

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR LEADERSHIP RESEARCH (NDLR)
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Paper

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Paper title:

Embracing, containing, and resisting professional identity dualisms: How professionals manage organizational logic and identity conflict related to their identity progression at work

Abstract:

Professionals working in professional organizations are often expected to continue progressing “up the ladder” over the course of their careers. Adhering to this logic can be beneficial both to individuals and their work organizations. Yet, it can also be costly for individuals. In this paper, we examine how professionals navigate strong organizational logic related to their professional identity progression at work. Specifically, in an inductive, qualitative study of 54 professionals (i.e., academic scientists and military officers working in US research universities and the US military, respectively), we found that they experience a “both/and” identity conflict between identity growth that is aligned with this logic and their identity struggles that are not. We refer to this conflict as a professional identity dualism. We find that identity growth, in particular, is experienced as either adaptive or progressive and that both patterns exist for each gender and in each profession. Adaptive identity growth is less predictable and less organizationally-valued while progressive identity growth is more predictable and more organizationally-valued. In general, professionals manage the identity dualism using five different strategies/strategy combinations. Yet, a 2x2x2 analysis (i.e., identity growth pattern*gender*profession) revealed strategy differences within seven of the eight sub-groups. Our study will reveal the strategies/strategy combinations employed, strategy differences within each sub-group, and how they relate to “momentum” at work (i.e., who maintains it, who loses it, who (re)gains it?).