

Paradoxes of authentic leadership: Leader identity struggles

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Abstract

Using in-depth interview material, this article explores the socially constructed and locally mediated nature of authentic leadership. The findings illustrate an irony of authentic leadership: while leaders claim that it is their true and natural selves that make them good leaders; simultaneously, they must restrain their claimed authenticity in order to be perceived as good leaders. This generates tensions that undermine the construction of a more stable and coherent leader identity. The study finds that in order to resolve these tensions, the managers develop *metaphorical selves*—Mother Teresa, messiah and coach—as a way of trying to accommodate conflicting identity claims while remaining true to the idea of themselves as authentic leaders exercising good leadership. These findings contribute to a constructed, situational and contested notion of leadership by showing how authenticity is an existential project of ‘essentialising’ fragmented and conflicting selves.

Keywords

Authentic leadership, metaphors, discourse, identity, social construction

Introduction

In the recent years, authentic leadership has gained increased recognition among researchers, consultants and practitioners (see, for example, the special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* in 2005). Following the many contemporary corporate ethical scandals involving business managers, authentic leadership offers hope to a scrutinised field by promoting optimism and

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humanistic values (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leadership scholars developed Bass' (1985) and Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) transformational leadership in advancing a positive leadership theory (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2009; Yammarino et al., 2008). The salience of authenticity is also evident in practitioner-oriented journals, in which managers and leaders are urged to be 'authentic,' 'real' and 'true to yourself' in order to be 'good' leaders that deliver bottom-line results (Gardner and Schermerhorn, 2004; George et al., 2007: 129; Goffee and Jones, 2005: 1; Luthans, 2002). The somewhat exaggerated focus on the significance of authentic leaders may have created a market for such views of leadership. However, inherent idealism is part of the problem in these writings. When the ideological appeal is high, it is easier to escape criticism of un-nuanced reflections that characterise many of the ideas of authenticity.

Our engagement with the authentic leadership literature proceeds from the observation of how interviewed managers made authenticity, being true to one's self, a central aspect of their leadership and a central element of their identity. However, in contrast to the positive images portrayed in the authentic leadership literature, the managers expressed that acting according to their true self promoted negative responses and made them feel bad. This suggests that, beyond recognising managers' capacity to produce statements in keeping with the ideal of authentic leadership, it is important to investigate the process of upholding a perception of authentic or true self amidst conflicting leadership norms and demands. This requires taking into account the interpretations of social and organisational conditions that influence how people construct themselves as leaders at work. We are thus interested in understanding what happens to the authenticity ideal when leaders experience conflicting organisational situations and demands?

In responding to this question, the paper engages with the authentic leadership debate by challenging the assumption that there is an essential 'true self' and that acting according to this 'real self' will lead to good, or morally superior, leadership that delivers positive organisational outcomes (see also Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Ford and Harding, 2011; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Shaw, 2010). We contribute to a constructed and contested notion of authentic leadership by conceptualising authenticity as an attempt by leaders to 'essentialise' their self, without invoking the idea of an essential self (Cunliffe, 2001; Ferrara, 2009; Sparrowe, 2005). Rather than an inward quest of finding a true or essential self, authenticity is a multi-faceted outward project of binding or 'crystallising' contrasting and fragmented identities into a coherent life story (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005). Empirically, we contribute to the limited knowledge of the 'lived experience' of managers; how managers think, feel and possibly practice leadership in work settings (Caza and Jackson, 2011; Cunliffe, 2009).

The article is structured as follows: we first briefly engage with the development of the burgeoning authentic leadership literature. While questioning its essentialism, this literature allows us to develop the concepts of self-awareness and self-regulation. Second, we employ socially constructed versions of leadership (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010) and authenticity (Sparrowe, 2005) to conceptualise these reflexive movements as identity work in narrating a coherent self (Ricoeur, 1991a). Third, we provide a methodology section that describes how the interviews were conducted and analysed. Fourth, the empirical sections outline how the interviewed leaders (a) constructed themselves as natural leaders, (b) suggested that they were authentic in their leadership, (c) confessed that being true to one's self was problematic in being a good leader and (d) used metaphors or characters from past, present and future-oriented discourses to overcome this tension. Fifth, we provide a discussion of the frailty of

leadership discourses in practice. Finally, we conclude with a call for scholars to further ground fashionable leadership discourses in practice.

Authentic leadership

The concept of authenticity in leadership studies has been most extensively theorized by drawing upon existentialism (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2010; Golomb, 1995; Lawler and Ashman, 2012), where the emphasis is on the responsibility of choosing oneself amidst normalizing discourses (Heidegger, 2005; Sartre, 2003). The key aspect of authenticity among existential scholars, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre, is the possibility for individuals to transcend socio-historical conventions and becoming who one is (Golomb, 1995). Note that this does not suggest an inward search for a true or essential self; to the contrary, existentialists see this as a process of becoming and overcoming who we are. Authenticity is about continuously re-writing the scripture one is following. Heidegger (2005) refers to choosing oneself and the impossibility of being authentic, since authenticity is a continuous process of self-making or self-construction in relation to societal norms of the ways things are done (Guignon, 2012). Similarly, Sartre (2003), engaging with Heidegger, claims that aspiring to be authentic involves realising one's freedom to act and taking responsibility for one's potential (Lawler and Ashman, 2012). Thus, one cannot use introspection to find knowledge of one's authenticity, since there is no atomistic self (Golomb, 1995). We are always already situated, or thrown, into a socio-historical context, with seeking authenticity then being an outward project of facing up to the social norms and standards we are thrown into and take responsibility for the possibilities and potentials of the future (Heidegger, 2005; Sartre, 2003).

As noted by Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) as well as Lawler and Ashman (2012), the existentialist project of owning up to social situations has in the authentic leadership literature largely been replaced with a psychological quest of knowing who you are. Although the concept of authenticity has been developed in various ways within the authentic leadership literature, there are more salient themes. In their review, Caza and Jackson (2011) suggest the common elements of (a) knowing one's true self in terms of preferences, beliefs, strengths, etc. (self awareness), (b) acting in accordance with that knowledge (self consistency) and (c) representing oneself in relation to others according to how one perceives one's true self (relational transparency). In addition to this, others have proposed that authentic leaders also gather and employ objective information about themselves that may challenge self-awareness (balanced processing) and exhibit a moral perspective referring to self-regulation and self-determination (moral superiority) (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Most authentic leadership literature is thus based on the idea that one should act according to an essential true self and that this true self is morally good (Avolio et al., 2004; Ilies et al., 2005; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Michie and Gooty, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008, 2010).

Authentic leadership is, in this literature, assumed to deliver an improved organisational culture, improved work performance, further engagement in organisational citizenship and an increased trust in leadership (Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Followers are assumed to benefit from positive emotions (Jensen and Luthans, 2006), task engagement (Gardner et al., 2005), higher motivation (Ilies et al., 2005) and greater satisfaction (Jensen and Luthans, 2006), while the leaders themselves benefit through increased positive emotions, improved well-being and higher leadership effectiveness

(Eigel and Kuhnert, 2005). Most of these writings can be conceptualised as ‘normative leadership’, in that they refer to theoretical ‘recipes’ that prescribe authenticity as a universal concept or solution with limited engagement with local discourses.

More critical approaches to the topic have problematised the moral element (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010), viewing it as a means for domination and suppression (Ford and Harding, 2011), and criticised the assumptions of essentialism that typically come with classic psychological traits approaches to leadership (Tracy and Tretheway, 2005). This critique raises questions about (1) the claims that it is possible to know and consistently express one’s inherent traits and (2) the claims of the natural good of authentic leadership. First, the assumption that people, through introspection, can reach a more or less complete self-awareness means privileging the individual self as a more or less fixed entity and marginalising social and cultural contexts. The self is here seen as integrated and robust with a specific direction and coherence. The authentic leader is thus driven by the self-concept rather than elements outside of the self. But whether there is a ‘true self’ is highly questionable. Arguably, people struggle to reach some form of a positive and coherent idea of who they are, but these efforts do not necessarily mirror or reach a true self-core. It is quite difficult to construct a true self in a socially varying, relational and dynamic workplace—an imperfect world—that calls for a variety of different roles and acts that do not necessarily overlap any notion of true self (Shotter and Gergen, 1989).

Second, the natural goodness of authenticity is highly problematic because of its self-referential and tautological nature. This argument is based on the idea that authentic leadership is good because good leadership is authentic. We have no means, however, of knowing what *is* good or who determines it (Spoelstra and Ten Bos, 2011: 183). There are no universal or commonly agreed-upon moral criteria to decide which leaders are good/authentic or bad/inauthentic (Shaw, 2010). Arguably, the inherent goodness of authenticity should be empirically examined rather than naively assumed.

In providing an alternative theoretical framing to understand the experiences of authentic leadership, we argue for a more interpretative and critical approach that substitutes the implicit *essentialism* in the authentic leadership literature with a *constructionist* approach (Cunliffe, 2001, 2009; Sparrowe, 2005). We thus take seriously the constructed and relational nature of what is seen as authentic and morally good. This recognises that managers actively take part in constructing who they are in relation to, whom they interact with and by drawing on available discourses. In developing how managers construct who they are as leaders, we suggest that the constructions of authenticity and leadership can be seen as identity work and that the identity work in creating a coherent self can be studied through the narratives constituting the interpretation of the self.

Studying experiences of authentic leadership

There is a growing body of literature concerning the social construction of leadership that challenges many of the assumptions underlying the dominant psychological theories (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). From this perspective, leadership is collectively and contextually co-constructed between and among actors through language and other symbolic media (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010: 175). The account of leadership is negotiated by actors in relation to dominant discourses of what leadership is, with potential gaps, contradictions and confusions between the current dominant account of leadership and the experiences of trying to enact it.

Narratives are one discursive practice by which individuals try to (at least temporarily) construct a coherent or 'real' self (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Narratives allow actors to understand and make sense of the relation between individual actions at the local organisational level and broader societal discourses. Sparrowe (2005), drawing on Ricœur (1992), employs narratives to understand authentic leadership. He provides a compelling account of how the self can be seen as a narrative process of weaving together life experiences into a coherent story of the self. Authentic leadership from this perspective is then about constructing and presenting a coherent self based on one's own experiences and the perception of followers' expectations. Whether one is constant, or fluid is not as important as the story itself, which weaves the accountability to oneself and others (Sparrowe, 2005). Narratives can then be used to further theorise and understand how this narration of authenticity works, that is, the actual practices of weaving a story of an authentic self-identity. We conceptualise this process as identity work, suggesting that individuals employ discursively available narratives in constructing a narrative about who they are (Watson, 2009).

Narratives and other discursive and social practices can be seen as sources of identity regulation but rather than being passively controlled by such practices—for example authenticity discourses and leadership roles—people actively interpret and 'work' on these discourses and role expectations based on reflexions of life history, personal orientations and future projects (Alvesson and Willmott, 20002; Watson, 2009). Identity work is here seen as an interpretative activity aimed at forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or modifying the constructions that are productive of a sense of a coherent and distinctive self-identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This overlaps somewhat with Epstein's (1973: 407) notion of 'self-theory', which refers to how individuals typically strive to hold a somewhat coherent understanding or concept of who they are, partly in order to maintain self-esteem. In moving away from more psychologically oriented understanding of the self, this paper focuses on the conscious identity work that is of a linguistic and social nature. This allows us to address theoretically the previously mentioned main problems with authentic leadership: (1) the idea of an essential self and (2) the assumed superior morality of that self.

First, in addressing the idea of an essential self of 'who I am', identity work is the narration of stories and experiences in a plot connecting past accomplishments and future expectations. Ricœur (1991b) refers to this as a 'narrative identity' in that narratives integrate lived experiences in constructing a story of a coherent self. Narrating an identity is a continuous work of configuring the past, the present and the future into a coherent story with a plot (Ezzy, 1998). There is thus possibility for agency in this temporal dimension in terms of narrating or interweaving diverse experiences with projections through narratives that integrate heterogeneity (McAdams, 1993; Ricœur, 1991a). In drawing together diverse and conflicting experiences and events into a coherent plot with a temporal span, the self is 'crystallised' (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005). While the identity narrative provides a sense of continuity, this does not necessarily make the identity sustainably coherent, since identity construction is an ongoing process of making sense of 'who I am', both lived and living.

Second, in narrating ourselves, we employ 'good characters' to explain past behaviours and provide directions for the future (McAdams, 1993; Taylor, 1989). Generally, in social life, people have a preference for high self-esteem and seek feedback and information that put them in a favourable light (Markus and Wurf, 1987). Discourses of leadership provide rich subject positions in terms of what is expected of a leader as well as what it means to be a 'good' leader. Often, the character of a leader suggests an esteem-enhancing subject position as being good. This is exemplified in the overwhelming romanticism and heroism of

leadership historically evident in the leadership literature (Meindl et al., 1985). In line with this heroic image, it is frequently suggested that good leadership inspires people beyond daily work tasks in order to accomplish a higher purpose (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). This appears to be somewhat disconnected to managers' morally ambiguous everyday reality (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). It is thus arguably the discourses of leadership, rather than the experiences of leadership, that provide a conceptualisation of leadership as something 'good'.

In the following analysis of our empirical material, we employ narrative identity work to conceptualise how the leaders are trying to create coherence in who they in being authentic leaders. Narratives allow us to investigate how leadership is constructed in practice. We balance the role of discourse in forming the individual with people's capacity to create reflexively a life story or narrative based on life history, experiences and motivations for the future.

Research design

We used interviews to investigate the construction of the self as an authentic leader. We view the interview situation as an interaction between the interviewee and interviewer in producing the text to be analysed (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Potter and Hepburn, 2008). When interviewing people about leadership, we can, of course, expect people to construct stories, plots and narratives about leadership. These interview statements do not objectively mirror a reality beyond the interview situation. They may even reflect the respondents' identity ambitions, interests and impression management (wanting to be perceived as a strong and certain leader). However, it is in speaking that we make sense of and construct, or narrate, our lives (Cunliffe et al., 2004). Of interest then is not only what interviewees say about leadership, but how they construct a coherent narrative out of their leadership ambitions, experiences and available discourses. The sections below clarify how we assembled the empirical material and the analysis employed to form our findings.

Data collection

The empirical material is based on interviews with three managers in a single company, 'Concrete' (a pseudonym), with approximately 1200 employees. The company produces concrete foundations for large building projects. In order to assure anonymity, the three managers in this paper are given the pseudonyms of Joe, Lisa and William, and their respective position in the organisation is also concealed. They hold management positions in various parts of the organisation, ranging from factory managers with over 100 employees, to sales department managers supervising a group of around 10 people.

The three managers were chosen for this study in collaboration with Concrete's human resources (HR) manager, based on their participation in a leadership development program. The HR manager recommended those she perceived to be 'good' leaders. Although we did not ask for good or successful leaders, the HR manager's choice fits the purpose of the paper, that is, to understand the experience of being leaders, since the three managers are attempting to be 'good' leaders in Cunliffe's (2001) use of the term: managers who are sensitive and responsive to their surroundings.

One of the authors conducted interviews three times with two of the leaders (Lisa and William) and twice with one of them (Joe) over a period of three years (2008–2010).

This allowed us to gain longitudinal and in-depth data and follow up on events that may have shaped their experiences over time. The continuity of contact and confidentiality of the previous interviews established a certain level of trust and familiarity between the researcher and the managers, which meant that more personal questions about their leadership could be asked. The total amount of audio-recorded interview data is between 2.5 and 4.5 h with each leader, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Since the original transcripts are in Swedish, the authors subsequently translated extracts into English. All interviews were conducted in the managers' offices.

The interviews were loosely structured so as to assemble personal experiences of leadership and allow the interviewees to construct a narrative flow. The interviews were formed as conversations about leadership, touching upon areas such as the concept of leadership, the role and function of leaders and the interviewees' experience of leadership. The in-depth conversations thus tried to develop an understanding of how the managers made sense of their role as leaders in relation to expectations and opportunities.

We acknowledge that interviewing three subjects may make the study look more vulnerable to idiosyncrasies of those involved and the empirical material more limited. However, the interview material in many ways was relatively clear and formed fascinating accounts of leadership constructions. It allowed us to make supported general points about paradoxes in claims about authentic leadership. We are aware of problems with overgeneralising or draw premature interpretations from a small material, but qualitative research is not primarily to be assessed on the size of the empirical material but rather to what extent it facilitates and allows for rich interpretations. The number of interviews is perhaps less relevant in research where meaning, not frequency, is the overall theme (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Our set of interviews offers a rich and interesting case for analytically fine-tuned examinations of how leadership discourses are employed in identity work in order to challenge some of the assumptions underlying discussions of authentic leadership. This facilitates the possibility of using what Stake (2005) calls 'natural generalisation', i.e. using personal, but socially and reflexively mediated experiences, in order to draw out generalisable interpretation from case studies.

Data analysis

Following a discourse analytical approach, we see the interviewees' narratives of leadership and their diverse range of stories about leadership as locally discursive acts constructed in interplay with their circumstances and life histories (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). This means that they are considered outcomes of dominant discourses, political actions, impression management, script-following, identity work, etc. (Alvesson, 2003; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The analysis then required us to attend to the interviewees' discursive work of drawing upon local experiences and societal discourses in weaving these into narratives about their leadership. Recognising the constructed and constructive dimensions of discourse (Potter and Hepburn, 2008), we used 'analytical bracketing' to attend to these interplays or discursive movements between the *whats* (discourses, stories and narratives) and *hows* (the assemblages of these versions, actions and events) (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

In analysing the empirical material, we first bracketed the 'hows' and focused on the available and employed discursive formations used by the managers to tell their stories; that is, the substance and conditions that shaped the narrative (Gubrium and

Holstein, 1998). While slightly different, all three managers employed prevailing leadership discourses in emphasising positive and romantic images of leadership. Recurrent themes included talking about themselves as natural and born leaders true to themselves. However, the positive images of leadership they employed are contradictory to the stories of how they often practised leadership. It became noticeable that there was a gap between how they talked and reflected upon their leadership in terms of conventional leadership discourses and how they talked about their practical experience of leadership. This raised questions about how they constructed their identity in response to conflicting leadership norms and demands.

Second, we bracketed the local and societal discourses, the ‘whats’ outlined above, in analysing how the managers constructed and crafted the narratives of themselves as leaders. The managers chose particular stories and events to provide a meaningful narrative of their leadership. This part of the analysis thus turned to understanding how the managers essentialised or crystallised their self-construction in producing coherent selves amidst diverse and conflicting leadership discourses and experiences. The coherence in their leadership narratives emerged through familiar ‘narrative characters’ or metaphors. Metaphors, broadly defined as understanding one phenomenon in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), allowed the managers to make sense of leadership by connecting their experiences to particular characters—Mother Teresa, messiah and coach. The metaphors used by the managers were analysed in terms of how the managers employed them to construct a coherent leadership identity amidst fragmentised experiences. The analysis followed the temporal aspects of how the managers narrated their lives rather than the chronological order of the actual interviews. Thus, the usage of metaphors was identified to overcome temporal discrepancies in their life stories and not discrepancies in the interview situation.

The empirical sections below broadly follow our analytical steps. We first illustrate how the managers talk about and see themselves as leaders, possessing natural leader traits reflecting leadership discourses. By regarding themselves as natural or born leaders, they appear to assume that they need to follow their calling and be true to their leader traits. In the following empirical sections this assumption is problematized. The empirical material demonstrates that acting according to what they perceive to be their true nature makes the managers feel bad, which triggers them to act differently. Finally, we show how the leaders construct new positive metaphors to weave together conflicting identity constructions into a coherent self.

Being an authentic and good leader

Even though talk of leadership differs slightly among the three managers interviewed, they all talk about themselves as good leaders. This is perhaps not surprising considering the status of contemporary leadership discourses. Joe, one of the managers, explains the importance of being visible and clear and at the same time approachable:

A good leader, for me, he [sic] should be unambiguous so he’s visible. One should know where he stands. He provides judgements without necessarily knowing everything, but, at least, they should be able to come and talk to me. I don’t think everyone can be leaders. I think you can learn tools and be a good leader based on schooling through feedback, mentorship and things like that. I also think there should be inherited characteristics . . . like being available and socially skilled.

Joe seemingly suggests that a good leader should be determined, honest and certain, which are traits that he considers himself to more or less exhibit. This expresses a somewhat leader-centric view, indicating the leader (Joe) as the visible point of reference on whom people can rely in terms of judgements as well as providing a secure position for others. Although skills acquired by learning are also important, for Joe, leadership is typically about natural pre-dispositions. He elaborates on this when he says that:

I want to be a leader. I cannot escape it. I end up there [as a leader]. Working alone is not Joe... I want to be a part of something bigger... I am myself all the time. It's nothing I think about. I'm like this.

Throughout the interviews, Joe portrays himself as a true natural leader, and it appears as if he anchors his self-identity in being a leader, something he has not chosen to be but rather becomes because of his particular nature.

Similar to Joe, Lisa expresses the idea that she has certain traits that make her a leader, which suggests that leadership is a matter of being true to herself. Although uncertain about what 'it' is, Lisa says that she has this mystical 'something':

I just have to admit that. I have something, people listen to me, engage with what I say, I am seen. I don't really know what it is... I have some kind of capability.

While she is struggling to identify the particular skill or trait that separates her from others, this 'something' justifies her position as a leader. It is notable that the capability is hidden, since if identifiable, it could be applicable to others and possibly lose its powers.

The third manager, William, similar to Joe and Lisa, suggests that he has certain inherent traits, such as charisma, that should be employed according to the situation. While it is important to recognise people's needs, it is by displaying and acting according to one's true beliefs that these needs can be addressed:

I think you are born a leader. I don't think you can learn it; I don't think you can take courses or study to be a leader. It is something you have in yourself. You have that charisma and that capability and foremost the social skill to see the group's needs. You are who you are. You have certain values, base values and cornerstones that you have put in place that you don't move easily no matter what kind of education.

Perhaps more explicitly than the two other managers, William expresses a static and pessimistic view on leadership; either you have it or you do not. In any case, William has 'it'.

Their consensus that you are born a leader and that there is limited value in leadership courses is perhaps somewhat surprising, since all three leaders during the period of the study participated in leadership development programs. Even so, being authentic, expressed by the leaders as being true to yourself, 'who you are' and your capabilities, is typically seen as central in good leadership; managers are expected to act according to their nature in order to exercise good leadership. According to the interviewees, their managerial status was largely a result of them being true to their nature. Their leadership narratives appear to overlap somewhat with common discourses of transformative or authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Yammarino et al., 2008) and the associated leader-centrism where the leader facilitates the realisation of the followers' interests (as aligned with the purpose of the organisation) (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). But this only tells part of the story. In order to more comprehensively understand authenticity in organisations, we also need to expand the

processes to local situations. What is the impact of being true to one's self in terms of how the presumed leaders' experience interactions with followers?

Being an authentic and bad leader

When asked to elaborate about being a good leader, the managers talk about the need to regulate and restrain the natural inclinations of taking the centre stage and being too determined, honest and certain. They suggest that it is also important to be considerate and helpful, even though this may go against their claimed true self. For example, Joe explains how he has to restrain his temper and competitiveness; he actively struggles with his identity in relation to himself and others as a leader:

Even though I may be perceived as tough, I want to help everyone. I have a lot of altruism in me, even though I'm a leader. I know that I can get fired up, but I have changed.

I have a word that I try to live by. It is: 'you don't need to win every war; choose your fights'. Focus on long term. You may destroy this person. You may have it wrong. Choose your fights. I try to do this. I know that I have problem with this, but I try. I don't have to talk all the time. Watch and study what happens. I'm active, but I cannot be anything else, but silence can also be good. I'm very competitive. There is a danger that you think you have to win all the time. Over the years I have tried to think which fights to choose. Remember to give the others time. Just because I'm sure about the question doesn't mean that I can preach ten minutes to get my way. I have to give others time.

This rather forceful quote may be seen as suggestive of a rather antagonistic view of managerial work that typically spins around conflicts and struggles. However, our analysis suggests that Joe displays some guilt in regards to leadership norms and who he wants to be as a person and a leader. Being determined, strong and articulate are typical leader traits according to Joe, while helping others in terms of listening and giving others space are framed as something almost opposite to being a leader. The identification with leader-centred discourses results in conflicts when responding to others' needs and who he wants to be. Hence Joe finds it difficult to act 'authentically', since it (partly) prevents him from being helpful and caring—to be good. The interactions with others appear to produce identity struggles and anxiety in relation to leadership behaviours.

Lisa similarly struggles with acting against her perceived nature as a leader in being less dominant. Lisa explains how she has to moderate and restrain her supposed authenticity in order to be good. She does this by suggesting that she is not taking too much space from others:

I try to take it a bit easy, but it just doesn't work. Then it is about what you do with it [leadership], so you don't use it to dominate and take everyone's place, because that is not good. I have to balance using the throttle and the break. Grab space when needed and let it go when that is needed.

I cut off discussions in order to finish in time. You feel really awful. You feel like an army officer sometimes. I reflect upon my behaviour. One time I told myself not to say anything, not be seen, not exist, try to let others take the centre stage. That was really hard. I don't want to be someone who dominates and takes the centre stage.

Here, we see how the perceived authentic and natural powers of the leader can backfire and subsequently create what Lisa acknowledges to be bad leadership. Talking about trying to be

yourself in this case indicates some anxiety and guilt ('feeling awful') for being dominating and cruel. Of interest is also Lisa's usage of the metaphor of an army officer as a negative construction that facilitates dis-identification. This can be compared to the analogies of 'wars' and 'fights' used by Joe in his identity work.

Similar to Joe and Lisa, William also expresses struggles between being true to one's self and being a good leader. William explains how he has to restrain himself from being too dominant and commanding:

It is problematic for me to take a step back. I want to be active in meetings. I have to make an effort not to talk all the time. But, at the same time, I have been chosen for this job because of who I am. I don't think you should change too much. A person who really wants to talk, it is stupid if that one is quiet, because you are expected to act in line with who you are by nature. One of the criticisms I got is that I'm too direct, I forcefully instruct. I really try to restrain myself to not do this in all situations. In some aspects you should do it, but I know that that is what I do. At the same time, I'm picked because of who I am so I will never fully change. That wouldn't work. Of course, I am certain that a leader has to be able to forcefully instruct when it is demanded.

William recognizes that acting in line with his nature leads to criticism from his subordinates. There is a conflict between his self-construction as a natural and talkative leader and the subordinates' demands for someone who listens. William moves back and forth between trying to be true to himself and changing according to the situation, indicating that being authentic may give rise to some identity anxieties and guilt about to what extent the image people have of William is well aligned with how he wants to be perceived.

The three managers' leadership experiences suggest that acting according to what they perceive to be their authentic selves paradoxically undermines the esteem-enhancing aspects of an authentic identity. Arguably, it is one thing to discursively construct an authentic leader identity somewhat detached from the actual experience of interaction with subordinates, and quite a different thing to maintain that identity when elaborating upon the actual experience of the interaction with subordinates. All three managers indicate that authenticity can backfire and portray them as bad leaders in terms of destroying others, being awful or forceful. We here see a conflict in the managers' narratives between being true to a perceived self and being true to others in constructing a coherent narrative of leadership. The following section illustrates how the managers try to overcome this identity insecurity by developing narrative characters that support their leadership roles.

Struggling with paradoxes of authenticity

The paradoxical demands on managers to be authentic leaders in terms of popular leadership discourses, and the local demands of others engender a struggle that undermines self-esteem and the possibility of sustaining a coherent and stable leader identity. Bringing metaphors into play can be seen as a way of reframing the leader experience and relieving the identity struggle. This is aimed at re-establishing a valued identity connected to self-esteem and self-worth. In doing this, Joe juxtaposes his toughness with compassion although combining them is difficult:

There is a lot of Mother Teresa in me, which almost destroyed me because I wouldn't let anyone feel bad . . . Some probably have a picture of me as always so tough, but realised that I have other

sides too... From growing up, I have this Good Samaritan and a bit of Mother Teresa within me and I'm happy about that, and this experience has been extremely useful in meeting people.

The story from his past grounds his current narrative insecurity by providing history to the identity construction of Joe as a 'softer' leader. By drawing upon the metaphors of Mother Teresa and the Good Samaritan, he seeks to overcome identity fragmentation and weave together the past with the present, which gives the identity a consistency over time. The historicity of the metaphor signals that he has always been like this, that is, it is the authentic self. By framing this (being helpful and participatory) in terms of Mother Teresa and Good Samaritan, Joe can mitigate a possible sense of guilt and perhaps maintain self-worth. Even if this softer side does not fit Joe's talk of being a heroic (strong and tough) leader, the metaphors allow him to maintain a leader identity and certain amount of heroism. This is done by reframing himself as gentle and helpful in terms of a kind of anti-hero; a person that does not want to appear as heroic, but nevertheless does on account of his special acts.

Lisa employs similar types of metaphors, and here, we note how the war metaphors are interchanged with religious and more compassionate terms:

There are a lot of things to do here if they are on board and want to. There is no point in being a messiah if no one is on board. They think: 'here comes the saviour who will make sure everything is alright'. It feels like the expectations are really high. They think: 'now, if ever, will something happen'. That is why the executive board doesn't dare to slow me down. Because if they reject my changes, I will get tired.

They (the subordinate managers) couldn't believe how I got the things done. We had a team meeting with all the managers and no one who left the re-organisation meeting believed in it at all. They thought that [the re-organisation plans] would never be accepted by the executive board. Never! I got back to my team and told them that we were going to hire more people and they were: 'What! Is it true?! You are joking!'

The quote above is one example how Lisa manages identity tensions. In this case, she is framing her tendency to 'grab space', 'take the centre stage' and being 'seen' in the leader role of a messiah and a saviour based on how she imagines subordinates are regarding her. The metaphors appear to assist Lisa in her identity struggle, and they justify her inclinations of leader-centrism through the miracles she perform in overcoming obstacles. The positively laded metaphors align her self-perceived nature as dominant with the recognition by others for her to take the centre stage.

William expresses similar struggles against his perceived natural identity as a leader. He uses the metaphor of a coach to facilitate delegating work and responsibility. This is challenging, however, since he is forced to go against his perceived nature:

Take the example of work delegation... I think I was too articulate in the beginning. I spelled out what was needed to be done, which was my responsibility and was obviously correct, but I was too expressive and walked over people, which meant that no one dared to do anything without me telling them what to do. It meant an inability to act and that would be great, if I could sit here and tell them what to do, but this is not pre-school, so I realised I cannot work that way, since nothing happened... That is something I work with in regards to meeting to make sure that I don't stand there as a teacher. But rather delegate the responsibility. Foremost I want to be more advising and coaching than what I am. When they come in to me, instead of forcefully instruct, I can coach them to the right solution.

William suggests that acting authentically by being 'too expressive' and 'walking over people' would be counter-productive in terms of making people take responsibility. Being direct and expressive runs the risk of backfiring as it may reinforce subordinates position as followers. Framing this kind of direct and determined leadership as coaching gives a positive aura and suggests that William is 'doing well'. William imagines himself in the future as a coach, a common metaphor for good leadership and one that is less confronting. The metaphor is thus used to bridge William's past and present identity with an idealised future. By shifting the pedagogical role from teacher to coach, William can counter his perceived criticism directed towards him—the commanding teacher—and be seen in a more favourable leader light—the facilitative coach. This illustrates a continuous self-regulation of leader identity where William tries to find a source of leader identity that more appropriately relates to what is commonly seen as good leadership.

Constructing a coherent self from the fleeting imageries of their leader identity is like walking a tightrope for these three managers. All three express that it is their nature, their authentic selves, which make them the epicentres of their organisation. But, simultaneously, they try to restrain this authenticity in order to be good leaders by framing their leadership slightly differently. Joe framed his dominant 'preaching' as being close to the positive-valued identities of helping others via metaphors of Mother Teresa and the Good Samaritan. These metaphors from the past made it possible to restore the idea of exercising good leadership and are given more positive meaning compared with the conquering war hero. Lisa frames her tendency to 'grab space' in terms of being a messiah and saviour, which appear to reduce her anxieties expressed in the negative military identity by comparing her behaviour to a compassionate leader helping others. In a similar way, William frames his talk about being forceful as an aspect of being a coach. Acting against his perceived authentic self, William regulates his leadership towards what the subordinates need for the future.

Discussion

The three managers construct themselves as leaders and role models who provide guidance and direction for followers. The central idea is that they, as leaders, constitute the natural hub around which their organisation, department or group revolves. They see themselves as distinct in hierarchically leading by being determined, assertive, decisive, enthusiastic and self-confident. In doing this, they are destined to have a disproportionate impact on organisational processes and outcomes. Their personal qualities resonate well with various forms of leader-centric 'heroism', where the role of the leader is to be in control and expresses superior insights in relation to subordinates (House and Aditya, 1997; Levine, 2008). Put differently, we can see how ideas of authenticity—being oneself and acting accordingly—enable an emphasis of the psychology of the individual leader, whose qualities positively influence followers and organisations.

However, when talking about how these norms of authentic leadership work in interaction with subordinates and their call for consideration, recognition and appreciation, the managers give an opposing meaning to authenticity. This leader-centrism is suddenly constructed as bossy and dogmatic and, consequently, 'bad'. Practising what one perceives to be authentic leadership backfires, and it becomes difficult to remain true to one's perception of oneself. Our study thus exhibits a somewhat darker side to authentic leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2007) that is less appealing and perhaps even anxiety-ridden as a source of identity work. From being a central element in leader self-esteem, we can see how

interactions with subordinates reverse the view of authenticity. These darker and coercive dimensions of authenticity are rare in the literature of authentic leadership, which includes only positive effects for individual leaders, followers and organisations (Caza and Jackson, 2011).

The indications of experiences of anxiety and guilt among the interviewed managers perhaps partly rest on a marginalisation of many contemporary ideas in more shared forms of leadership, such as processes, relations, interactions, recognition and participation, that sometimes is labelled post-heroic (Collinson, 2005). While portraying the leader as the ultimate cause of everything is appealing for managers, when contrasted to ideas of consideration and participation it appears authoritarian and intimidating both for managers and subordinates. The identity work among the managers seems regulated by two somewhat contradictory discourses of leadership, both with identity appeals (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003): the transformative approach with its emphasis on heroic abilities (that the managers regard themselves to have) and the post-heroic approach with its emphasis on recognition and participation (that they also want to express). This produces identity tensions and the struggle to maintain a coherent leader identity (Lewis, 2000).

These tensions are illustrated when the managers talk about their managerial career and present hierarchical status as a result of their authentically good leader traits and styles (directive, assertive and determinate), but in the light of the post-heroic notions of leadership, those very traits and styles are constructed as bossy and dogmatic. These tensions are expressed in ways that appear to indicate anxiety and perhaps even guilt. To overcome the anxiety and, at least temporarily, restore a coherent managerial identity and a valued sense of self, the managers employ different metaphors. We can thus see how ‘... metaphors gives contradictions in society a sense of coherence’ (Sennett, 1980: 79). The usage of metaphors to reduce anxiety partly overlaps with Epstein’s (1973: 409) suggestion that people typically try to avoid incorporate information that jeopardises the coherence and stability of self-theories in order to maintain self-esteem. The metaphorical selves—Mother Teresa, messiah and coach—repress and mask contradictory elements of different leadership roles or expectations and may alleviate the experience of identity stress.

In addition to restoring them as good and even virtuous leaders, the metaphors provide some meaning and consolation in seemingly resolving conflicting leadership demands. Metaphorical selves ascertain (temporarily) identity coherence and continuity and, following that, good leadership. The employment of these metaphors can be seen as sustaining their feeling of being chosen and be productive for their self-esteem (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The construction of metaphorical selves further illustrates the generative aspects of identity work when confronted with conflicting or competing discourses. The managers manoeuvred well-known leadership characters and metaphors to provide consistency to their conflicting leadership experiences. Coherence of the self is then a process of actively changing the narratives of the self to configure a coherent self. A stable identity is thus based on continuous change over time; accomplishing a sense of sameness is dependent on temporal consistency (Ricoeur, 1992). Identity formation and the experience of a configuration as a person is dependent on organising a diverse range of experiences into a plot or meaningful story. In Joe’s case, this plot reached back to his childhood; for Lisa, it was recent meetings that supported her identity work, while in William’s case, the plot stretched into the future.

The identity work in using metaphors shows how a socially constructed reading of authenticity can be useful (Cunliffe, 2001; Sparrowe, 2005). With no essential qualities, authentic leadership can be seen as a social construct that people draw upon to make

sense of themselves and certain activities (Bresnen, 1995). However, while the metaphorical selves may temporarily provide identity coherence and stability, they tend to recall the problems associated with leader centrism, now explicitly accompanied with a strong moral undertone. The metaphors used suggest that the managers are not only natural born leaders, but also morally superior leaders. Most writers on authenticity assume that authentic leadership represents good leadership since it rests on moral foundations of what is claimed to be legitimate values (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 184). Thus, rather than open up a reflexive space for more post-heroic versions of leadership, the identity work—based on the metaphorical selves—among the managers may actually reinforce more heroic versions of leadership. The characterisation of leaders as saint or prophets may encourage and reinforce hierarchical relations and power dependencies. Thus, others are best positioned to listen, accommodate and model themselves after the enlightened managers that reside on a higher moral ground, which may further reinforce employee dependencies, submissions and traditional organisational asymmetrical relations.

Perhaps, a bit ironically, it is when the three managers challenge the norms of being a leader associated with the authentic leadership literature that they can be seen as seeking authenticity from an existential tradition. All three managers struggled with owning up to the leadership discourses of leader heroism or superiority in relation to organisational members and situations. In choosing these leadership discourses as basis for their identity construction, the managers are forced to challenge the interpretations of who they are and who they want to be. All three in different terms express guilt, anxiety or a sense of failure in acting with the norms they are identifying with. This agony of challenging conventional norms is a key aspect of authenticity for existentialist, such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre (Golomb, 1995). The metaphorical selves constructing a coherent self can then be seen as a way to take responsibility for who they are and who they are becoming in seeking authenticity.

Conclusions

Leadership is frequently promoted as both the cause and solution to many present-day moral concerns. Authentic leadership has drawn particular attention in this respect as one of the most popular topics in contemporary leadership. In this paper, we have critically examined the relevance of authentic leadership in a contemporary organisation. By drawing on in-depth case study material, the ambition has been to investigate and problematise the practice of authenticity rather than take it for granted. The findings of our study call for three general conclusions.

First, authentic leadership is an attractive ideal among managers as it reassures managers of their traditional power positions. Academically, it can be seen as an effort at restoring leader centrism in leadership studies. A key idea is that managers/leaders still represent the primary solution to be relied upon when it comes to leading and developing contemporary organisations. There are strong undertones of heroism suggesting a renaissance of the transformational approaches to leadership. As such, the mobilisation of the psychology of the individual leader can be seen as an ideological project aimed at restoring belief in a proposed enlightened version of leadership although much of it echoes classic managerialism (Caza and Jackson, 2011). While much contemporary research in leadership has made efforts to orient itself towards processes, interactions, relations and shared leadership (Ford and Harding, 2011), authentic leadership ideas reinforce the significance of the individual leader.

Second, organisational complexities—typically ignored in most mainstream writings—often obstruct (not surprisingly) the possibility to maintain a strong authentic leader identity (in terms of being oneself). Idealistic talk of being an authentic leader partly obscures organisational interactions when managers exercise the presumed authenticity in relation to subordinates. When the managers in this study elaborated upon their experiences, the idealised—abstract and objectified—notion of authenticity becomes nothing more than a managerialist dream. It is difficult to regard oneself as an authentic leader when the local organisational community contradicts authenticity ideals. This forces leaders to engage in identity work to span contradictory discourses. It can thus be concluded that it is misleading to disassociate the talk of authentic leadership from the organisational and social context in which it takes place (Algeria and Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Shaw, 2010).

Finally, efforts at practising authenticity produce identity struggles that demand managers to engage in the production of metaphorical selves in order to cope with these struggles. These metaphorical selves facilitate a recall of leader centrism in authentic leadership that prevents reflection and practice of more participative leadership approaches. Rather than assuming that authenticity produces all sorts of individual and organisational benefits, it is useful to investigate the significance of the concept for how people think, feel and act. A central challenge of being an authentic leader, of being true to oneself as a good leader, is to overcome the inherent tensions between available social discourses of leadership, between local discursive demands about what it means to be a leader and between reconstructed past experiences and future imaginations of the self as a leader. Although the metaphorical selves that were developed by the managers in our case may have created some consolation for the managers, they also repressed the possibility for a more profound reflexion of the value of authenticity in organisations by re-emphasising the centrality of managers, thus precluding the possibility for more shared forms of leadership.

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