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Leadership and Identity: An Examination of Three Theories and New Research Directions

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Identity has emerged as a potent force in understanding leadership. This chapter reviews the contributions of role identity, social identity, and social construction theories toward comprehending the emergence, effectiveness, and development of leaders. In recent years leadership scholars have combined two or more of these identity theories to conceptualize and study a range of phenomena including transitions into leadership roles, the challenges faced by women leaders, and the role of identity workspaces in leadership development. Based on the authors' review they propose areas where further research attention is needed, in particular the process by which non-prototypical leaders emerge, lead effectively, and develop; leader identities in contemporary settings characterized by globally distributed teams and multiple leadership roles; and identity evolution in the context of the life cycle of a leadership career.

Keywords: gender, identity, identity workspaces, leader identity, leader identity development, social identity

While the self as an organizing construct in the behavioral and social sciences has a long history going back to the foundational work of William James (Leary & Tangney, 2003), the notion of identity has received little attention among leadership scholars until relatively recently. As workplaces become more globalized, mobile and diverse—rendering identities more malleable and their maintenance problematic—scholars have increasingly focused on the dynamics that give leaders their standing beyond the formal position they occupy. The common definition of leadership as a social process of mutual and reciprocal influence in the service of accomplishing a collective goal (Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010) inherently implies basic identity processes such as categorization, identification, and identity change. Accordingly, a new perspective has been emerging that more explicitly links leadership and such identity processes (e.g., Carroll & Levy, 2010; Day & Harrison, 2007; Hogg, 2001; Ibarra, Snook, & Guillen, 2010; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord & Hall, 2005; Petriglieri G., 2011; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; van Knippenberg B., van Knippenberg D., Cremer, & Hogg, 2004), pointing attention to the role that leaders' identities play in their emergence, effectiveness, and development. As leadership (and followership) is increasingly conceptualized not as a static superior-subordinate exchange but as a complex and adaptive interaction process (DeRue, 2011), ideas about identity increasingly provide the foundation for theorizing and empirical research.

Our objective in this chapter is to consolidate and extend this burgeoning line of thinking, by comparing perspectives from different theories of identity, identifying gaps in our current understanding of the relationship between identity and leadership processes, and pointing to new and promising research directions. The chapter is organized into three sections. We first provide an overview of three strains of identity theorizing that are relevant to the study of leadership—role-based, social identity, and social constructionist theories—comparing and contrasting their potency for enhancing our understanding of leadership phenomena. Next, we focus on three areas of recent empirical and theoretical attention that combine ideas drawn from several theoretical traditions: transitions into, and identification with, formal and informal leadership roles; the emergence and effectiveness of leaders from “non-prototypical” groups, in particular women in male-dominated contexts; and the role of “identity workspaces” in facilitating the identity work that underpins leaders' development. We conclude with a look to the future, charting specific areas where further attention by researchers is needed.

Identity Theories: Roles, Social Identities, and Identity Construction Processes

Identity refers to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others (Gecas, 1982). These meanings or self-conceptions are based on the social roles and group memberships a person holds (social identities) as well as the personal and character traits they display, and others attribute to them, based on their conduct (personal identities) (Ashforth, 2001; Gecas, 1982). Both personal and social identities aid us in answering the questions “who am I?” and “who do other people know me to be?” Identities are claimed and granted in social interaction (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and evolve over time with varied experiences and meaningful feedback that allow people to gain insight about their central and enduring preferences, talents, and values (Lord & Hall, 2005; Schein, 1978). Although people have many, frequently mutating identities, some are more central to a person’s overall self-definition, and are more deeply embedded in his or her social life, while others are relevant only in specific contexts and situations (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

Adding further complexity, Brewer and Gardner (1996) argued that identities or self-concepts range along a continuum of inclusiveness. An individual identity emphasizes the uniqueness of an individual and how he or she is different from others. A relational identity defines the self in terms of relationships with others, and a collective identity defines the self in terms of membership in and endorsement by groups or organizations. Whereas people understand themselves and others through all three kinds of identity, any single identity may incorporate meanings drawn from personal idiosyncrasies, interpersonal relations, and collective demands. Further, specific contexts trigger differentially the salience of different levels: the construction of a person’s various identities implies a continuous interaction between the self and the environment—the individual may propose different selves as a result of sequential attention being paid to certain contextual cues or patterns, but it is ultimately the environment that will determine which particular selves are active (Yost & Strube, 1992).

Identities also have enduring, trans-situational components. Relevant for our purposes is the idea that a professional identity such as “leader” can combine individual, relational, and collective identities, as the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role (Schein, 1978). From this perspective, a leader identity is not simply the counterpart to a formally held leadership position but rather evolves as a person internalizes and tailors a leader identity and is recognized by others as ‘leader’ (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). For example, a person may hold a social role as a group head, a personal identity as someone who takes initiative and is good at getting things done through people, and social relationships that reinforce this self-conception; over time he or she may increasingly seek out roles and assignments in which there are more opportunities to lead, and these experiences will also shape his or her evolution as a leader.

Three distinct but related streams of theorizing are relevant to understanding leadership phenomena: identity theory, which focuses on the roles that individuals adopt in their personal and professional lives; social identity theory, which focuses on social categories and processes of categorization; and theories about how the self is constructed in social interaction that have focused on identity work. By examining the self through the lens of role-based identity, social identity theory, and social construction we hope to advance a more general understanding of identity processes in leadership. As reviewed in the text that follows, leaders’ development, emergence and effectiveness involves the internalization of a leader identity, the integration of this identity within an individual’s broader self-concept and life narrative, and its enactment, refinement, and validation in social interactions.

Identity Theory: Leadership as a Social Role

According to structural interactionists, identity theory provides a view of individuals through the roles they take on or have ascribed to them (Gecas, 1982). For example, a person may define him- or herself, or be defined, as a friend, parent, spouse, co-worker, boss, and so forth. From this perspective, *leader* would be one possible role that, once internalized, would form a part of a person’s identity. Roles are the different “hats” a person wears: demarcated positions in a social structure, with different roles potentially overlapping (one’s roles as spouse and parent, for example, may be active simultaneously in some situations), conflicting, or being ascribed to completely different and bounded areas of a person’s life. Each is associated with socially defined expectations as to what behaviors a particular role requires (Gecas, 1982), and the degree to which a role is internalized (or committed to) will determine how influential that role is to a person’s behavior (i.e., “role-person merger;” Turner, 1978).

The perspective of leader identities as social roles permits the exploration of the socialization processes and motivational factors that spur people to assume or grow into leadership roles, or, alternatively, distance themselves from them (Lord & Hall, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). People learn new roles by identifying with role models, experimenting with provisional identities, and evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback (Ibarra, 1999). Although most leadership scholars distinguish between leadership as a formal position and leadership as an informal role, most existing empirical and conceptual work concerns formal leadership roles (see DeRue [2011] for a recent review) and transitions into them (Hill, 1992; Ibarra, 1999), processes in which shifts in identity are clearly linked to changes in the position the individual occupies in the social structure, and concomitant changes in the expectations of, and exchanges with, those with whom the person interacts in performing the new role.

Proponents of viewing leader development through the lens of role-based identity argue that acquiring leadership skills, much as other forms of expertise, is done through deliberate practice (i.e., Day & Harrison, 2007; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). Lord and Hall (2005), for example, posit a model of development in which increasingly sophisticated systems guide manager's behavior, knowledge and perceptions; these systems develop along with emerging personal identities in which leadership roles and skills become more central to a person's sense of self.

Whereas putting forth a clear and compelling argument that, over time, leadership skills and knowledge become inextricably integrated with the development of a self-concept as a leader, research and theorizing on leadership development has yet to specify the processes and moderating conditions that account for this identity transition and change. For example, once a person assumes a formal leader role, it may or may not become a part of his or her identity, depending on his or her level of commitment to the role. What happens when a person occupies a leadership role without having a leader identity, and what impact would this have on his or her effectiveness as a leader? Alternatively, how does internalizing the role identity affect a person's hierarchy of possible salient leader sub-roles? And what about other identities a person holds, which may impinge on the internalization or enactment of the leader role-identity? Whereas some extant identities may more easily be revised or discarded to better fit the requirement of the leader identity one aspires to, other identities—such as those based on personal history or deeply ingrained habits—may prove harder to dislodge, hence generating potentially dysfunctional intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts (Petriglieri G. & Stein, 2012). Recent research on how individuals cope with multiple, conflicting, and/or ambiguous identities (Ashforth et al. 2000; Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Elsbach, 1999; Pratt & Foreman, 2000a; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and adapt role identities to fit better their sense of self and vice versa (Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Van Maanen, 1997) can be applied to leadership studies in order to delineate ways in which individuals clarify, tailor, and/or manage conflicts between their leadership and other role or social identities.

Social Identity Theory: Leadership and Social Categorization

A rich vein of contemporary scholarship examines the emergence and effectiveness of leaders through the lens of social identity theory (for a review, see van Knippenberg and Hogg [2003]), and suggests that “the secret of successful leadership lies in the capacity of the leader to induce followers to perceive him or her as the embodiment of a positive social identity that they have in common and that distinguishes them from others” (Ellemers et al., 2004: 469).

Whereas identity theory is concerned with the various roles people play in organizations and society (Hogg, 2003; Stets & Burke, 2000), social identity theory focuses on the social categories and group-level processes. People both define themselves and enable others to define them based on the groups to which they belong (Hogg, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 2010). When a social identity is activated, people see themselves as part of a larger group; this process entails depersonalization, which causes the individual to classify people, including him- or herself, not as individuals but as in- versus out-group members (Brewer, 2003).

Van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) suggested that this depersonalization process promotes the emergence of prototypical leaders, who embody the values and identity of the group, producing a range of outcomes including shared norms/normative behavior, collective behavior, high levels of cohesion and positive attitudes among the in-group, mutual influence, cooperation, altruism, empathy and emotional contagion, stereotyping and ethnocentrism

(Hogg, 2003). As group identities are activated, individuals come to see as ideal whatever the prototype of the group is, motivating them to strive for the relevant group characteristics and thus creating a more cohesive and likeminded collective.

The principal contribution of social identity theory to leadership research is Hogg (2001) and van Knippenberg & Hogg's (2003) notion of prototypicality, in which people who embody prototypical characteristics of the group are more likely to emerge and be effective as leaders. Ellemers et al. (2004) developed the argument further, demonstrating that prototypical leadership results in higher levels of motivation in groups, and Hirst et al. (2009) showed that leader prototypicality is related to creative effort and, as a result, creative performance. Ruderman and Ernst (2004) proposed that leadership effectiveness arises in part due to self-knowledge of social identity, the groups a person belongs to and those that are ascribed by others to him or her. Taking a longitudinal approach, Hogg and Terry (2000) argued that leaders have an inherent self-interest in constructing the group's identity in such a way so that they remain prototypical.

Building on the work of Hogg and colleagues, Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2011) argued that there are four social identity bases for effective leadership. The first basis, "being one of us" is the prototypicality argument: the more representative someone is of the group the more influential or leader-like he or she will be in the group. The second basis entails "doing it for us," or advancing the collective interests of the group and showing that a leader's actions are not simply self-serving, but rather are for the benefit of the group. This notion is founded on research indicating that leaders are most effective when they pursue purposes that are aligned with their personal values and oriented toward advancing the collective good (Fu et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005: 594; Quinn, 2004). The third basis is "crafting a sense of us," or shaping and communicating a collective identity. Fourth, leaders engage in "making us matter," by embedding identity more deeply, casting the group's identity and purpose as valuable in a broader context beyond the group. Leaders who advance such purposes experience themselves and are experienced by others as authentic (Fu et al., 2010). When leaders are connected and connect others to larger purposes, they inspire trust, increase others' sense of urgency, and help them find greater meaning in their work (Jung & Avolio, 2000; Podolny et al., 2005; Quinn & Spreitzer, 2006).

Two unresolved issues arising out of this stream of research concern leadership in complex intergroup or multiple identity settings, and the emergence and effectiveness of non-prototypical leaders as organizations become more diverse. First, with regard to what leaders lead best in groups with various sub-identities or when intergroup collaboration is required, van Knippenberg et al. (2004) have suggested that effective leaders create overarching "superordinate identities" and Hogg et al. (2012) have proposed the notion of "intergroup relational identity" in which leaders recognize different identities as legitimate and distinguishable parts of a whole. Research is needed, however, to discern conditions under which these forms of leadership are effective, as current theorizing leaves open questions about leadership of multiple-identity groups (i.e., religion and health, as discussed by Pratt & Foreman, 2000a) or groups for which the boundaries are not entirely clear.

Second, while all social identity theories hinge on the notion of prototypicality, scholars disagree on its definition and proxies. One of the earliest references is Rosch's (1978) definition of a prototype as a set of characteristics that describe the essence of a group. Hogg (2001) defined the prototypical leader as one who is perceived to embody the group's identity. But, on what bases are people perceived to be prototypical? While van Knippenberg and his collaborators argue that the values the group cherishes will be the *fons et origo* for prototypical leader emergence, what of visible signals such as personal history, gender, or race that people use as proxies for less easily observable traits? Integration and equal rights, for example, defined the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and one can hardly imagine a Jesse Jackson or Martin Luther King, Jr. emerging who had never experienced segregation or the African American struggle.

Pratt (2001) suggested that visible signals could denote group characteristics, depending on their ease of accessibility. A group that values strength, for example, depending on the socio-cultural understanding of the definition of "strength," may see brawn, brains, or courage as the proper embodiment of that value; this may, in turn, lead to the emergence of leaders of certain genders, levels of education or personal history. Thus, whereas values may be the underlying foundation for judgments about prototypicality, in reality prototypicality will likely be expressed and understood through proxies that serve as shorthand in defining the group itself.

A focus on prototypicality and ways in which leaders embody their groups necessarily raise questions about the

pathologies of overidentification. Dukerich et al. (1998) highlighted the negative consequences of overidentification for the individual, such as diminished willingness to question organizational practices and take responsibility to change them, and/or increased vulnerability to identity threat. Overidentification is riskier for individuals in “highly visible, high status, and intrinsically motivating roles, which offer highly seductive identities for their incumbents” (Ashforth et al., 2008: 338). In other words, just as overidentification “may be a substitute for something that is missing in one’s life” (Dukerich et al., 1998: 254), it may also generate pressure to protect the status quo on which one’s leader identity is grounded, and to distance oneself from or even attack those who may question or simply differ from it (Petriglieri G. & Stein, 2012).

Social Constructionism: Leadership as Identity Work

If identities are claimed and granted in social interaction, they are partially defined by how a person’s social entourage views him or her (Baumeister, 1998; Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Goffman, 1959). Recent scholarship on identity work, defined as people’s engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising their identities (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Svenigsson & Alvesson, 2003), has been used as a foundation for understanding the social processes involved in becoming a leader. As conceptualized by DeRue and Ashford (2010), internalizing a leader identity entails a set of relational and social processes through which one comes to see oneself, and is seen by others, as a leader. A person takes actions aimed at asserting leadership, others affirm or disaffirm those actions, encouraging or discouraging further assertions, and so on. Through this back and forth, the would-be leader accumulates experiences that inform his or her sense of self as a leader, as well as feedback about his or her fit for enacting the leader role. Based on the preceding review of role identity and social identity theories, identity work for leaders can be defined as the process through which individuals acquire, internalize, and validate a leader identity and refine, revise, and enact their other identities so as to minimize conflict with the leader identity and maximize group prototypicality.

The recursive and mutually reinforcing nature of the leader identity-construction process can produce positive or negative spirals (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). On the positive side, receiving validation for one’s self-view as a leader bolsters self-confidence, which increases one’s motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Kark & van Dijk, 2007) and to seek new opportunities to practice leadership (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). As one’s opportunities and capacity for exercising leadership grow, so too does the likelihood of receiving collective endorsement from the organization more broadly, such as assignments to formal leadership roles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Recognition and affirmation strengthen one’s self-identity as a leader, which in turn fuels the search for new opportunities and growth. Internalizing a leader identity helps to sustain the level of interest and fortitude needed to develop and practice complex leadership skills (Lord & Hall, 2005) and to take the risks of experimenting with unfamiliar aspects of the emerging identity (Ibarra, 1999). In this positive spiral, the leader identity moves from being a peripheral, provisional aspect of the self, indicative of one’s leadership potential, to being a more central and enduring one, grounded in actual achievement (Lord & Hall, 2005). On the negative side, failing to receive validation for one’s leadership attempts diminishes self-confidence as well as the motivation to seek developmental opportunities, experiment, and take on new leadership roles (Day et al., 2009), thus weakening one’s self-identity as a leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Building on McAdams’s (1999) definition of identity as “the internalized and evolving story that results from a person’s selective appropriation of past, present and future” (486), scholars have also argued that a central task of identity work is crafting, experimenting with, and revising identity narratives, or stories about the self (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987). This is both an introspective and a social process, whereby the narrative that endures is the one that one feels to best account for his or her experience and aspirations, accrues the most social validation from interaction partners, and fits the narrative repertoire available within one’s culture (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). In this respect, leaders’ identity work entails selecting a suitable narrative of the self as a leader, as much as accepting to be cast within a narrative that followers hold dear (Gardner & Laskin, 1995).

This conceptual approach to leader–follower interactions highlights the importance of identity construction in developing leadership and social capital through interactions between leaders and followers rather than a sole focus on developing the leader and his or her human capital (Day, 2000). This view resonates with theorizing on authentic leadership development (Avolio, this volume; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) as well as psychodynamic

perspectives on identity and leadership (Petriglieri G. & Petriglieri J. L., 2010; Petriglieri G., 2011).

A view of leadership as acquired and sustained (or lost) through constant social interactions shifts power away from the leader and transfers it to the relationship between leader and followers, and the latter's identification with the former. Whereas this may accurately reflect the fate of leaders in the flat, informal, and fast-changing organizations of this day and age, it also puts them in the position of having to deal with the insecurity, anxiety, and potential for loss that experiencing a valuable identity as unstable entails (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). Although there is mention of struggle in the literature on identity work, much of the focus is on the crafting of identities, rather than on the identity undoing (Nicholson & Carroll, 2013), emotional distress, and existential puzzlement (Petriglieri G., Wood & Petriglieri J. L., 2011) that are part and parcel of the experience of developing and practicing leaders. Identity work research has recognized that valued identities are sources of pride and self-esteem, and identity voids are often filled with anxiety and hope. Scholarship in this field, however, has focused on the dynamics of shifting self-conceptions and enactments more than on the emotional undercurrents of acquiring, sustaining, or losing a leader identity. And although some of these emotions may be dealt with consciously, some of them are likely to be dealt with through less conscious defensive processes (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Given the role of implicit affect in influencing decisions and behavior (for a review, see Barsade, Ramarajan, & Westen, 2009), this is a fruitful area for future investigation.

A view of identity as constantly negotiated throughout the life span also challenges traditional scholarship in adult development (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). In his seminal work, Erikson (1959/1980) posited that resolution of identity questions in late adolescence was necessary to be able to focus on the adult endeavors of forming lasting intimate bonds, serving others, and building a legacy (Erikson, 1959/1980). Developmental psychologists have since moved away from an age-related view of identity formation and suggested that the development of identity at different levels of complexity continues throughout the life span (Kegan, 1982). Nevertheless, the question of whether a preoccupation with their own identity vis à vis their social context may distract leaders from other fundamental pursuits remains a pertinent one.

Table 1 summarizes three existing strands of identity theory and research reviewed in the preceding text as they pertain to leader emergence, effectiveness, and development.

Table 1. Leadership implications of identity theories

	Identity theory	Social identity theory	Social construction
Leader emergence	Individuals take on role or have it ascribed to them (Gecas, 1982).	Prototypical group members gain influence by embodying the characteristics that define the group's essence (Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg et al., 2000).	Individuals claim or are granted the leader role in a given social interaction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).
Leader development	Development may occur through experimentation, personalization, and internalization (commitment) of the leader role (Ibarra, 1999; Turner, 1978) and through practice (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005).	Members may adapt behavior to group prototypes in order to gain power; leaders may guide group's identity to maintain prototypicality and preserve power (Hogg & Terry, 2000).	Positive spirals of being repeatedly granted leader claims (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, Ashford & Cotton, 2009) result in increased confidence, motivation (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Kark & van Dijk, 2007) and seeking of leadership opportunities (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009).
Leader effectiveness	Through adaptation and growth into the role, understanding and living up to expectations associated with the role schema (Gecas, 1982) and followers' specific needs (Lord & Hall, 2005).	Leader prototypicality engenders member trust (e.g., van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005), allows for wider range of acceptable action (e.g., van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), and can protect perceptions of leader effectiveness even in the case of failure (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008).	With practice and exposure to different situational requirements, leaders are better able to judge what is needed by different followers and adapt leadership style to them (Lord & Hall, 2005).

Personal Identity as Linchpin cross Identity Theories

Although some proponents of social identity theory see major differences with role-based identity (e.g., Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995), others see substantial similarities and overlap between the two approaches to identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). The basis of the claims of similarity and overlap lie in the practicality of trying to disentangle group identities from role identities, which cannot be easily separated from *personal* identities constructed over time with experience and social interaction. Stets (1995) argued that personal identities and role identities are related through a common system of meaning. The gist of the argument is that an individual cannot be guided by role or group identities and have his or her personal identities unaffected by them. For example, a leader role identity may be linked to a personal identity such as self-perception of self-efficacy and mastery, that is, being a competent person. Thus, when acting to influence someone or otherwise exercise leadership, behaviors are often enacted in the service of role, group, and personal identities.

If leaders are most authentic (Avolio, this volume) and effective when they internalize, not just enact, the identities that followers hold dear, leader development is likely to result in a "deep identification," with a dissolution of the boundary between one's role requirements and personal identity—so that the person experiences an overlap

“between self-at-work and one’s broader self-concept” (Rousseau, 1998: 218). This implies that although there are different pathways to the development of valued identities at work (Dutton, Morgan Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), in the case of aspiring leaders the development of personal identities will be tightly interwoven with the development of leader identities and vice versa. Anecdotal evidence for this view can be found in the popularity of leadership development programs that focus on leaders’ personal foundations and aspirations (Petriglieri G. et al., 2011).

For these reasons, Stets and Burke (2000) have argued that an analysis of the group, the role, and the person might foster a deeper understanding of motivational processes such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and authenticity. As they noted: “It is possible that people largely feel *good* about themselves when they associate with particular groups, typically feel *confident* about themselves when enacting particular roles, and generally feel they are “real” or *authentic* when their person identities are verified” (p. 234, italics in original). They argued that working to merge these identity approaches will result in stronger social psychology theory that can address macro-, meso-, and micro-level social processes. As noted earlier in this chapter, to date little work has been conducted to achieve this end but it remains a potentially important area of further theory development and research in linking identity and leadership.

New Research and Theorizing on Leadership and Identity

The idea of identity as multiple, relatively fluid, and highly contextual is especially pertinent for the study of leadership today, when individuals increasingly aspire to mobile careers that unfold across organizational boundaries (Arthur, 2008; Sennett, 2006). In the subsections that follow, we first extend current theorizing about leadership development as identity transitions, call attention to the impact of gender on the processes of claiming and granting a leader identity, and highlight the role of identity workspaces in leadership development.

Transitions into Leadership Roles

Conceptualizing leaders as both occupying social roles and continuously engaging in processes of claiming and being granted or denied leader identities is helpful in understanding career development dynamics, notably how people transition into formal leadership roles, and the relationship between leader development and adult development (Day et al., 2009). Lord and Hall (2005) proposed that the knowledge and information processing capabilities required as leaders develop differ qualitatively as the leader progresses from novice to intermediate to expert, at each expertise stage. In particular, identity, meta-cognitive processes, and emotional regulation are proposed as factors that are pivotal in developing the deeper cognitive structures associated with leadership capability. Furthermore, the self-regulation needed to acquire leadership expertise depends at least partly on the currently active identity held by an individual. It is thought that as leaders develop, there is a systematic shift in identity from relatively independent to more inclusive (i.e., collective) forms.

At the heart of the Lord and Hall (2005) model is the notion that as people develop leadership skills they also shift their identity focus. This is a relatively simple but important point. Novice leaders emphasize individual identities in terms of differentiating themselves from followers and other leaders. Novices focus on acquiring basic leadership skills and being seen as a leader by others. As these basic skills are mastered, the focus changes from self to others in which building numerous, differentiated relationships with followers is seen as the key to effective leadership. This is supported by a shift from an individual to a relational identity. As collective group membership becomes more important to developing leaders, there is corresponding development of a more principled and contextually based capacity to promote and enact alternative identities. This type of shift to a deeper structure is indicative of expert level knowledge and expert performance.

Building on this theoretical perspective, Day and Harrison (2007) investigated changes in self-identity (individual, relational, and collective) across developing leaders’ career stages. They proposed that identity level changes from an individual focus at lower organizational levels to a more collective identity focus at higher levels. In order for these identity shifts to occur it is necessary for individuals to engage in *letting go to develop* across career stages, especially in areas of technical expertise that are tied to identity. In a similar vein, others have taken a role-based perspective on leader identity in arguing that leader development unfolds as an identity transition in which people disengage from central, behaviorally anchored identities while exploring alternative possible selves (Ibarra, Snook, & Guillen Ramo, 2010). When making major role transitions, individuals co-mingle new and old identities

while trying on and refining provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999). The notion of letting go to develop is evident in this approach as well if old selves (e.g., technical experts) are discarded in favor of new possible selves (e.g., leader of others) that occur through role transitions and career progression.

Women's Leader Identity Development

Conceptualizing leaders as simultaneously occupying social roles, belonging to social categories, and continuously engaging in processes of claiming and granting social identities sheds light on the leadership development challenges faced by members of underrepresented, and therefore, non-prototypical group members, notably women in business leadership. Building on these foundational theories Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) recently argued that subtle, institutionalized forms of gender bias—stemming from workplace structures, cultures, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men—shape, and often interfere with, the identity work of women leaders.

Gender researchers argue that the social interactions in which people claim and grant leader identities, and the status accorded to social categories such as gender do not occur *ex nihilo* but are shaped by culturally available ideologies about what it means to be a leader. In most cultures, the meaning is masculine, making the prototypical leader a quintessentially masculine man: decisive, assertive, and independent (Bailyn, 2006; Calás & Smircich, 1991; Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Willemssen, 2002). By contrast, women are thought to be communal—friendly, unselfish, care-taking—and thus lacking in the qualities required for success in leadership roles (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Schein, 2001; Fletcher, 2004).

The mismatch between personal qualities attributed to women and qualities thought necessary for leadership places women leaders in a double bind and subjects them to a double standard. Women in positions of authority are thought too aggressive or not aggressive enough, and what appears assertive, self-confident, or entrepreneurial in a man often looks abrasive, arrogant, or self-promoting in a woman (for a review, see Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007). In experiment after experiment, women who achieve in distinctly male arenas are seen as competent but are less well liked than equally successful men (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004: 416). Merely being a successful woman in a male domain can be regarded as a violation of gender norms warranting sanctions (e.g., Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). By the same token, when women performing traditionally male roles are seen as conforming to feminine stereotypes, they tend to be liked but not respected (Rudman & Glick, 2001): they are judged too soft, emotional, and unassertive to make tough decisions and to come across as sufficiently authoritative (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In short, women face trade-offs between competence and likability in leadership roles.

These cultural norms are reinforced and amplified by women's underrepresentation in formal, top leadership roles in business and society. For example, women currently constitute only 2.2 percent of *Fortune* 500 CEOs (Catalyst, 2011a) and about 15 percent of these companies' board seats and corporate officer positions (Catalyst, 2011b). How work is valued informally may similarly favor men, making their bids for leadership seem more valid. Research suggests that visible, heroic work, such as setting strategic direction (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2009) or taking charge of a turnaround (Ruderman & Ohlott, 2002), more often the purview of men, is recognized and rewarded, whereas equally vital, behind-the-scenes work (e.g., building a team, avoiding crises), more characteristic of women, tends to be overlooked (Fletcher, 1994).

If a central developmental task for an aspiring leader is to integrate the leader identity into the core self, then this task is fraught at the outset for a woman, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about her authority (Ely & Rhode, 2010). Workplace conditions, including the lack of role models for women (Ely, 1994; Ibarra, 1999), gendered career paths and gendered work (Baron & Bielby, 1985; Bielby & Baron, 1986), and women's lack of access to networks and sponsors (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011) exacerbate the problem, posing challenges for women at every stage of their career development. The result is a vicious cycle: people see men as a better fit for leadership roles partly because the paths to such roles were designed with men mind; the belief that men are a better fit propels more men into leadership roles, which in turn reinforces the perception that men are a better fit, leaving gendered practices intact. Thus, a challenge for women is to construct leader identities in spite of the subtle barriers organizations erect to women's leadership advancement.

Identity Workspaces and Leadership Development

While acknowledging that the development of leaders' identities involves both intrapsychic and social processes, theorizing and research on leaders' development, emergence and effectiveness has mostly focused on *how* leaders' identity work unfolds, as opposed to *where*. Once we conceptualize the exercise and development of leadership as social accomplishments, however, examining the social settings in which they take place becomes of utmost importance. These settings are neither just background for leaders' growth and deeds, nor simply targets of their influencing efforts. They are constitutive and reflective of leaders themselves. That is, they provide—or fail to—the raw material from which leaders' identities are crafted, and the social validation on which the consolidation and ongoing enactment of those identities rests.

Not all social settings are equally favorable for the development of leaders' identities. Identity workspaces, defined as social settings that are conducive to the development and maintenance of leaders' identities, are institutions or groups that provide a holding environment (Winnicott, 1975) for identity work, that is, a social context that reduces disturbing affect, facilitates sense making, and eases the transition to a new identity and/or the consolidation of an existing one (Petriglieri G. & Petriglieri J. L., 2010).

The notion of identity workspaces rests on two common assumptions in identity scholarship. The first is that, by definition, individuals cannot craft or validate identities on their own (Kreiner et al., 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987); the second is that identity work is often sparked by, and always involves, experiences of uncertainty, destabilization, fragmentation, and anxiety (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). Identity work, therefore, can be facilitated by a holding environment that supports the individual in the cognitive, emotional, and social process of elaborating, experimenting with, and consolidating the meanings associated with the self (Petriglieri G. & Petriglieri J. L., 2010).

Three elements enable a social setting to potentially become an identity workspace for its members—viable social defenses, a sentient community, and meaningful rites of passage. Social defenses are collective arrangements, shared beliefs, interpretive schemes, accepted routines, that allow the individual to understand, and act in, the world in a way that minimizes his or her experience of uncertainty and anxiety, be it related to the work or to broader existential concerns (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960; Halton, 1994; Long, 2006). Sentient communities are social groups that provide clarification, advice, support, feedback, validation and, most important, a felt experience of belonging (Miller & Rice, 1967). Rites of passage are ceremonial events that manage major role transitions within a social system (Trice & Morand, 1989). Such rites have multiple functions, including the transmission of practical and cultural knowledge to role incumbents and the collective affirmation of a valued social narratives and mores (Campbell, 1972; Van Gennep, 1960).

Identity workspaces can be located within an established organization. For example, a corporate management training scheme involving job rotations, mentoring, and in-house educational opportunities and transition ceremonies, may serve as an identity workspace that accelerates individuals' acquisition and affirmation of an identity as an organizational member, or as a manager of that specific organization. They can also be located at the periphery of established organizations. For example, a medical residency program may be designed to facilitate the acquisition of a "pediatrician" or "radiologist" identity that, although requiring ongoing maintenance, is legitimate and relatively transferable across different hospitals.

Petriglieri G. & Petriglieri J. L. (2010) argued that the more individuals aspire to mobile careers that unfold across organizational boundaries (Arthur, 2008; Sennett, 2006), the less likely they are to entrust work organizations—the traditional context for leader development—as identity workspaces. The reasons are twofold. The expectation that organizational membership may last but for a limited time makes one less likely to want to alter one's personal identity too much to fit organizational requirements. The second is that such careers require the development of a work identity that may generate and facilitate access to opportunities elsewhere. As a result individuals are likely to seek identity workspaces that facilitate the development of personal and professional identities that can be transferred across organizations, for example, those provided by professional schools and leadership courses.

To function as an identity workspace, a social setting needs to help its members address two fundamental identity questions: "Who am I as a leader?" and "What does leading mean to us?" (Petriglieri G., 2011). Whereas some identity workspaces are designed to indoctrinate individuals to adopt prescribed answers, the most valuable ones are those in which identity questions are openly addressed rather than pushed aside. This occurs through two processes: personalization and contextualization.

Personalization is a process through which individuals examine their experience and revisit their life story as part

and parcel of learning to lead (Petriglieri G. et al., 2011). This allows them to examine the influence of their personal identities, and of the groups and social systems they are embedded in, on the ways they think, feel, act, and are perceived as leaders. Through the process of personalization, individuals integrate their personal identities with their identity as leaders, which allows them to give themselves more fully to their leadership roles.

Contextualization is a process through which individuals acquire and reflect on the language, skills and cultural scripts that are expected of those who aspire to lead in a specific social context. This involves not only practicing a language, a set of skills, and requisite behaviors. It also involves taking ownership, individually and with one's peers, of the existence of language, skills, and requisite behavior; its maintenance, and if necessary, change.

Despite an organization or group's best efforts to provide access to viable social defenses, valuable sentient communities, and vital rites of passage not all members will entrust it as an identity workspace (Petriglieri G. & Petriglieri J. L., 2010), as evident in the recurrent empirical finding that even organizations explicitly designed to be identity-transforming succeed only with a portion of their members (Greil & Rudi, 1984; Pratt, 2000). The notion of identity workspaces calls us to examine the cultural assumptions upon which the meanings associated with being a "leader" rest—and to whom those meanings are more likely to be attributed. This mindfulness marks the difference between identity workspaces used only for cultural replication versus those that enable cultural reflection and change. A conceptualization of identity workspaces for leadership development, therefore, would suggest that interventions revisit the meanings traditionally associated with leadership.

Future Research Directions

Calls for tackling the inherent multiplicity and dynamism of identity processes have multiplied (e.g., Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton, 2000), as have attempts to shift the focus of leadership research and theorizing from a concern with the personal characteristics of leaders and followers to a dynamic and fluid leading-following process that is contextually embedded. Yet the potential of combining these two areas of inquiry remains largely underexploited. When viewed through the perspective of identity, the study of leadership broadens into an exploration of a process that is experimental (Ibarra, 1999), interactive and iterative (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), and context dependent (Yost & Strube, 1992). Our discussion in this chapter points to several avenues for furthering our understanding of identity processes as they relate to leadership.

Diversity and Non-Prototypical Leadership

If roles are socially constructed (Gecas, 1982), social context matters to leader identity development and effectiveness. Leaders developing in different situational and cultural contexts will necessarily relate in distinct ways to their subordinates—a leader whose tenure has been altogether peaceful will have a different understanding of the leader identity than one whose experience has been rife with fragmentation and group infighting. Although a leader in a hierarchical culture may develop the capacity to guide subordinates in a paternalistic manner, he or she will probably not have developed the understanding of leader as a collaborative member of a team that leaders from more egalitarian cultures would espouse. This is all the more likely if the leader's primary identity workspaces have all been consistent with that culture, rather than exposing him or her to diverse contexts and their differing leadership mores.

Whereas certainly leadership across cultures has been explored (e.g., House et al., 2004), an examination of a cross-cultural process of leader identity development, grounded in context-specific role interpretation and experimentation, may add explanatory depth to the process of becoming a leader in transnational contexts. If the leader identity developed in one sociocultural context manifests itself in a different way from those of leaders developed in others, what is required to show oneself a leader and be accepted as such across contexts? Cultural and contextual processes of leader identity development have implications for multinational organizations that require leadership across national boundaries.

Similarly, if prototypical leaders are more likely to emerge and be effective (van Knippenberg, 2011; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), our theories need to account for the emergence and effectiveness of leaders who are not prototypical of their groups by virtue of their gender, race, age, or national culture. That ascribed characteristics are not the only factor at play in leader selection is highlighted by examples of such leaders as Condoleezza Rice, who after growing up in the segregated US South became the youngest, first woman, and first

minority member to be appointed as Stanford University's Provost, and later became the first female African American United States Secretary of State. How do non-prototypical group members develop a leader identity and gain respect as effective in environments in which social identity theorists would suggest that they are unlikely to be viewed as leaders from the start? Future research is needed to clarify the ways in which the identity work of leadership development is complicated by cultural differences and intractable biases in the workplace and society.

New Settings for Leadership: Global, Virtual, and Multiple Identities

As organizations become more international and globally connected through technology, leaders are required to work across borders and cyberspace. Distributed groups and multiple team memberships have become commonplace in organizations, fundamentally changing the nature of the social units being led to accomplish common goals (e.g., O'Leary & Mortensen, 2010; O'Leary, Mortensen, & Woolley, 2011; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). From product development to scientific discovery, a range of work today is conducted via distributed leadership of multiple actors using social media across organizational and national boundaries. Although the emergence, development, and effectiveness of leaders for virtual and broadly distributed teams is likely to differ from that of small face-to-face groups, the bulk of the research on which identity theories are based concerns the latter. Research questions here include: What kinds of leaders emerge in virtual teams? What kinds of leaders are effective in virtual contexts? Are leader identities developed in a dispersed, virtual community more or less portable than those developed in face-to-face social groups?

In today's careers and organizations, people may also play multiple, sometimes competing, leadership roles. For example, surveys estimate that 65 to 95 percent of knowledge workers across a wide range of industries and occupations are members of more than one project team at a time, while in some companies it is common for people to be members of five, ten, or twelve or more teams at a time (O'Leary, Mortensen, & Woolley, 2011). As a leader identity become more central to an individual's self-concept, it moves up an identity salience hierarchy (Gecas, 1982; Stryker, 1980). The more central the identity, the more a person will seek out opportunities to enact it (Shamir, 1991), and successful enactments will lead people to seek out further roles that allow expression of the underlying identity. Once a leader identity is internalized and developed new opportunities to take on a leader role will be seen as compatible with the "leader" part of the individual's self-concept; these will not violate the individual's need for self-consistency (Gecas, 1982). Thus, there will be affinity between the already established leader identity and extra-role leadership opportunities (see Pratt, 1998 and Ashforth et al., 2008 for relation of affinity to the taking on of organizational roles). A multiplicity of leader roles, then, can be viewed as manifestations of a unifying leader identity.

Although identity synergy (Pratt & Foreman, 2000b) may result from having a common identity base across roles, high levels of intra-identity permeability can produce identity spillover (Kreiner et al., 2006) and role blurring (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2000). Questions for further exploration include how holding multiple leadership roles affects a person's ability to transition into the roles for which he or she is not leader—is it a more difficult balance when one is a pluri-leader than when one holds one or very few leadership positions? To what degree is it possible to integrate various leader roles, on what does this integration depend, and what are the results of such integration? On the other hand, when and how is it possible or beneficial to build boundaries (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2000) between these integrated leadership role identities? Finally, what are the implications of exiting a formal leadership role (Ebaugh, 1988) on the person's other leader roles? Table 2 outlines findings from the three identity theories reviewed in this chapter that may be used to develop hypotheses about identity and leadership in virtual and multiple roles.

Table 2. Leadership and identity in the current organizational landscape

	Identity theory	Social identity theory	Social constructionist
Multiple leadership roles	The more a leader role is internalized, the more likely a person will be to seek opportunities to enact this role (Day & Harrison, 2007). This may lead to leader role transference across boundaries.	The leader would be prototypical of each group's characteristics, likely resulting in leadership across similar types of groups.	Positive spirals would result in confidence in enacting leader role in different social contexts. Experience and practice in one context would enable adaptation to follower needs in another.
Leading across boundaries and in diverse groups	The leader can be effective as long as the groups have non-conflicting leader role expectations.	Either build an overarching superordinate identity (van Knippenberg et al., 2004) or a coalition of different identity groups (Hogg et al., 2012).	Inexperienced leaders would focus on their leader identity, restricting the range of leader action to their understanding of the leader role; experienced leaders would have the capacity to adapt their leadership style to different followers' needs (Lord & Hall, 2005).

The Lifecycle of Leader Identities

Identities are taken on, adapted, made more or less salient, or sloughed off depending on their relevance in how a person defines him- or herself. This can be viewed as a sort of identity life-cycle that may or may not end in death—identities are born through exposure, develop to different degrees through experience (Yost & Strube, 1992), become more or less salient through use and necessity, and are abandoned when or if they become incompatible with a person's understanding of him- or herself in light of the demands of his or her context (cf. Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2003, for a discussion of organizational identity obsolescence). Leader as an identity is no different; however, it is important to differentiate between a leader identity that is tied exclusively to a position or role and a leader identity that permeates and is used as a lens through which to best interpret the obligations of leader roles in various aspects of a person's life, as described earlier. In the former case, the losing of a position may result in an identity loss for the identity embedded in a role (cf. Ebaugh [1988] on "becoming an ex"); whereas in the latter, the role is simply one expression of the underlying identity. Because an acutely developed leader identity can have manifestations across a range of roles, the process of abandoning a meta-leader identity will be a more complex process than leaving an identity that is tied to a discrete and well-demarcated role. In a world where attaining and keeping leadership status is seen as overwhelmingly positive, and losing it is seen as failure, there is no body of literature that we know of that explicitly focuses on the process of *unbecoming* a leader. In the case of exit for a leader identity based on multiple leadership roles, it is unclear what viable alternative identities would be available.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have discussed what leader identity emergence, development, and effectiveness entail in three theoretical perspectives. First, in the case of identity theory, leader is a *role* whose adoption and enactment is defined by societal expectations. From this perspective, "practice makes perfect": the leader role is internalized and a leader gains competence through increased exposure to different role situations and time-in-role. Questions not fully satisfied by our current knowledge of leader identity based in identity theory include change and

transitions to and from leader roles; internalization of the leader role and to what degree this affects leader effectiveness; and how an established leader identity affects other—including other leader—roles. Second, social identity theory sees leader identity in terms of representing a *category*. Those who lead are they who best embody what it means to be a member of their social group. It is due to this representativeness or prototypicality that they are entrusted with opportunities to pursue leadership, and the practice of leadership in turn serves to influence the group's identity. A leader's status as a prototypical group member who knows the group (because he or she *is* the group) vests him or her with the expertise necessary to lead appropriately. The questions, however, that social identity theory has not yet satisfied are definitions and proxies used to establish prototypicality, and leadership in complex groups, such as those with multiple identities. Finally, social constructionism proposes leader identity as a *process*—of identity acquisition, internalization, and validation—involving continuous interplay between a leader and his or her current and prospective followers. Although leaders' development is indeed important according to this perspective, followers play an equally important role because of their interaction and identification with the leader. Thus, followers here are both enablers (or inhibitors) of leader development and arbiters of effectiveness. We propose that understanding leader identity from these three theoretical perspectives permits evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the approaches, and an integration of these can serve to impel further investigation.

Combining the different perspectives, we have explored transitions into leadership and identity work; the granting or denial of leadership based on sociocultural understandings of who is considered appropriate and prototypical leader material; and the social settings where leaders can emerge and develop. Transitioning into and between positions of leadership requires changes in identity and self-understanding, and openness to “letting go to develop”—exploration of what identity personalization entails for both the leader and his or her followers. This space of leader-follower interaction and exploration is bounded by sociocultural expectations, and leadership positions are not necessarily open to every aspirant. In the case of women leaders, in particular, many times what is seen to be prototypical of “leader” is seen as incongruent with what is prototypical of “woman.” Thus, women face the challenge of both gaining leadership and being effective in arenas where traditionally few women have tread. We propose that identity workspaces provide a setting to craft and experiment with leader identities, allowing people a safe environment to internalize and maintain what it means for them to be leaders. These workspaces can be located within an organization, but when subtle barriers to leadership positions exist in many organizations and this in a world of rapid job change and mobile careers, aspiring leaders seek validation and development of identities outside of the traditional milieu.

The field of leader identity is ripe for further research. In leader emergence, there is much room to expand our current knowledge of how non-prototypical leaders emerge, develop, and are effective, even when theory proposes lack of support by prospective followers. The burgeoning area of cross-cultural research in management offers the opportunity to develop theory on leadership capacity transfer across cultural and national boundaries. From technological developments questions arise on new leader capabilities in virtual and distributed teams. Teamwork in diverse and numerous environments creates meta-leaders who must understand and deploy their leader identity (or identities) across contexts—we have yet to understand this process. While our chapter has provided an overview of existing theory and ideas for future discussion and investigation, we encourage and look forward to new and exciting voices and directions in research on leadership and leaders' identities.

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