

The Role of Organizational Experiences in the Formation and Acceptance of a Leader Identity: A Phenomenological Study of Leaders Working Within the Context of a Religious Not-for-Profit Organization

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Abstract- This study examined the leadership identity development of a sample of leaders in order to better understand leaders' perceptions about what contributed to the development of their leadership identities. Using in-depth interview questions, the lived experiences of organizational leaders were explored so as to build on the limited existing research on leadership identity and offer further insight into the phenomenon of leadership identity formation. The results of this study revealed that the study participants had each experienced leadership within multiple social and organizational contexts. Based on the responses of study participants, the acceptance of their leadership identities was influenced, in part, by the leaders to whom they had been exposed and by the social contexts in which their leadership experiences took place. The participants in this study began to identify themselves as leaders while working within the context of organizations that provided opportunities for leadership, collaboration, and mentorship from experienced leaders.

Index Terms- Leadership, Leadership Identity, Identity Development, Organizational Context.

I. INTRODUCTION

How one forms a leadership self-identity is a phenomenon that has yet to be fully understood (Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012; Komives, 2011). There has been growing curiosity surrounding this issue, and some researchers have speculated on the possibility that certain social-contextual factors may contribute to leadership identity development (Campbell, 2011; Komives, Owen, Longenbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Wagner, 2011). As leadership has been identified as a construct that is often shaped by the social context in which it is experienced (Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Onorato, 2010), an examination of the social contexts in which leadership is identified provides a deeper understanding of the process of leadership identity formation. This study examines how organizations, as social contexts, affect one's leadership identity formation by answering the question: What are leaders' perceptions concerning the role of their organizations in their leadership identity formation?

This study examines leaders' perceptions concerning how their experiences in the social context of organizations influenced the development of their leadership identities.

Recognizing organizations as social contexts provides an atmosphere for continued study of the organizational experiences that shape one's leadership identity. As individuals spend a significant portion of their waking lives in the context of organizations, it has been suggested that this life domain may influence one's self-identity (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010; Wagner, 2011). This identity can be influenced by differing contextual aspects and can even affect one's overall professional development (Brook, Garcia, & Flemming, 2008). With this in mind, it was necessary to not only examine how an individual's leadership identity had been formed but also how this identity development may have been influenced by the organizational context in which leadership experiences took place (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

The apparent scarcity of published information about leadership identity development, particularly the lack of research focusing on organizational context and leadership identity, supports the need for further study (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009; Komives, Owen, Longenbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). Adding to the existing knowledge base by exploring the organizational experiences that contributed to the development of one's leadership identity is of interest to anyone working within any modern organization, because it has been suggested that leadership identity development is an antecedent of leadership effectiveness (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue, Ashford, et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012). By examining how leadership identity is formed and how this identity formation was influenced by organizational experiences, this study serves to provide further insight into the phenomena of leadership.

II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Leadership identity formation is a phenomenon that has received limited attention (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Johnson et al., 2012; Wagner, 2011). Curiosity surrounding this issue has led to an increased awareness of the role self-identity plays in the overall development of leaders and prospective leaders (Komives, Owen, et al., 2006). This study helps to gain a greater understanding of how leaders choose to identify themselves as leaders and how organizational experiences have influenced their understanding of their leadership identities. This was accomplished by first identifying the existing theories that have a bearing on this study.

Identity Theory

As one of the two most commonly held views concerning self-identity, identity theory is built upon the understanding that one's identity develops as a response to the situational need for a particular formalized role (Stets & Burke, 2000). Individuals understand who they are based on their understanding of the world in which they live and the roles they play in their world. In this view, one understands one's self as the occupant of a particular role (Burke & Tully, 1977). Identity theory appears to be much more situational in nature, as it builds upon the assumption that one's identity develops as a result of the need to perform a particular task or to fill a particular role (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

Identity theory's emphasis on role performance has somewhat limited the overall understanding of identity in that identity theory does not fully account for individuals' understanding of how they fit into a particular group but rather places emphasis on what an individual does (Stets & Burke, 2000). As Hogg, Terry, et al. (1995) pointed out, identity theory does not place as much emphasis on the socio-cognitive variables related to identity development and may ignore the importance of contextual cues. This theory does not provide for a complete understanding of how an individual develops his or her identity.

Social Identity Theory

Unlike identity theory, social identity theory holds that identity is the result of an individual's involvement in various social constructs and that one's identity develops as a response to observed similarities between one's self and the other members of a social group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner 1979). Tajfel (1972) introduced social identity theory and explained that the process involved an individual comparing oneself to members of other groups; this involves self-categorizing and social comparison. As people label or categorize themselves, they begin to identify with groups based on their perceived similarities with those other group members (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). If people believe that they exhibit the prototypical behaviors of the members of a particular group, they will identify themselves as also being a part of the group (Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012).

Though useful in studying the dynamics of some social groups, social identity theory does present some challenges (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through social comparison, one's identity depends upon one's ability to accurately assess how he or she compares with the members of a group. This also involves understanding how one may differ from the group members. An individual may only understand that he or she is dissimilar to other individuals and may not be able to truly understand his or her own unique identity.

Identity Development

Though both views do provide insight into the nature of self, neither identity theory nor social identity theory appear to fully explain how one develops his or her personal identity—let alone explain how one develops a leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, Ashford, et al., 2009). Identity theory places more emphasis on the individual's behaviors, while social identity theory focuses on the individual's perceptions of social categorization and group fit. When addressing a leader's identity

development, identity theory appears to define a leader based on how he or she does leadership, while social identity theory supports this definition based on how individuals categorize themselves as leaders. In other words, identity theory focuses on doing, while social identity theory focuses on being, but neither fully explain how individuals self-identify as leaders (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Leadership Identity Development

Komives, Owen, et al. (2005) examined the identity development of leaders by exploring the issues that influence the development of an individual's identity as a leader. The grounded theory study conducted by Komives, Owen, et al. resulted in the identification of a six-stage LID model. The six stages in the model were awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identified, leadership differentiated, generativity, and integration/synthesis (Komives, Own, et al., 2005).

Awareness is identified as the period of time during which an individual first becomes aware of leadership. During this stage, leadership is understood as something that does exist and leaders such as teachers, parents, and politicians exist outside of one's self. Leadership, in this stage, is merely a concept that exists externally (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005). One's understanding of leadership within this stage is limited to an external concept and is not understood as a state that can be achieved by one's self; rather, it is understood as something that is for others (Komives, Owen, et al., 2006).

The second stage is exploration or engagement. This stage is characterized by one's exposure to groups and to group experiences (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005). During this stage, individuals begin to build friendships within their groups and begin to learn how to work together (Komives, Longbeam, et al., 2009). In this stage, individual group members may be given some responsibilities in their group, but these do not necessarily include any leadership responsibilities (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005).

During the third stage, one identifies leadership as a hierarchical system that allows for positional leaders (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005). Leadership, in this stage, is understood as a position that some group members hold. Leadership exists in the actions or activities of the group's positional leaders. In this stage, leadership is not understood as being achievable by all group members but is reserved for those who are already recognized as leaders (Komives, Owen, et al., 2006).

During the fourth stage, leadership is understood as a process shared within a group. The understanding of leadership moves beyond recognizing leaders as those holding positions to the recognition that leadership happens in all aspects of the group (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005). The leader, in this stage, is understood as "a facilitator, community builder, and shaper of the group's culture" (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005, p. 606). During this fourth stage, individuals still do not recognize that leadership is a role that they can take on within the group.

The fifth stage is characterized by the understanding that leadership can be developed, but this is still understood as a process that takes place in the other group members (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005). During this stage, one does not necessarily self-identify as a leader but does understand the importance of developing other group members. Individuals who reach the

stage of generativity may feel a sense of responsibility for developing and even mentoring others in the group (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005).

The sixth and final stage is integration or synthesis. It is during this stage that one truly recognizes that he or she can also be a leader (Komives, Owen, et al., 2005). The capacity for leadership within the individual is understood as being a part of the process of personal development, and one begins to understand that he or she is also a potential leader (Komives, Owen, et al., 2006). This is the point when a leader first identifies himself or herself as a leader. This is when one actually accepts a leadership identity.

Social Learning

To better understand the social contexts in which leaders developed their leadership identities, and the social influences that may have contributed to leaders' leadership identity, this study used Bandura's (1976) social learning theory to examine what study participants learned about leadership within the social context of organizations. Social learning theory has been built upon the understanding that individuals learn how to behave in various social situations based on their observations of others (Bandura, 1976). As an individual observes the actions and outcomes of certain behaviors, he or she in turn learns how to act within similar situations (Bandura & Walters, 1963). This observational learning involves modeling the behaviors of others and applying this knowledge within a given social context.

Bandura (1977) noted that individuals are more likely to imitate the behaviors of others whom they perceive to be similar to them. These observed similarities help to determine the learned behaviors and contribute to the cognitive understanding of one's role within the social context (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, social learning is also understood as a reciprocal process during which a social environment determines one's behavior and one's behavior determines his or her environment (Bandura, 1977). Because social context and social learning have been recognized as possible elements within the various stages of LID (Komives, Owen, et al., 2006) the role of social learning was addressed in this study.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach. A phenomenological research approach was appropriate for this research study because the purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences among individuals who had experienced similar phenomena and also to focus on what may have influenced these common experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). All of the participants in this study have shared experiences, as all of the participants had experienced the phenomena of LID and all had had past leadership experiences within the social context of organizations.

Study Participants

When considering the use of a particular research method, Hycner (1999) explained, "The phenomenon dictates the method . . . including even the type of participants" (p. 156). As leadership identity formation was the phenomena examined in this study, a phenomenological approach was utilized to select

study participants. With this in mind, participants for this study were selected after determining that they held a recognized leadership position within an organization and determining that they identified themselves as leaders.

The participants in this study, or co-researchers, all worked within the context of a religious not-for-profit organization and each had a leadership position within the organization. Though all worked with the same organization, some participants also worked with other organizations and had other employers. Three of the study participants were female, and the remaining seven were male. Their ages ranged from 25 to 69 years old. The participants' demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Study Participant Demographic Information

Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Location
1	Adam	M	66	Northeast US
2	Barbara	F	69	Northeast US
3	Chris	M	39	Northeast US
4	Megan	F	38	Northeast US
5	Peter	M	42	Northeast US
6	Patrick	M	25	Northeast US
7	Bryan	M	34	Southern US
8	Tom	M	47	Northeast US
9	Bernie	M	37	Northeast US
10	Donna	F	47	Northeast US

Note. Participant numbers were assigned based on the order of recruitment, not order of interview.

Analysis

This study used Moustakas's (1994) modified Stevic-Colaizzi-Keen method in order to provide textural-structural descriptions of experiences. The analysis began with the identification of, what Creswell (2007) described as, "significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participant experiences the phenomenon" (p. 61). These statements were organized into clusters of meaning to identify common themes within the participants' interview responses. This information was organized using a coding method involving the categorization of interview responses. The interview transcripts were coded and organized in order to identify common themes within the study participants' interview responses (Saldana, 2009). These themes were used to construct descriptions of the experiences of each of the study participants. The individual participant textural and structural descriptions of their experience with the phenomenon of leadership identity formation were used to create a composite textural-structural

description of participants' experiences. This information provided the opportunity to present a unified account of the phenomenon being examined and further insight into leadership identity. The codes and themes that were present in the participant interviews are provided in Table 2.

IV. RESULTS

From the interview transcripts of each of the study participants, or coresearchers, horizons emerged. These horizons provided the content needed to uncover the meaning of each of the participant interviews. Through the use of structural coding, the horizons revealed meaning units, which were analyzed and clustered into six common themes. Though presented as a composite, the themes were found in each of the participant interviews. These six themes along with the meaning units that were used to develop each theme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes Present in Participant Interviews

Codes/Meaning units	Theme
Church, college, family, military, school, sports teams, youth organization, workplace	Leaders experienced leadership in multiple contexts
Acknowledgement, assigned roles, calling, group-granted ID	Leaders need to be recognized as leaders
Inspiration/motivation, mentoring, personal growth, prayer	Leaders need to be invested in and developed
Authoritarian positions, modeling, natural/authentic, nonauthoritarian, reluctance	Leaders identify who they are through social comparison
Communication, hands on, team work	Leaders recognize the need to work with others
Accomplishing goals, fulfillment, responsibility for others	Leaders feel a sense of purpose

Note. Codes, meaning units, and themes are based on a composite of all 10 study participants.

The composite themes were used to develop textural descriptions and structural descriptions of the experiences of each of the coresearchers. These individual descriptions were used to create a composite textural-structural-description of the participants' experiences.

Composite Textural-Structural Description

The 10 leaders who participated in this study each experienced leadership within multiple social contexts. Leaders recognized the advantages of having a variety of organizational experiences and pointed out the value of working within environments that allowed for observation and interaction with different styles of leadership. Through social comparison, leaders were able to, at an early age, determine the types of leaders that

they did not want to be as well as the types of leaders they wanted to follow. From this knowledge, leaders were able to construct a concept or model of leadership that they wanted to emulate.

The identification of others as leaders was not enough to initiate study participants' acceptance of a leadership identity. The participants needed to not only observe leadership but also to be active participants in social groups. They recognized the importance of working within groups and developed a sense of teamwork. Their interactions in their respective social groups positioned them to prepare for their future group leadership roles. Though some participants may have had an innate sense of their future leadership role, their group involvement further contributed to their understanding of leadership.

The study participants' involvement in groups allowed them to be recognized as leaders. Through acknowledgement, assigned roles, or a group-granted leadership identity, the participants began to recognize that others identified them as leaders. This recognition came from either their peers or from one of their mentors or leaders. The participants were recognized as leaders by being appointed to leadership positions or by being identified as role models by their peers. Through this recognition, they were eventually able to identify themselves as leaders and accept their leadership identities.

Each study participant was invested in and developed. In some cases, this process was closely related to their recognition. Study participants continued to learn about leadership and were able to develop as leaders. Through the mentorship and motivation by their leaders and peers, the study participants were able to accept their leadership identities. Though they recognized themselves as leaders, the participants in this study acknowledged that they understood that leaders need developed. They each described their own personal growth and explained that, as leaders, they felt a sense of purpose.

Essence of the Experience

The final phase of a phenomenological investigation is the development of "a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). Through the composite textural-structural description of all 10 of the study participants, the researcher captured the essences of the experience of leadership identity formation. The development of a leadership identity is initiated by observing leaders and through one's involvement in multiple social groups. The acceptance of this identity is aided by encouragement and recognition from others. Following acceptance, one's leadership identity continues to develop over time.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the study participants experienced leadership within multiple social and organizational contexts. The acceptance of their leadership identities was influenced, in part, by the leaders to whom they had been exposed and by the social contexts in which their leadership experiences took place. The participants in this study were identified as leaders by others and eventually accepted leadership identities.

Leadership Identity Development

Each of the 10 participants in this study described the development of his or her leadership identities as a process. Even though some of the participants, such as Bernie and Tom, explained that they felt that they had a natural ability to lead, they made a point of emphasizing that their understanding of themselves, as leaders, developed over time. The 10 participants' descriptions of the processes involved in their identity formation appear to be consistent with the research conducted by Komives, Owen, et al. (2005). Each participant described a process that resembled the six stages presented by Komives, Owen et al.

The participants in this study described that they first became aware of leadership by observing leaders. This took place in the home as they observed parents and other family members. Participants also observed public figures and recognized these individuals as leaders. They became aware that there were people who were in charge of things. Bernie became aware of this when he observed his father. Donna and Patrick recognized that their mothers were leaders. Megan was aware of public officials and political leaders. As each participant became aware of the existence of leadership, he or she had a structural context for understanding leadership.

The study participants explained that when they became aware of the existence of leadership, they began to interact with leaders. These early interactions took place within the context of their families, churches, and schools. Megan and Peter both described interactions with their parents and explained that their early interactions with leaders were somewhat one-sided. This was similar to the descriptions offered by all but two of the remaining participants. Chris explained that his early interactions with leaders were more collaborative and positive experiences. Bernie also described his early interactions with leaders as being positive experiences. Through these early social interactions, the participants were able to learn about leadership from their own personal experiences and recognized leadership as more than just a vague concept.

As participants observed and interacted with leaders, they were able to identify leaders. Leaders were initially identified as those individuals who held positions of authority. This concept was described in all 10 participant interviews. The participants explained that they had developed an understanding of leadership that was based on leaders who held authoritarian positions or served in assigned roles. This seemed consistent with the third stage of leadership identity development presented by Komives, Owen, et al. (2005).

The study participants each shared that after identifying leaders, they had compared and contrasted the leaders that they observed with their own understanding of leadership. Tom did not see that the leaders he observed embodied his understanding of leadership as a group process. He identified leaders who only held positions of leadership but did not, in his opinion, act in the best interest of the group. This was similar to the descriptions shared by Peter, Megan, and Patrick. Chris and Donna recognized leadership as a group process and saw this style of leadership in the leaders that they observed. The descriptions offered by each participant showed that the participants developed an understanding of leadership within the context of groups and recognized leadership as a group process prior to

accepting a leadership identity. This, too, is consistent with the research findings of Komives, Owen, et al. (2005).

After becoming involved with organizations, the participants in this study recognized that they could be leaders and recognized the need to develop others who were in their social groups. The descriptions offered by Megan, Peter, and Adam suggests that they had identified themselves as leaders before recognizing the need to develop others. This seemed to deviate slightly from the research of Komives, Owen, et al. (2005), which suggested that leaders first felt a sense of responsibility for developing and even mentoring others in the group before leaders accepted a leadership identity. The remaining participants had identified the need to develop others prior to the acceptance of their leadership identities.

Identity and Social Identity

The organizational leaders who participated in this study developed a leadership identity after having experiences that required them to perform roles within their groups or organizations. Their descriptions fit within Stryker's (1968) view of self-identity as an individual's desire to perform a specific role within a social structure. This role-focused view of identity was illustrated in the descriptions offered by the participants in this study. Adam, Barbara, Peter, and Patrick each described the leadership roles that they had within their groups and explained that they developed a sense of leadership while performing the tasks associated with their roles.

The participants in this study also described that they had developed a leadership identity while taking part in the activities of social groups. This appeared to be consistent with Tajfel's (1972) social identity theory, which focused on how individuals identify themselves within social groups. This theory explains that an individual compares himself or herself to the members of his or her group, as well as members of other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The description of Tom's experiences highlight this perspective. He decided that he did not share in the values of his youth group and left the group.

Social Comparison and Self-Categorization

Through social comparison and self-categorization, the participants in this study were able to understand who they were as leaders. All the participants in this study shared that they had compared themselves to other leaders and that, as a result, they had developed an understanding of themselves as leaders. This appears consistent with the ideas presented by Tajfel and Turner (1979) who explained that as people compare themselves to others, they begin to develop an understanding of where they fit within the social structures that exist in their world. The participants' descriptions of their experiences suggested that, by observing leaders, they were able to create some standard for a leadership self-definition or self-categorization. The descriptions of these experiences support the social identity theorists' position that an individual's understanding of self requires that he or she compare himself or herself to others (Hogg, Terry, et al., 1995; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The leaders who participated in this study offered descriptions of their leadership experiences that were also consistent with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) presentation of self-categorization as the process by which an individual identifies

himself or herself as being included in a particular group. Barbara Peter, Patrick, and Donna shared that they did not feel that they fit within the same categories as the leaders that they observed. Their initial understanding of leadership did not seem consistent with the views that they had of themselves. The descriptions of these experiences were similar to Hogg's (2001) observation that because of the subjective self-evaluative nature of this concept, individuals might not have a completely accurate perspective of other people or of themselves.

Group-Granted Identity

The leaders who participated in this study shared descriptions of their experiences that also supported Hogg's (2001) argument that followers create or promote group leaders who typify leadership behaviors. Barbara, Megan, Chris, Bernie, and Donna began to identify themselves as leaders after their peers granted them leadership identities. These participants had other members of their social groups who encouraged them to take on leadership roles and appointed them as their group leaders. Though the study participants may not have initially identified themselves as leaders, their peers identified each of them as leaders. This, as Hogg explained, gives the power of leader identification to group members who proclaim that selected members are, in fact, leaders. Though the participants' peers granted them leadership identities, all of the 10 participants still had to accept their leadership identities.

Identity Acceptance

It has been suggested that the process of self-identifying as a leader may actually take place after one assumes a leadership position (Kramer, 2003; Lord & Hall, 2005). This position appears to be supported by the descriptions offered by the participants in this study. Adam, Peter, Patrick, Bryan, and Tom accepted their leadership identities after being appointed to or assuming leadership roles within a group. Barbara, Megan, Bernie, Chris, and Donna finally accepted their leadership identities after their peers acknowledged them as leaders. Whether appointed, assigned, or granted the role of a leader, all the leaders who participated in this study eventually accepted their roles and, as a result, identified themselves as leaders. This appears to support Kramer's (2003) study, which found that those in positions of leadership who have been identified as leaders by other members of their social constructs eventually self-identify as leaders.

The Role of Social Learning

The study participants explained that they had initially learned about leadership by observing others in their social groups. This is consistent with Bandura's (1976) understanding that individuals learn how to behave in various social situations based on their observations of others. As the participants in this study observed the actions and outcomes of certain behaviors, they learned how to behave in similar situations. Bandura explained that this form of observational learning involved modeling the behaviors of others and applying this knowledge within a given social context.

Some participants offered descriptions that included modeling the behaviors of their leaders. Bernie and Chris, for example, modeled the behaviors they saw their older family

members exhibit after determining that these behaviors had positive outcomes. Donna observed leaders who she saw as effective and eventually decided to emulate their behaviors. Tom observed what he identified as negative leadership behaviors and learned that such behaviors hindered the effectiveness of a group. Patrick observed leaders who were authoritarian and a leader who took a collaborative approach toward leadership. He eventually chose to model the collaborative leadership behaviors that were exhibited by his youth group leader. The participants' descriptions of their leadership experiences suggest that opportunities to observe various leaders allowed them to learn about both effective and ineffective approaches toward leadership.

Organizational Context

The leaders who participated in this study described the characteristics of the organizational settings in which they experienced leadership. Adam, Barbara, Chris, Megan, Peter, Patrick, Brian, Bernie, and Donna identified themselves as leaders through their involvement in educational organizations. They described the opportunities for leadership as well as the support and mentorship that were offered in these organizations. This seems to coincide with Campbell's (2011) research of college administrators, which suggested that the availability of mentors and the abundance of student leadership opportunities contributed to the development of her study participants' leadership identities.

The study participants also described the role that the church played in their leadership identity formation. Tom shared that he had identified himself as a leader while participating in his church youth group. He described this group as being dysfunctional and did not initially identify it as an environment that would allow him to grow, but within this context, he began to understand that he had a responsibility to be a role model to the other members of the group. Barbara also identified herself as a leader while working with her church. Though she also worked within the context of an educational institution, she described her church as a safe environment that seemed like a family. In this environment, she learned about leadership and began to take on leadership roles.

Limitations and Recommendations

Adhering to a phenomenological methodology, this study offered a description—not an explanation—of the participants' leadership experiences. This research has offered descriptions of the experiences of a specific group of organizational leaders but cannot be generalized to describe the experiences of all leaders. With this in mind, the researcher encourages future investigation of the concepts described in this study using other sample populations and other research methods. Using an equal sample of men and women may provide additional opportunities to examine any differences between the way in which males and females experience leadership identity.

Research on specific leadership styles may also provide opportunities for future research on the topic of leadership identity. A study of leaders who self-identify as servant leaders, for example, might provide opportunities for insight into the process involved in one taking on a servant leadership identity. Bryan and Donna explained that they viewed themselves as

servant leaders but did not fully describe how they accepted that specific leadership identity. This study did not fully examine the leadership styles that each participant had observed. Bernie and Donna described early experiences with leaders that were only positive. Tom described leadership experiences that he viewed as negative. The remaining participants described both positive and negative leadership experiences. The role of the style of leadership and the impact that this has on the process of a leader's identity development may be worth investigating.

This study did not account for people who did not self-identify as leaders, despite having leadership positions. Though Peter and Patrick both identified themselves as leaders prior to their participation in this study, they each, during his respective interview, admitted to sometimes struggle with accepting this identity. The salience that they attached to this identity and the reasons for their reluctance to accept the identity may be worthy of future study. Research using a sample of people in leadership positions who do not self-identify as leaders may provide further insight into the nature of leadership identity formation.

As an emerging area of study within the field of organizational leadership, there are numerous opportunities for future research related to leadership identity. This study examined leaders' perceptions concerning how their experiences in the social context of organizations affected their individual leadership identity formation and provides a foundation for future research focusing on the role of contextual factors. Recognizing organizations as social contexts provides an atmosphere for continued study of the organizational experiences that shape one's leadership identity. Future research will provide opportunities for insight and allow for a deeper understanding of the process involved in the formation of one's leadership identity.

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