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LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES: IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF LEADERSHIP

Abstract

This study sought to understand how a leader's leadership is affected by their salient identities. To achieve this, the study employed a qualitative paradigm using a phenomenological methodology. Ultimately, the study worked to craft a shared understanding of how identity is experienced by leaders within the context of their own leadership. Textual descriptions are provided for each of the three themes of awareness and salience, leader differentiation and context affiliation, and identity as a situational factor in leadership. Implications for research and practice are highlighted for leadership educators.

Introduction

"Enhancing the development of students has long been a primary role of student affairs practitioners" and leadership educators (Torres, et al., 2009, p. 1). Identity development theories (i.e., Chickering's (1993) student identity development theory, Gilligan's (1982) women identity and moral development, Cross and Helm's (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1990) racial and ethnic identity development, and Cass' (1976) sexual orientation development) help leadership educators understand the process by which students discover their "abilities, aptitude, and objectives" while supporting them to realize their "maximum effectiveness" (American Council on Education, 1994, p. 69). Identity is shaped by how one organizes experiences within the environment (context) that revolves around oneself (Erikson, 1959, 1994). Across academic disciplines, the view of how individuals organize experiences takes on varying definitions. Within the research community, identity is commonly understood as one's personally held beliefs about the

self in relation to social groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) and the ways an individual expresses that relationship (Schwartz et al., 2011). However, are leadership educators and scholars framing the context of leadership in the most ideal way to examine identity?

Examining identities as distinct, independent variables is much easier to accomplish methodologically and is one way of "managing the complexity" of intersecting identities (McCall, 2005). Some researchers have moved toward embracing this complexity through qualitative methodological strategies that allow for more closely examining the realities of lived experience. However, examining intersecting identities has inherent challenges and is difficult to address methodologically. The challenge, as Bowleg (2008) suggested, is "how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach" (p. 314). What this means for educators is that the presence of

intersecting identities (e.g., Asian American students with disabilities) does not necessarily constitute an intersectional approach. Indeed, all individuals possess multiple social identities. However, each is typically treated as distinct and independent. Rather, intersectionality centers analysis on how student experiences are enmeshed in systems of power and inequality.

Identity within the leadership context is the next frontier in leadership scholarship. In 2011, Haslam and colleagues posited the formation of an identity approach to leadership. Within this approach it became clear that the study of both identity and leadership requires contextualization. Additionally, all leadership does not depend on the "quality of the leaders alone but rather of the relationship between leaders and followers" (Haslam et al., 2011, p. 45). Relationships frame our identities, and identities are both observable and hidden within the leader and follower. This complex interplay suggests more intersectional investigation.

While identity and the leader are often researched, the scholarship is light on studies of how the leader's identity is understood, enacted, managed, or otherwise present in leadership. Much of the recent scholarship contributing to an identity approach to leadership centers on the follower's perspective (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2001; Postmes & Branscombe, 2010; Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010; Tyler & Blader, 2003). Likely this is due to the social psychology background of the original theory of social identity leadership (Hogg, 2001a) underpinning the approach. A more limited and narrow view exists of the leader's perspective of their own identity and its role in their leadership.

Understanding a leader's perception of identity within leadership has implications for the field. As Petriglieri (2012) conceptualized, leadership development programs are "identity workspaces" that help meet the demand for effective leadership by benefiting the individual, the organization, and society. A leader's identity refers to the extent that an individual self-identifies as a leader and contemplates the leader role as a key part of whom he or she is (Day, et al., 2009). Leader identities serve as a motivating and organizing force necessary for thinking and behaving as a leader along with pursuing and engaging in leadership development opportunities (Day & Harrison, 2007). Thus, leadership educators stand to benefit from understanding the complexity of identity within the context of leadership for the purposes of leadership education and development.

Purpose and Research Question

The primary purpose of the present study was to understand how a leader's identity is experienced within their own leadership context. Our interest was to describe how a leader's leadership is affected by their salient identities.

Methodology

This study, conducted as part of a larger study exploring leadership and identity, focused on the experience of leaders and how their identity intersects with their leadership. The core population of this study was student leaders at Texas A&M University (TAMU), which is a large, Research One, land-grant university in the south United States. The institution enrolls over 60,000 students annually and is considered a predominately white institution. TAMU also has a reputation for student leadership and engagement ("Texas A&M University", 2020). The methodological approach for this study was qualitative in nature, as qualitative inquiry research helps comprehend processes or phenomena within experience (Bamberger, 2000). Because the purpose of the study was to understand how a leader experiences their identity within the context of leadership, a constructivist epistemology was used

to enact a phenomenological approach. Specifically, a hermeneutical phenomenological methodology was employed.

In The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offered a definition of qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices … turn the world into a series of representations including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Research on the leader's perspective of identity within the context of leadership is scant; a qualitative paradigm aids this exploratory research.

A constructivist perspective assisted in the attainment of the research's purpose, as the meaning leaders ascribe to the role of identity in leadership was of interest. The meaning then was derived by the lived experience of the leaders who participated. Both identity and leadership researchers recognize the social construction of each discipline, and "the way in which people being studied understand and interpret their social reality is one of the central motifs of qualitative research" (Bryman, 1988, p. 8). In terms of background, social constructivism has roots in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1970). Thus, a phenomenological methodology connects well to this research approach, ontology, and epistemology.

A hermeneutical phenomenological methodology was chosen (van Manen, 1990). Merriam (2002) asserted that "qualitative research attempts to find out how people make meaning or interpret a phenomenon" (p. 68). Leadership researchers have typically used quantitative approaches; however, to better understand complex, embedded phenomena such as identity and leadership, qualitative approaches to studying leadership are also necessary (Alvesson, 1996; Bryman, Stephens, & à Campo, 1996; Conger, 1998). A hermeneutical phenomenology was chosen over empirical, transcendental, and psychological phenomenologies (Moustakas, 1994). This was because this particular approach suggests that researchers first turn to a phenomenon, an "abiding concern" (p. 31), that seriously interests them (e.g., running, mothering, learning). The researcher is also involved in interpreting the phenomenon as they, too, have experienced it. In this case, the phenomenon was a leader's experience of their identity within their leadership.

Sampling. Purposeful sampling procedures were utilized in this study. Specifically, intensity sampling to identify "intensity-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely" (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Study participants included 166 undergraduate, graduate, and professional-school students currently holding positional leadership roles within recognized student organizations or who were emerging leaders. Emerging leaders were students who may not hold a formal leadership position but were nominated to participate in the study because of his or her leadership abilities observed by a staff or faculty member at the research site. As part of the larger study, participants were asked to attend a 30-minute, in-person research meeting. At this meeting, participants experienced the following Institutional Review Board–approved protocol: (a) completing an informed consent, (b) being facilitated through the completion of an Identity Wheel Activity paper worksheet, and (c) completing an online survey including the AIQ-IV (Cheek & Briggs, 2013). The AIQ instrument suggested the intensity with which an individual ascribes him- or herself to one of four identity orientations (i.e., personal, relational, social, and collective).

Because the intent of the present study was to explore identity regardless of the level of identity process, all four identity orientations were desired. Thus, the sample of participants purposefully included representation from each identity orientation. Participant identity orientation was determined by their highest weighted mean score within the AIQ-IV. Intensity sampling consisted of inviting participants with the highest associations of each identity orientation. In addition to diversifying the identity orientations based on results from the AIQ, participants were intentionally diversified based on the identifiers listed on their Identity Wheel Activity (i.e., race, gender, characteristics, and relationships) and by the context in which they practice their leadership (i.e., student organization, employment, faith community, etc.). All invited participants wrote about their experience of how their identity is active in their leadership on their Identity Wheel Activity. Thus, they experienced the phenomenon of interest to the present study.

A total of 22 participants were selected based on their quantitative responses and were invited to participate in a face-to-face interview, of which 13 interviews were conducted, at which time data saturation was achieved. Given (2016) considered data saturation as the point at which "additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes" (p. 135). As Polkinghorne (1989) recommended, researchers ought to interview from five to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. Thus, data saturation was achieved within this data collection method and the literature.

Table 1 presents the participants who experienced the phenomenon. Participants are presented by their own chosen pseudonym selected during the research meeting. Their leadership context, position or role, and other selected demographics, including race and religion, are also included. These data were collected from a demographic questionnaire where participants could select an option provided for race, gender, religion, etc. or write in their own response.

Table 1
Participant Table

Pseudonym	Context	Role	Race	Gender	Age	Religion	Sexual Orientation	Class
Andre Jones	Employment	Resident Advisor	White	Male	21	None	Gay	Middle Class
Andrew	Stu. Org.	Vice President	African American	Male	19	Christian	Gay	Middle Class
Autumn	Stu. Org.	Safety Officer	White	Female	21	Evangelical Christian	Straight	Upper Class
Bruce	Stu. Org.	President	Asian	Male	26	Hindu	Heterosexual	Middle Class
Elizabeth	Stu. Org.	Social Chair	White	Female	23	Agnostic	Bisexual	Middle Class
Finesse	Academic	Leader	African American	Female	20	Christian	Heterosexual	Middle Class
Johnny	Faith	Retreat Leader	White/ Portuguese	Male	20	Catholic	Heterosexual	Middle-Middle Class
Marie	Stu. Org.	President	Hispanic	Female	28	Catholic	Heterosexual	Middle Class
Mimirou	Stu. Org.	Co-Chair	Black	Woman	19	Catholic	Bisexual	Upper- Middle Class
Rat Commander	Stu. Org.	Unit Commander	Hispanic	Male	31	Nondenomi-national	Straight	Working Class
Scott	Stu. Org.	Social Chair	White	Male	18	Atheist	Heterosexual	Middle-Middle Class
Shawarma	Stu. Org.	Social Chair	Middle Eastern	Male	19	Maronite Catholic	Heterosexual	Middle Class
Trisha	Employment	Researcher	Asian	Female	26	Secular	Bisexual	Upper-Middle Class

Data Collection. Using the results of the quantitative component of the larger study, intensive interviewing was utilized, which means a "gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perspective on their personal experience with the research topic" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 56). Additional key characteristics of intensive interviewing considered in the design were (a) selection of research participants who have first-hand experience fitting the research topic, (b) in-depth exploration of a participant's experience, (c) reliance on open-ended questions, (d) objective of obtaining detailed responses, (e) emphasis on understanding perspective, meanings, and experience or research participants, and finally (f) practice of following up on unanticipated areas of inquiry, hints, etc. (Charmaz, 2006). In the case of this study, the open-ended questions focused on identity within the context of leadership.

Questions were framed around the topics above and were ordered in initial, intermediate, and ending questions to aid in rapport building and sharing by the participant (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, the in-person research meeting, which preceded the in-depth interview, was designed to increase rapport between the researcher and participant. This was determined helpful due to the nature of the research topic. Researchers must center the rapport-building process from their first interaction with a participant to build a research relationship that will enable the researcher to access the participant's story (Ceglowski, 2000; Goodwin, et al., 2003; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2004; Minichiello, et al., 2008; Payne & Westwell, 1994; Taylor, et al., 2015).

The participants were asked two broad questions (Moustakas, 1994): (1) "What role do you think identity plays in leadership – if any" and (2) "In what ways is [identity] active for you in your leadership?" Other open-ended questions were also asked, but these two, especially, focused on gathering data leading to a textual description and a structural description of the experiences and ultimately provided an understanding of the common experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Different identities were included in the interview to enable describing the phenomenon across various identities and identifiers (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, characteristics, and religious affiliation), as well as from differing identity orientations.

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also included in analysis. It is understood that field notes in qualitative studies are a vital component of rigorous research. The majority of qualitative methods encourage researchers to take field notes provide rich context for analysis and enhance the data (Creswell, 2013; Lofland, et el., 2005; Mulhall, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis. We used the psychologist Moustakas's (1994) approach to phenomenology because it has systematic steps in the data analysis procedure and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions.

Building on the data from the first and second key interview questions, I reviewed the interview transcriptions and highlighted significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon of their identity within their leadership. Moustakas (1994) calls this step horizontalization. Next, we developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements, which later emerged as themes.

These significant statements used to form the themes were then used to write a description of what the participants experienced. These textual descriptions were then used to write a description of the context or setting influencing how the participants experienced the phenomenon, called imaginative variation or structural description (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) added a further step in which the researcher writes about their own experiences and the context and situations influencing their experiences. To shorten Moustakas's procedures, we have included them below in a methods discussion of the role of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

From the structural and textual descriptions, we then wrote a composite description presenting the "essence" of the phenomenon. It is a descriptive passage, a long paragraph or two, from which

the reader should come away with the feeling, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

Role of the Researcher. For this purpose, the role of the researcher was that of constructivism. At its simplest, constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed; in other words, individuals make meaning of their world by constructing their own models or representations of their experiences (Jonassen, et al., 1999).

We believe that knowledge cannot be passively amassed, but rather is the outcome of active cognitive processes undertaken by individuals as they organize and make meaning of their experiences. Constructivism has been instituted by the work of individuals such as Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, Kant, and Kuhn (Phillips, 1995). As a constructivist leader, I, as the primary author, explore the way things were by speaking to the people who were there. Then, individuals use that knowledge to determine how things should be and find ways to get there. All this is done in a context within which everyone involved can relate. Inherently, this study worked to construct meaning from shared experiences on how identity influences the leader and their development. Additionally, I often work to be consciously aware of my own personal, relational, social, and collective identity (e.g., white, queer, male) as it relates to my own leadership. This awareness and consideration of my identity within my own leadership practice was the motivation for this study.

At first, my own identity motivated me to affiliate with student organizations and now community groups, for instance, by seeking out German Club or the LGBTQ professional organization. These identity spaces were places I first desired to affiliate with and then lead. Of course, my identity first made me relate to and belong with these groups. Then, my identity, in conjunction with my desire to influence the outcomes of the group, motivated my leadership.

On the other hand, I also joined organizations and groups where an identity was not the paramount focus. These groups were Residence Hall Staff Council and student activism efforts for shared governance.

These groups comprised a heterogeneous mix of members of various identities. These spaces were not identity-focused, but my own awareness of my identities (both marginalized and privileged) shaped my leadership, for instance, by creating positions on the leadership team charged with inclusion or diversity goals and by realizing how my identity as a male may be experienced by the women with whom I worked. Overall, identity remains a consistent factor considered in all my leadership contexts. While the way in which my identity influence changes based on my context, it remains an important consideration.

The second author supervised the research, contributed to the rigor of the data analysis by verifying textual descriptions and their connections to participant transcript excerpts, and provided guidance to the primary author as his major professor. The second author too has experience with the phenomenon being investigated as a white, woman, heterosexual leader. Therefore, her perspectives also aided in developing a richer thick description of themes.

Limitations. For this study, we employed a phenomenological framework. As with any phenomenological study, the participants in the study need to be carefully selected. This is because the individuals must have all experienced the phenomenon in question so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a shared understanding. Additionally, this methodology also required participants to be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings about the experience being studied. Because identity and leadership are often discussed independently, discussing them within their intersection could have proved challenging. Furthermore, depending on the identity, it may have been sensitive for a participant to discuss. Finally, it is important to understand the single research site provides a unique context where particular shared experiences may lead to common identity characteristics. For example, connection to the university mascot or dominate identity narratives may manifest in findings. This again illustrates the need for additional context-specific leadership research at additional research sites.

Results presented in this study—regardless of the sample size—did not produce generalizable data. This was not the intent of this qualitative study.

Findings

When discussing the phenomenon of identity within the context of leadership, leaders revealed three themes within their experiences. These themes aid in achieving the primary purpose of the research to understand how a leader's identity is experienced within their own context of leadership. Textual descriptions are provided for each of the three themes of (a) awareness and salience (b) leader differentiation and context affiliation, and (c) identity as a situational factor in leadership. If a theme contains a subtheme, additional textual descriptions are provided.

Before delving into themes of the participant experiences, I articulate some of the action verbs used to describe how salient identity is experienced within leadership. First, Andre Jones, when asked, matter-of-factly shared, "I mean, they guide my leadership." Scott was very clear in his use of the actions preforming identity in his leadership, at first describing some identities as the motor for his leadership and later as an informing factor. For Andrew, identity was a differentiating perspective in his leadership. Finesse described identity in the way that it "empowers me to [lead]." While the role in which identity is situated in leadership varied, these themes encompassed the operationalizations.

Awareness and Salience.   When leaders described their identity in the context of their leadership, identity importance and awareness were attributed. While identities and identifiers discussed by leaders as within their leadership spanned race, sex, sexual orientation, citizenship status, student classification, relationship identifier, and others, the majority of the 13 participants mentioned personal or group awareness, salience, or the importance as underpinning the involvement of identity in their leadership.

Within the awareness and salience theme, Rat Commander described, "Well, [identity is] important for me, too, just because I guess some of the experiences that I encounter. You don't want to have these blinders up to these things, you would like to think that these things don't exist in the world, but they do." Thus, Rat Commander suggested that identity adds an awareness element to his leadership. Finesse discussed awareness as well, but also suggested that she (Finesse's pronoun) adapts within her leadership:

> Being aware. I think it just makes me, I wouldn't say hypersensitive, but I'm always aware of my language, my tone of voice, my speech, that goes into being African American. Like when I raise my voice I'm not just [Finesse] raising her voice being assertive. I can be perceived as [Finesse] the angry, black woman, or [Finesse] just the angry black person who's always angry.

Overall, leaders were aware of their own identity and the identity of others in their leadership. Andre Jones commented, "They play an active role in my thought process in what I do when I'm leading." Finally, Johnny reflected on how his faith identity informs his values and therefore his leadership. "I guess the most important way that it's active in my leadership is that, in the Catholic faith you learn about being loving to other people and also glorifying God through your actions." He continued, "So going off being loving to other people. That's a huge part to leadership." Because of his Christian identity, there seems to have been an awareness of how his church experience contributed to his development and therefore his leadership. Across these participants, there is an awareness of identities within their leadership context. The impetus for this identity awareness seems to vary by participant, but the awareness nonetheless influences leadership.

This awareness and salience led to the subtheme of visibility or recognition by others. For instance, for Trisha, her female identity was active in her (Trisha's pronoun) leadership. She articulated, "Pretty much what is visible from people who are around me, what they can see about me, those are the ones that I starred." Mimirou also echoed this awareness

through visible identities when she (Mimirou's pronoun) shared the following:

> You can look at me and tell that I'm a black woman, that's not particularly hard to decipher, and so that visual, being able to see that I identify as a black woman, my influence, my experiences, but for me at least personally, I think that my sum of experiences throughout my life has really helped shape and change my identity.

Another way in which certain identities were active in leadership emerged when they were recognized first by others. Trisha shared that her self-identifier of being self-critical is active in her leadership because of confirmation by others. "I try to be self-critical of myself to an extent, then people around me look at it and acknowledge it, it's more of reassurance for me that, 'Yes, I am this kind of person.'" Johnny elaborated on this subtheme while contextualizing where his mentor identity within his (Johnny's pronoun) student organization role comes from:

> I was the president of the Future Farmers of America club, so the FFA. I was the president of that, so I was a leader, and then someone told me that they saw me as a mentor and that I kind of like put them under their wing, or they were under my wing. After that, is when I guess I understood that identity. So first I was a leader, then someone told me they saw me as a mentor, and then I practiced more on that.

While the visible participant identities including race and gender were sometimes described by leaders as the reality of their leadership, the identities, like self-critical and mentor, were more ascribed by others according to the leader's perspectives. Either way, these identities were salient to the leader, or they became salient due to them being regularly ascribed to the leader.

Leader Differentiation and Context Affiliation. The other shared experience by participants were two concepts often found together in the analysis.

Leaders were often drawn to the particular leadership context (e.g., student organization, employment, or faith community) due to their identities. Then, within these leadership contexts where they share identities with group members, participants focused on how their identities differentiated themselves from others. Scott summarized this interplay of concepts when he described, "… identity definitely plays an important part in leadership roles in both being the leader and selecting what to be a leader in."

To illustrate the first concept of how identity influences the participant's affiliation with the leadership context in the first place, Johnny reflected, "If someone identifies like me, in agriculture, they're more prone to be a leader in agriculture. I really just think that the only important part of the identity is what they're going to lead in." Scott discussed a similar sentiment in identity, connecting it to the focus of his identity-based organization, a secular student association, when he shared the following:

> I have said that it's really important for me personally to align with the organization that I'm representing, but that might not be true for everyone. If someone really, really cares about this one particular issue or thing, even if they might not align themselves with anything else that an organization might represent, if that's sufficiently important to them, then sure, go for it.

These affiliations with the leadership context led some participants to describe their feeling of relatability with followers due to their identity. Identity led to relatability in their leadership because of the connection to others within the organization. Shawarma asserted this experience with other students who identify similarly to him (Shawarma's pronoun) in an Arab student organization. He recalled, "Being able to relate to experience, culture, those types of things, and how that gives you trust or insight into the people you're around or working with."

This was echoed by Autumn with her (Autumn's pronoun) Greek Life organization and by Rat

Commander in his Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) unit. Finally, not only is identity a draw to particular leadership contexts, it may aid with decision making to narrow a leader's options. Scott shared the following:

> …identity definitely told me where I wasn't going to go. Like, I know what things I'm interested in, but I also know what things I'm super not interested in, and so my religious identity sort of informs my decision to not participate in most religious organizations.

While this may be more associated within identity-based organizations, this experience was described in a comparable way in less clearly identity-based leadership contexts. Thus, the leader's identity led to the participant's motivation to serve in leadership positions. For instance, Andre Jones described how his identity was a part of his leadership role as a resident assistant:

> I had some issues with myself coming to terms with being gay. And I realized, wow, other people could have those same issues when they don't identify as what people think is the 'norm.' So that's given me the ability to understand people and become more understanding of their situation and then make accommodations for them if they need it in terms of what they need to be an effective follower.

Thus, Andre Jones's gay identity aided in his ability to relate to different groups or individuals within his employment. This motivated him to apply for this particular leadership position in the first place.

The other concept connected to context and group affiliation is how leaders described how their identities differentiate themselves from the group. For instance, Marie described the identities with which she (Marie's pronoun) identifies:

> So, I started with being a woman, just like … Kind of like when I tried to do my intro speech, elevator pitch. I try to identify as a woman, as a Latina, a grad student, and

then I started more with descriptions that the people mention about me, or even in those strength tests …

Then she began to share a different set of identifiers that she began connecting to her leadership. Marie continued later in the interview, saying the following:

> I think more … I was describing kind of in myself that that's … To be a leader, you don't need to be a specific … Like a woman, like a Latina or grad student, but I feel that you definitely need to be responsible, organized, honest, and then ethical and persistent if you actually want to carry out an idea. So, that was more the characteristic for being in leadership, and then the others were characteristics about myself. So, if an African American has the same characteristics for leadership, they could be a great leader, even if it's a male or another race.

Marie differentiated that some identities are more associated with a person and not necessarily a leader or within leadership. This differentiation resonated with other participants when they described the identities they employ to distinguish themselves as leader within a group. Bruce confirmed this notion when he shared, "You might relate to everybody in terms of ethnicity or being an international student, but when it comes to communication skills or the semi-professional skills, you should be able to stand out." Bruce focused on his identifiers of differentiation:

> I think the identities that I mentioned in general differentiate you from others or give you an edge, so you stand out. I think one of the main characteristics of a leader would be that they stand out in the crowd, and on the other hand, which might seem contradictory, a leader should be able to relate to everybody. That's where the other identities come into play.

In sum, this theme contends that participant identity within leadership serves as a mechanism for connection as well as differentiation.

Identity as a Situational Factor in Leadership. The final theme that emerged when discussing identity within the context of leadership was the way identity is a situational factor in participant leadership. Andrew summarized this shared experience:

> I definitely think in certain situations your identity can play an important role into what you're doing. Sometimes it may not play an important role at all, so definitely when you're leading the situation, you're probably going to be more of the less-identifiable person, so you're not going to be your individual self in that situation. You're going to be more catered to the group because if you try to cater to one person you're going to leave out the rest, so in situations where it's diverse you kind of have to be more caterable to the crowd, but if you're in a situation where everyone's decision is the same or more the same, you can definitely use your identifiers to have a bigger impact on that crowd.

Andrew, in the description above, seems to manage identity as a tool within his leadership. There is a reference to how this situational consideration of identity may relate to leader effectiveness. Andrew concluded by saying, "Sometimes, your identifiers can help you be more impactful if you know the situation where, again, it makes sense and be powerful in that situation". Later, Andrew circled back to this idea when he reflected out loud, "So just in the situation, it's kind of like you have to turn certain identities off in order to, I guess, be more effective towards people." He went on to say the following:

> You start talking about certain things in one crowd, they're going to disconnect, and then you're just going to start losing people, so you kind of just have to be aware of what's going on … you're not going to say the same thing to children to adults.

Andrew was describing identity as a factor in influencing groups. Marie discussed a time in which identity may contribute to leader effectiveness in particular situations. She described the role of a diversity dean at the university. She shared, "… your personal background could help you to be … depending on the role, to be more effective … to have more empathy with the situation." She elaborated by describing an African American and white woman who were being considered for this role and why she believed the African American candidate might be more effective as a leader. She concluded, "So, there's some that your role can make it … I mean, your personal background could make you a better leader in the role, but then that doesn't mean that others could not fulfill the role."

Identity as a situational factor was also described by participants in other ways for leader effectiveness. Mimirou articulated the situational leadership context of her student organization and how it elicits her black identity:

> Outside of [student organization], it's honestly not something that I think about. Part of it's probably the way that I was raised. My parents were always just like, 'Yeah, you're black. Yeah, you're African, but it's not a big deal. You're just a person.' And so yeah, I don't think in other leadership contexts it necessarily is as active.

Mimirou experienced this theme differently as she made it known that the importance of her black identity is not the same within other leadership contexts. Thus, leadership context is a situational factor for Mimirou. Overall, identity was expressed as a situational factor in leadership for participants. Essence and Conclusions. In conclusion, the essence of the three themes cues the articulation of the experienced phenomenon of a leader's identity within the context of leadership. This phenomenon includes identities spanning demographic groups (e.g., race, gender, religion), leadership contexts (e.g., employment, student organizations), and personal identities (e.g., self-critical, honest).

A leader's awareness and salience of their identities contribute to their development as a leader or their

own mindfulness in performing leadership. A leader's identities guide the determination of how they come to affiliate with the leadership context and followers. Plus, salient identities aid leaders in differentiating themselves within the group—possibly aiding with leader emergence. Finally, identity is a situational factor that leaders consider as supportive of their effectiveness.

As Scott posited, "I think that identity should absolutely be an informing factor for leadership, I don't think it should be a deciding factor." Scott articulated the conundrum of which comes first—identity informing leadership or leadership informing identity:

> So I don't know. I definitely do think leadership could inform identity, but it's difficult to see that first step being taken, depending on your identity to begin with. So definitely, like, a leadership role could make someone more social, but if they wanted to stay as far away from people as possible to begin with, would they ever consider that? I don't know. Probably not.

Thus, Scott established the age-old "which comes first" argument—the chicken or the egg? Does identity salience inform leadership, or does leadership inform identity salience? Can they occur simultaneously? When Mimirou was asked, "Do you think that identity influences leadership?" she replied, "I think it can," and when asked in follow-up which direction was more powerful, she asserted, "I would definitely say identity to leadership." These two concluding thoughts may situate implications for future research and practice.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

There are a number of implications for further research and practice that became evident from the present study: (a) further investigating identity salience within leadership for informing research and practice, (b) considering the attribution processes and how leaders describe this within leadership in juxtaposition to the existing perspectives of followers,

and (c) identifying implications for how identity is considered a situational factor within leadership, which may or may not relate to the contingency approach to leadership.

Not surprising as emergent within this phenomenological study was the theme of awareness and salience. As Hogg et al. (1995) posited, "Identity salience is conceptualized (and operationalized) as the likelihood that the identity will be invoked in diverse situations" (p. 257). Identity that is salient in a leader's life may also be salient within their leadership. Thus, this theme confirms existing identity research in this area. To illustrate further, Finesse's experience as an African American is an identity important in her life, as well as in her leadership. There is a difference in the function of identity and the role it plays within leadership.

The theme of leader differentiation and context affiliation leads to the next implications for research and practice. These shared experiences within this leader-focused study suggest similarities to the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001a). Within this model, which situates Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory, the explanatory nature of the model suggests leader prototypicality, social attraction, attribution, and information processes. While this model is based on follower perspectives within a social psychology lab, leaders are confirming aspects in the model using similar but distinctive language. For instance, the model refers to leader prototypicality; however, leaders within this study described a similar sense of identity with the group as relatability. As discussed by Shawarma in his Arab student organization, groups with more prototypicality (e.g., salient group membership) can suggest that a leader with similar identities to the salient group membership will aid in leadership. As for social attraction, this might be where the leader-focused phenomenon differs from the follower-focused model. According to Hogg (2001b), social attraction is when more prototypical members tend to identify more strongly and thus display more pronounced group behaviors. Hogg (2001b) continued that leaders "will be more normative, show greater ingroup loyalty and ethnocentrism, and

generally behave in a more group serving manner" (p. 189). This pronounced nature of social attraction within the model was described differently by participants of this study. Study participants focused on how the differentiations within the group aid them in emerging and enduring in their leadership positions. This may be an intersection of further research to determine if social attraction process is something a leader is aware of consciously in their leadership. Finally, the information processes and attribution component of the model concerns itself with attribution process groups in which members make sense of others' behavior (Hogg, 2001a). As shared in this theme, participants shared their experience and sense-making of their interactions of identity with their leadership. It is important to note that this aspect of the model also includes the sense-making of followers. Thus, another implication for research is what attribution process might leaders possess that are distinct from that of followers? For example, Finesse mentioned her black identity and how she is aware of others treating her differently due to her race. Because of her leadership, what attribution is different for her due to her leadership positioning in this regard? Luckily, some research has explored this more richly in the field, but often does so with only one identity in intersection with leadership (e.g., women's leadership, black leadership). Thus, it is recommended to review existing research of these forms of intersection from various identities, paying particular attention to the leader attribution process.

Finally, implications are discussed for the situational factor in which identity might play a role in leadership. It important that the situational role discussed here is differentiated from the situational or contingency approach to leadership (Northouse, 2016). As Fiedler (1964) asserted, both a leader's personality and operational situation matter to leadership. The contexts, or situations, emphasized in this approach are the organizational and leadership contexts. The way in which participants described the situational factors in which identity matters are related to the organization/group contexts, the followers, and the external perceptions of identity. There is also a situational element to the experience explained

by participants. Among these considerations by participants are leadership context, leader identity, and the perceptions of followers. Thus, Fiedler (1964) may have been incorporating identity within his original assertion. More research might be able to determine the ways in which this phenomenon aligns with this approach and where they are distinct.

Implications for practice do focus on reflective practices that encourage leaders to consider identity in their leadership. Rat Commander argued the following:

> I think [identity] does play a role in some capacity, I just … It's hard for me, unless I sat down and went through this kind of exercise and this reflection, would I know that these are the components of my identity as a leader. I think that, like I said, they do have a place, but unless you find a way to bring those things out, then you can still probably be an effective leader, a bad leader, if you didn't know these things.

Thus, Rat Commander provided the impetus for the final implication. Identity and its intersection with leadership warrants inclusion in leadership education and development programs. Mimirou concluded her interview by saying, "No. I'm really interested by this 'cause it's just something I had never thought of before." As mentioned previously, Petriglieri (2011) conceptualized leadership development programs as "identity workspaces" that aid effective leadership by benefiting the individual, the organization, and society. Thus, spaces that permit, create, and hold space for reflection on such central topics are paramount to leadership development. Infusing the themes articulated in this study in leadership development and education programs may provide a groundwork for exploring an identity approach to leadership. Reflection questions could include "How is identity an informing factor in your leadership?", "In what ways does your identity connect you to and differentiate you from the group you lead?", and "Describe a time in which a greater understanding of your own or your group members' identities may have aided you in your leadership effectiveness."

Overall, an essence was captured as to how a leader's salient identity—spanning many personal and social identities—is experienced within leadership. Recommendations were presented related to future research and current practice in leadership education and development. In sum, the present study contributes to the notion that an identity approach to leadership is warranted.

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