

# What can we learn from senior leader narratives? The strutting and fretting of becoming a leader

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore subjective life histories and leadership journeys of senior leaders, drawing upon elements of an authentic leadership framework (life trigger events, values and emotions). The paper surfaces partial life histories and the often unheard of individual experiences of becoming a leader, offering stories to others as a media for learning and extending authentic leadership theory.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper draws upon a qualitative empirical study engaging 22 UK senior leaders in semi-structured interviews, involving a life-history approach to generate subjective narratives of how individuals establish and sustain leadership.

**Findings** – The empirical data highlights that elements of authentic leadership theory resonate in practice. Senior leaders' life histories and in particular negative trigger events are significant to their approach as leaders. The values of honesty and integrity were important to the leaders, with some able to sustain their values uncompromisingly. The leaders openly expressed emotion and vulnerability when re-telling their stories, but whether they do so as leaders in relationships with others, requires further research. Authentic leadership theory may be over simplified in terms of emotion and vulnerability in practice.

**Practical implications** – Elements of authentic leadership offer alternative understandings of experiences of leaders. The life history approach enables important insights into leaders' subjective realities and should be integral to leadership development approaches.

**Originality/value** – The paper offers empirical data from UK senior leaders, highlighting the unheard of strutting and fretting of leadership and contributing empirical research to authentic leadership theory.

**Keywords** Leadership, Senior management, Narratives, United Kingdom

**Paper type** Research paper

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.  
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V. V. 24-28)

## Introduction

To date, leadership theories and models can appear unhelpful in relevance and application to practicing leaders. Leadership research has tended to neglect subjective realities of "becoming" a leader by failing to consider individual leaders' journeys. As a result, when leaders evaluate themselves against models and theories, they can feel frustrated, confused and/or compelled to adopt the latest leadership "trends". While some models of "successful leadership" are often seductive, self evaluation against

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them can often result in a “strutting and fretting”, inauthenticity or excessive plasticity on the part of the leader (Seeman, 1960). The quote from Macbeth resonates when reflecting on the leadership literature, likening it to “a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. Indeed, many leadership theories express a relationship between attributes and outcomes and this is generally the best you can do when you do not understand what causes a given outcome (Christensen and Raynor, 2003).

Leadership theories have generally focused upon more cognitive elements, while the theory and measurement of affective processes has been ignored, or alternatively has emphasized attitudes rather than basic emotional processes (Lord and Brown, 2004). Avolio and Gardner (2005) argue that the existing frameworks are not sufficient for developing leaders of the future. To enable understanding of the often unheard and messy individual experiences of “becoming” a leader; “a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,” we engaged in a research process with senior leaders and asked them to tell us about how they established and sustained leadership.

In order to interpret senior leaders’ subjective experiences we turned to recent work on authentic leadership. Cameron *et al.* (2003) view authenticity as owning one’s own personal experiences; be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences and acting in accordance with one’s own true self, expressing what you think and feel and behaving accordingly. Authentic leadership, in theory, is achieved through self awareness, self acceptance, authentic actions and relationships, whilst remaining cognizant of one’s own vulnerabilities (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders are portrayed as being highly self aware, having clearly defined and therefore strongly articulated values; what they say is consistent with what they believe (Shamir and Eilam, 2005), with ongoing drive and motivation towards natural goals and the ability to harness followership.

While authentic leadership is positioned as the “root construct”, for other forms of leadership (Avolio *et al.*, 2004), it is based upon little empirical data. The aim of the research presented here is to explore individual experiences of becoming a leader, offering stories to others as a media for learning and in doing so, extend authentic leadership theory. The guiding research question was what can individual experiences of becoming a leader offer to authentic leadership theory and leader development?

The paper provides a brief overview of authentic leadership from Gardner *et al.*’s (2005) framework; the research approach is outlined as a qualitative empirical study engaging UK senior leaders in generating individual life stories and experiences of establishing and sustaining leadership. We re-present selective narrative extracts from leaders’ life stories with interpretations drawing upon elements of the authentic leadership framework. Within this paper, we focus specifically on antecedents, life trigger events, values, feelings and emotions of authentic leadership and do not consider followership. We do not aim to “test” authentic leadership, nor do we aim to establish whether senior leaders are “authentic leaders” by evaluating experiences against authentic leadership theory; rather our aim is to explore resonance of theory in practice, providing leader practitioners an alternative lens through which to understand experiences of a leader’s role.

### **Leadership approaches**

Often leadership literature purports dimensions of leadership in a clinically prescriptive way, seeking to define and then categorize leadership as an aspirational



“end point”, through approaches such as leadership behaviour, contingency theory and trait theory (e.g. Lewin and Lippitt, 1938; Fielder, 1967; Burns, 1978). Seldom does mainstream leadership research reveal the internal angst, emotions, self questioning, self doubt or the thoughts and feelings associated with different experiences of becoming a leader, despite the suggestion that the challenges of knowing, showing and remaining true to oneself have never been greater for leaders (Gardner *et al.*, 2005).

While Goleman’s (1998) concept of emotional intelligence and Binney *et al.*’s (2005) “Living leadership” explore leadership from perspectives of individual leaders and begin to raise the unspoken, social elements of leading in organization, leadership research often overlooks subjective experiences of a leader’s life story. “Authentic leadership” is of particular interest as it focuses upon such individual subjectivities. There is no single definition of authentic leadership nor authentic leader, and the terms are used in different ways (e.g. Bennis, 2003; Bennis and Thomas, 2002; George, 2003, Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Authenticity is usually understood as not fake but genuine and original. Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggest leaders achieve “authenticity” through self awareness, self acceptance, authentic actions and relationships.

Authentic leaders are often portrayed as identifying strongly with their leadership role, expressing themselves by enacting that role and acting on the basis of their values and convictions (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 2). “Leadership is an eudaimonic activity for authentic leaders in that they are true to one’s self and their personal life activities are congruent with their deeply held values” (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 3). These personal life activities are of importance to our research with senior leaders. An empirically grounded perspective is offered by Kernis (2003, p. 1), who defines authenticity as “the unobstructed operation of one’s true or core self in one’s daily enterprise”. Here, authentic leaders remain cognizant of their own vulnerabilities and openly discuss them with associates. Vulnerability is an under researched aspect of authentic leadership and also of importance to our study with senior leaders.

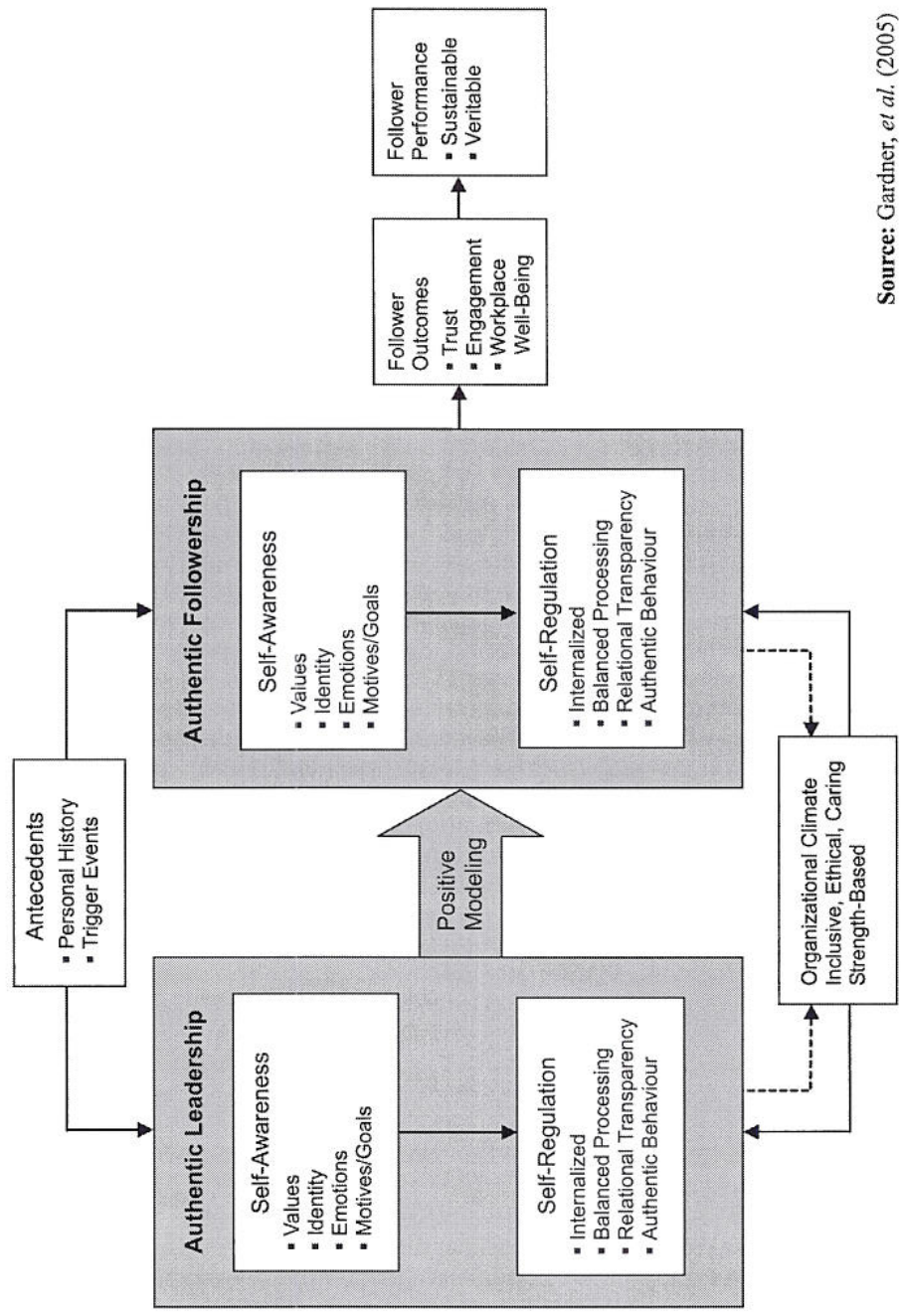
Gardner *et al.*’s (2005) conceptual framework of authentic leadership concerns authentic leader and follower development (see Figure 1) and is grounded in self and identity. The framework represents how authentic leader and follower development can result in trust, engagement, workplace well being and sustainable performance.

## **Elements of an authentic leadership framework**

### *Antecedents and life trigger events*

We begin by exploring antecedents and life trigger events within Gardner *et al.*’s (2005) framework. Trigger events constitute dramatic and sometimes subtle changes in the individual’s circumstances that facilitate personal growth and development (Gardner *et al.*, 2005, p. 347). Shamir and Eilam (2005) draw upon Bennis and Thomas (2002), Gardner (1995) and Tichy (1997), suggesting that leaders acquire certain characteristics by constructing, developing and revising their life stories. While Kegan (1982) argues that life stories can provide leaders with a “meaning system”, enabling them to act in a way that gives their interpretations and actions a personal meaning.

Shamir and Eilam (2005, p. 13) suggest that the events and experiences chosen by authentic leaders to appear in their life-stories reflect their self-concepts and their concept of leadership, enabling them to enact their leadership role. They argue that leader’s life stories account for and justify their “leadership”, identifying leadership



Source: Gardner, et al. (2005)

**Figure 1.**  
The conceptual framework for authentic leader and follower development



development out of “struggle” as an important aspect (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 13). Struggle relates to events that have created significant impact which have jettisoned the leader to a different place and continued to be a motivation behind “leading”. These experiences enable fine-tuning of qualities such as determination, drive, commitment, independence and toughness.

Lord and Brown (2004) discuss how positive and negative events can trigger deep change in an individual’s self identity, bringing into clearer focus alternative “possible selves” that may eventually replace the individual’s actual self. Indeed Avolio (2005) suggests that authentic leadership starts with how individuals interpret accumulated life experiences. Indeed, we know or discover ourselves by the stories we tell about ourselves (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). However, recounting some impactful experience is not enough; the experience must be reflectively worked into the life story, such that the story and identity is revised or redirected (Pallus *et al.*, 1991).

### *Values*

The second element of the authentic leadership framework we explore relates to values. Kernis (2003) argues that behaving authentically means acting in accordance with one’s values, preferences and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others, attaining rewards or avoid punishments through acting falsely. Values are lasting beliefs that certain modes of conduct are more desirable than others (Rokeach, 1979), with authentic leaders guided by values oriented towards what is “right” and “fair” for all stakeholders. It has been suggested that these values include trustworthiness, credibility and moral worth. When values are internalized, they become integral components of self (Erikson, 1995a, 1995b). As Shamir and Eilam, (2005, p. 397) suggest “authentic leaders are originals not copies, they hold their values to be true, not because these values are socially or politically appropriate but because they have experienced them to be true”.

The values and convictions of authentic leaders are highly personalized through their lived experiences, experienced emotions and active process of reflection on those experiences and emotions. Luthens and Avolio (2003) and Harter (2002) believe that this is what is meant by authenticity as ‘the owning of one’s personal experiences’. Schwartz (1994) categorized authentic values as “self enhancement”: values of achievement, pursuit of personal success, power, dominance over others, personal gratification, hedonism and “self transcendence”: benevolence, concern for immediate others and universalism concerned with the welfare of people.

Leader values are expected to vary on a continuum anchored at one end by self-enhancement success centered values and at the other self transcendence system centered values (Schwartz, 1994). We explore whether leaders’ trigger events compound this internalization process and whether in practice a leader becomes resistant to social and situational pressures to compromise their values.

### *Emotion*

Emotion is the third element of the framework considered. Emotional self-awareness is a basic component of emotional intelligence, one determinant of effective leadership (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). Turnbull James and Arroba, (2005) argue that it is important for leaders to understand the emotion and emotionality within the organizations they lead. Emotionality, understood as behaviours that are observable and theoretically linked to underlying emotion, exists within an organizational system (Reber, 1995). Emotion is

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motivation (Gabriel, 2000); it is what creates, perpetuates and holds together both individuals and organizations (Vince and Saleem, 2004).

Leadership research often portrays emotions as culprits that impair or distort an individual's perceptual and cognitive faculties (Beyer, 1999; Kant, 1963). Here, emotions should always be repudiated or kept under control to attain a clear appreciation of reality (Mitchie and Gooty, 2005). There is pretence that leaders, whilst allowed to be "emotional" in their abilities to inspire, motivate and "lead", do not experience personal emotions and in particular, negative emotions. Emotion is experienced as "bad" while rationality is split off as "good" (Carr, 1999). For example, leadership research in general implies that leaders do not experience the primitive anxiety surrounding survival that can be experienced in times of re-organization or mergers or when promotion and pay are an issue (Turnbull James and Arroba, 2005).

Leaders are emotional beings who come to know and experience leadership through personal emotional journeys. Within the authentic leadership framework, Gardner *et al.* (2005) argue that leaders will be relatively transparent in expressing their true emotions and feelings to followers, while simultaneously regulating such emotions to minimize displays of inappropriate or potentially damaging emotions. Hirschorn (1997) contradicts Gardner *et al.*'s (2005) view suggesting that in taking up leadership roles people are more personally exposed and vulnerable which requires leaders to be more psychologically resourceful and to carry a robust and integrated sense of self into their role (Turnbull James and Arroba, 2005, p. 305). We are interested in how leaders express emotion in re-telling their stories, given the failure of the literature to explore the "strutting and fretting" of leaders.

### *Emerging issues*

In reviewing elements of the authentic leadership framework (Gardner *et al.*, 2005) a number of issues emerge. First, life stories and trigger events may enable leaders to develop certain characteristics, one being enhanced self-awareness. However, as this is lacking empirical data, we aim to explore this in practice with senior leaders. This approach may also provide an opportunity for a leader to engage in meaning making of their experiences of becoming a leader. Second, values play a fundamental role for an "authentic" leader as they are lived, experienced and owned. Research suggests that self transcendence values take priority but we question the likelihood of this in practice and the dichotomy between "rationally controlled" leaders and those viewed as authentic when "appropriately" expressing their emotions and feelings.

### **The research approach**

The research was informed by a subjective epistemology, acknowledging that multiple realities exist (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), focusing upon the meaning making of individual leaders in co-constructing their experiences. A research objective was to gather rich qualitative data by exploring life stories and experiences of senior leaders, focusing upon how they establish and sustain leadership in organizations as part of their subjective, fluid "becoming" process.

Life stories are a recognised method of enquiry; each leader has their own history of personal development and change as they "process" along their life course (Miller, 2000). We had a number of aims in collecting life stories of senior leaders; life story as a research method enables the individual leader to be grounded in their personal context,



preventing fragmentation and we wanted to gather data reflective of the subjective realities of senior leaders. As life stories are continuously constructed and revised, the “lessons of experience” (McCall *et al.*, 1988) can be learned, not only close to experience but also much later (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 16); we aimed to generate life stories as a means of reflexive learning. The principle that lives are not only constructed as stories but also lived, and that people shape their biographies and construct them into life stories (Avolio, 1999) underpinned our research.

We took a narrative approach to life history which bases itself upon the ongoing development of the respondent's viewpoint during the telling of a life. Here, understanding the individual's unique and changing perspective is mediated by context, which takes precedent over fact (Miller, 2000). Here the interplay in the interview partnership is key, and the interview is a site for producing reportable knowledge (Atkinson, 1998). Taking a biographical perspective, means participants' re-tell experiences of the constraints and opportunities that were available in the past, and how they dealt with these (Miller, 2000). In this research the vehicle of life story enabled leaders to explain and in some cases 'justify' their current leadership position and approach to life. Life-stories can be analysed and compared to others' stories to discover the answers that leaders give to questions such as 'how have I become a leader' (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, p. 19). Indeed, “biographies are global constructions by which individuals constitute a defined present within the specific horizons of the past (retentions) and the future (protentions)” (Bertaux and Kholi, 1984, p. 222). In this respect as a result of our research we offer significant leader figures illustrating elements of authentic leadership theory in practice.

To date 22 senior leaders from the North East UK region have engaged in the research. The leaders are Managing Directors, Chief Executives, Chairpersons and Directors from public sector, corporate and SME organizations. A combination of selective and snowball sampling identified research participants; selective in that each of the individuals was chosen because we identified them as people in hierarchical senior leadership positions which was conceptually crucial to the study and snowball, in that this group of senior leaders in the North East UK region is difficult to “penetrate” by researchers and as we gained the confidence of selective participants we were referred to others and so on (Miller, 2000). Changing names of participants and neutralizing organizational details has ensured anonymity.

We used a semi-structured interview guide, which included life history prompts, to develop individual case studies of senior leaders, which we analysed to produce subjective narrative texts. Each interview was transcribed then individually read and re-read to categorize story content. Narrative text was sorted into broad themes reflective of the discussion and then a process of comparison across themes and interview transcripts. Initial themes were revisited and more meaningful concepts began to emerge.

Narrative is particularly valuable for shedding light on aspects of individual and group sense making; sense making as those processes of interpretation and meaning production whereby people reflect on and interpret phenomena and produce intersubjective accounts (Leiter, 1980 in Currie and Brown, 2003). Narratives reflect the multiplicity of experiences and multiple social roles that are often acted out simultaneously but are situationally contingent, producing situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991).

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We accept that full narratives cannot be included and that we cannot completely contextualise and ground each participant in their life story, due to publication constraints. Those partial narratives included were identified because they particularly illustrate a general theme from analysis aimed to have a particular effect on readership, and this is part of our authorial strategy (Currie and Brown, 2003). As a final step, we drew upon conceptual cohesion with reference to the authentic leadership framework (Gardner et al's, 2005) (Kitchener *et al.*, 2000, p. 219) for interpretation and analysis. It is not our aim to generalize knowledge from this research, but by analysing commonalities that the leaders share, then experiences can be more fully understood, enabling a contribution to existing approaches and theory.

### **Narratives from senior leaders**

#### *Life stories and trigger events*

The narratives of senior leaders concerning their leadership journeys re-presented here are grounded in their life stories. Gardner *et al.* (2005) view leader's life stories and key trigger events to be antecedents for authentic leadership development. Trigger events involve crises and events which continue to shape the leader's development in that they are reflected upon and interpreted in terms of self (Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Luthans and Avolio, 2003, Bennis and Thomas, 2002). Here participants told stories and described trigger events, which indeed had a major personal impact and were offered as explanations for sustained "leadership drive" and current leadership roles. For example, when asked how she came to her current role, Rose who is a CEO comments:

I was quite a latecomer to a career. One of seven, parents divorced, lived on income support basically and public funds. I cleaned the floors at the local Co-op in the mornings and during the day I went to work in a tobacconist and then I had work cleaning someone's house in the evening so that's actually three jobs in order to make sufficient income. So not your traditional start point! I went back to education when I was 24, my daughter was four years old and I realized that this was the rest of my life if I didn't do something about it now ...

... I am incredibly driven as a person. A lot of that I think is to do with how I started out and it's a – I'll give you an example of this: we had a – just before I came into the job – there was a school reunion at my old school which was about to be demolished to make way for lovely plush apartments and it was the first female grammar school built in the country ... And I went back to school and because I left in the middle of a year and I didn't do my A levels, all my friends stayed and I lost touch with them immediately and they all thought I'd gone because I was pregnant, and I was ferried off somewhere to have this baby which was obviously not the case! But my assumption has been for the last God knows how many years, that all of my friends that I was at school with, went on to do fantastic things because they went through their A levels, went to University and they've ended up big high-flyers in big corporations – wasn't the case at all.

In fact in one discussion I got very very embarrassed because I was awarded an OBE in 2000 and somebody – we were in this discussion around the dinner table and somebody said I saw your picture in the paper when you got your OBE and it was complete and utter silence, these dozen women sitting around the table and I thought – and I could've crawled into a hole and I'm thinking why am I embarrassed about this? This is a bloody big achievement for Christ's sake, you should be proud of it but I was embarrassed about it. So all my assumptions about where everybody else had got to and the fact that I'd been dragging my heels, latecomer and all this sort of stuff just got blown away overnight. It was about what I think my peers would've been and therefore enough from a competitive point of view about where I should've been by now and all of what I've done has been I've been playing catch-up



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with what my assumption at where everybody was so I'm looking back on that and thinking that was such a false assumption. But I'm now on a path and I'm now driven to continually challenge myself and succeed with things and be ambitious and move up the ladder and do amazing things myself – other people might not see them as amazing but some of the things I do I think I amaze myself . . . A lot of it is about also the kind of environment that I came from which was, as I said, I was disadvantaged, free school meals throughout my young life. I had hand-me-downs, we just lived on the bread line all the time so it's this constant "I am never ever going to be there". Sounds very psychologically deep doesn't it . . ." (Rose, 2006).

Rose articulates a set of circumstances, the trigger being her return to education and the determination to move away from her current situation, then the realization that she has achieved something in relation to her peers from her history. Thus Rose's story highlights Lord and Brown's (2004) suggestion that positive and negative events can trigger deep change in an individual's self identity, bringing into clearer focus alternative possible selves. Gardner *et al.* (2005) refer to negative trigger events which continue to shape the leader's development and Natalie's (Chairperson) partial life history highlights changes in motivation and explanation for her internal drive and motivation:

I left school at sixteen, I did my O Levels. I had absolutely no intentions of staying on for A Levels. I had no parental influence at all in that direction, I don't think it ever occurred to my parents – I was the first person in my family to go to a grammar school, to pass my 11 + so there was no parental guidance or influence to stay on. I come from quite a poor working class family and I think it was – it's bad enough I'd just got to leave school at sixteen while my sisters, who both went to secondary modern schools were leaving at fifteen – it was bad enough that I had to do an extra year and I think that there was no pressure to leave but there was certainly no pressure to stay, except by the school but it just wasn't in my psyche to want to stay . . .

After that first terrifying moment where I was being made redundant and I was a single parent, that absolutely terrified me – it really brought home the responsibility that I had for my son . . . You are now wholly responsible financially, you have got to work. And I think a lot of my drive and what you said, goal-orientation, was staying in work and that was very difficult over the years . . . There were redundancies on a six-monthly basis, there was another cull and another cull. So I spent most of the eighties and the early nineties expecting to lose my job and success for me was staying in work (Natalie, 2006).

In relation to negative events triggering deep change in self identity, which in turn provides a focus for explaining current roles and approaches, Fraser (CEO) comments that "something fundamentally happens to you":

I had a big stark awakening on the last day of my apprenticeship they came into the cabin and paid everybody off – it's a bit of a shock for a 19 year old lad just saying, "right you're all finished," and on the dole and something fundamentally happens to you and I think I said to myself that's never going to happen again I need to take control of my own destiny as opposed to having it done to me" (Fraser, 2006).

A further example is provided by David (CEO):

I never had anything as a kid. The initial drive was purely thinking of ways that you can make money, honest ways of making money and as I was becoming more exposed to more successful people and realizing how little I had it in comparison to them, as you get introduced to successful people you don't know what you don't know until you are introduced to it (David, 2006).

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Other narratives from leaders re-presented feelings of being the “underdog” in a number of situations early in their careers which provided “drive” and “determination” to “make a difference” and “to succeed”. The leaders’ narratives highlight “struggle” in relation to trigger events, which have jettisoned them to a different place and continued to be a motivation behind “leading”. These experiences enable fine-tuning of qualities such as determination, drive, commitment, independence and toughness. Here leaders’ experiences appear to have triggered deep change, which has sustained as a basis for their leadership career history.

### *Values*

In terms of values, Rose (CEO) highlights the theoretical characteristics of “authentic leadership” clearly in her narrative and actually draws upon authenticity to describe her views on leadership:

It’s something about acting with integrity and I think acting with authenticity. In times of change I think people sometimes think the answer is out there but usually my experience has been that the answer is in yourself or in other people and I think it’s retaining that self-belief when perhaps round about you things are getting very very difficult. So I think that would be one of the values for me. That authenticity and integrity I think are extremely important (Rose, 2006).

The senior leaders’ values were explicit in their narratives and demonstrated that some have developed resistance to compromising their values (Erikson, 1995a, 1995b). Natalie (Chairperson) comments:

“Honesty and integrity. I don’t think I ever promise what I can’t deliver. But I think it’s about honesty and not being frightened to say ‘I don’t know, I haven’t got a clue’. I don’t think there’s any shame about not knowing something, we can’t all know everything” (Natalie, 2006).

Most leaders commented upon honesty, trust and integrity as fundamental values to their views of leadership, for example:

I tend to be honest (Steve (MD), 2006).

Honesty, integrity, trust, fairness. I think that the honesty and the integrity are probably key ones (David (CEO), 2006).

I think you have to keep it simple and be honest and operate with integrity and values. “Values” is a greatly used word but people don’t walk the talk with them (Fraser (CEO), 2006).

So my core values are in accordance with those and I’m probably known most for the valuing people one – hopefully the integrity and the excellence as well (Mary (Director), 2006).

On discussing their career moves in their stories, some leaders were clearly uncomfortable when their values of honesty and integrity were not shared in their organizations and this had prompted different career choices. This is illustrated by, Karen and Tom, who comment:

I felt uncomfortable because their values were not mine (Karen (Director), 2006).

At times I feel I cannot deal with things because of my values and what I was involved in previously. It is hard to release that (Tom (Director), 2006).



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Paul's narrative is an example which highlights how leaders draw upon values and emotion when Paul re-tells his experiences of his "biggest learning point" in becoming a leader:

There was an awful lot of negative media coverage – I was a court jester on a web site at Christmas and it was "Save the X" and all of that . . . and we've moved on considerably since then. And generally people think that what we're doing now is dramatically better than it was in the past . . . The sort of lessons from that I suppose, big thing for me was, if you really deep down feel something is the right thing to do and all around you are just sort of, you know providing no clarity at all as to how things can be stopped just drifting – then you've got to get a grip of something like that, and even though you know it's going to be quite painful for a while, and it's going to be high profile in the media, and you're going to have lots of letters in, and your board members are going to be lobbied and all the rest of it (Paul (CEO), 2006).

### *Emotion*

As Turnbull James and Arroba (2005) argue, leaders need confidence in their capacity to contribute by relying on their personal authority, bringing in more of themselves into the workplace to guide their decisions and choices. However, while leaders are often constructed as inspirational, motivational, charismatic and visionary; descriptive processes which draw upon emotion for authenticity and success, individual leaders are rarely "allowed" to express individual emotion. In this study, the leaders' narratives revealed significant internal dialogues and internal regulation processes to maintain the external impression and "performance" of "the leader". This supports Hirschorn's (1997) argument that on taking up leadership roles people are more personally exposed and vulnerable, they need to be more psychologically resourceful and develop an integrated self.

In particular Natalie's narratives highlight emotionality when re-presenting her story of taking on her Chairperson role, particularly in terms of finding it "hard" and "tough". Natalie also reveals levels of vulnerability; of feeling exposed and being out of her comfort zone in comments such as "I had no knowledge," "I didn't know anyone," "I didn't have a clue" and also levels of personal distress in comments such as "the worst six months of my life".

[When taking on the Chairpersons role] This was even harder. I think this was even harder . . . So I had no handover at all. So I just came in . . . I had no knowledge of the public sector never mind this specific organization really . . . I found it very tough at first. I found it very very tough indeed . . . So I started off life . . . I didn't have a clue, I mean not a clue. I didn't know anyone in the organization I didn't know who to send anything to. I couldn't reply to these letters because they were technical . . . The first six months I would have said were the worst six months of my life, they really were . . . What he needed like a hole in the head was a new Chairman who really didn't know the role. So I found it very very tough but you've just got to get on with it haven't you and ask questions and make it my business to find out, meet all the important people in the place like security, cleaning and catering . . .

I would be a bit bolder. I spent the first few months dreading coming into work because of how little I knew. And I think being in X for twenty-four years almost, because I grew up through the ranks, there wasn't much I didn't know or understand and everyone used to say the trouble with you is we can't bullshit you on anything because you've been there and done it and got the tee shirt! I knew so little here I was afraid because I didn't know. So I should have just been bolder and stamped my feet a bit more and said to the Chief Executive 'the support I'm getting in this place is crap; the briefings I'm getting are absolute garbage' and I should have been tougher. If I got a briefing now like I was getting in those first few months I

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would just say you've got to be joking, you know, go away and do it again, this is really not acceptable. I was going off to meetings with all the other Chairs and not understanding the brief . . . I would be tougher in terms of my own weaknesses and be a bit more assertive about "I need better briefing, I need to know more" instead of just saying "oh whatever" because I really didn't have a clue (Natalie, 2006).

Joanne's narrative also reflects emotionality and vulnerability in the first few months of her Chief Executive role:

I made loads of mistakes, that's the first thing. When I first came I thought that to be a Chief Executive you had to wear severe suits and know everything that there was to know about X . . . that lasted for about six months and I was worn out. I should've really stuck to being me and I am flawed therefore you need to make sure that within the team that you work with there are people that are really good at the things that you are really bad at . . . For the first six months I thought I had to be able to do all of those things and people expected me to, so I had a very uncomfortable time for the first six months and I was quite pompous and I think made lots of mistakes as a result of not acknowledging those areas where I am able to lead and those areas where I am best keeping out of it (Joanne, 2006).

An emergent theme concerns how vulnerable the senior leaders have felt at times during their leadership journeys; they experience great "worry" behind the scenes of the "performance" of leadership and emotional vulnerability about processes of becoming a senior leader. The leadership literature often ignores such "flaws", however in practice we were offered numerous examples of vulnerability by senior leaders:

You will be vulnerable and you will be exposed. Its how you deal with it that separates the leader from anybody else (David (CEO), 2006).

I think we do have to keep performing . . . and I guess that's when I feel the most vulnerable. If I spend weeks on a big tender and we don't get it a) I feel gutted and b) I do feel vulnerable because someone . . . may well say why didn't we win it? (Nick (Director), 2006).

I feel vulnerable that I might have upset or done something negative without knowing it. So I feel a bit vulnerable about that. Somebody says to you oh you know that fella he is a horror and he is a nightmare because he said this and did that and this happened to me, that would make me feel terrible . . . so I feel vulnerable about unforeseen consequences (Edward (MD) 2006).

## **Discussion**

The narratives of senior leaders demonstrate that their life story and related trigger events, specifically highlight "struggle" (Shamir and Eilam, 2005), they provide the foundation to aspects of their leadership journeys and other elements of the authentic leadership framework. Here, negative trigger events in life stories impact upon leaders' self-awareness, drive, values, and emotion. These trigger events contribute to the development of senior leaders' identities, creating a clearer focus for alternative "possible selves" (Lord and Brown, 2004) as they develop as leaders. Rather than displaying attributes and leadership "outcomes" manufactured against rational models of leadership in the re-telling of their stories, our leaders prioritised their own subjectivities and the often unheard of, hidden aspects of leadership resulting from their personal experience. Here engagement in re-telling life trigger events enables learning from leader realities and for the leaders themselves the process facilitates reflection on personal leadership approaches and leader identity.



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This research also highlights how trigger events compound internal regulation processes so that leaders become resistant to social and situational pressures to compromise their values (Erikson, 1995a, 1995b). The narratives reveal that for some senior leaders they have developed a level of “authenticity” in that they uphold their values without compromise, whilst for others, the internal regulation is more of a struggle, depending on context. As noted earlier, Schwartz (1994) refers to values on a continuum with self-enhancement at one end and self-transcendence at the other. We suggest that leaders fluctuate between the two and return to the self-enhancement arena to recharge themselves during their leadership journeys.

In terms of emotion we were particularly interested in how Gardner *et al.*'s (2005) framework elements of emotion and vulnerability manifest in practice, given the relative failure of the extant literature to explore the “strutting and fretting” of leaders. We argue that the senior leaders did surface emotion and emotionality in their narratives, with emotional regulation evident in Natalie's narrative in that once internal dialogues are complete they “just get on with it”. The leaders revealed feelings and thoughts relating to vulnerability, isolation and emotion through the interview process when re-telling their experiences. However, this emotion and vulnerability, whilst expressed and felt in the research process, may be suppressed when they “perform” as leaders; their emotions may remain hidden beneath the surface in practice. As we did not explore whether the leaders shared their emotions, vulnerability or feelings with others as leaders, we are left with questions in this area. Whilst emotion and vulnerability was shown in the research relationship, how naïve, realistic or feasible is it for leaders to display these feelings in practice without consequences to how they are perceived and consequences to their career? Further research is needed for this theoretical framework to be realistic in practice.

A final area for discussion is the impact of the research process on the leaders themselves. Engaging in this research enabled leaders to reflect on their life stories through a process of reflexivity, on re-telling their stories to us, when reading the transcripts of their interviews and in a plenary session discussing the findings of the research. The resulting life stories and specific trigger events offer insight into realities of leading for the individuals and for others, and offer reassurance in relation to the thoughts and feelings associated with what appears to be the inevitable “strutting and fretting” in a leader context.

As a result we argue that, rather than focusing upon traditional models and theories of how to “be” a leader, a more powerful approach to leadership development is to enable leaders to reflect upon their own life stories and to enable aspiring leaders to share in others' life stories, so that they may also engage in meaning making of their leader approach and identity. Shamir and Eilam (2005, p. 15) argue that a life story approach to authentic leader development suggests that self-knowledge, self-concept clarity and the internalisation of the leader's role into the self-concept are achieved through the construction of life stories; returning to the experience, replaying it in the mind and recounting it to others, attending to the feelings accompanying the experience and its memory, re-evaluating the experience and drawing lessons from it. Therefore an important area for practice is to include the facilitation, and the sharing of, such life stories in leadership development programmes, achieved through guided reflection and reflexive processes. This is a powerful tool and an alternative to traditional leadership development approaches.

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## Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to explore individual experiences of becoming a leader, offering stories as a media for learning with the research guided by the question, what can individual experiences of becoming a leader offer to authentic leadership theory and leader development? The narratives of senior leaders highlighted that life stories experiences and in particular trigger events, are worthy of serious exploration and further research. These fundamental experiences are significant to the performance of leadership and leadership development. The re-telling of life stories can enable leaders to reflect upon their values, emotion and to define anchor points from which their leader approach and identity develops and grows. Importantly, this process is based upon individual subjective experiences rather than leader development against manufactured leadership attributes and outcomes.

Further research is necessary in relation to leaders' experiences of isolation and vulnerability, their emotional displays or emotion work and any impact on the performance of leadership in practice. Without empirical research in these areas, the authentic leadership framework appears over simplified. If, as we propose, it is often politically naïve and unrealistic for leaders to share their emotions and vulnerability in relationships at work then we potentially return at this juncture to the "poor player strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage". However, what the authentic leadership framework does offer in practice is an alternative to prescriptive leadership theories which present leadership as a necessary "end point" to be achieved. The framework provides a vehicle to interpret and understand the often unspoken and unheard of aspects of leadership.

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#### **Further reading**

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