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Becoming a Leader: Catalysts and barriers to leader identity construction

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Abstract

In response to increased calls for research that can provide greater understanding of the relational and contextual issues surrounding leader identity construction processes, this qualitative study aims to provide insights into the subjective experience of constructing a leader identity within the context of organizations. Drawing on data from 50 semi-structured interviews, this paper focuses on significant sub-themes, which were grouped into two categories, namely identity catalysts (e.g. issues that participants identified as positively aiding in their leader identity construction process) and identity barriers (e.g. issues that participants identified as negatively impacting their leader identity construction process). These catalysts and barriers will be elaborated upon and their relationship to leader identity explained. This paper provides new insights into the leader identity construction process by using Leadership Identity Construction Theory as a lens for interpretation, and offers notable implications for theory, research and practice.

Keywords: Leadership, Identity construction, Leader identity, Qualitative research

1. Introduction

As calls for the investigation of leader identity grow, so too does the need for understanding not just *what* is being constructed, but *how* it is being constructed (Ainsworth & Grant, 2012; Lord & Hall, 2005; McInnes & Corlett, 2012). Individuals construct a leader identity through both relational and interactional processes, which take place across time and situations (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hammond, Clapp-Smith, & Palanski, 2017; Marchiondo, Myers, & Kopelman, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, the nature and content of the relationships and interactions that play a role in leader identity construction are underexplored, and there remain limitations in our understanding of how individuals come to see themselves and come to be seen as leaders within organizations (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Day & Harrison, 2007; Dinh, et al., 2014; Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2016; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Additionally, although there is much previous research engaging with the ways in which individuals construct various identities (Gibson, 2003; Ibarra, 1999), it remains unclear how these avenues of insight might contribute to our understanding of leader identity construction. This study provides a qualitative account of the experience of constructing a leader identity within an organizational context, helping to bridge the gap between what has been theorized regarding leader identity and what individuals experience during the leader identity construction process.

This paper contributes to the leader identity literature in four ways. Firstly, it builds on existing theory by providing further insight around which types of interpersonal relationships may play an important role in the leader identity construction process. Specifically, it outlines the

benefits of role models, including negative role models, and mentors in aiding individuals to construct a leader identity. Although previous research has identified the value that certain relationships such as mentors may have to leadership in general (Dworkin, Maurer, & Schipani, 2012; Gibson, 2004; Ibarra, 1999; Ragins, 1997; Sealy & Singh, 2010; Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978; Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2006), there have been few contributions that have provided insight into the types of relationships that may contribute to leader identity construction.

Our second contribution is that our research provides greater understanding of the challenges individuals may face in their leader identity construction process. There is a growing acknowledgement of the difficulties individuals may face while working to construct a leader identity (Croft, Currie, & Lockett, 2015; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Meister, Sinclair, & Jehn, 2017). This paper extends our current understanding of these challenges by providing contextual evidence regarding the types of relationship and context that may negatively impact one's efforts to construct a leader identity. Further, this paper makes a contribution by addressing the complex interplay between levels of analysis (e.g. individual, interpersonal, group) and identity construction by outlining how various levels of analysis feed into the leader identity construction process. Finally, this study also helps to answer the call by DeRue and Ashford (2010) for the qualitative investigation of their theory. Taking a qualitative approach to the investigation of the LICT might yield valuable insights, specifically regarding to issues of ecological validity (Johnson, Buehring, Cassell, & Symon, 2006).

1.1. Literature Review

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1.1.1. Identity, identity construction, and leader identity

Identities are commonly defined as the "meanings that people attach reflexively to themselves in response to questions such as 'who am I?' and 'who do I want to be in the future?'" (Brown & Coupland, 2015, p. 1316). Identities are useful in part because they aid us in answering the question of "who am I?" and "who do others know me to be?" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Further, according to Pittaway, Rivera, and Murphy (2005), individuals are motivated to know themselves and have a relatively clear sense of the self, and as such, engage in identity construction when presented with identities that need to be defined. Identity construction is the process through which individuals come to define who they are, the result of which is identification, or the extent to which one internalizes an identity (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Identities evolve over time through experience and meaningful social feedback, which allow people to learn about who they are (Lord & Hall, 2005). Identities also represent the self at different points in time. For example, they can represent what we used to be in the past, what we are in the present, and what we hope to become or not to become in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Identities therefore represent a complex understanding of the self that evolve in part through interaction with others ad across contexts (Gecas, 1982). As a result, it is commonly accepted that individuals possess multiple identities, which are held or collected within the larger framework of the self-concept (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2014; Zheng & Muir, 2015).

A leader identity is the "sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader" (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365). A leader identity may be constructed in the complex interplay between organizational hierarchies and interpersonal relationships such that there may not be just a single method or site in which leader identity construction can take place (Hammond, et al., 2017). As more research is devoted to the

investigation of leadership through an identity lens, some researchers have also begun to argue that beyond using an identity perspective to understand the "*doing*" of leadership, we also need to start applying identity as a tool to gain a better understanding of the "*being*" of leadership (Ibarra, Snook, & Guillén Ramo, 2010, p.659). This perspective is one that calls for research of leader identity construction in a way that can account for how leaders act or behave, and how they come to see themselves as leaders, while also taking into consideration the role of others in this process.

1.1.2. Identity in the leadership literature

According to Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, and Day (2014), there are three significant theories of identity relevant to leadership. The following section will outline these theories. The first theory to be discussed is Identity Theory (IT) which is focused on understanding how individuals take on social roles or have them prescribed to them in order to form identities, and proposes that an identity is formed as a result of a process known as role internalization (Burke & Stets, 2009; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007). A leader identity according to IT would be seen as one of many social roles that individuals can enact. This theory views a leader identity as arising from interaction with the complimentary identity of follower. However, this theory is largely predicated upon the assumption that one has access to the social role and may therefore have limited insight to explain how individuals come to construct a leader identity outside of clearly defined social roles such as organizationally-sanctioned leadership roles. If one's identity is more than just a role, then it becomes difficult to explain how one's leader identity can be constructed outside of the social role, or why an identity may not be constructed even when the social role has been conferred.

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The second theory that has commonly been applied to understanding leader identity is Social Identity Theory (SIT). This theory is concerned with understanding how individuals come to be seen as leaders through social categories and group-level processes. A leader identity from this perspective is the result of defining oneself and others based upon the groups to which one belongs (Hogg, 2000; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). According to SIT, leaders emerge in groups due to their prototypicality within the group. However, there remain several unresolved issues with applying an SIT approach to the topic of leader identity. As Ibarra et al., (2014) note, further clarity is needed in order to understand how individuals evaluate prototypicality and therefore come to identify leadership. Although both IT and SIT hold significant possibilities for understanding how identities are constructed, they both have limitations. Notably, these theories fall short of being able to account for how the highly personal and negotiated individualized meaning of the self emerges. For these reasons, these theories may have certain limitations when it comes to understanding the subjective nature of leader identity construction.

Identity Work (IW) is another broad area of identity research that also has applications for leadership research. IW is generally understood as "people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.626). From an IW perspective, individuals can form and maintain a leader identity if and when it is of value to them in a particular context or time. Individuals work to form their leader identity by making claims for this identity, and they maintain it through ongoing negotiations with others (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In addition to utilizing IW to construct identities, it can also be used to manage existing multiple identities (Kourti, Garcia-Lorenzo, & Yu, 2018). A recent line of theorizing that conceptually draws on IW, but which is aimed specifically at understanding the

leader identity construction process, is Leadership Identity Construction Theory (LICT), as proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010).

1.2. Leadership identity construction theory

At its core, LICT is a theory specifically targeted towards explaining how individuals construct an identity as a leader (or follower) (Brown, 2015; Dinh et al., 2014; Marchiondo, Myers, & Kopelman, 2015). This theory accounts for the role that other organizational members as well as social interactions have in the construction of these identities (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). In this way, LICT is somewhat of a departure from other areas of theorizing on leadership that have focused on leadership as a top-down process with little emphasis being put on conceptualizing and articulating the role that other people in an organization have in the process of constructing leader identities (Marchiondo, et al., 2015). Furthermore, this theory moves away from other identity theories that have often attempted to understand how individuals come to construct an identity through a focus on the purely cognitive aspects of the process or by attempting to explain leader identity as a function of group prototypicality. DeRue and Ashford (2010) divide their theory between the process of constructing a leader or follower identity (i.e. the work of constructing an identity through identity claims and grants), the reciprocal nature of identity construction, and other features that may lead to claiming and granting. This paper is particularly interested in the work of constructing an identity, and therefore focuses on this portion of the theory.

According to LICT, the identities of leader (and follower) are mutually-recognized and co-constructed over time through relational processes of identity claims and reciprocal grants (Marchiondo, et al., 2015). An identity claim is any action used to assert an identity, while an

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identity grant is any action used to bestow an identity on another individual. These identity claims and grants can be made through both direct and indirect means as well as through both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. An example of making a direct claim for a leader identity could be an individual stating that they wish to lead a project. An indirect claim for a leader identity could be an individual sitting at the head of the table during a meeting. An example of a direct grant of a leader identity could be an individual telling another teammate that they want them to take the lead on a departmental initiative. Lastly, an example of making an indirect grant of a leader identity could be asking an individual to make the final decision on an important issue.

According to LICT, in order for a leader identity to be constructed, individuals need to make claims for a leader identity and have these claims reciprocally granted by others. When other individuals grant these claims for a leader identity, they are in turn also making a claim for a follower identity. In response, the individual who has been granted a leader identity then needs to reciprocate by granting a follower identity to the individual who granted them their leader identity claim. Over time, this reciprocal claiming and granting cycle leads to patterns of behaviour that reinforce one's understanding of one's mutually recognized role as a leader, thereby leading to the construction of a leader identity. However, LICT also proposes that individuals can be granted a leader identity even before they make a claim for one. For example, an individual can be nominated to act as a team leader before telling others that they wish to do so. DeRue and Ashford (2010) suggest that these types of scenario can occur due to previous rounds of identity construction. For example, if an individual has made successful claims for a leader identity in the past, this can lead others to perceive them as being suitable for a leadership

role, and therefore lead to them granting a leader identity prior to additional leader identity claims being made. This example highlights the cyclical nature of the identity claiming process.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that LICT is not predicated upon the assumption that individuals who engage in constructing a leader identity are already in leadership roles within an organization, opening up the theory to apply to individuals outside of recognized organizational leadership hierarchies. This theory also does not regard those being granted or claiming a follower identity as being relegated to a subordinate position. Rather, it proposes that anyone can enter into this process, regardless of their hierarchal position or organizational standing. Finally, an additional element of LICT is that it accounts for levels of analysis in the identity construction process. According to DeRue and Ashford (2010), identities are internalized at the individual level, reinforced at the relational level and endorsed at the collective level. This theorizing is in line with the levels of analysis of identity as proposed by Brewer and Gardner (1996). In this way, LICT provides a dynamic framework for understanding how individuals utilize identity work in the form of reciprocal claiming and granting processes, to construct a leader identity. This theory therefore becomes useful when attempting to understand the interpersonal components that may contribute to the construction of a leader identity. Adopting LICT as a framework from which to investigate the leader identity construction process provides opportunities to explore the relational and interactional components that may drive the leader identity construction process, but which may not be elaborated on by other theories in sufficient detail.

2. Methods

2.1. Current study

The current study takes an inductive approach to the investigation of the leader identity construction process. Taking an inductive approach provides opportunities to investigate in greater detail the reflexive and subjective experience of constructing a leader identity and in doing so may provide further insights that can drive the development and refinement of theory (Bryman, 2004). The present study was driven by a recognized need for further insights into the types of relationship and interaction that contribute to an individual's leader identity construction process. We therefore adopted the following research question to inform our study: "what experiences, relationships, and interactions contribute to the construction of a leader identity"?

2.2. Materials and methods

2.2.1. Study participants

The data for the study consists of 50 semi-structured interviews with individuals from a wide range of professions and organizational positions. There were 26 female and 24 male participants, with ages ranging from 26 years of age to over 50 years of age. Forty participants reported that they currently lived and worked in England. Three participants were from Ireland but were currently working in England. Six participants were living and working in the United States, out of whom three had emigrated from India. One participant was Indian and was also currently living and working in India but had extensive work experience in Europe and the United States. In terms of their organizational position, nine participants reported that they currently occupied an upper management position, while 36 participants reported that they were

in a middle management position, and 5 participants reported that they were currently in a non-managerial position.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants (Suri, 2011). Purposeful sampling means selecting participants who meet certain criteria set out by the researcher, which are believed to enable the participant to provide the information needed. For this study, this meant interviewing individuals who reported having official/unofficial and past/current leadership experience. The participants were recruited in the following ways. Firstly, the study was advertised via an internal memo in a large UK governmental organization which had agreed to give access to the researchers to conduct interviews with employees. Secondly, the study was advertised via email to staff and faculty at a large university in the north of England. Additionally, the study was also advertised via email through an industrial/organizational relations representative who worked at a large university in the north of England and who had connections with organizations across England. Finally, several interviews were secured by directly emailing individuals and organizations known to the lead author in the US and requesting access to participants through these organizations. In this way, the authors were able to attract a wide range of individuals from across different industries. The authors also made a significant effort to recruit participants from across organizational ranks. This was achieved by advertising the study across organizational ranks and by not disqualifying interested individuals even if they reported that they had an entry level position, for example. Interested individuals were then able to email the authors directly to express their interest in participating. The authors then provided the interested individuals with further information regarding the exact details of the study, including ethics forms.

2.2.2. Interview process

One-on-one interviews were conducted face to face (n=25) or over the phone (n=25) in cases where the participant had time or schedule constraints. The interviews lasted on average 42 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission. The participants were asked 12 interview questions that focused on past and current career history, past experience and relationships with regard to their leadership experience as well as questions asking participants to reflect on how they thought of themselves in relation to being a leader (appendix A contains a list of interview questions). In order to allow participants to provide additional information, the authors chose to employ a semi-structured interview technique in which the interview questions were asked at points that felt appropriate to the interviewer (Rabionet, 2011). Furthermore, to ensure that as much data was collected as possible, participants were asked to share as many examples as they could with regard to each relevant interview question (Flick, 2000). All interviews ended by asking the participants whether there was any additional information or reflections they would like to share, after which all participants were debriefed.

2.2.3. Data analysis process

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) lay out six steps to conducting thematic analysis, namely: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report. The analysis began with the first author transcribing the interviews. Next, to further familiarize themselves with the data, the first author listened to the interviews a second or third time and followed along with the transcripts. After this had been completed, the first author then

moved on to searching the data for initial codes. An inductive approach was adopted in this phase of the data analysis, in order to ground the findings in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The first order coding phase was followed by a second order sorting of the codes into sub-themes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). After this step, the authors each reviewed the first order codes and sub-themes and then collectively discussed the fit of the codes to the sub-themes. After this discussion, the themes were further refined and categorized into second-order themes (see appendix B for an example of codes and a list of themes).

3. Results

Several key themes emerged from the data, which helped to answer the research question. Specifically, it emerged that the relationships, interactions and experiences discussed by the participants in the interviews fit into two key categories, which worked as either catalysts to their leader identity (i.e. helping) or as barriers to their leader identity (i.e. hindering). The following sections will outline these identity catalysts and barriers through the presentation of data extracts from the interviews in order to demonstrate how these findings help us to better understand the leader identity construction process.

3.2. *Catalysts to the construction of a leader identity*

3.2.1. *Role models*

Role models were identified by study participants as important individuals who contributed to their leader identity construction process in two main ways. Firstly, they served as an observable possible leader identity. Secondly, they also provided opportunities for the study

participants to make claims for or receive grants of a leader identity. A quote from participant 17 helps to illustrate how role models act as an observable possible leader identity.

"My manager at the time she was a senior civil servant…she had an excellent leadership style, she was really open, and gave huge amounts of time to people, and I think that was the first time I had seen a strong female leader in the civil service and I thought I want to be like her".

For this participant, observing this leader helped her to see what was possible to achieve as a female leader by showing her a gender congruent leader identity while also showing what was achievable in terms of being a leader in the civil service. Thus, by showing participant 17 what could be achieved in terms of leadership, and by modelling specific leader behaviours, this individual demonstrated a possible leader identity, which was highly informative for her identity construction.

In terms of acting as a source of identity grants, participant 23 reflected on the impact that one of their leader role models had on their leader identity. In this case, they identified that their supervisor actively granted them a leader identity by giving them ownership of their work, while also modelling a possible leader identity.

"she would give you ownership of your project, which is something I had not seen before…and I think that sort of leadership style was helpful, and that is something I try to use in my own projects".

A quote from participant 45 also helps to illustrate the impact that having a supervisor who is also a role model can have, especially when they also provide leader identity grants to individuals. When asked to reflect on an important relationship they felt had an impact on how they thought of themselves as a leader, they shared the following:

"She was very good at giving me opportunities to do things, because I really respected her and thought she was good at what she was doing in the department. I always thought that if she was asking me to do this thing she must think I could do it, and that really sort of changed how I thought of myself and my role".

A final quote from participant 30 further illustrates how role models can act as a source of identity grants. Participant 30 identified how one of their directors acted as a role model for them and contributed to their leader identity construction process by granting them a leader identity, while also displaying a possible leader identity through modelling appropriate leader behaviours.

"My current director is one of the few people I have identified in my career as a role model…he…is very relaxed and easy going and he is very clear where he is going…he is pinpoint clear about what he wants as an outcome but he does not spend a nano-second talking about how it is to be achieved, because he puts that trust in me".

3.2.2. *Mentors*

Mentors were also identified as having an important role in the leader identity construction process, both as a source of modelling possible leader identities and in providing opportunities for individuals to claim or receive grants of a leader identity. For example, participant 35 reported having an important relationship with a mentor in their organization. This mentor granted them a leader identity by identifying their potential as a leader in the organization and taking them on as a mentee.

"I was mentored by my leader, he was quite high up in the organizational hierarchy, but I was not his direct report, but he did see something in me and he started mentoring me…so that individual had a huge impact on my overall leadership, my style, how I would approach things".

A quote from participant 36 also echoes a similar experience of benefiting from a relationship with a mentor, in this case by displaying a possible leader identity.

"I have also had important relationships with mentors along the way who have acted in a way that has made me think "oh that is a good way to treat somebody", the way she just treated me, because it just feels good, it feels supportive, it feels respectful, it makes me think more about what my contributions are and how I want to have that effect on others".

3.2.3. *Negative role models*

Negative role models also served in a similar capacity to positive role models and mentors, in that they provided individuals with examples of possible leader identities. However, due to the undesirable behaviours displayed by negative role models, their function serves more as a boundary guide, giving individuals information on how to avoid being a "bad" leader or how to avoid an unwanted "bad" leader identity. It may also be the case that negative role models help individuals learn how to avoid being perceived in a negative way by others, which would likely reduce the number of identity grants an individual would receive. Participant 28 outlined how they learned from a negative role model.

"Early in my career, I experienced bad examples [of leadership], that I think formed how I want to be and how I don't want to be. I had some leaders early in my career who were very successful but made life difficult for people…I could see the effects of these behaviours and somehow managed to survive them myself and take the learning forward in my own career".

As this data extract shows, for participant 28, observing a leader whose behaviours negatively impacted those around them served as an opportunity to learn about the type of leader identity they wished to avoid. What this quote helps us to understand is the vital role that negative role models have in helping individuals to gain insight into their own leadership and their own leader identity, ultimately helping them to learn about the type of leader identity they wish to avoid, which may aid them in focusing their leader identity claims.

An example from participant 49 also illustrates how negative role models may act as a source of information about possible leader identities to avoid.

"When I was a PhD student…I had an extremely young and inexperienced mentor that sort of showed me what bad leadership could be like… and then when I started doing leadership I sort of amalgamated all of this together and worked out how I wanted to be".

Participant 4 provides a further example of the impact of negative role models on the leader identity construction process.

"I had one manager that to me was kind of okay but quite controlling and quite difficult for the team and I found that difficult on the team's behalf…and that made me think that I do not ever want to be like that".

3.2.4. *Feedback*

A further significant sub-theme that emerged from the interviews focuses on seeking and receiving feedback about one's leadership. We argue that feedback allows individuals to monitor their performance as a leader, which contributes to shaping one's leader identity. However, there has been less attention paid to the role of feedback as a tool for identity construction. As will be

demonstrated below, participants reported seeking out feedback about their leadership, often as a means of self-monitoring. For some this meant monitoring to avoid an unwanted negative leader identity and for others this meant monitoring to maintain and/or improve upon their current leader identity. It is therefore likely that beyond seeking information about one's functional leadership performance, some individuals may utilize feedback for the purpose of working to maintain their leader identity in front of others. Feedback may also provide individuals with information regarding the success of past leader identity claims by providing them with information and confirmation of what they are doing right or wrong as a leader.

Participant 6 reported that feedback provided him with information regarding the success of his leader identity claims, while also providing him with information that informed his perception that others saw him as a leader. He stated, "I have had positive feedback about the way that I lead meetings and chair things, people think I am good at it and want me to do it". Participant 6 gave multiple examples in his interview of how he had been granted a leader identity in his organization even though he was not currently in an official leader role. It therefore appears that feedback about his behaviours and performance helped him to construct his leader identity outside of a formal leadership role.

Participant 13, a midlevel manager, reported that she seeks feedback about her leadership, on a regular basis. She said: "I get feedback from my direct reports and I always get feedback on things we could be doing better in our relationship, so I think there are different opportunities for me to learn and improve how I lead". This quote suggests that Participant 13 seeks feedback in order to self-monitor. It also demonstrates that she has insight and is reflexive about her identity construction. After all, it could be argued that if she did not see herself as a leader, she would not work at it nor seek feedback. An additional point to bring out is the fact

that she seeks feedback not from her supervisors, which would suggest that she links her leadership with performance, but from her direct reports, suggesting that the relational aspect of her leader identity is a highly salient element of her identity.

Participant 4 recalled a particularly difficult time of being led by someone who was quite difficult, as she put it. As a result of this experience, this participant reported that she now actively seeks feedback about her performance as a leader from her direct reports. She seeks this feedback as a means of assessing whether or not she is displaying any of the negative leadership qualities that she observed previously. She said: “Now, I even say to my team, if I am being like this tell me, because I don’t mind being all these other things, but I don’t want to be like this [a bad leader]”.

3.2.5. *Crystallizing events*

Another sub-theme from the interviews suggests that key events, may also have a critical role in the leader identity construction process. Across the interviews, when participants were asked to recall events they felt were important to their leader identity construction process, they often reported significant events that crystallized their leader identity. As will be shown, through the data extracts below, these events were significant points of tension, change, or challenge to the individual and/or their organization and were not necessarily the most recent, and therefore most easily recalled events. These events were significant points in the participants’ life histories that signified a recognized changing point in their life stories and self-perception as a leader.

Participant 24 reflected during his interview that a significant time of change in his organization and his involvement in driving this change acted as a crystallizing event for his leader identity. He stated that, “a piece of work sticks with me as the best leadership work I have

done and really cemented my view of myself as a leader". Participant 27 also reported on a crystallizing event for her, which was a situation in which she took on a leadership role during a challenging time in her organization. Like participant 24, participant 27 also led on a significant change initiative in her organization. However, unlike participant 24, participant 27 volunteered to lead on this initiative. She remarked that "leadership and leading that piece of work and giving people their own areas they could lead on and checking up on people so that they were not left behind" was a significant event in her coming to see herself as a leader. It appears that significant points in time in which individuals have the opportunity to make highly visible claims for a leader identity, seem to act as identity catalysts.

The final example of a crystallizing event comes from participant 48, a leader in UK local government who reported on a crystallizing even that encouraged her to continue in leadership.

"one of the pivotal moments was that someone gave me a job and they told me they thought I was quite good and I had never heard that before, and they trusted me to run this community centre and I did not have a clue, but the fact that someone had trusted me enough and valued me enough to put me in that position…it set me on the path to thinking that I could do this".

As participant 48 pointed out, having someone give her her first experience with leading and being in charge gave her the confidence she needed to carry on taking on leadership roles. In participant 48's case, she continued seeking out leadership roles throughout her career to the point that she reached a significant leadership position in local government. This example brings to light the positive impact that having a leader identity granted, before one makes a claim can have on one's confidence and motivation to continue working to construct a leader identity.

3.3. Barriers to the construction of a leader identity

Catalysts and barriers to identity

3.3.1. Organizational structures

Across the interviews, participants reported that their ability to construct their leader identity and make claims for a leader identity were at times negatively impacted by the constraints of their organization. Participant 25 reflected on the role their organization had in controlling his opportunities to make claims for a leader identity. He said:

"…when I feel that I have the scope to step into that space [leadership], I am not shy about it, I like doing it, but I do feel that on lots of occasions there is no space to step into".

Participant 25 went on to explain that his organization controlled his opportunities to make claims for a leader identity and take on a leadership role. Because of this control, he therefore felt that he did not have agency in constructing a leader identity, and that his organization had control over the process through their control of leader identity claiming opportunities. Organizational control over the leader identity construction process of individuals is also evident in a quote from participant 26.

"It is not about how I am as a leader, it's about the perception of the people above me about my leadership skill and if I am ready for the next level. And that is the problem...I even ask people how do you know if someone is ready for the next level, if you have two people doing the same job?…How do you compare if one person has a team of 20 under him and the other is an expert but has a small team of experts under him? And what I have seen…is that they look at the size of the team, and that is what people ask, how many people report to you?".

Although participant 26 reported that they identified as a leader currently, they recognized the significant struggles they had experienced in getting to this point in their identity construction. Their role in the organization as a specialist meant that their purview of direct

reports was limited in comparison to others. However, in spite of their performance record, they reported facing significant challenges in being perceived as a leader by those above them in the organization. They were therefore not receiving grants in return for their claims for a leader identity because their organization assessed leadership by the size of an individual's team rather than through their overall contribution. This example helps to illustrate the role of the organization in driving norms and organizational culture around how leadership is assessed. This may in turn also drive organizational norms around how individuals' claims for a leader identity are granted. Organizations that reinforce certain understandings of leader identity may be inadvertently signalling to their members that only certain individuals are leaders. This in turn will likely stifle efforts to construct a leader identity in the future if an individual perceives that their claims for a leader identity will not be granted. Although this example brings to light the role of the organization in the leader identity construction process, it also parallels another sub-theme from the data, which is identity rejection.

3.3.2. Identity rejection

During the interviews, some participants reported experiences where their claims for a leader identity were rejected by others. In some instances, these claims were rejected by single individuals and in others by groups of individuals higher up in the organization. As noted previously, according to LICT, identity claims and grants need to occur concurrently in order for a leader identity to be constructed. If an identity claim is rejected (i.e. not followed by a grant at some point in the future), there is a likelihood that the individual may become demotivated to make further identity claims, and in turn may be unlikely to construct a leader identity. Participant 47 shared their experience of having their leader identity rejected.

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"I have really sort of been blocked in my leadership aspirations in my current organization, and that was important to me…I am not in an organizational hierarchy position in terms of what matters most to me".

When asked how they had been blocked, participant 47 explained that they had applied and been rejected for a promotion in their organization. This promotion would have allowed them more organizational credibility and resources to enable them to implement their vision for the organization. Significantly, this bid for an organizationally influential position had been rejected by the board of their organization. Yet during the same period, they were given an award for their leadership. They reported that the staff lower down in the hierarchy recognized them as a leader, as evidenced by the leadership award, yet their leader identity claim for a leadership position in their organization had been rejected by those higher up in the organizational hierarchy, as evidenced by the board rejecting their application for promotion. Participant 47 faced a troubling dichotomy whereby their leader identity was being recognized and granted by certain individuals in the organization, while simultaneously being rejected by others. This led participant 47 to report that they were currently struggling with their identity as a leader. This example may indicate that those who reject an individual's leader identity may be just as important as those who grant it. The data indicates that having one's leader identity rejected by individuals with significant organizational power and influence, such as a board of trustees may have a greater negative impact on one's leader identity than having one's leader identity rejected by individuals with less organizational power or influence. In the case of participant 47, having their leader identity claims granted by their staff does not seem to have been sufficient to overcome the rejection of their leader identity claim by the powerful board. This example also provides insight into how identity rejection may lead to uncertainty regarding one's identity. The

conflicting identity grants and rejections experienced by participant 47 created an uncomfortable identity struggle that will ultimately need to be resolved through additional identity grants if they are to continue in their leader identity construction process.

However, as will be shown in the following example, having one's leader identity rejected by individuals with organizational credibility may be a particularly powerful barrier to constructing a leader identity, but having one's leader identity rejected by those lower down the organizational hierarchy may not be as problematic if there is also support from organizationally credible individuals to counter this rejection. Participant 1 reported an experience where they faced rejection of their leader identity from one of their direct reports.

"When I moved up and became a…manager…up north, I had some stiff wind against me, in that one of the workers had been fulfilling my duty before… [and] she really worked against me".

During their interview, participant 1 reflected on the experience of having their right to carry out their new leadership role rejected by someone who had previously been carrying out the role. In this case, participant 1's claim for a leader identity was rejected by their direct report. However, as participant 1 went on to explain, while she faced having her leader identity rejected by her direct report, this rejection did not seem to impact her leader identity, because she also simultaneously received support in the form of leader identity grants from her own supervisor. Therefore, it may not be as black and white as having one's leader identity granted or rejected. The person doing the granting, or the rejecting, clearly matters, and those individuals with organizational status, power or influence appear to have a key role in driving leader identity construction processes.

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3.3.3. Identity Uncertainty

The final theme identified as acting as a barrier to the leader identity construction process centres around identity uncertainty. In the context of this study, identity uncertainty is understood as an individual feeling unclear or conflicted about their identity as a leader (Cicero, Pierro, & van Knippenberg, 2010; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Uncertainty of identifying oneself as a leader may manifest itself in a variety of ways. For example, a number of study participants reported feeling uncomfortable with identifying themselves as a leader and in making claims for a leader identity due to a reluctance to stand out. They reported that they did not want to be the centre of attention and therefore struggled with identifying themselves as a leader because they felt that being a leader meant being the focus of attention. However, for some participants, their job role necessitates that they be perceived as a leader, even though they felt that they would rather not lead or be in a position of leadership. For these individuals, the demands of their job role or their organization were in conflict with their personal preferences, resulting in them labelling themselves as uncertain about their identity as a leader or as a reluctant leader. A quote from participant 41 helps to illustrate this point.

"I am quite an introvert, given the choice I am a solitary person and would like to stay off people's radar, so initially did not see leadership as something that I wanted to do, but over time I realized that if I want the best for my patients, and my colleagues, then I need to adapt to the role, so initially a reluctant leader".

Given that making a claim for a leader identity requires individuals to be visible to others, the incongruence that participant 41 experienced with their self-evaluation and what they thought

was necessary to be a leader is a clear indication of the impact of uncertainty on the leader identity construction process.

Another reluctant leader was participant 42. Like participant 41, their job role was considered a senior leadership position in their organization, and yet, they too struggled with taking on the leader title in this role.

"I don't see myself as a leader…I have always seen myself as a follower, I did not want to stand out, I did not want to be a leader, I never wanted to be noticed…if I am a leader…it is certainly not something that I sought out".

This individual recognized the need to be perceived as a leader in their current job role, but he reported struggling with coming to terms with how to construct an identity as a leader that could serve the needs of his job role while at the same time allowing him to stay within his personal comfort zone. The incongruence between his self-evaluation and his perception of what is necessary to be a leader may be driving his feelings of uncertainty about his identity as a leader. Furthermore, in the case of participant 41, he did not seek out a leadership role. Rather, he was requested to take on the role by his department. Therefore, because this job role transition was not of his choosing, his uncertainty about his leader identity may be driven in part by a perceived leader incongruence, but may also be the result of a role transition which he had neither anticipated nor prepared for. However, the result of either of these explanations is that this individual is left feeling uncertain about his leader identity, the implications of which may be significant given his senior leadership role in the department.

In the following section, these catalysts and barriers will be discussed within the larger context of leader identity so that the insights from the data can be put into greater context.

4. Discussion

The findings from these interviews reveal the identity work that individuals engaged in in order to construct a coherent sense of the self as a leader, and in the process brought to light issues that both help and challenge individuals face in becoming a leader identity. Organizations continue to find value in leadership and leaders, which in turn drives organizational leadership and leader development initiatives (Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017). There is significant research suggesting that having a leader identity may benefit leader development (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Miscenko, et al., 2017). Therefore, the findings from this study may help to provide greater understanding of the boundary conditions that may impact the leader identity construction process, which in turn may provide meaningful insights that can be applied to leader development initiatives. These same insights may also be of value to the larger leadership and identity literatures, by helping to bring to light issues which many individuals experience in their day-to-day organizational lives, which may not have previously been understood as having a role in leader identity. In the following section, we will outline the theoretical implications of the study findings before moving on to a discussion of the limitations of the study and implications for future research.

4.1. Theoretical implications

A number of theoretical implications can be drawn from the data of this study. Notably, many of the theoretical implications are focused on the type, content, and quality of relationships that foster leader identity construction. Although there has been much research aimed at being able to articulate the types of relationships that are of value to leadership within organizational contexts (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008; Dworkin, et al., 2012; Ghosh & Reio Jr., 2013; Mitchell, Eby, & Ragins, 2015), the current study helps to bring further context and richness to

our understanding of the types of relationships that specifically facilitate the leader identity construction process.

According to Ibarra (1999), role models and mentors may serve as sources of identity information that individuals can observe and learn from during their identity construction process and may serve as examples of a future leader identity. Individuals in organizations may look to leader role models as a source of leadership behaviours to observe and model, but they may also identify with aspects of the leader role model, drawing comparisons between the leader role model and themselves, resulting in a desire to increase similarity through imitation and some level of behavioural modelling (Ibarra, 1999; Sealy & Singh, 2010; Singh et al., 2006).

Although previous research has implicated role models and mentors as drivers of other forms of identity such as professional identity (e.g. Ibarra, 1999), these previous studies do not implicate these relationships as drivers of leader identity. As noted in a previous section of this paper, leader identity is a unique identity, conceptually distinct from other identities such as professional identity. In the larger context of the mentorship and role modelling literatures, the findings from this paper, therefore, provide significant new insight into how role models and mentors might drive the development and construction of multiple identities, including leader identity.

Drawing connections between role models and mentors as sources of identity modelling and the behavioural component of the claiming and granting process of LICT, it is possible that leader role models and mentors help to demonstrate which claiming and granting behaviours are successful in having a leader identity granted to them. Research by Bucher and Stelling (1977) further suggests that professionals create their identities by “picking and choosing” aspects of

their role models in order to construct their ideal self, and the same is likely also true of leaders and leader identity construction. Individuals may observe certain behaviours from their leader role models, picking and choosing the behaviours that are most successful in helping the individual to make claims for a leader identity, and in doing so work to construct their leader identity.

Overall, role models were identified by study participants as helpful to their leader identity construction. However, it is worth pointing out that issues of diversity appeared in the data, specifically regarding gender. Significantly, it was found that many of the female participants identified the benefit of having a gender congruent role model. Having a role model or mentor who can demonstrate what is possible as a leader, while also demonstrating what is possible in terms of navigating the challenges of being a mother and being female, may have a particularly powerful impact, especially regarding to the performative nature of gender and it its complex interplay with leadership (Butler, 2006; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Gibson, 1995; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Previous studies suggest that gender congruent role models and mentors may be key to helping women enter into and remain in male dominated sectors and roles (Drury, Siy & Cheryan, 2011; Mitchell, et al., 2015). Leadership is decidedly male dominated. Female role models and mentors may therefore be particularly influential for new and developing female leaders. There may also be less obvious implications to having gender congruent role models and mentors, such as the opportunity to learn and develop ways of coping with the perceived gender incongruence that may occur when women take on leadership positions. Taken as a whole, we argue that there are significant positive implications when women have access to gender congruent identity construction resources such as mentors and role models.

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In addition to the positive elements of the relationships identified in the previous sections, there is also the added element of how negative relationships can serve as powerful learning tools for the developing leader. Although role models are commonly thought of as sources of positive behavioural modelling, it is becoming increasingly accepted that individuals learn from both positive and negative aspects of role models and that role models may not always be sources of positive behaviours (Gibson, 2004). Research suggests that role models may also serve as models of negative behaviours to be avoided (Bucher & Stelling, 1977; Gibson, 2004; Ibarra, 1999). The concept of a negative role model is an individual who displays negative or undesirable behaviours (Bucher & Stelling, 1977; Gibson, 2004). Like positive role models, negative role models provide the individual with opportunities to learn and define themselves through observing possible identities, although in this case, they are observing identities to be avoided. In the context of this study, we argue that the individual observes the leader role model and actively attempts not to model the behaviours they have identified as being possibly harmful, uncharacteristic of effective leadership, or as being inauthentic to how the individual wishes to lead. In this way, the negative leader role model serves as an example of how not to lead or how not to be a leader and helps to shape the individual's leader identity by providing them with information that may help them identify how they wish to be in the future or what they fear being in the future (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986). There has been very limited research linking negative role models with leader identity construction, and this study therefore helps to fill this gap.

As noted in previous sections, although the leadership literature has begun to address issues of identity with greater frequency in recent years, much of the literature continues to focus on what could be considered as the more positive aspects of identity construction, with a focus

on understanding what leaders do, or can do to construct an effective and authentic leader identity (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Klenke, 2007). Far fewer studies have attempted to unpick the identity construction process of leaders by taking a closer look at the barriers they may face during their leader identity construction process. We argue that understanding the hurdles and obstacles that individuals may encounter during their leader identity construction process is as important as understanding what leaders do to successfully construct a leader identity. In this regard, this paper makes a significant contribution by outlining the challenges individuals face in constructing a leader identity.

In addition to the relational elements of leader identity construction addressed by this study, the challenges that individuals face in constructing a leader identity are also conceptually and theoretically valuable. This is due to the fact that these challenges help us to better understand ecological issues associated with structural control, as well as the subjective experience of how individuals may struggle in their identity construction. Significantly, this study brought to life the role that organizational structures have in creating barriers to the leader identity construction process. Previous research has indicated that organizational structures such as organizational hierarchy may work to regulate identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvasson, 2003). However, it remains unclear how these same structures may impact the leader identity construction process. Our study therefore helps to draw out the ways in which organizations create barriers to constructing a leader identity. Although these forms of control may manifest themselves in different ways, for example as organizational titles or as organizational reward structures such as pay, their impact is still to act as a form of control, limiting who makes claims for leader identities and in what way identities are constructed. However, as organizations move away from more bureaucratic

structures (Shamir, 1999), it could be questioned whether these organizational barriers identified by the participants (e.g. job role, grade, and so on) will disappear and their barring effect to leader identity along with them.

In addition to the main issues outlined above, there are also valuable insights that can be drawn regarding issues of power and status in relation to leader identity construction. Specifically, this study indicates that it matters who supports or does not support one's leader identity construction process. We argue that having one's leader identity rejected by individuals who have higher organizational status may have a greater negative impact on one's leader identity construction process in comparison to having one's identity rejected by individuals with lower organizational status. Further, the findings of this study also indicate that it matters who supports one's leader identity construction by providing leader identity grants. Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) suggest that individuals with greater organizational status appear to provide social validation of claimed identities. The findings of this paper support this, but also go a step further by implicating the dichotomous nature of social validation specifically within the context of leader identity construction. Significantly, just as social validation can prove useful in the construction of one's identities, the findings from this study also help to illustrate what happens when one's identity is rejected.

Significantly, the findings of this study also help to provide a greater understanding of the type of social validation that may be most impactful to leader identity construction. Given that most, if not all individuals with higher organizational standing are likely to be in leadership positions, it may be that the social validation received from another leader may be key for leader identity construction. The findings from this study indicate that individuals discriminate between the sources of their identity grants, perceiving grants from high status individuals as being more

valuable, with greater significance attached to perceived identity rejection. The apparent information processing and discrimination regarding the source of a grant or rejection could have important implications in terms of from whom individuals seek identity grants. It may also have implications in terms of to whom individuals have access when constructing their leader identity. This may be a vital and key component of the leader identity construction process that many organizations are not addressing. The ever-growing trend in many organizations towards addressing identity in leader development initiatives could be overlooking a vital element if they do not address both sides of the leader identity construction process (e.g. who is claiming and who is granting). Providing opportunities for individuals to make claims and receive grants from key organizational individuals or individuals with perceived organizational status (i.e. organizational leaders), could be a key driver of leader identity. Furthermore, it should also be noted that having one's leader identity claims rejected by high status individuals may have significant negative outcomes. We argue that if organizational members higher up in the organizational hierarchy received training and guidance on how to support leader identity claims through purposeful grants, it might be possible for these individuals to have a more invested role in fostering the leader identity construction of their direct reports, and if exercised effectively, this could be used to encourage greater leadership development in unrepresented groups.

A final element worth discussing is the issue of levels of analysis that emerged from the interview data. Brewer and Gardner (1996) note that there are three levels of self-representation associated with levels of analysis. These are personal, relational, and collective representations. They suggest that these representations of the self associate with the individual, interpersonal, and group levels of analysis respectively. These representations of self as outlined above highly correlate with the levels of identity construction outlined by LICT. As noted previously, LICT

proposes that the leader identity construction process takes place across levels of analysis. The findings from this study help to illustrate in part how the leader identity construction process plays out across these levels, while also providing insight into which levels of analysis may be most significant to the subjective experience of identity construction. The eight sub-themes identified in the study occur across various levels of analysis. Specifically, crystallizing events, identity uncertainty, and rejection occur at the individual level. Given the subjective nature of identity construction, the prevalence of this level of analysis in the data highlights how important individual perceptions may be to identity formation. Further, positive role models, mentors, and negative role models all occur at the interpersonal or dyadic level of analysis, thus representing the strong relational and interactional components of identity construction present in the data. To a lesser extent, the team or group level of analysis was also represented in the data though the sub-theme of feedback. This underrepresentation of the team level of analysis is likely the result of the highly individualized perspective of the study itself rather than a representation of the overall impact of team level issues on the leader identity construction process overall. Taking these levels of analysis into consideration, we argue that the relational recognition element of LITC is a particularly powerful agent in driving leader identity construction. This should make sense given the relational nature of the claiming and granting processes. However, it would appear that it is also in this space of dyadic interaction that individuals found a wealth of meaning for their leader identity. Furthermore, although group level collective endorsement was also discussed by participants, as the example given by participant 47 illustrates, the data would suggest that in comparison, collective level endorsement as proposed by LICT is much more precarious and challenging to the identity construction process. Thus, from the data, we can gain

insights into which levels of analysis may be of greater value to the leader identity construction process within the context and lens of LICT.

5. Limitations of the study

This study provides a valuable contribution to the leader identity literature by helping to shed light on a number of contextual factors that may play a role in the construction of a leader identity. However, there are limitations to address. Firstly, qualitative research is ill-suited to issues of "prevalence, generalizability, and calibration" (Lee, 1999 as cited in Murphy & Ensher, 2008). Therefore, it is recommended to exercise caution when generalizing these findings. Furthermore, given that these findings are the result of non-randomized sample selection and are drawn from a small sample of individuals, further research is required to establish with greater certainty the role of these catalysts and barriers in the leader identity construction process. What is more, although the sample was diverse in terms of almost equal gender distribution while also representing individuals from across the UK, the organizations represented in the sample were predominantly large and with established norms around leadership. It is therefore unknown whether these same issues are prevalent in smaller organizations or organizations with less formal leadership norms and structures. Finally, although it is certainly the case that a number of participants in this study were employed in highly structured organizations, the study sample also included organizations with less rigid structures. This therefore brings to question whether these organizational barriers are the result of bureaucracy or the nature of organizing itself. This lack of clarity is therefore a limitation to the insights drawn from the study.

6. Implications for future research

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Future research building on this initial qualitative study might engage further with the key findings of the study. For example, future studies might investigate the concept of negative role models further through quantitative methods in order to better understand their ability to influence and drive leadership development outcomes (Brown & Treviño, 2014). It may be possible that providing developmental opportunities that offer individuals the ability to observe and reflect on the implications of both positive and negative leader behaviours can help new and developing leaders build and establish behavioural parameters within which to exercise leadership and navigate their leader identity.

A study of this nature might also have applications for leader development by providing greater insight into the types of training that might better enable leaders to both develop leadership skills and gain greater proficiency in exercising leadership. Secondly, future studies could further engage with identity uncertainty and identity rejection in order to better understand how these factors impact leader development and leadership outcomes (Epitropaki et al., 2016; Hogg, 2009). For example, it may be important to understand the effect of perceived identity rejection on leadership outcomes such as engagement with subordinates (Epitropaki et al., 2016). Furthermore, it may be worth investigating the implications of leader identity rejection on seeking out leader development and leadership opportunities (Petriglieri, 2011). Day and Harrison (2007) suggest that one's leader identity is vital to the ongoing development of a leader. However, DeRue and Ashford (2010) propose that individuals may disengage from the leader identity construction process if their claims for a leader identity are not granted. It may also be useful to understand how having one's leader identity rejected might interact with one's personality (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). We question whether there might be an interplay between one's personality and the ability to rebound from identity rejection.

6.1. Practical implications of the research

A number of practical implications can be drawn from the research that may be particularly useful for practitioners. Significantly, because this research highlighted interactions, experiences, and relationships that both contributed and detracted from the leader identity construction process, we envision that the practical implications would diverge in terms of how practitioners might apply insights from this study. Firstly, the findings of this study indicate that mentors and role models had a positive impact on the leader identity construction process. There are both organizational as well as individual level implications for these findings. Firstly, as noted before, there has been very little literature linking role models with the leader identity construction process, although the link with other identity processes is well established (Ibarra, 1999).

Therefore, one practical implication for organizations would be to take note of the value of role models and mentors in aiding leader identity and to create formal mentoring or role modelling schemes in the workplace or on leadership development programmes in order to facilitate the leader identity construction process. Secondly, at the individual level, it may also be the case that new or developing leaders can utilize both formal and informal mentorship and role model schemes in order to facilitate their leader identity construction process. However, this second point is predicated upon the assumption that individuals are made aware of the value of role models and mentors to their ability to positively impact their leader identity construction process. Therefore, it is also vital that this information is disseminated, therefore indicating that individual development initiatives should be linked with the organization so that individuals can be both made aware of the value of mentors and role models to their leader identity construction and be given access to these resources. Organizations, human resource managers, department

heads, and line managers could facilitate access to role models and mentors and therefore play an active role in aiding the leader identity construction process.

Additionally, given that there were significant issues brought up by the study participants around the issues of gender and diversity in relation to role models and mentors, we believe that these findings further support the value and need for organizations to establish programmes that facilitate opportunities and access to leadership role models and mentors for individuals who are underrepresented in leadership. Although the findings from this study suggest that role models and mentors are beneficial to the leader identity construction process overall, the findings also suggest that gender congruent role models and mentors are especially beneficial in being able to allow the developing leader to tap into the social learning aspects of these relationships. Previous research supports the broader concept of demographic congruency of mentors (see Dworkin et al., 2012; Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005; Ragins, 1997), but our current understanding of mentor congruency has yet to specifically address this concept in relation to leader identity construction. This study therefore helps to draw links between these concepts and provides a greater understanding of how congruency can foster leader identity construction. Further, given that the previous literature indicates that demographic congruency between mentors and protégés may increase liking and facilitate relationship establishment, it may be possible that these factors might provide greater impetus for identity claiming and granting to take place. We would therefore argue that programmes designed to match individuals with leader role models and mentors who possess similar characteristics to themselves, might provide more constructive opportunities for leader identity construction to take place. This would especially be the case with regard to the issues of role models and mentors in relation to female leader identity construction.

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Furthermore, the findings of this research indicate that individuals face significant organizational level barriers to constructing a leader identity. For example, organizational structures such as job roles can create situations in which individuals face significant challenges in being able to make claims for a leader identity and receive grants. These findings therefore indicate that there is a significant loss of agency in the identity construction process. However, there appears to be an added level of complication factored into this issue. It is possible that organizations can take steps to restore agency to the leader identity construction process. However, this would require organizations to be able to identify and address the organizational level issues that may impair leader identity construction. This is said with the understanding that such changes would likely be quite challenging to implement. However, if leader identity construction is an issue that organizations take seriously and wish to facilitate as part of their wider organizational leadership development, then working to address these issues could be part of a larger change programme to steer the organization towards creating a culture of leader identity with organizational and individual congruency between the socially constructed understandings of leadership.

7. Conclusion

By providing insight into the types of experience, relationship, and interaction that contribute to the leader identity construction process, this paper makes a number of contributions to the leadership and identity literatures. Firstly, it builds on existing theory by providing insights into both the nature and content of interpersonal relationships in the leader identity construction process by outlining how role models, mentors and negative role models drive the leader identity construction process. Secondly, this study makes a contribution by providing a greater understanding of the challenges individuals may face in their leader identity construction

process. Much of the previous literature on the leader identity construction process has focused on the factors that may contribute to constructing a leader identity, with much less attention paid to understanding and attempting to describe which issues and factors may prevent or impair the leader identity construction process. Additionally, this study also makes a contribution by answering the call of DeRue and Ashford (2010) for the qualitative investigation of their theory. This paper also addresses the complex interplay between levels of analysis (e.g. individual, interpersonal, group) and identity construction by outlining how various levels of analysis feed into the leader identity construction process, and in doing so provides valuable ecological validity to the qualitative study of leader identity.

Lastly, although LICT provides significant new theorizing on how individuals come to construct a leader identity, there remain unanswered questions regarding the parameters around identity rejection and identity granting. The findings of this study bring into question whether the organizational credibility of leader identity grants also extends to issues of leader identity rejection. Brought together, the findings of this study provide an important contribution to understanding not just *what* identity is being constructed, but also *how* individuals come to construct a leader identity by explicating the relationships, interactions, and contextual issues that may be at play in this process.

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Appendix A. Interview protocol

1. Can you tell me what your job title is?
2. How long have you been working here?
3. What do you do in your job role?
4. Do you line manage or have any direct reports?
5. Do you think of yourself as a leader?
    - If so, how?
    - If not, why do you think that is?
6. What does being a leader mean to you?
7. Can you tell me about an important experience that you have had that you feel has had an impact on how you think of yourself as a leader?
8. Can you tell me about any important relationships that you have or have had, which you feel have had an impact on how you think of yourself as a leader?
9. Looking back at your time in this job role and in others, do you feel that your sense of self as a leader has changed, or grown over time?
    - If so in what way?
    - If not, why do you think that is?
10. Do you think there is anyone in your organization who identifies you as a leader? If so, how did you conclude that this person / these people see you as a leader?
11. Do you feel that your job role allows you to act as a leader?
    - If so, how?
    - If not, why do you think that is?

Catalysts and barriers to identity

12. Are there any other experiences or relationships or anything else that you would like to share that you think would be relevant?

Appendix B: First order codes, themes, and global themes

Codes	Themes	Global themes
Emulating other leaders Identifying with historical leaders Having a female role model Learning from a leader role model	**Role model**	Leader Identity Catalysts
Having a leadership mentor Help to grow as a leader Informal coaching	**Mentors**	
Observing poor leadership Negative leader relationship Learning from bad leadership	**Negative Role Model**	
Seeking feedback from others Seeking feedback from direct reports Actively asking for feedback from others	**Feedback**	
Thinking of self as leader after significant event Others see me as leader now Now think of self as leader	**Crystallizing Events**	
Grade conscious Job role constraints Organizational expectations of leadership	**Organizational Role in Leader Identity**	Leader Identity Barriers
Feeling almost like a leader Mismatch between self and leader identity Feeling like an impostor Struggling to see self as a leader	**Leader Identity Uncertainty**	
Lack of recognition of leadership Having project taken away Staff rejecting role as leader Lack of support from senior leaders	**Leader Identity Rejection**	