

## ACTIVE IDENTITIES AND THEIR LEVELS IN COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP

### Abstract

Identity has emerged as a compelling force in understanding leadership. Situated within the identity approach to leadership, this study explored identity within the context of leadership for both assigned (i.e., positional) and emergent (i.e., nonpositional) student leaders. Findings from this study suggest that a distinct set of a leader's identities is active in college student leadership and that personal identities are most salient to leaders. By making connections between identity and leadership, educators and practitioners may strengthen their understanding of how their curriculum and workshops may serve as identity workspaces for leaders.

### Introduction

Identity has emerged as a potent force in understanding leadership (Ibarra et al., 2014), but until the turn of the millennium identity was just a minor research issue in the leadership field (Lord, et al., 1999; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007). After a clustered production of scholarship in the area (Carroll & Levy, 2010; Day & Harrison, 2007; Hogg, 2001a, 2001b; Ibarra et al., 2014; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord & Hall, 2005; Petriglieri, 2012; Snook et al., 2010; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; van Knippenberg et al., 2004), Haslam et al. (2011) articulated the emergence of an identity approach to leadership. Distinctly different, but not completely disregarding other approaches, the identity approach worked to center followers and the identity process within the context of leadership. To frame this study, we review identity theory, the importance of examining identity within context, and

finally the role identity as leader.

Identity Theory. Lührmann and Eberl (2007) held that identity theory provides a suitable theoretical basis to gain deeper understanding into leadership. Basically, individual-focused identity research causes four primary issues that are of enormous importance for understanding leadership. First, identity is about motivation, and according to the work of Shamir, House and Arthur (1993), Hogg (2001a), and Lord, Gatti, and Chui (2016), leaders and followers are motivated to act in ways consistent with their identities. Another issue is that identity is about authenticity and conformity. From one perspective, followers must obey the expectations of their social surroundings (i.e., groups or individuals) if they want to be perceived as leaders. On the other hand, the beliefs and visions communicated by leaders must reflect something of what the leader really is. The third

issue of identity is about power. Analyzing the work of Foucault (1982), they acknowledged that power is not some external force but rather an internalized part of individual identity. With this line of thinking, Deetz (1995) contended that “the modern business of management is often managing the ‘insides’ . . . of workers rather than their behaviors directly” (p. 87), making power an interconnected element to identity. Finally, the fourth issue is that identity is about relationships. As researchers (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Komives et al., 2009; Komives et al., 2006) have suggested, leader identity is a direct result of the leader-follower relationship. Thus, identity theory draws leadership scholars’ attention to the point that leadership is relational (Chemers, 2014; Grint, 2000). It “is not something the leader possesses” (Hollander, 1993, p. 29), but rather a social phenomenon. These four issues focus on the need for leadership scholars to thoroughly explore, in an empirical way, the role of identity within the context of leadership for college students. This is of particular importance as there is no monolithic college student.

An identity theory of importance to leadership researchers understanding are levels of identity. For instance, Johnson, et al. (2012) reported finding that collective identity is positively related to transformational leadership behaviors. Further, research in the area of leadership development suggests that successful leaders move beyond developing a personal identity to also developing a strong sense of collective identity (Ibarra et al., 2014). This has been confirmed by Lord and Hall (2005) and Day and Harrison (2007), who echoed that novice leaders emphasize individual identities, whereas more experienced leaders emphasize a more collective identity.

Understanding levels of identity also matters to leadership practitioners. Haslam et al. (2017) coined the 5R leadership development program. This five-stage process for leadership development relates to understanding identity processes of affiliation and

influence. In the end, a leader with an integrated individual, relational, and collective set of identities within an overall leader identity may be able to draw from any of these identities depending on the given leadership challenge. This insight an understanding could aid leadership practitioners in designing leadership curriculum, activities, and simulations.

**Identity in Context.** Several approaches to leadership have emphasized the importance of context, inciting Hollander and Julian (1969) to posit that leadership is highly contextualized, involving complex interactions among leaders, followers, and situations. Leadership is a process of reality construction (Smircich & Morgan 1982) that takes place within a specific context. This, then, provides a foundation to understand identity and identity processes within the leadership context for college students in particular.

Psychologists and sociologists echo the importance of context in understanding identity. Côté (1996) wrote that constructing a contextual approach to understanding identity is the biggest challenge now facing identity researchers. Many identity researchers have attempted to find a way to address this issue (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), but it remains important to ensure that identity research is grounded in context like college. Only within a context can identity processes be evaluated. Because identity salience is also contextual (Spears, 2011), it is important that context of leadership is explored separately as a distinct context.

The field of leadership education has also indicated its desire to explore identity within the leadership context. The National Leadership Research Agenda of the Association of Leadership Educators (Andenoro et al., 2013) has recommended that “leadership scholars and educators should more effectively center considerations of social identity in leadership research, education, and practice” (p. 19), noting that “considerations for the unique needs of varying

social identity groups related to effective pedagogical approaches and educational interventions are necessary" (p. 19). Even with this call to scholars, a review of the Association's Journal of Leadership Education yields moderate but disjointed work in this area.

**Leader Role Identity.** Lebrón (2018) looked at strategies for discussing social activism and social identity for the purpose of analyzing power and influence tactics for leadership education, while earlier, Brue and Brue (2018) analyzed leadership role identity and its impact on emergent leadership to improve opportunities for women in leadership. Additionally, contributing to this research agenda theme were Collins, et al. (2017), who investigated leadership capacity in their research comparing identity-based leadership immersion programs. Their study compared an all-black male program and black men in a separate racially and gender-diverse session. Early (2017) investigated the role played by race and gender pairings in leadership capacities for resident assistants who were paired with a mentor based on data obtained in a Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership report. Additionally, Preston-Cunningham, Elbert, and Dooley (2017) explored first-year female students' definitions of leadership after participating in a women's learning circle. Bowers, et al. (2016) focused on the gains associated with international and domestic student participation in leadership development; findings suggested that while similarly sized gains emerged, predictive factors differed for student increases in leadership skills. Intentionally, Tillapaugh and Haber-Curran (2016) interviewed four college men to unpack their leader perceptions of power and influence. Finally, Preston-Cunningham, et al. (2016) provided insight into African American males performing leadership at a predominately white institution. Journal of Leadership Education scholarship within this intersectional area is growing, but the foundation for identity process and leadership framework remains under investigated for student leadership.

**Conceptual Framework.** Most identity researchers share an understanding of identity processes as

three selves. The "individual self-comprises unique attributes, the relational self-comprises partner-shared attributes, and the collective self-comprise ingroup-shared attributes" (Sedikides et al., 2011, p. 98). By utilizing identity levels as a conceptual framework, the identities of leaders, as well as those identities active in themselves, can be better understood.

Well-established aspects of identity typically focus on one or more different "levels" at which identity may be defined: individual, relational, and collective senses of self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The distinction among these levels can be conceptualized, in part, as a distinction among different identity contents, but they can also refer to different kinds of processes by which identities are formed, maintained, or changed over time (Schwartz et al., 2011). Each of the three levels is summarized below to provide the conceptual framework for this study.

Individual or personal identity denotes aspects of self-definition (Schwartz et al., 2011). Marcia (1966) and Waterman (1999) suggested that this level includes goals, values, beliefs, and religious/spiritual beliefs (MacDonald, 2009), standards for behavior and decision making, and self-esteem/self-evaluation (Atkins et al., 2005).

The relational identity level is one's role in comparison to other people, which umbrellas identity concepts such as child, spouse, parent, coworker, supervisor, customer, etc. In contrast to personal identity, relational identities are defined and located within an interpersonal space (Bamberg, 2004; Chen et al., 2006). A common theme in these perspectives is the idea that identities cannot be established by individuals on their own due to a role or obligation (Schwartz et al., 2011).

Finally, collective identity "refers to people's identification with the groups and social categories with which they belong and the meanings that they give these social categories and groups, and the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes that result in identifying with them" (Schwartz et al., 2011, p. 3). Collective identity refers to membership in any form

of social group, including ethnicity (Taylor, 1997), nationality (Schildkraut, 2005, 2007), religion (Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005), and gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Identity levels may provide a unique avenue to understand college student leadership. To date, we are unaware of any studies which utilize this framework to examine college students. This framework may prove fruitful in understanding identity processes active in college student leadership and therefore can inform leadership education and development efforts.

**Purpose and Objectives.** The aim of this study was twofold: first, to understand what identities leaders possess, and second, to identify which identities are most salient in leaders' context of leadership. Along with the two primary questions, two further research objectives included the following: (a) Which identity levels (i.e., personal, relational, or collective) are prominent when analyzing the above questions? and (b) what are the primary leadership contexts of participants?

The open analysis of identity enables respondents to share, in an unrestricted way (e.g., open-ended questions), identities salient or important to leaders rather than a researcher-imposed identity framework. "Identity salience is conceptualized (and operationalized) as the likelihood that the identity will be invoked in diverse situations" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 257). Identities salient to leaders within a context-sensitive and perspective-sensitive (Haslam et al., 2011) manner are important tenants within an identity approach to leadership. Such an open method of determining salient identities in college-student leaders has not been studied in recent years, revealing a gap needing to be addressed within contemporary literature.

Additionally, this study sought to enhance understanding of the leadership phenomenon by understanding which identities matter most to college student leaders' leadership. Leadership is a unique context. Therefore, understanding a leader's salient identities is important because these self-views have

an increasingly important role as a metastructure that guides goal formation, knowledge access, actions, and interpretations of social reactions (Lord & Hall, 2005). This is where the provided identifiers were considered within identity levels (i.e., personal, relational, and collective)—all of which are significant to understanding leadership.

## Study Design

The core population of this study was student leaders at Texas A&M University, which is a large, Research One, land-grant university in the south United States. The institution enrolls over 65,000 students annually and is considered a predominately white institution. Texas A&M University also has a reputation for student leadership and engagement (Texas A&M University, n.d.).

**Paradigm.** Conducted as part of a larger study, this research employed a constructivist approach. The ontological position of constructivism is relativism. "Relativism is the view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Thus, this constructivist approach believes that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). This is because I, as the researcher, tend to rely upon the "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003, p. 8) and recognize the impact made on the research by their own background and experiences.

As Halberstam (1998) asserted, "there are selves behind the projects" (p. 63). For this reason, it is important for the researcher to acknowledge where they is situated within the research (Denzin, 1986, p. 12). For me, identity has been central in my own leadership. As a white, queer, cisgender male, most of my leadership development experiences have been with others with similar identities to my own, with only my queer identity as the exception. This identity made me question early on my own fit into the leadership paradigms I was learning. At present, my identity and its bound connection to my leadership are inseparable. For this reason, my own experience

fuels my interest in this line of scholarly inquiry.

The constructivist approach is common to both leadership and identity research, as constructivism encompasses two seemingly divergent views of learning: personal, where meaning is made by the individual, and social, where knowledge is constructed when the individual interacts socially (Merriam et al., 2007). This constructivist approach informed the design of the present study.

**Participants and Sampling.** Participants represented a criterion-type purposive sample, as all were required to meet an indicated criterion (Patton, 2015). The target population was leaders, regardless of being in a positional or nonpositional role. Intentional effort was made to detail the recruitment and sampling method to aid replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For positional leaders, the accessible population was undergraduate, graduate, and professional students at Texas A&M University who were currently holding or had recently held an officer position in one or more of the 1,076 recognized student organizations on campus. The organizations spanned 31 university-defined administrative categories including but not limited to academics, campus service, cultural/international, global services, honor, recreation, professional/career, social and political issues, spirit and tradition, and student government (Texas A&M University, n.d.). Using a roster method (Marsden, 1990), 6,052 students who were currently holding or had recently held officer positions within these organizations were invited to participate in this study via email. Email addresses were obtained from the public-facing rosters of the university's student organization recognition database. The roster contained positional leaders whose officer titles included chief student leader, president, treasurer, vice president, general officer, information technology (IT) officer, social chair, and others. As mentioned, participants were invited via email utilizing the Dillman Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). The Dillman et al. (2009) approach relies on personalized, repeated contact to boost response

rate. I personalized study recruitment emails by (a) using messages sent to each person by name (e.g., "Dear James Baldwin"), (b) tailoring each email subject and body with reference to the student organization name, and (c) referencing the officer position title of the participant. The survey recruitment email also explained how responses would benefit leadership research. For repeated contact, participants received (a) an email with a personalized survey link and (b) up to three reminder emails with personalized links to partial respondents and nonrespondents over a three-week period.

To recruit nonpositional leaders, a nomination process was utilized. A solicitation email was sent to 197 university faculty and staff members from over 19 units. Nominators in professional positions were invited to nominate undergraduate, graduate, and professional students whom they considered leaders. A total of 242 student leader nominations were made by faculty and staff. Once nominated, an individualized recruitment email was sent. The recruitment email was personalized to the participant using their name and referencing the nominator's name (Dillman et al., 2009). Two follow-ups using personalized links were sent if nominations were received prior to the final research meeting during the study's recruitment period.

Between both recruitment pathways, a total of 1,796 students responded, of whom 611 stated "yes" to their desire to attend a 30-minute research study meeting on the campus of the research site. When "yes" was selected, participants were then hyperlinked to an online sign-up system where they chose one of 18 research meetings, which were varied by day and time. The system automated a reminder email to participants 24 hours prior to the research meeting. Each research meeting was capped at 30 participants and ranged in attendance from 3 to 24.

Recruitment methods yielded a sample of 166 undergraduate, graduate, or professional students representing current leaders.

## Procedure

After receiving IRB-approval at the research meeting, a single protocol director utilized a script to facilitate the achievement of three primary objectives of the meeting. The use of a single protocol director and script aided dependability (Creswell, 2014), ensuring transparency and consistency in the participant experience and instruction. The protocol director was trained and the script reviewed by content experts (e.g., experienced with the methodology and leadership scholarship) and other members of the research team. The primary objectives of the research meeting included (a) obtaining informed consent, (b) completing an Identity Wheel Activity, and (c) completing an online demographic questionnaire. For the purposes of this study, the focus of this research is findings associated with the Identity Wheel Activity.

After obtaining informed consent, participants were guided through an established Identity Wheel Activity paper worksheet (Adams & Bell, 2016). The worksheet's previous use to elicit sharing of salient identities by practitioners (Adams & Bell, 2016) aided trustworthiness by using good practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The activity was selected to elicit social constructions from participants around the research topics of identity and leadership. The worksheet served as a product of meaning-making or sense-making (Weick, 1995) of social constructions for identity and leadership.

Sense-making, broadly defined, is activities and actions that "people [use to] make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves" (Weick, 1995, p. 15), as various mechanisms exist for making sense of ambiguous concepts. Participants were first asked, "In each circle below, list the ways in which you identify." Participants were also invited to add circles as needed. Next, after all participants at a research meeting completed this step, they were asked to star identities active in their leadership. The verb active was further explained to participants, but beforehand they were asked to be reflective before starring identifiers on their wheel as active, salient, or important to their leadership. Participants were also

given the option of not starring any identity. Next, participants were asked to rank-order the starred identities in order from most important or active in their leadership to least important or active in their leadership.

Finally, three reflection questions were posed to understand their leadership context. These questions included naming the leadership context, naming the primary context they considered when they connected their identity to their leadership, and providing a layperson's description of the organization, group, or context of their leadership.

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed using deductive, directed content analysis. Content analysis "is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text" (Weber, 1990, p. 9). Content analysis can be both a qualitative or quantitative research technique. The difference depends upon the procedure of analysis rather than the character of the data available (Selltiz et al., 1959). The words listed to describe the participant's Identity Wheel Activity were analyzed (deductive), along with their connections to the conceptual framework of identity levels (directed). Content analysis is appropriate for this study to aid in identifying patterns within the text elicited in the worksheet. Before the directed content analysis, frequencies were reported, along with the identifiers. The intent here was not to collapse identifiers completely, but to put similar associations together. For instance, misspellings by participants were combined with the properly spelled identifier. Additionally, the identifier of student was expressed as student, students, and university student. These were collapsed into one identifier for frequency reporting. Distinct identifiers like female and woman were kept independent. Variations were also listed, along with the more frequent identifier. For instance, graduate student and graduate students were collapsed together. This was intentional by the researcher so as not to confound potential differences between participant understandings of sex and gender. Then, directed content analysis was conducted.

Trustworthiness was established via triangulation with the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and auditability with the use of NVivo for the development of an audit trail. For instance, existing literature was connected within the discussion and implications to demonstrate the triangulation. The audit trail was kept in NVivo allowing for initial codes to be reviewed after being combined in themes. The software also enabled us to view the data source directly from which the code was derived. Content analysis also requires deciphering skills and pattern recognition to ensure that variations can be “rigidly and consistently applied so that other researchers or readers, looking at the same messages, would obtain the same or comparable results” (Berg, 2001, p. 241). For this study, I incorporated a peer debriefing technique to review the assigned identities to their respective identity level within the conceptual framework (Creswell, 2014).

Finally, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested three approaches for qualitative data analysis via content analysis: interpretative or constructivist, social anthropological, and collaborative social research. The constructivist research approach outlined above aligns well with this method. This content analysis approach provides a means for discovering the practical understandings of meanings and actions (Berg, 2004). Researchers with a more general interpretative orientation (dramaturgists, symbolic interactionists, etc.) are likely to organize or reduce data in order to uncover patterns of human activity, action, and meaning.

Limitations. First, the research site was a limitation. Because leadership and identity are both highly contextual, it is important to understand the research site as a limitation. The research site is a large, land-grant, conservative, Research One university in the south United States. The university boasts large enrollment students on campus with over 130 undergraduate degree programs, 170 master’s degree programs, and 93 doctoral degrees. This context must be recognized because other educational settings, university types (i.e., public, private), and missions may impact the student

experience. For instance, other universities may have a different student leadership paradigm or approach that may affect this type of research.

Additionally, the ambiguity of language and transferability. With complex, interconnected phenomena like identity and leadership, ambiguities in human language become a limitation. Ambiguities, which are inherent, are often uncovered in analysis of such a research design. For example, Atieno (2009) posited, “the word ‘red’ could be used in corpus to signify the color red, or a political categorization (e.g. socialism or communism)” (p. 17). When identifiers are single words or word phrases written by participants, the ambiguity causes difficulty in analysis or the sorting process.

Third, social desirability was a limitation. For instance, participants were student leaders who were asked to list identifiers in front of the protocol director. Thus, the participants may have filtered the identifiers they listed due to their perception of desirability by the research team member.

Finally, one of the main pitfalls of research designs is that when qualitative data are transformed to numbers, the data lose their flexibility and depth, which is one of the main advantages of qualitative research. This occurs because qualitative codes are multidimensional (Bazeley, 2004), while quantitative codes are one-dimensional and fixed, so, basically, changing rich qualitative data to dichotomous variables produces one-dimensional, immutable data (Driscoll et al., 2007). The conversion of the identifier active in leadership to a category loses this descriptive specificity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

The aim of the present study was twofold: first to understand what identities college student leaders possess and then to identify which identities are most salient in leaders’ contexts of leadership. We analyzed the identifiers and reported frequencies of each. Then we associated each identifier with one of the three identity levels (e.g., personal, relational,

Identities Leaders Possess. Table 1 presents the selected findings from the deductive content analysis of the 1,711 identifiers provided by participants. Participants averaged about 10 identifiers (M = 10.29) in their reflection on the ways they identify.

Identifiers, their frequencies, and, where applicable, variations in expression by participants are included in this table. This table addresses the first aim of the study.

Table 1.  
Frequencies of top identifiers and their variations

Identifier	Count	Variations
Leader	59	
Student	52	Students
Friend	46	
Female	40	
Male	39	
Aggies	32	Aggie
Daughter	32	
Sister	29	
Christian	29	Christian (Faith)
Woman	26	Women

Leader was the most predominant identifier among participants (n=59) using this identifier. Close behind, student was the second most commonly used identifier (n = 52) Third, friend was the third most frequent identifier used by participants when listing the ways in which they identify. Of note, female and woman were kept as independent identifiers and were not collapsed into one category. This was intentional to demonstrate the sense-making process.

Beyond the top 10 identifiers, in terms of their frequency and not necessarily their intensity/salience to individuals, there were 453 identifiers listed only once by study participants. Examples of identifiers with only one count included hopeful, bold, half-Portuguese, caver, foster, sassy, and romantic.

Table 2 presents the findings from the directed content analysis, which achieved the research objective of how leader identities are described in terms of identity level. The top five identifiers for each identity level are enumerated. For personal, there are six identifiers presented due to a tie. Considering each identifier as a separate code for analysis resulted in 1,711 units of data. Of these data,

39% (n = 679) were personal identities, 19% (n = 327) were relational identities, and 41% (n = 699) were collective identities.

For the personal identity level, introvert (n = 15), caring (n = 12), and independent (n = 11) were the highest shared identifiers. Leader (n = 59), friend (n = 46), and daughter (n = 32) were determined to be the most frequently used identifiers from the relational identity level. The final identity level was collective. The most common identifiers named by participants were student, female, and male, with frequencies of 52, 40, and 39, respectively.

Table 2.

Top identifiers of leaders by identity level.

Identity Level	Top Identifiers	F
<i>Personal Identity</i>	1. Introvert	15
	2. Caring	12
	3. Independent	11
	4. Researcher	9
	5. Extrovert	8
<i>Relational Identity</i>	5. Honest	8
	1. Leader	59
	2. Friend	46
	3. Daughter	32
	4. Sister	29
<i>Collective Identity</i>	5. Son	17
	1. Student	52
	2. Female	40
	3. Male	39
	4. Aggie	32
	5. Christian	29

Salient Identities in Leadership. The second aim of the present study sought to understand identities salient within leadership from the leader's perspective. Of the 1,711 identities listed, for the first step of the worksheet, participants indicated 719 identities, or 42%, as active in their leadership. This averaged about four ( $M = 4.33$ ) identifiers active in participants' leadership. Table 3 presents the top five identities active in participants' leadership.

Hardworking ( $n = 15$ ), confident ( $n = 9$ ), organized ( $n = 9$ ), introvert ( $n = 8$ ), and caring ( $n = 6$ ) were the personal identity-level identifiers represented most frequently in participants' reflection of identities active in their leadership. The relational identity level had noticeable differences among the top five frequencies. Within the relational identity level, leader ( $f = 35$ ), friend ( $n = 55$ ), mentor ( $n = 9$ ), follower ( $n = 5$ ), and son ( $n = 4$ ) were the top five identifiers. Finally, the collective identity level consisted of student ( $n = 22$ ), Aggie ( $n = 22$ ), Christian ( $n = 14$ ), woman ( $n = 14$ ), and female ( $n = 11$ ) identifiers.

To address the final research objective of describing the context of a leader's leadership, the deductive content analysis revealed five contexts. Overwhelmingly, the primary context of participant

connection of identity within their leadership was in student organizations ( $n = 137$ ). Employment ( $n = 12$ ) was the second largest leadership context, followed by faith communities ( $n = 5$ ), academic projects ( $n = 4$ ), and other leadership contexts ( $n = 7$ ). The other contexts included professional development, being a citizen, and specific professional development experiences.

Table 3.  
Frequencies of active leadership identifiers and by identity level

Identity Level	Top Identifiers	<i>f</i>
<i>Personal Identity</i>	1. Hardworking	15
	2. Confident	9
	2. Organized	9
	4. Introvert	8
	5. Caring	6
<i>Relational Identity</i>	1. Leader	35
	2. Friend	25
	3. Mentor	9
	4. Follower	5
	5. Son	4
<i>Collective Identity</i>	1. Student	22
	2. Aggie	17
	3. Christian	14
	4. Woman	14
	5. Female	11

## Discussion

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the study's findings. To begin, there was a contrast between the mean number of identifiers used by leaders to identify ( $M = 10.29$ ) and those they consider to be active in their leadership ( $M = 4.33$ ). This difference in the mean suggests that leaders may not be able to hold as many identities as active in the context of leadership as they do in their worldview, or it may suggest that not all identities are as meaningful in a leadership context. As Oyserman and Lee (2008a, 2008b) and Oyserman, et al. (2007) posited, identities are orienting—they provide a meaning-making lens and focus one's attention on some but not other features of the immediate context. Thus, the difference in the salience of identity in the leadership context may have implications for the orienting, meaning-making, and focusing of leaders when performing leadership.

The second conclusion stems from the identities salient to leaders. Leader and student were the most frequent identifiers used by participants. This is not surprising given the context of the research site, as well as the population frame. This confirms the claim of Hollander and Julian (1969) that leadership

is highly contextualized. It is common in higher-education vernacular to address leaders of student organizations as "student leaders." This might bring about a socialization process of these identities becoming internalized in the worldview of this study's participants. Additionally, a leader identity may be salient for participants who responded to the recruitment emails. Other identifiers that appeared describe dominant demographics of the research site.

While the findings of the most frequent identities are not unexpected, participants did include some identifiers of interest. Some identifiers differed from higher education's commonly used references to identity (i.e., personality or those connected to -isms). For instance, survivor, ravenclaw, gun owner, and Gen Z may relate to current events and popular culture. Survivor, presumably connected to the Title IX legislation and the #MeToo movement, may have been the impetus for these identifiers being included by study participants. As for gun owner, the location of the research site has had open-carry and campus-carry legislation as a contextual influence element, along with recent mass shootings at educational locations around the United States. These identifiers rise to a level of importance such that participants

and collective).

identify with these movements and current popular culture.

For practice, another conclusion arises from the findings of the top identifiers by identity level. Considering the data within the conceptual framework reveals that personal and collective identity levels influence the identity processes of leaders more than relational. While frequency may not signify intensity of identity to participants, it can be reasonable to conclude that identity processes associated with these dominant two levels may have greater impact on leaders.

It again must be stated that all participants in the study starred at least one identifier as being active in their leadership, despite the fact that participants were explicitly given the opportunity to not star any identifier. This suggests the conclusion that leaders believe that identity plays a role, to some extent, in leadership.

Finally, active identity in leadership reveals a different, but not completely distinct, set of identifiers by identity level. When considering the number of identifiers in each identity level, the primary identity level was personal followed by collective. The relational identity levels were not nearly as frequent. Thus, it can be concluded that leaders emphasize distinguishing-characteristic (i.e., personal) identities within their leadership, along with collective elements that may aid in establishing a shared cohesion with the group. To illustrate, a leader may consider her woman identity to be present because she leads her all-female sorority; however, she might emphasize her hard work identifier to distinguish herself as operationalizing influence in the group.

## Implications for Research and Practice

Conclusions from this study have direct connection to future research and practice. To organize this discussion, implications for research and practices

will be reviewed in order of the six conclusions presented above.

First, the number of active identifiers within college student leadership leads to recommendations for research and practice. This recommendation also includes the conclusion in which all participants consider at least one identity as active and/or important in their leadership. In terms of research, these underscore previous literature results that leadership is a unique context in which identity might be studied. Participants indicating a difference in the identifiers within various contexts of their lives and suggesting a narrowed number (in most cases) of them in their leadership gives impetus for this recommendation. This conclusion offers validation for the situated identities theory (Alexander & Wiley, 1981). The situated identities theory says that we take on distinct roles in different settings and that behavior can radically shift in accordance with the situation and the people present. Not only is this situated identity essential as a basis for initiating interaction, it is crucial for guiding and anticipating the course of that interaction (Alexander & Wiley, 1981). Thus, future research might benefit from this additional contextualization of inquiring about identity within the leadership context. For practice, this conclusion may provide practitioners with implications for designing identity-based leadership development opportunities for college students. Rather than connecting a plethora of identities to a leadership development participant, it could be considered to use a focusing exercise in which participants narrow their focus to one to four identities active in leadership. This additional focus, according to this study's participants, may aid in a more focused dialogue and discussion. Overall, these two conclusions aid in establishing an identity approach to leadership within the college environment.

Next, recommendations stem from which identities are salient for college student leaders, as well as the unique ways in which participants identified. For research, a recommendation may be to update the existing instruments that utilize levels of identity as a theoretical framework. For instance, the Aspects of

Identity Questionnaire IV (AIQ-IV) originally created by Cheek and Briggs (2013) could align with more of the commonly referenced personal, social, relational, and collective identity orientations when the population is college students. One of the relational identity items currently reads, "having close bonds with other people," but a more salient relational identity for study participants is leader. Thus, it is reasonable to recommend that for relational identity, an orientation item may be edited to read, "Being a leader within a group and the relationship I have with those I lead." Plus, as the development of the superficial/special factor in the AIQ-IV suggests (Dollinger et al., 1996), there are identifiers of importance unique to academic and college environments. This special factor and the items contained in it may vary by the context being studied. For higher-education practitioners, this study reveals a difference in how identity is conceptualized within the literature and the identities of participants. For instance, the salience of identity by higher education focuses on collective identity (e.g., race, disability, first-generation status, nationality).

Another recommendation arises from the findings of the top identifiers by identity level. This study would recommend that practitioners not limit leader identification to solely collective or relational identities alone. This suggests that college student leaders consider personal identities most prominently in their leadership. Mainly, personal identities are of specific interest, but may be explained by the larger context of an individualistic culture of the United States. While within the leadership scholarship, these personal identities might have previously been found in trait-based approaches, this study begins to suggest that considering identities by identity levels could offer a new investigative tool in future leadership scholarship.

Overall, the present study contributes to the literature by reaffirming the need to study leadership as a unique context for identity research. Additionally, this study offers researchers and practitioners recommendations related to how college student leaders identify and their relationship to identity

levels. Finally, this study provides utility in how leadership education and development may be framed within an identity approach to leadership.

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