

## **Shared social identity in leadership**

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## *Abstract*

In this paper we review recent evidence on the social identity model of leadership. First, we explain how this model is rooted in the social identity approach in social psychology and, specifically, the notion that shared reality and joint action in groups derives from shared social identity. We then show how effective leadership is a process of social identity management and we examine both the antecedents, the psychological and the political consequences of managing social identities

*Keywords:* Leadership; social identity; group processes; shared reality; identity management; entrepreneurs of identity

### *The group context of leadership*

Approaches to leadership differ in the breadth of their analytical focus. The trait approach<sup>1</sup> concentrates on the characteristics of the leader alone. Transactional<sup>2</sup> and transformational<sup>3,4</sup> approaches broaden this out to address the relationships between leaders and followers. The social identity model of leadership<sup>5,6,7</sup> extends the focus still further. It starts from the premise that a leader is always the leader of some specific constituency: a political party, a religion, a country or whatever. Accordingly, it argues that leadership should be understood in terms of the relations between the leader and followers within a particular social group<sup>8</sup>. It follows that an understanding of leadership depends upon an understanding of group processes more generally.

The social identity approach in social psychology — comprised of social identity theory<sup>9</sup> and self-categorization theory<sup>10</sup> — argues that group behavior is underpinned by a sense of social identity (or 'we-ness') that is shared by a given a set of people. Shared social identity sets in train a series of cognitive, relational and emotional transformations which allow people to co-act effectively and thereby constitute a source of social power<sup>11</sup>.

To start with, when people share a common social identity, their behavior becomes underpinned by a sense of connection informed by common norms, values, beliefs and goals<sup>12</sup>. Not only that, they also expect to agree on matters of relevance to the group<sup>13</sup> and they interact in ways that lead to convergence on a consensus<sup>14</sup>. In these various ways, perceptions of shared social identity lead group members to achieve a sense of shared reality in the sense of (a) a commonality of concerns, (b) a commonality of internal states and (c) a reflexive awareness and assumption of commonality of internal states with fellow group members (see the work of Echterhoff, Higgins and colleagues<sup>15,16</sup>). What is more, the sense of shared reality transforms what were individual opinions into social facts<sup>17</sup> and thereby contributes the epistemic heft to render beliefs adequate as the basis for action.

Next, shared identity creates a sense of intimacy and togetherness between people. It leads to an enhanced sense of trust and respect and increases cooperation, helping and social support<sup>18</sup>. In this way, people do not only gain certainty about their understandings and goals but are also able to combine their efforts - thereby becoming empowered to enact these shared understandings and to achieve their shared goals (collective self-realisation, CSR<sup>19</sup>). Finally, successful CSR is experienced as intensely positive, thus explaining the powerful affectivity (sometimes termed 'effervescence') associated with

collective phenomena<sup>20</sup>.

It follows from this, that to the extent that an individual is able to shape the shared social identity (i.e., to define 'who we are' and hence 'what we want to do'), then he or she is in a position to influence the shared reality and the coordinated action of group members.

On the one hand, then, the social identity model sees leadership as dependent upon processes of shared identity and shared reality. That is, leadership is a process of social identity management<sup>6</sup>, by which the leader gains influence through defining the meaning of the group identity and hence shaping what we believe, what we value and how we should act.

On the other hand, the social identity model sees shared identity and shared reality as dependent upon leadership. A sense of 'we-ness' and a sense of what this 'we-ness' means does not necessarily arise spontaneously. It is something that is created by leaders<sup>21,22</sup>. Indeed one could argue that the key aspect of leadership and politics more generally is to create co-acting constituencies who see themselves as part of the same social category.

#### *Four dimensions of effective leadership*

So what is it, then, that gives leaders the capability to manage social identity and thereby achieve collective social influence? Early studies in the field focused on group prototypicality<sup>23,24</sup>. This is the notion that an individual represents what it is that makes the group distinctive and special in comparison to other relevant groups. In this way, prototypicality differs from the notion of typicality or simply being an average group member<sup>25</sup>. Group members are more likely to accept that someone who, in themselves, represents the group and who they therefore see as 'one of us', is in a position to understand and to articulate the group identity.

More recent work complements this emphasis on prototypicality, showing that being 'one of us' may be an important element in leadership but that it is only one of several separate dimensions – and not always the most important one<sup>26</sup>. For, insofar as group members are oriented to the practical implementation of their social identities, it may be necessary but not sufficient for a leader to understand and represent what this consists of.

Two further things are generally needed. The first is that leaders employ their insights in working for the ingroup rather than for their personal interest or else the interest of an

outgroup. Indeed while we may want leaders to treat members of the ingroup fairly, we expect them to favour the ingroup over the outgroup and will often reject those who treat the ingroup and outgroup alike<sup>27,28,29</sup>.

The second is that these efforts need to bear fruit so that leaders' actions pave the way to the achievement of group goals. This is not just a matter of success, it is also a matter of ensuring that such success is consonant with the values and priorities defined by group identity.

There is also a temporal paradox which needs to be resolved here. That is, if leaders' influence depends upon success, then they equally need to have influence and be able to mobilise group support in order to achieve such success. This paradox is resolvable to the extent that the leader is able to enact the goals of group mobilization within the mobilization itself. Here the performative dimension of leadership is critical. An example would be the way that Donald Trump choreographed his rallies to create a world where ordinary Americans, directed by Trump vanquish both an alien 'enemy without' (through the ejection of protestors) and an elitist 'enemy within (through the taunting and silencing of the attendant media)<sup>30</sup>. In short, in advancing the group, leaders need to be *impresarios of identity* who create structures that allow group members to enact and live out their sense of shared identity

In addition to being one of us, acting for us, and achieving for us, there is a fourth dimension which overarches all the other three. That is, while effective leadership depends upon the relationship of leaders and their actions to group identity, this identity is not something fixed and pre-given to which the leader must adapt and conform. Rather, one of the core elements of leadership lies in actively defining the identity, one's self and one's actions so as to produce a fit between them. Critically, this means that effective leaders must be skilled *entrepreneurs of identity*<sup>31</sup>.

One of the best examples of this relates to one of the greatest American Presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). Early in his adulthood, FDR contracted what was thought to be polio or 'infantile paralysis' and his advisers considered that this would disqualify him from high leadership, seen as associated with maturity and potency. Yet, in his triumphant election of 1936, in the midst of the great depression, Roosevelt constructed a vision of a crippled America overcoming economic paralysis and he deliberately paraded his own paralysed body before the country as a metaphor to show both that he understood the plight of ordinary Americans and also that he was the one to

overcome it<sup>6,32</sup>.

Entrepreneurship is not limited to establishing the prototypicality of leaders, however. It is also involved in representing them as working tirelessly for the group and as meeting group goals. In this way, two claims that were central to Donald Trump's appeal were that, being rich himself, he could not be bought by Wall St. but was free to work for the people and that he (unlike career politicians) was supremely skilled in 'the Art of the Deal'<sup>29,33</sup>.

For those who are successful in establishing such connections between self and group identity, there is a growing body of literature showing them to be effective in motivating group members to follow them<sup>34,35</sup>, making group members more confident<sup>36</sup> improving group performance<sup>37</sup>, and reducing burnout and increasing commitment to the group<sup>38</sup>. Such findings span a wide range of different types of group including work organisations<sup>39</sup>, educational establishments<sup>40</sup> sports teams<sup>41</sup>, and political groups<sup>42,43</sup>, and they also are applicable to a wide range of cultures<sup>44</sup>.

It is critical, therefore, that would-be leaders understand the importance of *reflecting* on the identity of the group they seek to lead and on the relationship between their leadership performance and the nature of group identity, of *representing* the group and its aspirations, and of *realizing* its goals. These are the so-called "3Rs" of identity leadership<sup>6</sup> that are further elaborated in the '5R' program of leadership development<sup>45</sup>

#### *Leader-follower relations and the definition of group identity*

The foregoing argument can be summarized by saying that the ability of leaders to shape the shared reality and shared action of followers depends upon what they have in common with these followers. Unlike trait, transactional and transformational theories, which generally focus on what sets leaders apart from followers (e.g., particular personality characteristics, special resources or extraordinary qualities like 'charisma') the social identity approach argues that it is shared membership of a social group that makes leadership possible.

It is important to stress, however, that this focus on categorical relationships is not at the expense of analyzing personal relationships. Rather, it argues that the personal relationship between followers and their leader is framed by the over-arching categorical framework. Thus many followers evidently feel a close personal bond with their leader, but the extent to which they feel such a bond depends upon the extent to which they identify with the group and also identify the leader with the group<sup>46</sup>. That is, it is the mutual bond to the group that gives rise to a sense of connection between individuals within the group.

Similarly, the evaluation of the leader's qualities is a function of this mutual bond. Thus, highly identified followers rate their leaders as more charismatic<sup>47</sup>, as more authentic<sup>48</sup>, and they feel more closely bonded to them<sup>49</sup> when these leaders are seen as being of the group and working for the group.

But it is important to stress that the group context which binds followers to leaders and which enables effective leadership also acts as a constraint upon the exercise of leadership. Indeed, unlike other approaches which suggest that, if the leader has the necessary qualities or resources he or she can influence followers in any way they choose, the social identity approach asserts that a leader gains traction with followers as an interpreter of social identity. While leaders may have some leeway in defining 'who we are' and what that implies for action in context, they do not have completely free rein. They are constrained by the material artefacts of group culture (e.g., the way that national culture is defined in school history texts, public statues and monuments, even place and street names)<sup>29,50</sup>. They are also constrained by the understandings and interpretations of group members themselves. In this sense the positions of leader and follower can be regarded as more fluid than fixed — as encapsulated in the famous quip, variously attributed to Napoleon, Gandhi and (most accurately) the French politician Ledru-Rollin, speaking of the masses during the revolution of 1848: "I must follow them, I am their leader"<sup>6</sup>.

Taking the argument one step further, the relationship between leaders and followers in defining the nature of group identity is not fixed at a psychological level. Rather it is a matter of politics. Indeed, different types of political system can be characterized precisely by the balance between these two parties in the definition of group identity. Three broad types can be identified<sup>23,51</sup>. One, egalitarian leadership, involves the leader as a facilitator of a conversation between group members as to who they are in which all participate as equals. Another, hierarchical leadership, still allows space for leaders to participate but claims special expertise for the leader and involves the presentation of specific essentialised versions of identity as the one true definition. Finally, authoritarian leadership is characterized by an elision of the leader with the group. The leader becomes the embodiment of the group prototype such that anything the leader says, by definition, represents the group identity and anyone who disagrees with the leader, by definition, is attacking the group. This legitimates the repression of dissenters as 'enemies of the people' and renders debate impossible<sup>52</sup>.

*Conclusion*

The social identity approach to leadership starts from the premise that shared social identity is the basis for shared perceptions of reality and coordinated actions to (re)shape social reality. Leadership then consists of the ability to shape this social identity and hence determine the nature of shared reality and coordinated action. This in turn depends upon the ability of leaders to establish themselves as being of, and acting for, the group and hence establishing a bond with followers who also identify with the group. The dynamics of the group and its politics then depend upon the balance between leaders and followers in defining their shared identity, their shared reality, and their joint actions.

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