

Reflective Identity Leadership Theory: A Relational-Reflective Model of Leadership Identity Development

Ambrues Monboe Nebo

Ph.D. Student -Security Studies with an Emphasis on International Security, Hill-City University, Benin Republic

Adjunct Faculty, Department of Sociology and Criminology & Political Science, University of Liberia

Adjunct Faculty, Department of Criminal Justice & Forensic Science Program, African Methodist Episcopal University, Liberia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800083>

Received: 08 August 2026; Accepted: 14 August 2026; Published: 26 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This conceptual article develops Reflective Identity Leadership Theory (RILT) as a leadership-specific extension of the Looking-Glass Self and related identity-based approaches to leadership. The theory builds on Charles Horton Cooley's proposition that individuals develop aspects of self-concept through their interpretations of how significant others perceive them, while incorporating insights from Symbolic Interactionism, Social Identity Theory, leader identity development, and relational leadership scholarship. Rather than claiming that leadership identity is created solely through social recognition or individual reflection, RILT proposes a recursive reflective mechanism through which leaders perceive and interpret social responses, evaluate those responses against their emerging leadership self-concept, modify or defend that identity, and subsequently enact revised leadership behaviors that generate further social responses.

RILT's central contribution is not asserting that leadership identity is socially constructed—a proposition already established in leadership scholarship—but specifying a reflection–interpretation–identity adjustment–enactment–feedback cycle through which leadership identity may be reinforced, revised, or destabilized over time. The theory further identifies power asymmetry, identity salience, cultural expectations, social conformity, and the credibility of feedback as boundary conditions that influence whether relational feedback produces identity adaptation. Because the study is conceptual rather than empirical, the political and organizational examples presented are illustrative rather than evidentiary. The study develops six theoretical propositions to guide future empirical investigation. RILT consequently offers a process-oriented framework for examining how leadership identities develop, persist, adapt, and become socially reinforced across organizational and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Reflective Identity Leadership Theory; leadership identity; Looking-Glass Self; identity work; symbolic interactionism; social identity; leadership development; relational feedback; reflexivity.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership scholarship has generated extensive knowledge concerning traits, behaviors, relationships, competencies, and contextual influences. Yet an important question remains: How does an individual come to understand, maintain, revise, and enact a leadership identity over time?

This question is important because leadership is not simply a position occupied by an individual. Formal appointment may provide authority, but it does not automatically produce a corresponding internal leadership identity or social recognition. Individuals may occupy leadership positions while continuing to negotiate whether they see themselves as leaders, how others perceive them as leaders, and what kind of leader they believe they should become.

Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the Looking-Glass Self provides an important sociological foundation for examining this process. Cooley argued that individuals develop self-understandings partly through their perceptions of how others see and evaluate them. In the leadership context, followers, colleagues, supervisors, and other relevant social actors may therefore function as social mirrors through which leaders interpret their emerging identities. Nebo's (2022) earlier application of the Looking-Glass Self to leadership development advanced this argument by proposing that followers can operate as a "mirror" through which leaders interpret how they are perceived and use that perception in developing their leadership self-concept.

The present article takes that earlier argument a step further. It does not claim that the Looking-Glass Self previously explained nothing about leadership identity. Nor does it claim that social interaction, identity work, or relational leadership are absent from existing scholarship. Rather, the purpose of RILT is *to formalize a leadership-specific process that connects social appraisal, reflective interpretation, identity adjustment, behavioral enactment, and subsequent social feedback into a recursive cycle.*

This distinction is important because contemporary leadership scholarship already recognizes leadership identity as dynamic and socially embedded. DeRue and Ashford (2010), for example, conceptualized leadership identity construction as a social process involving identity claiming and granting. Ibarra et al. (2010) emphasized identity experimentation and development, while Miscenko et al. (2017) demonstrated that leader identity can develop over time. Social identity approaches further explain how leaders influence and mobilize groups through shared identities. Recent scholarship continues to emphasize the dynamic character of leadership identity. Braun, Nieberle, and Acton (2026), for example, explicitly examine leadership identity as involving dynamic states and identity liminality.

RILT therefore enters an already developed theoretical conversation. Its contribution is to ask a more specific question:

What happens between social feedback and subsequent leadership identity enactment?

RILT proposes that the missing link is reflective identity regulation: leaders do not simply receive social feedback; they interpret it, assess its meaning for their leadership identity, decide whether to incorporate, resist, or reinterpret it, and then enact an identity that produces additional social responses.

Thus, RILT is best understood as a ***theoretical extension***, rather than a claim that all elements of the theory are unprecedented.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Looking-Glass Self and Leadership Identity

Cooley's Looking-Glass Self provides the foundational sociological insight underlying RILT. Individuals develop self-understandings partly through their perceptions of how significant others view them.

Nebo (2022) applied this insight specifically to leadership development, arguing that followers can function as a "mirror" through which leaders interpret how they appear in the eyes of those they lead.

However, the Looking-Glass Self does not, by itself, constitute a complete theory of leadership identity development. It provides the foundational insight that perceived social evaluation contributes to self-concept, but it does not specify a leadership-specific sequence explaining how social appraisal becomes leadership identity, how that identity influences behavior, or under what conditions identity is changed or preserved. RILT addresses this limitation.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism provides the second theoretical foundation. Blumer (1969) emphasized that people

act toward things according to the meanings those things have for them, that meanings emerge through social interaction, and that meanings are interpreted and modified through interaction.

Applied to leadership, this suggests that leadership is not simply something individuals possess. It is also a socially interpreted role.

A leader's decision, communication style, gesture, or response to criticism carries meaning. Followers interpret those actions, and leaders subsequently interpret followers' responses. RILT places this reciprocal process at the center of leadership identity development.

Social Identity Theory and Identity Leadership

Social Identity Theory provides another important foundation by explaining how group membership influences self-concept and behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Identity leadership scholarship has subsequently developed this insight into an influential approach emphasizing how leaders embody, advance, construct, and embed shared group identities. Recent scholarship confirms that identity leadership has become an important area of leadership research, while also identifying theoretical complexity and unresolved questions surrounding identity processes.

RILT does not attempt to replace identity leadership theory. Instead, it addresses a somewhat different level of analysis.

Identity leadership primarily asks how leaders shape and mobilize a shared group identity. RILT asks how the leader's own leadership identity is continuously interpreted and regulated through relational feedback. This distinction is central to the theory's contribution.

DISTINGUISHING RILT FROM EXISTING LEADERSHIP IDENTITY THEORIES

The theoretical contribution of RILT becomes clearer when it is situated in relation to established perspectives on identity, interaction, and leadership. RILT does not claim that social appraisal, relationality, identity construction, feedback, or leadership identity development are individually novel concepts. Rather, its contribution lies in bringing these established insights together within a specifically leadership-focused, recursive mechanism that explains how individuals continually interpret, regulate, enact, and revise their leadership identities in response to social feedback.

The Looking-Glass Self provides an important foundation for understanding how individuals develop self-conceptions through their perceptions of how others view and evaluate them. Cooley (1902) conceptualized the self as emerging partly through an individual's interpretation of how they appear to others and the judgments they believe others make about them. RILT extends this foundational insight into the leadership domain by specifying how perceived evaluations of an individual's leadership are not merely incorporated into self-concept but become inputs into an ongoing process of leadership identity reflection and enactment (Cooley, 1902). Thus, RILT moves from the general formation of self-concept through perceived social evaluation toward a more specific account of how leadership identity is continually regulated through that process.

Similarly, Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes that meanings, identities, and self-conceptions emerge through social interaction. From this perspective, leadership identity cannot be understood as an entirely internal or fixed characteristic because it develops within relationships and social contexts. RILT builds upon this interactionist foundation by specifying a leadership identity cycle in which interpersonal encounters generate social appraisals, those appraisals are reflectively interpreted by the individual, and the resulting interpretation influences subsequent leadership behavior and identity claims (Blumer, 1969). The contribution of RILT, therefore, is not the assertion that identity is socially constructed, but the specification of how that construction operates recursively in the particular context of leadership.

RILT also differs from Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups and how group identification influences attitudes, perceptions, and behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social Identity Theory is particularly valuable for explaining collective identification and the ways in which group membership can influence leadership and followership. RILT addresses a different but complementary question: how feedback concerning one's perceived identity as a leader is interpreted and incorporated into an evolving leadership self-concept. The emphasis is therefore not principally on group categorization but on the reflective processing of social information concerning one's leadership identity.

The distinction from Leader Identity Development is equally important. Leader identity development perspectives explain how individuals come to see themselves as leaders and how that identity evolves through developmental experiences, social interactions, and opportunities to enact leadership (Ibarra et al., 2010). RILT accepts this developmental premise but places greater theoretical emphasis on the recursive mechanism through which identity development is continuously stimulated by social appraisal. Rather than treating leadership identity development primarily as a progression toward greater identification with the leader role, RILT conceptualizes development as an ongoing process in which reflection on social feedback can produce identity adjustment, reinforcement, negotiation, or resistance. Leadership identity can consequently become stronger, weaker, modified, or defended depending on how social evaluations are interpreted by the individual.

RILT is also distinguishable from Identity Leadership, which focuses substantially on how leaders represent, advance, and cultivate a shared group identity. Identity Leadership is concerned with how leaders become effective representatives and embodiments of a collective identity and how they shape followers' perceptions of "who we are" (Haslam et al., 2011). RILT instead focuses on the leader's reflective regulation of their own leadership identity. Its central concern is how leaders interpret social responses to their leadership, evaluate those responses against their existing self-understandings, and subsequently adjust, reinforce, resist, or renegotiate their leadership identity through future enactment.

Likewise, Relational Leadership Theory conceptualizes leadership as a social and relational process that emerges through interactions among individuals rather than as a property possessed exclusively by an individual leader (Uhl-Bien, 2006). RILT is compatible with this relational understanding but directs greater attention to the cognitive-reflective processes that occur within those relationships. Social relationships provide the context in which leadership appraisals are generated, but RILT explains what the individual does with those appraisals: how they are interpreted, reflected upon, incorporated, resisted, and translated into subsequent leadership behavior.

Taken together, these distinctions establish that RILT should not be understood as a claim that relationality, social construction, identity development, or feedback represent new theoretical discoveries. Those foundations are well established across sociological, social psychological, and leadership scholarship. The theoretical advancement proposed by RILT instead resides in their integration and formalization into a recursive leadership identity-development mechanism. The theory proposes that leadership identity is continually produced and reproduced through a dynamic sequence in which social appraisal leads to reflective interpretation, which produces identity adjustment or resistance, which shapes subsequent leadership enactment, which generates new social responses and, consequently, renewed social appraisal.

The recursive character of this process is central to RILT. Leadership identity is therefore neither simply imposed by others nor generated entirely from within the individual. It emerges through an ongoing interaction between external social evaluation and internal reflective interpretation. A leader may accept positive appraisal and strengthen an existing leadership identity, reinterpret negative appraisal and modify that identity, or resist social judgments that conflict with a strongly held self-conception. In each case, the individual's interpretation of social feedback influences subsequent enactment, while that enactment generates additional social responses that feed back into the identity process.

Accordingly, RILT's distinctive contribution is best located not in any single component of the model but in the recursive relationship among its components. The theory provides a leadership-specific explanation of how

social appraisal becomes theoretically consequential through reflection, how reflection can produce identity adjustment or resistance, and how those identity responses become visible through subsequent leadership enactment. The resulting enactment then becomes the basis for further social evaluation, making leadership identity an evolving and potentially self-reinforcing—or self-correcting—process.

The theoretical center of RILT can therefore be expressed as:

Social appraisal → reflective interpretation → identity adjustment or resistance → leadership enactment → social response → renewed appraisal.

This recursive mechanism differentiates RILT from theories that emphasize social evaluation, interaction, group identity, relational leadership, or leadership identity development primarily as separate phenomena. RILT's proposed advancement is the articulation of how these processes are connected through continuous reflective regulation. In this sense, RILT positions leadership identity not as a static personal attribute or a one-directional product of socialization, but as a recursively negotiated identity process in which leaders continually interpret social responses and regulate their subsequent leadership identity and enactment.

DEVELOPMENT OF REFLECTIVE IDENTITY LEADERSHIP THEORY

Definition

RILT is defined as:

A process theory of leadership identity development proposing that individuals construct, maintain, revise, or defend leadership identities through a recursive process in which perceived social appraisal is interpreted reflectively, incorporated into or resisted by the emerging leadership self-concept, and subsequently enacted through behavior that generates further relational feedback.

This definition contains five essential elements depicted in the figure below

Figure1: Recursive Cycle of Identity Construction and Leadership Practice in RILT



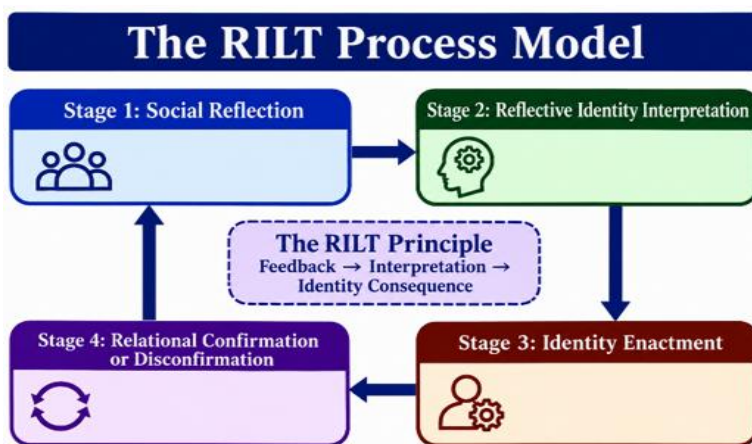
Source: *Author's conceptualization and theoretical formulation of Recursive Identity and Leadership Theory (RILT).*

Figure 1 illustrates leadership identity as a continuous, socially mediated, and reflexive process rather than a fixed personal attribute. The cycle begins with social appraisal, through which leaders interpret how they are

perceived by followers and other relevant actors. This appraisal informs reflective interpretation, prompting leaders to evaluate and make meaning of those perceptions. Leaders then adjust, reinforce, or resist aspects of their identity, which shapes subsequent leadership enactment. Their behavior generates follower and social responses, which provide further feedback that may confirm or disconfirm the leader's existing identity. This feedback initiates renewed reflection, returning the process to social appraisal and sustaining the recursive cycle. Thus, RILT conceptualizes leadership identity as continually produced, tested, revised, and reproduced through the interaction between self-reflection, social feedback, and leadership practice

THE RILT PROCESS MODEL

Figure 2



As shown in Figure 2, the RILT Process Model provides a structured explanation of how leadership identity is continuously formed, interpreted, enacted, and re-evaluated through social interaction. At its core, the model proposes that leadership identity is not a fixed or predetermined characteristic of the leader; rather, it develops through an ongoing process in which leaders perceive how others respond to them, interpret the meaning of those responses, adjust or reinforce their understanding of themselves as leaders, and subsequently enact that identity in their behavior. The responses generated by such enactment then provide new social information, allowing the process to continue recursively.

As depicted in Figure 2, the RILT Process Model comprises four interconnected stages, each representing a distinct but related component of the identity-development process: (1) Social Reflection, (2) Reflective Identity Interpretation, (3) Identity Enactment, and (4) Relational Confirmation or Disconfirmation. Although presented sequentially for analytical clarity, the stages should not be understood as a rigid linear progression. Rather, they constitute a recursive cycle in which the outcome of one stage becomes the social input for the next cycle of reflection and interpretation.

Stage 1: Social Reflection. The process begins when the leader perceives social cues concerning how significant others respond to their leadership. These cues may include verbal feedback, praise or criticism, follower compliance or resistance, consultation, trust, exclusion, body language, public approval or disapproval, organizational evaluations, and other informal social responses. At this stage, the central concern is how the leader perceives others to view their leadership. In essence, the leader asks: “How do significant others appear to see me as a leader?”

Stage 2: Reflective Identity Interpretation. The leader then interprets the meaning of the social responses received. This stage represents a central mechanism of RILT because social feedback does not automatically produce identity change. The same response may be interpreted differently by different leaders, producing different identity consequences. For example, a leader may interpret team disagreement as evidence of ineffective communication and consequently become more consultative. Alternatively, the leader may interpret the same disagreement as resistance to authority and respond by becoming more directive. Thus, RILT emphasizes the sequence: *feedback* → *interpretation* → *identity consequence*.

Stage 3: Identity Enactment. Following interpretation, the leader enacts the revised, reinforced, or defended leadership identity through observable behavior. The identity is therefore translated into leadership practice. A leader who interprets social feedback as a need for greater consultation may adopt a more participatory leadership approach, whereas a leader who interprets criticism as evidence of weakened authority may respond with greater direction and control. Identity, in this sense, becomes behaviorally visible through leadership enactment.

Stage 4: Relational Confirmation or Disconfirmation. The leader's enacted behavior generates further responses from followers, colleagues, and other relevant social actors. These responses may confirm the emerging leadership identity, disconfirm it, strengthen or weaken it, or provide new information that initiates another cycle of reflection and interpretation. This stage captures the fundamentally recursive character of RILT: leadership identity is continually tested and reconstructed through subsequent social interaction. The process therefore does not terminate with identity enactment; rather, enactment produces new relational feedback that returns the leader to the process of social reflection.

Taken together, the four stages demonstrate the central proposition of RILT: leadership identity develops through an ongoing interaction between social feedback, reflective interpretation, identity enactment, and subsequent relational responses. The model therefore moves beyond a simple feedback-based explanation of leadership identity by identifying interpretation as the mechanism through which social responses acquire identity significance. This recursive process explains why similar social experiences may produce different leadership identity outcomes and why leadership identity can be simultaneously revised, reinforced, or defended over time.

The RILT Process Model provides a structured representation of how leadership identity is continuously formed, evaluated, and revised through social interaction and reflective interpretation. Building on the theoretical distinctions established above, the model translates RILT's central proposition into a sequential but recursive process linking social appraisal, reflective interpretation, identity adjustment or resistance, leadership enactment, and subsequent social response. Rather than presenting leadership identity as a fixed attribute, the model conceptualizes it as an ongoing process in which leaders continually interpret social feedback and regulate how they understand and enact their leadership identity.

NEXUS BETWEEN THE RILT PROCESS MODEL AND THE RECURSIVE CYCLE

The RILT Process Model and the Recursive Cycle of Identity Construction and Leadership Practice represent two complementary levels of the same theoretical mechanism. The Process Model specifies the causal and interpretive logic through which social feedback becomes consequential for leadership identity: social appraisal is interpreted reflectively, that interpretation produces identity adjustment, reinforcement, or resistance, and the resulting identity is expressed through leadership behavior. The Recursive Cycle extends this logic by demonstrating that the process does not terminate after leadership enactment. Rather, enacted leadership generates new follower and social responses, which provide additional material for identity confirmation, disconfirmation, and renewed reflection. In this sense, the Process Model explains how the mechanism operates, whereas the Recursive Cycle demonstrates why the mechanism is recursive.

The relationship can therefore be expressed as follows: *social appraisal* → *reflective interpretation* → *identity adjustment, reinforcement, or resistance* → *leadership enactment* → *follower and social response* → *identity confirmation or disconfirmation* → *renewed reflection* → *subsequent social appraisal*. The final stage returns the process to its beginning, establishing the recursive character of RILT. Consequently, leadership identity is not understood as a stable outcome produced once through social interaction; it is continuously reconstructed through the ongoing interaction of social perception, reflective interpretation, identity regulation, behavioral enactment, and relational feedback. The recursive cycle is therefore not a separate model from the RILT Process Model but its dynamic extension and visual representation.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

The theoretical propositions of RILT translate its central process model into specific, testable statements about how leadership identity is formed, maintained, adjusted, and sometimes resisted through social appraisal and reflective interpretation. These propositions clarify the mechanisms through which RILT extends existing leadership identity perspectives and establish the conditions under which social feedback is expected to influence subsequent leadership identity and enactment.

Proposition 1: Social Appraisal

P1: The greater the salience and credibility of social appraisal concerning an individual's leadership behavior, the more likely that appraisal is to influence the individual's subsequent interpretation of their leadership identity.

Proposition 2: Reflective Interpretation

P2: The relationship between social appraisal and leadership identity change is mediated by the leader's reflective interpretation of the meaning and legitimacy of that appraisal. This proposition is particularly important because it distinguishes RILT from a simple stimulus-response model.

Proposition 3: Identity Enactment

P3: Changes or reinforcement in a leader's perceived leadership identity increase the likelihood of corresponding changes or reinforcement in leadership behavior.

Proposition 4: Relational Confirmation

P4: Repeated congruence between a leader's enacted identity and followers' responses increases the stability of the leader's perceived leadership identity.

Proposition 5: Identity Disconfirmation

P5: Persistent discrepancy between a leader's self-understood leadership identity and significant social responses increases the likelihood of identity revision, behavioral adaptation, or defensive identity preservation.

Proposition 6: Power and Cultural Boundary Conditions

P6: The influence of relational feedback on leadership identity is moderated by power asymmetry, identity salience, cultural expectations, and norms of social conformity, such that feedback is less likely to produce identity adaptation when leaders possess substantial institutional power or when prevailing cultural norms strongly discourage identity deviation.

These propositions transform RILT from a descriptive framework into a theory capable of generating empirically testable expectations.

BOUNDARY CONDITIONS OF RILT

RILT does not assume that all social appraisals exert equal influence on leadership identity. The effect of feedback is likely to vary according to the source, credibility, relational significance, and perceived importance of the evaluator. Accordingly, feedback from a trusted mentor, long-serving colleague, superior, or highly influential follower may carry greater weight in shaping reflective interpretation and subsequent identity adjustment than anonymous criticism from an insignificant or weakly connected actor.

Power Asymmetry

Leaders with substantial formal or coercive authority may be less dependent on follower approval.

Consequently, negative feedback may not necessarily result in identity adaptation.

Identity Salience

The more central leadership identity is to an individual's self-concept, the more consequential identity-confirming or identity-threatening feedback may become.

Cultural Expectations

In cultures characterized by strong expectations concerning hierarchy, respect for authority, communal obligation, or conformity, leaders may interpret feedback differently from leaders operating in highly individualistic environments. RILT therefore does not predict identical identity-development processes across cultures.

Organizational Climate

Organizations that encourage psychological safety and open feedback may provide leaders with more credible and diverse social information. By contrast, highly authoritarian organizations may suppress negative feedback, creating an inaccurate social mirror.

Feedback Credibility

Not all feedback has equal identity consequences. Feedback from a trusted mentor, long-serving colleague, superior, or highly influential follower may carry greater weight than anonymous criticism from an insignificant actor.

POLITICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS

The following political, organizational, and security-related cases are presented as illustrative applications of RILT rather than empirical tests of the theory. They demonstrate how the proposed mechanism can be used as an interpretive framework for examining leadership identity across different historical, political, organizational, and security contexts. The cases are therefore intended to demonstrate the explanatory reach of RILT without implying that the theory has been empirically validated through these examples. To maintain analytical consistency, each case is interpreted cautiously, distinguishing observable leadership enactments and social responses from claims about leaders' internal reflective processes.

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela provides an early illustration of how leadership identity may be shaped and reinforced through collective recognition. His leadership became closely associated with the values of the anti-apartheid struggle, reconciliation, justice, and national unity. Following his release from prison, his legitimacy was reinforced through broad recognition within the African National Congress (ANC) and internationally that he represented important aspirations and values of South Africa's oppressed majority (Mardhiana, 2025; Koshal, 2024). From an RILT perspective, this illustrates how social appraisal and collective recognition may reinforce a leader's perceived identity and legitimacy over time.

The case does not, however, establish that Mandela consciously processed these social evaluations through the specific reflective sequence proposed by RILT. It is therefore best treated as an illustrative application demonstrating how collective recognition may contribute to leadership identity reinforcement rather than as empirical confirmation of the RILT mechanism.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's presidency provides a related illustration within a post-conflict setting. Her leadership became associated with Liberia's aspirations for stability, reconstruction, good governance, and women's political empowerment following years of civil conflict. Her acceptance and recognition among significant segments of the Liberian population can be interpreted as forms of social validation through which these expectations became associated with her leadership identity (Maran, 2025; Gallo-Cruz & Remsberg, 2021). From an RILT perspective, the case illustrates how prevailing societal expectations and subsequent social responses may contribute to the reinforcement of leadership identity.

As with Mandela, however, the available evidence does not establish that Sirleaf consciously perceived, interpreted, and incorporated particular social appraisals into her leadership identity. The case consequently illustrates the potential explanatory application of RILT without constituting an empirical test of its reflective mechanism.

Jacinda Ardern

Jacinda Ardern's response to the Christchurch mosque attacks provides an illustration of leadership identity in a crisis context. Her empathetic public addresses, visible solidarity with the Muslim community—including her wearing of the hijab—and personal engagement with victims' families communicated compassion, inclusion, and collective solidarity. These actions can be interpreted as leadership enactments that resonated with broader social expectations concerning how a national leader should respond to tragedy and vulnerability (Khorana, 2022; Timperley & Hayward, 2025). From an RILT perspective, the case illustrates how social expectations and subsequent appraisal may become relevant to the enactment and reinforcement of leadership identity.

The public record, however, does not establish that Ardern consciously perceived particular social appraisals, reflectively interpreted them, and incorporated them into her leadership identity. The case therefore functions as an interpretive illustration of the relationship between social expectations, leadership enactment, and social response rather than as evidence of the internal cognitive process proposed by RILT.

Barack Obama

Barack Obama's early political campaigns provide an illustration of leadership identity formation within an electoral environment. His “Yes We Can” slogan and emphasis on inclusion, hope, and collective participation helped construct a leadership identity that resonated with the expectations and aspirations of a diverse electorate (Bligh & Kohles, 2009; Bang, 2009). From an RILT perspective, these campaign practices can be interpreted as leadership enactments shaped by the social environment in which Obama sought to establish himself as a national leader. The interaction between campaign messaging, public expectations, and electoral responses illustrates how leadership identity may be negotiated through social appraisal and subsequent enactment.

Nevertheless, the available evidence does not establish that Obama consciously processed specific social appraisals through the recursive mechanism proposed by RILT. The case is therefore best understood as an illustration of the potential interpretive utility of RILT rather than empirical evidence of the theory.

Angela Merkel

Angela Merkel's leadership in Germany offers another illustration of leadership identity within an institutional and crisis-management context. Her pragmatic and consensus-oriented style was repeatedly associated with expectations of stability, responsibility, and institutional continuity, particularly during periods of uncertainty such as the European financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2022; Bartenstein & Wessels, 2024). The continued recognition of these characteristics can be interpreted through RILT as social appraisal that potentially reinforced particular dimensions of her leadership identity over time.

At the same time, the case does not establish that Merkel consciously followed the RILT sequence. Without direct evidence of her perception and reflective interpretation of specific social appraisals, the example remains an illustrative application of how social expectations, leadership enactment, and identity reinforcement may be connected.

Paul Kagame

Paul Kagame's leadership in post-genocide Rwanda provides an illustration of the relationship between leadership identity and observable leadership enactment. His emphasis on national unity, institutional discipline, security, technological development, and economic transformation has contributed to a leadership identity frequently characterized in terms of strong, development-oriented, and transformational governance (Abraham & Etuk, 2025; Mulyanyuma, 2025). From an RILT perspective, these policy choices, decision-making practices, and communication strategies can be examined as visible expressions through which leadership identity is enacted and subsequently evaluated by followers, institutions, and other stakeholders.

The case also highlights that leadership identity becomes socially consequential through observable performance and subsequent social response. Particular aspects of Kagame's leadership identity may consequently be reinforced, contested, or renegotiated through continuing interaction with relevant audiences. However, the available evidence does not establish that Kagame consciously perceived particular social appraisals, reflectively interpreted them, and deliberately modified his leadership identity according to the RILT mechanism. The case therefore remains an illustrative application rather than an empirical test.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala provides an organizational and international policy illustration of leadership identity enacted across changing professional roles, institutional expectations, and global challenges. Her career spans economic policy, international development, financial governance, and international trade, including service as Nigeria's Finance and Foreign Minister, Managing Director of the World Bank, and Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO describes her as an experienced negotiator and consensus builder who has worked with governments and stakeholders across diverse international settings (WTO, 2026). During the COVID-19 pandemic, her leadership at the WTO involved addressing disruptions to global supply chains, facilitating access to essential medical products, and advocating stronger international cooperation and a more resilient multilateral trading system (WTO, 2021, 2023).

From an RILT perspective, these experiences provide an illustrative basis for examining how leadership identity may be enacted and potentially adapted as leaders move across institutional environments and respond to changing expectations and global challenges. Her engagement with governments, international institutions, and other stakeholders demonstrates the relational and socially situated character of leadership enactment.

However, the evidence establishes her leadership activities and responses to changing circumstances rather than the internal process of perceiving, interpreting, and incorporating specific social appraisals. The case should therefore be understood as an illustrative application of RILT rather than an empirical test of its reflective mechanism.

Obiageli Ezekwesili

Obiageli Ezekwesili illustrates socially responsive leadership in governance advocacy and civil society engagement. Her advocacy for transparency, accountability, and governance reform, including her involvement in the #BringBackOurGirls movement, demonstrates leadership enacted through responsiveness to pressing societal concerns and collective demands (Abubakar, 2015; Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). From an RILT perspective, such engagement can be interpreted as leadership enactment shaped by attention to public concerns, social expectations, and responses from affected communities.

The case also illustrates how leadership identity may be expressed and reinforced through visible engagement with issues carrying substantial social meaning. Nevertheless, it does not establish that Ezekwesili consciously processed particular social appraisals through the reflective sequence proposed by RILT. It is therefore an illustrative application rather than evidence that the RILT mechanism directly caused her leadership behavior.

Fatim Cissé-Dibba

Fatim Cissé-Dibba's work in women's education, leadership development, and professional capacity-building provides an illustration of leadership identity enacted through engagement with social structures and the development of others. Her involvement with initiatives such as the Amujae Initiative and leadership programs reflects an emphasis on developing women's leadership capacity and expanding opportunities for women to participate more effectively in institutional and public life (Wadda, 2025). From an RILT perspective, these activities can be interpreted as leadership enactments through which responsiveness to social needs and expectations becomes incorporated into leadership practice.

The case further highlights the relational dimension of RILT: leadership identity may be reinforced not only through responses to one's own social appraisal but also through engagement with and development of others. However, available evidence does not establish that Cissé-Dibba consciously perceived, interpreted, and incorporated specific social appraisals according to the recursive process proposed by RILT. The case is therefore best treated as an illustrative application rather than an empirical test.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine provides a particularly useful illustration of dynamic leadership identity work under conditions of crisis. His transition from entertainer and political newcomer to wartime president involved a significant reconfiguration of how his leadership identity was publicly enacted and perceived. Through frequent direct communication with Ukrainian citizens and international audiences, Zelenskyy projected themes of solidarity, resilience, national unity, and resistance (Guliashvili, 2023; Larsen & Ihlen, 2025). His military-style attire, informal video addresses, and highly personal communication also became recognizable symbols of solidarity with Ukrainians experiencing the war (Myzelev, 2025).

From a Social Identity Theory perspective, these practices can be understood as reinforcing a shared Ukrainian identity organized around resistance, unity, and collective endurance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Scholarship similarly demonstrates how Zelenskyy's wartime rhetoric constructed and reinforced collective identity through inclusive language and representations of Ukrainians as a unified national community (Guliashvili, 2023; Gleibs, 2025). From an RILT perspective, however, his repeated communication and symbolic presentation can additionally be interpreted as leadership enactments occurring within an environment of intense social appraisal, where public expectations, institutional demands, and audience responses continually shape the context in which leadership identity is enacted and evaluated.

As with the other cases, this interpretation does not establish that Zelenskyy consciously perceived particular social appraisals, reflectively interpreted them, and deliberately adjusted his leadership identity through the RILT mechanism. The case therefore demonstrates how RILT may complement Social Identity Theory by directing attention to the reflective and recursive relationship between social appraisal, leadership identity, and subsequent enactment.

Security Leadership

The RILT framework also extends naturally to security organizations, where leadership identity is negotiated under conditions of hierarchy, operational pressure, institutional expectations, accountability, and competing understandings of effective leadership. Consider a police or security commander who receives repeated feedback that subordinates perceive the commander as overly authoritarian. Rather than assuming that such

feedback automatically changes the leader's identity, RILT directs attention to the reflective process that follows the appraisal.

The commander may interpret the feedback as legitimate and adjust the leadership identity being enacted by adopting a more consultative approach. Alternatively, the commander may resist the appraisal and maintain the existing leadership style if it is perceived as necessary for operational effectiveness. Either response may generate new reactions from subordinates, creating another cycle of social appraisal. The example therefore illustrates the central RILT mechanism:

Social appraisal → reflective interpretation → identity adjustment or resistance → leadership enactment → social response → renewed appraisal.

The security example is particularly useful because feedback in high-risk environments may carry different meanings depending on its source, credibility, timing, relational significance, and perceived relevance to mission requirements. RILT therefore provides a framework for examining how leadership identities may be adapted, reinforced, or resisted across political, organizational, and security environments rather than assuming that social feedback produces uniform identity change.

Synthesis

Taken together, these cases demonstrate the potential applicability of RILT across diverse leadership environments—from political transitions and national crises to organizational leadership, civil society advocacy, international governance, and security operations. Their purpose is not to establish that particular leaders consciously followed the RILT process, but to demonstrate how the theory can be used to interpret observable relationships among social appraisal, reflective possibilities, leadership enactment, and subsequent social response. In this respect, the cases provide illustrative applications of the theory's explanatory logic while preserving a clear distinction between theoretical illustration and empirical validation.

RILT AND THE AUTHOR'S EARLIER WORK

RILT represents a development of, rather than a simple relabeling of, Nebo's (2022) earlier application of the Looking-Glass Self to leadership development. The earlier study established the foundational proposition that followers can function as a social mirror through which leaders interpret how they are perceived. RILT retains this insight but extends it in four ways. First, it specifies reflection as a distinct mediating mechanism between social appraisal and identity change. Second, it distinguishes identity adjustment from identity reinforcement and resistance. Third, it connects identity interpretation to subsequent leadership enactment and the social responses generated by that enactment. Fourth, it specifies boundary conditions—including power asymmetry, cultural expectations, identity salience, organizational climate, and feedback credibility—that determine when relational feedback is likely to modify leadership identity.

METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITION

This article adopts a conceptual theory-building design. It does not report primary empirical data and therefore does not claim to empirically validate RILT. The theory is developed through critical integration of established scholarship concerning the Looking-Glass Self, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Identity Theory, leader identity development, identity work, and relational leadership. The illustrative leadership cases are used to demonstrate the possible explanatory application of the proposed mechanisms rather than as empirical evidence of causal relationships.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The theoretical contribution of RILT rests on four interrelated advances that distinguish it from existing perspectives on leadership identity. First, at the mechanistic level, RILT specifies a recursive process

connecting *social appraisal* → *reflective interpretation* → *identity adjustment or resistance* → *leadership enactment* → *relational response*. This mechanism explains how social evaluations become consequential for leadership identity through reflective interpretation and subsequent behavioral enactment.

Second, at the process level, RILT conceptualizes leadership identity as an ongoing and potentially changing process rather than as a fixed psychological state or stable personal attribute. Leadership identity is continually reproduced, reinforced, adjusted, or resisted as leaders encounter and interpret social responses to their leadership.

Third, at the boundary-condition level, RILT identifies circumstances under which social feedback is more or less likely to influence leadership identity. The significance of an appraisal may depend on factors such as the credibility, status, relational proximity, trustworthiness, and perceived importance of the source. Thus, RILT does not assume that all feedback carries equal identity-shaping influence.

Fourth, at the integrative level, RILT brings together insights from sociological and organizational perspectives on the self, social interaction, identity, leadership, and relational processes while maintaining a distinct analytical focus on reflective identity regulation. Its contribution therefore extends beyond simply combining existing theories. RILT specifies how these established insights are connected through a recursive mechanism that explains how leaders interpret social appraisal, regulate their leadership identities, and subsequently enact those identities in ways that generate further social responses.

Taken together, these four contributions position RILT as a mechanism-oriented, process-based, boundary-sensitive, and integrative theory of leadership identity regulation. Its theoretical novelty lies not in claiming ownership of the individual concepts on which it draws, but in specifying their recursive relationship and identifying the conditions under which that relationship is most likely to operate.

WHAT RILT DOES—AND DOES NOT—CLAIM

RILT does not claim that leadership identity, social construction, relationality, feedback, reflection, or identity work are newly discovered phenomena. Each of these concepts has substantial theoretical and empirical foundations. Nor does RILT claim that leaders invariably change their identities in response to social feedback. Rather, the theory's contribution lies in specifying how perceived social appraisal may become consequential through reflective interpretation, identity adjustment or resistance, behavioral enactment, and subsequent relational confirmation or disconfirmation. RILT is therefore proposed as a process-oriented theoretical extension that generates propositions for empirical examination rather than as an empirically validated theory.

CONCLUSION

Reflective Identity Leadership Theory offers a process-oriented extension of existing scholarship on leadership identity. Its starting point is the sociological insight associated with Cooley's Looking-Glass Self: individuals develop aspects of self-understanding through their interpretations of how others perceive them. Nebo's (2022) earlier application of this leadership insight established its relevance to leadership development.

RILT extends that foundation by specifying a recursive leadership identity mechanism consisting of social appraisal, reflective interpretation, identity adjustment or resistance, leadership enactment, and relational confirmation or disconfirmation.

The theory consequently shifts the analytical question from simply asking “*How do others see the leader?*” to a more theoretically precise sequence:

How does the leader perceive how others see them, how does the leader interpret that perception, how does that interpretation influence leadership identity, how is the identity enacted, and how do subsequent social responses reinforce or challenge it? This distinction represents the principal theoretical contribution of RILT.

The theory also recognizes that leadership identity does not develop under identical conditions. Power, culture, organizational climate, identity salience, social conformity, and the credibility of feedback can influence whether relational information produces identity adaptation or identity resistance. RILT therefore does not assume that leaders are passive recipients of social judgment. Leaders are reflective actors who may incorporate, reinterpret, negotiate, or reject social evaluations.

Because this article is conceptual, the proposed relationships should not be interpreted as empirically established. The cases discussed are illustrative applications rather than evidence validating the theory. Future research should therefore test the propositions through longitudinal qualitative studies, interviews with leaders and followers, experimental designs, multi-source organizational studies, and comparative research across cultural contexts.

Ultimately, RILT's value lies not in claiming that leadership identity has never been understood as social, relational, or dynamic. Those insights are already well established. Its value lies in providing a more explicit account of the reflective mechanism through which social appraisal may become identity change, identity reinforcement, or identity resistance in leadership.

DECLARATIONS

Funding

No funding was received for this research.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the research, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval and consent to participate were not required because this study is theoretical and conceptual in nature and did not involve human participants or the collection of primary empirical data.

Acknowledgement

I express my sincere gratitude to the editors of this journal and the anonymous reviewers for their careful evaluation of this manuscript and for their constructive comments and insightful suggestions, which contributed significantly to strengthening its clarity, coherence, theoretical development, and scholarly rigor.

I also pay tribute to the late Dr. Joseph Saye Guannu, a distinguished Liberian historian, educator, and scholar, whose mentorship, intellectual guidance, and unwavering commitment to academic excellence profoundly influenced my scholarly development. His emphasis on critical inquiry, intellectual discipline, and ethical scholarship continues to inspire my pursuit of rigorous and meaningful research.

I gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of scholars whose foundational work in sociology, social psychology, symbolic interactionism, identity theory, leadership studies, organizational behavior, and relational leadership provided the conceptual foundations for this article. In particular, the manuscript draws upon the enduring insight of Charles Horton Cooley's Looking-Glass Self, together with subsequent scholarship on social interaction, identity formation, leader identity development, social identity, and relational leadership. These bodies of scholarship provided the intellectual foundation from which the Reflective Identity Leadership Theory (RILT) was developed. RILT does not claim that social appraisal, relationality, identity development, or feedback are individually novel; rather, it seeks to integrate these established insights into a distinct theoretical framework centered on the reflective regulation of leadership identity through a recursive

process of social appraisal, interpretation, identity adjustment or resistance, leadership enactment, and renewed social response.

I further acknowledge the assistance of artificial intelligence–assisted language editing tools, including Grammarly Gen AI and ChatGPT, which were used exclusively for editorial refinement, including grammar, language, readability, sentence structure, organization, and overall presentation. These tools did not contribute to the conceptualization of RILT, the development of its theoretical mechanism, the formulation of its propositions, the identification of its boundary conditions, the synthesis or interpretation of the relevant literature, or the theoretical arguments and conclusions presented in this article. All AI-assisted suggestions and revisions were critically reviewed, evaluated, and accepted or rejected by the author. The author assumes full responsibility for the manuscript's content, originality, accuracy, theoretical interpretations, arguments, conclusions, and any remaining errors.

Finally, I acknowledge that the development of RILT is situated within, rather than separate from, the broader intellectual traditions on which it builds. The theory's proposed contribution is therefore not the replacement of existing perspectives but their integration around a more specific analytical question: how social appraisal becomes consequential for leadership identity through reflective interpretation and subsequent identity regulation. All interpretations, theoretical propositions, analyses, and conclusions advanced in this article remain solely the responsibility of the author.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Ambrues Monboe Nebo is an interdisciplinary researcher, sociologist, and senior police officer with more than 20 years of professional experience in policing, security, training, administration, and international peacekeeping. He served with the Liberia National Police in various professional and leadership capacities and subsequently served as a Police Advisor with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), contributing to international peacekeeping and security-sector operations.

His research interests span international security, policing and criminal justice reform, transnational organized crime, critical infrastructure protection, cybersecurity governance, governance and institutional capacity, and African socio-political development. His interdisciplinary academic background includes Sociology, Peace and Conflict Studies with an emphasis on Humanitarian and Refugee Studies, Public Administration, Law Enforcement, and Peacekeeping. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Security Studies at Hill-City University in the Republic of Benin.

Dr. Nebo has taught at several universities in Liberia and has served in academic and administrative leadership roles. He also contributes to scholarly publishing as a peer reviewer for the International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS). He is the author of four books and numerous scholarly publications addressing security, governance, policing, criminal justice, and contemporary policy challenges affecting Liberia, Africa, and the wider international community.

His academic publications and research portfolio are available on his Academia profile at <https://neboambrues.academia.edu>, ResearchGate and Semantic Scholar