrates a moment of severe

loneliness during a period of serious illness. One day, when he was driving his car, the following occurred:

And there I arrived at the intersection with traffic lights, and I drove to the traffic light, and then I felt a very deep loneliness, I felt it very bad, and at the same time I felt so much power in a voice that told me: 'You are not alone.' And yes, I actually had an existential experience there. And it was only then when I actually experienced, in a flash I experienced how caringly my surroundings were around me. Because in the process of being ill, and being at a low point, I did not see that at all. I think that was also a turning point, by then the will to live and strength and liveliness came back again.

In front of the traffic lights, Luuk suddenly experienced a power and heard a voice telling him that he is not alone and he was overwhelmed by the awareness of how loving and caring his acquaintances actually are.

From the data, we can conclude that life events in the category of contingency receiving are partly religious in the sense that they relate to a superhuman agent or reality. In these cases, mostly a glimpse of a transcendent reality breaks through. In some cases, this glimpse is the starting point of a spiritual search; in other cases, respondents report to have received a concrete message from a transcendent being.

5. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

To gain a better understanding of the relationship between personal biography and leadership qualities of school leaders, we examined how they handle experiences of contingency. We wanted to know to what extent school leaders interpret existential life events as contingency denial, contingency acceptance, and contingency receiving. The qualitative analysis showed that all three modes were present in the data and provided rich insight into how school leaders experience these modes. Similar life events such as marriage, divorce, childbirth, and loss were interpreted as different modes of contingency (denial, acceptance, and receiving).

We have gained better insight into how respondents explain the causality of events in cases of contingency denial. People bring up their own agency, blame others and find explanations in physical reality (for example, genetic defect, virus). Cases of denial also include spiritual or religious explanations of predestination; people experience that the course of their lives is already set or has a specific meaning or message for them.

We analysed the interviews with a new definition of contingency receiving, understood as "new possibilities that become actual" in ontological

contingent life events. Respondents mentioned a range of new possibilities such as new insights into the self, into life and the world, and into what is truly important in life. The new possibilities or insights that emerge are not the result of cognitive reasoning; they can be characterised as an awareness that overwhelms people. This experience of being apprehended transforms the self-understanding, understanding of the world or of what is truly important in life. Conceptually, this experience of contingency receiving can be qualified as an experience of self-transcendence:

Experiences in which a person transcends herself, ... of being pulled beyond the boundaries of one's self, being captivated by something outside of myself, a relaxation of, or liberation from one's fixation on oneself (Joas 2008:7).

The experiences of contingency receiving can be understood as such an experience, in which boundaries are transcended and people are captivated by something outside themselves.

Despite the fact that the reported events in the category of contingency receiving were, in some instances, viewed as negative, the respondents evaluated the transformations that resulted from these experiences positively, in all instances. The transformations that manifested in the contingent life event brought them closer to their true self and provided a better, deeper understanding of (ultimate meaning in) life and the world. Taylor (2009:16-46) indicates this as an experience of *fullness* in life, "a condition in which life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be". For Taylor, this experience of fullness is (in a secular age) open to both religious and non-religious people.

While previous research shows that only Christian respondents experience contingent life events as an encounter with a transcendent agent (Van den Brand *et al.* 2013:177-179), our results show that the mode of contingency receiving is open to religious and non-religious interpretations. Religious interpretations all refer to a transcendent agent or reality (God, Jesus, angels). For some respondents, this reference is grounded in a particular religious or spiritual tradition. We also recorded references to a transcendent agent beyond any tradition. While only part of the experiences of contingency receiving can be viewed as religious experiences, all can be characterised as spiritual experiences, because all cases of contingency receiving can be regarded as experience of self-transcendence, in which fullness of life manifests itself.

The limitation of this study is that it is based on a specific sample, namely (highly educated) school leaders of primary schools in The Netherlands. In order to test the robustness of our definition of contingency

receiving and its resonance for contemporary religious experiences, more research needs to be done in terms of both (traditional) religious and non-religious people. For example, do conservative Christians or Muslims refer to contingency receiving the same way as secularised people do? Does a difference in cultural background, for example between Christian immigrants from Africa compared to native Christians, influence the way in which people report on contingency receiving?

The aim of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the connection between personal biography and professional qualities of school leaders. We observed a constructivist bias in previous leadership literature and proposed to examine school leaders handling experiences of contingency. Our empirical result shows that this new mode succeeds in overcoming the constructivist bias and is open to religious and non-religious interpretations of school leaders. Further research should reveal how the leadership qualities of school leaders, who have an experience of contingency receiving, differ from others.

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