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Authentic action: A recipe for success or a minefield?

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Our academic field of leadership studies is plagued by an unscholarly obsession with fashions and clientelism. We have a pronounced penchant to tell our audiences what they like to hear and what makes us popular rather than what they need to know. Moreover, much of our work suffers from a chronic illusion that the study of leadership pertains to natural sciences and is governed by what to us at least appear to be highly elusive laws of causality. These two afflictions together skew the study of the fuzzy social phenomenon we have come to know as *leadership*, towards understandings of a world that many find intellectually unappealing, ideologically loaded, and practically misleading.

Despite our skepticism towards authentic leadership theory (see Alvesson & Einola, 2019, 2022; Einola & Alvesson, 2021), we do think that authenticity should be a topic of inquiry within the field of leadership and organization studies. We want to encourage our colleagues to be what the Enlightenment scholar and poet, Schiller, referred to as *philosophical minds* (Alvesson et al., 2022a) and use imaginative and novel approaches to conduct research in this area. In this article, we seek to both address some broader questions of what we suggest leadership studies is about—or rather could be about, and to engage directly with Helmuth, Cole and Vendette's article on *authentic action* (Helmuth et al., 2024).

2 | BACK TO LEADERSHIP?

We are certain that most students of leadership who believe in the power of positive psychology to inform what is indisputably a social and relational phenomenon probably mean well. However, good intentions, optimistic personal worldviews, and wishful thinking do not help when the looking glass reflects back the image of a confused human being, in search of—or trying to get away from—their true, authentic self when they need to adjust to working with a new boss with radically different values, blow the whistle on colleagues engaging in insider trading, or define a grand purpose for a fast-fashion company. Genuinely facing one's authentic self, in fact, can be difficult, scary, and intimidating for many of us—hence a common inclination *not* to engage in this type of reflexivity, like Heidegger's influential work shows us.

We who read and write about *leadership* in this and other similar journals are fortunate to live in a world of abundance and possibilities but also in a society where polarization, destruction, and conflict of all possible shades of black are paving the way to a looming apocalypse, as the Doomsday Clock symbolically indicates. We clearly need capable guidance, *leader-ship*. We use the hyphen to partly separate a word, leadership, we have come to consider as one to make an analytical distinction between its two parts. The study of etymology tells us that “leader” originates from a word that implies a *guide* and the suffix “ship” extends this meaning to a person's *capacity to lead others*.

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If *authentic action* implies the rise of courageous leaders who like Ulysses know their True North and guide us and our institutions out of the perilous waters thanks to their exceptional navigation skills and unwavering faith, then we think we are onto something meaningful. Alas, we as educators and advisors of these leader-candidates world so impatiently (still) waits for do not feel confident that our pedagogical skills match the pastoral task at hand. It will take epic persuasion powers and charisma we individually and collectively may simply lack, to convert the same senior managers and their heirs whose actions have gotten us where we are today into morally strong humble and self-sacrificing leaders and guides, capable of uniting the troops under one same flag, generating actions that take us to the promised land, despite all odds.

3 | WHEN DID AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP (THE THEORY) GO WRONG?

In their article, Helmuth et al. (2024) ask: *when did authentic leadership go wrong?* Our answer is that the study of authentic leadership derailed when it was turned into the Authentic Leadership Theory (ALT) as captured in the authentic leadership *construct*. As Helmuth and colleagues also point out, the research community turned inwards, stopped questioning the validity, key premises, and the way in which the construct was operationalized almost immediately after its inception to then start a massive empirical effort showing that authentic leadership is “good”—indeed a source of almost anything good.

For us, the idea of leadership as an objective phenomenon unconcerned by the complexity of social life and unaffected by our subjectivities, discourses, and the very human inclination to constantly alter, mess-up, and (mis)interpret social phenomena such as leader-follower relations is an interesting thought experiment. However, we remain dismayed at how swiftly a popular discourse and an *idea* of authentic leadership was transformed into a *construct* and an authentic leadership *theory* (ALT) and at how sticky ALT has been despite all the critique of this theory, as well as of other positive leadership theories, such as transformational leadership (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Ford & Harding, 2011; Gardiner, 2016; Gardner et al., 2021; Iszatt-White, Carroll, et al., 2021; Iszatt-White, Stead, & Elliott, 2021; Spoelstra et al., 2021; Tourish, 2019). The field of leadership appears immune to critical reflection. There are even scholars who openly confess that they never read critique (Tourish, 2019). Yet no serious scientific endeavor—different from ideology—can be sustained without skepticism, doubt, and engagement with well-founded critique.

4 | LACK OF PLURALISM: AN ENDURING PROBLEM

We note that Helmuth and colleagues argue for a combination of qualitative and quantitative work—but only use or aim at the latter.

We believe that many realize that good understanding calls for something else than getting questionnaires filled, but single-minded training, myopic publication norms, and stiff academic career regimes prevent people from conducting qualitative studies, such as ethnographies, as well as other forms of *slow research*. Qualitative studies are also often fraught with problems. One-time interviews with X number of people may be as shallow as questionnaire-filling research, but well-carried out interviews exploring issues in-depth perhaps employing mixed methods designs have a better chance to go a bit deeper into the subject matter.

Our point here is that in our messy field, objectivity can only be an elusive ideal. For a more insightful and novel leadership studies, more pluralism, both philosophical and methodological, is needed. Studies interested in the vague, complex, elusive, and highly subjective area of authenticity need to take the genuinely qualitative (intuitive, interpretative, tentative, uncertainty-acknowledging, situationally sensitive, and openly explorative) seriously.

5 | AUTHENTICITY AS THE “BASIC ELEMENT” IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

Helmuth, Cole, and Vendette aim to capture “the basic elements” of leadership and write that

Our interest in this regard is sparked by Suddaby's (2010) realization that when researchers “cannot agree on or communicate the basic elements of a phenomenon, the accumulation of knowledge cannot occur ... and organizational knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented” (pp. 352–353).

Are there basic elements in authentic leadership? And is this claimed phenomenon necessarily a phenomenon? The tribe of authentic leadership researchers assumes that authenticity is a basic element of “leadership,” the “root” construct other sibling constructs are built on. One could say that leadership (whatever the meaning of that is for the reader) is mainly about what managers and subordinates do within a relation and what happens as a result. Here, researchers implicitly claim to know what this relation and its basic elements are all about. They think of themselves as experts because they have read and published many academic papers on the topic, diligently citing each other. But since researchers may not have deductive capabilities and working life experience to automatically know best, other options should be considered.

Researchers could go to the field for longer periods of time, and once they think they know the context well enough to ask meaningful questions and make competent interpretations, they could approach people in different roles and ask them questions about what is important for leader–follower relations to get their work done in an optimal way. Any good qualities emerging could be listed, from technical competence, empathy, group identification, social skills, cognitive sharpness, political astuteness, courage, fairness, availability, autonomy,

support, having the “right” values, being tactful and getting along with people, speaking up, being loyal upwards, downwards, sideways, with the profession or being capable of doing resistance, being hands-on, or avoiding anything that indicates micro-management. It is not obvious that “authenticity” would score high on the list (unless the participants recently attended a course on authentic leadership inserting the idea in their heads). More than something substantive, “basic elements” may constitute a researcher fantasy, a pretense of scholarly knowledge, and a quite reductionistic and researcher-egocentric view on the subject matter.

6 | THE IDEAL OF ACCUMULATION OF KNOWLEDGE

There are also problems with the ideal of the accumulation of knowledge, at least as a linear and systematic project. For accumulation to be successful, a larger community of researchers needs to be strongly agreeing on the accumulation project and doing the same thing—same definitions, same measures, and studying the same group of people. If we consider the limited success of leadership studies (other than when it comes to being a successful business in its own right) and look at areas scoring high on the accumulation of knowledge-ideal, the track record is clearly disappointing (Fischer, 2018; Tourish, 2019; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). All the positive psychology applied to leadership studies has received devastating critique suggesting that most things are wrong with these theories, including an arbitrary lumping together of impossible-to-study “elements.”

Is the lack of accumulation of knowledge really a problem? Probably yes, if one would very much want the social world to function like the physical world, fairly uniform and following mechanical laws, and if one has a strong need for certainty and a strong conviction that one's philosophical position is simply the best. If not, fragmentation may instead be considered as much welcome diversity of thought, manifestation of human creativity, and reflect a deep interest in the many dimensions and facets empirical phenomena can be cultivated, not to be reduced to finding some basic elements being universally relevant, replicable, and important. The strive towards consensus and accumulation may prevent ideas, insights, and valuable knowledge from emerging.

7 | SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO ACTIONS?

An important question is then if Helmuth and colleagues' interest in authentic actions is likely to reduce the confusion, achieve further consensus and accumulation of results to “be transferred to practitioners.” We have mixed feelings about this suggestion. Problems concern the distinction of how to assess “authentic actions” and the assumed close link between the person of the leader and their (authentic) action. While we may assess a product or painting as authentic (and not fake), it is more difficult to assess the activity in such a way, decoupled from the person doing the act. More positively,

cultivating a strong interest in authenticity of people *and* their actions *and* the consequences of these could lead to valuable insights about contemporary organizational life. One could, for example, investigate when does a person think they are acting authentically and not—and why.

Shifting the focus to actions may be a small step in the right direction. Leadership, few would disagree, is very much about behaviors—and reactions. However, when studying *authentic* leadership, intentions cannot be decoupled from actions simply for the construct to better accommodate dictates of a preferred method. Authenticity emanates from a human mind and authenticity-dilemmas are intimately a reflection of the mind. My painful process of decision-making to follow convictions and denounce my wrong-doer boss thus risking my career inevitably comes before my act of denouncing them. The company mailbox filling with anonymous denunciations is no proof of authentic action, just an objectively verifiable empirical observation. The upshot is that these denunciations can readily be read and counted, and appropriate action taken to fix the problem. The fixer can be authentic, inauthentic, or someone who simply is trying to do a good job and does not really care about truthfulness to self. Here, it is the outcome that matters, at least for practical purposes. The problem is that many organizational malpractices, despite all the good intentions of authentic leadership scholars, remain unattended as organizational members, including leaders, often prefer to engage in willful ignorance (Alvesson et al., 2022b) and avoid facing issues around (in-)authenticity upfront.

8 | ON HOW TO STUDY ACTIONS

A key statement in the article by Helmuth, Cole and Vendette seems to be that “A leader acts authentically when they resist the external pressure from the Other and choose to act according to their own desires” (p. 120).

Resistance to norms is a key theme here. While this resistance appears often laudable in principle, in practice, any manager going against culture, team expectations, and superiors will risk being negatively evaluated and punished by the people or groups they go against. This type of resistance is typically not articulated as authentic behavior but in very different ways: going against the company spirit, violating expectations, or refusing to do one's job. Own desires may not necessary be seen as a matter of authenticity and integrity, but as stubbornness and mental rigidity, or being socially insensitive, self-righteous, disloyal, or just being difficult to work with (Jackall, 1988). Organizations and professions are often intolerant of people focusing more on the self than others or on moral commitments breaking with norms. And when a particular self-other link is established, it may go against others. For instance, it is sometimes difficult for middle level managers to be loyal to seniors and juniors at the same time (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Sims, 2003).

An additional problem is the link of actions to a specific person. A classical trick for people is to take credit for outcomes of successful actions and attribute responsibility for less positive decisions, acts,

and outcomes to others: external circumstances, senior management, and complexity. Few acts come directly from the leader's free agency, unless we talk of people with almost absolute power like Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk. Outcomes are subjected to constraints that come from others—seniors, suppliers, customers, subordinates, professional norms, legislation, policy, and so on. As leaders do not act in splendid isolation but typically in socially contingent ways, tracing the authenticity of action to specific people is often difficult. A multitude of demands for frontstage behavior—acting differently in front of an audience than when one is socially unconstrained—may put pressure on the leader. Some managers see subordinates occasionally, and in planned interactions, such as formal meetings and appraisal talks, others work very closely with them in a variety of situations. Actions assessed in terms of authenticity may show considerable differences based on how close the leader/follower relation is.

9 | THE EXISTENTIAL ESSENCE OF AUTHENTICITY IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

Helmuth et al. (2024, p. 131) in their tab. 4 offer interesting directions for future research that do not box in authors in any method or research philosophy upfront. Maybe a mixed approach taking inspiration in different fields historically concerned with authenticity such as psychology, philosophy, literature, sociology, and leadership and organization studies could capture the richness of the concept better? We simply need to think more broadly and in varied ways about different aspects of the (in-)authenticity problem, including all the forces making and rewarding us for being not so authentic.

The article concludes with two suggestions or possible “paths” for the future of authentic leadership. We find more interesting the second path proposing *a complete rebuild because authentic leadership's theoretical, conceptual, and measurement deficiencies*. According to Helmuth et al., this requires *developing a new construct that then lends to measurement*. It implies *developing a clear and theoretically sound definition and establishing its nomological network by articulating the antecedents, correlates, and outcomes of the newly developed authentic leadership construct*. We do not have the training or the imagination to see how a robust measurement for authentic leadership—including leader self-awareness, relations with others, actions, and consequences or related “outcomes” could be built. The risk is apparent: more shaky research on respondent questionnaire filling behavior rather than authenticity, having little bearing on more complex phenomena (sense-making, actions, relations) outside the act of form-filling (Alvesson, 1996, 2020).

However, we do see how a person can communicate situationally through storytelling or other forms of persuasive talk (backbone of leadership!) or journaling moments when they struggled with choices of being their authentic selves, or situations from their life as managers when the authenticity question became salient forcing them to confront it, and what happened as a consequence. We can also study how employees assess their managers as demonstrating behaviors and attitudes of someone who is or appears to be sincere, empathetic,

fair, a good listener, capable of reversing own bad decisions and so on ... but what do these lived experiences and perceptions have to do with *authenticity*—and then *which* notion of authenticity of all these diverse things packaged into authentic leadership theory?

We also do not as researchers of leadership conceptualize either authenticity or leadership (and by extension authentic leadership) as a construct but as interesting concepts or phenomena. Hence, to be constructive, we suggest not to mix authenticity as in existential philosophy with any *construct* that has to do with authenticity. The very essence of authenticity in existential philosophy is phenomenological and based on serious introspection—a journey into the Self or one's Being. What is good life for me? How should I live it? What is an authentic existence? There is no space or meaning for leadership in these ponderations that highlight individual freedom and free will not only for leaders (typically managers) but as an essential part of what it means to be human.

10 | NAVIGATING THE CONFUSING MEANING OF AUTHENTICITY IN AN ERA OF SUPERFICIALITY

We have attempted to convey that, as we see it, both authenticity and leadership are slippery concepts and should *not* be combined into *authentic leadership*, implying some relational aspect or organizational outcome that can be attributed to leader authenticity. It is theoretically much less contestable and promising to inductively study managers or other organizational members struggling with (in-) authenticity or encountering critical moments when their true selves are put to test or otherwise become an essential part of their organizational lives or career paths. We live in an age of fake commercialized authenticity where much of life occurs in a virtual world and social media. Our lives increasingly involve people we do not know, are never going to meet or know in person, and who do not really care that much about us, let alone about our authentic or inauthentic thoughts, acts, and the consequences of these. So is the case also with most people we interact with at work—customers, suppliers, senior managers, most colleagues, subordinates, and so on. Most are interested in effective and smooth role-playing and adaptation to laws, rules, corporate policy, organizational and professional culture, political correctness, navigating between sectional interests, and a multitude of value commitments and social identities in workplaces.

Sometimes, all the noise around “authenticity” signals a world full of fake, hypocrisy, imitations, persuasive talk, and so on. Leadership researchers may add to a commercialized and commodified world selling “authenticity” and persuade consumers to buy into the package. Ideological escape attempts may be tempting to avoid having to think for oneself—the very first task for an aspiring authentic self. So there are reasons to be skeptical—and engage in critical scrutiny.

If organizations take the issue of authenticity-promoting seriously, the consequences can be both positive and perilous, depending on the context. Most organizations call for compliance, smooth social relations, and people saying the “right” thing, in line with policies and

cultural norms. If only the top leaders exercise their authenticity and others need to follow, then thinking humans become clones and diversity of thought is discouraged. We do not see how this could be ethical or even desirable. If all people exercise authenticity, being “truly true” to their selves, organizational cultures genuinely welcoming diversity of thought need to be created as a first step. Individuals being authentic in their jobs can lead to positive changes, but it can also lead to sanctions and unpopularity, as we so often see when employees use their voice and become whistleblowers. Few organizations genuinely foster workplace cultures where people's true selves can flourish. Authenticity is often a career stopper, while appearing authentic or complying may help people at work to be promoted as they are assessed to be made of “leadership material.”

11 | TO CONCLUDE

In our view, the ongoing authenticity discussions need to be decoupled from what has come to be understood as *authentic leadership theory*. We believe that no amount of facelifts, tummy tucks or botox (re)fills will restore this *construct* and make it reach the beauty and elegance of the theory of relativity. Are we as a community bending a concept to fit what for many is a preferred method and research philosophy and to cater to customer likings? Or are we trying to make everyone who has invested time, money, and a substantial amount of their egos in this theory feel happy and psychologically safe? Is the article by Helmuth, Cole, and Vendette simply playing with semantics to save a shipwrecked theory from sinking?

What does it take to refute a theory in leadership studies? Or are we trapped in our socio-cultural differences, from where the difficulty to establish common ground—and if so, can we do something about it? We hope that the study of leadership will not become a hopeless and tyrannical drama as much of modern politics. If a loud thought leader and a ruling coalition have great many supporters, then their voice prevails. On the scene, a chorus of clones, “perfect” followers who have willingly given up the painful burden to exercise their freedom to (authentically) think for themselves, sings along out of tune no matter how cacophonous the melody is, muffling any dissident voices, including the authentic voice inside themselves.

Even though we are not really on board with the twist of moving from existentialist philosophers into a standardized questionnaire and inserting yet another measurement and new intermediary variable into the authentic leadership “construct,” we have enjoyed reading the piece by Helmuth et al. (2024). Some, although modest rocking of the boat, is vital within the field leadership, not only by very skeptical outsiders such as ourselves but also by people in the broad mainstream. Intellectual humility this type of debate can bring forth is an attitude we could collectively be much better at nurturing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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