

Perspective

Toward an Intersectional Leadership Identity Development Approach

Pedro J. De La Cruz Albizu

Brooklyn College, City University of New York, New York, NY 11210, USA; pedro.delacruz@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Abstract: This paper introduces an intersectional leadership identity development framework to support both the leadership development of aspiring school leaders and the study of educational leadership. By combining aspects and insights from critical sensemaking, role identity, and intersectionality, this framework aims to expand the understanding of the flexible sensemaking of aspiring educational leaders, provide educational leadership preparation programs with necessary insights to better support the increasingly diverse cadre of aspiring leaders, and open new avenues of empirical research and practical application in the study of role identity and its influence on the preparation of successful school leaders.

Keywords: role identity; leadership identity development; educational leadership preparation

1. Introduction

School principals play a critical role in school improvement and in shaping the educational environment of their schools [1–5], and the way in which they enact their roles is strongly influenced by their role identity. Role identity refers to a combination of a person’s definition of what it means to be in a particular role and in-role expected behaviors. For educational leaders, this includes their beliefs about what educational leadership is, what effective leaders do, and how they view themselves as leaders. A growing body of literature emphasizes the importance of school leaders’ role identity to their professional success [6–8]. This is not surprising given the centrality of role identity in the sensemaking of individuals [9]. The way in which individuals understand their roles provides a window through which they make sense of their in-role environment. This sensemaking determines how they enact those roles, and how they enact those roles, in turn, influences their success in those roles. In fact, researchers have posited that even images and impressions conveyed by individuals must be consistent with the social role they occupy in order to not just be effective but to be granted the right to continue occupying that role [10–12]. In other words, the role identity of a school leader is a determining factor in their sensemaking, as well as in their ability to shape and improve schools.

Even as research findings point to the importance of the role identity of leaders for both professional success and sustained continuous improvement, recent discourses on leadership and the preparation of leaders have mostly focused on specific skills and competencies in what some researchers call the “technocratic orientation” [13–15]. This technocratic orientation results in a technical, decontextualized, and depersonalized theoretical perspective in the study and preparation of leaders [16–18]—a perspective that scholars are questioning, positing that while specific skills and competencies are necessary, an added focus on role identity and its development would allow for enriched academic conversations and for “broadening the perspectives on the practices of school leaders in an uncertain world” [13].

While all current and aspiring leaders must intentionally work on the development of their role identities, members of traditionally marginalized communities (TMCs), including those positioned through differences in nationality, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability status, face additional challenges as they take on



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leadership positions [19–21]. For example, researchers have found that being White and male are characteristics often associated with leaders [22]. As such, White males are more readily identified and accepted as leaders, even when their actions are similar to those of others, thus making leadership more difficult for individuals who are not White males. As more and more members of TMCs rise through the ranks to assume leadership positions, it is incumbent on leadership preparation programs to ensure that all their graduates, including members of TMCs, learn how to develop strong role identities.

While sensemaking and identity construction are ongoing through life, there are times when they are most rapidly developing, such as when there is a break in normal routines, when there is a crisis, and when individuals are in the process of changing roles. As such, educational leadership preparation programs are in a unique position to support the role identity development of aspiring leaders as most often those aspiring leaders are in the process of changing roles. I propose an Intersectional Leadership Identity (ILI) approach that combines aspects and insights from critical sensemaking (CSM), role identity, and intersectionality to support the leadership development of aspiring leaders [10,23,24] (see Table 1).

Table 1. The ILI approach: component frameworks and relevant concentration.

Framework	Concentration				
	Meaning-Making in Context	General Identity Construction	Role (Leadership) Identity Development	General Prejudice	Intersecting Patterns of Prejudice
Critical Sensemaking	Yes	Yes	Some	Some	Some
Role Identity	Some	Yes	Yes	Some	Some
Intersectionality	Some	Some	Some	Yes	Yes
Intersectional Leadership Identity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Briefly, the ILI approach combines the concentration on meaning-making in context of CSM, the role identity development of role identity, and the intersecting patterns of prejudice and their effects of intersectionality to provide a focused framework to support the exploration and development of role identity in marginalized aspiring educational leaders (see Table 1). Such an approach would connect context, ideologies, culture, relationships, experiences, and beliefs about leadership to develop aspiring leaders' reflective abilities and sensemaking, all while critically assessing and improving adaptive leadership capacities. By purposely concentrating on their identity formation, aspiring leaders study, practice, evaluate, and modify their understanding of leadership in general and of themselves as leaders. As individuals work on their leadership identity, they start: (1) seeing themselves as leaders and searching for opportunities to practice leadership, thereby further developing their leadership capacity [25]; (2) critically assessing their leadership skills and developing improvement plans to address any gaps between their current and desired states [26]; (3) learning about and decreasing differences between how they define leadership and how they act as leaders [26–28]; (4) connecting leadership identity to previous leadership experiences [29]; and (5) integrating their leadership identity into their global identity [30].

2. Theoretical Overview and Literature Synthesis

Combining aspects and insights from critical sensemaking [9,31], role identity [12], and intersectionality [32], the proposed approach uses an Intersectional Leadership Identity (ILI) framework. An ILI framework is a micro-framework that recognizes and seeks to understand the intricate interplay of social categories and their effects on aspiring leaders' leadership identities and their development. As such, it is utilized to understand and support the identity development processes in which marginalized individuals engage as they prepare to take on formal leadership positions.

The foundation of the ILI framework is Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills' critical sensemaking approach [9]. Critical sensemaking refers to how individuals understand and enact their worlds in a contextualized process both grounded in and grounding identity

construction. Generally, individuals come to understand their environment (sensemaking) through an ongoing process influenced by past experiences, social interactions, and context. When the context in which they are sensemaking is connected to a specific role, their role definition and the outward expectations of the role they occupy (role identity) affect their enactment and effectiveness in that role. And, when the role is that of a leader, implicit leadership theories affect how they (and others) define that role.

Importantly, the ever-present intersecting patterns of prejudice (intersectionality) that marginalized individuals must navigate and experience in life affect every aspect of their identity development, including how they make sense of the world, their social interactions and contexts, their role identity, and the implicit leadership theories held by self and others. As such, the facts that these individuals currently have steady and relatively well-paying jobs and are in programs preparing them to take higher-than-average salaried positions do not mean that the intersectional patterns of prejudice they have endured, and often continue to endure in many areas, are no longer affecting them—in fact, it is even more pressing that they begin to understand how those patterns affect them and their leadership identities before they become school leaders.

2.1. Critical Sensemaking

In his 1995 seminal work, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Karl Weick departed from traditional outcomes-oriented approaches to organizational studies and introduced sensemaking as a perspective that instead focuses on the meaning-making of organizations and organizational actors [9,31]. He identified seven social psychological properties that provide insights into how organizational actors come to understand their environments and how the same event is understood differently by different actors [9]. According to Weick (1995), “sensemaking is understood as a process that is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, [and] (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” [31] (p. 17). Thurlow and Helms Mills explain as follows [33]:

“Our understanding of events is an ongoing process that is influenced by factors that have shaped who we are, past experiences that shape how we understand what we are experiencing, what is happening in our current environment, our interactions with others and the cues that we extract to give plausibility to our interpretations” [33] (p. 247).

However, researchers have argued that while Weick’s properties of sensemaking serve as a useful heuristic to understand organizational actors’ sensemaking, they do not sufficiently account for issues of power, context, and structure [33,34]. More specifically, how power determines whose voices are considered more (or less) important in the organizational sensemaking process [9], or “why some experiences, language, and events become more meaningful for individuals while others do not” [35] (p. 2). To account for these issues and their effects on the sensemaking of individuals and organizations, Helm Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010) developed the critical sensemaking approach, which expands the basic frame of sensemaking to capture the influences of discourse, and macro- and meso-structural dimensions on the process and enactment of sensemaking [9]. Going beyond the social psychological properties of sensemaking, a CSM approach supports the exploration of agency in context, as well as identifies and highlights the effects of asymmetrical power structures on the sensemaking of individuals, in our case, aspiring leaders.

Using the questions “Whose critical sensemaking?” and “What is the purpose of CSM?”, Aromaa et al. (2018) analyzed the recent literature using CSM and outlined agency, contextual sensemaking, theory, and fusion as the four different directions in which sensemaking research has been published [36]. Within the “agency” direction of CSM research, a number of studies had foci in areas such as identity, gender, immigrants, and intersectionality [21,36,37].

Most relevant, however, are two studies using CSM; one proposing the use of CSM as a pedagogical tool in higher education [38]; and one utilizing and proposing connections

between intersectionality and CSM [39]. With the goal of increasing equity in college environments, Taylor and Williams (2022) proposed the use of CSM to support students, particularly marginalized students, “in developing and deploying CSM strategies [so that they can] identify oppressive structures, navigate those challenges, and advocate for improvements” [38] (p. 11). Advocating for practitioners to collaborate with students in order to increase inclusivity in college environments, the authors proposed CSM “as a mechanism for reflections, accountability, and coalition building” (p. 9). While focusing on undergraduate students, there are many points of agreement between the ideas presented by Taylor and Williams and the ILI framework; namely, (1) the invaluable opportunity that the college environment presents to support the development of critical sensemaking capacities in students; (2) the need for students, particularly minoritized ones, to interrogate their environments and experiences with a focus on unequal power structures; and (3) the importance of students understanding how their identities both shape and are shaped by their environment.

Ruel, Mills, and Thomas (2018) also provided an important perspective that agrees with the ILI framework—a way in which intersectionality and CSM can be used in tandem. They created a plausible story of Ruth Bates Harris, who was the first African American hired as a senior manager by NASA, and then applied CSM as an analytical framework to the story to illuminate the “interaction and interdependence of complex identities”, including the intersecting patterns of prejudice she experienced [39] (p. 42).

While CSM has been used as a heuristic to understand the sensemaking of individual actors in a process that takes into account issues of power, context, and structure, the ILI framework’s focus on marginalized aspiring leaders and their role identity development necessitates an increased focus on role identity and intersectionality. While these aspiring leaders, like everyone else, have to make sense of epiphanic moments when they occur, they also have to make sense of their experiences in a world that continuously shows them in multiple ways that the role of a leader is not one usually granted to them. Additionally, these aspiring leaders need to understand how their sensemaking has been affected by their experiences and contexts as their sensemaking will determine how they lead. Thus, complementing CSM with role identity, implicit leadership theories, and intersectionality allows for this framework to better focus on how the interplay of multiple forms of oppression have affected aspiring leaders’ beliefs about leaders and leadership so that they can work toward the exploration and development of strong role identities before they take helm of our schools—our most precious institutions.

2.2. Role Identity

Organizational study researchers have defined global identity as the elements of personal and social identities that are integrated into a consistent self-theory [11]. Global identity, in general, aligns with the story we tell ourselves about who we are, looking for answers to questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who am I now in this situation?”. Identity is constructed throughout an individual’s life and depends on self-discovery, personal interpretations, and social interactions [40]. Some very important determinants of identity development include openness to change through feedback and self-reflection, having a safe and supportive environment that includes role models and expectations, and the results of previous developmental experiences [25]—determinants that can be developed, supported, and reflected upon in leadership preparation programs.

Role has been defined as the behaviors that are attached to or represented by a particular status [40], and as the “core set of behavioral expectations tied to a social group or category that defines appropriate and permitted forms of behavior for group members” [41] (p. 1470). In other words, role refers to outward behavioral expectations that are shared by group/organizational members. In differentiating role and identity, Wolf et al. (2020) noted that while role looks outward and comprises behavioral expectations in social positions, identity looks inward and comprises internal meanings and expectations [40].

The concept of role identity is a combination of the inward character of identity and the outward character of role [42]; it refers to a person's definition of what it means to be in the role they are in [12], and to in-role expected behaviors, values, beliefs, social norms, and even mannerisms, attitudes, and social rituals [12]. When the role occupied is that of a leader, role identity refers to the aspect of an individual's identity that relates to that individual's beliefs about what leadership is, what effective leaders do, and how she/he enacts the role of leader [10,23,24,43]. Importantly, some researchers have posited that leadership identity differs from other role identities because of its ambiguity and because it is not necessarily bounded by formal roles [44]. In other words, leadership can be enacted in different domains (home, work, community, etc.), and it does not depend on whether the individual is the "official" leader of the organization.

Several scholars have made important contributions to the study of the professional identities of current school leaders at an international level, including Tubin's (2017) exploration of the leadership-claiming practices of four successful school principals in Israel, ranging in experience as school leaders from 10 to 21 years [45]; Notman's (2017) study on the role of professional identity on how two principals in their second principalship in New Zealand adaptively managed change processes in their schools [46]; Robertson's (2017) exploration of the professional identity transformation of a very experienced principal (15 years as principal in his third principalship) in New Zealand [47]; and Crow and Moller's (2017) article proposing a critical constructivist theory of identity [13]. These studies all highlight the importance of the principals' role identity to their professional success, the influence of context on role identity development, and the ongoing and adaptive nature of leadership identity development.

In a very relevant piece, Crow and Moller (2017) present identity development as a fluid and collective process, and argue that in addition to technical capabilities, the research on and preparation of leaders should emphasize role identity; they state: "they need to know why we use the skills we do in particular cultural, historical, and political contexts and what educational purposes these skills and strategies reflect" [13] (p. 754). Such arguments support the premises of the ILI framework as they highlight how leadership practices are grounded in the role identity of leaders, and how the fluid and collectively negotiated role identity of leaders are themselves dependent on cultural, historical, and contextual realities.

Another relevant body of literature supporting the premises of the ILI framework is the work on teacher leadership identity. While focusing on teachers, studies on teacher leadership identity generally aim to understand the processes through which teachers begin to see themselves as leaders and to influence their school communities to improve student achievement [48–50]; these aspects are also relevant for the study of the role identity of aspiring principals. For example, in a study investigating the development of three teachers attending a leadership program, Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) found that the process was unique for each of the participants based on their priorities, contexts, and life experiences [50]. Additionally, and in agreement with the literature on leadership identity development [25,29], they suggested that teacher leadership development depends on the interplay between the teachers' "views of leadership, engagement in leadership practices and identity development" [50] (p. 368).

While there is an emerging number of studies exploring the development of leadership identity of current school principals [7,45–47,51,52], and on the development of teacher leadership identity [48–50], there is a dearth of research on the leadership identity development of aspiring school leaders [53], even more so when those aspiring leaders belong to TMCs. In fact, in a systematic review of the literature on educational leaders' role identity, Cruz-Gonzalez and colleagues (2021) posited that "standard international training programmes do not meet the contextual and adaptive nature of educational leadership" [7] (p. 43); that factors such as gender, sexual orientation, and race raise barriers to the development of principals' role identities and "pose a threat to the successful exercise of leadership" (p. 45); and that only a handful of studies focused on educational leaders' role identity

concentrate on the training and education of aspiring leaders [7]. The ILI framework aims to facilitate the growth of studies and initiatives focused on the role identity development of aspiring school leaders who belong to TMCs.

According to Hammond et al. (2017), there are four dimensions in the development of leadership identity: (1) strength, (2) integration, (3) level, and (4) meaning. (1) Strength refers to how much a person identifies as a leader; (2) integration refers to the domains in which an individual identifies as a leader (home, work, community, church, etc.); (3) level refers to the concept levels with which the individual identifies as a leader, namely individual (distinctiveness), relational (relationships), and collective (belonging to a group or organization); and (4) meaning refers to the individual's understanding of what leadership is, ranging from role-based authority to the inclusion and recognition of the interdependence present across different roles and levels in organizations [24,25]. The ILI framework employs aspiring leaders' leadership identity strength, integration, level, and meaning to explore and support their leadership identity development.

Since identity construction occurs throughout a person's life and is influenced by social interactions; it is greatly impacted by personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, and gender [20,54–57]. Such characteristics affect most social interactions and, therefore, greatly determine role identity development. Hence, paying attention to personal characteristics and their effects on identity construction is a necessity for the ILI framework as it aims to better understand and support the leadership identities of marginalized aspiring educational leaders.

Implicit Leadership Theories

“The exercise of leadership is shaped not only by who the person is, what they do, and in which context they operate, but also by others' leadership perceptions” (Lord et al., 2020 [58], p. 50).

The meaning dimension of leadership development is often based on idealized leader prototypes, also known as implicit leadership theories (ILTs) [59]. Implicit leadership theories (ILTs) are cognitive structures that designate specific attributes, skills, behaviors, and capacities to idealized leader prototypes [58–60]. These structures are used by followers to make sense of leaders' behaviors, and both by leaders and followers to assess leaders' efficacy [61]. Leaders act according to their ILTs, and followers rate leaders according to their own ILTs; furthermore, individuals are often promoted to leadership positions according to the ILTs of those who influence promotion processes [58,62]. In fact, once/if followers match an individual with a leader prototype, the leader's decision-making is more readily accepted by followers; trust in the leader increases; and both organizational outcomes and the rating of the leader improve [58]. Additionally, features such as gender, race, ethnicity, and context are both part of and affect ILTs [21,58,63–65]. As such, the ILI framework encourages the exploration and questioning of the ILTs held both by aspiring leaders and others in order to make the implicit explicit, and to gain deep and insightful understandings of not just the ILTs themselves, but also of the experiences that helped form them, the effects they have on the meaning dimension of leadership development, and the enactment of leadership.

2.3. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that seeks to understand the intricate interplay of various social categories and power structures by challenging traditional approaches that oversimplify identities [32]. It recognizes that individuals experience multiple and intersecting forms of oppression, prejudice, and privilege by emphasizing how those dynamics shape social experiences, identity formation, and power dynamics [32]. Intersectionality highlights the ways in which individuals negotiate, resist, or internalize societal expectations as they engage in complex processes of identity formation [66]. As such, intersectionality intentionally illuminates the uniqueness of the identity formation experiences of multiply marginalized individuals.

While similarities in the role identity development of marginalized aspiring educational leaders are expected, the inclusion of an intersectional lens in the ILI framework serves both as a checkpoint and as an illuminating/deepening tool—as a checkpoint by ensuring that intra group differences are not ignored or conflated, and as an illuminating/deepening tool by emphasizing how different intersecting patterns of oppression specifically and differently affect the role identity development of individuals within this particular group. For example, while both a Black woman and a Latinx immigrant man may experience oppression as they engage in a process to become educational leaders, those experiences will be different based on the different dimensions of their identity and in the ways that those dimensions intersect in a social world. As such, the inclusion of an intersectional lens will allow for a deep exploration of participants lived experiences both individually and as members of the overarching classification of marginalized aspiring educational leaders.

An important contribution to the use of intersectionality in the study of leadership identity was provided by Armstrong and Mitchell (2017). They combined intersectionality and Black feminist theory to examine how two Black female principals in Canada constructed their professional identities and learned, among other important findings, that multiply marginalized (through race and gender) individuals must contend with “the normalizing power of patriarchy and whiteness” that excludes, controls, and contains their administrative practices” [62] (p. 836). Such findings support the integration of intersectionality in the study and development of aspiring leaders’ role identity.

Intersectionality, as a foundational aspect of the ILI framework, fosters a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to understand the complex realities of marginalized aspiring leaders as they engage in identity development processes.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The combination of CSM, role identity, and intersectionality is almost natural in the study and development of aspiring leaders’ role identities, particularly if those aspiring leaders belong to traditionally marginalized communities. As aspiring leaders prepare to take on educational leadership positions, they must develop their role identities as educational leaders, including gaining an understanding and perhaps challenging their own beliefs about what educational leadership is, what effective leaders do, and how they view themselves as leaders. Yes, CSM can be used to explore the meaning-making of individual actors in a process that takes into account issues of power, context, and structure, but it does not have an explicit focus on the role identity development of aspiring educational leaders belonging to TMCs. Yes, role identity can be used to analyze and support aspiring leaders’ leadership development, including its strength, integration, level, and meaning, but it does not have a sufficient concentration on sensemaking nor on the intersecting patterns of prejudice that aspiring leaders must face. And yes, intersectionality can be used to explore the intersecting pattern of prejudice that individuals experience and their very damaging effects, but it does not concentrate on how aspiring leaders make sense of their world as they prepare to take on educational leadership positions. However, by combining CSM, role identity, and intersectionality, the ILI framework can be used as a focused framework to support the exploration and development of role identity in marginalized aspiring educational leaders.

ILI framework goals include an expanded understanding of the flexible sensemaking of aspiring marginalized educational leaders—one that recognizes the effects of power, context, structure, experiences, relationships, ideologies, and the interplay of multiple forms of oppression on their leadership identity’s strength, integration, level, and meaning. This increased understanding may provide educational leadership preparation programs with the tools necessary to better support the increasingly diverse cadre of aspiring leaders and the schools they serve. By intentionally working on the development of their role identities, members of traditionally marginalized communities will be better equipped to successfully lead our most precious institutions.

The development, articulation, and implementation of the ILI framework may significantly advance our understanding of role identity and its influence on the preparation of successful school leaders. This model provides a focused and comprehensive approach to analyzing and addressing the adaptive nature of educational leadership, particularly for traditionally marginalized aspiring leaders. It has the potential to not only bridge gaps in the literature but also to open new avenues of empirical research and practical application. Future studies can build upon this foundation to further refine the framework and explore its implications across diverse contexts. Some possible areas of future research and application include the exploration of aspiring leaders' role identity, the development of coursework and training programs focused on role identity exploration and development, the development of tools to support the role identity development of school staff, and expansion of the framework to support role identity development in leadership preparation programs both within and beyond the field of education.

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