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## Leadership behaviour repertoires in public organizations

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# Chapter 5

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## **Joining in with leadership? A survey of leadership behaviour and identity of non-managerial employees in public organizations**

### **Abstract**

Awareness that not only managers, but also non-managerial employees are valuable sources of leadership in public organizations is growing. As leadership behaviour of non-managerial employees is still rarely studied, understanding why they show leadership behaviour has theoretical and practical value. Based on identity theory, seeing yourself as a leader may be a piece of the puzzle of behaving like a leader. This study zooms in on leadership behaviour of non-managerial employees and assesses whether leadership identity and previous experience in formal leadership positions affect their engagement in leadership. Survey data collected among public servants ( $n = 976$ ) in The Netherlands show that a more central leadership identity also stimulates leadership behaviour in this group of organizational members, which can partially be explained by their past experience. The results demonstrate the utility of role and identity theories in explaining leadership behaviour and have implications for research and leadership development.

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## 5.1 Introduction

Developments in organizational leadership are pronounced, whereby a shift from hierarchical to distributed and collective forms of leadership can be observed (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gronn, 2002; Jakobsen et al., 2021; Ospina, 2017). Increasingly, more flexible and hybrid forms of organizing enter traditionally bureaucratic organizations, blurring the typical connection between formal management positions in the hierarchy and responsibilities and expectations of leadership (Denis et al., 2001; Getha-Taylor et al., 2011; Groeneveld & Van de Walle, 2011; Shamir, 1999; van der Voet & Steijn, 2021). In response to these developments, organizations recognize the need for a broader participation in leadership, meaning that leadership must become enacted as a distributed phenomenon. Not only formal leaders, but also other organizational members are involved and expected to participate in organizational leadership (Spillane, 2006; Tian et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2004). Engagement of non-managerial employees in leadership can be seen as an organizational resource (Tian et al., 2016), because it taps the diversity of perspectives and expertise of organizational members (Woods et al., 2004; Lumby, 2019). Against this background, it is important to develop leadership capacity in organizations in a broader sense than formed by managers only (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Typically, non-managerial employees are not thought of as ‘leaders’, since bureaucratic structures grant leadership responsibilities and expectations to formal managers in the hierarchy (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hansen & Villadsen, 2010; Mintzberg, 1979). This resonates in the literature: studies on leadership behaviour by non-managerial organizational members are scarce, as research usually conceptualizes leadership as supervising subordinates (Van der Hoek, Groeneveld et al., 2021) and has a strong theoretical and empirical focus on formal managers (Ospina, 2017; Vogel & Masal, 2015). Now that this former group becomes more important for leadership in organizations, however, understanding why they engage is relevant. Prior research points out that thinking of yourself as leader contributes to exercising leadership behaviour (e.g., Day & Harrison, 2007; Day et al., 2009; Miscenko et al., 2017), indicating the concept of leadership identity is useful for this question. Identifying with a leadership role may be even more important in the absence of common expectations linked to a position as is the case for managers; possibly more barriers need to be overcome to show leadership behaviour when it is not explicitly part of your job (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Turner,

2002). Therefore, how non-managerial employees think of themselves is important to understand their leadership engagement.

How such leadership identity is shaped can be understood from someone's experiences. Besides experience gained through leadership training (e.g., Grøn et al., 2020), the literature shows that experience from learning on the job can contribute to one's self-image as a leader (Day et al., 2009; Miscenko et al., 2017). Working in managerial positions has much potential in this regard given commonly held job expectations involving leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Variation in prior working experience exists among non-managerial employees, since career paths do not only involve linear, upward moves along the hierarchy towards more managerial responsibility, which is particularly relevant when organizations become more flexible and hybrid.

This study addresses these issues by zooming in on the leadership behaviour of individual organizational members who are not formal managers and as such have no responsibility and authority over personnel. This is guided by the research question: *To what extent can leadership behaviour by non-managerial employees in public organizations be explained by leadership identity and formal leadership experience?* This research then aims to gain insight in leadership by non-managerial employees.

Several contributions to the literature on leadership and public management follow. Firstly, this study introduces a focus on leadership by non-managerial organizational members – a group that has largely been neglected in leadership research. Recently, more scholars call for adopting a more collective conception of leadership in public management (Kjeldsen, 2019; Jakobsen et al., 2021; Ospina, 2017). This study aims to connect to this developing scholarship by studying leadership behaviour of a group of increasingly important organizational members on the individual level. As some types of behaviour may be typically associated with formal authority and managerial positions, a repertoire conceptualization of leadership behaviour (Van der Hoek, Groeneveld et al., 2021) is adopted. Including such variety could help to avoid missing relevant differences in behaviour because non-managerial employees generally lack formal authority from their position. Secondly, the concept of leadership identity in relation to leadership behaviour has received limited empirical research attention in the generic and public management and leadership literature (Grøn et al., 2020; Kwok et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2020). More specifically, application to non-managerial public sector employees, in light of distributed leadership expectations, has not been investigated yet. Drawing on identity theory, this study advances theorizing on leadership behaviour

and identity. Addressing these theoretical questions can provide stepping stones for leadership development in practice.

The article continues with the theoretical framework, elaborating the central concepts and hypotheses. Then, the research design and methods are outlined and the analyses are presented. The final paragraph discusses the results and theoretical and practical implications.

## **5.2 Theoretical framework**

### **Leadership behaviour and identity**

Leadership is not reserved for formal leaders in hierarchical management positions only; increasingly, non-managerial employees throughout organizations are playing a role in organizational leadership (Gronn, 2002; Jakobsen et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2004). Since non-managerial employees often lack formal authority and roles, it is informative to focus on the leadership behaviour they engage in. Yukl's (2008) definition of leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 8), is open to broader participation in leadership. While collective and distributed notions of leadership become more common (Gronn, 2002; Jakobsen et al., 2021; Ospina, 2017), academic research on leadership behaviour by this latter group is rare. Possibly one of the reasons why such research lags behind is the association of leadership with positions in the hierarchy (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hansen & Villadsen, 2010). Like many observers, non-managerial employees may not see themselves as leaders, because of this prototypical idea of leaders. Yet, one's self-image affects one's behaviour. The literature on leader and leadership development shows that the notion of a leadership identity can help to explain leadership behaviour (Ibarra et al., 2014).

Following Grøn et al. (2020), leadership identity is defined as "the extent to which an individual views himself or herself as a leader" (p. 1698). Like leadership behaviour, it is not the sole terrain of formal managers (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). DeRue and Ashford (2010) discuss that leadership identity is not exclusively for formal hierarchical managers. They reckon that management positions are generally associated with leadership (Mintzberg, 1979), although these are not necessarily connected (both directions). Indeed, the authors argue

that managers and non-managerial employees can have leadership identities (as well as follower identities). They argue this is increasingly relevant as shared and distributed conceptions of leadership in organizations gain currency, which acknowledge that also non-managerial employees can enact leadership, and have leadership identities.

In line with Kwok et al. (2018) and Miscenko et al. (2017), this definition of leadership identity is connected to a particular role rather than a social category. Drawing on role theory, a role can be understood as the expectations regarding the behaviour of a person in a specific position, forming a mental image of what this role entails (Seeman, 1953). Similarly, identity theory poses that a role identity “reflects an internalized set of role expectations” (Farmer et al., 2003, p. 620; Stryker & Burke, 2000) that guides an individual in “what to do, what to value, and how to behave” (Kwok et al., 2018, p. 649). Since individuals can have various roles in their working lives, they can have multiple sub-identities (Day & Harrison, 2007), of which a leadership identity can be one. Among the set of sub-identities, variation in strength and centrality is possible. The stronger an identity is, the more someone defines herself with it (Miscenko et al., 2017), and the more central an identity is, the more important this identity is for one’s self-definition (Grøn et al., 2020). Considering the centrality of leadership identity helps to understand leadership behaviour, since central identities are more easily available to activate internalized role expectations and hence for cuing behaviour (Kwok et al., 2018). Additionally, more central identities have a stronger influence on behaviour, because centrality enhances consistency between role expectations and role behaviour (Grøn et al., 2020; Kwok et al., 2018).

Centrality involves contrasting two or more sub-identities. To understand the relationship between leadership behaviour and identity for non-managerial employees, the centrality of leadership identity in relation to substantive occupational identity merits attention. Analogous to a leadership identity, a substantive occupational identity is thought to provide an individual with role expectations in terms of values, beliefs, and behaviours connected to a specific career track (Leavitt et al., 2012). Such occupational identities result from being socialized in a culture of strong professional norms (Leavitt et al., 2012; McGivern et al., 2015; Pratt et al., 2006). When non-managerial employees work in substantive occupational roles, it is likely that they identify with their professional group and accept the behavioural expectations flowing from the professional norms. As Grøn et al. (2020) argue, this occupational identity is particularly relevant for employees



in public organizations, where many types of work are done by professionals and developing a leadership identity is even challenging for formal managers arising from such strong professions that provide strong occupational identities. This may be even more pronounced for organizational members without managerial position, for whom the substantive occupation may be the primary work role that offers a source for identity.

Combining these insights, a relationship between an individual's leadership identity and leadership behaviour can be expected. When you identify with a role of leader, identity theory posits that you have internalized expectations about appropriate behaviour matching that role (Day et al., 2009; Farmer et al., 2003; Lord & Hall, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In line with role theory, behavioural expectations inform the exposed behaviour (Biddle, 1979). This means that if you identify as a leader, you have accepted and internalized the expectation that you will act as a leader and therefore are also likely to show leadership behaviours. Indeed, various studies show that seeing yourself as a leader motivates engagement in leadership behaviour (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010) as it guides how you act and interact in roles of leadership (Day et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Kwok et al., 2018; Miscenko et al., 2017). When this identity is stronger or more central, the acceptance of behavioural expectations is stronger, and role behaviours are more easily activated. Consequently, it is more likely that you will follow up on these expectations by enacting leadership behaviour. In a public sector context, Grøn et al. (2020) also found support for this relationship. Since non-managerial employees can also develop a leadership identity, it can be expected that this relationship holds for this group.

**Hypothesis 1:** Organizational members with a more central leadership identity perform more leadership behaviour.

### **Leadership identity and experience**

How, then, does a leadership identity develop and become more central? Prior research points out that identity develops, amongst others, because of external stimuli (Miscenko et al., 2017) and empirical findings support that managers' centrality of the leadership identity is enhanced by prior experiences (Day et al., 2009). Also in a public sector setting, Grøn et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between tenure and leadership identity, indicating that managers with more formal management experience have a more central leadership identity compared to less

experienced managers. Two mechanisms that usually underlie such leadership identity development can be derived from identity theory: becoming acquainted with and internalizing the behavioural expectations connected to the leadership role and practicing and acting out the expected behaviours (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As a result, a connection between the leadership identity and the self is made and the individual sees herself as leader: a self-in-role schema is developed (Collier & Callero, 2005). A type of experience that can trigger these processes is working in managerial positions. A change of work position and role, for instance when transitioning into managerial positions, spurs development of the identity to also include more leadership identity (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day et al., 2009; Miscenko et al., 2017). This type of experience is particularly relevant to understand the development of leadership identity, as DeRue and Ashford (2010) note: “it is likely that a person’s leader identity will be enhanced by being placed in a formal supervisory role, even though the two are not synonymous.” (p. 640).

Why managerial experience contributes to leadership identity can be explained by the formal role expectations that connote a managerial position as well as opportunities to practise leadership behaviour. Typically, task descriptions of managerial positions contain explicit references to being in a leadership role. DeRue and Ashford (2010) refer to institutionalized expectations of leadership provided by formal supervisory positions. Formal leadership positions provide cues that can reinforce leadership identities, both for leaders themselves and for followers: “occupying a supervisory role represents a powerful institutional grant of a leader identity conveyed through a formal social structure that all group members recognize and operate within.” (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 640). The behavioural expectations that accompany a leadership role are then explicated and are more likely integrated into one’s self-image and leadership identity (Day & Harrison, 2007). Moreover, working in a managerial position creates opportunities to practise leadership behaviour and enacting the leadership identity. This reinforces one’s self-image as a leader (Collier & Callero, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Whether this translates to non-managerial employees has not been studied, yet a case can be made that experience that stimulated leadership identity in past positions of formal leadership continues to influence this group’s leadership identity when no longer in a management position. While non-managerial employees are likely to have a balance occupational–leadership identity that is tilted towards the former, management experience may have shifted it towards the latter. Although identity is subject to development and can change over time, it can be understood

more like incremental than radical change (Ibarra et al., 2014). It can then be thought that by transitioning from a managerial into a non-managerial position, the substantive occupational identity gains in importance. At the same time, the leadership identity may become less important, for instance because others around you expect you less to perform a leadership role (Stryker & Burke, 2000), but the leadership identity remains part of the self-image. The leadership identity built up during past managerial experience may be less important for the new position, but can still be activated and guide behaviour. Longer experience in managerial positions could have made the leadership identity more central, resulting in a stronger and more durable connection between the leadership identity and the self (Ibarra et al., 2014; Stryker & Burke, 2000). It can then be expected that having more experience in management positions makes it more likely that a leadership identity has been integrated in the self-image and hence that someone has a leadership identity that is more central compared to someone with less managerial experience.

**Hypothesis 2:** Organizational members with longer formal leadership experience in management positions have a more central leadership identity.

### **Leadership identity connecting behaviour and experience**

Based on identity theory this study argues for a path from prior experience through identity development to engaging in leadership behaviour. Several studies have supported this argumentation by showing that past behaviour enhances role identity and subsequently future behaviour. In sociology, Penner (2002) discusses research that supports this relationship for volunteering behaviour and volunteer identity (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Piliavin et al., 2002). Both the influence of prior volunteering behaviour on volunteer identity and the influence of volunteer identity on sustained volunteering behaviour have been supported. Moreover, the full path has been tested by Callero (1985) in a study of the salience of a blood donor role-identity in relation to blood donations. Callero (1985) shows that past blood donation is associated with higher salience of the identity, which in turn is associated with a continuation of more role-congruent behaviour.

These arguments could be translated to leadership behaviour and identity. Though not tested directly, Day and Harrison (2007) write about novice leaders having a narrower leadership identity and accordingly a narrower leadership behaviour repertoire, as they seem to “encounter most situations in the same way” (p. 366). This reflects that prior experience with leadership behaviour affects

the leadership identity and subsequently follow-up leadership behaviour. When someone has gained less experience, the leadership identity has developed less. In turn, this limits the impact on future behaviour. On the other hand, more experienced leaders are found to have a more developed leadership identity that is stronger and more central (Grøn et al., 2020; Lord & Hall, 2005), which is associated with more engagement in leadership. As DeRue and Ashford (2010) theorize, showing leadership behaviour bolsters the leadership identity, which stimulates continued leadership activity.

If leadership behaviour can be explained by the centrality of one's leadership identity, and centrality of leadership identity can be explained by one's past managerial experience, it could be argued that past experience leads to leadership behaviour as a consequence of developing a more central leadership identity. This leads to the last hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3:** Organizational members with longer formal leadership experience in management positions perform more leadership behaviour due to the development of a more central leadership identity.

The hypotheses are visualized in the conceptual model (Figure 5.1)



**Figure 5.1.** Conceptual model

## 5.3 Research design

### Data and sample

The hypotheses are tested on survey data, which were collected as part of a survey among civil servants in the Netherlands (see also Chapter 4). An online questionnaire was distributed among members of Flitspanel: managers and employees in the Dutch public sector who have signed up voluntarily to participate in research about management and work in the public sector. InternetSpiegel

(part of the Ministry of the Interior) coordinates Flitspanel and has carried out the logistics of sampling and questionnaire administration. Data collection ran from January through March 2020; one reminder was sent two weeks after the first invite.

The sample used in this study consists of non-managerial employees without formal leadership positions, which was specified as supervising employees and includes conducting performance and development reviews. Respondents work in organizations in four subsectors of the Dutch public sector: municipalities, police, universities, and university medical centres (UMCs). This selection was made to sample respondents with different types of work (policy, implementation, service delivery, high-skilled professional work) employed in organizations with varying characteristics (e.g., the role of hierarchy and professionalism), with the intention to sample variation on the explanatory variables. In total, 1,001 respondents filled out the survey (23% response rate). Respondents were excluded if they were older than the retirement age and/or they had entered impossible values (e.g., 102 years of experience in their current position). This resulted in complete data of 990 respondents. Upon inspection of outliers, 14 respondents were deleted, resulting in a total of 976 respondents.

60% of respondents were male, respondents had an average age of  $M=54.7$  ( $SD=7.72$ ) years and had on average  $M=10.8$  years of experience in their current position ( $SD=8.22$ ). In the total sample, respondents reported  $M=3.4$  ( $SD=6.46$ ) years of experience in managerial positions, ranging from 0 to 40 years. Leaving out those without managerial experience, respondents ( $n = 366$ ) had a mean of 9.2 ( $SD=7.69$ ) years of experience in managerial positions. The distribution of respondents per sector is as follows: municipalities 47.4%, the police 17.6%, universities 20.7%, and university medical centres (UMCs) 14.2%.

## **Measurement**

To measure the central concepts, previously developed scales and measures were used in the questionnaire. An overview of all items can be found in Appendix D.

### *Leadership behaviour*

The dependent variable, leadership behaviour, was measured with a 16-item scale developed by Denison and colleagues (1995). This scale covers a variety of leadership behaviours, matching a repertoire conceptualization of leadership behaviour (van der Hoek, Groeneveld et al., 2021). All items were scored on a 7-point

scale ranging from 1–*Almost never* to 7–*Almost always*. Item wording was adapted to ask respondents about their own leadership behaviour.

Four types of leadership behaviours, related to the quadrants of the Competing Values Framework (CVF; Denison et al., 1995; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981), were distinguished in the analyses and were measured by four items each. *Open Systems leadership behaviours* concern the process of adaptation to the organization's external environment. This includes developing, scanning, and maintaining a network and envisioning, encouraging, and facilitating change. *Rational Goal leadership behaviours* focus on directing and motivating goal-directed efforts of the group. This involves setting goals, clarifying roles, managing expectations, and stimulating task completion. *Internal Process leadership behaviours* emphasize internal control and stability. This entails creating and maintaining structure, coordinating, problem solving, collecting and distributing (performance) information, and overseeing compliance with rules and standards. *Human Relations leadership behaviours* prioritize human interaction and group processes. This involves encouraging deliberation and discussion, seeking and negotiating consensus or compromise, signalling and attending to individual needs and requests in a fair and active way, and facilitating individuals' development (Denison et al., 1995, pp. 527-528).

#### *Centrality of leadership identity*

Following the procedure of Grøn et al. (2020), centrality of leadership identity was measured with an item contrasting the importance of the respondent's substantive occupational identity and leadership identity: "The question below concerns the role that you identify with most in your work. We distinguish between a substantive occupational identity (such as police officer, doctor, researcher, policy advisor) and a leadership identity. Could you indicate which identity is most important to you in your work?" Answers were measured on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0–*Complete identification with occupational identity* to 5–*Both are equally important* to 10–*Complete identification with leadership identity*.

#### *Formal leadership experience*

Respondents were asked: "How many years of experience in management positions have you gained during their working life?" Respondents who answered *Not applicable, no such experience*, were recoded into a score of 0 years.

### *Control variables*

The analyses control for several individual and organizational characteristics that could influence the variables of interest and their relationships. Relevant individual characteristics are gender (0=*male*, 1=*female*), age in years, and educational level (0=*other*, 1=*lower vocational training*, 2=*lower secondary education*, 3=*higher secondary education*, 4=*intermediate vocational training*, 5=*higher vocational training*, 6=*some university education*, 7=*university education*, 8=*doctoral degree*). Moreover, experience in the current position measured in years is important, since it may affect identity centrality as well as the potential influence of prior managerial experience on identity centrality. Two organizational characteristics were included as control variables. Size of the organizational unit was measured by asking respondents to indicate the number of employees working for the organizational unit that their direct manager supervises. Answer categories range from 1=0-10; 2=11-20; 3=21-50; 4=51-100; to 5=More than 100. Lastly, sector serves as control variable, based on the sampling frame (municipalities, police, universities, and UMCs). Sector was dummy coded, with the university sector as reference category.

### **Analytical strategy**

To test the hypotheses, structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed using STATA 15. As a first step, the measurement model for the dependent variables was assessed in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Following Kline's (2011) recommendation, various complementary criteria were used to evaluate model fit. Since assumptions of (multivariate) normality were violated, the Santorra-Bentler correction was applied (Byrne, 2010). Table 5.1 reports the model fit statistics for alternative models. A single-factor model shows poor fit to the data. Alternatively, a measurement model including four factors corresponding to leadership behaviour types of the four quadrants of the CVF (Denison et al., 1995; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981) fits the data acceptably well. Evaluation of fit statistics and modification indices resulted in the inclusion of four error correlations. These additions are substantively defensible, because the included error correlations only relate to items measuring similar behaviours within the same factor (Byrne, 2010). Each factor has adequate reliability above the common threshold of 0.70 (Open Systems leadership behaviour: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ; Rational Goal leadership behaviour: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.74$ ; Internal Process leadership behaviour: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.82$ ; and Human Relations leadership behaviour: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.73$ ). Since single-indicator constructs complicate identification of full SEM models, path analysis with only

observed variables was performed. Therefore, factor scores, standardized at  $M=0.0$  and  $SD=1.0$ , were computed from the CFA to represent the leadership constructs.

As a second step, the structural path model was estimated to investigate the hypothesized relationships. A total mediation model was compared to a partial mediation model, in which the independent variable also had a direct relationship with the dependent variables. All control variables have direct paths to the dependent variables and are all correlated among each other and with the independent variable. Fit statistics were compared (see Table 5.1), which revealed a better fit for the partial mediation model. The analysis below therefore continues with this partial mediation model.

**Table 5.1.** Model fit of measurement and structural models ( $n = 976$ )

<b>Model</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Chi<sup>2</sup><sub>s-B</sub></b>	<b>TLI</b> <b>TLI<sub>s-B</sub></b>	<b>CFI</b> <b>CFI<sub>s-B</sub></b>	<b>RMSEA (90% CI)</b> <b>RMSEA<sub>s-B</sub></b>	<b>SRMR</b>
<b><i>Measurement model</i></b>						
1 factor	104	1384.29	0.746 0.758	0.780 0.790	0.129 (0.124-0.134) 0.112	0.074
4 factors	98	894.36	0.832 0.840	0.863 0.869	0.105 (0.099-0.110) 0.091	0.063
4 factors + 1 error correlation	97	715.05	0.867 0.875	0.892 0.899	0.093 (0.088-0.099) 0.081	0.059
4 factors + 2 error correlations	96	572.47	0.895 0.902	0.916 0.922	0.083 (0.077-0.088) 0.071	0.051
4 factors + 3 error correlations	95	485.65	0.913 0.919	0.931 0.936	0.075 (0.070-0.081) 0.065	0.048
4 factors + 4 error correlations	94	452.50	0.919 0.925	0.936 0.941	0.073 (0.067-0.079) 0.063	0.044
<b><i>Structural model</i></b>						
Total mediation	12	56.717	0.982 0.981	0.996 0.996	0.061 (0.045-0.077) 0.062	0.033
Partial mediation	8	22.599	0.991 0.991	0.999 0.999	0.043 (0.022-0.064) 0.043	0.016

Note: all Chi<sup>2</sup><sub>s-B</sub> values are significant at  $p < 0.01$ .



## 5.4 Results

### Descriptive statistics

Table 5.2 displays means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of all variables. Variation on all key variables is present. Respondents score just below the scale mid-point for centrality of leadership identity ( $M=4.18$ ,  $SD=2.264$ ), indicating that their occupational identity is slightly more important than a leadership identity, yet the latter is also substantial. Put in perspective: Grøn et al. (2020) observed the opposite balance in their sample of managers ( $M=6.75$ ,  $SD=1.94$ ). Importantly, the dependent, independent, and mediating variables show significant and positive associations, in line with the theoretical expectations. To what extent the variation in leadership identity centrality and prior management experience can account for variation in leadership behaviour activity will be examined next.

### Hypothesis testing

Table 5.3 shows the partial mediation path model with all direct and indirect effects. Looking at the control variables, only a few significant relationships appear. The effect of education is positive and significant for Open Systems, Rational Goal, and Human Relations leadership behaviour. Respondents working for municipalities in contrast to universities report significantly more activity for Open Systems and Human Relations leadership behaviour.

All direct paths from centrality of leadership identity to the four types of leadership behaviour are positive and significant (Open Systems leadership behaviour:  $B=.314$ ; Internal Process leadership behaviour:  $B=.296$ ; Rational Goal leadership behaviour:  $B=.308$ ; Human Relations leadership behaviour:  $B=.316$ , all  $p<.001$ ). Noteworthy are the differences in effect sizes: whereas Human Relations leadership behaviour only changes with  $b=.052$  for each step on the scale towards a more central leadership identity, the effect size for Rational Goal leadership behaviour is more than double that size ( $b=.127$ ). Still, the pattern holds for the whole repertoire of behaviours, providing support for hypothesis 1. The centrality of leadership identity itself can be explained by formal leadership experience in management positions, with every additional year of such experience being associated with a shift of  $.066$  towards a more central leadership identity ( $b=.066$ ;  $SE=.012$ ;  $B=.188$ ;  $p=.000$ ;  $R^2=.036$ ; not displayed in Table 5.3). Despite the weakness of this effect, it is significant and in the expected direction in support of hypothesis 2.

Table 5.2. Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and reliability statistics in diagonal ( $n = 976$ )<sup>a</sup>

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1 Leadership OS</b>	3.68	1.131	.85										
<b>2 Leadership RG</b>	3.95	1.103	.611**	.74									
<b>3 Leadership IP</b>	3.87	1.031	.542**	.748**	.82								
<b>4 Leadership HR</b>	4.32	.884	.607**	.631**	.597**	.73							
<b>5 Centrality leadership identity</b>	4.18	2.264	.305**	.292**	.289**	.268**	-						
<b>6 Management experience</b>	3.43	6.464	.204**	.211**	.199**	.156**	.188**	-					
<b>7 Gender</b>	.40	n/a	-.089**	-.041	-.022	.024	-.044	-.152**	-				
<b>8 Age</b>	54.66	7.715	-0.052	.012	-0.10	-0.13	-.001	.238**	-.134**	-			
<b>9 Education</b>	5 <sup>b</sup>	n/a	.216**	.004	-.002	.060	-.082*	.025	.101**	-.167**	-		
<b>10 Experience current position</b>	10.80	8.224	-.108**	-.075*	-.026	-.044	-.022	-.091**	-.038	.233**	-.111**	-	
<b>11 Size organizational unit</b>	3 <sup>b</sup>	n/a	.034	.044	.045	.031	.082*	.043	-.009	.026	-.097**	.022	-
<b>12 Universities</b>	.21	n/a	-.002	-.061	-.025	-.028	-.113**	-.012	.082*	-.011	.319**	.015	-.201**
<b>13 UMCs</b>	.14	n/a	-.067*	-.043	.014	.016	.001	-.061	.132**	-.073*	.077*	.127**	-.014
<b>14 Police</b>	.18	n/a	-.046	.016	-.025	.038	.083**	.106**	-.146**	.031	-.260**	-.054	.170**
<b>15 Municipalities</b>	.47	n/a	.084**	.068*	.029	-.018	.027	-.029	-.047	.037	-.114**	-.060	.044

\*\*p<0.01; \*p<0.05

<sup>a</sup> Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations were calculated based on the sum scores rather than factor scores of the dependent variables for ease of interpretation.

<sup>b</sup> Median provided for ordinal variables.

Table 5.3. Structural partial mediation model including control variables ( $n = 976$ )

	Leadership OS			Leadership IP			Leadership RG			Leadership HR						
	b	S.E.	B	p	b	S.E.	B	p	b	S.E.	B	p	b	S.E.	B	p
<b>Direct effects</b>																
<b>Control variables</b>																
Gender	-.079	.047	-.051	.093	-.013	.050	-.008	.791	-.031	.059	-.017	.592	-.020	.023	-.027	.386
Age	-.004	.003	-.044	.161	-.004	.003	-.041	.198	-.004	.004	-.036	.256	-.002	.002	-.039	.222
Years current position	-.004	.003	-.044	.175	-.002	.003	-.021	.545	-.003	.004	-.030	.373	-.002	.002	-.037	.262
Education	.094	.016	.189	.000	.015	.017	.030	.369	.043	.020	.072	.031	.030	.008	.124	.000
Size organizational unit	.016	.022	.023	.464	.021	.023	.029	.373	.022	.027	.025	.429	.009	.011	.025	.420
UMC <sup>a</sup>	-.023	.075	-.010	.758	.024	.081	.011	.771	.016	.095	.006	.867	.004	.038	.004	.909
Police <sup>a</sup>	.028	.083	.014	.738	-.036	.085	-.018	.666	.010	.100	.004	.923	.016	.040	.016	.696
Municipality <sup>a</sup>	.136	.059	.088	.022	.082	.065	.045	.267	.126	.075	.067	.091	.058	.029	.078	.047
<b>Independent variable</b>																
Management experience	.019	.004	.156	.000	.022	.004	.179	.000	.025	.004	.176	.000	.010	.002	.168	.000
<b>Mediating variable</b>																
Centrality leadership identity	.107	.010	.314	.000	.103	.011	.296	.000	.127	.013	.308	.000	.052	.005	.316	.000
<b>Indirect effects</b>																
Management experience through leadership identity	.007	.001	.059	.000	.007	.001	.056	.000	.008	.002	.058	.000	.003	.001	.060	.000
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>				<b>.192</b>				<b>.143</b>				<b>.158</b>				<b>.172</b>

<sup>a</sup> Reference category sector = universities.

Furthermore, the indirect paths from formal leadership experience in management positions through centrality of leadership identity to all four types of leadership behaviour are positive and significant. Thus, the data support hypothesis 3. These findings qualify the indirect relationships as mediation, though the coefficients signal only a weak association (Open Systems leadership behaviour:  $B=.059$ ; Internal Process leadership behaviour:  $B=.056$ ; Rational Goal leadership behaviour:  $B=.058$ ; Human Relations leadership behaviour:  $B=.060$ , all  $p<.001$ ). Again, the effect size of the mediated path for Human Relations leadership behaviour ( $b=.003$ ) is less than half the size than for the other types of leadership behaviour. The mediation also has to be considered as partial only, since formal leadership experience in management positions also has an independent positive and significant influence on each type of leadership behaviour (Open Systems leadership behaviour:  $B=.156$ ; Internal Process leadership behaviour:  $B=.179$ ; Rational Goal leadership behaviour:  $B=.176$ ; Human Relations leadership behaviour:  $B=.168$ , all  $p<.001$ ). Comparing the direct and mediated effects of the independent variable shows that the proportion of the total effect that is mediated is only modest. Respectively 27.4% (Open Systems leadership behaviour), 23.8% (Internal Process leadership behaviour), 24.8% (Rational Goal leadership behaviour), and 26.3% (Human Relations leadership behaviour) of the total effect of formal leadership experience is mediated through centrality of leadership identity, which reflects direct effect sizes being about three times as big. Still, the comparison of the direct effects of past experience and leadership identity centrality indicates that the latter is more influential for each type of leadership behaviour.

## 5.5 Discussion

Many public organizations are evolving into bureaucracies that incorporate more flexible structures. As formal authority becomes more distributed and collaboration across boundaries becomes more common, a clear command structure through the hierarchy becomes less straightforward. Consequently, the leadership role is no longer exclusively reserved for formal managers. This research ties into these developments at the individual level of those who are more and more assumed to step into a leadership role, although their formal position does not explicate that as part of their role: non-managerial employees.

This study confirms that studying leadership identity for organizational members who are not formal managers is relevant to understand their leadership behaviour. The data relate that non-managerial employees identify not only with their occupational role, but frequently also have a partial leadership identity. Moreover, leadership identity is more central for individuals with prior management experience, which indicates that an internalized leadership identity is not solely embedded in specific managerial positions, but transcends them (Ibarra et al., 2014). This invites follow-up questions about another group of interest for distributed forms of leadership: hybrid managers with substantive responsibilities for specified projects, but without hierarchical formal authority over personnel and resources (Mintzberg, 1979; Gronn, 2002). Future research could take job characteristics and role expectations into account to understand the relationships between leadership identity and behaviour better.

Furthermore, the analyses show that non-managerial organizational members with a more central leadership identity are more likely to step into leadership roles, since they are more actively engaging in leadership behaviour. This is in part a result of their experience in formal leadership positions in the past, in line with the hypotheses. However, it should be noted that the mediation is weak and only partial. This means that past managerial experience has an influence on leadership behaviour for additional and stronger reasons than through identification as a leader. Still, the association of leadership behaviour with leadership identity is stronger than the direct relationship with past managerial experience. This indicates that leadership identity is a relevant concept to understand leadership behaviour of non-employees better, but how the identification mechanism for this group is activated needs more research.

Focussing specifically on leadership behaviour, a notable contribution of this study is that this conclusion applies to the whole repertoire of leadership behaviours. It therefore underlines the relevance of taking a varied repertoire of behaviours into account, also when studying others than managers. Nevertheless, some differences in relationship strength appeared for the various types of leadership. Behaviours that can be described as more formal leadership (in particular Rational Goal leadership behaviours) were more affected by the leadership identity than behaviours related to social and group relations (Human Relations leadership behaviours). This is in line with arguments of Grøn et al. (2020) that the recognition of oneself as leader is necessary to perform leadership behaviours that relate to goal-oriented decision-making in line with the organizational strategy. When someone has done that before

as a manager, it may feel less out of step with their current role to contribute to such processes. Without the formal authority of a managerial position, there may be more perceived barriers to take on a leadership role and, consequently, limits to what can be expected from this group in terms of leadership behaviour.

These findings have implications for theorizing about broader participation in leadership. To advance these insights further, connecting to two lines of research seems particularly fruitful. Firstly, a connection with implicit leadership theories (ILTs) emerges, which is of growing interest in the public management literature (e.g., Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021). ILTs refer to the ideas people have about what leadership is and who is a leader based on prototypes of typical leaders and leadership (Lord et al., 2020). When organizational members not readily linked to such prototypes become more important for organizational leadership, follow-up research could explicitly address the social processes underlying leadership development and examine how ILTs relate to the development of leadership identity in general and among non-managerial employees in particular. In the social dynamics of claiming and granting leadership identities, ILTs come into play and are a useful angle to gain more understanding at the individual and group level. It would be particularly relevant to distinguish between ILTs that are more hierarchical (groups have a single leader and leadership and follower identities are mutually exclusive) or more shared (groups can have multiple leaders and leadership and follower identities can co-exist) (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Building on DeRue and Ashford (2010), it can then be argued that it is important for organizations with ambitions for increasing participation of non-managerial employees in leadership to consider what type of ILTs are current among their ranks and to stimulate shared views of leadership as a shared process.

Secondly, this research has focused on the individual level; another approach to understand leadership as a distributed phenomenon better is to adopt a system-centred approach that analyses leadership at the collective level (Currie et al., 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Ospina, 2017; Zeier et al., 2021). One recommendation is to study the social dynamics of leadership identity and behaviour on the level of groups or organizations separately as well as in combination with individual level inquiry. Questions relate to who accepts who as leader and who lets who lead, which would shed new light on leadership as a collective endeavour. In connection to ILTs, it could further be examined to what extent such practices are in line with ideas about what makes someone a leader and how many leaders can be active in parallel (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Marchiondo et al., 2015; Eпитopraki et al., 2017).

Furthermore, to what extent leadership expectations are incorporated into job descriptions and role conceptions of non-managerial positions, and how that relates to shared ILTs merits study. A further step is to investigate organizational culture, dominant ILTs, and how those relate to ideas and realities of distributed leadership. Relational acceptance and collective recognition require research beyond the individual level to grasp the social process.

Besides implications for theorizing, this study practical implications that could contribute to leadership development in public organizations. Since it was found that a more central leadership identity goes hand in hand with more leadership behaviour, leadership identity offers a leverage point to activate leadership capacity among non-managerial employees to accommodate a growing need from distributed forms of leadership. In particular, the finding that a leadership identity is not solely embedded in formal leadership positions indicates this potential, because it means that fostering a leadership identity among non-managerial employees could be a way to stimulate broader participation in leadership throughout organizations. Explicating what employees can do and are expected to do as part of their job helps them to adopt a leadership role and identity. Moreover, organizations could facilitate learning among colleagues, since employees with more formal leadership experience were found to use more leadership behaviour. Such former managers could act as examples for other non-managerial employees to engage in leadership (first to assume more leadership identity, then to act upon it), by drawing on their own past experiences.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations require some caution in drawing conclusions. Firstly, the cross-sectional design hampers the ability to make claims about causality in the model. Here it was argued that the development of leadership identity is a consequence of gaining experience in managerial positions. In contrast, it could be argued that individuals with a more central leadership identity seek out more opportunities to enact that identity and practise skills by pursuing formal leadership positions (Miscenko et al., 2017). Likewise, the centrality of leadership identity and engagement in leadership behaviour could mutually influence each other. While self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) supports that individuals derive a stronger sense of self as a leader from their past experience in management positions (in line with the current study), it would also support that engaging in leadership behaviour would feed a more central leadership identity (Miscenko et al., 2017) (in contrast

to this study). Feedback loops are plausible and require follow-up research, which should be tested in longitudinal designs.

Secondly, the measurement of the central concepts has some limitations. The measurement model of leadership behaviour included several items with weaker factor loadings, at the expense of construct validity. Moreover, error correlations within factors were included in the model to achieve better fit to the data. Since the instrument to capture the leadership behaviour repertoire is relatively new and was not used before to examine leadership behaviour of non-managerial employees, this study was an opportunity to explore the utility of this measurement. Based on the results, improvement is advisable to draw conclusions about effects on different types of leadership behaviour more confidently.

In addition, the measurement of leadership identity and formal leadership experience convey limited information. Respondents were not asked how they understand a leadership role, so no insight in how ILTs impact the studied relationships is available. Moreover, the contrasting of occupational and leadership identities in a single measure of identity centrality may forego the existence of a professional leadership identity with a distinct effect on leadership behaviour. Grøn et al. (2020) did not find that managers with a balanced occupational–leadership identity use more leadership aimed at professional development, indicating against this. Yet, if a separate type of identity exists for non-managerial employees cannot be ruled out. The measurement of experience necessitates the assumption that more years of experience indicate more opportunities to develop and a qualitatively richer experience. Prior studies show that type of management position, span of control, hierarchical level in an organization, and amount of leadership training play a role in leadership identity development (Dragoni et al., 2011; Grøn et al., 2020).

Finally, the sample was not selected randomly and is likely not fully representative for the population in terms of gender and age. The sampling frame contains a bias in favour of men and older employees, which also appears in the sample with a majority of male respondents and very low response by employees below the age of 30. Gender and age, however, do not seem to confound the relationships of interest in this study. Both in models that include and exclude these control variables, the relationships between formal leadership experience, centrality of leadership identity, and engagement in leadership behaviours are positive and significant. Still, it would be of theoretical value to further study the role of gender. The literature points at generally less management experience and less developed leadership identity among women due to the stereotype



‘think manager, think male’ and ILTs that may one’s identification with a leadership role less likely (e.g., Ibarra et al., 2014). In light of expectations of broader participation in organizational leadership, understanding possible barriers for a large share of the workforce seems necessary.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This study has two main contributions for the public management literature on leadership: creating insight in leadership behaviour as a repertoire by non-managerial employees in public organizations and demonstrating that leadership identity is a meaningful lens to explain why this group engages in leadership behaviour. Thereby this study feeds into discussions about distributed forms of leadership, in which this group of organizational members increasingly plays a role. Public organizations can take away that leadership development throughout organizations can be stimulated by encouraging a leadership identity for non-managerial employees to participate in leadership.