

# Exploring the Contents of Leader Identity Development Across Life Domains

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**Abstract:** The way an individual self-identifies as a leader (leader identity) is a critical component of the leader development process (Day and Harrison, 2007). Since this recognition, the field has experienced increased attention (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017). In this way, the *development* of a leader identity naturally becomes a topic of importance given that organizations are interested in more effective leaders, considering the 60 billion dollars spent on leadership development programs by global organizations every year (Future Market Insights, 2024). However, despite some recent advances in understanding leader identity development, the discussion is often limited to a single life domain, most commonly work (Lanka *et al.*, 2020) when leadership is understood to transcend a formal role or context (DeRue, Ashford and Cotton, 2009). The present investigation draws on theory of leader development across life domains (Hammond, Clapp-Smith and Palanski, 2017) to explore factors that promote and hamper self-identification as a leader. Through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), 25 in-depth interviews focused on three different life arenas revealed four factors promoting leader identity development: being conceded responsibility, taking initiative, having an expanded understanding of leadership, and having a sense of purpose. Additionally, two factors served as obstacles: a feeling of incapacity, and self-focus. Implications for practice and theory are discussed. Specifically, the section distinguishes between internally- and externally driven leader identity, how leader identity can be developed before and during the course of a research interview, and the role of purpose. On the obstacles side, the findings are firstly linked to the impact of leadership stereotypes (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004). Also, foundational works such as social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and job demands-resources theory (Bakker, Demerouti and Sanz-Vergel, 2014) are incorporated in terms of how they may justify obstruction of positive change in leader identity.

**Keywords:** Leader Identity; Leader Identity Development; Multi-domain; In-depth Interviews

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## 1. Literature Review

Leader identity refers to how one thinks of oneself as a leader (Day and Harrison, 2007). The importance of developing leadership beyond the typical focus on skills and behaviors was highlighted by Lord and Hall (2005), who recognized the role of deeper development, namely cognition and identity. Those conceptual ideas were further advanced by Day and Harrison (2007) who promote the use of identity as a developmental lever to accelerate leader (the individual) and leadership (the collective) development (Day, 2000).

Komives *et al.* (2005) was one of the first to bring to light a process of leader identity development ranging from awareness about leadership to integration through daily leadership actions. This developmental path is similar to other leader identity development proposals (e.g., Ibarra *et al.*, 2010; Zheng and Muir, 2015) in the sense that there is usually some sort of divergent movement (e.g., understanding, exploring) followed by a convergent movement (e.g., synthesis, internalization).

It is also suggested that the development of identity and skills work in a mutually reinforcing way for an individual, like a spiral (Day *et al.*, 2009). In practice and over time, this would mean that the more one identifies as a leader, the more motivated one would be to develop leadership skills, an act that further strengthens leader identity. The opposite, a negative spiral, is also argued to be true.

A complementary view is offered by Derue and Ashford (2010), who proposed that leadership identity is co-constructed in organizations through claiming and granting acts to lead or to follow. For instance, one can claim leadership through an action (e.g., volunteering to find a work solution) that can be granted or not by others. Over time, this ongoing claiming-granting social mechanism leads to the formation of leader and follower identities.

More recently, leader identity was theorized to develop in four dimensions: meaning, the understanding of leadership an individual holds; strength, the extent to which a person identifies as a leader; levels, a range that goes from individual to relational to collective; and integration, the extent to which a leader identity is integrated within a global self-concept (Hammond, Clapp-Smith and Palanski, 2017).

Regarding how leader identity evolves in terms of its trajectory, it was found that it develops in a curvilinear way based on seven measurement points with graduate students who were participants in a leadership program (Miscenko, Guenter and Day, 2017). Kwok, Shen and Brown (2021) also observed a quadratic trajectory of leader

identity with military cadets. Within the organizational context, it was found that leader identity develops in a linear and positive way across four measurement points with high-potential leaders (Kragt and Day, 2020) and across 12 measurement points with senior leaders (Middleton, Walker and Reichard, 2019).

Increases in leader identity have been observed by scholars and this impact is linked to psychological detachment from work after hours (Lanaj, Gabriel and Jennings, 2023), mentoring, not only from the perspective of mentees (Muir, 2014), but also mentors (Ayoobzadeh and Boies, 2020), learning goal orientation and motivation to lead through a leadership intervention (Kwok, Shen and Brown, 2021) and through many types of leadership intervention programs (Middleton, Walker and Reichard, 2019; Kragt and Day, 2020). Exploratory studies also highlight what can catalyze leader identity development, for instance, role models, mentors, negative role models, feedback, and crystallizing events (Lanka, Topakas and Patterson, 2020).

Less is known about what negatively impacts the leader identity of individuals, but rumination after work hours was found to play that role (Lanaj, Gabriel and Jennings, 2023). Similarly, Lanka *et al.* (2020) identified that barriers to leader identity construction include organizational structures, identity rejection, and identity uncertainty.

Alternative views to develop leader identity include play (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010; Kark, 2011), having a transitional time and space (Ibarra, Snook and Ramo, 2010), and development across life domains (Hammond, Clapp-Smith and Palanski, 2017) through sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Considering what was discussed so far, the research question is expressed below:

*RQ: What factors facilitate the process of an individual self-identifying as a leader (or not) through an exploration of different life domains?*

## 2. Methodology

A narrative inquiry research strategy was employed, a methodological approach that refers to the exploration of a story or the shaping and ordering of past experience through retrospective meaning making (Chase, 2018). The choice is aligned with the aim of this study as narratives and life histories are seen as an essential source of knowledge about how individuals experience and make sense of themselves and their social contexts through speech (Musson, 2004).

This broader methodological frame was operationalized through in-depth interviews. First, interviewing is a basic means of inquiring about narratives (Seidman, 1992). Also, they are a way of learning about the meanings of participants' thoughts and actions and go beyond commonsense explanations by exploring boundaries of experience that can uncover hidden insights (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012), and the emergence of unknown leader identity facilitating factors is a critical part of this investigation.

Participants (n = 25) were members of an international community focused on meaningful discussion events around intellectual topics. In total, 12 women and 13 men with an average age of 45 years old agreed to participate.

Interviewees were obtained either by direct recruitment by the first author of this study or by referral, categorizing a snowball approach to collecting data. Upon invitation, participants were informed that the conversation would be around the concept of leader identity. No incentive was offered, all participants joined voluntarily.

Interviews took place from September of 2023 to February of 2024. On average, they lasted 45 minutes and were conducted in English and virtually. Additional demographic data was collected through an online questionnaire. Three pilot interviews were conducted for learning purposes.

Given the in-depth approach to interviewing, known as friendly, intimate, and aimed at collecting "deep" knowledge (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012), the interviews were purposefully centered around only one question, leaving significant space for organic follow ups as digressions are likely to be productive and "going with the flow" is encouraged when conducting in-depth interviews (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012). The main question being referred to was "generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a leader?" and the follow up questions were organically framed throughout the course of the interview having three different life domains in mind: family, work, and community. The choice for the main question stems from the definition of leader identity itself, which is how one thinks of oneself as a leader (Day and Harrison, 2007).

Thematic analysis was used to arrive at the results, a technique that involves identifying, analyzing and reporting themes that emerged from data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This analytical approach not only effectively answers the exploratory research question presented earlier, but it also shows to be appropriate to investigate leader identity development as it has been used in recent publications (e.g., Lanka *et al.*, 2020; Ryan *et al.*, 2024).

The present study follows the six steps of the thematic analysis process: familiarization with the data, producing initial codes, seeking themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data was processed using the MAXQDA software.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Promoters of Self-identification as a Leader Across Life Domains

##### 3.1.1 Being Conceded Responsibility

According to the data, being conceded responsibility refers to being formally assigned a responsibility or role to lead one or more initiatives. It is observed that when leadership is formally conceded to individuals, they will consequently self-identify as a leader more easily. After saying that she generally identifies as a leader, participant 14 expands on her reasons: *“Because I’ve had to take leadership roles in a unit or in an office. So, by nature, that was my role”*. So, having a leadership role was clearly impactful to her leader identity. She went on to illustrate that the role was assigned to her, instead of pursued by choice:

*Well, I suppose since I started to take those leadership positions, it was not really a question, you are either a good leader, a bad leader, a mediocre leader, but that was, in a way, a role prescribed to you. And you may have people, let's say, in an office or unit who would be looking at you as a leader and expecting you to play that role. So, it's not really by choice, but it was a responsibility.*

What is also noticeable from the quote above, is a feeling of necessity to be a leader that emerges after being assigned responsibility. Similarly, participant 19 indicates an equivalent process when it comes to his leader identity. He confidently identified as a leader and reported the fact that he *“was thrown into relatively responsible roles early on”* as a main reason. Again, the terminology used (*“was thrown”*) signals that being a leader was not a choice, but externally driven.

##### 3.1.2 Taking Initiative

The data suggests that taking initiative refers to voluntarily or proactively taking the lead with a task or event that involves lower or higher stakes. Participant 16 who strongly identifies as a leader, exemplifies a high-stakes situation where he takes a sizable responsibility by bringing his recently bankrupt family in search of a better life to the United States against his father’s will:

*I took the role of a leader early, when we became refugees. We'd lost everything and I decided that I will come to America and do something for the family, even though my father said ‘no, you're going to fail, you have no money’. So, if you look at those three categories, I guess I never thought of it, that I was playing the role of a leader, but now, if you define those three categories, looking back, I would say I was acting as a leader in my family.*

Compared to being conceded responsibility, the previous theme categorized by externally-driven leader self-identification, leader identity was a result of an internal drive or willingness to take the lead.

It is also interesting how participant 16 can point out exactly when he became a leader according to different life domains and how those moments are all related with taking some sort of initiative:

*Work wise it happened when I built, when I started building my company and I started helping immigrants move. And then community wise, it happened also in my 40s, I got involved at a church, at the church council. I got involved in many other communities, the city, with the city I lived in, I’ve served on the development committee.*

Participant 24, who identifies as a leader, endorses those ideas as she shared an example of how she is the one who leads certain family activities.

### 3.1.3 Having an Expanded Understanding of Leadership

It was noticed that some research participants held a broad and flexible definition of leadership, exemplified by the idea that “we are all leaders” as pointed by participant 3 and elaborated by participant 25:

*I think everyone is a leader in one way or the other. Not everyone is a good leader. And not everyone's mandate is like a company with like 100,000 employees or something. But you're leading, you know, if you're a parent, if you're a spouse, if you're a son or daughter, like, even the simplest of settings.*

This way of conceptualizing leadership may impact individuals' capacity to identify as a leader. The line of thinking portrayed above raises the suspicion that the more expanded one's definition of leadership is, the easier it is to fit oneself into it and therefore self-identify as a leader. Linking back to the main interview question voluntarily, participant 25 illustrates this “If I pretty much see any everyone as a leader, then I don't see myself as an exception to that question.”

It was also noticed during some conversations that this expansion of a leadership understanding can happen during the interview itself. Participant 11 demonstrates part of the referred expansion happening in practice.

*Because I have this idea of what a leader is, when I think of a leader, I don't immediately think of myself as a leader because I'm not that, right? But if I start thinking about what leader means, yes, sometimes I can be a leader in a group of friends or at work. Or, you know, even in my Pilates class I can be a leader, like bringing people along to do something, for instance.*

Lastly, the expansion of one's leadership understanding may not only happen during the interview, but the mere invitation for an interview about leader identity can be a contributing factor, as described by participant 8:

*Well, before you asked me to be part of this [the interview], I would have never thought, but since it's been a while since you first asked me and then it [the topic] starts living in my head, you know, like this thing has been put there. And in a way, I started seeing the ways I am a bit of a leader. Well, first of all, I organized this meet ups in Sevilla for the first time and that's, like, quite an obvious way of being a leader, like nobody else organizes, so I have to do it and I am capable of doing that.*

To summarize, the current theme has diverse characteristics. Individuals can have an expanded definition of leadership pre-interview, they can expand it during the course of an interview through conversation, and even the invitation for an interview on leader identity serves as a developmental lever since participants naturally start to think about the concept and their future responses.

### 3.1.4 Having a Sense of Purpose and Vision

A sense of purpose, vision or drive was observed in some participants as influential factors to their leader identity. Participant 16 shared his particular belief: “I have this bias and this belief, right or wrong, that you're born for a purpose. I have just... I've always, always believed that”. He then elaborates on the impact of having a purpose on big life decisions that relate to being a leader:

*I didn't have to take a chance to go to America, [...] but there was a direction, there was a drive that came from, I don't know where, and that that fed into, 'oh, I could do this, I could do that'. And once I got my family settled, I said 'you know, maybe I can help hundreds of other families', and we did.*

Another perspective is given by participant 8 who talks about wanting to be “the example or the inspiration” to people so they can heal themselves through her video contents published online. She referred to this project as “the gift” she wants to offer. Taking a more objective approach, participant 3 also talks about his desire to lead: “Many years ago I created a vision board. I think maybe I learned it in some workshop. So, I have a vision board, it's called 'to-be list' and I have, like, pictures of my ideal self and I think I mention that I want to be a leader.”

In summary, similar terms like purpose and vision have been used to describe how a sense of direction in life can facilitate the development of a leader identity.

## 3.2 Obstacles to Self-identification as a Leader Across Life Domains

### 3.2.1 Feeling of Incapacity

The data shows that this theme refers to a feeling of incapacity guided by self-perceptions of lack of confidence/assertiveness or not having the right personality/nature. Often during conversations, participants

used these factors as a justification for not seeing themselves as leaders. After expressing that she does not think of herself as a leader, participant 15 elaborated on her reasons:

*When I think of a leader, I'm thinking of someone that's more assertive and that is something that I struggle with in my life, like being able to seek my boundaries and reinforce it all the time.*

As observed, due to the central importance she places on assertiveness and given the perception that she lacks this quality, participant 15 is unable to label herself a leader after being explicitly asked about it.

The lack of confidence can be observed when participant 17 speaks about her difficulty to take initiative in social settings and her tendency to overthink:

*I am not the person that, in a group, tends to immediately... I don't step forward immediately. No, I don't think so. In that sense, I always try to listen from... maybe I balance too much every opinion.*

The data also reveals that the belief of not having the right personality or nature to be a leader functioned as a barrier to self-identification as a leader. Participant 4, for instance, talks about the impossibility of changing her “default personality” because of how she would start shaking every time she held the microphone before giving her testimony at church despite wanting to participate. Participant 15 endorsed this belief “I feel like you should have a certain personality to be able to do that [be a leader]. Well, yeah, I'm more of a quiet thinker.”

### 3.2.2 Self-focus

Another theme that emerged as an obstacle to self-identifying as a leader is having a stronger self-focus. This was manifested in many ways, for instance, being more interested in one’s free time and hobbies as illustrated by participant 18:

*I'm not the person who wants to be a leader for one reason, I'm a person who has a private life. I like my hobbies. I don't want to be fully colonized by work. So, I want to have my free time. I go to work, I do the work, I go home, and I want to break any connection with work while I'm home.*

This self-focus can also be observed through a desire to improve one’s own skills. In describing an invitation to play a role in a community she is a part of, participant 4 expresses her “selfish” reasons after accepting to help:

*I was just really interested in the events and I thought that it would be nice to help, but mostly, like I said, for selfish reasons. I want to improve myself, like, I want to speak better. I want to be able to... I want to be a better listener.*

## 4. Discussion

The first theme of this study, being conceded responsibility, highlights the importance of being given a formal role to the development of a leader identity. This finding is supported by theory on claiming and granting leadership (Derue and Ashford, 2010), where being conceded formal responsibility is equivalent to being granted leadership, an important social event for leader identity construction. Based on the data, being conceded responsibility was associated with a feeling of necessity to be a leader. A possible justification is that formal roles are likely to induce a sense of responsibility (Tost, 2015). Perhaps because of the social nature of leadership, a significant social recognition of one’s leadership will lead to a “pressure” to perform well, an effect that is suspected to be catalyzed when the individual holds a modest leader identity self-view. The data indicates that the role of responsibility is critical for leader identity development, and the current study contributes to the body of knowledge suggesting the same, but through a unique multi-domain approach. In the artistic world, for instance, having responsibility is associated with increased leader identity (Elstad and Jansson, 2020). In the educational sphere, responsibility is part of a student leader identity development model (Komives *et al.*, 2006), and having a sense of responsibility was found to be instrumental in the process of developing a leader identity in teachers (Quaisley *et al.*, 2023). It is noticeable, however, how overlooked the impact of responsibility on leader identity is to organizational scholars. So, the present multi-domain work brings this discussion to new contexts.

The theme “taking initiative” represents that being proactive to take the lead also contributes to an individual’s leader identity. Both smaller (e.g., organizing a family outing) and bigger (e.g., building a company) efforts are shown to be related to a sense of identity as a leader. As opposed to a feeling of necessity (linked to the previous theme), the present theme is associated with *willingness* to be a leader. This idea is similar to the concept of motivation to lead (Chan and Drasgow, 2001), which means an individual desire for leadership. In aggregation,

the first two themes of this study highlight the importance of having some degree of responsibility, either taken or given, for a leader identity to be developed.

The third promoting theme refers to having an expanded understanding of leadership. This concerns the meaning and integration dimensions of multi-domain leader identity (Hammond, Clapp-Smith and Palanski, 2017). It was found that this expanded understanding comes in various ways, for instance, holding a belief pre-interview that “we are all leaders” is connected to seeing oneself as a leader as explained by one participant. The expanded understanding of leadership was also something that developed during the course of the interviews through dialogue, or even after receiving the formal invitation to be interviewed as this subsequently motivated participants to engage in self-reflection about leader identity. These findings not only offer support to works indicating that leader identity can be discursively constructed through research interviews (Clifton and Dai, 2020) and through redefining leadership (Zheng and Muir, 2015), but also extend the discussion as a mere invitation to be interviewed catalyzed self-reflection that served as a means to amplify own definitions and perceptions of leadership.

Lastly, having a sense of purpose was found to play a role in developing a leader identity. To justify their positions, some participants who thought of themselves as leaders referred to purpose-related subjects such as having a direction to be followed in life, believing to be born for a purpose, and keeping a vision board. Even though research on purpose and leader identity is scarce, other aspirational variables have been positively connected to leader identity, including learning goal orientation (Middleton, Walker and Reichard, 2019) and motivation to lead (Kwok, Shen and Brown, 2021). The concept of purpose is argued to be so connected to leadership that it's almost always taken for granted and subsumed by research (Kempster, Jackson and Conroy, 2011). Maybe because of that the current theme does not initially come across as unique, but, in fact, purpose and leader identity represent a novel link, categorizing a contribution to knowledge by this study.

Beyond promoters, obstacles to leader identity development were also observed. Lack of confidence/assertiveness and not having the right personality/nature, for instance, emerged as relevant themes. Both themes seem to represent a feeling of incapacity in light of an idealized leadership image. Since stereotypes of leadership include traits such as intelligence, tyranny, masculinity, dynamism (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004), then it is likely that individuals unable to acknowledge those traits in themselves probably had difficulties in this self-identification process. While this research only entails self-views, identities are inherently social (Mead, 1934). So, from a leadership development perspective, even though some individuals do not see themselves as leaders, other people could see the opposite, categorizing an incongruent leader identity (leader under-identification) (Bartels and Wellman, 2023). Given that social endorsement contributes to a self-internalized sense of identity as a leader (Palanski *et al.*, 2021), this incongruence can potentially be bridged by individuals with feedback mechanisms, for instance.

The theme of having a stronger self-focus was also found to hamper leader identity. Through stories, some participants demonstrated no interest in labeling themselves as leaders. Data points to many explanations, but potential reasons include wanting more time for personal hobbies, free time, and liking to do things on one's own. In reviewing some interview conversations, thoughts such as “I'm not a person who wants to be a leader for one reason: I'm a person who has a private life, I like my hobbies, I don't want to be fully colonized by work, so I want to have my free time” could be further explored with social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) as some individuals may see social endeavors like leadership to have costs that outweigh benefits.

Further interview excerpts such as “let's be frank, a leader is someone, at least in our society, who probably has to work *a lot*... They have to have a very work-oriented life, and I'm a person who's trying to skip work all the time” could mean an unhealthy relationship with work that could be better understood through the lenses of job demands-resources theory (Bakker, Demerouti and Sanz-Vergel, 2014) in the sense that demands (e.g., workload) exceed resources (e.g., autonomy). One additional interpretative lens for this phenomenon could be supported by social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) as individuals derive a sense of identity based on their group memberships and negative job experiences could lead to disengagement, blocking leader identity positive change.

Considering this discussion and given the strongly held positions observed in some participants when it comes to not identifying as leaders in the present or future, it is also suspected how biological or cognitive factors (e.g. cognitive biases) help explain leader identity development incapacity. For instance, would confirmation bias matter? Would availability bias matter? These seem to be relevant questions.

## 5. Limitations and Future Research

Like most qualitative studies, the generalizability of the results presented here may be limited, so caution needs to be exercised when extrapolating insights. Also, identity is considered to be inherently social (Mead, 1934) and the current research is restricted to self-views, categorizing another potential liability. Therefore, multilevel research is encouraged in future studies.

Moreover, the present data can be classified as cross-sectional and even though this approach is helpful, the leadership development field is seen as longitudinal by nature (Day, 2011), therefore, despite the difficulties involved in collecting qualitative data over time, obtaining multiple waves of data can increase the level of insights on how leader identities are developed.

Despite the relative diversity observed in the participants of this study, it is difficult to guarantee sampling bias immunity, which generally means relying on samples that are convenient and less representative in developmental psychology (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is recommended that more systematic sampling techniques are used when studying leader identity.

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