



## Leadership and followership identity processes: A multilevel review☆



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### ABSTRACT

A growing body of leadership literature focuses on leader and follower identity dynamics, levels, processes of development and outcomes. Despite the importance of the phenomena, there has been surprisingly little effort to systematically review the widely dispersed literature on leader and follower identity. In this review we map existing studies on a multilevel framework that integrates levels-of-the self (individual, relational and collective) with the levels-of-analysis (intrapersonal, interpersonal and group) on which leader or follower identity work takes place. We also synthesize work from multiple research paradigms, such as social psychology experimental studies, narrative accounts of leaders' identity work and field studies on antecedents, outcomes, mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions. Finally, we outline implications for leadership development and call attention to key themes we see ripe for future research.

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## Introduction

In the last decade, the study of identity has sparked much interest and has become one of “the most popular topics in contemporary organizational studies” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1163), leading to the accumulation of a significant amount of novel theoretical and empirical work on the topic (e.g., Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Collinson, 2003; Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor, 2009; Petriglieri, 2011). Leadership and followership identity processes, in particular, play a significant role in indicating ‘who will lead’ and ‘who will follow’ as well as ‘how leaders and followers will influence’ and ‘be influenced’. Examining identity is important as most of the dominant theoretical paradigms in the leadership field (e.g., trait theories, transformational and charismatic theories, Leader-Member Exchange) focus on how *others* see and evaluate leaders (or followers) and how leaders and followers *behave*. Understanding how leaders and followers see and define *themselves*, as well as understanding the complex ways in which these self-definitions develop, change, and are influenced by leader-follower interactions and contexts, is an important piece of the leadership puzzle that can offer us unique insights on the drivers of leader and follower behaviors and actions.

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**Fig. 1.** Frequency count of articles containing leadership identity, leader and self-concept, follower identity, follower self-concept, leadership and social identity, leader identity and development, in the article title in five year increments from 1995 to 2015 and one increment presenting everything that has been written before 1995.

Thus, it is of no surprise that a fast growing body of leadership literature focuses on leader and follower identity development dynamics, levels, co-construction and effects (e.g., Carroll & Levy, 2010; Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009; Eilam-Shamir, Kark, & Popper, 2016; Ibarra, 2004; Ibarra, Snook, & Guillen Ramo, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005; Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010). This growth in leadership identity research is reflected in recent work published in the fields of management, I/O, organizational sociology and social psychology. As can be seen in Fig. 1, over 219 articles were published on leader and follower identity and related constructs in the last 50 years (150 of them published in the last 10 years).

Despite the importance of the phenomenon, there has been surprisingly little effort to systematically review the widely dispersed literature on leader and follower identity since Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, and Hogg's (2004) review in the *Leadership Quarterly* (LQ) and their special issue on 'Leader, Self and Identity' also published in LQ, in 2005 (Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2005). Their 2004 review adopted a *follower-centric* perspective and addressed the effect of follower self-conceptions (i.e., self-construal, self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-consistency) as possible mediators between leadership behavior and follower behavior. Since then a substantial body of work on leader and follower identity processes has accumulated (e.g., Carroll & Levy, 2010; Day & Harrison, 2007; Day & Sin, 2011; DeRue et al., 2009; Hiller, 2005; Ibarra, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2010; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007, 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005) and the absence of systematic reviews on the subject is striking. To the best of our knowledge, there has only been one recent review chapter by Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, and Day (2014) in the *Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organizations* that adopts a *leader-centric* perspective and integrates three theories of identity, i.e., role identity (e.g., Gecas, 1982), social identity (e.g., Hogg, 2001) and social construction (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) in order to cast light on processes of leader emergence, effectiveness and development.

None of the prior reviews have adopted a multilevel perspective and this is an important contribution of our review as it answers the call for more "...integrated, 'levels rich' science of leadership" (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty & Salas, 2010, p. 1069). As Dionne et al. (2014) pointed out, despite the progress made in the last 25 years in terms of incorporating a levels-based theory and measurement, the leadership field still falls short of explicitly addressing the issue of levels of analyses. Their data showed that throughout the *Leadership Quarterly*'s history, 37% of conceptual papers and 33% of empirical papers clearly specified the level of analysis. As we will later explain in more detail, in our review we utilize a Levels-Within-Levels approach to map existing studies on both the Level-of Analysis (intrapersonal, interpersonal and group) on which leader and follower identity work is taking place and the Level-of-Self (individual, relational, collective) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) that is activated or salient for a leader and a follower.

A major challenge we had to tackle in this review was the wide dispersion of the leadership identity literature. Similarly to the general identity literature (Ramaraajan, 2014), leadership and followership identity studies "suffer" from a similar polyphony of epistemological paradigms and perspectives. Terms like "self", "self-concept", "self-schema", "working self-concept", "possible selves" and "identity" have been used in the conceptual landscape of leader-follower identity literature interchangeably. With regard to self-report scales, some researchers have used existing generic measures from the psychological field (e.g., Selenta & Lord, 2005), whereas others developed their own (e.g., Hiller, 2005; Lee, Sonday, & Ashford, 2016). We generally observe an absence of well-established leader and follower identity measures that have been used consistently and can allow for future meta-analyses. Several questions remain unanswered in terms of leader/follower identity content, salience and malleability. Identity change is

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