

Authentic Leadership: Getting back to the roots of the ‘root construct’?

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Summary

In their 2011 review paper Gardner et al concluded that the Authentic Leadership (AL) construct was still in the first stage of evolution, that of concept introduction and evaluation. At that time, the field was characterized by two types of contribution: conceptual expositions and largely quantitative research seeking to map out its antecedents and consequences, moderators and mediators. The current review aims to: 1) critically evaluate the development of the AL construct to the present time; and 2) taking this evaluation as a point of departure, propose the need for a radical re-grounding of our understanding of AL aimed at countering what we believe to be the substantive flaws in both its philosophical underpinnings and

empirical grounding. We propose that these shortcomings have arisen due to the failure of existential and other critiques of the dominant (normative and functionalist) discourse of AL to gain traction, and due to an absence of practice-based, qualitative research. As a strategic platform for the potential re-grounding and relaunch of AL we propose a radical return to the existential and practice roots of authenticity as the basis for a broader understanding of ‘authentic leadership’ as a ‘central organizing principle’ in leadership studies. Despite the flaws identified in the AL construct, we suggest that the notion of authenticity may still have a valuable role to play in the study of leadership: that role, however, can only be determined through a thorough understanding of authentic leadership as a practice-based phenomenon.

Introduction

In the broadest possible context, ‘authenticity’ has been subject to two very different symbolic interpretations (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009): ‘type authenticity’, which refers to whether an entity is true to its associated type, category or genre, and ‘moral authenticity’ where ‘the issue concerns whether the decisions behind the enactment and operation of an entity reflect sincere choices (i.e. choices true to one’s self) rather than socially scripted responses’ (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009: 255). Type authenticity – associated most commonly with products, tourist attractions and the like – is relatively easy to assess and establish. There exist a number of recognised authentication processes – from hallmarks on silver, through patents on product designs, to historical listings on buildings – to establish the innate qualities of the ‘product’ and its right to be described as belonging to a particular type. It is when we consider moral authenticity, as it relates to people and roles, that the issues become more complex. For example, Harter (2002: 382) tells us that authenticity occurs when ‘one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings’. On this view, authenticity is clearly a property of that which is claiming to be authentic, and arises as a natural or spontaneous occurrence. Yet, as most leaders will know

to their cost, it is possible to have authentic intentions and yet appear inauthentic, or to effectively ‘fake’ authenticity for others and yet not feel it. In relation to leadership authenticity, issues of intention versus attribution (Martinko, Harvey and Douglas, 2007) become particularly salient. In a related qualitative research project exploring the relationship between authenticity and emotional labour, the ability of leaders to be relationally transparent (a key component of the AL construct) was seen to be problematic (authors, in press). It was this point that catalysed our curiosity in relation to the development of the AL construct and prompted our undertaking of an in-depth review. In undertaking this review, we began from a position of broad sympathy with the idea of authentic leadership as a potentially useful development in leadership theorising but with the caveat that our experience with leadership practitioners and our knowledge of the AL literature suggested there may be flaws in the current construct when considering a practice orientation. We believe our concerns have been borne out by this review and that a question mark now hangs over the future of AL which can only be answered by empirically re-grounding the notion of authenticity in the everyday enactment of leadership by practicing leaders, and what it means to them to be authentic.

The development of authentic leadership (AL) was explicitly positioned as a response to a troubled world and a loss of faith in previous forms of leadership, said to have resulted in an ‘ethical corporate meltdown’ (May et al, 2003: 247). The construct grew out of attempts to answer the question ‘what are the factors that influence ethical decision-making processes and behaviours of leaders ... and why [do] they choose to deceive their followers, shareholders and the general public?’ (May et al, 2003: 247). Northouse (2010: 205) supports the appeal of AL as a response to disillusionment with past leadership scandals when he suggests that:

Upheavals in society have energised a tremendous demand for authentic leadership.

The destruction on 9/11, corporate scandals at companies like WorldCom and Enron

and massive failures in the banking industry have all created fear and uncertainty.

People feel apprehensive and insecure ... they long for bona fide leadership they can trust and for leaders who are honest and good. People's demand for leadership makes the study of authentic leadership timely and worthwhile.

Recent events in the political arena (for example the UK Brexit vote in 2016 and the election of President Trump in the US in 2017) suggest a more complex picture of what people demand from their leaders in times of trouble, and how their apprehensions and insecurities might be expressed. The close-knit coterie of early AL writers were nonetheless able to gather a following for the notion of authenticity as a valuable underpinning of modern leadership. The antecedent influences perhaps generated an idealized conceptualizing of AL. The instrumentalist and functionalist orientation sought to meet the desired outcomes of AL for followers, alongside an alignment with enhanced organizational performance, rather than focusing on the robust operationalization of the construct itself. These outcomes found resonance in the desires of the time: as Guthey has noted (2013) leadership research has a significant role to play in the production and reproduction of popular leadership ideas, and the rise of 'fashionable' approaches as cultural products. Such fashions are rarely based on an in-depth understanding of the underpinning research or a critical consideration of their tenets. In parallel with a consideration of the antecedent drivers of AL, the notion of how the construct has developed is, we believe, useful in gaining an understanding of the current state of AL as a field, and particularly so in saving it from future redundancy. (As discussed in the conclusion to this review, we believe it is an open question as to whether it can be so saved). Following the lead of Gardner et al (2011) we draw on Reichers and Schneider's (1990) three-stage model for the evolution of constructs to inform our narrative account of AL's history and current state of development. Taking this critical narrative as a point of departure, we then propose the need for a radical re-grounding of our understanding of AL aimed at

countering what we see as significant flaws in the construct itself. In a few short years, AL has arrived at a generally accepted definition and operationalization – both arising from Walumbwa et al's (2008) construction, 'validation' and subsequent mass propagation of a psychometric instrument - whilst it has yet to resolve more substantive issues of its theoretical underpinnings and philosophical antecedents. The AL construct is also yet to be thoroughly grounded in empirical research from a qualitative, practice perspective: a 'bottom up' approach that we would strongly advocate as the safest means of determining whether the construct has real substance or is merely an 'empty signifier' (Kelly, 2014), an aspirational straw man that lacks substance when we try to enact it. A key question for us in this regard is whether a reductionist psychometric, with only four key components (Walumbwa et al, 2008) can comprehensibly capture the complexities of what it means to be an authentic leader? We would suggest this is most unlikely. As a strategic platform for the future development of authenticity in leadership we suggest that the notion of authenticity may still have a valuable role to play in the study of leadership, but that that role can only be determined through a thorough understanding of authentic leadership as a practice-based phenomenon. Only in this way can it hope to address the day-to-day complexities of authenticity in organizational leadership practice.

The review is structured as follows. Firstly, we set out our approach to establishing the domain of the review and offer a critical outline of the construct evolution model which is subsequently utilized to inform our analysis. There then follows an intentionally brief descriptive synthesis and evaluation of research and writing in the field, setting out our understanding of the progress made to date in the development of the authentic leadership construct. The main substance of the review follows, in which we develop a critical argument

in relation to the current state of the construct, as a ‘strategic platform’ (IJMR Author Guidelines¹) for its future development.

Methodology

This review considers authentic leadership (AL) research in the domain of management and management studies. It includes studies published between January 2000 and May 2017, a period which covers the vast majority of writing on this topic area. Whilst the authors were already familiar with much of the literature in the field, the review takes as its basis a systematic search undertaken specifically for this purpose. This was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS) social sciences citation index, and utilized the words ‘authentic’ and ‘leadership’ as search terms in the field of ‘topic’. In selecting papers to be included in the review, references to authentic followership and four generally accepted components of AL (self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective) were accepted. This search resulted in 88 items not including three retraction notices and one corrigendum notice. We include the three retracted papers in this number as we see them as having had a contribution to make to the development of the construct. We have not included book chapters and other similar sources within the review, although a number of these (e.g. George, 2003; George and Sims, 2007) did inform our thinking about the construct. Authenticity per se is not included in the review as it constitutes a very wide literature in its own right.

Analysis of the collated material was undertaken in a number of stages, as follows. To develop an early sense of the ‘shape’ of the field, a preliminary spreadsheet based primarily on abstracts/WoS listings was drawn up, categorizing papers under a number of headings. These included such obvious distinctions as qualitative versus quantitative, and conceptual

¹ [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1468-2370/homepage/ForAuthors.html](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1468-2370/homepage/ForAuthors.html) accessed 07/09/17.

versus empirical but also served to highlight peaks of activity, key authors and journals, and some unanticipated gaps (for example in relation to gender and AL). Subsequent in-depth reading of papers served to supplement and validate the emerging themes and to further delineate the field, enabling us to identify key distinctions and debates. These then served to structure our analysis and formed the basis of our broader theorizing and proposals for re-conceptualizing the field.

As a means of interrogating the literature within the field, we initially drew on Reichers and Schneider's (1990) three-stage model for the evolution of constructs. This framework was utilized by Gardner et al in their 2011 review of the developing field although we see their application of it as being not unproblematic, coming, as it did, so early in the development of the construct and from an explicitly positivist perspective. Specifically, the stage model does not allow for an analysis of how an unfounded or inherently flawed construct can emerge and persist. We nonetheless believed it could offer useful touchstones for our own analysis and interpretation. Reichers and Schneider's (1990: 6-8) delineation of the three stages can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Concept introduction and elaboration, during which concepts are borrowed or 'displaced' (Morey and Luthans, 1985) in order to invent new ones, which are then interpreted and modified to suit their new context (Schön, 1963). Attempts are made to legitimize the concept and offer preliminary data to 'prove' it describes a real phenomenon.
- 2) Concept evaluation and augmentation, during which critical reviews of the concept appear, attempting to address faulty conceptualization, inadequate operationalization and equivocal empirical results. 'Improved' reconceptualizations of the construct also appear.
- 3) Concept consolidation and accommodation, when one or two definitions and operationalizations become generally accepted and research interest declines. Acceptance

of the construct is signalled by its inclusion in more general models, where it appears as a mediator/moderator or contextual variable.

Whilst Reichers and Schneider (1990) acknowledge that the stages are not strictly chronological and boundaries can be fuzzy, we see the stages themselves as more problematic and potentially indicative of a lack of robustness in the model itself. In the case of the AL construct, papers relating to all three stages of 'evolution' appeared throughout the review period, with multiple aspects of construct development occurring within a compressed period of time. In addition to the issue of stages per se, there is also a clear positivist/quantitative bias in Reichers and Schneider's world view which we would not share. The absence of grounded, qualitative research as a key component of the model seems to us to leave room for one of the flaws (a disconnect from practice) to which we draw attention in our discussion. In light of these issues, we downgraded our application of the model to drawing on the components, without abiding by the linear stages proposed and with the caveat that we see these components as necessary but not sufficient for the development of a robust, well-grounded construct.

Descriptive analytics – mapping the field

As earlier noted, the search criteria resulted in a data set of 88 papers. Whilst it is not the intention of this review to dwell on the numerical classification of these papers, there are some characteristics of the data set which are worthy of note, and have implications for our more substantive review below. These characteristics are discussed briefly in the remainder of this section.

The generally accepted definition of the AL construct, and the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) as its most usually utilised measure and common operationalization,

derives from a paper by Walumbwa et al (2008). By this definition, authentic leadership is said to be:

‘a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development’ (Walumbwa et al, 2008: 94).

Deriving from idealised normative and functionalist aims of delineating a style of leadership capable of producing measurable organisational outcomes (Avolio et al, 2004; Gardner and Schermerhorn, 2004), authentic leaders are said to be ‘transparent about their intentions and strive to maintain a seamless link between espoused values, behaviours and actions’ (Luthans and Avolio, 2003: 242). The ALQ, comprised of the four components of self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective, has remained largely untested and unchallenged in the literature (see Randolph-Seng and Gardner, 2012 and Neider and Schriesheim, 2011, for the only exceptions). Of the 88 papers, 27 were conceptual (and hence contained no empirical data). Of the 61 empirical papers 52 were quantitative, 8 were qualitative (including one review paper) and one utilized mixed methods. Of these 9 empirical ‘outliers’, 3 (including the mixed methods paper) related to AL Development (Baron, 2016; Baron and Parent, 2015; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2014) and focused more on the training intervention than the AL construct; the 2 papers published in the Harvard Business Review (George, Sims, McLean and Mayer, 2007; Goffee and Jones, 2005) were generic in their ‘one size fits all’ recipes for authenticity; and one was the 2011 *Leadership Quarterly* review paper (Gardner, Coglier, Davis and Dickens, 2011). The remaining 3 were either contextual in developing the Western AL construct for application to a Chinese context (Zhang, Everett, Elkin and Cone, 2012) or constructionist in considering

the gendered nature of media representations of authentic leadership (Liu, Cutcher and Grant, 2015) or the use of metaphorical selves to alleviate the tensions between leadership authenticity and effectiveness (Nyberg and Svenningsson, 2014). The skewed distribution of empirical studies is not, in itself, particularly significant – although we will return to the issue of the lack of practice based studies later. It represents a reasonable pattern of work aimed at sketching out the parameters of the construct, including challenges to early formulations; empirically testing antecedents and consequences, mediators and moderators; and the first indications of construct maturity in terms of the appearance of review papers. What is more significant – and most pertinent to our argument in relation to the development of AL – is the cultural distribution of conceptual authors within the field, and the parallel distribution of conceptual underpinnings. Table 1 sets out the distribution of the 27 conceptual papers according to the nationality of the lead author and the theoretical underpinnings utilised to ground the AL construct (figures in brackets show the same distribution by nationality of the journal of publication).

Table 1: Cultural orientations of researchers for conceptual papers

- *by lead author (by journal of publication)*

	USA/CAN	EUR/AUS	Asia/RoW
Positive psychology	6 (6)		
Existentialism	0 (1)	2 (1)	
Psychoanalytics		2 (2)	
Other critical	4 (6)	2 (1)	1 (0)
Other	3 (4)		1 (0)
Peripheral	3 (3)	3 (3)	

It becomes immediately apparent that the US origins of the construct (most of these papers were published in the *Leadership Quarterly* 2005 special issue or before) are deeply imbedded in the somewhat superficial and one-sided views of authenticity deriving from positive psychology (May et al, 2003; Price, 2003; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al, 2005), and have as their goal the normative and functionalist specification of a style of leadership aimed at producing measurable organisational outcomes (Avolio et al, 2004; Gardner and Schermerhorn, 2004). In contrast, the later and more critical conceptualisations originated in Europe and Australia (seven out of 11 papers being written by European/Australian/Asian authors), often deriving from existentialist (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Lawler and Ashman, 2012) or psychoanalytic (Ford and Harding, 2011; Costas and Taheri, 2012) traditions, and thus grounded in a more complex, political and contested understanding of authenticity, and one which problematizes both the supposed moral underpinnings of the AL construct and the notion of a 'self' to which an authentic leader can be 'true' (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). These existential and other critiques of the dominant normative and functionalist discourse of AL failed to gain traction against – or at least be properly addressed by – the construct's positivist, American founding fathers. Whilst it is not our intention to dwell here on the 'politics of publishing' in which we as academics all (to a greater or lesser extent) collude, we would concur with Li and Parker's (2012) observation that perspectives critical of an influential 'centre' ground within the literature – in this case, a positive psychological stance developed within a positivist framework – can expect to find themselves marginalized in terms of citation patterns and influence (Li and Parker, 2012). As Li and Parker (2012: 321) note 'the audience for such [critical] writing is likely to lie outside the centre [of the field], which means that marginality and interdisciplinarity should be understood as strategic positions, not indicators of the failure to play a particular game.'

For the purposes of this classification papers dealing with incremental or peripheral aspects of the construct (e.g. authentic followership – de Zilwa, 2016 and leader-follower relations – Hinojosa et al, 2014) have been classified as ‘other’ whilst those relating to marginal uses of AL (for example, AL as it fosters workplace inclusion – Boekhorst, 2015; as a pathway to positive health – Macik-Frey et al, 2009; or relating to pedagogies underpinning AL Development – Berkovich, 2014) have been classified as ‘peripheral’. These papers do not add to our understanding of the AL construct as such, but nor are they empirical.

As already noted, an overview of the empirical papers reveals an unsurprising leaning towards quantitative research, with this work being evenly distributed between the US and Europe. Of the 26 US papers, 12 were published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, whilst the European work shows a significant contribution (7 papers out of 26) relating to leadership in healthcare (specifically, being published in the *Journal of Nursing Management*). This latter occurrence - largely driven by two key authors, Wong and Laschinger (Regan, Laschinger and Wong, 2016; Wong and Giallonardo, 2013; Bamford, Wong and Laschinger, 2013; Laschinger, Wong and Grau, 2013; Wong, Laschinger and Cummings, 2010; Giallonardo, Wong and Iwasiw, 2010) and relating to the interaction between AL and employee engagement - potentially skews the nature and findings of the qualitative research into AL away from the mainstream, and serves to illustrate the need for broader and more frequent application of qualitative – and specifically practice based – perspectives. These papers can be treated as peripheral to the main body of AL literature in the discussion of construct evolution. The three retractions from the data set – all quantitative papers and all published in US journals - arose from methodological concerns which the authors were unable to satisfy due to the data having been destroyed.

Preparatory to our critical narrative of the development of the AL construct, which follows in the next section, Table 2 maps the entire data set (conceptual and empirical papers, by region

of publication) against the key elements of Reichers and Schneider's (1990: 6-8) three stage model of construct evolution.

Table 2: Mapping of papers against evolutionary stages

- *in total (EUR/USA/Asia)*

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Conceptual/theoretical	27 (7/20/0)		
Antecedents/consequences	44 (21/23/0)		
Comparing with other theories	6 (2/4/0)		
Critical of definition or operationalization		14 (6/8/0)	
Validity of empirical findings		-	
Characteristics/components		24 (8/15/1)	
Mediators/moderators		26 (12/14/0)	
Accepted definitions/measures			61 (29/31/1)+
Meta analytic studies			2 (0/2/0)
AL as mediator/moderator in other theories			9 (5/4/0)

+ all the empirical papers included some form of definition/operationalization of AL either derived directly from the ALQ (Walumbwa et al, 2008) or more broadly from the positive psychology related writing by the same team of authors, although the two Harvard Business Review papers were 'theory lite' in this regard and one paper was the definition/operationalization to which the others referred either explicitly or implicitly. No empirical work has been based on any of the critical papers relating to AL.

It was common for papers to combine antecedents and consequences with mediators and moderators of AL (Ling, Liu and Wu, 2017; Malik and Dhar, 2017; Valsania, Moriano and Molero, 2016; Hsieh and Wang, 2015) or characteristics and components (Gatling, Kang and Kim, 2016). Similarly, AL antecedents and consequences were often considered at the same time as treating AL as a mediator or moderator for other variables (Liang, 2017; Monzani, Braun and van Dick, 2016; Agote, Aramburu and Lines, 2016) or when comparing AL with other leadership theories as part of a meta-analytic review (Banks, McCauley, Gardner and

Guler, 2016 – comparison with transformational leadership). There are two papers which span all three stages of ‘evolution’ in their subject matter. One of these is, not surprisingly, Gardner, Cogliser, Davis and Dickens’ (2011) review paper which explicitly uses evolutionary stages as a framework, and the other is Nichols and Erakovich’s (2013) exploration of the potential for the components of AL to operate as mediators or moderators to implicit leadership theories. A review of the publication dates of the papers relating to each column of Table 2 reveals the appearance of research papers relating to all three stages of the evolution model throughout the review period. What emerges is a broad overlapping of the three ‘stages’, with multiple aspects of construct development occurring within a compressed period of time. This suggests to us either a flaw in the development of the construct or a lack of interrogation and robustness in the model when applied to organisational leadership contexts and practice. We will return to this issue in our discussion.

It is significant to note that all 61 empirical papers adopt a generally accepted definition of the construct based on positive psychological roots, accompanied by a parallel psychometric (Walumbwa et al, 2008) for its measurement, both of which have passed into the popular narrative of what it means to be an authentic leader. This occurs in parallel with the continuation of work in relation to exploring its antecedents and consequences (44 papers in all) and significant research relating to characteristics and components (24 papers) and mediators and moderators (26 papers). The appearance of meta-analytic reviews of previous work (2) and the use of AL as a mediator or moderator in other theories (9), is in evidence whilst empirical warranting of where AL sits within the leadership lexicon and the implications of its philosophical grounding (14) remain relatively light. Significantly, calls for further warranting and philosophical exploration by Cooper, Scandura and Schriesheim (2005) seem to have failed to gain traction since they were made over a decade ago.

Interestingly, given that over 1/3 of the authors in the field have been female, only two papers

– one conceptual (Eagly, 2005) and one empirical (Liu, Cutcher and Grant, 2015) – address issues of gender. As noted above, recent papers are starting to see AL used in other topic areas/fields such as organizational change (Alavi and Gill, 2017) and project management (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011).

Authentic Leadership – A critical narrative

Having mapped the field, our approach in this section is to create a narrative interpretation of the AL construct development based on the analysis we have undertaken and captured in Tables 1 and 2. We draw on Gergen's (1999) notions of a narrative as a way of describing a temporal sequence of events and actions which establishes what the connections were, or might have been, among them. We use it as a meaning-making device through which identities (the construct's and potentially our own) are constructed (Chase, 2005). Whilst diligently seeking to construct a narrative that is perceived as legitimate and meaningful to our audience (Barry and Elmes, 1997), we fully acknowledge that other narratives could be constructed in this space and that ours is only one reading of events. Drawing on Gabriel's (2000) poetics modes our narrative is, in part, a romantic tale of seeking to establish a grand theory of leadership. There are key central actors, prominent scholars in the leadership field, and outsiders, the critics of the emergent AL construct. Sadly there is also a potential tragedy within this tale. The central theme of the narrative is an exploration of how the emergence of the AL construct occurred, the rapid acceptance of the construct with the establishment of a mechanism for operationalizing it, and why critical voices questioning the construct had very little influence. The 'denouement' questions the future of authenticity as a superordinate term for all that is considered good within leadership. The narrative commences with a contextual scene setting – the antecedent influences. We then introduce the main characters of the story along with supporting cast. We add to the plot dissenting and cautionary voices. The

conclusion of the narrative offers up the development of the AL construct as akin to the emergence of a fashion.

Romantic antecedent influences

As noted above, the authenticity construct has a long history in the fields of tourist attractions, product origination and the like (see Gardner et al, 2011 for a historical overview), but it first entered the leadership lexicon in the late 1990s as a response to the apparent failure of transformational and charismatic leadership to deliver the promised counter-weight to brewing ethical crises in business and more broadly. A number of high profile corporate scandals that spanned the globe – accounting fraud at Enron Corporation in America, obtaining contracts by bribery at BAE Systems in Saudi Arabia, and large-scale financial fraud at Satyam Systems in India - have all come to light since the turn of the century but there were much earlier scandals too. The flight of CEO Asil Nadir after the collapse of Polly Peck in 1991, money laundering and regulatory fraud by BCCI spanning the 1980s and accounting fraud at Barlow Clowes in 1988 started to raise concerns that powerful leaders were not always a force for good much earlier. The tendency to conflate positions of power with ‘leadership’ was a common feature of how such scandals were reported, obfuscating the more complex structural antagonisms of organisational life in favour of a false unitary perspective (Learmonth and Morrell, 2016). This did not stand in the way of the presentation of a ‘new’ kind of leadership as the suggested solution, however. One response to these concerns was a tighter formulation of what it meant to be transformational. Based on a distinction between ‘personalized’ and ‘socialized’ forms of leadership, Bass (1998) coined the term pseudo-transformational leadership to refer to those leaders who transform others but do so in pursuit of their own goals, and contrasted it with authentic transformational leadership, which may be said to transcend individual interests in favour of the interests of others (Howell and Avolio, 1993). This distinction between authentic- and pseudo-

transformational leadership was further developed by Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), who delineated four components said to constitute authentic transformational leadership, and which grounded authenticity in moral foundations (May et al, 2003).

The 1980s had seen the decline of manufacturing and the rise of service industries around the globe, privatization of key industries such as rail and power in the UK, and a radical change of personal horizons and perceptions following the invention of the internet. By the 1990s the prospects presented by the aspirational '80s had been dashed and most of the major world economies had seen a dramatic economic downturn, with clamorous calls for a new kind of leadership to solve the world's problems, both economic and environmental. Set within this context AL emerged in the early years of the new century.

Introducing the key actors

Price (2003) built on Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) foundational work that sought to embrace morality within the established model of transformational leadership in order to address the apparent emergence of pseudo-transformational leadership. Price made the overt connection between ethical behaviour and authenticity, and was potentially the first to suggest 'authentic leadership' as an idea in its own right. This was extended by May, Chan, Hodges and Avolio (2003) to offer AL as a positive construct, and by Gardner and Schermerhorn (2004) who drew together the preceding ideas through case studies of prominent leaders to offer the connectivity of AL with organizational performativity. Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans and May (2004) drew together the various strands as well as suggesting how AL connects with follower attitudes, behaviours and performance. This paper was instructive and foundational to the trajectory of research on AL. It is subsequent to this paper that our narrative really commences.

The stage is set ...

The narrative commences in June 2004 with the inaugural Authentic Leadership Development Summit, as captured in the following press release:

‘CEOs and scholars will gather June 10-12 in Omaha to summit on the development and renewal of "authentic leadership", an emerging area of business study. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Gallup Leadership Institute and The Gallup Organization are hosts of this inaugural leadership summit on authentic leadership, "*Stretching Across the Academic-Practice Divide: Crossing Borders on Authentic Leadership Perspectives.*"

Today's challenges - globalization, rapid technological advances, social and political unrest, and widespread public dismay over dramatic cases of gross corporate misconduct - have fueled resurgence in the scholarship in authentic leadership. According to authentic leadership scholars and researchers at the UNL College of Business Administration, authentic leaders:

- Know who they are and what they believe in.
- Are transparent and show consistency between their espoused values, ethical reasoning and actions.
- Focus on developing positive psychological states such as confidence, optimism, hope, and resilience within themselves and their associates.
- Are widely known and respected for their integrity.’

The conference organizers included Avolio, Gardner, May and Luthans. Three of these four would become key scholars in the development of AL, as would Fred Walumbwa, a research associate at Gallop during this period working under the mentorship of Bruce Avolio. They were prominent, respected and influential scholars of the leadership field at this point in time and continue to be so. Avolio had undertaken extensive work with regard to transformational leadership in conjunction with Bass. Perhaps striking in the announcement of the event is the clarity of the AL construct very early on – we shall return to this point.

A special issue (SI) in *The Leadership Quarterly*, followed the next year. The SI provided a range of outlines of the emerging AL theory, not yet a construct but a series of aligned definitions and perspectives. Key elements developed in the SI were informed by the tenets of positive psychology. Various constructs were offered and suggestions made with regard to discriminant validity with respect to transformational leadership, ethical leadership, servant leadership and spiritual leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), for many of which authentic leadership had been described as the ‘root construct’ (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Within the SI Cooper et al (2005) argued for the development of AL to proceed carefully: cautioning against a rush towards ‘designing strategies for authentic leadership development’ they suggest that ‘careful consideration needs to be given to (1) defining and measuring the construct, (2) determining the discriminant validity of the construct, [and] (3) identifying relevant construct outcomes (i.e. testing the nomological network)’ (2005: 477). In many respects the SI offered a useful starting point for seeking to legitimize the concept and elaborate on earlier definitions and arguments (see for example Harter, 2002; May et al 2003; Avolio et al 2004). Within the SI there was encouragement for subsequent research to begin to understand the dimensions of construct. In particular, Cooper et al. (2005) encouraged the need for qualitative research in the early stages of theory development ‘as a useful way of identifying specific dimensions [...] when there is little extant research on which to base hypothesis [and to] relate authentic leadership to its key antecedent, moderating, mediating and dependent variables’ (2005: 479).

The SI (alongside an edited collection of chapters that were not accepted in the SI itself) offers considerable alignment to definitions of AL, but Gardner et al (2011) described the period which followed (between 2005 and 2008) as problematic for researchers seeking to operationalize AL due to the lack of an accepted instrument for measurement. In this context the appearance of the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) (Walumbwa et al, 2008)

was of much significance for the construct's development. Table 2 illustrates the dominance of the ALQ within empirical papers between 2008 and the present. Gardner et al (2011) reflect a similar finding (for the period up to 2011) and give affirmation of the ALQ as the dominant instrument. It is grounded in Avolio, Gardner, Luthans, May, Walumbwa and colleagues (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al, 2005; Walumbwa et al, 2008) perspective of AL, which in turn derived from Kernis and Goldman's (2006) 'multiple components of authenticity' (2011: 1134).

The ALQ was and remains centred on 4 dimensions: self-awareness – 4 questions; transparency – 5 questions; internal moral compass – 4 questions; and balanced processing – 3 questions. Table 2 shows that the empirical papers using the ALQ after 2011 accept rather than challenge the underlying components, with no serious alternative to them having arisen. With regard to construct validity assessment Gardner et al (2005) highlight the paucity of empirical papers examining discriminant validity and point to Walumbwa et al (2008) as the only paper undertaking this, with regard to transformational leadership and ethical leadership. They also observe that 'further assessment of the ALQ's construct validity is needed, as well as alternative [...] approaches to operationalizing the construct' (2011: 1133). It is telling that these alternatives are yet to materialize.

The 'outsiders' speak up ...

Following the initial establishment of authentic leadership being offered as a new kind of leadership, a range of scholars, mainly European, drew from different orientations – specifically existentialist and psychoanalytic – to problematize the normative positive psychological roots of AL. For example, Ford and Harding (2011) draw on object relations theory to argue that authentic leadership as a reflection of the 'true self' is impossible and that the AL construct 'contains the seeds of its own destruction' (2011: 464). In being predicated

on leaders sacrificing their subjectivity to that of the organizational collective, AL by definition requires them to be *inauthentic* – to privilege their collective or organizational self over their individual self. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this suggests the potential for destructive dynamics within the organisation generally and deleterious impacts on those leaders subjected to its expectations and whose imperfections as individuals are not acknowledged. Also from a psychoanalytic perspective, Costas and Taheri (2012) problematize the possible implications of AL as a model of post-heroic, non-authoritarian leadership seeking to displace traditional hierarchical, authoritarian leadership theories. Drawing on insights from the work of Lacan, they critically discuss the potential of AL to foster more emancipatory subject-authority relations in organizations and conclude by highlighting the dangers they perceive as arising from the enactment of AL's operating principles. Its categorical emphasis on love, harmony and completeness as a substitute for symbolic authority has, they contend, the potential to generate paranoid dependency in followers and reinstate leaders to the position of a 'fantasy figure akin to the Freudian primal father' (Costas and Taheri, 2012: 1211).

Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) offer an existentialist perspective on authenticity, suggesting that insufficient focus has been accorded to the ontological question of what it means to be authentically human as a necessary precursor to what it means to be an authentic leader. Their concern is that by dismissing the complexities raised by existential authenticity – relating to inevitability, personal meaning, goal/value congruence and intrinsic ethicality – as awkward but essentially minor obstacles to implementation, the resultant theorizing has been limited and inconsistent. In addition, they suggest that the importance of being true to 'self-in-relationship' (Erickson, 1995: 139) rather than merely true to self as an aspect of authenticity means that more attention needs to be paid to the relational and structural aspects of AL, rather than the individual and psychological aspects. Also from an existential

perspective, Lawler and Ashman (2012) echo this latter point by drawing on Sartre to reject the current AL focus on an ‘inner’ or ‘true’ self – rejected by existentialist thinking – in favour of the need to consider context and both subjective and intersubjective experience in the practice of authentic leadership. Both these critiques are concerned with the offering of AL as a ‘technique’ (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 120) rooted in positive psychological bias that fails to appreciate tensions and complexities inherent in its practical enactment by fallible humans.

A second area of critique is more Cinderella-like in terms of the lack of interest in contextualized empirical research (similar highlighted by Gardner et al 2011). The dearth of qualitative research was highlighted in Table 2. Of the few qualitative papers (3) that explore the construct directly, one seeks to develop the Western AL construct for application to a Chinese context (Zhang, Everett, Elkin and Cone, 2012), one considers gender issues in relation to AL (Liu, Cutcher and Grant, 2015) and the third explores the use of metaphorical selves to alleviate the tensions between leadership authenticity and effectiveness (Nyberg and Svenningsson, 2014). As such, they are all elaborating the construct as already given rather than testing its validity. It is striking that there has been no contextual examination of the suggested dimensions that shape the AL construct despite much encouragement in the SI (Cooper et al 2005) – encouragement reinforced by Gardner et al (2011) in their review paper. There is similarly no critical response to the development of AL until after 2011. The concern here is that normative and idealized core assumptions underpinning the AL construct have not been developed through empirical research, but rather posited on the basis of ideas borrowed from elsewhere. However, we note here the limited empirical, qualitative research that has begun to emerge as part of the developing AL narrative (reference withheld for review purposes). Cooper et al (2005) outlined the fundamental need for the AL construct to be defined, developed and elaborated through qualitative research. Gardner et al (2011)

appropriately criticize the limited studies that have been undertaken for lacking scope for transferability and dependability as a result of the approach undertaken. Both these criticisms speak to the still-unsatisfied need for more robust and credible qualitative empirical research to be undertaken in relation to authentic leadership.

The theoretical concerns regarding definition and the operationalization of AL, along with the lack of qualitative empirical research, have seemingly not impacted on the continuing advancement and consumption of the AL construct. This is perhaps as a consequence of the construct appearing relatively straight forward in definitional terms or is influenced by the status of notable scholars in the field (Reichers and Schneider, 1990). We would suggest that the theory of AL has a risk of becoming a fashion (Jackson and Guthey, 2007), with a significant commercial element (Guthey, 2017). As Abrahamson (1996: 263) observes, ‘management fashions do not emerge spontaneously as a result of the inventive behaviors of managers. [...] They are cultural commodities deliberately produced by fashion setters in order to be marketed to fashion followers’. The influence of an AL fashion may suggest the construct is fully formed and beyond definitional examination and elaboration, resulting in attempts at robust construct development becoming distracted or diluted to the detriment of AL’s future status and usefulness. Gardner et al (2011) have rightly sought to guard against such an assumption, but our examination of the quantitative research in Table 2 suggests that contributors within the field are using AL as an established and understood construct that is beyond contention before it is deserving of this status.

And the tragedy...

Costas and Taheri (2012: 1209) quote Fineman’s (2006: 281) belief that the ‘positive scholars’ quest for positive change and learning is likely to be a truncated, single-loop mission if the stress, anxiety, anger, pessimism and unhappiness of life and work are silenced

or marginalized.’ Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012: 120) see AL as having been reduced to a ‘technique’ – rather than a ‘central organizing principle’ (Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007) – which has abandoned its ontological roots in favour of ease of implementation and leader development, and hence is failing to meet its normative goals. Drawing on the work of Jacques Ellul, they draw attention to the manner in which AL is treated as a ‘totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency’ (2007: 333) supported by a ‘closed fraternity of its practitioners’ who ‘have their own discourse and are obsessed with facts and results’ (2007: 334). Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) make a cogent and as yet unanswered case for how the AL construct, egged on by the demands of fashion, has fallen into excessive ‘technicalizing’ (2012: 120) to make the construct operational, thereby reducing it to a technique and robbing it of its potential to constitute a significant addition to the development of leadership. This reduction in the construct’s potential is a tragedy, but becomes a greater tragedy if AL falls victim to changing fashions because the construct has not been thoroughly defined and hence is unable to achieve the worthy purposes that drove its inception. There have also been human tragedies associated in the AL narrative as a consequence of the redacted papers.

In setting out our strategic platform for AL below, we seek to delineate a potential regrounding of the construct by returning to its existential roots and exploring its practical enactment rather than sacrificing complexity in favour of easy operationalization/leader development. In doing so, we see it as a fundamental problem with the original positioning of AL as the ‘root construct’ for positive forms of leadership that this precludes the human possibility of being inauthentic which is inherent in existential authenticity. Hence it is problematic, we believe, to singularly ground AL in individuality and psychology rather than embrace relationality. To be clear, what we are suggesting here is a ‘potential regrounding’ not a cosmetic relaunch: until a significant body of practice-based research into leadership

authenticity as a phenomenon has been conducted, it is unclear whether this superordinate term is the best/right way of capturing our aspirations for leadership – or whether it can be retrieved from its current reductionist connotations.

Authenticity in leadership: Regrounding the AL construct

It seems to us almost inevitable that the positive psychological underpinnings of AL mean it is an idealised construct that may not reflect the daily experience of practicing leaders. This was not its aim. Rather it sought to be a normative framework capable of initiating a new kind of leadership. Its authors were single-minded in this attempt. The existential and psychodynamic critiques of AL sought to reflect the tensions and challenges of the real world and were thus in tension with the normative idealised framework. Understandably the two communities were a long distance apart philosophically, and the ‘politics of publishing’ noted above can be expected to have contributed to this distance. The distance philosophically and politically was unfortunate for the development of AL. Although the gap between the two camps appears unbridgeable this need not have been so. For example Cooper et al (2005) called for grounded theory, and Gardner et al (2011) spoke of the need for contextual analysis. However future bridge building needs to embrace more perspectives than the singularity of positive psychology in order to build a robust root construct of AL.

Our own philosophical leanings would have been for construct development to have originated in a ‘bottom up’ practice-based enquiry. We would suggest it is imperative to address the following key question in seeking to re-ground the notion of leadership authenticity and evaluate its future potential: are the concerns raised by existentialist critiques of AL reflected in practice-based understandings of what it means to be an authentic leader? We see this as requiring two strands of activity. At a conceptual level, there is a need to address the one-sided and (we would suggest) naive grounding of authentic leadership by

opening up the positive psychological system underpinning AL to allow dialogue with the issues raised by existentialist and psychoanalytic perspectives. This may have the effect of undercutting the normative status of AL by problematizing the idealised meaning of authenticity, but it can at the same time be expected to generate a richer understanding of what it means to be authentic in practice. The necessary lines of enquiry here are already in place – in particular, the existence of a ‘true’ or ‘inner’ self to which we can be authentic (Lawler and Ashman, 2012; Ford and Harding, 2011) and how a ‘true self’, if it does exist, can be enacted or embodied (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). There is a clear need for this research to be joined with authors from a positive psychology orientation in a robust exploration and interrogation in order to provide a firmer footing for any emerging, comprehensive understanding of what it means to be authentic as a leader – and, indeed, whether ‘authenticity’ stands as the most useful label for what we want to encourage as aspirational in leadership.

At an empirical level, the inclusion of a rich and varied diet of qualitative research within the overall programme will allow for a more grounded, bottom-up, practice-based understanding of what it means to be authentic as a leader, and whether this is a useful defining characteristic. What results can be expected to be a construct – Al or otherwise – that is more recognisable and less overwhelming to practicing leaders: overwhelming in the sense of the normative and idealised current construct of AL not aligning with everyday practice, and what is possible in organizational contexts. We would anticipate that research of this kind would produce a more nuanced, less reductionist, understanding of what it means to be authentic as a leader than we have currently; one which offers a more implementable basis for the achievement of the many worthy goals which drove early work in the field. We would also see such practice-based research as being essential in arriving at an existentially nuanced understanding of authentic leadership practice. In this context, we can see value in exploring

such issues as the juxtaposition of authenticity with the performance of emotional labour (reference withheld for review purposes), relational authenticity (Eagly, 2005) and the experience of delivering an ‘authentic performance’ (Bulan, Erickson and Wharton, 1997) among others.

More broadly, we suggest the potential value of pluralism of research methods (and particularly the inclusion of qualitative, grounded, practice-based research) to re-ground the notion of authenticity in leadership and to generate a richer, deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges of enacting it in practice. Our aim in making this suggestion is to bring all stakeholders to the current construct together through informed dialogue, rather than to support any one philosophical position, or indeed dominant voice, that determines its definition and operationalisation. By embracing a wide range of perspectives and methodologies we seek to enrich the theoretical understanding and practical usefulness of authenticity as an underpinning of leadership, and set in train the practice-based programme of research required to explore its potential as a ‘central organizing principle’ (Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007) in the future of leadership studies.

Conclusion

The need for a strongly aspirational underpinning for everyday leadership practice remains as strong now as it was at the turn of the 21st century. But the epistemological and axiological assumptions that have pushed through the progress of the AL construct’s development have been blind to the alternative offerings originating from different epistemological foundations. In particular, a thorough engagement with existential and other critiques has been lacking, to the deficit of construct robustness and application in practice. This bias has risked the reduction of a potentially valuable ‘central organizing principle’ (Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007) for leadership studies to a more partial ‘technique’ (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 120).

For us, these flaws bring into question whether AL *as such* can be re-grounded and re-launched to fulfil this aspirational role. We also find it difficult to understand how the construct can be advanced – or even fully developed – without embracing a qualitative understanding of how authenticity is enacted within leadership practice. If authenticity in leadership is to be reclaimed, there is a need to (re)define authenticity in this context in a way which would reflect practitioner experience and embrace and accommodate differing conceptions and complexities. Such a redefinition will likewise require the inclusion of a broader range of conceptual and methodological perspectives in its delineation and empirical investigation. It may be that authenticity as an empirically grounded phenomenon may look very different from the current construct – or that this is not the most useful label for what such empirical research requires to be captured. Our strategic platform for new directions in AL research thus require a conscious move away from the current ‘fashionable’ conception of the construct and towards the development of a practice-based understanding of authenticity in leadership and its potential utility in the advancement of leadership practice for the enrichment of organizations and society.

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