A SOCIAL INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO LEADER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: A PROCESS MODEL

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WORKING DRAFT

A question that makes people pause, even in a room full of people assigned to formal supervisory roles, is “are you a leader”? One notable reason for this is that there are no objective measures or indicators of whether one is or is not a leader and indeed no consensus in either the academic or popular literatures on just what defines leadership or leaders (Stodgill, 1974; Yukl, 2006). Rather, multiple traits and behavioral tendencies are associated with leadership, and there is often disagreement and ambiguity as to the relative importance of these attributes for defining what a leader is (Pfeffer, 1977). Furthermore, although individuals often have implicit theories and schemas for the prototypical attributes of effective leaders (Epitropaki & Martin 2004; Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; Lord 1985), just how individuals should enact leadership in any given context is often unclear. In any single situation, scholars and laypeople alike often have different beliefs about what leadership behaviors and actions are appropriate. In addition, leadership is decidedly a social process in which the meaning and appropriate display of leadership is socially constructed through the mutual influence of individuals (Hollander, 1978; Meindl, 1995). Thus, seeing oneself as a leader is at least in part a function of social cues and information. In light of these differing views about what leaders should do and what behaviors are appropriate, along with the social context of leadership, we pose the following question: “Why and how is it that some individuals come to see themselves as leaders and other individuals do not?”

Many traditional theories of leadership conceptually equate leader with a formal role that is comprised of supervisory responsibilities and functions, which are then assigned and limited to a particular person or group. The person expected to perform this formal supervisory role is thereby designated as the “leader,” and those individuals working with or under the supervision of this person are referred to as “followers.” In this sense, leadership is embedded in a

hierarchical structure where some people can be viewed as a leader and others cannot because of their designated role. This hierarchical perspective on leadership is detectable in a variety of traditional leadership theories, including much of the research on leader traits, behaviors, and leader-follower relationships. In this research, leadership is generally assumed to originate from a single individual – the boss, supervisor or manager (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2006). In fact, over the past five years, 84% of leadership research in management journals has approached the study of leadership from this hierarchical perspective (Ancona & Backman, 2008).

The hierarchical perspective on leadership offers some clues about how individuals come to see themselves as leaders. Clearly, being assigned to or holding a formal role or position within a hierarchical structure conveys some meaning with respect to leadership and likely affects how one sees him or herself as a leader. In particular, it is likely that people in formal supervisory positions are more likely than non-supervisors to see themselves as leaders—whether it be the CEO of an organization, the head coach of a sports team, or a front-line supervisor. In addition, hierarchical models of leadership emphasize that certain personal attributes and behaviors of individuals are important indicators of leadership, and these attributes and behaviors likely impact how individuals see themselves as leaders and the extent to which others perceive them as leaders.

The equation of "leader" with "person holding a supervisory position in a hierarchy" has been criticized (Bedian & Hunt, 2006), and in response, an alternative conceptualization of leadership as a mutual and social influence process has emerged. From this perspective, leadership is independent of any formal role or hierarchical structure, and can be diffused among the members of any given social system. This interactionist perspective dates back to the work of Selznick (1957) and can be seen across a variety of contemporary leadership theories. For

example, Quinn (1996) argued that leadership is a state of being that can be entered into by people irrespective of their formal role or position within an organization. Similarly, the literature on team leadership often conceptualizes leadership as a shared property of the group such that all members of the group, irrespective of their formal role or position, participate in the leadership process (Carson, Tesluk & Marrone, 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003). From this perspective, leadership is embedded in a process of mutual influence among social actors rather than a formal role or structural position. Any member of the social system may exhibit leadership at any time, and there is no clear distinction between who is a leader and who is not a leader. Consequently, seeing oneself as a leader is not simply about holding a formal role or structural position within a social system. Identifying oneself as a leader is also subject to information communicated though social interactions. We propose that both the hierarchical and interactionist perspectives on leadership are necessary but insufficient for explaining why some individuals come to see themselves as leaders and other individuals do not.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to develop a theory that accounts for but goes beyond existing models of leadership to explain why and how some individuals come to see themselves as leaders and other individuals do not. In developing this theory, we draw from the identity literature to frame "leader" as a personal identity that can be internalized as part of one's self-concept. We posit that the process by which one internalizes "leader" as a personal identity is comprised of cognitive, behavioral, and social elements. That is, we theorize that all individuals have a cognitive schema about what it means to be and act like a leader. When an individual's perception of self matches this leadership schema, that individual is likely to engage in verbal and non-verbal acts intended to reflect the characteristics that are emblematic and essential to a leader identity. Examples might include taking the seat at the head of a meeting

table or asserting one's expertise in a particular domain. The social aspect of the process occurs when others perceive this person's attributes and behaviors to be consistent or inconsistent with their own leadership schema, and as a result, engage in behaviors that assert and convey their own sense of that person with regard to the identity of leader. These verbal or non-verbal acts can further affirm that an individual personifies the characteristics of a leader identity (e.g., deferring to the person's opinion or responding to his or her vision for the team), or these acts might disaffirm the person's identity as a leader (e.g., not following his or her direction). As illustrated in Figure 1, we posit that it is through this cognitive, behavioral and social process that an individual's personal identity as a leader is socially constructed and internalized, and through this internalization process, impact important outcomes at the individual, group, and organization level.

We present our theory as follows. First, we establish "leader" as a personal identity and explain why behavioral and social processes are particularly pertinent to the internalization of a "leader" personal identity relative to other possible personal identities. In this section, we also highlight why current identity theories, namely identity theory and social identity theory, are insufficient for explaining why some individuals internalize a leader identity and other individuals do not. Next, we elaborate an interactive process that accounts for the cognitive, behavioral and social mechanisms that explain how individuals come to internalize leader as a personal identity in organizations. Our emphasis on the process of internalizing a leader identity also yields a broader understanding of the temporal dynamics, relational influences and contextual factors that influence one's ability or willingness to claim a personal identity or grant it to others. We conclude by charting a course for future research on the development of a leader personal identity and its implications for individual, group and organizational outcomes.

THE IDENTITY OF "LEADER"

The way we perceive ourselves, our identity, can have profound effects on the way we feel, think, and act, and on what we strive to achieve in life (James, 1892; Leary & Tangney, 2003; Turner, 1976). Individuals' self perceptions are thought to encompass social and role identities, representing the groups and roles they feel tied to, and also a personal identity. Personal identity refers to "a sense of self, built up over time, as the person embarks on and pursues projects or goals…" (Hewitt, 1997, 93). A personal identity is based on a set of attributes that individuals feel differentiate them from other individuals, and thus reflect their "true self" (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Simon, 1997). We experience our personal identity as a set of dispositional traits or behavioral tendencies that are considered "core" to ourselves (Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Examples may include more singular attributes such as smart or kind, and more complex constellations of traits and tendencies such as "environmentalist" or "good corporate citizen." In this way, personal identity is a set of labels that individuals come to internalize as descriptive of the self. The designation or attribution of these personal attributes to the self, which we refer to as internalization, is often embedded in a particular social context and asserted during the course of social interaction (Deaux, 1996; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Thus, while personal identity is a cognitive representation of oneself, the process by which any particular personal identity comes to be internalized is decidedly social.

In this article, we consider "leader" as a personal identity that individuals can come to internalize as part of their self-concept. Through socialization processes and past experience with leaders across different contexts, individuals develop varying assumptions and beliefs about the personal attributes and characteristics that are prototypical of leaders (Kenney, Schwartz-Kenny, & Blascovich, 1986; Lord & Alliger, 1985; Lord, Foti, & Devader, 1984). For example, recent

research suggests that personal attributes such as sensitive, wise, dedicated, and dynamic are often associated with effective leaders, whereas attributes such as domineering and manipulative are associated with ineffective leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). In this sense, these personal attributes represent the content of a possible leader personal identity. To the extent individuals experience and come to internalize these leader-like attributes as descriptive of the self, the label of "leader" becomes part of one's personal identity.

The two most prominent theories on identity, identity theory and social identity theory, incorporate the idea of personal identity, but primarily to differentiate it from the other forms of identity that were their focus (Stets & Burke, 2000). In identity theory (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000), one's identity is thought to be tied to hierarchically structured roles that become salient as situations call for a particular role. In this sense, one's identity is based on the properties of a particular role and does not necessarily reflect anything unique about the individual. From this theoretical perspective, "leader" would be a function of what role the person was situated in and thus does not account for how social interactions independent of any formal role or position impact the internalization of "leader" as part of one's personal identity. Likewise, social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985) treats identity as a function of one's membership in various social categories and focuses primarily on the commonalities between people in different groups, not what differentiates individuals from each other (Hogg, 2001). With leadership, while one might relate to the group, "top leaders of this firm," there is not necessarily and not often a formal group that one belongs to and derives meaning from in such a way that leads to the internalization of a leader identity. For these reasons, neither identity theory nor social identity theory fully explain how individuals come to internalize "leader" as part of their self-concept.

A personal identity such as leader is likely to be much more ambiguous and idiosyncratic than some other personal identities. For some personal identities, the internalization process will be fairly straightforward. For example, people can come to internalize tall as part of their personal identity based upon concrete experiences and well-defined criteria (e.g., relative height). For other personal identities, including leader, the standards and criteria for ascribing an identity to oneself are much more ambiguous. A personal identity is especially ambiguous when it meets several criteria. First, identities that are composed of multiple attributes can be especially ambiguous (Hitlin, 2003). For example, the personal identity of "punctual" is less ambiguous because it is one attribute (e.g., showing up on time). By contrast, a personal identity of "good corporate citizen" is more ambiguous. Being a "good corporate citizen" may entail being helpful to others, raising concerns on behalf of the organization, and/or supporting organizational values, rules, and regulations (Organ, 1988). Second, personal identities are ambiguous when the relationship between the personal attributes within the particular personal identity or their relative importance is unclear, contextually bound and socially constructed. To use the same example of "good corporate citizen", the relative importance of raising concerns to others versus obeying organizational rules and regulations in any particular social context is ambiguous and may vary across people. Some may see raising issues in the organization as being reflective of a good corporate citizen, while others may see this act as being disloyal. Finally, just how one should enact some identities is ambiguous, as some identities have less social consensus about how they should be enacted in particular contexts than do others. In other words, when the appropriate behavior associated with a particular identity is vague, uncertain, variable across contexts, and/or dynamic, there is likely to be greater difficulty in concluding that the identity is descriptive of oneself (and therefore internalizing the identity).

We contend that the personal identity of leader is especially ambiguous. As noted earlier, there is no singular meaning of leadership, and no singular, objective measure or indicator of whether one is or is not a leader. As Stogdill (1974: 259) concluded, "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." Furthermore, Yukl (2006: 3) went on to say that these definitional differences "reflect deep disagreement about the identification of leaders and leadership processes." This dissension is largely because multiple traits and behavioral tendencies are associated with leadership, and there is often disagreement as to the relative importance of these attributes for defining what is and is not leadership, and who is and is not a leader. Although individuals often have implicit theories and schemas for what personal attributes are prototypical of effective leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; Lord, 1985), how individuals should enact leadership in any given context is often unclear.

To illustrate this lack of clarity, we return to the personal attributes often associated with effective leadership—for example, sensitive, wise, dedicated and dynamic (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). The meaning of these personal attributes can be vague (e.g., what does it mean to be "wise"?), malleable (e.g. what "dedicated" means changes over time and across situations), and socially constructed (e.g. others give one signals about what is and is not "sensitive" from their perspective and in particular situations). Thus, in any single situation, scholars and laypeople alike often have different cognitive representations or schemas about what leadership behaviors and actions are appropriate. These differing views about what leaders should do and what behaviors are appropriate, along with the fact that leadership occurs in the context of relationships and involves social exchange and influence processes, make the leader identity particularly ambiguous and susceptible to social construction. As a result, current theories of

identity development do not sufficiently explain why some individuals internalize a leader identity and other individuals do not. Therefore, our objective in this article is to describe the processes and underlying mechanisms by which individuals come to internalize "leader" as part of their personal identity.

In articulating the processes by which individuals come to internalize a leader personal identity, this article makes several noteworthy contributions to the leadership literature and the identity literature more broadly. With respect to the leadership literature, scholars often cite the development of a leader identity as one of the most important predictors of effective leadership and career development (Day & Harrison, 2007; Hall, 2004). The internalization of a leader identity is thought to be a positive, generative process that empowers people to take on leadership responsibilities and thereby engage in leadership processes that facilitate the accomplishment of organizational goals more effectively (Hall, 2004). In this article, we position an individual's personal identity as a leader as one explanation for why individuals engage in leadership behavior. This theory is complementary to and extends other leadership literature that has examined why individuals engage in leadership from motivational, dispositional or situational perspectives (e.g., Atwater, 1988; Chan & Drasgow, 2001). In addition, this article extends the leadership development literature's historical focus on skill and knowledge-based development outcomes (Day, 2000; DeRue & Wellman, in press), and considers the addition of or growth of a leader personal identity as an important outcome of developmental experiences. Finally, this article is one of the first to integrate alternative conceptualizations of leadership, as both a formal role structure and a social influence process, to explain a single phenomenon. Scholars such as Avolio (2007) and Bedian and Hunt (2006) have noted that the leadership literature is in dire need of more integrative theoretical perspectives. The goal of this article is to

develop a theory of leader identity development that draws from and integrates the leadership literature with the literature on identity development and construction.

For the identity literature more broadly, the processual interactionist perspective that is presented here is not new to theories of identity (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). However, these social interaction processes have not played a central role in the current literature on personal identity. Rather, the internalization of a personal identity traditionally has been conceptualized as a self-constructed, self-reflexive process whereby individuals author their own personal identities by structuring, relating and interpreting a variety of personal experiences (Berzonsky, 1992; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1993, 1994). From this perspective, a person initiates and directs the exploration of different identity elements, and through this exploratory process, self-constructs a personal identity.

We theorize that ambiguous personal identities such as a leader are not simply a self-constructed identity, but rather become internalized through social interaction. To begin understanding this process, we generalize a concept invoked in Bartel and Dutton's (2001) work on ambiguous organizational membership to the larger question of how individuals come to internalize particular personal identities. Specifically, we explore how the personal identity of leader is constituted through interactions with others in the form of claiming acts (where a person asserts his or her leadership) and granting acts (whereby others reinforce that assertion) (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Together, claiming and granting behaviors constitute the joint work that leads to personal identity growth and development. This claiming-granting framework highlights the social interactions that become the inputs to the process of internalizing an ambiguous personal identity such as leader. Thus, we emphasize that the internalization of leader as a personal identity is not simply an intrapersonal, cognitive act but also a social process of mutual claiming

and granting through word and deed that gets enacted over time. In this sense, our theory draws attention to the generative social processes by which people come to internalize ambiguous personal identities, including but not limited to leader.

PROCESS OF INTERNALIZING A LEADER IDENTITY

Prior research speaks to the process by which individuals actively shape their identities (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Pratt, Rockman & Kaufman, 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Drawing on social interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959) and reflecting an emphasis on personal agency, the broader concept of identity work refers to "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003, p.1165). This notion of identity work reinforces the symbolic interactionist idea that the meaning of the self is dynamic and negotiated through interactions with others (Goffman, 1959).

Past research in this area has addressed how people engage in activities to create, present, and sustain identities which are positive despite troublesome social conditions such as being homeless (Snow & Anderson 1987), or how identity work can cleanse a "dirty" occupation of its negative social meaning (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Identity work also describes how individuals negotiate among and balance different identities (e.g., balancing one's identity as a boss versus friend; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep 2006), and how individuals customize an identity to fit their evolving understanding of a particular environment or context (Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann 2006).

Our perspective draws from this prior research. We examine how a leader identity is formed in social contexts through an interactionist lens that is similar to Bartel and Dutton's (2001) example of temporary workers whose status as organizational members is not always

clear and cannot be taken for granted. In this work, Bartel and Dutton invoke Goffman's idea of "working consensus" to propose that whether or not temporary workers are seen as organizational members is socially constructed through an active and relational process of claiming and granting. Specifically, the moves and acts that temporary workers undertake to establish themselves as legitimate members of the organization (claiming) are met by responses from others (granting), which resolve the ambiguity of membership.

We propose that this claiming-granting process not only occurs when situations or social group memberships are ambiguous (e.g., as in the case of organizational membership for some), but also when the identity itself is ambiguous (as in the case for many personal identities, including a leader identity). Figure 1 and the following sections provide a description of how this process unfolds with respect to leader as a personal identity. As shown in Figure 1, our depiction of how a leader identity comes to be internalized (a cognitive outcome) is inherently interpersonal and iterative. In this model, we posit that individuals engage in claiming a leader identity and others engage in granting (or not granting) a leader identity to the individual. Through this iterative process, the individual comes to internalize "leader" as a personal identity.

Claiming

Our depiction of the process begins with an assumption that people have at least a perspective on what leaders "look like" and what leadership entails. This perspective is developed over time through personal experience (e.g., with family, school or work leaders), historical accounts (e.g., of military and political leaders), culture (e.g., social and artistic leaders), and media (e.g., images of business or world leaders). Over time, individuals integrate these various cultural vocabularies (Weick, 1995) to form a loose schema for what it means to be a leader in terms of specific personal attributes and behaviors. When individuals first think about

the question of whether or not they are a leader, they compare their self-view of their own personal attributes (e.g., traits, behaviors, skills) to their own cognitive schema of leadership (Kenney, Schwartz-Kenny, & Blascovich 1996). This *internal-to-self* comparison process influences individuals' choice regarding whether or not to assert a leader identity in social interactions (i.e., to act as a leader). These actions in a particular social context, which are intended to display characteristics that are seen as embodying attributes of a leader, are claiming behaviors.

At times, this choice to claim a leader identity will be fairly automatic, based on a perceived match of the individual's attributes and those attributes specified within his or her leadership schema. However, this comparison process could also be the result of a deliberate and conscious process whereby the individual thinks through whether the attributes of a leader are self-descriptive. If the self-view corresponds to the individual's schema of leadership, this match should encourage an individual to claim a leader identity. In other words, if people see themselves as embodying the attributes of a leader, they are more likely to exhibit leader-like qualities and engage in behaviors and actions that are consistent with their views of leadership. Individuals engage in schema-consistent behavior because they are motivated to act in accordance with their self-view as a way of expressing their true self (Foote, 1951). They do so based on a general motivation to act authentically, a motivation that is enhanced when the personal identity in question, like leader, is positively valued in society. It is important to note that the degree to which individuals are free to engage in claiming a leader identity will be subject to environmental and situational constraints. For example, the need for leadership differs across situations, and some situations may not present an opportunity for individuals to claim the

leader identity. We return to this idea in a subsequent discussion of possible boundary conditions for our theory.

In addition to claiming a personal identity that is believed to be authentic to oneself, claiming can also occur when there is discrepancy between the self-view and one's schema of a leader. In this case, the individual may become motivated to experiment with or "try out" a possible rendition of the self that is compatible with his or her view of leadership. Through this experimentation process, individuals claim a leader identity within their social environment as a way to clarify for themselves whether they embody a leader identity.

Thus, we expect that individuals may claim a personal identity of leader for one of at least three reasons. First, individuals are motivated to act in accordance with their view of self (Foote, 1951), and to bring others in line with their self-view (Swann & Read, 1981). Second, because acting leader-like and being seen as a leader is socially valued in many organizational settings, based on research by Higgins (1987) and Markus and Nurius (1986), we expect that individuals will experiment with such rewarded and socially-valued "ideal selves." Finally, people may have multiple conceptions of what it means to be a leader based on their life experiences and observations of various role models. For example, one schema of leadership may emphasize authoritarian attributes, another may emphasize democratic or participative attributes, and another might highlight more servant-leader ideals. An individual aware of multiple possible schemas of leadership might invoke any of these schemas in their internal-to-self comparison process and choose to experiment with any one of these as a possible identity. Consistent with Ibarra's (1999) research on how individuals experiment with "provisional selves," we propose that by taking small steps to act *like* a leader, the individual can explore where they stand with respect to a leader personal identity in their particular social context. We

extend this idea of identity experimentation to emphasize that the "trying on" of a personal identity is also an interpersonal process; it involves not just how it feels to the individual, but also both claiming by the self and granting by others.

Once motivated to claim a leader identity, individuals must then determine how best to do so. What are the specific actions that one engages in to claim a leader identity? Literature on the broader construct of identity work explores how people shape their identities and thus provides some insight into the types of tactics that individuals use in claiming an identity. Examples include "identity patching" for new medical residents (Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann 2006) or "inquiring" for those with ambiguous organizational memberships (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Many of the specific tactics discussed in prior identity research are highly context-specific, but we can draw from these accounts of identity claims to identify four distinct categories of claiming tactics that individuals might use to assert or experiment with a leader personal identity.

Claiming tactics can be organized into four clusters: behavioral (verbal), behavioral (nonverbal), physical, and relational. First, the literature makes a clear distinction between verbal claiming acts and nonverbal actions designed to assert or experiment with a particular personal identity (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Behavioral (verbal) acts might include making statements that one is a leader or statements consistent with being leader-like. Likewise, nonverbal behavioral acts might include managing one's appearance or dress to convey a leader identity (Gallo, 2006). Another type of claiming act related to a leader identity would be employing or manipulating physical artifacts associated with leadership. An example of this might include hanging a picture of a famous leader in one's office. Alternatively, one might manipulate the physical context for an interaction in such a way that claims a leader-like position (e.g., sitting at

the head of a meeting table). A final category of claiming acts involved the invocation of relational claims such as demonstrating or highlighting closeness with recognized authorities and other leaders. This is similar to Snow and Anderson's (1987) notion of "associational embracement" or "distancing" behaviors.

In light of these different types of claiming acts, we contend that our conceptualization of claiming – and identity work more generally – is distinct from general impression management. Whereas impression management focuses exclusively on how individuals attempt to shape others' perceptions of them, claiming can reflect *both* the expression of one's own self-perceptions as well as attempts to shape others' perceptions. Our core propositions related to claiming are that individuals will engage in claiming acts under three conditions: (a) when individuals desire to express an already internalized leader personal identity, (b) when there is extrinsic value in being seen as a leader in a particular context, and (c) when they are uncertain as to whether they are a leader or not. These claiming acts can be definitive such that individuals claim an identity that they believe is true to their self-concept, or experimental such that claims are made in order to determine if that personal identity is part of their self-concept. Claiming tactics can include verbal and non-verbal behaviors, invocation of relational ties, and the use of physical space in such a way that asserts a leader personal identity.

Granting

Comparable to the focal individual going through an internal-to-self comparison process that results in claiming, others within the social environment go through a similar cognitive-comparison process of their own. They have their own schema for what it means to be a leader based on their own background and experiences. We propose that they compare the focal person's attributes in terms of traits, skills, and behaviors to this schema, and based on this

comparison process, choose to either grant or not grant the focal individual a leader identity in their social interaction. Granting behaviors are actions that express how others perceive the focal individual. Their actions either affirm or disaffirm whether that person is seen as a leader. Granting acts, or the lack thereof, will help shape whether the focal individual internalizes "leader" as part of his or her personal identity.

Except under conditions that we will discuss later, we theorize that others will grant the focal individual a leader identity when their attribute-to-schema comparison process results in a match. When, according to the perceiver, the focal individual looks like, seems like, and acts like a leader, the perceiver is likely to grant a leader identity. This matching process and the recognition of leadership depend on how well the focal person corresponds to the perceiver's implicit theory or schema of leadership (Lord & Maher, 1991). This cognitive process, which like claiming can be conscious or unconscious, shapes and is shaped by the highly contextual and social processes of claiming and granting and are the central focus of our theorizing.

Although we expect granting mostly occurs in the presence of and in response to claiming acts, granting can also occur without a prior claim by the focal person. For example, individuals' schemas for what it means to be a leader can differ, and to the extent that the focal person's schema differs from that of others in the social environment, others may see leader-like attributes in the focal person that he or she does not yet see. Thus, the process of internalizing a personal identity as a leader may begin with a granting act (e.g., an unexpected designation as the leader of a group or task force). It is also possible that on some occasions, even when there is a discrepancy between what others observe of the focal person's attributes and their leadership schemas, granting may also occur based on other intentions or motives. For example, mentors might choose to grant a leader identity to mentees in the hopes of spurring the internalization of

the mentee's leader identity and subsequent leader behaviors. In this case, the mentor's granting behaviors begin to construct the mentee as a leader in their interactions, and over time, this should encourage the mentee to think of him or herself as a leader.

Similar to the claiming process, granting can include both verbal and non-verbal behavioral acts, as well as the use of relational ties or physical space. For example, others in the social context might grant an individual a leader identity via verbally affirming ("you are our leader") and/or behaving *as if* the individual is a leader (e.g., looking to the individual for statements about desired direction and vision). Likewise, granting can occur via the use of physical space, such as leaving an open seat at the head of the meeting table. A notable difference between claiming and granting, however, is that we expect granting to only be declarative, and not experimental. Even in the case of the mentor granting a leader identity to someone who does not yet possess leader-like attributes or act leader-like, the intention behind the grant is definitively developmental, and not experimental. In other words, the grant is not to see *if* he or she feels the person is a leader.

Internalization of a Leader Identity

When the focal person claims a leader identity and/or others in the social environment grant the leader identity to this person, together they accomplish the social achievement of a leader identity for the individual. Specifically, as others in the social environment validate the individual's leader claims through granting, the individual comes, over time, to see the leader identity as reflective of his or her true self and subsequently internalizes it. In this sense, the leader identity becomes part of a "working consensus" (Goffman, 1959) that the focal person is a leader in this particular context. As a result, the leader identity is strengthened and becomes a more salient part of the focal person's personal identity.

Conversely, when others do not grant an individual a leader identity, the individual may question whether "leader" should actually be part of his or her personal identity. Ungranted claims signal to individuals that others do not perceive them in a way that is consistent with their self-view or the provisional self with which they are experimenting. For example, if a member of a consulting team, seeing himself as a leader in that team, petitions to lead an upcoming client presentation, and that claiming act is met with resistance from other team members, the focal individual may begin to question whether he or she truly is a leader in that team context. Over time, the more an individual's claims go ungranted, the less likely it is this person will internalize the leader personal identity. These discrepancies between claiming and granting acts likely cause individuals to adjust their self-view to reduce the inconsistency, leading to fewer subsequent leader identity claims. Alternatively, if individuals are deeply interested in seeing themselves as a leader, or are in situations where displaying a leader identity is particularly valuable for extrinsic reasons, they may engage in stronger subsequent efforts to claim a leader identity and attempt to change others' perceptions.

We propose that this claiming-granting process is iterative and developmental over time. As more claims and grants are made, the personal identity of "leader" becomes structurally more salient as a part of one's self-concept. As noted, the process need not begin with an initial claim. Rather, the process may begin with an initial grant as others perceive a match between the focal individual's attributes and their own schema of leadership, and this can be independent of the focal individual making any claims for a leader personal identity. The granting itself in this case can be the stimulus for the individual to make the internal-to-self comparison, thus inviting the question of "Who me? Am I a leader?" The comparison work stimulated by this initial grant may cause the focal individual to reevaluate his or her self-view and/or leadership schema,

further illustrating how social interactions and cognitive processes together shape individuals' personal identities.

TEMPORAL DYNAMICS: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPIRALS

Thus far, we have presented a social process of claiming and granting that is the product of an internal cognitive process whereby individuals compare a focal person to their own cognitive schema of leadership. Through this cognitive comparison process, people are compelled either consciously or unconsciously to claim or grant a leader personal identity. Further extending this idea, we also expect that a relationship between claiming and granting exists, and that this relationship is positive and cyclic. Specifically, we expect claiming affects granting, which in turn affects subsequent claiming, and the process unfolds as a series of iterative and recursive loops. Because of this reciprocal causation, these iterative loops can become "deviation-amplifying" (Masuch, 1985; Weick, 1979). In such loops, a deviation in one variable (more claiming behavior) leads to a similar deviation in another variable (more granting behavior), which in turn, further amplifies deviation in the other variable Thus, the cyclic nature of the claiming-granting relationship can result in downward (decreasing claiming and granting) or upward (increasing claiming and granting) spirals. Because of the interdependence between claiming and granting, any attempt to determine unidirectional causality would mask the amplifying properties of the spiral (Weick, 1979). In other words, claiming and granting alternate as cause and effect.

When considered over time, the cyclical nature of the claiming-granting relationship suggests two possible trajectories of leader-identity development, an upward spiral and a downward spiral. Consistent with other literature that has examined spirals of individual cognition and belief structures (e.g., Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995), we define a spiral as a

pattern of consecutive increases (or decreases) in both claiming and granting over a minimum of three cycles. Although a spiral may continue for more than three cycles, a minimum of three is necessary to establish a pattern of change (Cronbach & Furby, 1970; Nesselroade, Stigler, & Baltes, 1980).

When individuals claim a leader identity and others grant the identity, a positive spiral ensues. Because grants from others not only convey how they see the focal individual but also signal what is valued in the social environment, a grant of a leader identity not only strengthens this identity in the focal individual's self-concept, but may also leave the individual more motivated to value the identity. Thus, grants from others increase both the salience and valence of the personal identity. Further, the identity grant may lead to the individual feeling more empowered to act in accordance with his or her leadership schema. Being seen as a leader by others may affect a person's efficacy beliefs with respect to leadership. Both of these effects directly lead to more leader identity claims being engaged in with greater frequency and confidence. These more frequent and confident claims lead others to then continue to grant in response, creating a positive spiral.

Alternatively, a negative spiral can emerge when the individual is not granted a leader identity. One likely response is for the focal individual to engage in fewer or weaker claiming behaviors. If these leader identity claims also remain ungranted, the individual further reduces the number and/or strength of future claims. Likewise, reduced claiming will lead to reduced granting, as it is less likely that others will see the person engaging in leadership acts. There are several reasons for the emergence of this negative spiral. First, a long history of research on motivational processes concludes that behaviors not positively reinforced are less likely to be repeated in the future (Ferster & Skinner, 1957). With fewer actions aimed at exhibiting

leadership, fewer grants are offered. Second, leadership is, as argued, uncertain and socially constructed. Given this uncertainty, when claiming acts are not met with mutually reinforcing grants, it is likely that individuals will begin to question or doubt their leadership capabilities and thus revise their self view to be less inclusive of a leader personal identity. In addition, the lack of a "working consensus" signified by ungranted claiming acts causes uncertainty about the claimer's status as a leader within the group, which may lead the person to withdraw from the social environment. The negative spiral based on these three mechanisms occurs unless there is a particular external motive to be seen as a leader. In such cases, we expect continued claiming behavior even in the absence of granting by others. However, it is most likely that accumulating ungranted claims over time results in the individual coming to see the leader identity as not self-descriptive.

In addition to positive or negative spirals, we also propose that personal identity development is not a smooth or linear process. Drawing from stage theories of human development (e.g., Kegan, 1982; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), we posit that individuals will initially develop a leader identity in relation to specific situations. As claiming and granting occurs in one context, the leader identity will be specific to that context, such as "I am a leader on the new product development team." However, through repeated episodes of claiming and granting across situations and over time, we posit that this situation-specific and socially-affirmed leader identity will begin to transcend across situations and grow stronger. This evolution of the leader identity requires that the individual draw connections across leadership situations, which may look very different and involve different behaviors. This process is akin to Sluss and Ashforth's (2007) notion of moving from specific to generalized identities. As the individual begins to make this transition, various context-specific leader

identities should cohere into a single, clear, and strong identity as a leader ("I am a leader"). In this sense, the identity "leader" would come to play a larger cross-contextual role in the content and structure of the individual's personal identity.

RELATIONAL INFLUENCES

History Matters

If one person grants a leader identity to another person in one context, how does this grant shape future claiming and granting processes among the same individuals but in different contexts? We propose that claims and grants made in one context can carryover to different contexts. The extent to which this occurs is likely a function of several factors, First, the degree of similarity across contexts is important. Grants to a person in a new context are more likely if the grantor sees the context as similar to that in which he or she made previous grants. That is, if the grantor saw the person as a leader before in a similar context, a grant in a new context is more likely. In this sense, history creates both an expectation and pattern that influences how the focal person and the grantor act and react in the current situation.

On the other hand, the more that two contexts differ, the less likely that a claim and grant from a previous context will shape one's identity in the subsequent context, or the claims that get asserted and the grants that get conferred in that subsequent context. For example, if the formal or informal social structures or reward systems in a particular context shift such that it becomes more advantageous to be the leader and be seen as such, historical patterns of grants may not be recognized and lose their influence. People may become less willing to grant based on history and more likely to claim the leader identity for themselves—thereby creating a new marketplace for the leader identity that is not based on history.

A Marketplace for Leadership

As stated previously, leadership is a social process whereby the meaning of leadership is socially constructed through the mutual influence of individuals (Hollander, 1978; Meindl, 1995). This mutual influence process has several implications for relational aspects of the claiming and granting process. Specifically, when multiple individuals who are part of the same collective are all interested in claiming a leader identity for themselves (and having others grant it to them), a marketplace for the leader identity is created. We posit that the implications of this marketplace for leadership depend on how leadership is structured and conceptualized within a particular social system. In some systems, people presume that leadership is hierarchically structured whereby there are leaders and followers, and that these are mutually exclusive roles within a group. In such social systems, we would expect to see far less voluntary granting in response to group members claiming a leader identity. This is because any grant of leadership to another person implies that the grantor is content to take on a follower identity. In this sense, the marketplace for a leader identity is competitive and zero sum. When the marketplace for a leader identity becomes competitive in this way, we expect simultaneous claiming of a leader identity and that this pattern of competitive claiming will yield conflict over personal identities. Group processes such as cohesion, helping and information sharing should degrade in such settings as group members focus on contending for the leader identity rather than effective teamwork.

This competitive context has important implications for the grantor in particular. For the person claiming a leader identity, a grant serves to reinforce and amplify that claim. For the grantor in this context, however, a grant also represents a claim for a "follower" identity. This claim of followership might be intentional, as many people wish to shy away from the risks associated with leadership. It also may also be unintentional and yet have lasting effects that undermine the grantor's ideal or possible self (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986) of being

seen as a leader. Ultimately, a grant of a leader identity can become an acceptance of a follower identity, and this relational identity structure (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) may persist over time.

In other social contexts, leadership is not conceptualized and socially constructed as a hierarchical form, but rather is enacted as a shared property of the collective (Pearce, Conger, & Locke, 2007). In this situation, the leader identity can be more diffusely spread among individuals within the group, as the leader identity does not necessarily reside within any single individual, and a grant of leadership does not necessarily imply followership for the grantor. However, this context presents its own set of challenges with respect to internalizing a leader identity. For example, when the social construction of leadership is particularly diffuse, as is the case with self-managing teams (Stewart & Manz, 1995; Wageman, 2001), it may be difficult for any single individual to internalize a leader identity. Individuals may be less certain about whether they should (or could) lead, and thus claims to a leader identity may be less frequent. Those claims may also be met with only ambiguous social feedback as to their efficacy (i.e., tentative or unclear grants). In fact, the diffusion of a leader identity could leave the group void of any leadership at all, as group members are unable to fully internalize a leader identity and thus do not engage in leader-like behaviors that would help facilitate group effectiveness. This pattern may underlie the empirical evidence suggesting that self-managing team structures provide little to no advantage over more traditional, hierarchical team structures (Cohen, Ledford, & Spreitzer, 1996).

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AND BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

We have highlighted an integrated social and cognitive process in which individuals first match their perceptions of their personal attributes to their schema of leadership, claim a leader identity in their social worlds, and are granted that identity by others. However, it is also likely

that various contextual and personal factors influence this process and thus the degree to which individuals come to internalize a leader identity. These factors are relevant to the extent that they constrain or enable the individual's ability or willingness to claim a leader identity, as well as others' ability or willingness to grant a leader identity. In this section, we highlight some of the more prominent contextual factors and boundary conditions that impact our theorizing.

In terms of the social context, one factor that likely influences the claiming of a leader identity is whether or not the focal individual holds a formal supervisory role in a particular group or setting. The endorsement represented by a formal supervisory role reflects a "granting" of leadership, if not by the current group members, then by a formal social structure that all group members operate within and to some extent endorse. Roles are made up of sets of activities or behaviors "expected to be performed, at least approximately, by any person who occupies that office" (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p. 173). We contend that people often hold expectations of a supervisory role that are indicative of leadership. When this is the case, these expectations serve to bias their observations and interpretations of a supervisor's behavior, leading others to more likely grant that individual a leader identity. They will continue to do so unless and until that individual is ineffective or acts in ways that are considerably inconsistent with existing schemas of leadership. We also expect that individuals in formal supervisory roles will feel particularly free to try "leader-like" acts, which should facilitate further granting of a leader identity. Indeed, leader-claiming behaviors are likely to be reinforced and affirmed by subordinates as role senders, creating greater freedom to experiment with a leader identity over time (Tsui & Ashford, 1994; Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair, & Xin, 1995). Thus, it is likely that a person's leader identity will be enhanced over time by being placed in formal supervisory

roles—even though leadership is not a role per se, but rather is socially constructed through a process of mutual influence among multiple actors (Quinn, 1996).

Another feature of the social environment that likely influences the claiming-granting process proposed here is the degree to which the environment provides an opportunity to experiment with a provisional leader identity. In some organizational or cultural contexts (e.g., empowered, decentralized organizational cultures) (Spreitzer, 1996), taking on leadership responsibilities in a group might be encouraged. In these contexts, experimenting with a leader identity is expected and normatively sanctioned, giving individuals the space to experiment with different leadership acts and identities. In other contexts, acts of leadership might be discouraged for those who are not appointed formal hierarchical roles. This idea is evident in research showing that the emergence of informal leaders in social contexts can be constrained by contextual factors such as cultural norms and values (Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). In such contexts, we expect much more limited claiming and granting.

The more opportunity there is to experiment with leading, and the more normative this experimentation, the more willing and able individuals will be to experiment with various leadership acts. When these leadership acts are met with granting by others, a leader identity will be reinforced. In contexts where experimenting with leadership is not possible or even discouraged, the claiming-granting process will be interrupted. Thus, the social environments within a group is an important boundary condition. Groups with norms that encourage personal risk taking, tolerate failure, and view experimentation as learning opportunities seem like particularly fertile ground for the development of leader identities.

Finally, we acknowledge that there may be attributes of the granter or the relationship between the claimer and granter that shape the willingness or ability to grant a leader identity.

For example, there are several reasons why some individuals might grant a leader identity regardless of the outcome of their schema comparison process. The leader identity may be granted to a person not because he or she seems to embody leadership, but because he or she seems to want it. That is, others may do such granting for affective or political reasons. Affectively, such grants may be offered due to simple liking of the other person. From a political perspective, group members may be more than happy to grant someone else a leader identity to avoid possible personal risks stemming from taking on any leadership within the group themselves. Likewise, theories of social exchange (Homans, 1961; Kelley & Thibaut, 1977; Foa & Foa, 1974)suggest that people may grant someone a leader identity because of that person's ability to provide resources or favors in return at some later point. Conversely, others may not grant a claim for leadership because they do not like the claimer, do not want him or her to reap the rewards of leadership, or because they want to claim it for themselves. All of these variables present situations that can interrupt the natural flow of the claiming and granting process, and ultimately influence the degree to which a person internalizes a leader identity.

INDIVIDUAL, GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH LEADER IDENTITIES

In this section, we highlight the individual, group and organizational benefits associated with individuals developing a leader identity. In terms of individual-level outcomes, numerous scholars have proposed that individuals who internalize a leader identity will be more motivated to seek out and take on leadership opportunities, and ultimately be more effective as leaders (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Day & Harrison, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005). Taking on such leadership opportunities, if performed with some success, should in turn yield more frequent "granting" of a leader identity such that a positive spiral of identity development ensues. Moreover, an increased

motivation to attempt new leadership activities also puts one into experiences that enhance the potential for learning new leadership skills and becoming more effective as a leader (Lord & Hall, 2005; McCall, 1998), thereby further reinforcing this positive cycle of leader identity development.

One potential mechanism by which the internalization of a leader identity might facilitate a greater willingness to take on leadership opportunities is via enhanced leadership self-efficacy (Day & Harrison, 2007; Paglis & Green, 2002). Individuals who have internalized a leader identity are more likely to believe they can perform new or unfamiliar leadership activities effectively and therefore will be more likely to undertake these activities. Because leadership is a process that inherently involves others, there are social and image risks involved anytime someone engages in leadership acts. Enhanced leadership self-efficacy should help mitigate these perceived risks and facilitate action in the form of practicing leadership skills and taking on new leadership challenges.

In line with Day and Harrison (2007), we propose that the development of a leader identity also has implications at the group level. Namely, we expect that the more group members develop and internalize individual leader identities via the interpersonal process of claiming and granting, the greater the group's capacity for different forms of team leadership. For example, the more a group consists of members with internalized leader identities, the easier it will be for that group to engage in rotated leadership (Erez, Lepine, Elms, 2002), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), and/or shared leadership (Carson et al., 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003). To enact these leadership forms effectively, it is critical that group members find ways to reduce dysfunctional competition and power struggles that arise due to multiple group members

claiming a leader identity. That is, group members must develop positive ways of mutually granting each others' identities.

For organizations looking to build a pipeline of leaders for succession opportunities at all levels, facilitating the development of a leader identity in people across a broad spectrum of the organization can have important benefits. In particular, developing a leader identity across the organization creates a cadre of people ready for (or at least open to) taking on new or challenging leadership responsibilities. In other words, facilitating the development of leader identities within people across the organization helps build the organization's bench strength. Such leadership depth creates a positive resource for the organization as it strengthens the organization's capacity to manage highly complex and dynamic situations. In this way, our perspective on the internalization of a leader identity has important implications for the empowerment and strategic middle management literatures (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Spreitzer, 1995; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990), which rely on an assumption that people are willing to step up and take responsibility for localized efforts. We argue that this willingness is at least in part a function of seeing oneself as a leader.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We have put forth a variety of ideas about the process of developing a leader identity. In addition to empirical tests of our proposed ideas, there are several additional directions for future research that could enhance our understanding of the leader identity development process.

Are there regularities in who tends to claim and not claim a leader identity (and who gets granted the identity)? We have articulated a claiming-granting process that explains how individuals develop a leader identity, but we have done so with little attention to individual differences beyond cognitive schemas and self-awareness. We expect individual differences

beyond these might impact the process. For example, do men tend to claim a leader identity more than women, or vice versa, and if so why? Do those who fit the societal norms or "great man" theories of leadership (e.g., tall, charismatic) tend to make leader identity claims more often in groups settings than those who do not? Or do such individuals enjoy formal and informal grants of a leader identity more frequently, thus inciting a positive identity-building spiral? As new leadership styles emerge, will new claims be forthcoming? Will these claims be more successful for certain types of people?

Features of the claimer and grantor also likely influence the claiming-granting process. For example, a lack of self-awareness may constrain a person's interest in, willingness, or ability to claim a leader identity. Individuals may not know that they actually possess the personal attributes that are viewed by others as prototypical of leadership. Moreover, people may hold a schema of leadership that is so idealized and elevated that they cannot see how the identity of leader could apply to them. In this way, a lack of self-awareness is a constraint on the development of a leader identity. For these individuals, the process of developing a leader identity would likely be initiated by a grant from others (e.g., a promotion, assignment to a supervisory role, or someone publicly acknowledging their leadership capabilities).

What are the mechanisms through which organizations can facilitate and support the leader identity development process? There are several possible points of intervention for organizations. First, the leader identity-development process described here is highly contingent on what individual actors' schemas are for effective leadership. Prior research has demonstrated that people hold implicit theories about what makes for an effective leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord, 1985), but it is also possible that organizations can affect and amend these implicit schemas in such a way that helps individuals see the "leader" in themselves more readily.

Likewise, it might be possible for organizations to develop training and feedback mechanisms that enhance individuals' self-awareness about what leadership means in a particular context and how the individual is seen along those defined dimensions. For example, drawing from social learning theories (Bandura, 1986), providing individuals with access to effective leader role models should help people learn whether they embody the attributes associated with a leader identity in a particular setting.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we articulate a process by which individuals come to see themselves as leaders. This process is comprised of an interplay between intrapersonal, cognitive processes and interpersonal, claiming-granting processes that together facilitate the internalization of leader as part of one's personal identity. As such, this theory extends our understanding of leadership development in several important ways. For one, the notion of leader as a personal identity inherently holds positive value for organizations. Individuals who see themselves as leaders are more likely to engage in and commit to the leadership processes required for accomplishing organizational goals. To the extent organizations can facilitate greater internalization of this leader identity among employees, the more those organizations will reap the benefits of an enhanced leadership capacity across all levels of employees. In addition, our theory outlines a generative process whereby individuals develop greater self-awareness and come to internalize a personal identity, that of leader, which holds positive value for the individual. Individuals who see themselves as a leader will likely be more confident when dealing with other people and have greater personal resources to draw from when faced with challenging situations. Although not all people internalize a leader personal identity, this chapter provides insight into how and under what conditions people will come to believe: "Yes, I am a leader."

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FIGURE 1

A Process of Leader Identity Internalization