

# Links Between Leader Identity, Leadership Identity and Their Fusion

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**Abstract.** Growing body of research in leader and leadership identity exhibits the topic's importance in today's turbulent and uncertain global environment. Leader identity, which is related to the personal development of the leader, analysed at personal, relational and collective (group) levels. However, leader identity does not fully support leadership. Leaders operate and grow within the context of the people they lead – the group, the followers, who collectively possess social (group) identity. Researchers view this as a complex phenomenon involving shared values, perspectives and goals. There is no distinct line that separates leader identity from group identity, but there is an area where they clash. As a person evolves as a leader, leader identity is expected to incorporate more elements of group identity and develop towards it, although that is not inevitable. The current study emphasises leader-follower interactions and identity fusion, linking them to identity leadership development and suggesting possible outcomes.

**Keywords:** *leader identity, leader-follower interactions, identity fusion, identity leadership.*

## Introduction

### *Relevance of the article*

Up-to-date scientific research further explains complex and dynamic phenomena of leadership, making it one of the most broadly researched fields in management. This article theoretically analyses leader identity, leadership identity, identity leadership and identity fusion concepts as well as points out links between concepts and their outcomes. Dynamic organisational nature and constant need for good leadership are not able to justify leading positions only by hierarchical structure and official titles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). On the other hand, the desire for leadership attracts individuals with egoistic and narcissistic, rather than altruistic, ambitions (Haslam et al., 2022). This article tends to draw ties and links from the individual concept of leader identity to identity leadership behaviour and its outcomes. As addressed in the recent theoretical dual-identity framework by Haslam et al. (2022), leader identity and identity leadership are two distinct constructs, that could be aligned to complement each other in leadership developmental path.

### *Level of problem investigation*

Identity is researched in two streams – leader identity and identity leadership. Leader identity is understood as how a leader is perceived and accepted by others (Epitropaki et al., 2016; Lord & Hall, 2005) with the main research fields being personal attributes of the leader, traits, behaviours and antecedents analysed (Komives et al., 2005; Reicher et al., 2005; DeRue et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Zheng, & Muir, 2014; Hammond et al., 2017; Kragt, & Day, 2020; English, & Ehrich, 2020; Lanaj et al., 2021). Identity leadership concept built on the basis of the *Social Approach to Leadership* and *Self Categorization Theory* (Turner et al., 1987), refers to leaders' capacity to influence and mobilise others by having abilities to *represent, advance, create* and *embed* a sense of social identity that is shared with potential followers (Haslam et al., 2020). Identity leadership research tends to explain its impact on commitment related organisational and personal outcomes, health issues, well-being, and satisfaction of individuals, experiencing one or another combination of identity leadership (Steffens et al., 2014; Khumalo et al., 2022; Van Dick et al., 2021; Krug et al., 2021, Fransen et al., 2020).

**Scientific problem:** What is the link and connection between the leader identity and leader's ability to pursue identity leadership?

**Object of the article** – link between leader's identity and identity leadership concepts.

**Aim of the article:** to investigate the link between leader's identity, identity leadership and identity fusion process.

### **Objectives of the article:**

1. To describe the concept of leader identity and its processes.

2. To describe the concept of identity leadership, its processes, and causal effects.
3. To analyse empirical research on leader identity and identity leadership.
4. To point out the links between leader identity and identity leadership.

### ***Methods of the article***

Main methods used in this article are critical literature review and analysis, synthesis, and generalisation.

## **1. Leader identity, leadership identity and identity leadership concepts in scientific literature**

Leadership concept in scientific and practical literature has an overall positive image, and leadership by itself is viewed as a greeter good, which has a positive organisational impact (Haslam et al., 2020). First of all, historically leadership was understood as high hierarchical position within organisation, although official leadership does not explain why some individuals are seen as leaders and others do not (DeRue, & Ashford, 2010). More recent and modern view on leadership supports leadership definition as a complex of various impacts and influences over others by mobilising followers to act towards common goal (Haslam et al., 2020). Leadership is being seen as social influence process on thoughts, feelings and actions, identity is viewed as factor, explaining leadership itself (Ibarra et al., 2014; Yukl, 2010). Research on identity in leadership studies falls into two directions: 1) *leader identity* and 2) *identity leadership*.

***Leader identity.*** Identity is seen as a multidimensional construct, where individuals may have several different identities and use them based on the situation, relations, and interactions they are in (Ashforth, & Johnson, 2001; Karp, & Helgø, 2009). Identity is defined in terms of relationship to others when individual behaviour changes depending on the context as different identities become salient (Reicher et al., 2005). As the leader grows, identity changes and is reformed, adapted, and created based on the context the leader is in. Leader identity in organisational context is how leader is perceived and accepted by others (Epitropaki et al., 2016; Lord, & Hall, 2005). Leader identity is less researched topic than follower identity, which later is analysed as result of leadership behaviour. At this level of analysis leader and follower self is a key variable (Komives et al., 2005; DeRue et al., 2009; Hammond, 2017; Kragt, & Day, 2020). Leader identity is analysed at three levels of self: *individual*, *relational* and *group/collective*. Individual's self-identification as a leader is seen as a starting point for leader identify formation when leader behaviour becomes active (DeRue et al., 2009). Identity is closely related to challenges and experiences that a person needs to overcome in order to stay or become a leader (English, & Ehrich, 2020). Strong self knowledge motivates leaders to seek new and more ambitious goals and practice leadership competences – *thinking motivates doing* (Kragt, & Day, 2020).

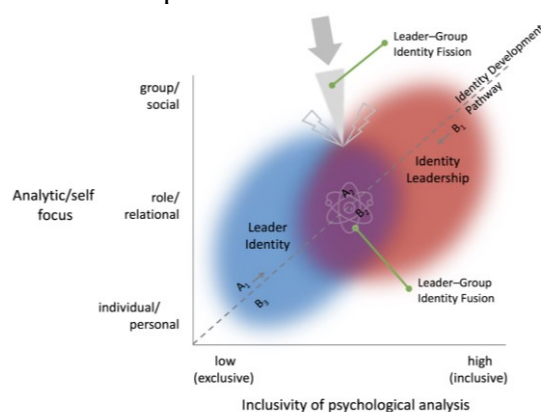
***Leadership identity*** in this article is defined and understood as an overall leadership capacity, view of leadership, that happens at the organisational context, where leader develops during self-identification as a leader (personal identity) and later, while interacting and influencing also being influenced by the group, broadening of initial view of leadership and crafting leadership identity occurs (DeRue, & Ashford, 2010; Komives et al., 2005). Leadership identity is defined as an overall capacity of leadership at organisational context, **identity leadership** concept derived from *Social Identity Approach to Leadership* (Haslam et al., 2020) and is based on the core stones of *Self Categorization Theory* (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987). *Social approach to leadership*, formulated and argued as “new psychology of leadership”, refers to leaders' capacity to influence and mobilise others by having abilities to *represent*, *advance*, *create* and *embed* a sense of social identity that is shared with potential followers (Haslam et al., 2020). Shared social group identity is a base for effective communication, employee's motivation and organisational behaviour as well as management of stress (Zheng, & Muir, 2015). It drives individuals to behave for the benefit of the group rather than individual achievement. Social identity is an important basis of social power – especially for groups which otherwise lack resources or control institutions (Turner, 2005). Individuals at the group level are seen as the ones that form the groups, but are also formed by the group (Johnson, 2006). As already witnessed by some scholars, leadership literature “suffers” from large amount overlapping concepts

(Epitropaki et al., 2016). Further in this article, **identity leadership** concept will be analysed, investigated and viewed by the author as leader's leadership identity path – leader's style of leadership identity.

**Identity leadership** model consists of four dimensions: *identity prototypicality*, *identity entrepreneurship*, *identity advancement* and *identity impresarioship* (Steffens et al., 2014). *Identity prototypicality* (“being one of us”) is the level of leader representation of unique group features and qualities. *Identity Advancement* (“doing it for us”) is leader's engagement into advancing, promoting and defending core interests of the group (Milesi, 2022; Steffens et al., 2014). *Identity entrepreneurship* (“crafting a sense of us”) refers to a sense of ‘we’ and ‘us’ within the group, where leader's behaviour makes different people feel that they are part of the same group (Haslam et al., 2020). *Identity impresarioship* (“making us matter”) is leader's initiation of certain processes (structure, practices, activities) in order to point out the impact, importance and meaning of the group (Steffens et al., 2014).

Leader identity and identity leadership being separate concepts with different psychological pathways and analytical focus, has no clear and distinct line between both, and some attributes can be seen as unique for the leader and sometimes as group identity shared with others (Haslam et al., 2022). It is clear from the scientific literature that a space where both identities meet is *relational identity* (Fig. 1), where a leader's personal identity is grounded in their social identity as a member of a group. Relational identity is perceived to lead to further leadership dynamics by possibility to pursue energies from both leader identity and identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2022). According to *relational leadership theory*, identities form during dynamic interaction process of leaders and followers, where they are “claimed” and “granted” by the other side during social processes (DeRue, & Ashford, 2010). Based on their adopted identity, individuals are perceived by others. It is of great importance for the leader to be accepted by the followers not only by the official title of the position, but as a leader of people in that group.

**Identity fusion** is grounded in followers' perceptions of the leader as someone who contributes to the collective identity of the group that he or she leads (van Dick et al., 2019). Concept of identity fusion points out that both identities – personal and social – rather fulfils one another than conflicts (Gómez et al., 2011). As individuals become highly fused with the group, boundary between personal identity (“me”) and social identity (e.g. “me, a scholar”, “I, an European”) fades (van Dick et al., 2019). Fusion emphasises the tendency for people to develop feelings of connectedness and reciprocal strength with other group members, identification emphasises the tendency for group members to ally themselves with a common group identity (Gómez et al., 2011). Since groups and organisations are of dynamic nature, leadership and fusion processes do not happen without a context. As fusion is seen to positively affect leadership, it is also related to extreme behaviour and health issues, since it is associated with high levels of commitment, altruism and fanaticism (Gómez et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2022; Swann et al., 2010). In such light, identity fission sometimes might be seen as a more positive outcome than fusion.



Source: Haslam, S. A., Gaffney, A. M., Hogg, M. A., Rast, D. E., & Steffens, N. K. (2022). Reconciling identity leadership and leader identity: A dual-identity framework. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 33(4) p. 34.

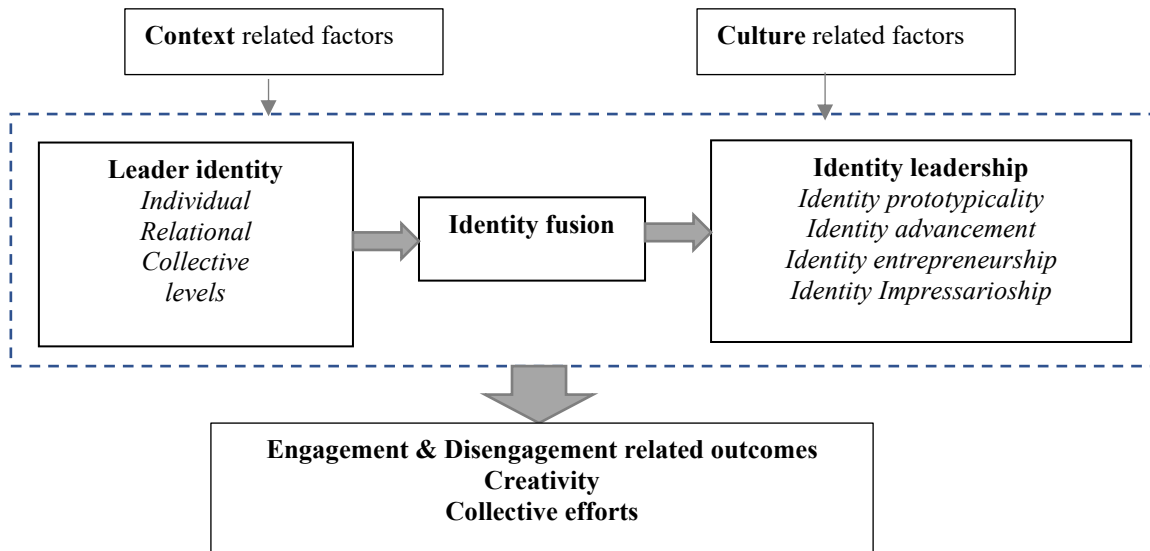
**Fig. 1 Leader–group identity fusion and leader–group identity fission**

## 2. Leader identity, identity fusion and identity leadership links in scientific literature

Effective leadership is about leaders and followers seeing themselves as bound together through their joint membership of the same group, and working together to satisfy group needs and realise group ambitions. (Haslam, & Reicher, 2016). The phenomenon of the successful leader, as a cause of effective leadership, has long been focus of the leadership research, where personality, knowledge, competences and other personal attributes have been analysed in order to define a good leader. (DeRue, & Ashford, 2010; Haslam, & Reicher, 2016). Following more recent leadership research on identity, it is clear that research from personal features moved towards more complex variables, that include social psychology, psychology, and group psychology elements. Studies of identity leadership are concentrated on processes of group social identity, where followers and leaders are members of the same group and shares collective group identity (Haslam et al., 2020, 2022; Haslam, & Platow, 2001; Hogg, 2001; Johnson, & Chang, 2006; Steffens et al., 2014; Zheng, & Muir, 2015).

Leader identity is found to be an antecedent for abusive, consideration and transformational leadership behaviours, which predicts leadership effectiveness: strong individual identity paired with a weak collective identity leads to abusive leader behaviour while collective level of identity is related to transformational behaviour (Johnson et al., 2012). High quality interactions between leaders and followers have an impact on organisational commitment (Lapointe et al., 2020). High leader identity is found to increase daily level of self-sacrifices, which helps at work, while harms at home (negative effect on family & personal life) (Lanaj et al., 2021). Acquiring a leader's identity is seen as a complicated process, that does not happen by single behaviour, but requires numerous social interactions over a period of time. Even when incorporating leader identity is a self-schema, leaders-to-be, have to acquire leader identity via claiming and granting process (DeRue, & Ashford, 2010; Marchiondo et al., 2015; Savani, & Zou, 2019). Complex identities (such as leader identity), can also be demotivating in engaging in related behaviour (e.g. Leadership behaviour) since invoking them appears to be too difficult to achieve. Thus, identity is a double-edged sword that can either motivate or demotivate behaviour or an individual (Savani, & Zou, 2019). Leader identity developmental trajectories differ based on leadership experience and level (for example student leaders, middle leaders or executives) and is positively related to developmental trajectories of three leadership competencies: challenging the status quo, valuing diversity, and creating commitment (Kragt, & Day, 2020)

Recent empirical evidence proves, that leaders' influence through social identity depends on the group context in which the relationship between leader and followers is embedded – group context matters for collective action evoked by ingroup identification due to identity leadership but not for collective action evoked by group efficacy due to identity leadership (Khumalo et al., 2022). Results suggest that leaders who act on the principles of identity leadership cannot mobilise followers for any kind of act – it needs to be within norms and values of the social group they lead. Recent findings of Khumalo et al. (2022) supports earlier implications of Haslam et Al. (2020) work on “New psychology of leadership” – content, not only process matters. Shared social identity of a team becomes even more important during periods of crisis, like recently experienced the COVID-19 pandemic (remote work, absence of the face-to-face contact in work environment). Work-related social identity continuity was proven to increase job satisfaction and reduce loneliness among employees during (Krug et al., 2021). Leader's engagement in identity leadership does not increase employee burnout, but on the contrary – lowers it (Dick et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2020). Such results suggest that leadership, which fosters team members' sense of “we” and “us”, is beneficial for their well-being (Dick et al., 2021). These findings are in line with other study of Fransen et al. (2020), that identity leadership in sports teams fostered athletes identification with the team and their psychological safety (Fransen et al., 2020). Importance of informal leaders engagement in identity leadership and contributing to healthier and more engaged team was also proven to be important and worth additional scholar attention (Fransen et al., 2020; Krug et al., 2021).



Source: created by the author.

**Fig. 2 Links between leader identity and identity leadership**

Leader identity and identity leadership are different concepts but within the similar context both concepts are connected at several dimensions – leaders do not act alone but within other individuals, they together form a group and work towards common group goals. Based on previous empirical research and conceptual models (Haslam et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2012; Lord, & Hall, 2005), this article suggests, that leader identity and its composition could be seen as an antecedent for leader’s ability to pursue identity leadership, while undergoing identity fusion process. Such conceptual model is presented in Figure 2. Leader identity evolves from individual level and shifts towards incorporating more collective level aspects, while at some point fusions with identity leadership, that is related to deeper psychological elements of the group. Such a process would be unique to a given organisational and cultural context where it takes place. Combination of leader identity dimensions (which consists of three levels: individual, relational, and collective) is suggested to have various impacts on leader’s ability to do identity leadership (*identity prototypicality*, *identity entrepreneurship*, *identity advancement* and *identity impresarioship*) that results into commitment and collectiveness related outcomes.

## Conclusions

1. Leader identity is widely explained and understood as “how a leader is perceived and accepted by the team (people) they lead”. Leader identity consists of three levels: individual, relational, and collective. The concept is mostly related to a person’s self-perception, understanding, and growth as leader. The identity of a leader serves a starting point for an individual’s pursuit of leadership behaviour.
2. Identity leadership refers to leaders’ capacity to influence and mobilise others by having abilities to *represent*, *advance*, *create*, and *embed* a sense of social identity shared with potential followers (Haslam et al., 2020). Identity leadership is seen as a process during which a shared social group identity is cultivated and maintained within the group.
3. Leader identity is analysed as a set of personal attributes of the leader, including traits, behaviours, and antecedents, while identity leadership research aims to explain its impact on commitment related organisational and personal outcomes, health issues, well-being, and satisfaction of individuals experiencing one or another combination of identity leadership. Both concepts are connected by the fact that leaders do not act in vacuum; they all undergo a fusion process and are also affected by unique social, cultural, and psychological factors.

4. Leader identity and its composition are suggested to be one of the antecedents for a leader's ability to pursue identity leadership, resulting in commitment, creativity, and collectiveness related outcomes. The developmental and psychological path of leader identity in certain contextual environment is believed to have an impact and serve as an antecedent of pursuing identity leadership.

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