

How are leadership discourses reflected in the leadership identity of young adults?

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Abstract

Purpose – This article focuses on the leadership development of young adults. The topic is of significant importance as leadership identity tends to form early in life, and its long-term implications contribute to leadership formation. The objective of this study was to gain insights into how leadership is constructed in young adults and how it is manifested in their preferred leadership identity.

Design/methodology/approach – This research was approached from a constructivist perspective, utilizing discourse analysis. The authors conducted a study involving 24 written essays by young individuals with a business background, in which they shared their early leadership experiences. Drawing upon a modified life story interview structure, the authors meticulously analyzed the content.

Findings – The authors identified eight discourses clustered into two groups according to the types of leadership orientation: toward oneself and toward others. The discourses in the toward oneself group consist of leadership as taking responsibility, leadership as courage, manifesting personal strengths and as a role/status. The toward others group includes discourses approaching leadership as balancing directivity, coordinating and organizing work, personalized approach and as performance management.

Research limitations/implications – The major methodological limitations stem from the qualitative design *per se*. The findings based on qualitative data have limits in generalizing.

Practical implications – The authors' findings have practical implications for educators. The authors propose the utilization of critical self-reflection on early leadership experiences and self-narration as effective tools in nurturing and developing young leaders.

Social implications – This paper underscores the importance of educating young leaders, as they can create a positive impact on their subordinates and society as a whole. By providing them with leadership skills, the authors initiate a chain reaction of influence that extends through different levels of leadership, leading to significant social change.

Originality/value – The authors' originality and contribution to the literature on leadership development lies in showcasing the diversity of perspectives on leadership among participants sharing a similar background and developmental stage. This holds valuable implications for educators working with this cohort.

Keywords Leadership, Leadership identity, Young adults, Discourses, Leadership development

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The acquisition of leadership competencies and the formation of leadership identity constitute a gradual process, wherein real-life experiences of leading people play a pivotal role. It involves the recognition of oneself as someone capable and willing to lead, fortified by continuous skill development, thereby shaping the perceived personal identity.



Leadership identity intertwines closely with an individual's self-awareness, acknowledging their potential as leaders and their preparedness for leadership roles. The formation of leadership identity is not static as individuals encounter new challenges, receive feedback, and engage with others, their perspectives on their leadership experiences evolve and transform.

To capture the dynamic process of leadership identity formation effectively, narratives serve as valuable tools. Narratives allow individuals to express their subjective views of themselves and their actions within the context of leadership. Narratives play a crucial role in capturing the process of leadership identity formation, as they provide individuals with a medium to comprehend and construct a more coherent and meaningful understanding of their leadership experiences. By reflecting on their leadership stories, individuals gain deeper insights into their leadership identity, making sense of their experiences and refining their self-perceptions.

In our study, we specifically focus on analyzing the discourses employed by young individuals to describe their formative experiences of leading others. By examining these discourses, we aim to understand how they are reflected in the preferred leadership identities of the participants. We believe that this knowledge can not only enhance our understanding of the process of forming leadership identity but also provide valuable insights for the creation of development interventions and educational programs designed to prepare organizational leaders. Our study seeks to contribute to the broader field of leadership development by shedding light on the complex and evolving nature of leadership identity formation among young adults.

1.1 Determinants of leadership identity development

Organizational leadership development involves enhancing readiness to manage leadership processes at both the individual and collective levels (Day and Dragoni, 2015). It extends beyond individual leaders ("leader development") and encompasses multiple individuals, including leaders, followers, or members of self-managed work teams, with a focus on enhancing the organization's overall leadership capacity (Day and Dragoni, 2015; McCauley *et al.*, 2006; Day, 2009). The distinction between leader development and leadership development lies in their respective targets. Leader development emphasizes building intrapersonal competence, enabling leaders to form an accurate self-model to perform effectively in various leadership roles. On the other hand, leadership development places primary emphasis on building and utilizing interpersonal competence at both the individual and collective levels (Day *et al.*, 2009). While leadership development encompasses individual leader development, it has a broader scope (Van Velsor *et al.*, 2010; Day and Dragoni, 2015).

Leader development aims to improve the individual prerequisites for effective leadership. In the short term, the goals of leader development include achieving relevant changes in self-concept and acquiring the competencies necessary to lead people (Lord and Hall, 2005). These changes encompass alterations in self-knowledge, perceived personal effectiveness (self-efficacy), and the individual's identity as a leader (Day and Dragoni, 2015). Perceived personal efficacy, also known as self-efficacy, refers to "the belief of an individual that he or she can successfully implement the behaviors that are needed to achieve specific goals" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). A leader's identity refers to the strength of their self-perception as a leader and the extent to which they integrate the leader role into their overall identity (Day *et al.*, 2009; Day and Dragoni, 2015). It encompasses a combination of beliefs, values, and self-perceptions that shape how individuals perceive themselves as leaders and engage in leadership roles. This sense of identity acts as a driving and organizing force, crucial for thinking and behaving like a leader, and for actively seeking and participating in leadership development opportunities (Day *et al.*, 2009; Grabsch and Moore, 2021).

The development of young leaders' leadership identity is significantly influenced by their interactions with others, as these interactions are vital for testing the effectiveness of their leadership actions and behaviors. This is because the leadership process lies in interactive influence, where the leader's impact on followers and the reciprocal influence of followers on the leader collectively shape the dynamics of leadership (Silva, 2016; Rosenbach, 2018; Haslam *et al.*, 2020; Haslam *et al.*, 2022). It's important to emphasize that the context in which leadership takes place is significant, as followers must accept the individual as their leader for the leadership process to function effectively (Silva, 2016).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) identified three main influences on the construction of identities: the narrative of self-identity, societally mediated identity-regulation, and identity work. The concept of identity as a narrative is essential for understanding identity dynamics, but it remains underrepresented in organizational research according to Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010). Stories help individuals connect their past, present, and future, maintaining coherence during work role transitions. Identity narratives are also shaped by societal discursive practices, which include identity definitions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). In the context of leadership development, constructing narratives allows leaders to connect their past experiences, current challenges, and future aspirations, thus maintaining coherence and meaning throughout their leadership journey.

Societally mediated identity regulation recognizes that our understanding of ourselves as individuals is not fixed but instead influenced by the interplay between personal experiences and the broader social environment. As people engage with various social practices and encounter different situations, their identity undergoes continuous changes and adjustments, reflecting the ongoing process of identity construction and reconstruction (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). For example, someone could be the head of a group, see themselves as someone who takes charge and works effectively with others, and have relationships that support this view. Gradually, they may actively seek out roles that involve leadership and gain valuable experiences that help them grow as a leader (Ibarra *et al.*, 2014).

Identity work involves the formation, repair, maintenance, strengthening, or revision of identities in a social context (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Brown, 2015). Watson (2008) highlights that identity work entails focusing on both the internal development of personal identity and the outward expression of one's identity. For leaders, identity work is crucial as they navigate their leadership roles within organizations and/or communities.

Haslam *et al.* (2022) conveyed that existing research on leadership and identity has predominantly centered on two aspects of leaders' identity: their individual identity and their identity within the group or collective (social identity). They formulated a dual-identity framework that integrates the requirements of leader identity with the requirements of identity leadership. It underscores that leaders will be in the optimal position for effective leadership when their identity as leaders is fundamentally rooted in and, consequently, harmonious with their identity as members of the group (Haslam *et al.*, 2022). Social identity is commonly defined as a facet of one's self-concept that takes shape within a specific social context (Tajfel, 1979; Bryman *et al.*, 2011; Haslam *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, at a micro level, the development of these identities is influenced by personal experience, as suggested by numerous researchers (Vleioras and Bosma, 2005; Day *et al.*, 2009; Van der Gaag *et al.*, 2017; Haslam *et al.*, 2022). An essential aspect of developing a leadership identity is thus the ability to reflect on their experience within a social context. Interacting with different individuals and groups allows leaders to recognize the significance of context in shaping their leadership approaches. Although "leader's identity" and "leadership identity" are often used interchangeably, it is important to distinguish between them. Leader identity refers to an individual's self-concept and internalized sense of being a leader, while leadership identity encompasses the collective identity associated with leadership within a specific context or

group. Leadership identity goes beyond the individual and includes shared beliefs, values, and norms related to leadership within a team, organization, or community. Hence, in the subsequent text, we opt for the term “leadership identity”.

Leadership identity development is a multi-dimensional process that begins at a young age and is influenced by role models, including parents. It involves skills acquisition, personality development, and social interactions through social relationships. The formation of leadership identity may not always be gradual. Instead, it may take place in leaps and bounds, influenced by specific experiences and learning episodes (Wolfinbarger *et al.*, 2021). Young leaders may act at one level and express leadership in different ways, making identity formation challenging to capture solely through self-reporting. To better understand the process of leadership identity construction, scholars seek to identify the contributing aspects and phases of leadership identity development.

In a study conducted in a religious context, Zheng and Muir (2015) identified three facets of leadership identity development: expanding boundaries, recognizing interdependencies, and discerning purpose. Expanding boundaries involves a shift from being responsible only for oneself to taking on responsibilities for others. Recognizing interdependencies entails a change in focus from self-centered perspectives to considering the needs and well-being of others. Discerning purpose refers to the realization of the reasons and motivations behind one's leadership role. On the other hand, Lord and Hall (2005) presented a different perspective on leadership identity development, proposing three levels: individual, relational, and collective. Identity development begins with self-regulation, which involves differentiating the self from others on an individual level. It then progresses to defining identity through social roles and relationships on a relational level. Finally, identity development is completed on a collective level, with prototypes shaping identity based on the acquisition of qualities valued in specific groups or collectives.

DeRue and Ashford (2010) offer a similar view of identity construction, emphasizing the dynamic aspect of the process. They integrate three components: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. The influence of societally validated values and ideals, mediated by social learning through education, role models, organizational cultures, and practices, further shapes the preferred leadership identity.

In the study at hand, preferred leadership identity is conceptualized in line with Brown *et al.* (2019), defined as an intentional understanding of identity and normative self-narratives regarding who individuals want to become as leaders and how they desire to be perceived as leaders. The proposed conception of preferred leadership identity underscores the significance of individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement in the process of forming one's leadership identity. The interplay between internal and external factors, including social learning and societally validated values, significantly influences how individuals understand and aspire to be perceived as leaders within their social context.

1.2 Leadership identity development models

Leadership identity development models recognize that the construction of leader identity is an ongoing and dynamic process. Two main approaches to leadership identity development have been identified: a generic model and a content-specific model. The generic model, as documented by Lührmann and Eberl (2007), proposes four phases of leadership development: (1) Identity negotiation: Leaders' identity proposals are modified through interactions with followers. (2) Identity balance: Leader and follower identities are validated and find a harmonious equilibrium. (3) Task interaction: Leaders and followers focus on task-related activities, and their identities remain unchanged. (4) Identity conflict: Identity balance is challenged, and reconstruction of identity is necessary. According to the authors, identities

are not produced solely by individuals, but are socially constructed through interaction with others. As the social relationships and contexts change, identities are repeatedly invented and reinvented, negotiated a renegotiated via ongoing and changing social interactions. Thus, for a young adult, building and maintaining a leadership identity means going through the above phases not just once, but repeatedly - in different time periods and social contexts.

The second approach, represented by the Leadership Identity (LID) model proposed by [Komives *et al.* \(2005, 2006\)](#), provides a more elaborate depiction of the identity development process. This model conceptualizes the formation of leadership identity as a series of six stages, with each stage leading to the next in a developmental progression:

- (1) Awareness: Recognition that leadership is occurring, but leaders are seen as external to oneself.
- (2) Exploration/engagement: Involvement in group experiences, building self-confidence, and learning to engage with others.
- (3) Leader identified: Viewing leadership as the actions of positional leaders.
- (4) Leadership differentiated: Understanding leadership not just as a position but as a shared group process.
- (5) Generativity: Accepting responsibility for developing leadership in others, emphasizing group objectives, and intending to influence them.
- (6) Integration/Synthesis: Being aware of one's capacity for leadership independent of context or holding a positional role.

Alongside the stages, [Komives *et al.* \(2005\)](#) identified five categories that influence the development of a leadership identity: (1) Broadening view of leadership, (2) Developing self, (3) Group influences, (4) Developmental influences, (5) Changing view of self with others.

The LID model highlights how leadership identity development involves progressive growth and transition through different stages, with each stage building upon the completion of previous stages. The model also emphasizes the significance of various factors that contribute to the shaping of a leadership identity, including one's evolving perception of leadership, personal development, group dynamics, developmental experiences, and how one views oneself in relation to others.

Another developmental perspective is presented in [Hogan and Warrenfeltz's \(2003\)](#) model, which proposes four competency domains that encompass the competencies organizational leaders need to acquire: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and business skills. These domains form a developmental sequence, where higher-level skills build upon lower-level ones. Leadership competency is thus dependent on the acquisition of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills throughout an individual's life. The development of leadership skills also leads to changes in the leader's identity, which in turn affect knowledge acquisition ([Lord and Hall, 2005](#)).

Both the LID model and the competency domains model offer valuable insights for the education and development of current and future leaders. [Hogan and Warrenfeltz's \(2003\)](#) competency domains model provide a framework for designing education programs and development interventions. However, the effectiveness of these interventions may be limited if they focus solely on leadership and business skills without considering potential shortcomings at deeper intrapersonal levels. To overcome this limitation, a focus on reflection, discussion, and experiential learning is essential. This approach encourages a shift from individualistic conceptions of leadership to more inclusive and relational viewpoints ([Bolden and Gosling, 2006](#)). By emphasizing reflection and experiential learning, leadership education can foster more holistic and effective development of future leaders.

Our intention is not to be *a priori* bound by a specific theoretical approach to leadership (opposite to Komives *et al.*, 1998). We agree with Bresnen (1995) that there is no collectively shared meaning of leadership and each of us constructs the meaning from a complex set of phenomenological experiences. Therefore, we argue that it is worth exploring not only the different meanings of leadership among people but also capturing how these constructs are applied in the reflection of one's experience with leadership and the shaping of an individual leadership identity.

We state, in accordance with Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), that leadership identity narratives remain an under-researched area, and knowledge needs to be expanded to better understand the process of leadership identity development. While there is a comprehensive understanding of leadership identity formation at a broad level, there appears to be a notable gap in our knowledge regarding the specific processes and pathways that young individuals follow during this developmental journey. It seems important not only to identify stages of leadership identity development but also to analyze in-depth the mechanisms of leadership identity transition. In their comprehensive multi-level review of leadership and followership identity processes, Epitropaki *et al.* (2016) reach a parallel conclusion, stating that although prior research on social identity has extensively examined identity processes at the group level, other levels of identity, such as intrapersonal or interpersonal, have received relatively little exploration.

The purpose of our study is to explore how leadership is constructed in young adults while reflecting on their key early leadership experiences and how this links to their preferred leadership identity.

2. Methods

2.1 Research interest

This research was approached from a constructivist perspective, utilizing discourse analysis. The constructivist view recognizes that participants not only describe reality but actively construct it through their words. Discourse analysis, a widely used method in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology, focuses on the use and form of textual data, revealing the meaning-making process of language and its social functions (Wiggins, 2016). By analyzing language patterns, discourse analysis provides insights into how individuals construct ideas, make sense of their world, and shape their overall experiences, highlighting the intricate connections between language, thought, and social dynamics (Willig, 2003).

The research interest was guided by the theoretical foundations of leadership identity development and the significance of narratives in shaping leadership identities (Zheng and Muir, 2015; Lord and Hall, 2005; DeRue and Ashford, 2010). We aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults construct leadership through their early experiences and how these experiences influence their future leadership identity. We chose the constructivist approach due to its alignment with the objectives of our study, emphasizing its suitability for understanding how language and social dynamics shape leadership identity development among young adults. This approach highlights the active role of language in constructing reality, which is central to our research focus.

2.2 Participants and data collection

The study focused on Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) graduates, a population with potential for future leadership roles based on their field of study. By examining how BBA students construct leadership through early experiences, we aimed to understand the formation of leadership identities and inform the development of educational programs for

preparing them for leadership roles. The sample consisted of 24 participants in Prague, Czech Republic, who had early leadership experiences that they described in written form. The final sample comprised 12 males and 12 females, aged 22 to 26, all studying in a master's program in management.

Participants were recruited from a university program in collaboration with their teachers, and extra credit was offered as an incentive for participation. We excluded four participants for specific reasons: unclear description of a leadership experience (2 cases), short and sloppy essay (1 case), and language comprehension difficulties (1 case) due to being a foreigner.

Data collection involved written essays submitted electronically, with no additional incentives other than the extra credit provided. Participants were asked to describe a key early leadership experience of their choice using the "Early Leadership Story" method, adapted from McAdams' Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008). The essay structure included: (1) description and characterization of the experience, (2) the strongest/peak moment, (3) the hardest moment and challenges, (4) breaking point, (5) benefits and lessons learned, (6) preferred future as a leader, and (7) future developmental needs. This structured approach aimed to facilitate a clear and comprehensive exploration of their early leadership experiences and their influence on preferred leadership identities.

2.3 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted following a structured procedure based on Wiggins (2016). Initially, the research team collectively engaged in a comprehensive familiarization process by conducting multiple readings of the data to ensure a deep understanding of its content. Subsequently, we adopted an inductive approach to identify prominent themes and patterns associated with leadership. During this phase, each author took detailed notes to describe the data and highlight its fundamental elements.

In the third phase, leveraging our shared background in psychology, we applied our knowledge of psychological theory to identify and categorize psychological constructs present within individual early leadership experiences. We then reexamined the data to pinpoint recurring patterns and distinctive discourses, with a particular emphasis on shared patterns of writing about leadership within each discourse. Any disagreements that arose during this process were thoroughly discussed among the authors, leading to a consensus.

In the final stage of analysis, we refined our examination and formulated conclusions based on the themes and discourses identified. To ensure the accuracy of the data in the Findings section, it is noteworthy that the data were meticulously translated from Czech to English by the authors and underwent further scrutiny by a professional translator to ensure clarity and precision. To enhance the reliability of the data analysis, all authors actively engaged in the process. Over a span of three months, we conducted weekly data sessions to address any ambiguities in the data's meaning and resolve disagreements that emerged during the coding and analysis phases. These collaborative sessions significantly contributed to a comprehensive and robust interpretation of the data.

3. Results

In this section, we present the results in two parts. Firstly, we describe and interpret the distinctive discourses that emerged from how participants constructed their early leadership experiences. These discourses are summarized in Table 1. We also identified the mechanism characterizing the shift from the significant experience to the preferred leadership identity, briefly describing and illustrating it with examples. Accompanying commentary is provided alongside the discursive part.

Table 1.
Identified discourses

Discourse category	Discursive construct	Description
Towards oneself	Leadership as taking responsibility	Acting based on the realization that one's actions or behaviors have influence on others and/or a group outcome
	Leadership as courage	Performing an act perceived as personally challenging (in terms of behavioral courage)
	Leadership as manifesting personal strengths	Activity attributed to one's own personal strengths (known or just discovered), e.g. personal characteristics or skills
	Leadership as a role/status	Realization of the importance of one's position or standing in a group (in our context more associated with informal authority)
Toward others	Leadership as balancing directivity	Finding a level of directivity and support toward team members
	Leadership as coordinating and organizing work	Workload distribution and its delegation to individuals
	Leadership as a personalized approach	Treating team members individually based on their strengths and weaknesses
	Leadership as performance management	Performance orientation, task fulfillment and related success experience
Source(s): Authors' own work		

It is important to note that the discourses were not always clearly distinguished, as they sometimes overlapped or participants used multiple leadership discourses. For the purpose of illustration, we selected those individual discourses that represented a clear description of the given construct.

3.1 *Towards oneself*

3.1.1 *Leadership as taking responsibility.* Discourses which participants used to describe leadership as taking responsibility emerged in two significant forms. First, personal responsibility as being accountable for affecting others directly as the one who initiates a group action, and secondly, affecting others indirectly by manifesting behavior that others can tend to imitate.

The situational context is important as responsibility can be triggered by the absence of leadership (usually in conjunction with a need for achievement). Conscientious people may feel that the situation urgently requires action and although they have no experience, they start acting as a leader.

... In the beginning, I actually became a leader without wanting to. I hadn't led a team before; I always prefer a position where I can observe more and not get so much attention from others. So, I actually waited for the first few days and I didn't really want to lead. The turning point came the day before the first seminar, when I had to radically reverse my approach, as nothing was done and no one was up to work, and there were no signs of better times. (KJ)

3.1.2 *Leadership as courage.* Courage-related characteristics were highlighted by participants when they reflected some aspects of their agency in which they had to take an action, which they perceived as demanding and uncomfortable. They had to overcome possible negative reactions from others and their own shortcomings. For example:

The most powerful moment was when I decided to talk about the obvious 'elephant in the room'. I addressed the problem/conflict that arose from our different expectations. (VK)

For me, the big obstacle was opening up the debate about the conflict. I try to avoid conflicts and I don't know how to address them properly. (VK)

3.1.3 Leadership as manifesting personal strengths. Some of the young adults in our sample attributed their emergence into a leadership role to their personal qualities and skills, which proved to be a strength in a certain situation, as in the following example:

The selection of the team leader was very quick. I think the others chose me mainly because I was the most extroverted of our group. . . . I can work under pressure, which is useful for my studies. I can get oriented quickly and make decisions. I'm a naturally communicative person, so working in a team has been generally beneficial for me and made the semester more enjoyable. (TG)

Reflected experience of leading a team resulted in admitting the future possibility of holding a leadership role, even though the young woman had previously considered it 'unnatural' for her. In the preferred identity she describes her ideas of how she could ideally fulfill this role.

I definitely want to be a person who, if I lead someone, leads by example. At the same time, I would be understanding to team members, can help them when they need it, and make sure that literally all team members are open to communicating their needs and concerns to me. So that as a leader they are not afraid to approach me if they feel they need help with any aspect of their work – for example to arrange training or to find someone across the organization who can pass on their knowledge. I wouldn't want anyone in the team to feel lost. (KS)

3.1.4 Leadership as a role/status. Leadership as a status was among the less preferred discourses, as participants seemed to favor the relational perspective toward leadership to the positional one. Participants describe importance of their position in a group and emphasized respect and trust as crucial qualities of their relationship with followers. They often perceive their age and lack of experience as disadvantage:

My most powerful moment was when, after a few days of initial introductions and getting to know each other, I gained some respect and understanding from almost everyone. Of course, it lasted differently for each of the kids and teens, after all I wasn't that much older, but in the end, we managed to make a team that I could trust and that respected me, and that was very crucial at that moment. The most difficult thing for me was definitely getting the right position in the team. Because of my relatively young age, unfortunately I didn't get the right position at first and it was very difficult for me to have the necessary authority and status. (BP)

Successful behavioral patterns are then directly transferred to the preferred identity, complemented by an emphasis on the need for effective communication:

In the future, I would like to be a leader that people like to work under. I would like to inspire others with my approach to work. I would like to create a friendly environment where no one is afraid to express their opinion or ask for help, whether it be me or anyone else. I would like people to feel comfortable in my work team, and this will motivate them to perform at their best. (MJ)

3.2 Towards others

3.2.1 Leadership as balancing directivity. One of the insecurities often mentioned in the narratives of our participants was the struggle to find the right level of directivity. They described situations which they perceived as too directive, or reflected on the complications of finding balance in approaching individual team members.

In the beginning I said I didn't want to lead the project in a directive way and I wanted to give others as much space as possible. However, as the submission deadline approached, I tended to slip into a directive leadership style. . . . In any case, I can't imagine that I would have entrusted them with even such a simple task as exporting a Word document to pdf without checking it before submitting. I felt that I had to check everything or it would not turn out well because the members did not instill confidence in me in their abilities. (PH)

3.2.2 Leadership as coordinating and organizing work. Some participants saw the major leadership challenge in organizing work and its distribution. One of the possible approaches was to formalize the tasks into a list for better orientation and task exchange. In this particular case, it smoothed the team's functioning.

Sometimes when dividing the tasks among the team members, not everyone felt that I had divided the tasks fairly. Because of this, disputes and arguments arose. Therefore, I consider the main problem to be the reasonable division of work among the team members. I decided to create a list of duties and tasks as before, but now everyone could exchange tasks with the rest of the team on agreement, which eventually helped to reduce the level of aggression in the team and also taught the team to negotiate with each other. (OS)

Another example of this is a participant who coordinated work according to individual strengths. Even though she underestimated the need to balance weaknesses as well, she finally perceived the situation as well managed:

Another important issue is the correct organization of work and the assignment of tasks to each team member. I had success with these two challenges . . . Although I was able to organize and set up the work correctly at the beginning and assign tasks to individual team members according to their abilities and strengths, I underestimated their weaknesses, such as poor time management and fear of asking for help. This then became a problem that needed to be resolved as quickly as possible. I think I was able to do that. (EF)

3.2.3 Leadership as a personalized approach. Some participants talked about leadership as an ability to find and manage the individual strengths of their team members, which required an individualized and personalized approach.

I tried to give out individual tasks based on which team member was right for each task. For example, in our team we had Nikita and Sultan who didn't speak Czech well, so calling the municipalities would be very difficult for them. (TG)

This led to the future preferred identity emphasizing the importance of empathy and helpfulness. The participant valued her insight into the experiences of others as well as the ability to assess the individual strengths mentioned before.

I can give a person advice and help them with their problem. I am an empathetic and a sensitive woman and I can usually sense when something is wrong with someone around me. I can also say that I am mostly optimistic and one of my strengths is that I can cheer up and encourage others. (TG)

3.2.4 Leadership as performance management. The participants also described leadership as performance management with clear goals and an effort to achieve them. A frequent issue among young adults is the comparison of their perspective on performance with the aspirations and performance orientation of individual team members, which is reflected in social norms and standards of excellence in team performance. Participants often deal with significant disaccord, which is reflected in conflicts or teams malfunctioning. The reward of a sense of achievement is a part of achieving a goal or being satisfied with performance, such as in the following example.

The best part of the experience came when team members delivered the results of their work. Each member was given a specific task to complete (from drawing a logo to creating a website). I had the best feeling of a job well done simply when my colleagues finished their tasks, and it was tangible that the difficult preparations and coming up with different ideas finally bore fruit. I don't mean that we won the election – we didn't win the election – but rather the moment when the campaign was in progress and all my colleagues had done their tasks extremely well. (SK)

Different ways and forms of positive rewards and acknowledgments for good performance such as finishing a task were described by participants:

But I think I've done a good job of highlighting what we've already done, what we've already achieved, and reminding us how good it felt. I also worked with motivation . . . The most difficult thing was to confront colleagues with the need for them to improve performance, to keep commitments better and to engage more in discussions on key issues. (FK)

4. Discussion

In our study, we identified eight distinct discourses that young people utilize in constructing their understanding of leadership. This finding aligns well with the view presented by [Bresnen \(1995\)](#), suggesting that leadership lacks a universally shared meaning and is instead shaped by individuals through a complex interplay of phenomenological experiences. Our research revealed two primary directions in which respondents streamlined their leadership perceptions, categorized based on whether leadership is perceived as connected to oneself or to others. This observation corroborates the findings of [DeRue and Ashford \(2010\)](#), [Zheng and Muir \(2015\)](#), and [Komives et al. \(2005, 2006\)](#).

It is worth noting that our research approach differed slightly from that of [Komives et al. \(2005, 2006\)](#) since we did not specifically select respondents based on their implicit leaning toward relational leadership. Nevertheless, we still observed a strong emphasis on the relational component in the discourses. Being accepted by others and becoming an integral part of a group emerged as prevailing themes, consistent with the approach highlighted by [Haslam et al. \(2020\)](#). This emphasis on acceptance and group belonging may also be influenced by the relational stage of leadership identity development, likely to be common among the majority of participants, aligning with [Lord and Hall's \(2005\)](#) concept.

Furthermore, this emphasis on relational aspects of leadership may be connected to the prevailing discourse on effective leadership within the educational and societal contexts, as suggested by [Alvesson and Willmott \(2002\)](#).

When examining leadership as a construct directed toward oneself, participants emphasized the significance of the leader figure. They emphasized the value of inspiring others, viewing it as one of the most desirable ways to influence followers. While the concept of leadership encompassed various aspects such as taking responsibility, displaying courage, or manifesting personal strengths, the central focus remained on the leader figure as the driving force in their narratives.

During their reflective process, many participants recognized the impact of their behavior on followers, understanding that their actions served as role models for others and could significantly influence their followers. We conceptualize leading by example as a phenomenon that embodies a combination of personality characteristics aligned with generally accepted social norms and values within a given community. This portrayal of an inspirational leader, one who is likely to be followed, reflects the significance of behavioral consistency in leadership.

Overall, our findings offer valuable insights into the diverse perspectives and conceptualizations of leadership among young adults with a business education background. The identification of these discourses contributes to the existing literature on leadership development, highlighting the importance of understanding and accommodating individual variations in leadership constructs.

When constructing leadership with a focus on others, participants often adopted a relational perspective, emphasizing the importance of personalized approaches. Other discourses, on the other hand, were result-oriented, with varying emphases on absolute performance, coordination, organization, and the level of directiveness employed by leaders to bring out the best in their followers.

The participants frequently reflected on the challenge of achieving balance in leadership. For them, leadership involved navigating a fine line between being directive or supportive,

prioritizing people or results, and considering their own needs versus those of others. This experiential understanding aligns with the theoretical concepts of versatile leadership (Kaplan and Kaiser, 2003) and situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1997), even though these concepts were not explicitly mentioned by the participants.

Our study also explored the reflection of the identified discourses in the preferred leadership identity of the participants. While the Komives *et al.* (2005) leadership identity developmental model focuses on the developmental aspect of “growing into leadership,” our focus was on capturing the range of constructs young people manifest in their thoughts about leadership. Although the level of complexity of our data precludes a full description of the evolution of identity creation, it does allow us to observe how leadership identity begins to take shape through various constructs. Notably, similarities in our models underscore the importance of self-awareness as a fundamental principle in the early stages of leaders’ identity development. Additionally, in line with DeRue and Ashford (2010), we find that this is the stage when a leader’s identity becomes an integral part of their self-concept by forging new aspects of self linked with the leadership role (individual internalization). Another crucial finding, consistent with the conclusions of other researchers (Komives *et al.*, 2005; Lord and Hall, 2005; DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Priest and Middleton, 2016), is the significance of the relational aspect in leadership identity development. Developing a leadership identity also necessitates showing initiative and exploring situations where leadership is required. An example that exemplifies this effect is leadership as courage. The process of constructing the preferred leadership identity reveals that, in most cases, embracing more complex perspectives of leadership (such as leadership as a role, shifting the focus from self to others, and understanding leadership as a process) helps young leaders integrate these aspects into a meaningful personal concept.

Similar to the findings of Lord and Hall (2005) and DeRue *et al.* (2009), our analysis identifies that the process of identity narrative encompasses individual, relational, and collective levels. In our case, the preferred leadership identity represents a blend of reflected experiences, leadership knowledge, and societally accepted leadership models.

In accordance with Sinclair (2011) and Muir (2014), we can state that critical reflection on the significant learning moments appears to be one of the key factors that lead to the development of leadership identity.

We identified the development of various leadership identities as participants employed different perspectives to construct them. Depending on the type of experience they went through and their ability to reflect on their learning momentum, participants confirmed their perspectives with varying levels of certainty. In most cases, they affirmed their personal qualities and described them as strengths in relation to leadership. However, not all of them believed they could be successful leaders in the future. Some stated that leadership seemed natural for them, while many others had doubts, and a few clearly expressed that they would prefer to take the role of a follower in the future. In accordance with Priest and Middleton (2016), we can state that the process of self-evaluation involved self-enhancement, as participants described their positively-regarded personal characteristics and self-verification, mostly confirming their existing self-conceptions. On the other hand, some participants decided to significantly improve their leadership skills or even refrain from leading others in the future.

Nevertheless, the preferred leadership identities were much richer than a simple shift of the discourses. While we were able to identify the reflection of the chosen discourse in most of the participants’ preferred leadership identities, it did not stop there. The descriptions were much more complex and included broad conceptions of what our participants wish to achieve as leaders. We observed an extension toward a more comprehensive mental model of leadership (in comparison to the discourse from which young adults reflected on their experiences) with more attention to a wider range of leadership facets or dimensions.

Simultaneously, the development of a preferred identity toward others was observed even in those young adults studied, for whom the main discourse was predominantly oriented toward oneself. Our results are in concordance with at least three categories that, according to Komives *et al.* (2005, 2006), influence the development of leadership identity: broadening view of leadership, developing self, and changing view of self with others.

4.1 Practical implications

The leadership stories we analyzed showed that the reflective process points to developing leadership as a learning process. Our participants experienced a leadership situation, which they reflected on, and in some cases, this led to the generalization and conceptualization of the experience. We can only assume that this will lead to further testing of the concepts in accordance with the Kolb experiential learning theory (Kolb *et al.*, 1971), in which learners change their reflected concrete experience into concepts, which they experiment with, leading to new experiences, and the cycle repeats while learning occurs.

These findings have practical implications for educators. Since all our participants were able to identify a leadership experience, we encourage educators to take what students already have and convert it into an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, create concepts, and plan future behavior accordingly.

In this context, an important role of educators is to help young people identify the important elements related to the application of leadership in different social situations and contexts and to help them integrate them into their leadership identity. This may include situations from the working environment of more experienced students, as well as from the university environment (e.g. team work on projects), and from leisure activities (team sports, coaching, organizing events, group holidays, etc.) of the undergraduate students. To effectively capture their experiences, we recommend employing a carefully chosen question structure or utilizing various modifications of the life-story interview. Alternatively, an unstructured description of the experience can also be considered as an option. Educators can then help students by providing feedback to identify applied leadership practices, and through group work and discussions in class, demonstrate how to use them effectively for the leader's practice in the organizational environment.

At more advanced levels of leadership education, it is appropriate to deepen and specify the reflection in the context of the leaders' self-development. In this regard, personal leadership development planning could be a useful tool (Warhurst, 2012).

Dealing successfully with emerging leadership situations can be seen as enactive mastery. According to Bandura (1997), a mastery experience is an important source of domain-specific (in this case, leadership) self-efficacy. On the other hand, some leadership experiences cannot be perceived as mastery and, as such, do not foster leadership self-efficacy beliefs. However, reflection on one's own experiences provides an opportunity for better understanding and new insights, which can lead to better performance in future leadership situations.

Self-reflection is considered one of the important developmental (meta)skills in autonomous, self-directed leadership development (Nesbit, 2012; Turner *et al.*, 2018). One possible means of fostering self-reflection and leadership development is self-narrative. The self-narrative approach was promoted by Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) and also Shamir and Eilam (2005), who showed how leaders' self-stories contribute to their development as authentic leaders.

Thus, we recommend enriching leadership development programs with a self-narrative opportunity for young adults to describe and reflect on their emerging leadership experiences, and to encourage them not only to critically reflect on these experiences for building their leadership self-efficacy but also to use them as a tool for deeper self-awareness. We agree with Komives *et al.* (2006), who stated that "connecting self-awareness with

intentional strategies to build self-efficacy for leadership is a central aspect of developing a confident leadership identity.” The written essays on early leadership experiences, which we used for collecting data, proved to be an excellent reflecting tool that can be included in a leadership development program of any kind.

Educators should also encourage young adults to seek out all opportunities to develop their leadership competencies through various activities outside of the class (e.g. sports, leisure, volunteer and work activities). Leading teams or groups in diverse environments provides a basis for self-reflection on the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, which are, according to [Hogan and Warrenfeltz \(2003\)](#), the building stones for the development of leadership competencies *per se*.

To help young people apply new knowledge, various teaching methods (e.g. role-playing, simulation, case studies, etc.), which also enable providing feedback, can be implied. The integration of new insights into existing knowledge structures enhances the individual's reflection on learning ([Baviskar et al., 2009](#)). In the case of using self-narrative stories, these can be analyzed from the perspective of newly acquired knowledge. This instructional approach fulfills the four criteria of the constructivist model of teaching - (1) eliciting learners' pre-concepts (prior knowledge), (2) creating cognitive dissonance, (3) applying new knowledge with feedback, and (4) reflecting on learning ([Baviskar et al., 2009](#)). The formulation of preferred leadership identity could be perceived as the first step in further self-development for future leadership situations. Thus, educational contexts can provide “identity workspaces” ([Priest and Middleton, 2016](#); [Petriglieri, 2011](#)), in which teachers create an environment where experience turns into learning, learning into motivation, and ability to develop.

4.2 Limitations and future research directions

The major methodological limitations stem from the qualitative design *per se*. The findings based on qualitative data have limits in generalizing. It is possible that different sampling might have brought different results. The choice of studying discourses might have narrowed down the research scope, and choosing a more generic method might have brought additional findings.

We encourage future researchers to investigate the topic with different methodologies. Further conceptualization should be corroborated with robust quantitative designs. As the research participants are a homogenous group, we recommend exploring the topic with participants from different age groups, educational levels, and cultural contexts, particularly to formulate follow-up recommendations. Longitudinal research designs are more than welcome to capture the developmental aspects of emerging leadership. Without monitoring at least several time points, we are not able to comment on the developmental stages. Also, the dominant discourses should be scrutinized in more detail, especially with a focus on the leadership identity link with research questions such as “Is it possible to change the leadership identity preference by changing the discourse?” or “How does leadership identity evolve in the context of social identity formation in emerging adulthood?”

5. Conclusion

In our article, we have conducted an analysis of how young people with a business education background construct different discourses of leadership. These eight discourses were categorized into two groups, depending on whether they focus on oneself or others. Our contribution to the literature on leadership development lies in showcasing the diversity of perspectives on leadership among participants sharing a similar background and developmental stage. This holds valuable implications for educators working with this

cohort. Instead of designing new leadership simulations, educators can effectively leverage students' existing leadership experiences and facilitate their reflection and conceptualization using the Kolb cycle framework. By doing so, educators can guide students in formulating steps to acquire new experiences. Additionally, our research underscores the efficacy of self-narration as an impactful tool for meaningful reflection.

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