The stories that make us: Leaders' origin stories and temporal identity work

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Abstract:

The stories we tell about our origins can shape how we think and act – helping us make sense of and communicate who we have "become" over time. To better understand the role that origin stories play in individuals' work lives, we explore how 92 men and women leaders make sense of "becoming" a leader (origin stories) and "doing" leadership (enactment stories). We find that, despite the uniqueness of their experiences, their narratives converge around four frames, *being, engaging, performing*, and *accepting*, through which they understand, articulate, and enact their leader identities. We theorize that these narrative frames serve as sensemaking and identity work devices which allow them to create temporal coherence, validate their leader identity claims, and offer them behavioral scripts. Our findings also unearth key gender differences in the use of these frames, in that men used the *performing* frame more often and women tended toward the *engaging* frame. These findings provide novel insights into the ways in which the gendered context of leadership becomes embedded in leaders' understandings of who they are and what they intend to do in their roles. We discuss the theoretical implications of our findings on scholarly conversations around identity, leadership, and gender.

Keywords: Gender | identity | identity work | leader identity | leadership | leadership development | narratives

Article:

Introduction

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. (George Eliot, 1876: 7)

Crafting and communicating self-narratives, or stories, allows individuals to form and express their identities (Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1996; Pentland, 1999). As our introductory quote implies, the *beginning* is a natural and important, albeit understudied, component of self-narratives. People are naturally prone to composing and telling stories about the origins of their identities, be it role identities, relational identities, or personal identities. For example, in her autobiography, *Becoming*, Michelle Obama (2018) dedicates several chapters to narrating her own origins and their foundational influence on shaping her relationships, how she leads, and more generally, who she has "become" today in the present. Reflecting and talking about their

origin stories allows people to understand how their reality came into existence (Leander, 2008; Richardson, 2008).

In fact, individuals create meaning and purpose through narrating the beginnings of their identities. This is because, "Understood as origin, a beginning is intended to provide an explanation. This in turn circumscribes our present potential: such a beginning is generally meant to determine the present situation" (Leander, 2008: 16). Given the potential for understanding individuals' sensemaking about their identities, and the theoretical importance of explaining this connection (Vough et al., 2020), it is surprising that little empirical research has explored origin stories in the context of work identities. Examining how individuals talk about the origins of their work identities can provide an important portal into their identity and sensemaking processes as it represents their understanding of how and why they are who they are and do what they do within their work roles. In this research, we sought to explore how individuals narrate the origins of their leadership, and how, if at all, these origin stories relate to who they have "become" as leaders.

We focus on leaders in particular because across the world, the leader role is recognized as universally important (Northouse, 2018) and increasingly depicted as high-status and aspirational (Kniffin et al., 2019; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006), making it desirable both to attain and to keep. However, despite the ubiquity and desirability of this role, there is no universal meaning associated with the leader role as it can be decoupled from a formal position (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), and hence there is no single clear-cut path to "becoming" a leader – to actually seeing oneself as a "leader" by taking on a leader identity. Instead, a leader identity (one's understanding of one's self in the leader role) evolves over time through interpersonal claiming and granting processes (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). The socially constituted nature of this identity can make it complicated to claim (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b), and require ongoing identity work to sustain (e.g. DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Hill, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2010; Sinclair, 2010). Taking together the desirability yet relative ambiguity of taking on a leader identity and the importance of narrated origins for claiming an identity, we investigate what origin stories allow individuals to make sense of, claim, and support their leader identities, and how they do so.

To accomplish this research aim, we inductively analyzed 92 individuals' narratives of becoming and being leaders – the stories they tell of their paths to leadership and of how they currently enact their leadership – to understand whether and how leaders' origin stories matter. We found that, despite vastly unique individual experiences, leaders' narratives converged around four dominant narrative frames that connect the recounted origins of one's leader identity to its present-day expression. Extrapolating from the four frames, we theorize that individuals use these narrative frames to engage in temporal identity work that builds psychological coherence between one's past and present, for both oneself and an external audience.

Our theorizing provides insight into how individuals draw from dominant leadership discourses and their own personal history to generate clear and desirable meanings for an otherwise ambiguous leader role, to bolster the solidity of their leader identity claims and justify their occupation of this coveted role. In doing so, we enrich our understanding of how individuals engage in temporal identity work to create and sustain their leader identity. An implication of

this is that while leaders' stories of their past may provide them with a sense of coherence and positive distinctiveness, it may also lock them into particular enactment narratives.

We also uncover nuance with respect to the gendered nature of leader identity work. Prior work has highlighted that the leader role is commonly assumed to be a masculine role that is better suited for men than women (e.g. Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 2003). This poses a significant challenge for women to construct and claim a leader identity that is authentic to them (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016; Sinclair, 2010). We find that women may be more prone to develop their leader identities around specific leadership actions, while men are more likely to build their leader identities around positional authority. This pattern suggests that the leader identities most easily available to women may be more ephemeral than those available to men, which adds a layer of nuance to our understanding of the gendered ways individuals work to claim leader identities amid dominant social discourses.

Conceptual background

In this section, we provide an overview of the literature that both motivates our research and grounds the theoretical interpretation of our data. We first review what we know about the leader role, the leader identity, and the inherent challenges people face in claiming a leader identity. We then zoom in on the importance of narrative identity work, and in particular the under-studied narrative origins that can be a portal to gaining new insights into how people claim and support a leader identity.

The leader role and identity

A leader identity is often tied to a leader role in organizations and broader society. Roles are expected patterns and standards of behavior that are associated with given tasks, which are sometimes tied to specific organizational positions (Ibarra et al., 2010; Katz and Kahn, 1966). While some roles have clear expectations, the expectations associated with the leader role are more ambiguous (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). For example, although the leader role is often associated with managerial positions, it can also be disconnected from them (Mintzberg, 2004); people in managerial positions may not always be seen by others as leaders (Bedeian and Hunt, 2006), and those seen as leaders may not hold managerial positions (Spreitzer and Quinn, 2001). Further, our expectations of leaders are also variant because they are shaped not only by organizational policies and expectations, but also followers' personal experience and other social cultural influences (Yukl, 2006). All of these can subject the leader role to different interpretations, that is, what leadership actually means – what it takes to be a leader, how it is performed, and who will lead and who will follow – varies across contexts and people (DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

Moreover, expectations about the leader role are not only multiplex and often vague, but they can seem unattainable because most of the dominant discourse around this role is positive and idealistic in nature. Prototypical leadership ideologies often suggest that leaders are exceptional, even heroic (e.g. Kinsella et al., 2015). There is an "almost cult-like belief in leaders as heroic, larger-than life, charismatic figures who have enormous self-belief and commensurate egos, and who will pursue their objectives come what may" (Burnes and By, 2012: 241). In a way, rather

than actual practices, leadership can be seen as a fantasy that reflects identity work (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006).

A leader role becomes a leader *identity* when role expectations become internalized by the individual, and incorporated into an individual's overall self-definition, which involves seeing and thinking of oneself as a leader (Day and Sin, 2011; DeRue and Ashford, 2010). As a result of the ambiguous and subjective notions of what constitutes leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b), people negotiate meanings and expectations as well as adapt their behavior in order to develop their leader identities (Ibarra et al., 2010). It is important to understand when, how, and why people begin to think of themselves as leaders, and what meanings they ascribe to this identity, because these understandings can guide their information processing, motivation, goal setting, decision making, behaviors, and skill development (Johnson et al., 2012; Kwok et al., 2018; Lord and Hall, 2005).

Leader identity work

The development of a leader identity requires making sense of oneself as a leader – creating an answer to the question, "who am I. . . as a leader?" (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Ely et al., 2011). This sensemaking about one's identity is an ongoing process over time, reflecting interactions between an individual and his or her external environment (Ashforth et al., 2018), in which pressures are constantly mounting for leaders to produce and project a coherent and convincing sense of themselves (Sinclair, 2010; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). Identity work is a term that broadly captures how individuals do so; it is "the cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective, role, and personal self-meanings within the boundaries of their social contexts" (Caza et al., 2018b: 7). Leader identity work is consequently the process by which individuals attempt to create, develop, and maintain their own coherent notions of who they are as leaders amid the social forces around them. Part of this leader identity work takes place in the context of ongoing and iterative social processes of claiming (asserting one's leader identity in social interactions) and granting (others' affirming one's leader identity) (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Another part of leader identity work takes place as individuals make sense of these interactions and craft a coherent self-narrative about who they are as a leader (Shamir and Eilam, 2005).

Narrative identity work reflects an individual's constructed reality about their place in the world, occurring as people reflect on and tell stories about themselves and their lives to support their understanding, construction, revision, and performance of their identities (Bardon et al., 2015; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). This type of identity work can support individuals to develop a sense of agency over their "self-in role", in the context of the dominant societal and organizational narratives surrounding leadership which can produce tension and struggle (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014). The stories people choose to tell are means through which they convey their values, traits, and beliefs to themselves and others, which in a sense construct who they are as leaders at the present time (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Further, when making sense of themselves and their lives, people are motivated to create a positive, coherent, and authentic sense of themselves (Brown, 2015; Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Within their self-narratives, individuals can construct

positive meanings and look for cohesion between external and internal reality (McAdams, 2003; Veglia and Di Fini, 2017). They do so, for example, by developing dominant plot themes that stretch across time (Bardon et al., 2015; Ericson and Kjellander, 2018; Jansen and Shipp, 2018; Watson, 2009). Research depicts, for example, the narratives leaders tell to reframe their self-views (Zheng and Muir, 2015), to elevate mundane managerial activities as extraordinary leadership acts (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b), or even to project unwanted aspects of oneself into others (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012).

Narrated identity origin stories, which have received little research attention, may reveal much about individuals' sensemaking of their leader identity, as they contain basic and important messages that individuals use to justify to themselves and others their occupation of the leader role (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). The "beginning" has been recognized as a critical component of any narrative – allowing people to make sense of and provide reasoning for why things "turned out the way they did", and why they themselves "turned out the way they did" (Leander, 2008; Richardson, 2008). How people recall their entrance into particular identities can mark a highly important transformation, shaping their experiences and worldviews (Anteby e al., 2016). At the same time, what people remember about their past can be influenced by their current self-views (Wilson and Ross, 2003). Consequently, individuals' narrated beginnings of their leadership are important to understand, as they provide a portal for understanding the meaning and legitimacy of one's leadership claims at the present. While scholars have investigated how *organizations* draw on and use their "histories" and early experiences, for example, to legitimize present-day actions (e.g. Ravasi et al., 2019), we know less about how individuals might do so to legitimize particular identities or roles that they occupy. We thus explore what narratives individuals draw on to tell their leader origins, and how, if at all, these origin stories relate to who they have "become" as leaders.

Methods

We adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach to data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 2009; Strauss and Corbin, 1994) to understand and build theory around the subjective nature of identity construction and management in organizations (Caza et al., 2018a; Pratt et al., 2006). Specifically, we used a grounded theory perspective, wherein we iteratively moved between our data and the literature (Gioia, 1998; Gioia et al., 2013) to derive meaning and create an understanding of how individuals build a narrative around their leader identity.

Research context and sample

Informants

Through using the ReferenceUSA database, we contacted top-level men and women managers (defined as individuals who hold the equivalent of Vice President level and above positions) from organizations in the Midwest of the USA (with job titles such as Chief Executive Officer (CEO), General Manager, Vice President (VP) of Human Resources, and Senior Executive VP of Marketing Communications). Recruitment continued until we had interviewed a roughly equivalent gender-balanced sample of men and women (60 men and 64 women). Although our recruitment was based on managerial positions (and we acknowledge that the literature has made

clear distinctions between managers and leaders; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Mintzberg, 2004), those in top-level managerial positions are frequently expected to exercise leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). Consequently, we expected that many of these managers may define themselves as leaders, but we narrowed our sample to only those who self-identified as leaders, through asking if they saw themselves as leaders and how often. This resulted in a final sample of 46 men and 46 women from comparable industries and functional areas. Please see Table 1 for informant background information.

Table 1. Informant background information

Personal background	Men (*N*=46)	Women (*N*=46)	Organizational background	Men (*N*=45)	Women (*N*=46)
Age	*(%)*	*(%)*	*Type of organization*	*(%)*	*(%)*
30–39	6.5	6.5	For Profit	64.4	84.8
40–49	26.1	26.1	Non-Profit	31.1	13.0
50–59	54.3	56.5	Educational	2.2	0
60 and above	13.0	8.7	Governmental	2.2	2.2
Not disclosed	0	2.2			
Ethnicity			*Industry*		
Caucasian	91.3	87.0	Services	42.2	39.1
Asian	4.3	6.5	Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate	24.4	30.4
African American	2.2	2.2	Manufacturing	22.2	21.7
Latino	2.2	2.2	Retail Trade	4.4	4.3
Mixed race	0	2.2	Wholesale Trade	4.4	2.2
			Public Administration	2.2	2.2
Functional area	*(%)*	*(%)*	*Size*	*(%)*	*(%)*
General Management	32.6	28.3	50–199	6.7	2.2
CEO	15.2	8.7	200–999	26.7	19.6
Sales and Marketing	15.2	13.0	1000–4999	24.4	15.2
Information Technology	10.9	4.3	5000–9999	8.9	6.5
Accounting and Finance	10.9	10.9	10,000 and above	33.3	56.5
Human Resources	4.3	6.5			
Operations	2.2	4.3			
Strategy	2.2	6.5			
Partner	2.2	8.7			
Legal	2.2	0			
R&D	2.2	6.5			
Legislator	0	2.2			

R&D: research and development.

Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews either in person or by phone in which we asked for stories about when and how the informants believed that they had become leaders (origin stories), their definitions of leadership, how they saw themselves as leaders, and how they exercised their leadership at the present time (see Appendix A for the interview protocol). Lasting for 56 minutes on average, with informed consent, the interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. Importantly, as the meaning of leadership is ambiguous (Bass and Bass, 2008; DeRue and Ashford, 2010) and varies from person to person (Hammond et al., 2017), during the interviews, we were careful not to define "leader" or "leadership" for the informants, so as to allow for their subjective understanding of who a leader is and what a leader

does. In presenting our findings, we have omitted organizational names and replaced all individual names with pseudonyms.

Data analysis

To analyze our data, we followed grounded theory guidelines (Glaser and Strauss, 2009), and specifically the Gioia method, wherein theory is built through several evolving and iterative stages (Gioia, 1998; Gioia et al., 2013) that we will describe below. Throughout the entire process – from coding to theorizing – we memoed our reflections and insights, and shared them during weekly meetings over several months, where we discussed emerging codes and compared notes on specific transcripts. When discrepancies between the authors arose, the relevant narratives were re-read and discussed until an agreement on the interpretation was reached. Importantly, these stages did not happen mutually exclusively nor linearly (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For example, we started by exploring our data regarding leader origin stories, which subsequently triggered questions and coding around leader identity enactment. As gender differences emerged, this again triggered new questions, for which we would again return to the data. See Figure 1 for our resulting data structure.

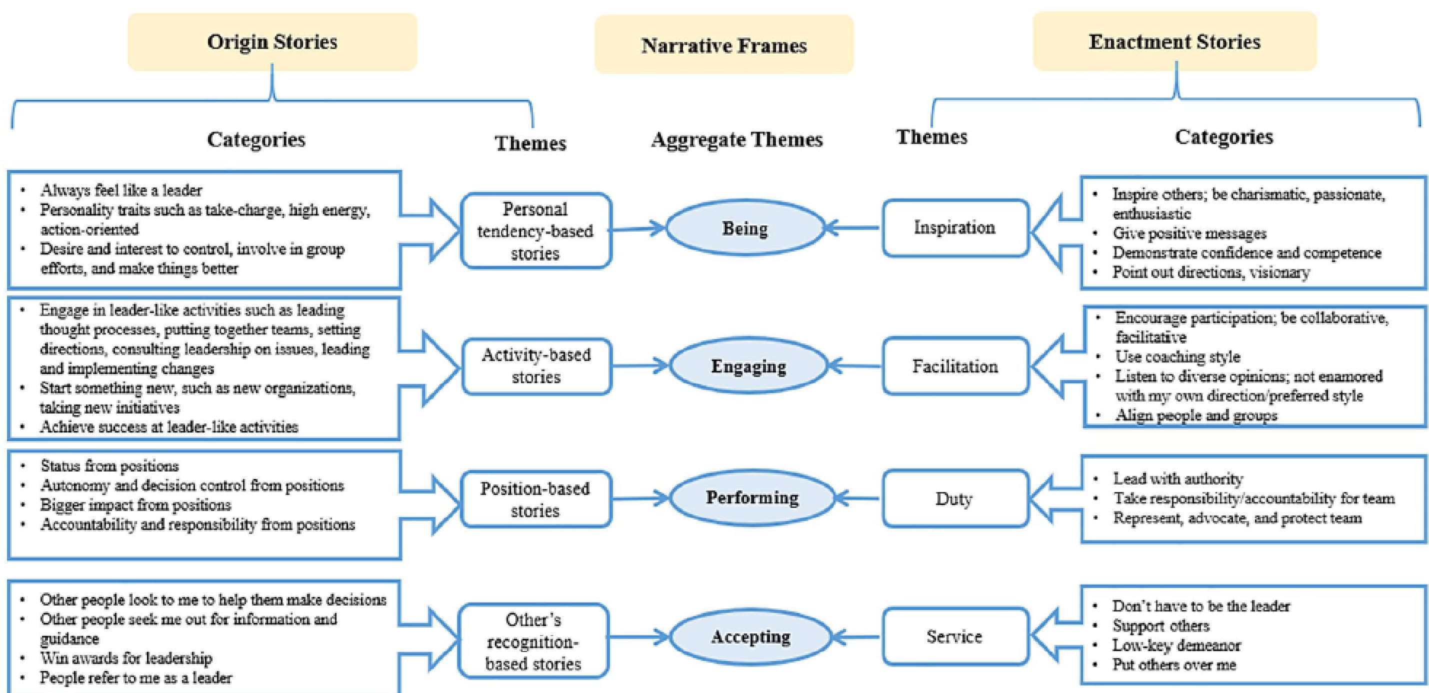

Figure 1. Data structure for origin and enactment stories.

Stage 1: Open coding

In this stage of the analysis, we independently read through batches of transcripts to generate open codes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Gioia, 1998). Initially, all narratives related to the informants' thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of leadership were openly coded, to have an overall understanding of their leadership narratives, and then we specifically focused on coding informants' narratives regarding how and when they first became leaders. For example, open

codes in our data included statements of becoming a leader by "volunteering to try different things" and "people coming to me for answers".

Stage 2: Axial coding

In this stage, we created second-order categories by consolidating our vast amount of first-order codes into more abstracted categories and themes (Gioia, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). From this process, four broad themes emerged from the data. For example, we aggregated codes and categories of narratives related to "having accountability and responsibility" and "having autonomy and decision control" from positions under the theme of "position-based origin stories", because all were explicitly mentioned as identity-defining moments that emanated from the attributes of *positions*. After the four themes emerged, we also revisited each of the transcripts to identify how many of the different themes each informant mentioned. In doing this, we found that although the frames were not always mutually exclusive and an informant might use multiple frames, they tended to consistently rely on one dominant frame in telling their stories. We therefore coded the dominant theme for each informant, while also noting other supplementary themes they may have used.

As we abstracted categories and patterns in the origin stories, we started to explore their implications for the informants' current leadership, which led us to focus on informants' enactment stories (how they described actually carrying out their leader roles). We reviewed prior open codes and quotations of the informants' stories related to their current leadership characteristics and behaviors, and consolidated relevant open codes into categories. This process resulted in distinct enactment themes. For example, we found the common theme of facilitative enactment (including categories such as being collaborative, facilitative, listening, and staying open to others' opinions), among the informants in the activity-based origin theme, which was not a common theme among individuals in other themes.

Stage 3: Selective coding

Looking at the origin and enactment stories side-by-side, we noticed narrative similarities between origin themes and enactment themes. This inspired us to abstract the aggregate themes that connected them. For example, we theorized that the common narrative frame of *being* underlies both the origin stories and enactment stories that focused on expressing and portraying personal attributes. During this process we also consulted theory and prior work on narrative identity work, to understand the theoretical foundations and implications of our emerging framework. We finally abstracted four common narrative frames that underpinned our informants' origin and enactment stories.

While identifying these narrative frames, we also examined our data closely to identify any contextual and individual factors that may shape informants' frame usage. While we coded for and analyzed several possible factors (e.g. age, gender, job function, industry, type of organization, and size of organization), in the end, only gender emerged as an important factor. We therefore explored and documented gender differences with respect to the usage of the frames.

Findings

We present our findings in two parts. First, we introduce the four narrative frames that emerged, through which our informants narrated their "becoming a leader" (reflecting on their origins) and their "being a leader" (reflecting on their present) stories. Second, we highlight how men and women differ in the usage of the narrative frames.

Four narrative frames

We found that four narrative frames served as connection points between how leaders describe their leader origins and the enactment of their leadership. We label these frames: *being; engaging; performing*; and *accepting*. Table 2 provides examples of informants' origin and enactment stories within each of the four frames.

Table 2. Sample quotations of origin and enactment stories.

Sample quotations		
	Origin stories	**Enactment stories**
Being		
Bert (m)	I aspired to be a leader, young. It was just something I have an ambition to do. . . I was in the Boy Scouts. When I first started, I wanted to be the patrol leader, then I wanted to be the senior patrol leader of the entire troop; I wanted to get to Eagle Scout. When I was in college, I wanted to be a leader on the soccer team. . . When I got into business, I wanted to be the first to get to every new position.	I want them to feel "I am playing for the winning team". And my role in this team is really important for us to win and deliver that great client experience. And so I look for ways to help them see that and when you engage them that way and you inspire them through a vision. I think they do things above and beyond in a way that is satisfying with a lot of pride that they wouldn't do if you weren't able to have that inspiring vision and engage them.
Darrel (m)	I've been a leader since I was a child. So I've always enjoyed leading teams, leading people.	Being a leader is to help provide people with direction, to provide people with inspiration.
Engaging		
Nanette (f)	I don't think I necessarily thought, "Oh, I really want to be a leader." I never thought about it that way. It was more around seeing something that needed to get done. . . and saying I think if I'm involved, it will get done better in a way.	In the 21st century, you don't tell people what to do. You help people come to a consensus around with what the goal should be and then help people figure out what's their game plan for achieving that goal. And it's much more influence and persuasion and asking good questions. That's one whole piece of it [leadership].
Shannon (f)	Early on being a leader oftentimes means being able to rally the troops, get people to move to the same direction, sometimes be the facilitator or the arbitrator. . . Part of it [my becoming a leader] is leading the project team and part of it is being able to lead a client, managing multiple stakeholders. It's something that I realized it's a self-skill – it's not something you learn in business schools. That's where leadership becomes more prominent.	I sort of developed the habit of always on the spot brainstorming. . . I make it very clear when I talk about brainstorming, these are brainstorming, these are not directives. But I like people to be able to brainstorm back, push back. It's a peer to a peer like debate and dialog. . . To me, that's my way of adding value – is being able to challenge the team, fostering their environment with that kind of conversation.
Performing		
Randy (m)	I never really thought about [being a leader] until I worked for the agency in Chicago. I was actually running at that time 50 full-time people – all need me in 50 offices. And that's when it clicked in that, "wow,	You have to take charge, you have to protect your people. You hold them accountable but also then accept the responsibility in front of the corporate if a mistake happens.

	I have a big position and I'm responsible for a lot of people".	
Tracey (f)	I became a leader at a young age. It was my second job after graduate school and honestly, I was probably 27 years old. . . And I had HR responsibilities for an entire site on my own. I had true responsibility for that site. I had to make tough business decisions because the people there were just used to doing whatever they wanted.	Being a leader is taking accountability for the actions of your team. . . Can you look in the mirror and say, "This was the right decision to make"? Making those difficult decisions and then a huge part of leadership to me is making sure you're mentoring and developing your team so that they do have a future.
Accepting		
Denise (f)	The key experiences that led me to become a leader, are probably because people followed me. So as you gave ideas and shared advice and people sought you out for information, those kinds of things, whether they're informal or formal.	The first word [to describe my leadership] that comes to mind, of course, is servant leader. I'm here to help others. I'm supportive as a leader. I think you lead best by asking questions and teaching others to be self-aware. So, as a leader here, what are our options with this challenge? So, I'm going to walk you through the alternatives. . . From a leadership point, being supportive, letting you know that many of the answers and knowledge are within you, but I'm going to bring those out and I'm going to help you discover those and trust your instincts.
Tyler	It was never things that I search out myself or said that I wanted to be a leader. But I think it was classmates at that time that saw leadership qualities which meant treating others equally, treating others with respect and being able to make a good fair and strong decision. So I'd say when I look back on it, that I was recognized by others as a leader before I even knew what leadership was.	I think that being a leader means that you empower other people to lead and you allow them to lead at times and you recognize that in some situations people are better at leading than you are. . . I'm empowering others to do that leadership within our organization.

Being: Having personal attributes that inspire

One group of informants connected their leader origins to their current leader enactment through an overarching narrative frame of "being" – expressing and portraying their enduring personal attributes over time. The informants highlighted their "take-charge personality", their unique "way to approach things", "game-changing attitude", and their "gravitation toward leadership positions", as underpinning their leader identities. In their stories of becoming, they emphasized that these personal attributes could be traced to early life, and have repeatedly manifested themselves throughout their careers to the present day. For example, Paula (f) described her leader identity as emerging from her natural tendency to want to be in charge of the environment: "I just remembered growing up and always being somebody. I like to be in charge. I didn't like other people telling me what to do and so I just think part of it is natural."

Like Paula, other informants who used this frame often expressed the belief that they had "always been a leader", even before their professional life had commenced. For example, in his origin story, Blake (m) highlighted his innate need to find a better way of doing things:

> My first memory of organizing a group comes from daycare. . . I've always been driven by a desire to find the best or better way. I feel I have exceptional judgment, intelligence, and pattern recognition, and can do the world a great favor the more say I have in terms of how resources are deployed more effectively and creatively.

Interestingly, in their stories of enacting their leader identity (i.e. how they behave now as a leader), this group also ascribed their behaviors to their personal characteristics, in particular, their inspirational qualities. They narrated confidence, energy, and optimism in their leadership behaviors and commonly used descriptive adjectives such as: “inspirational”, “passionate”, “visionary”, “optimistic”, and “confident”. For example, Meredith (f) described herself as “a motivator and an innovator. . . I’m pretty naturally optimistic. . . I lead with confidence.” She went on to give an example of how she led with optimism during a difficult time:

> I had to lead the closing of a clinic. . . I could have walked through just all of the facts from a technical HR perspective. And instead, I really talked about the journey of who we are now and who we’re going to be in the future and try to paint a picture that while the change is difficult . . . I’m not choosing to look at it negatively and here’s why and put some realistic examples out there.

Their origin stories and enactment stories converge on the emphasis on persistent personal attributes, focusing on how leadership is a natural expression of who they are rather than what they do. For example, Lois (f) traced her leader origin to childhood:

> I’ve always just been one [a leader]. From being the captain on the girls’ basketball team or the girls’ tennis team. . . I saw it as being assertive and with a kind of a can-do attitude, nothing kind of stood in my way. . . I don’t even know how to answer: “how did you become a leader?”, I just instinctively am.

In the same narrative frame of “always being a leader”, she portrayed her assertive and can-do attitude by telling a story of her speech during the 2008 recession:

> I got my group of salespeople together and said, “This is where we’re at, but it doesn’t mean that’s where we’re going to be. And we’re going to win and we’re going to take market share and we’re going to steal our competitors’ biggest customers.”

With striking similarity, Devin (m) who narrated that he had “always felt of myself as a leader, whether it would be in the workplace or in other types of activities”, described his current leadership also based on his inspirational qualities: “The things that I really strive for are helping people see and embrace a broad strategic vision and then getting them to use that vision to allow them to do great things.”

Likely because this narrative frame attributes both leader origins and leader enactment to enduring personal characteristics, it seems to offer individuals a sense of stability and consistency in how they talked about their leadership across time (“always”) and across contexts (work and nonwork contexts). In fact, almost all of the informants in this group reported thinking of themselves constantly as leaders. In this narrative framing, they did not “become” leaders at the workplace – leadership was always part of them throughout their (remembered) life. Further, the emphasis on desirable, positively distinctive, and “exceptional” personal attributes in both the origin and enactment stories seems to suggest that these individuals believed they were destined to become “great” leaders, who can, as Blake suggested, “do the world a great favor”.

Engaging: Facilitating collective actions

The second narrative frame that emerged from our data is *engaging*. Individuals who used this frame emphasized their active engagement – with people and key activities – in both their leader origin stories and enactment stories. In their origin stories, these informants reported starting to consider themselves to be leaders when they engaged in *activities* they associated with leadership. For example, Elizabeth (f) recalled when she first began to feel like a leader by taking on actions:

> When I was a staff accountant and manager of financial planning or reporting, I didn't feel like I was a leader . . . And then in order to drive change, I became a leader of that. . . I started to feel like I'm actually leading in the situation. I'm leading the analysis, I'm leading the thought process, and I'm putting together teams, and I'm setting a direction, and I'm really calling people to action.

As this example illustrates, the leader identity in this frame is pinned on the active doing of leadership activities rather than one's possession of certain personal characteristics or formally defined positions.

In these informants' origin stories, leadership often emerged in ambiguous and undefined contexts, wherein the individual recounted agentically taking leader-like actions in order to help guide a collective. For example, Samantha (f) started to see herself as a leader when "it was clear that something was problematic and somebody needed to step in and advocate for a solution. And I'd step in and say, I think this is what we need to do." Similarly, Aaron (m) recalled his stepping up before he was even expected to do so: ". . . just feeling like if nobody is going to step up and take charge and something that I felt needed to get done or needed attention, then I would be the one to do it". Anchoring their leader origins around activities seemed to allow individuals to feel like leaders even when they did not believe they possessed prototypical leader traits. For example, Max (m) said:

> I was very shy very early on in my life. So it's not like I came out of the chute trying to be the natural-born leader. . . But I do like the idea of creating a vision, looking at what needs to get done, making something better than it is now.

In line with the focus on taking on activities to guide the collective in their origin stories, their enactment stories feature their facilitation-oriented behaviors, spotlighting how they worked to engage people and coordinate collective action in various situations. For example, Samantha (f) narrated the origin of her leadership as stepping in to advocate for a solution in an ambiguous situation, and talked about her current leadership enactment as:

> collaborative, trying to pull the right stakeholders together and ask them to work together. . . Here's our mission, how can we achieve it? And then stepping back and letting them do some work. It's OK to just call the meeting.

Like Samantha, the majority of the informants in this category explained that their leader identity was activated when they engaged in what they considered to be leadership activities, and described their current leader role enactment with terms such as "collaborative", "facilitative", and "participative". Kyle (m), for example, who narrated the origin of his leadership as tied to influencing people during projects, also talked about his current participative approach to leading:

> I start with sort of the core of leaders that are underneath me to discuss what the issue is and why we need to move forward and build consensus with them and then in many cases, they're the ones actually carrying out whatever the new thing is or issue is.

In this frame, informants often explicitly decoupled their notions of leadership from formal positions. For example, like Elizabeth above, Donna (f) suggests her leadership was "not job-dependent". Instead of placing focus only on their own teams (as we will next explore in the *performing* frame), those in this group favored what they described as a collaborative approach that focused on a larger collective. Donna (f) described her attempts to be "agnostic" in promoting the good of the overall organization rather than of her own reports. Similarly, Sandra (f) gave an example of her facilitative approach when faced with two resentful groups, even though she was part of one group:

> I felt like I was playing this kind of diplomatic role trying to get management to be cohesive. If you unite this group with the larger group around culture – several different steps were then taken to unite. . . A lot of discussions. . . So there wasn't me versus them. It was we're on this together. That was very important.

Their descriptions of the efforts to "step up", "take charge", and coordinate the larger collective may reflect a desire to demonstrate their courage and competence, by acting and calling others to action. Interestingly, in doing so, those using this frame seem to narrate themselves as somewhat "selfless" – suggesting they work to bring people together through consensus (facilitating instead of dictating) and striving toward collective interests. By highlighting their agentic, prosocial behaviors, this frame sets them apart from others, while making them necessary for successful group functioning, strengthening their claims to leadership.

Performing: Carrying out positional duties

The third group of informants described origins stemming from formally conferred positions or roles and the sense of duty that accompanied them. In their origin stories, they recalled feeling like leaders when they were given positions that they themselves regarded as leadership positions in their early to mid-careers. For example, Andrea (f) explained:

> When I was a senior manager, the firm asked me to lead a professional women's network. . . I felt like in that role, in that context, I was a leader and had a platform and a voice that I didn't have before. That was because I was named the leader of a professional women's network.

As this excerpt demonstrates, it was only when Andrea received a recognized formal leader position that she began to see herself as a leader. Individuals using this frame referred to a wide variety of positions in which they started to feel like leaders, ranging from supervisors, group leaders, directors, regional managers, functional heads, to presidents. The common thread among them was a sense of duty and personal responsibility for a team, group, or organization. For instance, Mason (m) tied his leader identity to getting a position with more responsibility:

> When I was younger, like 22, I wouldn't necessarily have said I was a leader. I probably would have used the term of manager or something like that. And then probably about the time I was 35, I joined an organization with a much broader role and more direct impact on the organization such that I sort of felt responsible for the performance of the business as a whole.

The emphasis on formal roles and responsibilities that were central to this group's origin stories also anchored their narratives of how they currently enacted their leader identity. They viewed leadership as their "duty" as they often described themselves as having "responsibilities" and "accountabilities" for their teams. For example, Anthony (m), who recalled that he "began to feel like a leader when I had accountability for leading the functional area I was responsible for", showed a heightened sense of responsibility in his enactment story in another job:

> When I joined [company], the segment that I inherited was the most successful segment . . . yet was kind of lower on the totem pole in terms of investments. . . I went about advocating for our segment. . . basically across the organization, in all leadership meetings, and all management meetings, and reconstructed the image of our segment and the value that we bring. It really was important to the employees I inherited as they saw me saying: "This is somebody who's really representing us. He's advocating for us."

Similarly, Lynn (f) described her leadership as "carrying the company flag and mission on your face and actions every day. Leadership is a responsibility that I don't take lightly."

Highlighting their felt sense of duty and responsibility for their followers, these informants' narratives of their present leadership behaviors center around the idea of their "team" that they are expected to control, support, and guide. Anthony's narrative described his team as "inherited" as if it were his possession, and this exclusive focus on his team showed through further when he explained, "I view myself as an advocate, a cheerleader, a door breaker, a wall buster". In a similar way, Andrea (f) who traced her leader origin to a named leader role, described her role as making sure that:

> . . . my team has everything they need to be successful . . . I'm responsible for a team of 800 people and I got to make sure that they're doing the right thing for the firm, they're doing the right thing for each other, they're doing the right thing for our clients.

The performative element of this narrative frame was also made clear through increased mention of the role expectations and boundaries. For instance, Grant (m) explained: ". . . leadership isn't just doing the task – it's actually fulfilling a role that the institution wants you to". As this quote illustrates, this frame provides a vivid contrast to the *engaging* frame where self-initiated

activities themselves, rather than prescribed role responsibilities, were the enablers of the leader identity. This frame, which anchors the leader identity both in the past and present around formal roles, appears to support a relatively stable leader identity. For example, Lance (m), who felt like a leader when he "actually had people that were on the payroll under me, so I had a lot more responsibility for them", commented:

> I spend no less time on [thinking of myself as a leader] than a pilot of a 747. A pilot of a 747 has to think of themselves as the pilot 24/7 when they're up there in the sky. Because if they don't, then who's flying the plane?

Although this narrative frame is tightly bound to formal positions, which gives individuals access to positional power and control, informants' narratives instead focused on the responsibilities and duties inherent in these roles. They emphasized role obligations and duty to "their people", as Aric (m) put it, "I'm responsible for not only their day-in and day-out performance, but their dreams, their aspirations, their goals for the future." This potentially allows them to highlight their pro-social, almost moralistic efforts, and "selflessness" of taking on such responsibilities.

Accepting: Recognized by others to serve

A final group of informants used a less agentic, and more other-focused frame in their origin and enactment stories. They narrated their leader origins as discovering that they were seen *by others* as leaders and accepting and internalizing such an identity during early or mid-career. For example, Daniel (m) described his externally derived leader identity:

> I started feeling that way [as a leader] when people started referring to me as one. So it was more of an external thing than an internal thing. . . It was a label that was more tacked on to me externally. . . That actually feels good and I enjoy some of the attributes of leadership and maybe some of the recognition or just the implicit respect that you get as part of that.

Like Daniel, others in this group also explained that their leader identity was not actively sought, but instead bestowed on them by others, in the forms of others' seeking them out for advice, asking for direction, and even giving them leadership awards.

The narratives in this pattern highlight the emergent nature of one's leader origin, that was largely driven by other people's relationships with them, rather than tied to personal attributes, formal roles or responsibilities, or even specific behaviors. For example, Brent (m) narrated that feeling like a leader was not an intentional pursuit but occurred unexpectedly: "I think I became a leader by accident, by noticing that people were following. It certainly wasn't intentional . . . It's been something that's been more revealed to me that I am." Similarly, Savannah (f) commented that her leader identity was:

> Something that emerged and developed. . . It was more about all of a sudden being in situations where everyone's looking to you. They're looking to you to direct them, to help them make decisions, to tell them what to do, or figure out their career. . . So that's

> probably when you first start to see, okay, well that's what they want. . . So I guess I'd better go. I'd better give it a try.

The central focus on other people and taking on the role of helping, supporting, and guiding as demanded by others, is also embedded in the informants' enactment stories. Informants in this pattern focused on providing service to others, often from "behind the scenes". They maintained what they described as a "low-key" demeanor, used a "collegial", "non-confrontational" approach, that they "don't stand out", and play a "support role". For example, consistent with her origin story that emphasized being chosen as a leader by others because she could "help them", Leanne's (f) leader enactment emphasized being of help to others as well:

> I may be the CEO, but I'm going to be a team member and I'm going to dig in like anybody else. . . I'm more of a day-to-day kind of help out when needed and also ask others for help when needed.

Similarly, Gavin's (m) origin story centered around being needed by others and providing help to others: "Folks tend to look to me for guidance, for direction. . . I always try to help in the project or in problem solving." Such helping out is also embedded in his enactment narrative:

> Leadership to me, in a very simple form, is to make sure that everybody that I come across with, that I work with, (I am) able to help them out. . . I'm becoming a support role to them to help them so they can get to where they want to get to.

Interestingly, unlike other informants in our sample, the majority of the informants using this frame reported feeling like a leader infrequently, and even somewhat reluctantly. For example, Tyler (m) saw himself as a leader "only when I get in front of the board or when I get in front of our administrative team. . . which is probably only 10% of the time". This provides a strong contrast to the high salience of the leader identity for those using a *being* or *performing* frame. In this frame, other people play a central role in granting one's identity, and informants narrated themselves as accepting, rather than pursuing a leader role. Many of the stories told in this frame had self-sacrificial undertones, as informants described themselves as "supporting" and "helping" others. For example, Christina (f) explained: "I'm of the servant leadership philosophy. . . I do believe that if you put the needs of others before yourself, you are more effective." By putting others' needs in the forefront (rather than their own needs), those in this frame also potentially inject a sense of selflessness into their narrative.

Gender differences

Our analyses suggested notable gender similarities and differences in the use of the four frames. Overall, the four frames were well represented in both men's and women's narratives, and the same number of men and women adopted the *being* frame (11 men and 11 women) and the *accepting* frame (six men and six women). However, there seemed to be key gender differences in the other two frames: *engaging* was a more prominent frame in women's narratives than men's (24 women versus 11 men), and *performing* was a more prominent frame in men's narratives than women's (18 men versus five women). Women's narratives relied

heavily on engaging in activities rather than getting positions. For example, Lauren (f) narrated her becoming a leader by voluntarily taking on activities:

> . . . you can do a lot if you raise your hand. I was willing to try different things or volunteer for things that weren't specifically in my job responsibility. . . I'm not sure if I ever had an aha moment [that I'm a leader]. . . but it's always like being able to help get people to work together.

Taking on activities not in one's job responsibility, and feeling like a leader by continually helping people work together, are echoed in Elizabeth's (f) narrative of volunteering for tasks that led her to see herself as a leader:

> I would just volunteer to take on the troubled project or the new piece of business and transition it into the portfolio. And out of that, I think I just became known as a willing leader, not fearful of taking on the unknown, and so just step by step emerged into a role that became one of leadership.

Leslie (f) articulated the reason for taking such a route: ". . . finding the work you are interested in and engaging in it is much more natural than to step up and start taking on a leadership role".

In contrast, more men used the *performing* frame, relying on prescribed organizational criteria to guide their internal sense of being a leader. For example, Charlie (m) pinpointed his promotion to Chief Financial Officer (CFO) that made him feel like a leader:

> You feel like a leader when you're able to make decisions and influence the organization without having to work through someone else. . . When you're leading the department . . . you can influence things directly and not have to necessarily run them through an intermediary that may not see the same vision as you do.

These gender differences may be attributable to how gender creates different contexts for men and women, in which directly claiming a leader role may be more acceptable for men than women. Supporting this idea, in our data, women but not men recalled early experiences when their taking charge was challenged or refuted by others. For example, Cynthia (f) shared: "I remember getting in trouble, probably in first grade, when we started reading because I would always want to read to the other kids like I was the teacher. And it came across as 'she just talked too much'." Lois (f) shared similar negative feedback she received of "being called bossy when I was little, which really made me mad to be called bossy". No male leaders recalled such negative feedback on their seeking or taking up a leader role.

In their narratives, men tended to recount a more direct route to leadership, often pointing out how they were granted leader roles. Several men attributed this automatic granting to their stature. For example, Marvin (m) commented:

> I'm pretty tall and there's oftentimes where I'm just given a leadership role just because, "Okay, Marvin, you're the big guy. You're going to take on that role. People will listen to you." Obviously that was much more prevalent when I was growing up. But it's

> interesting how society kind of looks at that like: "Here's this big guy. He must be a leader." They kind of almost give me that title without knowing too much about me.

These gender differences in men's and women's narratives of their leadership and related experience point to the gendered nature of leader identity work, which are ripe for future research and we elaborate on this in the Discussion.

Discussion

All leaders have their own individualized journeys into leadership. Yet, the accounts of 92 leaders reveal that, despite the uniqueness of their experiences, leaders' recounted origin and enactment stories are connected through four narrative frames, which depict different sets of leadership meanings: *being; engaging; performing*; and *accepting*. Drawing on these findings, we theorize that individuals conduct temporal identity work by using these frames to articulate and give sense to their leadership over subjective time, explaining both how they became and who they are as leaders. Specifically, we provide insight below into the temporal identity work that individuals engage in in order to create temporal coherence, to make sense of and legitimize their leadership, and to maintain behavioral scripts over time. We then unpack our findings related to gender, and discuss our limitations and ideas for future research.

Our findings and theorizing contribute to theory in several ways. First, we contribute to our understanding of leader identity work by shedding light on how individuals draw on their origin stories and dominant discourses to justify their occupation of the ambiguous yet coveted leader role. This expands our thinking on what kind of identity work individuals engage in to support a leader identity. Second, the multiple themes surrounding how people make sense of and give meaning to their leadership suggest how narrative frames can both enable and constrain their behavioral scripts over time, which expands the conversation on how leader identity may be connected to intended leadership behaviors. Third, our findings and subsequent theorizing about how and why men and women differently use these narrative frames provide a novel perspective on how leader identity work is carried out differently by men and women. This has implications for what identity templates are more readily available to men and women, as well as for the stability of their identities. Below we start with theorizing about leaders' temporal identity work.

Narrative frames and leaders' temporal identity work

The narrative frames that we unearth in this study suggest that leaders engage in temporal identity work, which we define as individuals' construction and use of the past to justify, guide, and support their current identities. In particular, through narrative frames (*being, engaging, performing*, and *accepting*), leaders connect their origin stories to their current leader identity and its expression. In this way, our narrative frames reflect an underlying cognition that supports individuals to create coherence between "who I was" and "who I am" over subjective time. This temporal coherence can be interpreted in two ways. One interpretation is that leaders' origins are formative in shaping their present-day identity and behavioral scripts. Early internalized leader experiences influence later leader cognitions and behavioral intentions, through, for example, imprinting on the leader particular role attributes, actions, and characteristics. This interpretation

of our data suggests that leaders' behavioral scripts may be constrained and directed by the origin stories they hold on to over time.

However, origin stories may not reflect an objective reality – individuals have the reflexive capacity to modify past narratives when working on their current identities (LaPointe, 2010). That is, current self-views can influence how and what someone remembers from the past (Wilson and Ross, 2003). This interpretation suggests that as leaders' behaviors and motives evolve in the present, they can consequently update their understandings of themselves and may then revise their "remembered" leader origin stories accordingly. Bringing these two viewpoints together, we depict a leader's cyclical and ever-evolving temporal identity work, in which origin stories may constrain and direct current enactment stories, while paradoxically being recrafted and re-told as current identity motives and behaviors change over time.

Although previous literature has documented that individuals strive to create coherence in their identities (Ashforth et al., 2018; Brown, 2015; Vignoles, 2011), especially in times of transition where the past seems disconnected from the present (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), we further this understanding by unearthing a narrative device that supports leaders to create temporal coherence, which both enables and bounds leader identities in the present. We present a visual depiction of our theorizing in Figure 2.

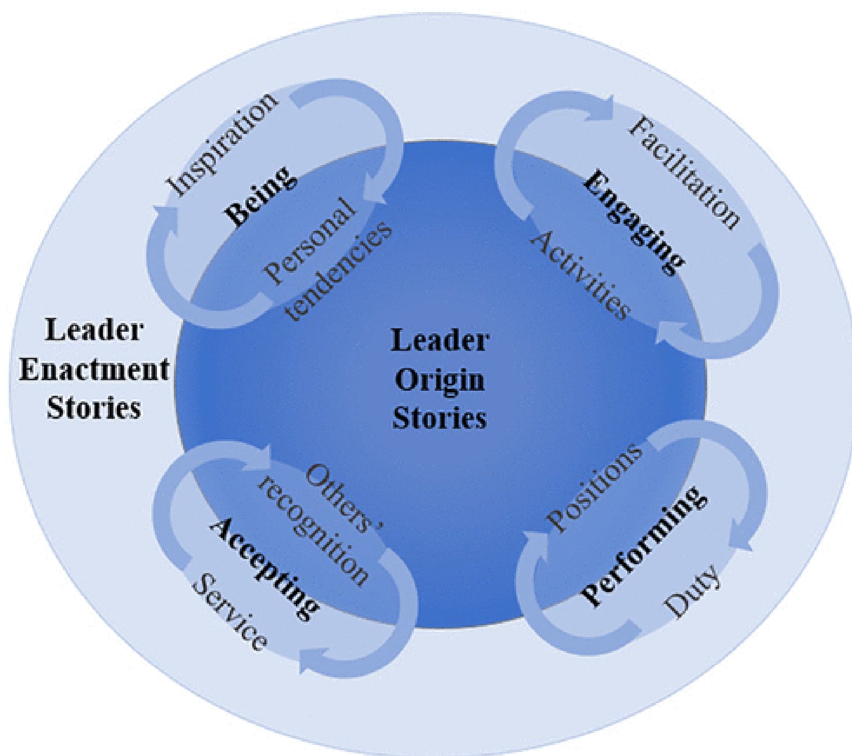

Figure 2. Narrative frames and leader identity work.

Legitimizing leader role occupancy

We suggest that the temporal identity work individuals engage in supports them to justify their occupation of this high-status yet inherently ambiguous role (Alvesson and Sveningsson,

2003b; DeRue and Ashford, 2010), by offering them clarity of the “meaning” of leader and leadership, and by helping them position themselves as “worthy” of this role. First, our study provides insight into the ways in which individuals may make sense of and situate themselves over time in this ill-defined role. Specifically, in their stories of becoming and being leaders, we can identify the underlying meanings and distinct sets of key features they ascribe to leadership, highlighting who a leader is and what a leader does. Specifically, the *being* frame suggests that leaders have natural in-born tendencies, and leadership is the use of these tendencies to inspire others; the *engaging* frame suggests that leaders are those who initiate activities to engage others; the *performing* frame connects leadership to a particular position in a hierarchy and the carrying out of its prescribed duties and responsibilities; and the *accepting* frame suggests leaders are chosen by others and leadership is accomplished by providing service to others. As such, they offer clarity and personally meaningful definitions to the leader role. Based upon such definitions, individuals make sense of events and activities from their past and current experience as constitutive of leadership. In this way, they may be authoring their own paths to leadership and legitimizing themselves in the leader role at the present time.

Second, despite the idiosyncratic stories of 92 individuals, the underlying meanings they attach to leadership through the narrative frames converge into only four patterns, which suggests the potential influence of dominant social discourses to make themselves “worthy” – to justify their occupation of this high-status role. Literature shows that when making sense of leadership, individuals frequently draw from socially endorsed discourses, which may involve both the traditional, “heroic” leadership discourses (Kniffin et al., 2019; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006), and the contemporary, post-heroic discourses of leadership that focus on interdependencies and collaboration (Pearce and Sims, 2000; Senge and Kaeufer, 2001). Through a closer look at the informants’ narratives, we can see evidence of informants drawing on these social discourses to position themselves in a positive and “worthy” way – as being of higher personal quality or being prosocial people, which provides justification for them being leaders. Specifically, in the *being* frame, individuals tend to position themselves as those who uniquely create “inspirational” and “visionary” changes, consistent with the dominant “heroic” leadership discourse (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). Although the *engaging* frame positions the leader as an equal, a facilitator, or a collaborator, individuals using this frame also emphasize how they step up to take on unassigned challenging activities (when others did not), spotlighting their courage and competence. While the *performing* frame may suggest a managerially oriented discourse (of control and coordination due to position), those using this frame direct their attention to the duties and responsibilities bestowed on them, elevating them in relation to their teams, as reflected in their accrediting themselves for providing livelihood to others. Finally, the *accepting* frame seems a reversal of the agentic “heroic” leadership ideology, by taking oneself out of the center to the periphery. However, by highlighting how they support the needs of others above their own, this may, for example, allow them to portray themselves as being prosocial people for having “sacrificed” their own needs for others. Building on past work that highlights that people are motivated to construct a positive, authentic, and distinct sense of self when at work (Ashforth et al., 2018; Dutton et al., 2010), our findings help shed light on the ways in which individuals engage with dominant leadership discourses to develop this sense of positive distinctiveness in their leader identity, which also supports the legitimization of their occupancy of a leader role.

Existing research has emphasized the socially constructed nature of leader identity work, such as claiming and granting (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), or the trying on of possible selves (Ibarra, 1999). Our study furthers our current understanding of leader identity work by theorizing about a narrative device linking the past and the present that not only helps individuals reduce ambiguity, but also supports them to claim worthiness to lead. This expands our thinking on what kind of identity work individuals engage in to support a positive leader identity.

Providing behavioral scripts

Cognition (who I think am) and behavior (what I do) can be connected by rhetorical devices (such as our narrative frames) which support individuals to justify their tasks and behaviors in organizations (Anteby et al., 2016; Fine, 1996). The coherence we find between an individual's origin stories and enactment stories through a dominant rhetoric (narrative frame) also suggests the link between cognition and behavior. The existence of the four narrative frames speaks to the different sets of meanings people attach to being and acting as a leader, enriching our understanding of the various definitions that people have of leadership. Consequently, we theorize that the different meaning systems embedded in individuals' narrative frames may be associated with different behavioral scripts (expected or desired behaviors). This is because one's leader identity influences how one cognitively processes socially relevant information and then intends to exercise particular leadership behaviors (Sun, 2013). The narrative frames individuals use may provide differential resources (such as beliefs, values, and motivations) that could lock them into certain behavioral scripts. For example, the *being* pattern may privilege the expectation of inspirational leadership behaviors (focusing on stimulating enthusiasm, building confidence, and inspiring others through using symbolic actions and persuasive language; Bono and Judge, 2004). The *engaging* frame may make way for facilitative leadership behaviors that focus on getting multiple parties to work together (VanVactor, 2012). The *performing* pattern emphasizes the control and protection of one's team of followers, and might direct attention to paternalistic leadership behaviors that involve the authoritarian assertion of authority and control, and the benevolent consideration given to individuals (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008).
The *accepting* pattern might point individuals toward servant leadership tendencies (Sendjaya et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Although our findings only capture individuals' behavioral scripts (not *actual* leader behaviors), they can suggest new ways of thinking about the possible leader identity–behavior link. Existing literature, especially functionalist-oriented literature, examining the leader identity–behavior link, has tended to focus on particular levels of identity (e.g. individual, relational, or collective) and relative strength of identification (from weak to strong identification) (e.g. Day and Harrison, 2007; Johnson et al., 2012; Rus et al., 2010), rather than the contents of the leader identity. This oversight leads to a missed opportunity to better explain the link between leader identity and behavior – through looking at different contents of this identity, we can better understand how distinct behavioral scripts may be activated that can influence behavior. Our findings add novel insights into the potential connection between leaders' internal identity templates and their external expressions.

The gendered nature of leader identity work

Our findings suggest that some of the narrative frames are disproportionately used by one gender or the other, suggesting that this form of leader identity work may be gendered. Men – more often than women – use the *performing* frame to align their origin stories and enactment stories, whereas women more often use the *engaging* frame. Prior research has documented that leadership is a gendered undertaking (e.g. Johnson et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2010), because the social system of gender is often evoked to influence the expectations, evaluations, and behaviors of leaders (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Our findings expand our understanding of the powerful influence of the gender system by demonstrating how it shapes the meanings and associations individuals create around their leader identity.

Men's larger reliance on the *performing* frame may be due to their easier access to leadership positions in organizations. As they have disproportionately held such positions, the congruence of the male gender role with the leader role (Johnson et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2011) may make it easier for them to be seen as leaders and receive leadership positions (Heilman et al., 1995; Scott and Brown, 2006). As a result, men are more likely to associate leadership with formal positions, which is central to the *performing* frame. Women, on the other hand, whose gender role is largely seen as incongruent with the leader role (Johnson et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2011), have less access to leadership positions, and often have to prove themselves via their actions to overcome perceptions of incongruence (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Zheng et al., 2018). Therefore, this may lead them to focus on *actions* in both their origin stories and enactment stories to justify their leader role, which is central to the *engaging* frame. Further, women may have (consciously or unconsciously) relied more on the *engaging* frame because it is more closely aligned with participative leadership behaviors, that are seen as gender compatible (Eagly and Johnson, 1990). This allows them to draw on evidence, histories, and memories of their "facilitative acts" to help them identify as leaders.

The implications of our theorized gendered leader identity work may be that, due to different access to leadership, men receive more grants (through positions) and women make more claims (through actions) to make up for their lack of access, adding a gender lens to DeRue and Ashford's (2010) claiming and granting framework. That is, the dynamic processes of claiming and granting may unfold differently in men's and women's subjective experience, with women's identity work involving more claims while men's more grants. This insight offers a novel perspective on gendered identity work in which women play a more, rather than less, active part in supporting their leader identity, which might be contrary to stereotyped expectations that men assert claims and women wait for grants. Further, due to the different frames men and women use, women's leader identity may be more ephemeral than men's. Specifically, men's identity built on grants of formal positions (in the *performing* frame), that are woven into the formal organizational hierarchy, can lend a more stable basis to their leader identity. In contrast, women's claiming of leadership based on activities (in the *engaging* frame) provides a more temporary basis for their identity, which may make their leader identity more volatile and ephemeral. Relying on the *engaging* frame may thus place extra burden on women when in a leader role, in that they may be prone to keeping taking up what they think are leader-like activities to sustain their leader identity. Taken together, the potential mental load of these added identity demands (more active claims based on activities) may help to explain why there are disproportionate levels of burnout, derailment, and dropout for women from leadership positions (Carli and Eagly, 2016; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016). In sum, the different usage of frames offers

a novel perspective on the leaky pipeline issue and further reveals challenges women face in their leadership journey.

Directions for future research

Our study offers several interesting directions for future research. First, from a temporal identity work perspective, our findings highlight the role one's origin stories play in anchoring one's enactment of this role. The origin stories set up the context within which one gives meaning to and builds boundaries around a role, which in turn provides a coherent grounding that enables one to act in this role at the present time as a legitimate role occupant. A promising direction for future research is to examine the dynamic interplay between the origin stories one tells and their actual leadership behaviors, to detect consistencies, inconsistencies, and evolvement over time. Another direction is to explore how the intentional shaping of one's origin stories, such as through structured writing activities (with cues to focus on different experiences and memories), may influence people's cognitive or behavioral tendencies toward leadership.

Building on this, although more than half of our informants only used a single narrative frame, the others used supplementary, or secondary frames, as part of their narratives. We found that *engaging* and *accepting* are the two dominant frames that are more likely to be supplemented with secondary frames, whereas the *being* and *performing* frames were less likely to be supplemented. This finding may speak to the strength of the *being* and *performing* frames that ground a leader identity on more stable foundations (i.e. innate abilities of the person and the organizationally instituted positions), and less strong support provided by the *engaging* and *accepting* frames in which the leader identity is more contextually and relationally built (i.e. on specific activities and other people's reactions to them). A helpful direction for future research is to explore the effect of using plural narrative frames on one's identity outcomes.

In the context of leadership research, existent in the current literature are separate streams of research studying implicit leader theories (what people believe make ideal leaders, e.g. Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Epitropaki et al., 2013), identity levels (how people define themselves as leaders, Lord and Hall, 2001), and motivation to lead (why people want to take a leader role, Chan and Drasgow, 2001). In practice, all of them influence one's understanding and enactment of leadership. Our findings of the four frames suggest that there may be ways we can study these separate constructs in an integrative way. Specifically, the four frames we identify each can be viewed as a leader identity template that offers an aggregate map of people's cognitive and motivational patterns. For example, the *being* frame may involve an individual-level identity (emphasizing one's uniqueness and differentiation from others, Lord and Hall, 2005), the implicit leadership theories of charisma (Offermann et al., 1994), and the affective motivation to lead (characterized by enjoying opportunities to lead, a tendency to take charge, and viewing oneself as having intrinsic leadership qualities, Chan and Drasgow, 2001). In contrast, the *accepting* frame may involve a relational level identity (emphasizing one's relationships with others, Lord and Hall, 2005), the implicit leadership theories of sensitivity (Offermann et al., 1994), and the non-calculative motivation to lead (overlooking personal costs associated with leading, Chan and Drasgow, 2001). Studying how each frame may be connected

to the cognitive and motivational forces can help us better form a picture of how these constructs may be related and interplay with the narratives people use to tell their stories.

Finally, with respect to gender, our findings on the gendered usage of the four frames open up a fertile new ground for future research to explore identity development for men and women leaders, such as the source of their identity, the timing of identity development, and how these might influence leadership behaviors. Some provocative questions future research might ask include: does the usage of different frames relate to different identity stability of men and women? How would key developmental events be similarly or differently encoded and made sense of by men and women? Under what conditions do women rely more – or less – on activities to become leaders?

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus and approach, which nevertheless can provide routes for future research. First, because we focused on how experienced leaders narratively construct and maintain their leader identity, the four frames and their impact may not generalize to the identity work of novice or emerging leaders. Future research could study the narrative identity work of less senior leaders to compare with our findings. Second, in this study, given our focus on the gendered context of leadership, we did not place a large focus on other reasons why people gravitate toward one frame versus another (e.g. a wider set of contextual influences). Future research could build on our findings to explore what contextual factors could shape the frames people use. Third, by eliciting origin stories from senior leaders, we may have captured narratives that have been tested and worked on for a longer period of time, than if we collected responses from more mid-career leaders. It would be interesting to explore how career stage or tenure affect leaders' narratives in future studies. Relatedly, whether and how much a leader had talked about their leadership stories before our interview might have influenced how much and what kind of narrative identity work was involved in their origin and enactment stories as captured by our interviews. Another direction for future research is to compare and contrast more rehearsed (frequently talked about before) and less rehearsed (less talked about before) leadership stories and their possible implications for identity. Fourth, our sample was limited to the same geographical area, the US Midwest. Although most of our participants work across geographical regions, on a national and international scale, future research could benefit from having a broader geographical and cultural sample.

Practical implications

Leader identity development is a key component of one's leadership development (Lord and Hall, 2005). Our findings suggest that a leader identity may be constructed using life events before, after, or separate from leadership positions. Therefore, organizations need to consider leadership development not just as preparing people for certain positions, but expand leadership development to include nurturing personal attributes, proactive tendencies, relationships, and social feedback that can be separate from positions. Further, organizations can create targeted learning materials to engage people in identity work through offering multiple frames, that may help enrich their templates of leadership and accelerate their leadership development.

Conclusion

People are implicitly interested in knowing their (and others') "origins". While the nature and impact of narrative origins has been an important topic of study in literature and mythology (e.g. Leander, 2008; Richardson, 2008) and research is emerging on how history is leveraged for identity work at the organizational level (e.g. Ravasi et al., 2019), there has not been a substantial amount of theorizing on how individuals engage with their origins to make sense of their professional roles. By zooming in on leaders' origin stories in this article, we have demonstrated how origin stories, and the temporal identity work that leaders do around these stories, help people make sense of who they are as leaders.

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Appendix A. Example questions from interview protocol.

Category	Example main questions	Example follow-up questions
Becoming a leader	1. Could you tell me how you have become a leader?	1a. Were there some key experiences that led you to become a leader?
	2. When did you start to feel like a leader?	2a. When was that? 2b. Why did that experience make you feel like a leader? 2c. What was different after that experience?
Leader identity and enactment	3. How often do you think of yourself as a leader in your work life?	3a. When do you think of yourself as a leader? 3b. What do you think of yourself as other times?
	4. How would you describe yourself as a leader?	4a. Could you share some examples of how these characteristics are demonstrated in your leadership?
	5. How is leadership demonstrated in your current work life?	
	6. Could you give me an example of a success you achieved that defines who you are as a leader?	6a. When did it happen? 6b. What does it say about you as a leader? 6c. What change did you experience after that?

	7. Could you give me an example of a challenge you overcame that defines who you are as a leader?	7a. When did it happen? 7b. What does it say about you as a leader? 7c. What change did you experience after that?
Background	8. What's your age range, tenure in the organization, tenure in current job, and number of people you directly and indirectly manage?	

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