

A qualitative study unpacking the leader identity development process taking a multi-domain approach

Leader identity
development
process

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the study is an in-depth exploration of the processes through which a leader develops their leader identity in strength, meaning and integration, with resulting enrichment outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Using multi-domain leader identity theory, this study provides an in-depth exploration of the processes through which a leader develops their leader identity. Set in a healthcare context, 26 participants took part in an 18-month multi-domain leadership development program.

Findings – Findings indicate a typology of leader identities, capturing the dynamic nature of leader identity based on combinations of strength and meaning. Our research also suggests that as the leader develops, their leader identity can change from a differentiated identity as a leader to a more integrated leader identity, with resulting enrichment outcomes.

Research limitations/implications – The results suggested value in inherently multi-domain focus using event-based reflection and, as such, are useful in leader identity development programs. We recommend future research generalize to other settings and a larger population.

Practical implications – By taking a multi-domain approach to leader identity development, the leader has the opportunity to learn and develop in a more holistic way. They are encouraged to reflect on and learn from leadership experiences throughout their entire lives, adding breadth and depth that are often overlooked in development programs.

Social implications – Developing leaders who understand who they are and are capable of critical self-reflection and learning is a fundamental requirement for the positive advancement of society.

Originality/value – The value of the study lies in the first longitudinal, work-based empirical study taking an explicitly multi-domain approach to leader identity development.

Keywords Enrichment, Leader development, Identity integration, Leader identity development, Multi-domain

Paper type Research paper

Organizations invest significant resources into leadership development programs. Meta-analysis suggests that programs are effective with improvements in reactions, learning, transfer and results (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2017). However, substantially less research has

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examined the effectiveness of programs focused on deeper-level developmental outcomes, such as leader identity. The role of identity in the leader development process has gained much traction in the last decade leading to novel theoretical and empirical studies on the topic (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017). The identity development process is integral to leader development (Day and Harrison, 2007) as it provides a motivational force for seeking out development opportunities and experiences (Day *et al.*, 2008). Leader identity has received growing attention in theory and empirically it is recognized as critical to understanding leadership emergence, effectiveness and development (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017).

Unlike most sub-identities (parent, employee, etc.), leader identity is unique in that it is not inherently domain-specific. Leadership is not confined to formal positions in workplaces, as the role of leader is ambiguous, fluid and complex and may transcend domains and formal roles (DeRue *et al.*, 2009), such that individuals may see themselves as leaders in various roles in work, communities and in personal networks. Additionally, opportunities for claiming and granting leadership can happen both inside and outside of the workplace (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Multi-domain leader identity development theory suggests that leader identity and competence develop through a sense-making process beginning with noticing cross-domain connections and disconnections (Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Creating a development program in which leaders are encouraged to notice and reflect on moments of (dis)connection across domains has promise in prompting deeper-level development of identity and competence.

The purpose of this research is to examine the process of leader identity development across life domains. Specifically, we sought to understand how individuals develop their leader identities and explore areas in which leaders note enrichment across work and non-work lives. The study takes place within the context of a leadership development program with an explicit multi-domain and identity-based focus within a healthcare organization. Leadership development in healthcare is an important consideration as it has been noted to lag behind other contexts (McAlearney, 2006). Also, the development of leaders in healthcare organizations is complex as bureaucratic organization structures and services make the practice of developing leaders challenging (Joseph-Richard and McCray, 2023). As such this rich environment filled with complexity provides the optimum context for studying leadership as global and organizational environments, in general, become more complex and volatile (Abbas *et al.*, 2022; Evensen *et al.*, 2022). Acting as a leader in a healthcare environment requires managerial and relational skills (Koskineniemi *et al.*, 2019), requiring the development of dual identities of leader and clinician. The formation of a leader identity may not be immediately apparent for professionals in healthcare given existing deep professional identities, which may complement or conflict with identities as a leader (Andersson, 2015; Cornett *et al.*, 2023). Taken together, examining leader identity development in healthcare is both insightful in terms of theoretical and practical implications for leader identity development theory as well as impactful for the healthcare profession.

Theoretical background

Leader identity development

In one of the first theoretical papers on the importance of leader identity, Lord and Hall (2005) argued the development of leadership skills is facilitated by firstly viewing oneself as a leader. Over time and with experience, leader identity develops as views of oneself as a leader solidify and strengthen (Middleton *et al.*, 2019). Day and Harrison (2007) further suggest “identity is important for leaders because it grounds them in understanding who they are, their major goals and objectives and their personal strengths and limitations.” More recent empirical work has supported the importance of leader identity as a predictor of leadership competence (Kragt and Day, 2020), leader development (Wallace *et al.*, 2021) and leader

emergence (Lee Cunningham *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, leader identity has implications both at work and home (Lanaj *et al.*, 2021).

Leader identity is theorized to develop in four areas: strength, meaning, level and integration (Hammond *et al.*, 2017). *Strength* is the extent to which an individual identifies as a leader (“I am a leader”). Leaders with strong leader identities see themselves as leaders and readily identify as leaders when called to lead. However, leaders with weaker leader identities may be reluctant to assume a leadership role or to initiate development as a leader (Day *et al.*, 2008). Leader identity strength has seen the most research attention of all elements (Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Growing in identity strength can reinforce a leader-centric view (“I am a leader”), however, growth in the meaning of leadership involves a movement toward a collectively focused view of leadership as a process rather than an individual (Day and Harrison, 2007). A leader’s meaning of leadership is a fundamental building block of their own identity. Meaning is related to the leader’s implicit leadership theories (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005) or belief about the attributes that make “a leader,” as well as views regarding what behaviors are most effective (Wellman *et al.*, 2022) and personal leadership style, all of which are constructed throughout the leader’s life and are based on individual experiences (Clapp-Smith *et al.*, 2019). Through these experiences, the leader develops both a schema of a prototypical leader and also their own individual identity as a leader.

Level of identity provides the basis for identity, either individual (based on individual characteristics), relational (based on dyadic relationships), or collective (based on group membership). Leaders are thought to develop from individual to collective levels as they gain expertise (Kjellström *et al.*, 2020). Research on levels has mostly focused on a general level of self-concept, rather than focusing specifically on a leader identity. Relational and collective levels, as opposed to stronger individual levels, are associated with greater transformational leadership (Johnson *et al.*, 2012), stronger leader-member exchanges (Jackson and Johnson, 2012) and more mentoring behaviors (Lapierre *et al.*, 2012). Alternatively, leaders with stronger individual-level identities may rely more on heuristics and stereotypes in decision-making (Wallace *et al.*, 2021) and engage in more toxic leadership behaviors (Johnson *et al.*, 2012).

Integration is the extent to which a leader identity is fragmented or integrated into a global self-concept. A person with a fully integrated leader identity would see oneself as a leader in all domains of life. Whereas strength, meaning and level may vary across domains, integration is inherently cross-domain. Integration has received little empirical attention, but in many ways, is foundational to our understanding of how identity develops more generally. Adult development theorists such as Kegan (1982) discuss how differentiation typically precedes integration (Day and Lance, 2004), suggesting that leaders may develop domain-specific identities before developing a more integrated holistic leader identity. To that end, a leader identity may initially develop within specific situations and contexts (such as only in the work domain) but may eventually become integrated and generalized across contexts (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Ibarra *et al.* (2010) propose a model of leader identity development based on a process of separation, transition and integration, which is moderated by developmental readiness, role models/guides and management of pre- and post-formal experience. We argue that successful integration of the leader identity into a person’s self-schema can be facilitated by focusing the development interventions through a multiple-domain lens.

Enrichment across multiple domains

Leader identity development, especially integration across domains may foster a transfer of the benefits of a developed leader identity, such as leadership skills, resources and networks across work and non-work domains. In the work-family literature, greater boundary

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integration allows for greater enrichment opportunities, in which skills, motivations and affect created in one domain can lead to positive outcomes in another domain (Leduc *et al.*, 2016). However, unlike this research on integrated boundaries, leader identity integration is not a management of a physical boundary, but rather a psychological or personal one. Therefore, sense-making plays a key role in benefitting from and managing conflict, rather than simply scheduling, or planning as would be the case for managing physical boundaries across work and life.

An individual's experience of work-family enrichment is often limited by that individual's ability to recognize the potential for enrichment in areas where positive spillover may occur (Maertz and Boyar, 2011). Interventions to increase awareness of connections across domains have been successful in promoting enrichment (Heskiau and McCarthy, 2020). Likewise, greater integration of leader's identity may foster their ability to see potential connections across domains fostering more positive spillover (Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Likewise, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) mention enrichment episodes as important in our understanding of this phenomenon. Additionally, Hammond *et al.*'s, (2017) model of cross-domain leader development highlights how certain triggers (usually events or episodes) foster greater identity and competence development through a sense-making process. To that end, the focus of the present development program includes episode-based "critical incident diaries" (CIDs) to notice and reflect on leadership (dis)connections across life domains. In addition to examining critical incidents, we sought to understand general outcomes at the conclusion of the program. Specifically, we ask.

RQ. How do leaders develop their identity through a multi-domain focus and what outcomes do participants experience?

Methodology

Sample

Twenty-seven leaders working in a healthcare context in Ireland voluntarily took part in an 18-month development program with a focus on leader identity and a multiple-domain lens. The program was advertised to all members of the staff who had two or more direct reports throughout six hospitals and leaders self-selected onto the program. The participants came from functional areas including radiography, hematology and business administration. The leaders' average age was 43 and held leadership roles in their organization for an average of 3.3 years.

Development program

The 18-month-long program using the principles of multiple-domain leader identity development included a 360-degree survey, a daylong seminar-workshop, individual interviews from one-to-one coaching, focus groups, reading and sharing groups and ongoing online CID completion. Each intervention was developed and administered using multiple domain categories including work, family and community. The data for the present study comes from three elements: the start of the program, CIDs throughout the program and the conclusion of the program. First, data at the beginning of the program was collected through a 360-degree survey and one-to-one feedback meetings as well as initial focus groups. Next, online CIDs were gathered throughout the program. We asked the leaders to record critical incidents that directly or indirectly impacted their leader identity in either the work, family, or community domains. Using an online survey platform participants could access at any time throughout the program, the participants were asked to provide a narrative of the incident discussing "what, when, where, and who was involved." They were also asked to identify features of the event, the intensity, the emotions experienced during the event and the

extent to which the event affected other life domains. One hundred ninety-four incidents were logged over an 18-month period. Finally, data collected through open-ended questions within an exit survey allowed us to gather information about what changes participants noted within themselves after completing the program.

Methods

The data was analyzed using qualitative thematic research strategies (Willig, 2012) which were employed to understand the complex social process of leader identity development. Thematic analysis is used to uncover patterns in information or accounts of experience (McLeod, 2011) and is useful in healthcare settings to make sense of multiple complex processes such as identity development (Tong *et al.*, 2007). To provide rigor in thematic analysis, a clear set of stages was followed in the data analysis (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013), using the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These included (1) identifying overall meaning and patterns in the data, (2) generating initial open codes, (3) condensing codes into meaningful themes and linking themes, (4) reviewing themes for accuracy, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) developing tables and figures (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

The results of the research are divided into three main sections. The first section presents a typology of the leader identity at the start of the program from an analysis of early-stage interviews and focus groups. The second section examines the process of leader identity development, particularly through the analysis of CIDs. Drawing mostly from latter-stage data and exit interviews, the final section outlines the outcomes and evidence of leader identity growth and enrichment.

Participant leader identity at program start

Prior to examining the identity development process for the participants, we began by classifying elements of leader identity at the beginning of the program. Through analysis of initial data in the research collected within the first few months of the program (one-to-one interviews and a focus group), themes around varying levels of leader identity strength and meaning as well as motivation to lead began to develop at the beginning of the program. We did not find levels of self-concept emerge as a differentiating factor data. That is when responding to general questions about how they see themselves as leaders, participants did not refer to their leader identities being grounded in relational or collective levels, but rather focused primarily on their individual level.

Interestingly, we found evidence of leader identity differentiation across domains for all leaders. For example, one participant noted: *"I am a leader at home . . . I'm not a leader at work . . . I'm definitely in charge at home."* Another stated *"I am definitely the leader in the family and in the community like a cub scout leader . . . I am not really a leader at work . . ."*; When discussing leadership in the community, another participant said *"the more of a leader I am at work, I tend to say, 'no' ya know, 'I'm not going to do that.' That's the kind of thing I do at work, I'm not a leader in the community."* These examples show that at the beginning of this program, there was a high level of differentiation and a low level of leader identity integration across domains.

Although reporting high differentiation across domains was universal, leader identity strength and meaning differed across participants. First-order codes were identified allowing us to categorize aggregate themes and the leaders into four typologies (See Table 1). From the thematic analysis, each of these 4 types is categorized by their description of what it means to lead (meaning of leader identity), how they saw themselves as a leader (leader identity strength) and their motivation to develop within the program. The following defines each type and

	Exemplary quote	Themes	Aggregate dimensions
<div> <div></div> <div></div> </div>	<p><i>Philosopher</i></p> <p>This type of leader is caught in a cycle of self-reflection looking only to the past and learning from others</p> <p>“My self-doubt keeps plaguing me. Are they secretly pissed off that I came in to help out but took over? Are they talking behind my back? Did I overstep into someone’s territory?”</p>	Questioning self as leader	Leader identity strength
	<p>“I think that it is important to lead by example, to work hard, to have empathy with staff, to be able to listen and actually hear what people have to say without interruption. It is important to explain what the goal is for the team and to give assurance that you are there consistently to provide support and leadership when required, yet that you are able to empower others to make decisions for themselves that they are confident in and that they know will have a successful outcome which positively impacts others.”</p>	Developed Meaning of Leadership	Meaning of leadership
	<p>“I would like to inspire others and allow them to maximize their full potential . . . I find I am just constantly questioning . . . Do I want to be a leader? Am I suited for leadership? Am I indeed a leader? Am I out of my depth?”</p>	Past oriented	Motivation to lead/develop
	<p><i>Dialectician</i></p> <p>Strength and meaning are high the leader has high self-awareness using both insight and outsight to take leadership risks as they develop their identity</p> <p>“I have confidence in leading my staff”</p>	Strong Sense of self as leader	Leader identity strength
	<p>“I have learned to take a step back from my staff on a personal level, which had enabled me to see situations from a neutral point of view, and I have learned to follow process more in guiding them and empowering them to address their own issues”</p>	Developed meaning of leadership	Meaning of leadership
	<p>“understanding about the leadership styles, and the organization in which we operate, was very powerful- I will take comfort knowing that I have many positive attributes as a leader, need to continue to develop but also not to be afraid to be start to become a leader in my own right”</p>	Strong motivation to develop and lead	Motivation to lead/develop
	<p><i>Unsighted</i></p> <p>This leader has little self-awareness creating unrealistic self-views and misrepresented views in terms of leader identity</p> <p>“I know I have the ability . . . I do not doubt my ability . . . I have no doubt in my skills”</p>	Strong sense of self as leader	Leader identity strength
	<p>When asked about the necessary skills for a leader they said “to know how to move to the next level . . . how to play the game so to speak, as I can do the work and do not doubt my ability, but I struggle with the games”</p>	Lack of meaning	Meaning of leadership
	<p>When asked about what they needed to develop their leadership ability they said “Change in title? Gain operational experience?”</p>	Lack of motivation to develop	Motivation to lead/develop

Table 1.
 Data structure:
 thematic analysis
 carried out with
 resulting typologies

(continued)

			Leader identity development process
Exemplary quote	Themes	Aggregate dimensions	
<i>Critical</i>			
This type suggests the leader has been involved in critical failures which have undermined their strength which made them question their meaning of leadership and their ultimately their identity			
"I am working with people who have been in the health service for 20 years . . . sometimes in meetings and during the working week, I would question my knowledge and experiences as I compare myself to them . . . this cannot be taught . . ."	Questioning self as leader	Leader identity strength	
"It [leadership] makes you a little bit vulnerable . . . when you say I am the leader you are putting yourself up there"	Focused on leader as an individual	Meaning of leadership	
"that's why I say I don't think I'm a leader, because I can't set goals, I can't do any of that because they're in the box, nothing they can do in or outside of the box is going to change. It's because I have no control over it. I probably don't have the confidence or even the belief in myself that I can do this."	Unwillingness/hopelessness about effecting change, usually from past failures	Motivation to lead/develop	
Source(s): Braun and Clarke (2006)			Table 1.

illustrates these types through specific quotes from the leaders (See Table 1 and Figure 1). Altogether eight participants were identified as the *philosopher* type, nine in the *critical* type, two in the *unsighted* type and, eight in the *dialectical* type. Each is described below.

We label the first type as "*Philosopher*" characterized by a leader who can describe a clear and cohesive meaning of leadership paired with a weak leader identity. Participants we classified as philosophers could clearly conceptualize what leadership meant for them but described significant doubt in themselves as a leader and their desire to embrace the challenges associated with leading. For example, when asked about their leadership, one participant shared "*I would like to inspire others and allow them to maximise their full potential . . . I find I am just constantly questioning . . . Do I want to be a leader? Am I suited for leadership? Am I indeed a leader? Am I out of my depth?*" This participant described being caught in a cycle of self-questioning which undermines her motivation to be a leader. Paradoxically, their nuanced understanding of the meaning of leadership seems to hinder seeing themselves as leaders. We can relate this experience to what Ibarra (2015) described as high on self-awareness but lacking the balance of "outsight."

The next quadrant represents high strength and high meaning, the *Dialectician*. This leader has a balanced self-awareness, both insight and "outsight" (Ibarra, 2015) giving rise to both high levels of strength and high meaning where leadership is seen as shared and about collaboration. The following is a quote from one participant reflecting this "*I have confidence in leading my staff (high strength) . . . I have learned to take a step back from my staff on a personal level, which had enabled me to see situations from a neutral point of view, and I have learned to follow process more in guiding them and empowering them to address their own issues*".

The third quadrant has low meaning but high strength, *Unsighted*, this leader has unrealistic self-views and an undeveloped meaning of leadership. The following is a quote from one participant as an example of this type of leader "*I know I have the ability . . . I do not doubt my ability . . . I have no doubt in my skills*." When asked about what they needed to develop their leadership ability they said "*Change in title? Gain operational experience?*" but were unable to identify specific skills or personal development areas. These leaders believe

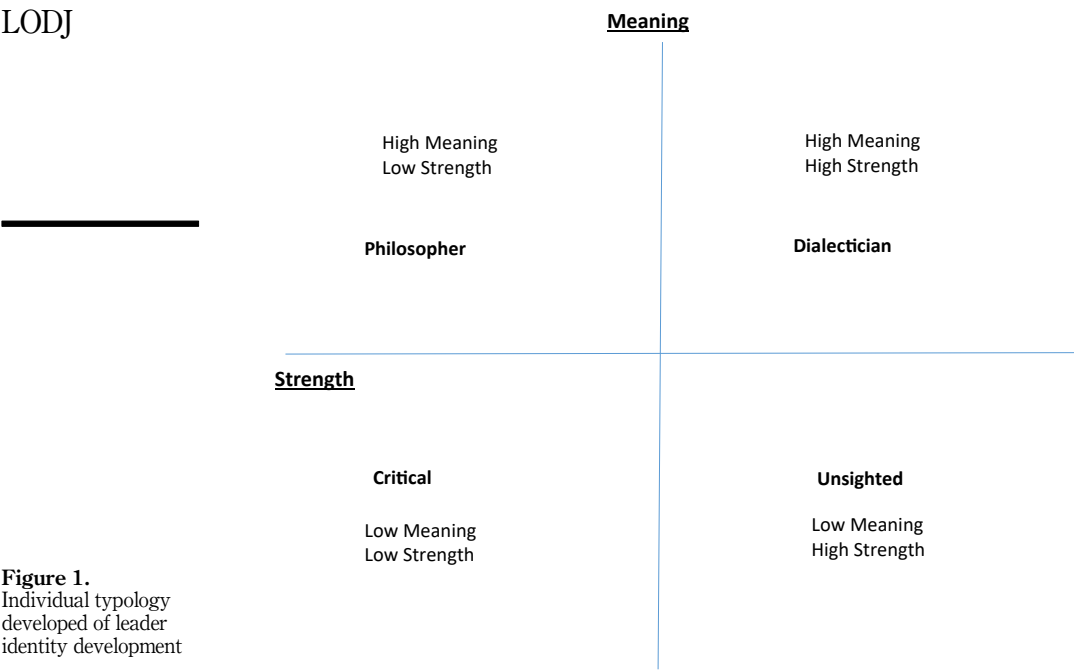


Figure 1.
Individual typology
developed of leader
identity development

deeply in the strength of their identity as a leader but limit their meaning of leadership to that of a position or role.

The final type is *Critical*, the leader has both low meaning and low strength here the leader has not developed their leadership ability in either depth or breadth. This is usually a result of critical leadership failures in the past undermining their strength and making them question their meaning of leadership and ultimately their identity. The following is a direct quote underpinning this type of leader in terms of low strength “*I am working with people who have been in the health service for 20 years . . . sometimes in meetings and during the working week, I would question my knowledge and experiences as I compare myself to them . . . this cannot be taught . . .*” Interestingly, the concluding statement here – “this cannot be taught” also suggests their understanding of leadership (meaning) is that of something that cannot be developed. Furthermore, when asked to discuss what leadership means to them one participant in this category said, “*It makes you a little bit vulnerable . . . when you say I am the leader you are putting yourself up there*” illustrating a meaning of leader identity focused primarily on hierarchy and position.

Development process: multi-domain critical incident diaries

Throughout the program, participants were encouraged to complete multi-domain CIDs which were administered through an online platform. As they completed the critical incident participants were asked to consider spillover into the other domains of their life. In total one hundred and ninety-four CIDs were documented by the participants.

By reflecting on leadership events inside and outside of work, the participants moved from a differentiated view of their leadership to a more integrated leader identity. In particular, participants used the CIDs to reflect on and learn from important moments of leadership. Through the development program, individuals grew in their awareness of potential

connections across domains. Interestingly, many of the events participants noted had been either ongoing or included reflections on previous experiences. Participants noted that some of the events actually happened 20 or more years ago, but something triggered their awareness of these events. For example, participants began their journaling with lead-ins such as *"I'm having ongoing issues with . . .," "two things have happened to me that stick out in my mind as a light bulb or aha moments,"* and *"rather than it being one specific event, there are a number of smaller incidents that have happened that has made me question my leadership."*

Participants reported that the CIDs were helpful in many ways such as to *"recognise formative events, be they positive or negative", "helped me recognise patterns", "allows you to reflect and be proud of what you have done", "make me take the time to self-reflect and actually see how I did a good job sometimes even though my fears may have me believe I didn't do a good job!"* and *"helped to jog my memory on achievements whether big or small in my working life and outside of it."* One participant said, *"The benefits of doing the critical incident diaries is that it hits home to me of how I have already acted as a leader in various aspects of my life that I would not have given myself credit for."* Others reported the diaries required them to go deeper into their past stating, *"The reflection required to document the CID was invaluable to me, it forced me to re-evaluate issues that I had locked away and in a way I then had to deal with these issues and make peace with them"*.

Outcomes

Interviews and exit surveys at the conclusion of the study showed nearly all participants reporting a movement from a differentiated to an integrated leader identity as well as growth in the meaning and strength of their leader identity. Using interview and exit survey data gathered after the program, we again applied the typology to classify development. Sixteen participants had developed and were identified as the dialectician type, eight participants were characterized as the philosopher type, one participant was categorized as critical and two participants originally characterized as unsighted remained in this category.

We noticed a pattern in the three leaders who did not move within the typology as they focused mostly on a view of leadership as being solely determined by position or role and a lack of "ownership" in their own development. One leader, for example, showed characteristics of the *unsighted leader* at the start of the program reporting *"natural born leader; very good leader; very effective leader"* yet struggled with *"a sense of failure because I haven't advanced as much as I like, there is obviously something holding me back."* At the conclusion of the program, this participant still reported being an excellent leader yet held back by others stating *"Rationally I know I am very good at my work, am highly accomplished and very capable, yet the messages I am getting are all negative. I feel that the decision-makers know I am good but yet do not want me and as a result, push me into cleaning up everybody else's mess. None of it makes sense to me."*

The content of the noted overlap across domains was analyzed to understand the outcomes of development by thematic analysis. Sixteen first-order themes were developed and grouped into three key dimensions of enrichment: psychological enrichment, personal enrichment and perspective enrichment. See [Table 2](#).

The first category of outcomes of integration, *psychological enrichment* involves increased self-efficacy, agency and confidence. These represent deeper-level personal views of the self, which carry over across domains. For example, increased confidence was noted in the following two comments: *"This project definitely made me more confident and I think in turn will rub off in my family and home life"* and *"I feel more confident in myself after this session because I realised the work ethic my mother instilled in me which I think will greatly help me on my journey to becoming a leader."* Additionally, a participant stated that changes to their philosophy of leadership carried across domains, *"my leader philosophy and my example cited from home/community has given me a confidence and a trust and a wisdom that I need to learn*

Table 2.
Enrichment outcomes

Source(s): Braun and Clarke (2006)

Second, *personal enrichment* represented a noticed knowledge, skill and social capital that was applicable across domains. Comments included gaining a general self-awareness such as this comment: *"The program has made me more aware of how I approach issues, thinking through issues, solving problems if they arise, being more reflective generally. I have also learned how my values and beliefs play a huge part in how I lead"*. Others mentioned skills gained such as *"I felt strong and it really did improve my skills in problem-solving."* Another specific skill was mentioned by another participant, *"I will take a more inclusive and multidimensional approach during projects. Taking different opportunities to network"*.

Finally, *perspective enrichment* represented an ability to see others' perspectives and an increased ability to "see the bigger picture." Participants noted that reflecting on experiences gave them a better perspective: *"I think that is the most important thing-awareness that I am not perfect, am always learning"*. Another example included how tough times in one domain put experiences in the other domain in perspective, stating, *"While this was a very difficult time in my life it has definitely strengthened me. Nothing else, especially in the workplace, could ever be as bad as that so I don't get too worried or upset. It's easier now to see the bigger picture and let go of the small insignificant stuff. This has made me a calmer leader and I think a better one"*. One leader noted how integral the multi-domain approach is: *"I think the multi-domain approach to leader identity was integral to demonstrating how I was not confined to being a leader just at work or in the community - the benefit of the multi-domain approach was that you could apply the learning from one domain to another."*

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the processes and content of leader identity development through a multi-domain leader identity development program. Our research was designed based on four growth areas including strength, meaning, level and integration (Hammond *et al.*, 2017). We presented our findings across three stages of the development process: a typology of leader identity at program entry, a process of development through critical incidents and an evaluation of growth at the program conclusion. We discuss several contributions to theory and practice at each stage.

First, our typology of leader identity at the program start makes several contributions. our findings suggest that strength and meaning in particular are integral to an integrated leader mindset. That is, leaders start development programs with varying levels of strength and meaning and can, through an integration-based intervention, develop and balance these two aspects of leader identity. The typology of four types of leader identities based on the interaction of strength and meaning may be a useful model for classifying leaders' starting points in a development program or indicating areas of development: philosopher/dialectical (high meaning and low strength), critical (low meaning and low strength), learner-practitioner (high meaning and high strength) and unsighted (low meaning and high strength). Strength and meaning dimensions capture both the content and the salience of the leader identity. These aspects are important to leader development as it is thought to occur as identities become clearer and more complex in meaning and more strongly integrated and consistent within a global self-concept (Day and Lance, 2004). Further, we found evidence of three of the four areas, strength, meaning and integration; however, level was not a differentiating factor. Participants' discussion of leader identity focused primarily on their individual-level identity. That is, they spoke of their own skills and attributes as a leader and what separated them from others (Lord and Hall, 2005) and mainly discussed individual internalization as ways in which they internalized 'leader' into their own sense of self over a collective endorsement (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). We have considered multiple explanations with theoretical impacts. First, this may reflect cultural individualism in Ireland [2023: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/>], consistent with a value of independence and focus on "I" over "we." Alternatively, self-selection or priming bias is such that individuals who volunteer for a leadership development program that is explicitly labeled as "identity-based" may be primed to consider their individual-level attributes rather than social group membership. We recommend further exploration into the application of levels of self-concept as a leader identity dimension as well as ways in which leader development programs may inadvertently prime an individual level of self-concept over more collective levels (Haslam *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding the second focus of the study—multi-domain CIDs—our results provided evidence that an explicitly multiple-domain leader development program is useful for promoting

leader identity development. Adopting the multiple-domain approach provided the participants with a variety of lenses through which they could reflect on their leader identity. Leaders face certain psychological barriers to developing one's leadership identity which must be fully understood to inform the development process (Lee Cunningham *et al.*, 2023). For example, reflecting on the impact of early life experiences—primarily in the family—helped them to unpack and make sense of their primary identities commonly formed in earlier life experiences. Past events as well as present events are the foundational stones of identity development and experiences, for example in childhood and are important to consider (Woodward, 2004). These identities are strong—forming around family, society and gender—and are more resistant to change than the identities we form in later life (Jenkins, 2014). Individuals recreated or reshaped their past remembered experiences as a leader by re-writing their narratives (McAdams, 2001) as their understanding of leadership expands. For example, leading acts may not be explicitly labeled as “leadership” at the time of enactment but may be retrospectively identified as such upon reflection. For example, an individual may help a family through a crisis by offering support, guidance, direction and a vision for the future. At the time, the individual might not realize he or she is enacting leadership, but upon reflection, realizes it was indeed leadership. This retrospective sense-making is done in the present but is strongly determined by the past and shapes the future understanding of oneself as a leader. In doing so, sense-making and identity work can provide an individual with a “sense of temporal coherence” (Alvesson, 2010).

Additionally, our findings regarding the process of leader identity development highlight the importance of using tangible work and life moments as developmental opportunities. Specifically, the critical incident approach enabled participants to notice resource transfer and the impact of an experience within one domain on the “whole person.” Maertz and Boyar (2011) highlight the benefits of viewing work-family enrichments from an episode perspective as it “provides a more accurate theoretical reflection and better empirical strategy for understanding how employees psychologically perceive and process WF [work/family] conflicts” and enrichments. Likewise, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) mention “enrichment episodes” as important in our understanding of this phenomenon. This research contributes to leader identity theory, and multi-domain leader development theory, by highlighting how certain triggers (usually events or episodes) foster greater leader identity and competence development through a sense-making process (Hammond *et al.*, 2017). The use of the critical incident approach as a methodology and tool for healthcare leadership development – as opposed to more managerial and traditional approaches – can offer a unique, nuanced and in-depth method for exploring and developing leader identity.

Finally, our findings regarding the outcomes of development contribute to the science and practice of leadership as well as research on the intersection of work and non-work. Further, identifying the three types of leader identity enrichment outcomes made a valuable contribution: psychological enrichment, personal enrichment and perspective enrichment. Whereas significant research has identified aspects of enrichment and conflict while managing boundaries of work and life, identity-based enrichment might look different. Certainly, elements of work-family enrichment were identifiable in the data, yet through an identity-based approach, participants' lives were enriched in much deeper ways than the spillover of mood or skills (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Those who failed to develop from the program did not progress in their meaning of leader identity beyond a role or position-based understanding whereas those who reported the most growth embraced a mindset that “*anyone can lead from anywhere at any time*” (Ashford and DeRue, 2010). Efforts aimed at encouraging leaders to “rethink” leadership across life domains may be most useful.

Limitations and future research

While the findings delineate reasons behind the development of the strength and meaning of leader identity and the integration process across domains, it is possible that these might not

generalize to other contexts. Like many focused qualitative studies, generalizability to a larger population might be limited. Also, the sample was limited to healthcare leaders in Ireland and as such we suggest further research is needed in other industries, levels and national contexts. Finally, the sample included leaders who self-selected for the leadership development program and as such this sampling process could cause selection biases (Heckman, 1990). We recommend further studies using random sampling techniques should be considered. Recent research has shown that informal leaders and female leaders experience perceptions of risk when stepping up to claim leadership roles (Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Ryan *et al.*, 2021). The enrichment outcomes experienced by formal leaders in this research through the development of an integrated holistic leader identity by taking a multi-domain approach may also be significant for these groups of leaders in terms of helping them to mitigate risk as it provides differing social contexts through which to learn (Zhang *et al.*, 2020) and increase self-efficacy to support agency development (Ryan *et al.*, 2021). Future research that follows this type of enrichment process through the mitigation of risk and ultimately an individual's motivation to lead could produce much-needed literature on how to produce effective leadership in organizations.

Additionally, we recommend future research to examine the facets of leader identity. Hammond and colleagues in 2017 suggested identity growth in four areas, our research suggested nuanced understandings of identity growth in terms of strength, meaning and integration, yet levels did not arise as a meaningful category of leader identity across the study. It is possible that individual, relational and collective levels of leader identity become subsumed within meaning. Further, as most research on levels of self-concept is not leadership specific, we may question its applicability as a sub-dimension of leader identity and may rather function as a more generalized self-relevant antecedent. As such, we recommend further research should be carried out on levels of self as it relates to the meaning of "leader" and leader identity more broadly.

Implications for leader development and conclusions

Scholars have suggested that a leader's view of self should be considered an important part of the development process (Day and Dragoni, 2015). Further, it has been proposed that leader identity development can be developed across multiple domains helping "would-be leaders appreciate, develop and enact a strong, integrated and meaningful leader identity" (Haslam *et al.*, 2022, p 6). Despite significant focus and funds allocated to the development of leaders within organizations, further understanding is required about how leaders develop as part of these programs (Kwok *et al.*, 2021). Our research adds to the literature by providing empirical evidence to support the multi-domain approach to identity development for leaders in the areas of strength, meaning and integration. It also answers the call for a more nuanced understanding of how leaders develop their identity (Antonakis and Day, 2017) by developing a typology of leaders based on the strength of their leader identity and their meaning of leadership when entering a development program. These novel findings add to our understanding of the differing levels of development and awareness with which leaders enter into development programs which can affect an individual leader's development trajectory (Day and Sin, 2011). Our study also contributes to research on the integration and enrichment process in leader identity development. We provide empirical evidence to support Ibarra *et al.* (2010) and Hammond *et al.* (2017) who both suggest that leader identity development includes processes of integration, further developing this concept by outlining the subsequent enrichment outcomes from this integration process. Previous studies have shown that multiple-domain interventions have been successful in promoting harmony between work and non-work roles (Heskiau and McCarthy, 2020). Importantly, through the interventions designed and used as part of the research program, we provide evidence to support psychological, personal and perspective enrichment outcomes through the development of an integrated holistic leader identity.

In addition to providing further understanding of the leader identity development process and contributing the underpinning theories, this research also has practical implications. Developing leaders is an expensive process (Gurdjian *et al.*, 2014) with a recent study by Forbes in 2019 putting the spend as high as \$166 million per annum in the USA alone (Westfall, 2019). However, scholars are still working to find the optimal development methods designed to ensure the effectiveness of this investment (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2017; Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2019). This research shows that a multi-domain approach using a critical incident approach can be effective in capitalizing on the leader's experiences in the other domains in which they operate. Experiences that happen inside as well as outside the workplace can provide valuable learning and development for the leader. Understanding and becoming aware as a whole leader offers benefits to leadership development, which is often overlooked. Our research also highlights the fact that individuals do not always enter into development programs with similar levels of strength and meaning in terms of their leader identity and as such a one-size-fits-all approach to the development process could harm the overall effectiveness of the development intervention and the leader's development trajectory. Individual readiness is often left unnoticed when beginning these types of programs, and hence, the typology we provide could be useful in categorizing the leader identity of individual learners which could in turn be used to inform program design based on these characteristics. For example, a participant with high meaning and low strength may be paralyzed by their sophisticated conceptualization of leadership if denied development opportunities. Finally, our research delineates the effect of taking a multi-domain approach in the development of an integrated self-concept by outlining how this holistic approach can produce significant enrichment outcomes for the learner. Organizations would benefit from harnessing these findings, supporting the leader to develop and uncover the learning across multiple domains creating spillover and development.

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