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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What kind of leader am I? An exploration of professionals' leader identity construal

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Abstract

Although the leadership literature has emphasized the importance of leader identity for leader behaviors and leader effectiveness, little is known about whether and how professionals, who are experts in their field and hold a formal leader role, construe a leader identity. To expand our understanding of leader identity construal, we explored how professors in German research universities interpreted their formal leader role and whether and how they saw themselves as leaders. Based on findings from an inductive interview study, we contribute to the literature in three ways: First, our findings imply that patterns of professional identity and leader identity dimensions likely predict when a leader role is *rejected*, *accommodated*, *incorporated*, or *emphasized*. Second, we explain why professionals with a formal leader role see themselves primarily as *specialists*, *mentors*, *managers*, or *shapers*. Third, we extend previous notions of the leader identity concept by elaborating on its dimensions. Our findings have practical implications on an individual and organizational level, and may help design more effective leadership development programs.

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KEYWORDS
identity construal, identity work, leader identity, leadership development, professional identity

INTRODUCTION

> I see myself as a leader and role model for my team. (Professional 6)
> I do not see myself as a leader—not at all. (Professional 12)
> I see myself as a mentor and not like the big boss. (Professional 16)

Professionals' focus lies on carrying out critical functions in organizations based on their unique knowledge and skills (Pratt et al., 2006); they are typically neither originally trained in leadership nor do they aspire to be a leader in the first place (Braun et al., 2016; Evans, 2017; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Kumar & Hsiao, 2007). Even when they hold formal leader roles, their professional identity—how they define themselves as a professional (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978)—is usually predominantly based on their expertise in a specific field (e.g. being an academic, an engineer, or a physician) rather than on their formal leader role (Ecklund et al., 2012; Henkel, 2005; Knorr-Cetina, 2009; McGivern et al., 2015; Muller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005; Spyridonidis et al., 2015). Moreover, individuals have varying interpretations of what it means to be a leader (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Clapp-Smith et al., 2019; DeRue et al., 2009; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Yet leader identity—the "sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader" (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365)—strongly shapes (positive and negative) leader behaviors and relates to leadership effectiveness (Day & Sin, 2011; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2012; Rus et al., 2010). Thus, knowledge on whether and how professionals—who perform specific, highly demanding, and complex tasks based on their expertise and also have a formal leader role—construe a leader identity, is needed.

Particularly professionals in research contexts, who often have only vague and even contradictory ideas about leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020), might have difficulties to see themselves as leaders. Such dis-identification with the leader role may increase the risk of ineffective leadership such as laissez faire leadership (Bass, 1985) or even destructive leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007). Similarly, the motivation to lead is crucial for leadership performance (Bergner et al., 2019). Hence, exploring professionals' identity work (Caza et al., 2018), as in whether and how they construe a leader identity is important to understand how—and also how effectively—they enact their formal leader role (Hogg et al., 1995). Our aim is to build theory and enhance knowledge on leader identity construal to help educate and support professionals who hold formal leader roles.

In this article, we examine whether and how professors in Germany, who have a strong domain-specific identity as experts in their respective discipline (Ecklund et al., 2012; Henkel, 2005) and hold a formal leader role as the head of a research group, construe a leader identity. This context should allow us to observe variations in how professors interpret their formal leader role because they are hardly constrained by organizational structures and have exceptionally high autonomy in whether and how they see themselves as leaders (Muller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005). We conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with professors at four comparable, research-intense German universities. Based on inductive methods, we uncovered differences

in professors' professional identity, in leader identity dimensions (i.e. strength, integration, level, and meaning, Hammond et al., 2017), and in their resulting primary identity in relation to their formal leader role. To interpret our findings, we draw on both role identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thereby, we are able to explain whether and how professionals construe a leader identity—questions which cannot sufficiently be answered by role identity theory nor social identity theory alone (DeRue et al., 2009).

This study contributes to the literature in three different ways. First, our findings imply that we need to consider both one's identity as a professional and the leader identity dimensions in order to explain variations in professionals' leader identity construal. We identified patterns of professional identity and leader identity dimensions that are likely to predict when professionals reject, accommodate, incorporate, or emphasize a formal leader role. That way, our research goes beyond previous frameworks describing either professional and occupational identity construction without considering a leader role (see Ibarra, 1999; Murphy & Kreiner, 2020; Pratt et al., 2006) or differences in leader identity dimensions without explaining how they occur (see Hammond et al., 2017).

Second, we extend recent previous research on leader identity work (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020), and respond to the call for more research on the intrapersonal process of leader identity construal (Epitropaki et al., 2017). We illuminate the heterogeneity of primary identities of individuals in the same profession, who hold a formal leader role. Specifically, our findings indicate that the identified patterns of professional identity and leader identity dimensions help explain why professionals primarily see themselves either as a *specialist*, a *mentor*, a *manager*, or a *shaper*.

Third, our research provides a more nuanced picture of the leader identity concept. We elaborate on and further specify Hammond et al.'s (2017) leader identity dimensions (strength, integration, level, meaning) by providing empirical evidence for their occurrence and by elucidating an important limitation of the level dimension. Concretely, our findings imply that we need to consider who leaders focus on in their leader role (in academia: on individuals, the research group, the scientific community, practitioners, or society).

Conclusively, the model that we develop in this research adds a novel perspective on identity-related aspects of leadership (see Figure 2).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PRECEDENTS

Leader identity and identity work

Recently, the leadership literature has emphasized the importance of leader identity in organizations (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Miscenko et al., 2017; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020). For instance, previous research shows that identifying with the leader role is a prerequisite for sustaining the motivation to lead and grasping opportunities to develop leadership skills (Lord & Hall, 2005). Furthermore, variations in leader identity have been shown to explain leadership behaviors. More specifically, leader identity relates to self- or group-serving behaviors (Rus et al., 2010), and a strong individual leader identity paired with a weak collective identity predicts abusive leadership (Johnson et al., 2012). Successfully adopting a leader identity is likely to serve as a predictor of leadership effectiveness (Day & Sin, 2011). Hence, it is important to understand differences in leader identity across individuals.

As an important step towards a better understanding of how leader identity varies across individuals, Hammond et al. (2017) proposed four dimensions of leader identity: strength, integration, level, and meaning. *Strength* refers to how much an individual identifies with being a leader (e.g. weak—moderate—strong). *Integration* explains how much the leader identity is integrated into an individual's global self-concept (e.g. splintered/domain-specific—integrated across some domains—fully integrated into global self-concept). *Level* indicates whether individuals identify with their own uniqueness (individual level), close relationships (relational level), or group membership (collective level). Lastly, *meaning* refers to an individual's understanding of leadership (e.g. leadership as dominance, interpersonal influence, or collaborative leadership). The subjective strength, integration, level, and meaning of leader identity builds the basis for whether and how individuals see themselves as a leader. Although these four dimensions (see Hammond et al., 2017) provide a conceptual explanation of variations in leader identity, we know little about how these variations occur in leader identity construal.

The construal of a leader identity is part of identity work (e.g. Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018; DeRue et al., 2009). Individuals engage in identity work when they construe their identity by "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Identity work can include both, identification and dis-identification. The process of identification is the process of establishing who one is, whereas the process of dis-identification refers to actively refusing to identify with a role. The latter process might occur as an attempt to maintain a sense of consistency in case certain roles do not correspond to one's beliefs, motives, or values (Ashforth, 2001). For instance, individuals might not be motivated or willing to take on a leader role if they believe that their own attributes do not match well with their personal image of a leader (Guillén et al., 2015).

Previous research on professionals' identity work within one domain (e.g. within a profession) showed that professionals engaged in identity work by experimenting with "provisional selves" while transitioning into senior roles (Ibarra, 1999). Situations where two different identities need combination or integration (see hybrid identities, McGivern et al., 2015) or when transitioning into a first-time leader role (Yip et al., 2020) triggered identity work as well as the transition into retirement (Bordia et al., 2020). However, differences in leader identity and how they relate to the professional identity (e.g. being an academic, being a doctor, and being an engineer) are not yet understood, and we lack studies that examine the intrapersonal leader identity construal process (Epitropaki et al., 2017).

Thus, the key interests of our study are to explore the variations in whether and how professionals with a formal leader role construe a leader identity and to understand why these variations occur. Although our research is inherently exploratory, we build on two key theories in identity research: role identity theory and social identity theory, which we will briefly introduce in the following.

Role identity theory and social identity theory

Previous research on identity has typically drawn on either role identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) or social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Whereas these theories have long been viewed as competing (Hogg et al., 1995), recent work calls for integration (Ashforth, 2001; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). The two theories share several assumptions: Both assume that individuals possess multiple identities, either based on their multiple roles or because of their group

memberships. A core theme in both streams is that identity shapes behavior when an identity becomes salient. Thereby, the salience of identities—"the likelihood that the identity will be invoked in diverse situations" (see Hogg et al., 1995, p. 257)—differs across situations and contexts (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Moreover, both theories propose that different identities are organized hierarchically, meaning that certain identities are more salient than others. This hierarchy of identities within the self-concept is relatively stable, as individuals seek a sense of stability and continuity over time (Petriglieri, 2011). In other words, individuals are motivated to engage in activities that confirm salient identities and disengage from activities that contradict the self-concept (Burke & Reitzes, 1991).

Role identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker & Burke, 2000) is based on role-related views of the self and assumes that identities are enacted in role-related behaviors. According to role identity theorists, roles comprise expectations linked to positions, and identities are internalized role expectations. Hence, each role is associated with expectations (Stryker & Burke, 2000) that shape the definition and meaning of the role. Moreover, role identity theory considers individual differences as it suggests that individuals do not necessarily identify with a given role nor view it as self-defining (Ashforth, 2001). Therefore, role identity theory helps us explain differences in how expectations associated with a formal leader role shape professionals' leader identity construal, and whether they identify with a formal leader role at all.

In contrast, social identity theory understands identity in terms of membership in social groups based on commonalities among members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Membership in a social group, for example, in one's profession, may evoke a specific professional identity. Professional identity is the professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978) as well as social motivations (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Professional identity is central to how professionals interpret work situations and how they intend to express their identity in the professional context. Social identity theory suggests heterogeneity in motivations and meanings that individuals associate with their profession (Caza et al., 2018). This heterogeneity is likely to shape leader identity construal and enactment. Therefore, we consider social identity theory as a fruitful perspective to understand how professionals' membership in a social group, their profession, shapes their leader identity construal.

Only the combination of role and social identity theory enables us to explain how the professional identity and the formal leader role, together, shape leader identity construal (see also Powell & Baker, 2014). Therefore, we chose to combine both perspectives to answer our research questions, that is, whether and how professionals with a formal leader role construe a leader identity.

Professors and their formal leader role

Academia provides an ideal context to study leader identity construal of professionals because professors have a strong domain-specific identity and, at the same time, hold a formal leader role. Professors have great expertise in their respective discipline, which may lead to the claim that "being a scientist itself may be a kind of master status identity that overrides other identities" (Ecklund et al., 2012, p. 695). At the same time, leadership demands in academia have risen due to intensified managerialism and competitive pressures (Braun et al., 2016; Clarke & Knights, 2015; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020), engagement in the commercial world (Klingbeil et al., 2019), and the increasing size of research teams (Wuchty et al., 2007). Yet there seems to

be confusion on what constitutes academic leadership (Evans, 2018; Rehbock et al., 2021), and academics have been shown to interpret formal leader roles rather as a duty than a relevant part of their own identity (Askling & Stensaker, 2002; Bryman & Lilley, 2009).

A recent study in the academic context showed that identity processes play an important role for middle managers to cope with pressures from university leadership and the need to protect their followers (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). This study indicates that middle managers in academia may identify more strongly with their profession and their subordinates than with their management role. Similar variations in interpretations of a formal leader/manager role may occur in other domains, in which professionals are also experts in a specific field or discipline. For example, when physicians who have high domain-specific expertise have to take on managerial roles, they have been shown to respond in different ways to integrate this new role into their identity (McGivern et al., 2015; Spyridonidis et al., 2015). Similarly, entrepreneurs who primarily identify with their product or with being an inventor (Cardon et al., 2013, 2017) and face the need to act as a leader in their growing start-up may also differ in whether and how they identify with being a leader. Hence, although academia appeared to be the most suitable context to answer our research question, more generally, we set out to shed light on whether and how professionals, who are experts in their field and have a formal leader role, construe a leader identity.

METHOD

Given our intention to understand differences in whether and how professors, who have a formal leader role, construe a leader identity, we chose an inductive approach (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) and conducted semi-structured interviews. More specifically, we drew on grounded theory inductive data analysis techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Pratt, 2000), and then used the variance approach to compare and contrast our data (Bansal et al., 2018). The aim of the *variance approach* was to reveal variance in the patterns and relationships between constructs at a certain point in time. Our approach is thereby based on post-positivism as we take into account the subjective view of every interview partner (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

Research setting

This research is based on data obtained from professors in research-intense public universities in Germany. This context is interesting for several reasons: First, the lowest organizational unit in German universities are chairs (*Lehrstuehle*), with concentrated power and authority in the professor holding the chair (Muller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005). Hence, professors in Germany are not only the intellectual leaders but also the formal heads of a research group who select and employ junior researchers on their own (Braun et al., 2013; McCaffery, 2010). Second, professors in Germany have exceptionally high autonomy in that their behavior is hardly constrained by organizational structures; therefore, their self-views should shape their behavior to a large extent (Henkel, 2005). Furthermore, freedom of research and teaching are guaranteed by the constitution (Dorf, 1999), and professors are civil servants who hold tenure for life. Accordingly, professors' autonomy might result in high variations in whether and how they construe their leader identity. This makes the German academic system a particularly suitable research setting to investigate our research question and capture relationships that might be too

weak to notice or capture in conventional settings such as large corporates with clear organizational structures (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010).

Recruitment and sample description

To explore leader identity construal of professors, we used a purposeful theoretical sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). We recruited professors via email requests from four public universities with 25,000 to 51,000 students (Times Higher Education, 2020), aiming for a diverse sample with regard to age, gender, fields of research, team size, and years of appointment. Because the authors are researchers who are employed at one of the universities, they are familiar with both the specifics of the professorial role in Germany and the characteristics of the German academic system. The interviewer (first author) had no previous personal or professional contact with any of the interviewees to ensure impartiality and confidentiality. The final sample (see Table 1) included 14 women and 21 men. The mean age of participants was 51.9 years, ranging from 32 to 76 years. On average, professors had been appointed for 13.6 years (ranging from 1 to 38 years). Their teams comprised 15 team members on average (including PhD students, post-docs, technical, and administrative staff). In addition to the interviews, we used complementary data (e.g. professors' websites and CVs) to integrate contextual information. However, the interviews provided the richest data to examine and describe patterns of professional identity and leader identity dimensions, and thus are the main focus of our analyses.

Data collection

To maintain consistency, the first author conducted all interviews in German and in person. The majority of interviews (89%) took place in professors' offices. The personal setting offered several advantages: first, we expected interviewees to feel comfortable and secure in their daily work environment, allowing for open responses (King & Horrocks, 2010). Second, we were able to take notes about interviewees' work environment such as professors' offices, behaviors and processes before, during and after the interview, allowing for additional insights into their identity; these were added to the "descriptive memo" of each interview (Charmaz, 2014). Third, we were able to use a photo elicitation exercise (Harper, 2002) to help stimulate the interviewees to talk about their formal leader role and to gain a different kind of information in terms of methodological triangulation (Patton, 2002).

The interview guideline included a broad range of questions around six major themes: (1) professors' daily routines and teams setup (e.g. number of team members and meeting structure); (2) balancing and prioritizing different tasks and roles, and the difficulties they faced in doing so; (3) professors' self-defined professional identity; (4) their personal motives for choosing an academic career; (5) their definition of success in academia; and (6) their definition of leadership and identification with being a leader. In order to avoid demand effects, no definitions of leadership were given. The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used to gain more explanatory information on daily work behaviors and challenges and how the interviewees addressed them. At the end of the interview, the interviewer used a photo elicitation task to further stimulate the articulation of professors' leader identity and their associations with leadership by asking them to choose one of 12 pictures (e.g. a sailing boat, a chess king, and a lion) that they could personally identify with the most, followed by selecting two pictures

TABLE 1 Sample overview

Gender	Age	Research area	Years of appointment	Team size
f	32	Computer engineering	1	5
f	34	Entrepreneurship	5	5
f	36	Life sciences	6	3
f	40	Physics	3	6
f	43	Physics	10	12
f	43	Life sciences	1	11
f	46	Mathematics	4	5
f	49	Pedagogy	8	6
f	49	Mathematics	15	2
f	50	Physics	14	6
f	59	Sociology	18	75
f	60	Informatics	23	15
f	61	Informatics	23	2
f	63	Life sciences	25	27
m	38	Informatics	4	4
m	39	Software technology	6	15
m	40	Software technology	3	5
m	45	Spatial planning	3	10
m	45	Entrepreneurship	9	12
m	48	Engineering	9	15
m	49	Engineering	2	8
m	51	Sustainable resource management	14	5
m	55	Communication science	17	6
m	56	Mathematical finance	16	17
m	57	Engineering	13	80
m	57	Engineering	20	15
m	59	Chemistry	16	15
m	59	Physics	16	5
m	60	Environmental policy	23	10
m	62	Engineering	17	50
m	62	Technology	22	40
m	62	Philosophy	25	12
m	63	Engineering	20	14
m	65	Mathematics	26	3
m	76	Management	38	9

Note: For confidentiality reasons, interview partners are ordered by gender and age in this table, whereas in the findings section, we used the chronological order of interviews to refer to participants.

that represent their understanding of either positive or negative leadership. Thereby, it did not matter which specific pictures they chose but rather how they explained their choices to us. The 12 pictures are a subsample of the validated 64 pictures of the Zurich Resource Model, which are used to gather implicit associations and thoughts through metaphors (Krause & Storch, 2006). The subsample was created by subsequent assessment of four experienced leadership scholars in an effort to select pictures representing leadership. Throughout the data collection process, our focus shifted from a rather narrow investigation of professors' roles, tasks, and leadership responsibilities, to a broader view on how they see themselves as professionals more generally, because the responses were more heterogeneous than we had expected.

On average, the interviews had a duration of 62 min. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. We collected 2185 min of interview data (1107 pages of transcript). The interview data allowed us to grasp a broad range of information on how professors interpreted their formal leader role and whether and how they saw themselves as leaders. We concluded the data collection after no new codes emerged from the interviews, which pointed us to theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data analysis

During the data collection process, we already dived into the data analysis process as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). We followed an inductive approach (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Gioia et al., 2013), allowing us to integrate ideas arising during the analysis and to consider themes emerging from the data during the process. Thus, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions were an iterative process in which we went back and forth between the data and our interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Pratt, 2000), eventually resulting in the development of a theoretical model. Although we initially drew on grounded theory data analysis techniques in the analysis process, we shifted towards applying the variance approach to compare and contrast our preliminary conclusions at a later stage.

As a first step, as we gathered data, the first author created fact sheets on every professor with characteristic statements by reading, rereading, and summarizing each interview (*data familiarity*). Complementary data (e.g. personal website and interview protocol with observational data) supported the development of the fact sheets for every professor.

Second, we analyzed all interview transcripts and the complementary data in detail, to look for emerging themes across interviews and to cluster similar responses (*data reduction*). One author was not involved in the analysis process to challenge our emerging findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). We observed a high variation in professors' identification with their formal leader role early during this process. Although some professors strongly refused to consider themselves as leaders, others stated that they clearly identified with being a leader.

Third, we became aware that organizing our data (*data display*) along Hammond et al.'s (2017) four leader identity dimensions could inform our theorizing in the data analysis process. We first examined the transcripts according to the leader identity dimensions *strength* and *integration* (Hammond et al., 2017), as they were most apparent in our data. Additionally, displaying our data according to *leader identity meaning* and *level* (as defined by Hammond et al., 2017) unveiled further differences. Our data showed that a more nuanced understanding of the level dimension was needed as to also consider the focus of professors' influence: Whereas some interviewees focused on influencing their own research group or individuals in their group, others focused on a broader target (e.g. practitioners and society).

Fourth, we identified differences in subjective interpretations across interviews and consolidated them into themes and aggregated dimensions (see Gioia et al., 2013). This process resulted in three aggregated dimensions: (1) *professional identity*, referring to differences in motivations and meanings regarding their profession, (2) *leader identity dimensions*, referring to differences in leader identity strength, integration, level, and meaning, and (3) *primary identity*, referring to differences in how professors see themselves primarily in relation to their formal leader role. By linking our data to these aggregated dimensions and by exploring the relation to each other, we identified four different kinds of leader identity construal (*drawing conclusions*, see Figure 1).

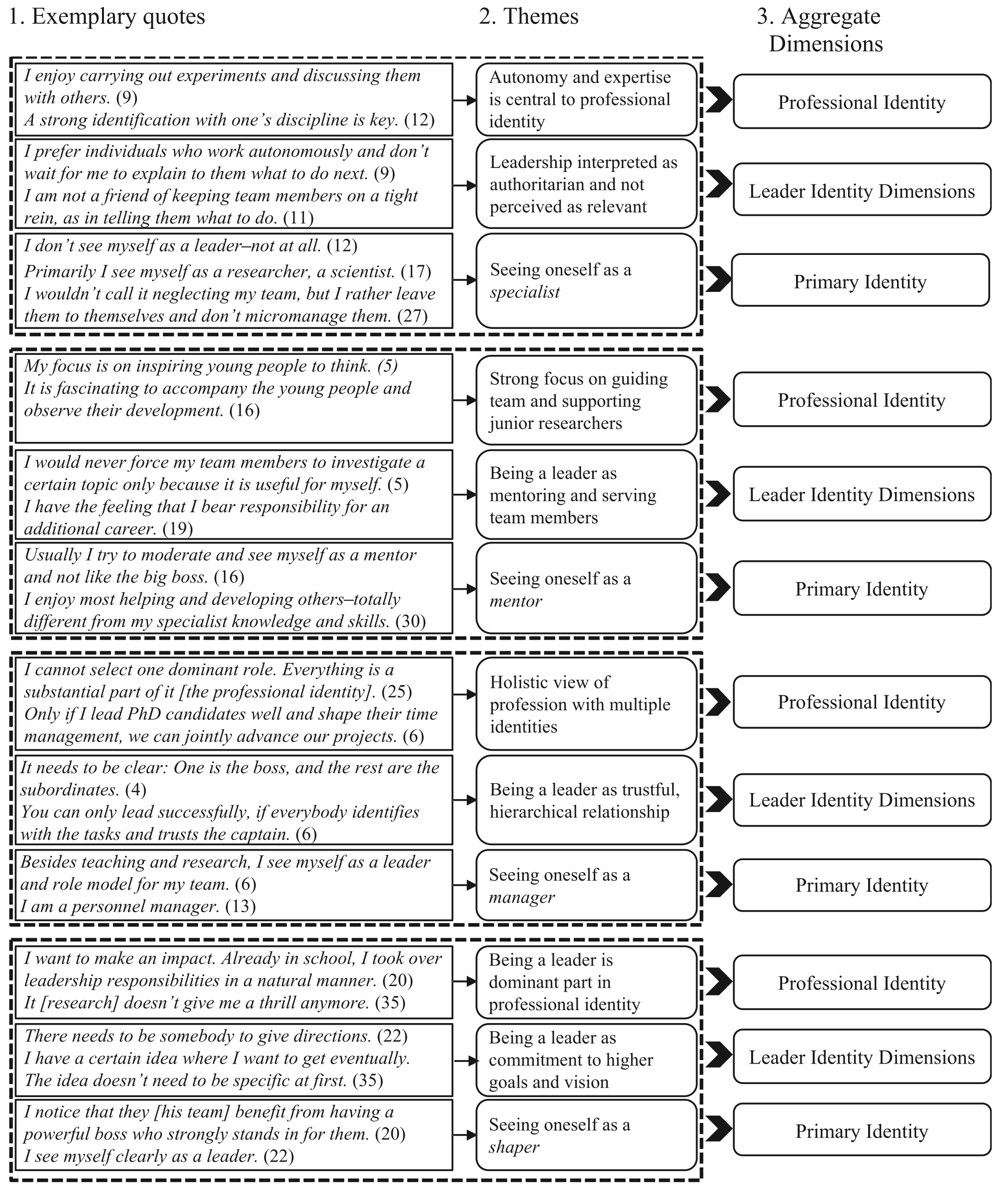

FIGURE 1 Data structure: Four emerging kinds of leader identity construal based on the professional identity, leader identity dimensions, and professionals primary identity in relation to their formal leader role

Fifth, to enhance trustworthiness of our qualitative analysis (*validation*), all of the authors jointly discussed the emerging kinds of leader identity construal, challenged the interpretation of the data and conclusions, and re-examined the interviews in-depth when disagreements occurred. We also discussed our findings with two of our interview partners to further validate our conclusions. Additionally, we compared our conclusions to previous literature and discussed findings with scholars active in the fields of identity and leadership research at various occasions, for instance, at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management.

Sixth, based on our data, we developed a variance model aiming to explain relationships between the emerged constructs (Bansal et al., 2018). The model illustrates the variations in professionals' leader identity construal and explains how the differences may shape the creation of distinct primary identities (*theoretical model development*).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Demarcation of four distinct kinds of how professionals construe a leader identity

The analysis of 35 interviews along with additional observational and online data revealed four distinct kinds of whether and how professors construed a leader identity, and in how they saw themselves in relation to their formal leader role: one group of professors strongly stressed their identities as researchers and/or teachers and *rejected* the formal leader role. They saw themselves primarily as a *specialist* (11 professors). A second group of professors focused on developing junior researchers and *accommodated* the formal leader role (but also rejected the label "leader"). They identified primarily with being a *mentor* (10 professors). A third group focused on managerial structures and delegation and *incorporated* the formal leader role. They saw themselves mainly as *managers* (eight professors). Finally, a fourth group aimed to impact political or societal spheres and *emphasized* their formal leader role. They showed a primary identity as a *shaper* (six professors). Even though some interview partners articulated statements that were also related to other kinds of leader identity construal, albeit to a lower degree, we aimed for clear categorization to highlight the differences across cases and assigned each interviewee to the group with the highest fit.

Although age was distributed equally among the first three groups, the group of shapers was comprised of interview partners who tended to be older (minimum age of 49 years). With regard to gender, the group of mentors included a majority of women (six women versus four men), whereas the group of managers consisted of only one female and seven male interview partners.

We use the four labels specialist, mentor, manager, and shaper to organize our findings. As we will explain in more detail, the variations in professors' leader identity construal were based on differences in (1) their professional identity and in (2) their leader identity dimensions (Hammond et al., 2017), resulting in (3) differences in professors' primary identity.

Rejecting the formal leader role: Seeing oneself as a specialist

The first group of professors focused on their expertise in their field and rejected a formal leader role. They identified primarily with being a specialist (Interview [Int.] 2, 9, 11, 12, 17, 21, 23, 26, 27, 28, and 33).

Specialists' professional identity

The group of professors that we grouped as specialists based their professional identity on high expertise in their respective discipline, for instance, interviewee 26, who emphasized: "Primarily I see myself as a researcher, a scientist." Further, interviewees 23 and 27 stated that the key motivation for their profession had been the "joy of delving deeply into unexplored topics" and developing something new. Similarly, interview partner 9 articulated his desire to conduct experiments himself and discuss research in-depth with his team. Interview partner 12 highlighted that "a strong identification with one's discipline is key" and added that he was motivated by contributing to the scientific community and educating students and/or junior researchers with regard to discipline-specific knowledge. All specialists showed a strong motivation for research- and/or teaching-related tasks, for example, finding solutions to "cognitively-challenging problems" (Int. 11). Next to the importance of research output, contributing to "scientific progress" defined interviewee 21's success. He explained that he wanted to spend most of his time on research, and therefore, prioritized research over other responsibilities. We concluded that specialists' professional identities were focused on excellent research and teaching.

Specialists' leader identity dimensions

When specialists were asked whether they identified with being a leader, they stated that they did not proactively take on leadership responsibilities. They highly valued autonomy for themselves but also for their followers. They typically put high expectations on junior researchers to be independent at a very early stage of their academic careers. Interviewee 27 explained: "I would not call it neglecting my team, but I rather leave them to themselves and do not micromanage them." Accordingly, she preferred supervising PhD students who did not need much guidance. Similarly, interviewee 23 stated "They [her doctoral students/employees] all have a Master's degree and work autonomously. (…) To me, being a leader is not an important aspect at all." She further encouraged her PhD students to start projects with other researchers on their own, thereby enabling them to become independent researchers. She aimed at having them publish their own projects at an early stage in their career. As specialists did not consider their formal leader role as a part of their identity, their leader identity was both *non-existent* and *not integrated* in their professional identity. Regarding *leader identity meaning*, specialists interpreted leadership as directive or authoritarian behaviors, which they considered as inappropriate in their profession. For instance, interviewee 11 stated, that if he had wished to become a leader and "tell others what to do," he would have joined a big corporation. Similarly, interview partner 9 reasoned: "I am not a friend of keeping team members on a tight rein, as in telling them what to do." Interviewee 17 argued: "Some people aim to organize everything in a managerial manner. In my personal opinion, a university is not a company and it should not be, because then we would attract the wrong people." Similarly, interview partner 21 turned down management tools (e.g. management by objectives or clear deadlines) because he believed that universities should not be as goal-oriented as companies. In terms of *leader identity level*, interviewee 17 described the relationship to his team members as close and trusting (relational). Likewise, interviewee 2 explained that leadership in his team was not needed, because everybody knew each other very well. When the interviewees were asked to select a picture in the photo

elicitation task, eight out of 11 specialists (Int. 9, 11, 12, 21, 23, 27, 28, and 33) chose a picture with a group on it. Interviewee 9 explained his choice: "There is no strict group structure. As an employer, I prefer individuals who work autonomously and do not wait for me to explain to them what to do next." Interview partner 12 also identified most with a picture that showed a group of equals, a concept that represented his preference for flat hierarchies; he explained that he did not want to stand out from his team. *Specialists* were mainly interested in contributing to the scientific community and emphasized their focus on individual researchers and the research community.

Primary identity as a "specialist"

The professors in this group clearly stated that they did not identify with—or even explicitly refused to identify with—being a leader: "I enjoy having a small team, because to me it is all about science, and I do not see myself as a research manager. Some people think this is needed, but I do not. I am somebody who still does calculations by himself and who is very close to research." (Int. 17) Professors in this group struggled to take on administrative leadership roles, as they were either not interested or felt that they were not qualified, as stated in a critical incident by interviewee 9: "I was in the dean's office for 3 years, which was very time-consuming. After 3 years, I knew, I was not made for university politics. I was lost. It was just not my world." Similarly, interviewee 12 stated: "Of course, some professors are active in higher education management and politics and want to change things. But I am a researcher and professors who enjoy these tasks [e.g. politics] are way better than myself and should do it." Interview partner 2 explained that he "consequently abandoned all other tasks [but research] or politely but clearly declined new requests."

Even though specialists did not see themselves as leaders, they enjoyed discussions with junior researchers about the progress of their research (e.g. Int. 9, 11, 12, 21, 23, 28, and 33). For example, interview partner 21 placed the coffee machine in his office so that his team stopped by every day to connect and speak about current research projects. Interviewee 9 implemented "paper speed-dating," where members of his team met for 3 min in random pairs of two to develop a new research idea. Interviewee 17 stated that he did not make appointments with his team members and that there were no fixed working hours. At critical stages of joint projects, he spoke to them several times daily in a rather informal manner. Thus, specialists supported junior faculty's autonomy in research but did not consider this as "leadership." Interviewee 12 explained that in contrast to other professors, he did not implement hierarchies and preferred to collaborate with junior researchers based on his gut feeling. Several professors openly stated that they established an informal, open door policy (e.g. Int. 12, 17, and 21). One of the specialists (Int. 11) even forgot the appointment for our interview and was found in a different part of the building discussing research results with fellow researchers (observational data). He complained: "I want to be a researcher with heart and soul—but I am expected to be a manager." This illustrates the mismatch of external expectations and personal motivations and values. In the end, even though professors in this group engaged in several activities that could be subsumed as leadership, they expressed a strong professional identity as an expert in their field and a rejection of the formal leader role. They expected their followers to work autonomously and make their own decisions.

Accommodating the formal leader role: Seeing oneself as a mentor

We labeled a second group of professors mentors based on explicit statements using the notions of "mentoring" or "mentorship" to describe themselves. We concluded that they made their leader identity fit to their understanding of a professor's profession, thus accommodating the formal leader role and primarily identifying as a mentor (Int. 1, 5, 8, 15, 16, 19, 29, 30, 32, and 34).

Mentors' professional identity

Professors in this group identified highly with their team and with guiding junior researchers. For instance, interviewee 29 explained: "I am very attached to my team. I call them 'my people'. This is very important to me." Interviewee 34 explained that she based her identity on individual development of her team members:

> I have several roles: I am an educator, a supervisor, and an examiner. With being an educator, I mean a developmental form. (....) We develop human beings, our employees are very heterogeneous, in everything they do, also with regards to their personalities. (Int. 34)

Her emphasis on developing individuals also became salient in her definition of success, which she based on helping individuals along their way: "Advancing somebody to a point where this person can achieve many great things—this is very fulfilling to me." (Int. 34) Similarly, interviewee 8 explained that in his opinion, human beings were the greatest good within the scientific system and therefore, they were most important to him. He described his choice of profession as a calling typified by high commitment and passion. Passing on this passion to junior researchers was a central motive for him: "My main task is to get young people enthusiastic about theories, methods, and research fields, so that they start reflecting about it." Similarly, interviewee 1 explained that she wanted to get the best out of junior researchers by challenging them and "stimulating as much scientific potential as possible." She added that she specifically enjoyed encouraging junior researchers to pursue an academic career. Interview partner 19, who felt great appreciation for the opportunity to mentor junior researchers, stated: "I would break my neck for the young people, because I think: I want to share this." She continued that she did not have children—which, in her view, might have influenced her wish to mentor her team members. She added that passing on her personal values such as scientific integrity and dedication to research was a major task for herself as a mentor. At the same time, mentoring was not restricted to her team, as she also enjoyed mentoring students who did not pursue a PhD.

Mentors' leader identity dimensions

Mentors understood their formal leader role as a part of their supervisory role but did not identify much with being a leader. Therefore, their leader identity *strength* can be categorized as weak. Considering the *meaning* of being a leader, mentors declined authoritarian leadership and favored participative forms of leadership. Relatedly, when asked which picture they

identified with the most, mentors' explanations included the notions of cooperation, giving orientation and support in achieving a common goal, and protecting subordinates. Interview partner 19 explained that she interpreted leadership as giving orientation in terms of communicating shared values and providing security. Interview partner 5's mindset also reflected humility and high person-orientation: "I am way too insecure that my position is the only right one. (...) I would never force my team members to investigate a certain topic only because it is useful for myself." Similarly, interviewee 34 did not only express interest in developing her group members but also stated that she needed to work on herself to be aware of her followers' needs.

Mentors rejected a strong hierarchy in their teams and aimed to establish personal relationships with their team members that were not based on formal authority. Interviewee 1 believed that she had authority due to her functional expertise and did not need further mechanisms to demonstrate power. Interview partner 16 explained: "I am neither very extraverted nor highly authoritarian, that's why I cannot lead in such a way, and why it would never work." In in terms of leader identity *level*, mentors' leader identity was based on close relationships to the group members (relational) as interviewee 19 stated: "I have the feeling that I bear responsibility for an additional career but my own." Mentors explained that they engaged mainly in behaviors on behalf of their group members. They focused on their research group members and highlighted their responsibility to consider their individual needs. For instance, interview partner 19 specifically approached her team members with questions: "I ask them 'What do you need? Do you know that?' Or I make offers: 'Do you prefer it this way or that way?' And then they get to choose." She further elaborated that these questions were helpful, because when she was a PhD candidate, she was never sure about when she had a valid reason to approach her supervisor or not. Similarly, interviewee 16 explained that he wanted to be approachable: "I do not want to have my head in the clouds and only be available sporadically."

Because mentors dissociated themselves from any form of leadership that initiated structure and defined clear rules, their formal leader role was only *integrated* in a splintered way into their professional identity. For instance, interviewee 34 stated: "It is important not to introduce too many rules and to avoid a culture which constantly evaluates (...) as is taught in management education."

Primary identity as a "mentor"

This group of professors distanced themselves from using the label "leader" and referred to themselves as mentors. They only talked about leadership in reference to their specific interpretation of being a mentor to others. For instance, interviewee 1 explained: "I am not a leader at all when it comes to research; I would call myself a mentor. This is clearly my role, because I do not think it would work to give clear orders to others," and interviewee 16 reflected: "I see myself as a mentor and not like the big boss." Those professors did not consider themselves as leaders but as mentors who supported junior researchers in achieving excellence and in their personal development.

Mentors explained that they aimed to support and empower junior researchers (e.g. by not deciding for them) while mentoring them along their career progress by asking questions and sharing their personal experiences. This group of professors reported that they invested much time in mentoring their team members, including personal and career development, which

shows their motivation to develop junior researchers. For instance, based on a critical incident interview partner 1 explained that she had formalized her mentoring activities: She would speak with every team member once a year about developmental areas and career objectives, including a discussion about what kind of support was needed from her side. Another mentor (Int. 19) explained that it was important to her to put the needs of her team members first and support them not only in professional but also private matters: "I want to give my PhD students a home during this limited time. They have enough to worry about anyways." Similarly, interviewee 16 explained: "I do not want to build an empire, and I do not need a team of 60. Ten or 13 researchers is totally sufficient." He expressed his intention to always support his team when help was needed as he had experienced the opposite during his doctorate. Therefore, he now aimed at investing more time, going out for lunch regularly with his team members, and implementing flat hierarchies. Likewise, interview partner 29 had experienced little support during her PhD and post-doctorate phase herself and explained: "It would have helped me to have more guidance. Therefore, I now try to help my people with preparing grant applications and paper manuscripts."

Incorporating the formal leader role: Seeing oneself as a manager

During our analysis, we uncovered a third group of professors for whom the leader identity was one of several professional identities. We concluded that these professors incorporated their formal leader role as an equally important part in their professional identity and identified mainly as managers (Int. 3, 4, 6, 13, 14, 18, 25, and 31).

Managers' professional identity

This group of professors explained that they needed to be research managers to be able to fulfill the high expectations linked to their various tasks. Interview partner 3 described that he spent most of his time in the office or on the phone, primarily while managing and organizing his team, as opposed to conducting research or writing a paper himself. Relatedly, interviewee 13 stated: "Basically, I have a typical personnel management job." To support them in their daily work, several managers had a secretary who arranged the interview appointment, who was the first point of contact upon arrival, and who served water or coffee during the interview (observational data during Int. 3, 6, 13, 14, and 31). Managers based their professional identity on a holistic view of their various roles. This became evident when we asked them with which role they identified most. Interview partner 25 explained that in his view being a researcher, a teacher, or a leader were not mutually exclusive: "I cannot select one dominant role. Everything is a substantial part of it, in my understanding." Similarly, interview partner 31 stated that a combination of multiple tasks led to synergies.

With regard to their motivation, interviewee 6 explained that he was striving to "get things done by working hands-on." As opposed to specialists, managers demonstrated a wish to advance their research fields but with the main focus on generating solutions to practical problems. Interview partner 18 explained that his aim was to improve current practice by providing scientific evidence: "It is important to manage electricity or traffic or healthcare systems properly. This is our overall objective. We want to improve the economy or life in general [with the help of our research]."

Managers' leader identity dimensions

Managers understood their formal leader role as a salient part of their professional identity and clearly explicated that they identified with being a leader; in other words, they held a *strong* and fully *integrated* leader identity. They expressed that delegation and clear management structures helped them to succeed in their various roles. When asking about his *meaning* of being a leader, interviewee 13 explained:

> You have to be a little bit of an alpha-male in a leadership position. You have to be able to give your team clear guidelines and a direction and thereby convey authority. (...) I am not the typical alpha-male, but I know that it does not work without it. I thus always try to provide a clear direction. (Int. 13)

Interview partner 4 explained that a leader should be attentive, protective, and balanced and always know when to intervene. To interview partner 3, steering towards one direction and providing foresight was important for a leader too. In line with that, interviewee 18 stated that one important task of the leader was to provide guidance and direction and that all others needed to follow—which stands in contrast to specialists' interpretation of leadership as being one amongst equals. Similarly, managers emphasized that leaders should take over responsibility in critical phases and establish structures that create good working conditions. For instance, interviewee 6 explained: “You can only lead successfully, if everybody identifies with the tasks and trusts the captain.”

Leadership was interpreted by managers for the good of the group, leading us to the conclusion that managers identified with being leaders on the *collective* level. For instance, interviewee 13 emphasized that his employees could feel safe because he, as the leader, took over the responsibility for the group. Managers often mentioned the importance of external stakeholder groups, such as practitioners or the economy in general, as stated by interviewee 18. Hence, they seemed to mainly focus on influencing practice in their leader role.

Primary identity as a “manager”

Professors with a primary identity as a manager saw themselves as leaders which was explicitly mentioned by interview partner 6: “Besides teaching and research, I see myself as a leader and role model for my team.” Managers were fond of leadership responsibilities and wished to create a practical impact beyond their research community.

Managers described that they chose a very structured and systematic way to organize and manage their team and responsibilities linked to their profession. The overall goal of managers was to lead their team members by initiating structure and by delegating tasks to them. Based on a critical incident, interview partner 4 reported that she had established clear structures, which she found particularly helpful in situations of conflict. Interview partner 13 further emphasized that, as a leader, it was crucial to delegate projects to junior researchers:

> It is important to not do everything on your own, because then you are automatically the bottleneck for important tasks. Instead, you have to delegate tasks and enable others to take over responsibility (....) I actually want to create an environment where my employees can be creative and proactive. (Int. 13)

To achieve successful delegation, interviewee 13 explained that he defined guidelines that helped his team members to decide; he went on to say that he understood leadership as "not standing in the way of his followers." Interview partner 18 took his team to a biannual team retreat on a regular basis. He explained that engaging in social and team building activities with his group helped to strengthen team cohesion and to overcome shyness (critical incident). Similar undertakings were reported from interviewee 31 who took over a departmental leader role. He explained that—also among colleagues on the professorial level—it was most important to engage in stakeholder management to align individual needs, to jointly define what the group stands for, and to focus on group cohesion. Interview partner 14 had a similar goal in mind: "I want everyone to have the feeling that they are part of this team (...) and that their work is meaningful. This is very important in terms of motivation."

Emphasizing the formal leader role: Seeing oneself as a shaper

The fourth group we identified were professors who were motivated by the desire to shape society as a whole, be it with regard to businesses, politics, or education. They emphasized their formal leader role and identified as shapers (Int. 7, 10, 20, 22, 24, and 35).

Shapers' professional identity

A pre-interview online investigation of our interview participants had revealed that all professors, whom we later grouped as shapers, had taken initiatives to become administrative leaders, for instance, within their universities, as members of the board of the professional association of professors in Germany (DHV), or by seeking other possibilities of influence. Also, during the interviews, professors who we later labeled as shapers pointed to special honors and awards from the government or higher education boards that were hanging at their office walls (observational data, interview partner 20 and 24). Interview partner 20 stated: "I want to make an impact. Already in school, I took over leadership responsibilities in a natural manner."

Unlike the other groups, shapers liked to engage in activities that allowed them to express their desire to have an impact beyond their scientific community. Their statements imply that they saw it as an important part of their work to shape society at large and to also enable their followers to do so. Interviewee 10 emphasized that she wanted to shape other systemic spheres such as politics, higher education, and/or society: "[To me, success is] something that has a lasting impact on the minds of people—be it researchers or not—by offering insights (...) which are valuable for the benefit of mankind and not only for the scientific community." Interview partner 20 further explained that he wanted his students to reach top leadership positions themselves: "When I see how many of our graduates have become executives or members of the board, it is highly satisfying." Thus, exerting influence and having impact as a leader was also understood as educating future leaders who would themselves exert influence throughout their careers. Relatedly, shapers aimed to foster their team's innovativeness and to provide inspiration through a clear vision. Interviewee 7 explained that his vision was to establish the globally leading group in his field, linking research and application, theory and practice. He aspired for his graduates to be the best on the market and that organizations would "apply to hire his students."

Shapers stated that they had declined other leading positions in industry or for political parties because they wanted to remain independent and wished to shape society themselves

without being influenced by political or economic stakeholders. Interview partner 20 explained that he had always been a politically motivated person, eager to change his environment for the better: "To me, it is of utmost importance to have the right of initiative. Whenever I was convinced about pushing new ideas or regulations, I convinced my employees, and then we marched."

Shapers' leader identity dimensions

Shapers showed a strong desire to have an impact and to shape society as a whole which revealed that their leader identity was *dominant* in their self-view. This group aimed to use their formal leader role to impact diverse groups such as members of the scientific community, students, practitioners, and society at large. Shapers understood themselves as leaders in various areas of their life, and their leader identity seemed to be central to them and highly salient. Thus, being a leader was *fully integrated* into shapers' self-concepts.

In terms of *leader identity meaning*, shapers understood leadership as exerting influence on others and shaping their larger environment. For instance, interviewee 35 explained:

> I have a certain idea where I want to get eventually. The idea does not need to be specific at first. This is basically the idea: we should try harder to investigate, reflect, and shape the role of science and technology in society. (Int. 35)

With that approach she managed to achieve several changes. To her, it was important that others perceive her as unusual: "People have to think, 'man, this lady is nuts'. That's what I have to live with. I know that quite a few people do not agree with me in several regards." To shapers, in order to have an effective and functional team, leadership was needed, as in somebody who gave clear directions. For instance, interviewee 22 explained: "Nobody can steer a sailing boat on his own. There needs to be somebody to give directions (…) There are many people that *need* [emphasis added] to be led. Somebody needs to scream 'right or left'." Shapers identified with their leader role on a *collective* level. For instance, interview partner 10 stated that she also needed to rely on her crew, because "you cannot do everything on your own—in the end, we are leading because we have the right people to be successful." Interviewees 7 and 35 explained that leadership to them meant leading a team of individuals with strong personalities and rallying them together to run into the same direction. Shapers wanted to impact multiple groups—not only within the university but also beyond, that is, towards politics and society at large.

Primary identity as a "shaper"

Professors in this group took on a clear leader role in seeking change and improving their environments for the better. For instance, interview partner 22 explained that he had always been a leader: "I do want to move things, to change, to build something." Many professors in this group actively sought opportunities where they could engage in political activities and shape their larger environment. Interview partner 10 highly valued research integrity and aimed to influence not only her team members but also society. She regularly communicated her values in public: She held speeches titled 'Do not trust me, I am a scientist' to sensitize for integrity

but also to invite others to "look in the ethical mirror." In her opinion, the intellectual elite of the past decade—be it in politics, industry, or academia—set "scandalous examples." Interview partner 20 also enjoyed taking over responsibility for the younger generation:

> Today's 20- to 30-year-olds are a lot more apolitical than my generation was (....) I notice that they benefit from having a powerful boss who strongly stands in for them and takes away their worries. (Int. 20)

Interviewee 24 reported a shift in her career from rather traditional activities towards active involvement in higher education politics and management on a national level. Similarly, interviewee 35 explained that whenever there was a free position to lead an institute or to engage in a council, she could not resist to accept:

> Pretty early in my career, another heart started to beat [besides research]: to engage in higher education politics which I have always found most interesting. I have been part of many advisory boards and engage in different activities. And I guess there was a shift at the expense of active involvement in research activities. (Int. 35)

She had changed universities as a full professor, because the new university (her current employer) offered her to start-up a new research institute. Her aim was to build bridges between different disciplines, but also between administration and research, and she admitted that in her former role in a traditional research professorship, she did not feel important. In line with that, she explained that writing scientific articles does not play a major role for her personally: "It does not give me a thrill anymore."

Due to shapers' emphasis on their leader role, they reported several challenges to exert influence which occurred in daily interactions with their followers. For instance, interviewee 10 aspired for continuous improvement and sometimes faced resistance by others who preferred "sticking to the way things always used to be." Relatedly, interview partner 22 explained that seeing himself as a leader sometimes led to conflicts, because members of his research group might have perceived him as too dominant and had different expectations:

> I have always been a leader and I have the feeling to know how things work. But there are different levers. I guess, my employees do have a different picture of how things go (...) Thus, I still see myself as a leader, but I probably ought to be rather a researcher and teacher. (Int. 22)

Interviewee 35 described that she had established clear responsibilities in her team so that she could easily delegate new projects and tasks. To her it was important to make her "team feel confident and understand how things work." She herself mostly engaged in relationship building, networking, and representation of the research institute to external collaborators and stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

In this research, we explored whether and how professionals with a strong domain-specific expertise and a formal leader role construe a leader identity. Based on interviews with German

professors, we have developed a model that explains variations in professionals' leader identity construal (i.e. when professionals *reject*, *accommodate*, *incorporate*, or *emphasize* a formal leader role) and the resulting primary identity as a *specialist*, a *mentor*, a *manager*, or a *shaper* (see Figure 2). Our research has important theoretical and practical implications.

First, our findings suggest that both, individuals' identity as a professional and the leader identity dimensions, shape leader identity construal. Specifically, different patterns of professional identity and leader identity dimensions are likely to predict when professionals *reject*, *accommodate*, *incorporate*, or *emphasize* a formal leader role. To reach this conclusion, we drew on role identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) perspectives, and combined previously separate lines of theorizing: professional identity and leader identity literature (see Hammond et al., 2017; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). Our analysis suggests that the professional identity lays the foundation for professors' leader identity construal because professional identities comprise priorities related to (dis-)identifying with being a leader (see also Ashforth, 2001). For example, professors who were mostly motivated by solving complex problems using their specific expertise and did not perceive leadership as relevant in their profession, *rejected* the formal leader role when talking about themselves. In contrast, professors who aimed to shape their larger environment and to have an impact beyond their professional community, *emphasized* the formal leader role in their self-concept. Considering the professional identity and the leader identity dimensions together allows for a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of whether and how a leader identity is construed—particularly by professionals who are experts in their field and hold a formal leader role. Our findings imply that future research on leader identity needs to take into account the influence of other salient work-related identities.

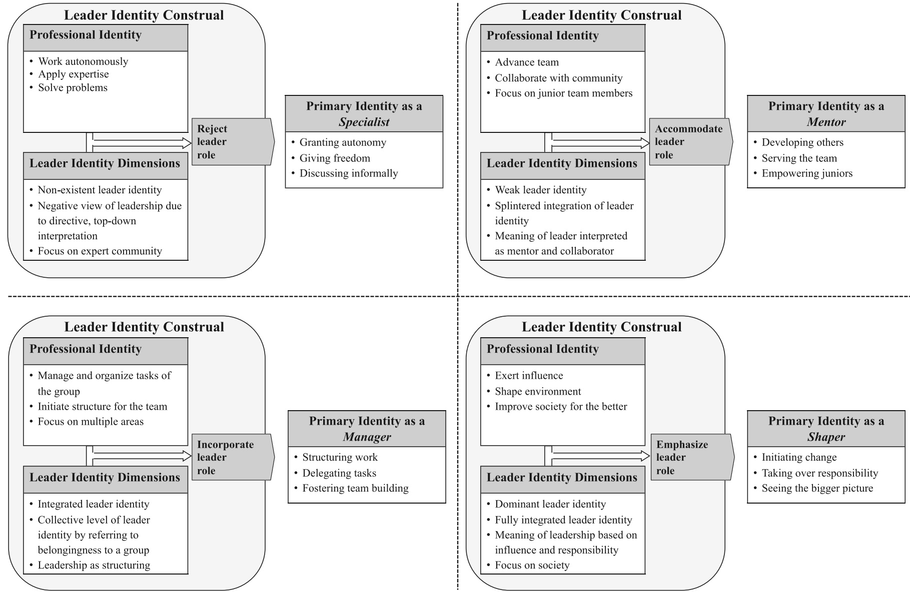

FIGURE 2 Model illustrating four kinds of professionals leader identity construal and resulting primary identity. Note: Professional identity refers to differences in motivations and meanings individuals associate with their profession. Leader identity dimensions refers to differences in leader identity strength, integration, level, and meaning. Primary identity refers to how professionals see themselves in relation to their formal leader role

Moreover, our research emphasizes the need to consider specifics of the context when analyzing whether and how professionals construe a leader identity. We chose to investigate German professors, who are likely to identify with their domain-specific expertise and hold a formal leader role in a setting with high autonomy. We expect that our findings are transferable to contexts with similar characteristics, in which professionals have invested a lot of time and resources in developing strong domain-specific expertise (e.g. through formal qualification and socialization in their professional community) and, at the same time, hold a formal leader role with high autonomy. For example, physicians with exceptional expertise who hold a leadership position might be in a similar situation. Similarly, entrepreneurs who have high autonomy in whether and how they deal with their leader role, may differ in whether and how they identify with being a leader when their start-ups grow. Hence, we expect similar variations of leader identity construal in contexts where professionals strongly identify with their domain specific expertise and additionally hold a formal leader role, while having high autonomy.

Second, we explain why professionals with a formal leader role are likely to see themselves primarily as *specialists*, *mentors*, *managers*, or *shapers*. Only recently, Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) found that middle managers in academia deal differently with their role and show variations in how they navigate pressures and conflicting demands. Most academic middle managers referred to be an "umbrella carrier" to express their role as subordinates' protectors. Although the umbrella metaphor appeared to be most prevalent among academic middle managers, we go beyond this research by showing that a formal leader role can lead to a great heterogeneity of primary identities for individuals in the same profession. By elaborating on those specific primary identities as well as underlying patterns, our research also responds to Gjerde and Alvesson's (2020) call for an enhanced understanding of academics who reject the label "leadership." Future research can draw on our categorization to reach a more elaborated understanding of how identification and dis-identification processes shape leader identity construal. Our findings further correspond with previous research from the entrepreneurship context that has shown that founders also identify with different aspects of their profession and have different social motivations that influence entrepreneurial effectiveness (e.g. Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011).

Third, we elaborate on and further specify Hammond et al.'s (2017) leader identity dimensions (strength, integration, level, and meaning) based on our findings. Importantly, we uncovered a limitation of the *level* dimension. Although the original notion of leader identity level only refers to whether professionals identify with their own uniqueness, their close relationships, or their group (Hammond et al., 2017), our findings imply that professionals also vary in terms of *whom they want to influence* in their leader role. More specifically, although managers and shapers both identified with leadership on a collective level, managers focused on practitioners and on solving practical problems, and shapers focused on higher education boards or political initiatives. This insight offers a more differentiated picture of leader identity level by considering the focus of professors' influence (individual researchers, their research group, the scientific community, practitioners, or society at large). This specification of the level dimension is needed for a clear differentiation of whom professionals intend to influence in their leader role. Our perspective links to Brewer and Gardner (1996) who differentiate social motivations, that is, the goals for social interactions, in self-interest, benefit for the other, and welfare for a group that one identifies with. Our findings expand their view in that professionals' focus in their leader role can relate to a wide range of stakeholder groups, including groups they are not

part of. We argue that these differences are relevant for leader identity construal as they are related to professionals' intention for their social interactions.

To conclude, we go beyond previous leader identity research that used helpful but simplified descriptions of leader identity (e.g. based on strength and/or centrality of the leader role, see Johnson et al., 2012; Rus et al., 2010), and thus, underrated its complexity. Building on our elaborations, future investigations can be more specific and that way reach a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the leader identity concept.

Practical implications

Our findings offer practical implications on an individual and organizational level, in particular for professionals who have leadership responsibilities but have not been trained nor necessarily aspire to be leaders.

First, on an individual level, self-awareness, reflection on critical incidents, and mentoring can foster the discovery and development of one's own leader identity (DeRue et al., 2009; Muir, 2014); hence, we encourage professionals to think about crucial parts of their identity. For instance, specialists might reject a leader identity because they think a leader should be authoritarian. Yet Yukl's (2010) definition of leadership as influence goes beyond specialists' interpretation; understanding this might encourage specialists to adopt their formal leader role more actively and seek developmental opportunities.

Second, on an organizational level, the different kinds of leader identity construal may help to enhance person-job fit and to develop targeted developmental activities. We suggest that organizations should critically evaluate who they select for formal leader roles, especially because some of them, such as specialists, are likely to be reluctant to accept a formal leader role. In this case, other career paths should be offered that are equally attractive, for example, an expert career track.

Additionally, our findings may help to design more effective leadership development programs that—instead of focusing on a specific set of leadership skills—put leader identity and identity work at the center of attention (see Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). Such an approach should help professors' "craft, revise, or affirm who they are" as leaders (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015, p. 626). This relates to the key challenge organizations face in understanding the highly complex underlying processes of adult development, which is needed for the conceptualization of leader development approaches (Day & Sin, 2011). Concretely, based on our findings, we suggest that trainings should incorporate the discussion of participants' implicit beliefs about academic leadership to raise awareness of variations amongst them. Leadership trainings could refer to images of the typical versus ideal academic leader as well as reflect on different roles and identities that may compete with each other (for an exemplary curriculum, see Knipfer et al., 2017). For example, professors' implicit images of leaders(hip) in academia can be made explicit via a drawing exercise in which a typical professor is drawn by each participant (Knipfer et al., 2017, adapted from Schyns et al., 2011). The drawings can help participants reflect and refine their images of leaders in academia. A discussion of the various roles, expectations, and strategies in academia, which may cause conflicts, can help participants integrate and prioritize them. Knipfer et al. (2017), for example, suggest asking participants to choose one out of four corners of the seminar room, labeled as "researcher," "teacher," "manager," and "leader" based on which role is most salient for them. They then discuss why participants choose different roles despite being in similar positions.

To foster the development of a coherent leader identity, participants could be asked to write down their personal leadership mission statement guided by questions such as "What kind of leader am I and what kind of leader do I want to be?" and "What do I want to stand for as a leader?" Additionally, our expanded view of levels of leader identity reiterates the importance of prompting questions about the focus of professors' leadership, that is, the question of "On whose behalf do I lead?", as also suggested by Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2015), p. 634). This question similarly relates to the needs and expectations of others they serve in their leader role.

Our model also suggests more targeted leader development approaches that go beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach. For example, mentors might benefit from learning coaching tools to professionalize their guiding and mentoring, whereas shapers might appreciate tools to integrate differing expectations from their various stakeholders. To conclude, we suggest a strength-focused approach that builds on the kinds of leader identity construal that we have identified to achieve professionals' full potential and to contribute to organizations' overall success.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Even though our research generates valuable new insights, this study has certain limitations that provide avenues for future research. First, our exploratory approach with data material from interviews does not allow to test specific predictions (see also methodological myopia, Caza et al., 2018). Yet we believe that our findings have the capacity to generate hypotheses that may be tested in future research. For example, future research could examine whether the professional identity and leader identity dimensions indeed predict when professionals reject, accommodate, incorporate, or emphasize a formal leader role in their identity. Moreover, we could not quantitatively measure differences in the professional versus leader identity. Although we used several techniques to increase the validity of our findings (e.g. using a photo elicitation task), future research could enhance the knowledge by applying quantitative measures. Combining explicit with implicit identity measures could be particularly promising to predict leader behavior even more accurately (Johnson & Saboe, 2011; Lord & Brown, 2003).

Second, as we observed that the *shaper* identity tended to be more salient for professors who were on average older than professors in the other groups, we may speculate that the *shaper* identity evolves over time, whereas professors at early stages of their career may see themselves more as specialists in their field, as mentors for others, or as research managers. However, our cross-sectional data does not allow for drawing conclusions about leader identity development over time. Hence, we encourage researchers to explore this further.

Third, we did not explore whether differences in leader identity construal result in different leadership behaviors towards followers. Yet our findings open up avenues for future research on leader identity construal as an antecedent of leadership behavior and effectiveness. Additionally, studies based on data from leader-follower dyads could investigate to what extent leaders' self-views of their leader identity are congruent with followers' perceptions.

Finally, we must take into account that the validity of our findings could be limited to the specific context we have chosen, namely the German academic system. Professionals' leader identity construal in corporate settings or consulting might be qualitatively different. However, similar variations in leader identity might be observed in contexts where professionals have formal leader roles in addition to a strong domain-specific expertise and have high autonomy in how they interpret their formal leader role, for example, in medicine.

CONCLUSION

By integrating multiple streams of research—role identity theory, social identity theory, identity work, and leader identity—our study adds a novel perspective on identity-related aspects of leadership. The integration of these streams is a particularly fruitful approach as an identity perspective transcends one-dimensional approaches to leadership (Day & Harrison, 2007). We illuminated variations in whether and how professionals' construe a leader identity—including the possibility that professionals reject a formal leader role—and explain why they differ in their primary identity. Thereby, our research also expands identity-based approaches to leadership and leadership development.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The participants provided their informed consent to participate in this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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