Dancing with Identity: How Women in IT Navigate Leadership Construction

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In today's world, it might seem outdated to talk about gender imbalances in the workforce. However, the phenomenon of male-dominated sectors of the workforce continues to persist in American society. Specifically in the realm of information technology (IT), recent data reveals that approximately only a quarter of IT professionals are women (National Center for Women & Information Technology, 2022). Given their status as under-represented members of their gender in their respective fields, it follows that many of these women experience challenges as they endeavor to con-struct their leadership identities in their organizations. In order to make sense of this phenomenon and better understand how women make sense of and claim leadership identities in their IT organizations, I explored this topic in depth in my dissertation, "A Little Loud And A Little Alone: A Phenomenology Of Leadership Identity Construction Among Women in Higher Education Technology" (Barry, 2024).

The theoretical underpinnings of this study come from the concepts of leadership identity as a social construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987). DeRue & Ashford's (2010) theory framed leadership as a socially negotiated and co-constructed process and described this negotiation as a process of claims and grants. In this process, the aspiring leader would put out a claim to leadership, which must be granted by others for them to be socially endorsed as a leader in their group setting. This claiming and granting continues until this person reaches a place of collective endorsement. It is important to note that a leader is never done seeking the endorsement of others to maintain their social standing; claims must continue to be initiated by the leader and granted by the group if that leader is to maintain their status in their group setting.

Prior to a person's decision to put themselves out there for others on a social level by making claims to leadership, they must be able to see themselves as a leader after undergoing identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Identity work is the messy, personal process of making sense of who you are, connecting that with who you want to be, and enacting it. Specifically, it may include things like "trying on" identities, disregarding unwanted selves, and determining which stories we should tell about ourselves at certain times. This also includes an aspect of performativity as a person decides how to arrange themselves and their surroundings in a way that they think will be conducive to their future goals. Let us briefly set aside the complexities of this internal and interpersonal journey and recall that women remain significantly under-represented in the IT sector. Given the pervasive gender bias they encounter as members of male-dominated organizations, the question arises: How do women navigate and shape their leadership identities within such an environment?

Methodology
To explore this question, I used homogenous criterion sampling to recruit six participants from IT organizations in U.S. higher education institutions. Study parameters included that participants must currently work at a U.S. higher education institution, must identify as a woman, must work in an information technology field, must be at or above the age of consent, and must have worked in the information technology field for at least 10 years. I completed three semi-structured interviews over Zoom with each participant for a total of 18 completed interviews. This research was guided by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology as described by Smith et al. (2009) and Smith & Nizza (2022).

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This methodology is based on understanding personal experiences through the lenses of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. IPA is often used to explore participant experiences with personal and occasionally distressing events such as identity exploration, illness, and mental health.

For data analysis, I followed the detailed steps as outlined in Smith & Nizza (2022), starting with the creation of 3056 exploratory notes, or initial codes, from the interview data. I then condensed these into 902 experiential statements and further clustered these statements into 94 personal experiential themes. Ultimately, I grouped these themes to identify five overarching themes that encapsulate the shared experiences among the participants. These five themes constitute the main findings of the study and revealed what the experience of identity construction was for the participants.

Findings

The five group experiential themes that emerged from my analysis were: 1. Navigating Bias and Challenges, 2. Growing and Building Resilience, 3. Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections, 4. Self-Building and Developing Authenticity, and 5. Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices. As a whole, these themes reveal the messy and non-linear process of growth and development that women experience as they become leaders in IT spaces. The experiences of the six participants — Reba, Kaya, Tina, Nicole, Tiffany, and Grace—were thematically focused on overcoming obstacles, gaining empowerment, fostering inclusivity, developing authentic selves, and remaining adaptable across shifting social contexts. The participants faced a double bind of gender bias and the pressure of leadership roles, resulting in experiences of microaggressions and social stigma. Through personal empowerment, they emphasized the importance of resilience in overcoming obstacles and valued the role of adversity in shaping their success. Relationships founded on inclusivity and authenticity were pivotal, facilitating growth and connection in the workplace. Ultimately, these women solidified their leadership through adaptability and integrity, using their experiences to guide others and influence their IT environments, despite the scarcity of women in higher education IT leadership.

My first research question examined how these women underwent the identity work necessary to become leaders. In answering this question, I realized that the identity work process is profound and multifaceted. For the participants of this study, internalizing a leadership identity involved growing resilience and authenticity through personal and professional experiences, including navigating through negative events which paradoxically fostered strength and preparedness for leadership. Accepting struggles, embracing flexibility, and adapting to different social contexts were highlighted as requirements for leadership. Learning to be transparent about limitations and experimenting with different leadership traits from others were also key to this internalization. Ultimately, like sculpting a statue from marble, these women carefully shaped their leadership identities, chiseling out a form that blends innate authenticity with honed skills and perspectives needed for their roles.

My second research question sought to explore how these women claim a leadership identity in their organizations. For this question, the data revealed that the participants navigated a path marked by the convergence of confronting bias and challenges, forming meaningful connections, and solidifying their leadership stance. Existing in a male-dominated field meant addressing disrespect and speaking up when encountering unfair gender dynamics. Essential to the leadership claim process was fostering nurturing relationships, something which was supported by open communication and a focus on authenticity. As they solidified their leadership perspectives, these women became adept at adapting to new challenges and possibilities, embodying a blend of combativeness and agility. This ongoing social dance of claiming leadership is especially nuanced for women in IT. They counteract normative biases while seeking social validation and establishing their statuses in environments with overlapping challenges, all at the same time.

Implications

The implications for community college leadership to support women in information technology (IT) are substantial. To foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, leadership could implement tailored professional development programs that specifically address the unique experiences of women in IT, avoiding gender-neutral approaches. Administrators could also consider highlighting the experiences of women with bias through educational materials and workshops to help dismantle persistent postfeminist myths that undermine the reality of gender disparities.

Community college administrators should develop inclusive social events that break down the exclusivity of

traditional "good old boys' clubs," creating a space where everyone can form networks and gain the affirmation necessary to develop as leaders. Community college leaders must be proactive and accessible, while also celebrating and reinforcing the achievements of women. By fostering an organizational culture that encourages personal development and the discovery of leadership potential, leaders can serve as role models. They provide aspiring women leaders with a chance to witness a variety of leadership approaches firsthand and adopt the methods that align with their values and goals.

For women in IT, integrating their life identities into their professional personas could foster a more authentic, stress-free existence that encourages professional success. Encouraging a mindset of perseverance is also vital. Women should be supported to embrace and apply their unique strengths, which may stem from personal aspects of their lives, to professional scenarios. Additionally, community college leadership could support strategies that increase women's presence and authority in the workplace, such as assertive communication tactics. By adopting these practices, community college leadership can create a nurturing environment for women in IT, enabling them to thrive as leaders and professionals in their field.

Conclusion

I will conclude this abstract with a quote by by Charles Cooley. Describing his theory of the looking-glass self, he wrote "I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am; I am who I think you think I am" (Cooley, 1902). This quote reveals the complex interplay between self-perception and external perception that shapes our identity, a phenomenon at the heart of the experience of leadership identity construction for the participants of this study. As we have seen with the participants of this study, they have not only redefined themselves through their own eyes but also through the perceived eyes of their colleagues and the larger IT community. This intricate dance of identity negotiation highlights the transformative power of recognition and support from others—showing us that affirmation is crucial for fostering leadership identities, especially in spaces where those seeking affirmation are from underrepresented and minoritized groups. It is my hope that the findings of this study will inspire community college leaders to create environments that not only recognize the unique challenges faced by women in IT but also actively promote their leadership aspirations through mentorship and advocacy. In doing so, we can move towards a future where women in IT leadership are no longer an exception but a well-represented and empowered part of the technological landscape.

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