Original Research

Identity construction in the UK higher education: How cultural gendered identity is shaped through leadership practice

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This article is a case study of the cultural gendered professional identity construction of an educational leader contextualised by an ethnically diverse and multilingual UK University language centre. The leadership identity of the female participant is co-constructed by the researcher through narrative-in-interaction to reveal its dilemmatic nature, being agentive and influenced by external forces and being unique vis-a-vis belonging to the wider community, staying the same and being subject to change. The study is presented within a Post Structuralist framework and views discourse as a means of identity construction. The implicit and explicit identity claims are elicited through small story analysis at three levels of positioning – against story actors, against the interlocutor and in relation to global discourses to ensure the best scrutiny of multiple and contradictory identity claims. The article gives voice to the underrepresented ethnic minority of female educational leaders by revealing boundaries to leadership identity development against discourses of gender ideology, marriage, ethnicity, migration, illness, death, work/life balance, professional success, and leadership learning. It also aims to contribute to the body of research on small story and positioning analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of this article is a female educational leader responsible for a team of teachers of Arabic from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. She has been nominated three times for an excellence award by her students and twice for outstanding leadership and managerial support by her colleagues. The gendered identity construction of a female educational leader from a culturally and linguistically diverse background working in the Foreign Languages Department at a UK University is an under researched area. The research findings of this study will shed light on the barriers in personal and professional leadership development in a culturally specific educational setting. The aim of the project is to gain an understanding and add to the knowledge of cultural gendered professional identity construction of an educational leader through small story analysis (Bamberg et al., 2007). The study's contribution to knowledge is limited to one participant. However, it is relatable within the specific context and is validated through the discourse. It will contribute to research on small stories (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) as a site of identity construction and positioning analysis of the dilemmatic nature

of identity – agentive vis-à-vis constructed by external forces, remaining the same or becoming different, being unique and belonging to the wider community (Bamberg, 2011).

The article will address the following research question: what aspects of gendered and cultural educational leadership identity emerge from the small story analysis? This question will lead to a sub-question: what indexes identity shift from dilemmatic to agentive when aligning or resisting dominant societal discourses of leadership, gender, and culture? By answering these questions, the article will attempt to reveal the transformative aspect of cultural gendered leadership identity construction through small story telling.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1. Paradigm rational

This study has been informed by constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology – interpreting the world as a social construct (Cohen et al., 2018; Kosta & Iskakova, 2022). The rich qualitative data is generated, analysed, and interpreted within a specific situation at a particular time (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) with the researcher being part of the research topic, having an impact on the researched (Coleman & Briggs, 2002).

The research is foregrounded in a Post Structuralist paradigm as it allows a high degree of subjectivity, reflexivity and potential for an emancipatory, transformative educational research project (Jameson, 2012) with the researcher being an agent of the research process, bringing with them their personal characteristics, values and beliefs (Hammersley, 2013), and having the ability to exercise a nuanced and sensitive approach to deconstructing the dichotomies of gender and leadership discourses (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Due to the interpretative nature of this research its validity is measured by the credibility and authenticity of the data and its dependability resulting from construction of meaning through contextual data (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The researcher's membership of the community under research allows for a deeper understanding of the participant's life trajectory and a greater agency in co-constructing her story, lending further credibility to the analysis (Riessman, 2015).

2.2. Identity

The methodology is based on identity research through narrative inquiry and narrative-in-interaction (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Barkhuizen et al.,

2014; De Fina, 2009) with narrative being a key site for identity construction (Van De Mieroop et al., 2022), specifically, gendered identity construction through reflective storytelling (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

The narrative approach views identity as a discursive construct, which changes according to a particular context (Antaki & Widdicombe, 2008; De Fina, 2009; Blommaert, 2005), fluid in interactive positioning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2022), regarding individuals as agents, constructing their identities through language and culture (Archakis &Tsakona, 2012). Bamberg (2011) considers identity as dilemmatic, thus making claims across three main socio-cultural aspects – being stable yet changing, being unique yet the same as others and being agentive yet constrained by the broader socio-historical context.

The current study is foregrounded in research into the dilemmatic nature of identity in education: teachers' continuity/discontinuity, permanence/change (Werbinska, 2015), positioning yourself within and at the same time outside the community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, Archakis & Tzanne, 2005), being agentive, yet subjected to the dominant gender ideologies (Baxter, 2003).

The article also draws on research in foreign language teachers' identity construction through the intersection of ethnic, racial, cultural, and gendered aspects, using autobiographical narratives (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), highlighting the plurality of complex and shifting identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Barkhuizen, 2017; Gallardo, 2019).

2.3. Discourse

The discourse is viewed as a means of identity construction and shaping of social reality (Archakis & Tsakona, 2012), where the participants draw on their linguistic resources to construct identities (Cameron, 2001), embedded in discourse as a social practice and negotiated using particular linguistic means (Foucault, 2018; Fairclough, 2003) and performative acts (Butler, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The researcher distinguishes between discourse, as social interactive practice (little d) and societal Discourse (big D) as a system of practices and ideologies, which help construct identities and affect or are affected by an individual's agency (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Gee, 2014). The study analyses the way the gendered cultural leadership identity is constructed and engaged in interaction with dominant discourses of gender, culture and leadership (Ford, 2006).

The discourse of gender is particularly important for this study and draws on the theories of gatekeeping (Holmes, 2007), 'doing gender', according to the assigned biological sex (West & Zimmerman, 1987), male versus female interactive models (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1994), gendered identity construction in social and workplace interaction (Cameron, 2001; Coates, 2004; Holmes & Schnurr, 2006; Holmes, 2007), not conforming to societal expectations (Litosseliti, 2003), women and 'the glass ceiling', developing gendered identity categorisations (Mullany, 2022), negotiating gender identities in male-dominated companies (Ely, 1995) and in mixed-sex professional settings (Baxter, 2003). The study draws on research into sexism in the workplace, which can be antagonistic and benevolent (paternal, protective) (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and post-feminist discourse of choice and individuality (Gill, 2014), which can make sexism invisible and perpetuate masculine hegemony (Gramsci et al., 1971) and egalitarian myth (Gill, 2014).

2.4. Sampling

The case study has been chosen as the best investigative research instrument for a small-scale enquiry with the focus on gathering personal data (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). The researcher's self-reflexive positioning is central to all stages of enquiry from selecting the theoretical framework and methodology to collecting and analysing data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) through the prism of the researcher's assumptions and bias (Merriam, 2009). The researcher uses self-reflection as a tool to minimize the risk of imposing their own ideologies on the interpretation of the data (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015) and create a polyphonic effect between the voices of the researcher and the researched (Baxter, 2003).

Through sharing similar biographical data with the participant/narrator (common educational background, professional status, and migration experience) the researcher's agency comes to the fore of the analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Wortham, 2000). Both the researcher and the participant come from the countries with traditional hegemonic gender roles, and both are used to juggling multiple and conflicting family and professional responsibilities. This commonality of backgrounds enhances the perspective of an inside researcher. The researcher and the participant have a collegiate relationship as a community of practice, engaged in common activity through interactive shared practice (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999).

2.5. Data collection

The research is data driven and aimed at analysing identity work by eliciting small stories from the participant through an unstructured interview lasting 60 minutes and conducted without a script to facilitate an unobtrusive and comfortable atmosphere, starting with a narrative-inducing question in order to highlight the most salient stories (Elliott, 2005). The interviewer follows the lead of the interviewee, allowing for reflection, supporting the participant in remembering and evaluating events (Wagner & Wodak, 2006) and providing prompts for elicitation of meaning. The interview has been recorded via Teams, listened, transcribed, read several times for data immersion and to ensure reliability and validity, establishing iterative links between the empirical data and theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

2.6. Data analysis

The positioning analysis (Davies & Harre, 1990) is used to analyse small stories as acts of gendered identity performance (Butler, 2006) at a given time and space. The analysis has been carried out at three levels: positioning in relation to the characters within the story or the story world; positioning in relation to the interlocutor/researcher and in relation to dominant discourses or master narratives (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). The first two levels of positioning through interaction reveal the ideological positioning of the narrator as either complicit or countering dominant discourses (Bamberg, 2006).

The elements of the Labov and Waletsky (1997) analytical model, consisting of abstract, orientation (time, place, participants, setting) and evaluation embedded in the complicating action, resolution, and coda (relevance) are used to outline the narrative structure and highlight the linguistic strategies and performative aspects of identity at the first level of analysis.

2.7. Ethics

The case study complies with research ethical principles, including minimising potential physiological, psychological, and emotional harm, obtaining informed consent, providing anonymity and the right to withdraw from the project and acting ethically and responsibly at all times, following the University guidance on using Teams for research interviews.

The researcher has exercised 'ethic of care' (Costley & Gibbs, 2006) of the participant and sensitivity about the ownership of data (Cresswell, 2013). In order to protect the researcher's integrity, the participant was

sent the interview transcript with the invitation to make comments and corrections. Following standard anonymity procedures of using a pseudonym and disguising identities of colleagues, the researcher had to reveal some identity details, such as gender and ethnicity, which are essential for this research design.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter provides a review of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature on women in leadership in Higher Education in order to highlight the importance of the topic and identify the gap in the knowledge of cultural/gendered/ethnic intersectionality in the context of educational leadership and identity construction. There is a need to distinguish between leadership, which is inspirational, innovative, and motivational, and management, which is operational, analytical and stable (Kitchin & O'Connor, 2015), however, the two concepts are often interchangeable in the narrative.

The theory of educational leadership brings female gendered identity construction into a particular focus, highlighting problematic areas of women's success in higher education across the world, including the global gender gap in senior leadership, perceived expectations of leaders in conflict with normative gender performances, lack of job security, identity work to manage self-doubt, occupational stress, gender bias and misrecognition of competencies, unmanageable workloads and the unsustainable work/life balance of women being caught between two 'greedy organisations' – family and career (Morley, 2013).

The body of research into educational leadership uncovers masculine hegemonic patriarchal discourse and masculine leadership culture (Harley, 2003), obstructing women's careers (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010), disproportional representation of male over female academics, particularly in senior executive and research roles (McTavish & Miller, 2009), and recommends interventions through leadership programmes, gender mainstreaming, and mentoring (Morley, 2013).

The need to identify barriers to female leadership and investigate perceptions of leadership in higher education has led to further studies on women confronting misogyny (Morley, 2011, 2013), hidden sexism, intimidation and marginalisation, and the think 'leader' think 'male' leadership approach (Savigny, 2014; Bakhtikireeva & Valentinova, 2022).

Further research into gendered practices and power relations in the UK Universities reveals a marked gender career disadvantage of women leaders (Deem,

2003), facing the 'double bind' (having to be professional and womanly at the same time) and the 'double burden' (doubling labour at home and at work) (Cotterill & Letherby, 2005).

The interplay between leadership and gendered identity has gained significance among post-heroic leadership scholars, i.e., those, who consider that leadership should be displayed at every organisational level and view it as decreasingly masculine (Billing & Alvesson, 2014), more collaborative, relational, shared and distributed (Fletcher, 2004). Leadership is the art of influencing others (Andrews, 2016) to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016) through the everyday practice of leading or 'lived experience' (Kempster, 2006), collaborative networks (Fletcher, 2004), situated curriculum (Kempster & Steward, 2010), observational learning (Kempster, 2006), authentic leadership experience (Shamir & Eilam, 2005) and emotional intelligence – the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others (Goleman, 2004).

Educational leadership research brings into focus an emergent leader (Kempster, 2006), an agent initiating change at a high level of pedagogical excellence, while female educational leadership is viewed as inspirational, innovative, and motivational (Kitchin & O'Connor, 2015).

The need to understand the nature of women's leadership has led to research into female leadership (Olsson & Walker, 2003), 'gender fatigue' or weariness of constructing a gender-neutral workplace on the one hand and powerlessness through facing discriminatory practices on the other hand (Kelan, 2009), and recognising feminine traits of gendered leadership practice as powerful leadership capital (Elliot & Stead, 2008).

The backlash theory further explores how perceived incongruity between a traditional female gender role and stereotypical leadership behaviour of dominance and self-promotion (Eagly & Karau, 2002) leads to a backlash in displaying power (Brescoll, 2011), identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), identity control (Alvesson et al., 2008), emotional labour (Iszatt-White, 2009) and emotional management (Hochschild, 2012).

The scholarship on female leadership maintains that leadership goes beyond leading a group of individuals, but also ideas and communities, where the personal and social are interconnected, signalling the tension between stereotypical gender role expectations and the post-heroic leadership style, emphasising the link between leadership, context, and culture (Elliott &

Stead, 2008). However, more empirical evidence is needed to find out how women learn to lead, particularly in culturally specific educational settings using a narrative approach.

The Post Structuralist research into female leadership views identity in a local, contextualised, culturally specific setting, produced and reproduced through the language (Burr, 1995), allowing for more nuanced and complex investigation of tensions between leadership, gender, culture and identity discourses, which can be contradictory, multiple and fragmented (Ford, 2006). Thus, leadership identity work has been highlighted through the study of intersection between educational leadership and ethnicity in the UK (Antaki & Widdicombe, 2008) and between gender, ethnicity, and leadership in the US context (Livingston et al., 2012). However, there is a gap in research into gendered ethnic leadership identity in the UK Higher Education sector.

The Feminist post-colonial perspective shifts the focus from gender only to culture, race, religion, and class privilege, acknowledging the need to understand leadership from a different cultural perspective and contest the ontological position of white Western leadership (Blackmore, 2013). The research into female leadership needs to be culturally specific and go beyond racially and culturally neutral studies of competing masculine and feminine models of leadership, examining tension between societal stereotypical perceptions of leadership competence and the racial, gender and cultural identity of individual leaders (Showunmi et al., 2019), privileging the masculine and disadvantaging the feminine (Billing & Alvesson, 2014).

This societal discourse permeating a particular culture is reflected in studies of educational leaders confronted by discourse of masculine hegemony in the workplace and gender roles assigned to a woman as a home maker and caregiver. Thus, it is contextualised by the cultural experience of female leaders of Arabic origin, whose social status is encumbered by traditional gender ideology linked to religion, gender segregation, male guardianship and societal perception and tension between egalitarian Islamic principles towards gender parity and discriminatory gender practices (Koburtay & Abuhussein, 2021), revealing the need to unlock the barriers to women in education leadership.

The literature reviewed has identified problematic areas in female leadership and the need for further research into female leadership in higher education, mediated by culture. The current case study of cultural gendered identity construction of a female leader in UK higher education will shed light on some areas of research into personal and professional identity construction and explore how female leadership is developed through the intersection of gender and culture in multicultural settings of business and foreign language teaching.

4. STUDY AND DISCUSSION
4.1. Study outline

The participant, Sofia (pseudonym), constructs her identity chronologically, signposting her career path and inserting small stories as most telling memories, outlining the most significant stages in her professional career and her personal life. Her business career starts in the Middle East, followed by the career gap due to marriage and migration. The change in personal circumstances prompted her to turn to teaching and build a successful career in the UK Higher Education. Sofia's narrative is marked for its dramatic performance achieved by the choice of linguistic, narrative, and rhetorical resources.

The small stories set in professional contexts of business, teaching and leadership are discursively embedded in the narrative to illustrate the strategies the narrator uses to position herself in relation to the story world and its characters, the interlocutor, and the global discourses (Bamberg, 2006). The section below presents the three levels of positioning analysis.

4.2. Positioning level 1: Positioning against story actors
4.2.1. Story 1

Sofia begins with an abstract, stating that her career in educational leadership did not come by choice, thus projecting a non-agentive figure of someone who has been confounded by personal circumstances of marriage, relocation, motherhood and later the death of a partner. The theme of not making a conscious choice in her career emerges at the beginning of the narrative and re appears at the critical moments of her life story trajectory.

I did not choose it, it chose me (14). So, what I'm doing right now is… none of my choice (16). It just came, and the job and the career has insisted that I should come and be there (17).

Sofia's identity construction through the narrative is punctuated by her references to the external forces shaping her agency, particularly at the crucial landmark moments. The orientation contextualises her career in the Middle East. She says:

'In her evaluation as being agentive in decision making, she struggles with the loss of her professional identity, as emphasised by the contrasting topoi, creating the image of strength (empowered, accomplishment) in relation to her career and the image of weakness (lost, missing) in relation to her persona'

Most of the women who were there at this time were Europeans. So, the number of Arab females who can fulfil the job… and Arabic was an important language required (35-37).

While understanding her educational, gender and linguistic advantages, she displays a lack of confidence in her appointment as a business manager and positions herself as *very grateful (38)* for the opportunity and:

*Trying to **prove** myself. Not to lose it and not to be called a failure (100). Someone with master's and it all sounded good on papers whether I delivered or not, I didn't know at the time (84-86).*

This non-agentive, submissive to a higher force's stance is invoked regularly across the narrative as one the most recurring themes. The repetition of a third person plural in reference to the higher force, regulating her career path and the use of indefinite pronouns such as *'someone'*, *'anyone'* in reference to herself linguistically mark her non-agentive positioning towards the story actors.

The story of Sofia's life in the Middle East tells of the close relationship between personal and professional in her identity work. Her career progresses well until the complicating action of a love interest:

I was very happy in my job until I fell in love with the top man (44).

The conflicting demands of her job and personal life have become untenable in the traditional context of male dominated power relations and lead to a resolution, which is twofold:

On the one hand, her professional agency started to emerge:

I grew in this post, and I started to discover myself (39).

On the other hand, her family life was a *failure, the price she paid* for her emerging professional career:

*The downside, of course… was my **family** life. So, you pay the price (93).*

In spite of the constraints placed on Sofia's agency due to circumstances of her gender and culture, her reference to *failure* in her personal life is counterbalanced by her professional success, which, in turn, has transformed her personality. She positions herself as someone who does not fit into the role culturally assigned to her, but claims her agency as a strong and independent person:

*It was a very, very **difficult** decision because this job was so important for me, so I had to **decide** job or personal life (116-118). I followed my heart (199).*

The resolution comes with her divorce, followed by another marriage to the company director and resignation from her job. The coda is rendered emphatically by repetition of the intensifier *very* and the use of key words, *difficult, decision, decide*.

The juxtaposition of the metaphor *followed my heart* and *being responsible* further reinforces the personal versus professional conflict, from which her new persona has emerged.

In her evaluation as being agentive in decision making, she struggles with the loss of her professional identity, as emphasised by the contrasting topoi, creating the image of strength (*empowered, accomplishment*) in relation to her career and the image of weakness (*lost, missing*) in relation to her persona:

*Financially, the job has **empowered** me to provide my daughter with a good education, when I left the job, you know, I became… a sort of… a **housewife**, OK? And this the time this is the period where I was… lost (131-133).*

But suddenly after a while you start to miss… that feeling of accomplishment (137-138).

In relation to her new husband, Sofia's narrative reinforces her identity dilemma of personal fulfilment on the one hand and lack of professional accomplishment on the other hand. The other side of her dilemmatic agency – staying the same and wanting to change – is reinforced by the syntax of using the verb of motion *becoming* referring to her husband, as opposed to a static verb *I am*.

*Watching him from afar and **missing him**, looking how **successful** he's becoming, and I am in the **background** (145-148).*

4.2.2. Story 2

The next landmark event in Sofia's life marks an agentive involvement of her husband, who steps in to help her carve a new professional identity after relocation to the UK, as in the orientation:

It's not easy to find it in other places. Especially in Europe and in the UK, you have to start from scratch (154-155).

He recommends her as a teacher of Arabic at a University. Sofia's narrative reflects her identity struggle and lack of confidence as a result of her professional identity loss expressed by self-questioning, hesitation devices, pauses, temporal coordinates such as *and then, after so many years, and when,* etc.

The whole thing after that… so and… teaching? Oh, let's, why not? Yeah, try it… Uh, after so many years of trying to find myself (188-194).

Her identity is constructed by the discourse of gender and culture (loss of professional confidence and security due to cultural constraints) and by other actors (her husband). This agentive turn helps Sofia's professional identity emerge from being conflicted and lacking in confidence:

*How can I **convince** the people that I'm the right person? (199).*

*They could not find anyone good and then they chose **me** (231).*

The complicating action of her going to the interview without prepared notes makes her mobilise her internal resources and act naturally.

*I went there very, very nervous, left everything and I started to share the language with them. You know, as **me** (203-205).*

The resolution of her getting the job as an Arabic lecturer leads to the coda. She positions herself as a teacher indexed by positive self-evaluation when recounting the feedback she received, using phrases such as *natural lecturer, very engaging, very warm, connection with the students, the way she smiles, goes close to the students.* The antagonists in the story (her observers) are deprived of agency, indexed by the pronominal third person. Her professional teaching persona performs in opposition to external forces and is rendered through an *acting* metaphor.

*It became like a job of **acting**. You know, you go to the theatre, you **perform**, the spectators sort of clapping for you. And you go back home very happy with your performance. Yeah, that you suddenly, you have discovered you shape their future (330-333).*

This story illuminates her positioning in relation to her students as a co-dependent actor, whose performed identity (Butler, 2006) becomes embodied in the course of interaction. At the same time, she acknowledges her agentive involvement in shaping her students' future, thus co-constructing herself as a powerful agent.

4.2.3. Story 3

The 'crucible experience' (Bennis & Thomas, 2002) in Sofia's career comes with the illness and subsequent death of her husband. She refers to immediate and profound change in her personality from the moment she hears the news, metaphorically describing it as changing physical locations, *(going through doors)* and pointing to the abruptness and immediacy of the action (repeated use of *in one second, suddenly*). She is confounded by the discourse of illness and death, as reflected in the quick transition from the abstract (*something came*), to complicating action (*cancer diagnosis*) and to evaluation through the use of personification and the indefinite pronoun *something that comes* in reference to cancer being a powerful agent, which has shaped her identity.

*Something came and changed all of this. **Every** aspect of people's life in one second, in one second. You know you come from the door… one person and you go out from the same door, a different person altogether (342-346).*

However, her resolution to turn the negative life event into a building block for her professional identity construction positions her as an agentive figure resisting the circumstances – she returns to teaching. She evaluates this move as becoming a *solid person,* who is *very vulnerable and very strong (*353) at the same time, indexing the transition metaphorically by constructing a performed identity.

You close the door of your house, and you go, and you are a performer again (354).

The resolution is brought about by her embarking on a leadership career by positioning herself as someone who no longer imitates somebody else's leadership style (as she did in the business world) but interrogates it agentively.

Why don't you think about this? Why don't you think about that? There was a sense of arrogance at that time (397-400).

*OK, so why? Why? Why do you want me to do this? Why are you asking this question? What is behind this process? So, is this lack of confidence in **me**? (416-420).*

In relation to the people she works with she positions herself as an agentive figure, who resists arrogance and micromanagement and influences others.

She builds her position as a critical emerging leader (Kempster, 2009) in opposition to the assigned leader at that department, who is lacking experience and confidence, but who learns to rely on Sofia instead.

Sofia's leadership identity is further constructed through notable people (Kempster, 2006). At first, she declines the managerial position and instead looks for other learning experiences:

*And I learned **who** I should choose to work with not only just as a manager, but **choose** your manager as well, if you want to fulfil your job **properly** (436-438).*

She agentively positions herself as a manager who makes conscious choices regarding her leadership learning. When she has an opportunity to learn from someone with *a sense of authority and knowledge (465),* she accepts the formal managerial position and re-asserts her identity as a collaborative educational leader.

I felt that both of us are going to build this together. So, for me it was a sense of collaboration (467).

Her positioning as a follower of a charismatic leader (Parry & Kempster, 2014), shapes her own leadership identity.

4.2.4. Story 4

When prompted to talk about challenging leadership moments, Sofia's story illustrates authentic leadership development through self-knowledge (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). She positions herself as an assertive and competent leader against the colleague who undermines her authority on gender and ethnic grounds. She sets the context in the abstract by the repeated use of the intensifier *very*.

Politically, gender and ethnicity where I'm working and managing a team are very, very, very important elements (514).

The conflicting situation resolves in the sacking of the male colleague. Sofia's positioning shifts from being *docile and kind* to becoming *ruthless*, invoking a post-feminist discourse of choice (Fletcher, 2004).

*I had a huge, big challenge because of my **gender, mainly**. And because of **my ethnicity**. Because the ethnicity where you come from our region, there are so many frictions between certain countries (526-529).*

Her assertive leadership positioning is claimed by contrasting the male colleague's *unfair* with her *fair game*, him being *on his own* and her *good managerial approach*.

Sofia's situated learning of leadership practice (Kempster & Stewart, 2010) has drawn on the complexities of leading a diverse team, where female ethnic minority leaders can be discriminated against, undervalued, and stigmatised on the grounds of their cultural, gendered, and ethnic identity (Showunmi, 2019).

The evaluation sheds light on her dilemmatic identity of developing an agentive power in the face of an adverse conflict situation yet wanting to avoid conflict and remain true to her natural non-confrontational self.

Conflict would come and you should just stand up and defend your position (543).

*So, you try certain **strategy** because you know you want to solve it in the best possible way. And also, I am keen not to cause trouble in the department (553-554).*

Sofia positions herself as a thoughtful leader, with emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2004). She draws parallels between her leadership learning and authentic leadership examples, to which she attaches particular meaning (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), as in her story of meeting the Head of the United Nations:

*And I noticed that the most **gentle**, the most **humble**… top people were the most respected (572).*

In the coda Sofia projects the image of an authoritative and supportive leader, who is confident in her leadership abilities, is well respected by her team and also generous in developing her team members.

4.3. Positioning level 2: Positioning against the interlocutor

At level 2 positioning (self in relation to the audience) Sofia perceives the researcher/interviewer as an empathetic figure. She indexes her agreement, reiteration of statements, confirmation of opinions and positive evaluations throughout the narrative:

Very interesting question. I love the question (281).
Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely (293).

She displays confidence in the researcher, only occasionally requesting confirmation of confidentiality regarding local professional context. These requests are framed in a way of apology, seeking to reconfirm the trust and solidarity, to ensure no offence is caused. Sofia is keen to have the interlocutor's good opinion of her and hedges any statements about herself by using self-deprecating phrases such as *allow me, I hope you know, I am sorry to tell you, allow me to say this*, etc,

The interplay between her personal and professional aspects of identity comes to the fore when the interviewer encourages her to elaborate on aspects of her marriage as in this example.

Interviewer: And how did your husband react to that? (101).

In response, Sofia acknowledges that the job changed her personality and describes how by learning to be assertive in her professional capacity she became more assertive at home.

'The interlocutor co-creates Sofia's educational leadership identity by sharing the moral purpose of improving students' learning experiences. Her story illuminates an interrelationship between the contextual, situational nature of leadership learning and enactment of leadership practice'

Sofia: *I didn't continue to be the docile. Mmhmm… accepting female anymore. Anyway, I started to see a place for myself in the society and at home, so it actually has **shaped** my personality and yes, so suddenly I discovered that I may **not** be the same person that was married to the person (103-110).*

Sofia's professional experience has led to strengthening her agentive stance as a woman. The interactive element has helped delve deeper into the intersectional nature of identity co-construction.

The researcher interrogates Sofia's contradictory claims of identity change from being *ruthless* in the business world to becoming *kind* as a teacher.

Interviewer: *So, did you have this ruthlessness in your first job?*

Sofia: *Very much so, especially working with men and other women competing with you (261-265).*

Further interaction reveals that Sofia had to show ruthlessness (Butler, 2006), while not being ruthless *by nature*, comparing herself with a *docile animal* playing the prescribed male leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Sofia: *It's like a cat going and getting her clothes ready. Just in case. You know, even though you are a lovely, docile animal, but your clothes are **out**, just in case (268-269).*

When discussing educational leadership identity, Sofia positions herself as a natural, authentic (Shamir & Eilam, 2005) educational leader. To the researcher's inquiry into her learning journey and whether or not she projected some of the lived experience (Kempster, 2006) of having to be ruthless and assertive in business to her educational leadership style, she admitted that *ruthlessness* for her was a coping mechanism, a response to bullying, which she did not need to exercise in her educational leadership job.

As she said: *So the ruthlessness… started to disappear with experience and you feel comfortable in your own skin as well, and also the local environment is working (293-294).*

Sofia and the interviewer co-construct her identity as assertive in the face of external agents (other teachers and students) who discriminated against her on the grounds of her ethnicity and gender (Savigny, 2014).

Her leadership experience made her turn the negative incident of bullying and micromanagement into a learning opportunity and *make things better* by *bringing peace* rather than metaphorically *taking the sword out of its sheath*. She started to develop a leadership style shaped both by her gender and her cultural identity. She said:

*And that's when I started to see the difference in my personality. I became more… **peaceful** and **docile** and at the same time more **experienced** in managing (312-314).*

The interlocutor co-creates Sofia's educational leadership identity by sharing the moral purpose of improving students' learning experiences. Her story illuminates an interrelationship between the contextual, situational nature of leadership learning and enactment of leadership practice (Kempster & Stewart, 2010). The positive experience of leadership is co-constructed interactively and indexed by key evaluative vocabulary, for example: *culturally compatible, exciting opportunities, rewarding students, golden age of the language centre, started to flourish, a sense of camaraderie, supporting each other.*

4.4. Positioning level 3: Positioning against global societal discourses

The analysis of the narrative identifies the key discourses which co-construct Sofia's leadership gendered cultural identity, which can be broadly placed in three categories: professional discourse, marriage discourse and leadership discourse. The three of them are closely interlaced with each other and invoke dilemmatic identity work by staying the same in the face of change, while being unique vis-à-vis being the same as others and being agentive yet subjected to the outside agents of the broader socio-historical context.

Sofia's agentive positioning starts to emerge through the masculine professional discourse and gendered constraints as her career in business progresses. As she says:

The job has started also to change my personality (103).

She further on constructs her professional identity in the context of the Middle Eastern discourse of hegemonic masculinity (Gramsci et al., 1971) claiming leadership agency by confronting circumstances (Turner &

Mavin, 2008) and learning leadership through lived experience (Kempster, 2009). She observes and copies her colleague's leadership style, reflecting on landmark experiences (Day, 2000), and gradually emerging as a leader.

I would stay at this meeting just **watching** *them how they deal with each other (80).*

Sofia evaluates her leadership style metaphorically as a *mother* or *mother hen* (26), who is caring and supportive and a *people person* (41) who is also good at communication and building relationships, thus doing gendered identity work in a predominantly masculine business world against benevolent sexist discourse (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Sofia eventually divorced her husband and married her company director. The resolution of Sofia's divorce and her subsequent remarriage, culminating in her resigning from her position, is a further example of her agency being on the one hand constrained by the traditional gendered cultural discourse of the Middle East (Afiouni, 2014), and on the other hand becoming stronger in the face of adversity and pushing cultural gender boundaries by choosing to *follow her heart (119).*

Her evaluation of the cultural gendered professional constraints encountered by women in the Middle East is critical to her decision to abandon her career. She says:

Because of the culture of the Middle East, it was not possible for me . . . to continue working and **being** *the wife of the boss (53).*

She refers to further boundaries created not only by gender, but also ethnic and racial inequalities prominent in that environment with a hierarchical culture of young European white men dominating the business leadership world. Sofia explains:

So, you can see the number of posts assigned. A high-level post would be assigned to **male** *and . . . And sort of men and not only men, they had a specific desire to appoint* **white***-skinned men (66-67).*

She constructs her teaching identity through her gender and in contrast to her business identity, aligning herself with postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2014), performing gendered identity at work. As she says, she is *acting normal, not like a robot.* She attributes her gender qualities to teaching – *very strong form of empathy, motherhood, you look at your students, I'm talking as a mother here, being a warm, kind, caring, mother hen* type. The repetitive use of the first-person pronoun is metaphorically enhanced.

Giving the students something from me, from the **culture***, from my* **heart** *(217).*

My gender as a **female** *is dominating here, how I deal with my students and the gender. Not only gender but my role as a mother.*

And the mother would be strict when it is required and **loving, understanding, patient** *(251-259).*

In contrast, she sees the business world as fake and unnatural. She has to exercise emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) to perform in the masculine professional discourse. She says:

You **had** *to be on your toes all the time. You* **had** *to be aware of everything. The political issues. You had to be* **very** *careful of what you say (243-245).*

Her husband died and Sofia moved house. The death of her husband and the move to a different city - have led to her agentive stance against the discourses of illness, death, and relocation. Her narrative highlights each career change from teaching to leadership, using metaphorical phrases such as *knocking on doors, entering doors,* as if she is physically moving in the labyrinth of career opportunities, where doors sometimes open straight away and at other times not. However, her journey is not random and non-agentive. She is driven by the newly acquired *courage to go and sell myself* (366) and the self-care needing to be geographically close to her workplace. Having built her confidence as an empathetic teacher, she knows her value and is selective in her professional choices.

Sofia's professional identity becomes further enhanced through the discourse of educational leadership learning. The qualities she acquired in the business world (organizational skills, thinking ahead, planning) become essential in constructing her leadership identity. While projecting a natural identity as a teacher, she acknowledges that leadership is a learned experience. She explains:

And it doesn't come sort of immediately you had **to work** *on it.*

At the same time, she admits that she did not become a leader through training.

The managerial skills are not taught as part of your role as a teacher.

This experience is conditioned by the environment, making her identity less agentive and more dilemmatic on the one hand: she *flourishes* in the favourable working environment with like-minded individuals, aligning herself to a post-heroic discourse of distributed leadership (Northouse, 2020) and mutual support. She goes on:

You know, we started **to flourish** *because there was a sense of* **camaraderie**. *Among us that we are all supporting each other. . . And when I was finally sort of recognised, yes, as someone who can manage (498-500).*

On the other hand, Sofia's agency develops in confrontation with the misogynistic behaviour of a male colleague, who discriminates against her on the grounds of her 'inferior' gender and ethnicity. This story invokes antagonistic sexist (Glick & Fiske, 1996) discourse and ethnic female leader discourse (Showunmi, 2019). It illustrates Sofia's leadership learning through conflict situation, in which she overcomes her gender and cultural boundaries set by traditional gender ideology (Koburtay & Abuhussein, 2021), experienced by female leaders in diverse multi-ethnic communities, thus positioning herself as an actor against the discourse of misogyny and ethnic discrimination.

The dilemmatic agency of Sofia's identity of being true to herself yet having to change to fit in with the hegemonic masculinity of the leadership culture in which she operated is indexed metaphorically. She uses the phrase, *learning their game*, implying that it was not her natural style, but something she had to put on, learning to be assertive and respected by regulating her identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). She says:

I was so **keen** *to learn their* **game**… *how do you assert yourself? Why is so and so much more respected than so and so, and that was very, very important (87-90).*

Sofia strategically reflects upon her leadership style and turns this negative experience of bullying into an opportunity to learn through reflection. She positions herself as a *peaceful*, rather than *ruthless* leader, thus building her agentive stance as a leader with traditionally feminine characteristics, conforming to a post-heroic, postfeminist leadership discourse of autonomy and choice (Fletcher, 2004; Gill & Scharff, 2011). The term 'feminine' leadership is used here in contrast to conventional 'masculine' style only in the context of this study. However, there should be awareness of essentialist labelling (Billing & Alvesson, 2000).

Sofia and the researcher construct a discourse of solidarity reflecting on their career choices, both experimenting with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999), keen to make a change and yet lacking an agency, but gradually developing power in the face of adversity. The increased confidence between the interlocutors is brought about by the researcher taking the initiative to share stories, which mirror each other's experiences of professional failure (as a fitness instructor and as an interior designer) and help make meaning of these experiences outlining the common discourse of being outsiders, thus projecting themselves as not belonging, navigating between sameness and difference (Bamberg, 2011), in-group and out-group identity by re-iterating and echoing the key phrases: *that is not me at all, it was not a career for me, your brain is not engaged, I distanced from it, I would be a total failure.* All phrases intensified by emphatic use of direct speech and exclamations such as: *Oh, my goodness!* Sofia's leadership identity is co-constructed through interaction as someone who gets stronger and wiser in the face of adversity and develops leadership agency in opposition to conflicting discourses of gender, culture, and ethnicity.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals the dilemmatic aspects of the participant's identity as being agentive and constructed by others at the same time, staying the same and being subject to change and being unique yet wanting to belong to the group. Sofia's narrative reflects the development of her agency in making personal and professional choices against gendered and cultural constraints of Middle Eastern business community, hierarchical leadership structure of a UK University, patriarchal marital discourse, discriminatory professional discourse, and the discourse of death.

The participant's identity shifts from dilemmatic to agentive in the course of the narrative, which is invoked linguistically through vocabulary choice and the use of metaphors in reference to her career as a businessperson, teacher and educational leader, closely linked to her persona as a wife and a mother. The study demonstrates the transformative value of the narrative in constructing a gendered cultural leadership identity by bringing to the fore the dilemmatic agency of the narrator who conforms and at the same time resists the dominant professional and essentialist gender ideology through the course of small story telling.

Positioning herself in relation to story actors, Sofia uses an agentive stance towards her career progression and professional success in the face of adversity arising from an essentialist hegemonic masculine professional and gendered discourse of inequality and discrimination. The dilemmatic aspect of constancy and change is invoked through the use of a semantically contrasting vocabulary (Kiklewicz, 2022) denoting strength and empowerment on the one hand and loss and weakness on the other.

In relation to the interlocutor Sofia maintains strong in-group identity through the discourse of solidarity, empathy, and collaboration. Her teaching and leadership identity shifts from dilemmatic to agentive resisting the discourse of sexism and ethnic inequality. She makes implicit identity claims against the discourse of adversity caused by negative personal (illness and death) and professional (bullying, misogyny) experiences, using the evocative language of metaphor as in *opening and closing doors, acting as a docile animal* and *taking the sword out of its sheath.*

The narrative demonstrates the shift from dilemmatic to more agentive positioning in the move towards alignment with discourse of post-heroic and postfeminist leadership, making explicit claims of using her gendered identity and relational, collaborative leadership practices to become an authentic leader.

Sofia's small stories illuminate the force of interactive narrative in identity construction in relation to the global discourses of gender ideology, marriage, ethnicity, migration, illness, death, work/life balance, professional success, and leadership learning. These discourses overlap and come to the fore at certain narrative turns to highlight the dilemmatic and agentive aspects of Sofia's identity construction: of constancy and change, being the same as other and being different, resisting and at the same time conforming to gender and professional ideologies through implicit and explicit identity claims.

This study adds to the body of research on gendered cultural leadership identity. The implication for professional practice is to reveal the boundaries to leadership identity development by giving voice to the underrepresented ethnic minority of female educational leaders revealing their agentive and non-agentive positioning within the discourses of teaching, leadership learning and gender ideology, using narrative as an emancipatory tool.

The recommendation for further research is to obtain comparable data by increasing the sample of participants and conducting ethnographic and auto- ethnographic observations in order to achieve a more in-depth analysis and better understanding of identity construction through discursive practices.

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