

## **Leadership through the lens of Social Identity and its use in exploring School Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

*Schools are set up to achieve overall development of students. Leadership is needed to achieve the objectives. Leadership is a process of influencing followers towards accomplishment of goals but the act of influencing followers is not so easy, considering so many diversities, variations and other challenges which make it more difficult for a leader to lead. To be able to lead the group, he or she has to be effective. One can be effective if one is prototype. Being prototype means leader is seen as ‘one of us’ by the group followers. For this purpose he defines a shared identity, which involves construction and negotiation of identity. For studying identity and leadership in group scenario, Social identity approach is used, which provides various ways of analysing leadership in terms identities related to ethnicity, gender, race, religion, social class, status, etc. Social identity influences leadership is evident from researches, but how it influences educational leadership is less researched. In the end, the paper highlights the various gaps or to say the potential prospects for research in social identity and leadership domain which can be taken up to understand educational leadership from a different perspective.*

**Key Words:** Prototype, Identity, Social Identity, Leadership

Different theorists of leadership propose that leadership is “influence on others” (Yukl, 1998). As given in OECD’s volume on Improving School Leadership, “Yukl (2002) stated that most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation” (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008).

But this act of influencing is not as easy as it may sound because there may be various forces which may be impacting this act of influence, and this paper seeks to highlight them.

A leader is an important person in any organisation to influence his or her followers towards the achievement of organisational goals. School is not an exception. Principal is considered to be the leader of the school and he or she had to influence the teachers and students towards the goals of education. The question arises whether the process of influence is so easy, given so many factors such as diversity of ethnicity, languages, religion, values, beliefs, gender etc. playing a part between leader and follower.

Literature shows that Principal holds a vital position in the functioning of a school and these days their role and responsibilities are getting more and more complex (Rho, 2016). They have to make complicated and difficult decisions with severely limited resources and time under the conditions of today's changing ecology of schools. (Badams, 2012; Ginsberg & Multon, 2011; Lytle, 2012; Mendels, 2012; Rho, 2016). They are forced to make tough decisions about organisational and staffing priorities under high level of public scrutiny (Lortie, 2009). Principal has to deal with teachers, staff and parents and interplay of all these leads to tricky nature of leading school. There is possibility of professional and personal toll leading to burnout, turnover and negative impact on quality of leadership and in turn leads to wastage of resources of the country. In order to avoid this, he or she has to be effective. Extensive literature is available which shows how Principal strives to be effective by taking various steps (Rho, 2016).

### **Leader is Effective if Prototype**

One of the ways to be effective is when a leader is being prototype, i.e. followers see him/her as “one of us” and also “doing it for us” which means elevating the shared interest of the group (Haslam et al., 2001; Haslam et al., 2011; Haslam & Platow, 2001). It is asserted and empirically proved that leaders are considered effective when they act in ways that serve group interest rather than their personal interest, meaning that they perform the role as being in-group (Duck & Fielding, 2003; Giessner, van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Sleebos, 2013; Haslam et al., 2001; Jetten, Duck, Terry, & O'Brien, 2002; Steffens et. al., 2014; van Dick, Hirst, Grojean, & Wieseke, 2007; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). Hence, by being prototype of the team or organisation, a leader is considered to be effective. Followers treat leader their role model only when leaders identify strongly with their teams or organizations (Van Dick, & Kerschreite, 2016).

Prototypicality can be shaped by time and spatial dimensions which make it diverge from point of maximal similarity because not only our present but also our past and future determine “who we are” and “what we mean” (Reicher & Hopkins, 2003).

Prototype is concerned with the concept of identity, which deals with the question of “Who I am?”. In order to meet the condition of prototypical for being effective, the leader has to do two things: i) firstly, he/she has to define the boundaries of the identity and ii) and secondly, he/she has to define the content of an identity. By defining the boundaries of identity, the leader conveys the follower who ‘we’ are and are not. This will help followers to feel part of same group (or not). Content of an identity can be defined by bringing about particular context or it can be defined by comparisons in present or past (Reicher et. al., 2005; Steffens et. al., 2014). Thus context is necessary for defining the content of identity.

Now, as we said above that for being effective, leader has to be prototype and for being prototype he or she has to define boundaries of identity and its content. So next question is what is identity and how is it affected?

### **Identity**

As per Meriamm-Webster dictionary, identity is “ ‘who someone is’, ‘the qualities, beliefs etc., that makes a particular person or group different from others’ ”.

The knowledge a person has about himself or herself in regard to various distinct concepts such as knowledge of – their competencies, values, attitudes and knowledge of likes, dislikes and aspiration constitutes the identity or self-concept. Identity or self-concept is ‘way in which individual perceives himself’. Individual tends to have clear self-conceptions on some dimensions. When they occupy extreme position on a dimension, as the dimension is of significance to them, their self-conception will be crystallized and clear (Markus, 1977). Self concept or identity affects our feelings, thinking, behaviour, and things we aim to achieve (Leary & Tangney, 2003).

Self is defined as personality or character, combination of thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. It is not one-dimensional. An overall self is comprised of number of categories, each category

represents a separate identity or self (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2003; Stets & Burke, 2003; van Knippenberg et. al., 2014). Each of separate identity or self is tied to social context, meaning that a person can have separate identity for different role relationships, personal and social position they hold in a context. Example – Self as a doctor is identity; self as employee of organisation X is identity, self as father is identity, self as principal is an identity (Steffens et. al., 2014).

Leadership is influenced by context. Researches on educational leadership can be conducted in social, cultural, historical and political contexts of school. These researches are important given the challenges posed by educational reforms and economic conditions which impact schools. (Crow & Scribner, 2014). Context of schooling impacts the formative experiences of the individual (Florio-Ruane, 2002; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). Thus, how an individual's experiences shape their understanding, assumptions, and expectations of how to operate in these contexts lies at the heart of his or her everyday thinking and action (i.e., one's practice) (Rho, 2016).

Investigating principal's identity in the school contexts can provide insights into complex nature of leading schools today, by focusing on how a person defines his or her identity to lead effectively. But before studying identity of school principal in school contexts, we need a framework for analysis. Let's first see how leadership has been analysed or explained and what are the various attempts made to study this phenomenon of leadership, as per the literature.

### **Leadership Researches**

Leadership theorists have tried to explain leadership from different dimensions. As Per Haslam (2004) Leadership researches have been divided into three phases. "The Great Man" theory is the first phase which sets leader apart from followers in terms of social and intellectual characteristics like imagination, good judgement, intelligence and insight. But due to lack of reliable evidence in terms of any trait that distinguishes a leader from non-leader or that predicts leadership effectiveness, this theory is less adhered to. (e.g., Jenkins, 1947; Mann, 1959; Nadler & Tushman, 1990; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Steiner, 1972; Stogdill, 1948). Although it's difficult to identify leaders by their characters, there is evidence to suggest that person's actions can help in identifying a leader.

As Fleishman et. al. suggest that leaders who are considerate and structure the activities of followers for achieving goals, are effective. (Fleishman, 1953; Fleishman & Peters, 1962, Bowers & Seashore, 1966; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005)

Second phase of leadership research began when researchers were not able to find the single factor or trait in the first phase. It was reasoned that leadership is a product which is contingent upon two factors namely, personal and situational (Gibb, 1958, Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005). Fiedler articulated the Specific model and Contingency approach under this school of thought (Fiedler, 1964; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005). But again, the proofs which may support this model were average and shaky (Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Schriesheim, Tepper & Tetrault, 1994).

Leadership was losing its vitality, it was then that Weber identified leadership as a process that is outside the realm of everyday routine. The Third phase of leadership began with rediscovering the concept of charismatic leadership given by Weber. Here the followers confer their leader with charisma. Lord's Leadership partly restored Weber's original insight through categorization theory which sees leadership as "the process of being perceived by others as a leader" (Lord & Maher, 1991, p. 11; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005).

So these were the three phases which analysed leadership with the help of leaders, situation and followers respectively.

When we focus on levels and process of leadership, we get a good idea of the simultaneously happening phenomenon at different levels of analysis, effecting leadership (Dinh et. al., 2014). Process of leadership involves multiple levels and can produce both top-down and bottom-up outcomes at higher and lower levels of analysis (Dinh, et. al., 2014; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2011; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). An example for top-down outcome can be a leader making ethical norms which guides moral behaviour of group, hence shaping organisational climate and cultures. (Dinh, et. al., 2014, Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Schaubroeck, Hannah, Lord, Trevino, Kozlowski, et al., 2012). In Bottom-up, for understanding the leader's influence on organisation and achieving leadership outcomes, the intrapersonal dynamics and influence of followers are considered.

(Dinh, et. Al., 2014; Dinh & Lord, 2012; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2002; Shamir, 2007). Researches in field of self-complexity and meta-cognitive processes show the way in which interpersonal complexity in due course of time is hyped owing to dynamics of intra-personal constructs, that enable individual to exhibit more behavioural adaptability in reply to contrasting situations (Dinh, et. al., 2014; Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009; Lord et al., 2011).

Theories were also evolved to know how cognitions, perceptions and emotions, termed as micro processes (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006; Dinh, et. al., 2014; Dinh & Lord, 2012; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000; Trichas & Schyns, 2011), and social-relational context, termed as macro processes (Chang & Johnson, 2010; Dinh, et. al., 2014; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), affect the outcome of followers and leader.

Leadership happens in a social context (Dinh, et. al., 2014). Leadership is not simply leaders and followers, but it is the relationship or connection between them in a group setting. (Haslam, 2001; Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003b; Sherif, 1962, p.17). A leader is referred to be associated with a group, which can be a corporation, a research group, a political party so on.

From the discussion until now, it has been clarified that leadership and identity, both needs a context. Leadership is social influence and identity influences behaviour. So in order to understand leadership in terms of identity, social identity approach to leadership is used.

### **The Social Identity Approach – Framework to Study Leadership and Leader’s Identity in A Group**

Apart from critical race theory, critical feminist theory and inter-sectionality, social identity is only one of many theories that have attempted to address questions of identity and leadership over last forty years (Cole, 2009; Weber, 2010). Emerging from the field of social psychological, Social Identity Theory received great attention in study of leadership over the last two decades (Rho, 2016).

Social Identity Theory states that individual carries multiple identities based on his/her membership in given social category. They provide answer as to who is based on defining features of the category. Social Identity influences people's action, achievement, behaviour, goals, interactions, norms, orientations, perception, relationships, thinking and values. (Haslam, 2014, p.4; McKee et al., 2008; Crow & Scribner, 2014). Use of social identity theory will help making processes visible which are not visible under surface of habitual behaviour (Vygotsky, 1978, p.12). The school leader's action, behaviour, beliefs, practices has been less researched through the lens of social identity. What is intended and what occurs is highly immediate, reflexive, and contingent on situation and also on interpretations, assumptions and decisions made by principals (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). The insight into their social identity will help in understanding the role and challenges they face in exercising leadership at the school because novel analysis of leadership in terms of all meaningful forms of group behaviour is made possible because of theoretical assertion provided by social identity. The social identity approach considers leadership as a multi-dimensional and recursive process (Steffens et. al., 2014). Leadership depends on leader's ability to portray, create, forward and fix a shared sense of social identity for group members (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Hogg, 2001; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; Steffens et al., 2014; Turner & Haslam, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Leaders are able to stimulate, motivate and harness transformative powers of their coordinated energies only when they develops and directs a shared sense of 'us' (Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Steffens, 2014; Reicher et al., 2005; Turner, 2005). Considered from this view, leadership is a process of social influence which affects the follower's want to contribute to shared goals. It can be understood as some sort of a thing which does not exist in a person, position, or a result (House, Javidan, & Dorfman, 2001).

### **Social Identity is Important to Study**

Social identity helps and impacts people. It helps in dealing with challenging transitions in life and it impacts individual's health when capacity for social identification is compromised (Haslam, 2014, p. 5). Many researchers suggest that social identity and issues related to social identity are important because they contribute to qualities of belongingness, authority, credibility, risk taking, sensitive to others and contributes to counterbalance the aspects they disapproves in regard to their ability to lead. Potential consequences of issues of identity and

leadership can be studied. Studying identity and leadership, in the school context, can contribute to the generation of school leader knowledge which can help in the improvement of future research, policy formulation, and knowledge of community practices.

Crow and Scribner (2014) argue that the practice of leadership and motivation is affected by dispositions, values and beliefs as researched by researchers in multiple international contexts. Identity as lived experience means that identity shapes and moulds the leader's role (Day and Leithwood, 2007 as cited in Crow & Scribner, 2014, p. 287). Thus studying identity will aim to deepen our understanding of how principals draw upon aspects of their identity to make sense of their expertise and manner in which such interpretations affect their understanding of leading the school and meeting challenges. (Rho, 2016). Jean Laun Chin (2013) argues that the concept of leadership should take into account lived experiences and social identities brought into the context of leadership by leaders and followers (Chin, 2013).

The Social Identity theory says that individuals assert and manage multiple identities relating to one's gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, profession, family status and geographic region. Haslam (2014) emphasises that theories of social identity and self-categorization help researchers in understanding of how social identities are defined, influence behaviour and interaction with others and are applicable to a broad range of relevant phenomena. Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi and Ethier (1995), in their studies on differences between social identities, found 64 different types of categories based on race, profession, family experience, etc. They found that social identities are multidimensional and heterogeneous. Members of the same social group may not share identical perspectives and make meaning of these in the same way. "Although identities may share some common properties, individuals may vary in the value or functional satisfaction that identities provide them" (Rho, 2016). These multiple social identities influence thinking and action, both overtly and subtly (Hogg et al., 1995). Issues of identity may influence and complicate the ways how leaders think and know themselves and others, hence it is important to consider identity. In leadership, since there are issues of power and politics, management of social identities is done. (Haslam, 2014).

Although a significant amount of research has been done over the last twenty years focusing on issues of social identity and leadership broadly (Haslam, 2014), little addresses educational leadership specifically (Haslam, 2014). Very little is known about how individuals understand



and perform their task as school principal and how lived experiences and identities of school leaders might influence the ways in which they lead schools.

The societies and organisation around the globe are becoming increasingly diverse. Women, racial minorities and ethnic minorities, person from diverse background are all joining the rank of leadership (Chin, 2013). All this makes it necessary to consider variations across gender, ethnicity, race etc. while studying leadership to examine complications of conduct attached with effective leadership (Chin & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). Since social identities influence behaviours in social and interpersonal domain, they probably affect the leader's behaviour and research is frequently silent on race/ethnicity influences the leadership behaviour (Chin, 2013). Asian Leaders and Native American Leaders, for example, are perceived to be less aggressive in their leadership behaviour and this role corresponds to their cultural values of harmony, cooperation and modesty, therefore their identity makes different leadership experience.

Kremer (2011) argues that display of emotions differs between women and men leaders with assumption that such emotional response in women occurs due to loss or lack of control that is rarely attributed to men under similar circumstances. He argues that women feel ashamed of public tears and strictly oppose this gender stereotype. Understanding of gender identity in this way can affect the expression of emotion and the sharing of sensitivity. This can lead to a sense of emotional distance, hence adversely impacting the building of relationships and rapport in social organizational context. Further, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) adds that in leadership, situation faced by women of colour is more complicated and worrisome as the ways in which they struggle with emotional self-management is influenced by race and ethnicity. (Suyemoto & Ballou, 2007 as cited in Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 173).

Hence we see that issues of identity, subjectivity may complicate the work that practitioners do, so it is necessary to acknowledge questions as to how they learn to deal with them. In the scenario of shrinking economic resources and high obligatory measures, the absence of choice severely affects the ability of leader to do more with less. Ball (2003) indicated that this can bring about change in our subjective existence (Rose, 1989, p. ix as cited in Ball, 2003, p. 217) severely effecting individual's social identity as an educator and as a leader. Hence it follows that complexity of the task environment in schools and districts can be capable of causing elevated rates of turnover and burnout of principals.

Of the sparse researches that exist on social identity and school leadership, most of them has considered on gender or racial/ethnic differences individually rather than taking them all together (Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, 2010). Hence, the question of social identity and leadership, specifically “intersectionality – [or] the manner in which multiple aspects of identity may combine in different ways to construct social reality” (p. 176; Weber, 2010), becomes significant in regards to future research of how principals perceive, understand, and thus approach solving the challenges before them (Jussim, 1991; Weick, 1995).

### **Gaps in Researches on Social Identity and Leadership & Scope of Further Research**

Although the nature of social identity approach is multi-faceted but previous researches furnished by this body of leadership tends to be slim in range. The theories and researches focused on importance of leader being seen as prototypical or representative of the groups which are lead by them (Rosch, 1978; Turner, 1985; van Knippenberg, 2011; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

There is more to explore in social identity and leadership, for example, the outcome of bringing together members and leaders with different social identities can be explored; then it can be found out how the levels of teamwork, problem solving, communication and trust are influenced by intersection of social identities among leader and members; another research can be what strategies can be formulated to validate social identities so as to make leadership effective ; another research can be on how the perceptions of leaders reflects their tendency to use their minority status or marginalized experience as a resource or advantage rather than disadvantage. Research could be conducted to find out factors which caused resilience to meet the negativity ; a study can be conducted to identify strategies which leaders can use in their leadership context which demands skills different to the ones prescribed by the culture values ; Coping mechanism associated with minority status, which diverse leader of colour may employ for their leadership can be studied; study can be conducted to find out whether minority status conferred being an outsider status can be overcome ; study can be done to find out whether negative consequences of stereotypic role expectation bound a diverse leader ; paradox between leadership roles and prescribed gender or ethnic roles can be examined like for example women have interpersonal and communication styles and are praised for excellent leadership skills while they are weak and not able to make choices when in

teamwork (Eagly, 2007), similarly when blacks are assertive they tends to show anger, Asians tends to be decent not proud, when being receptive or submissive, Latinos are overly expressing their emotions when they have active interest or excitement about something. - Study can be conducted to help these leaders to utilise the paradox as a personal resource in their leadership.

Leader can use their gender identity, racial/ethnic identity as a resource, but they pose challenges as to the authenticity. Study was conducted to find out whether one is genuine and honest to oneself as advocated by modern leadership theorist or they lose themselves negotiating over/through social contexts owing to dissimilar group associations, dominant-minority status and different group affiliation positions. (Walumbwa, F. et. al., 2008 ; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004). Presenting 'different selves' or ability to code switch can be viewed as apt, advantageous and fit to enable leader to be bring in new perspective or be more flexible, but it can be viewed with mistrust for being not authentic.

Individuals within diverse cultures are not alike. They differ in their personalities, ethnicities, beliefs, financial and legal status, in their education, religious beliefs and age etc., differences in psychological and emotional attributes regardless of backgrounds.

There are stereotypes about minority leaders: they can only lead minority followers; they lack confidence or skills that white leaders have; they are ignorant of their new culture and only do things the way they did in their own culture. Social identities and lived experience which are associated with minority status, perceived to have influence leadership. (Chin, 2013)

Hence by exploring leadership from social identity perspective, various dimensions, challenges, insights can be found out especially in the field of education leadership as Principals are coming from diverse backgrounds and are suppose to handle diversity in schools, in order to lead the school towards it objectives.

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