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*Special Issue: Do We Need Authentic Leadership?
Interrogating Authenticity in a New World Order*

The perils of authentic leadership theory

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Abstract

In this commentary, we discuss perils of authentic leadership theory (ALT) in a modest effort to help weed out one theory that has gone amiss to pave the way for new ideas. We make an argument for why ALT is not only wrong in a harmless manner, but it may be outright perilous to leadership scholars, scholarship and those who believe in it. It may undermine academic work, delegitimize university institutions, make false promises to organizations, and cause identity trouble through encouraging managers and others overeager to live up to the proposed formula. We argue that leadership and authenticity should be kept separate as interests and themes of study.

Keywords

Authenticity, critique, leadership, research, identity

Prologue

Around the turn of the millennium, criticism fueled by corporate scandals revealed the dark side of the then fashionable charismatic and other heroic leadership styles. Managerial misconduct and the financial crisis made people angry and at least for a brief moment turned the flashlight on the doings and morality of business executives. The time was ripe for a different narrative. A new, less heroic, and more humble leadership concept, authentic leadership, was born.

True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership, a book in the genre of “business self-help” authored by Bill George (the former chairman and CEO of Medtronic) and Peter Sims (a co-founder

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of Giving Tuesday and founder of BLK SHP for *black sheep*, a global conspiracy of misfits¹), was first published in 2007 and became an instant success. A review of the book that appeared in *The New York Times* states the following:

This is one of the most important books on leadership to come along in years, because it is based on so much up-close-and-personal observation. It is far more reality-based than the theories peddled by the bulk of management pundits (Holstein, 2007).

We assume that “management pundits” are implied to be people like us, the likely reader of *Leadership*: “choruses of management coaches, consultants, and business school professors who have proclaimed that they can teach executives how to become leaders. The avalanche of words spilled on the subject—many of them simplistic and repetitive—would fill many libraries” (Ibid).

Perhaps somewhat masochistically, we are sympathetic to this assessment coming from outside the Ivory Tower that appears to be plagued by a chronic dearth of original, fresh ideas. Thus, in the case of authentic leadership, in our view at least, scholarship has mainly followed the movement initiated by Bill George and his associates (see for instance George, 2003; George and Sims, 2007, or just log into YouTube and search for “Bill George”) and added the word *theory* to the concept to give it an aura of science.

Here, we could just privately savor the subtle irony of this situation, shrug our shoulders, and quietly move on. The survival of human kind will not be compromised by management theories standing on a wobbly foundation, or at least so we hope.

But we need to be aware of the risk of some bad consequences.

And maybe good or at least better theories could help mitigate the wicked problems we all face, after all?

In this commentary, we lay out what to us appear as perils of authentic leadership theory (ALT) in a modest effort to help weed out one theory that has gone amiss to pave the way for new ideas. We have made a detailed argument *against* ALT elsewhere (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Gardner et al., 2021; see also Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014; Tourish, 2019) and are not going to repeat ourselves here. Instead, we focus on developing an argument *for* why ALT is not only wrong in a harmless manner, but it may be outright perilous to leadership scholars, scholarship, and those who believe in it. Of course, the consequences of ALT are not devastating in the same way and magnitude as those of a global pandemic or the weakening of democratic institutions, for instance. Still, we claim it is harmful—but in ways that our community of researchers can collectively counteract. We together can decide where we want to go from here.

Even though our focus is on ALT, we consider it only as an example, one member of a much larger dysfunctional family of positive leadership theories celebrating good qualities in a leader linked with good outcomes and positive follower “effects” almost by definition.

Authenticity and leadership—not authentic leadership

Despite 15 years of scholarship and a large number of well-cited articles, we do not think that ALT measures up to the truth claims it makes. Our opinion is that no further adjustments and tweaking can provide a fix. We propose that we, students of leadership, should rather think anew how to study authenticity in people and in organizations—starting by carefully defining and agreeing on what we really mean by authenticity. The phenomenon per se is interesting and relevant in our contemporary

world where both authenticity and inauthenticity have become a central part of our culture (Erickson, 1995).

Authenticity is just very difficult to grasp and study in a straight forward manner. This by no means implies that we, leadership researchers, should abandon it altogether but rather that we should accept that we cannot study authenticity in the simplistic, linear, and one-dimensional manner proposed, for instance, by the current mainstream conceptualization of ALT.

The mere idea of combining two very different phenomena, *authenticity*, and *leadership*, into a positivist theory and a stand-alone leadership genre seems to us to be on very shaky ground. On one hand, there is the very complex philosophical, literary, theological, sociological, and psychological concept *authenticity* that has intrigued human intellect for thousands of years, and on the other, there is *leadership*, in comparison a very young and increasingly contested field of academic study. Whereas the first concept orients our gaze inward toward self-examination and deep reflection about who we really are, the second one directs it outward and implies a process of influence, whereby some people (leaders) herd others (followers) toward organizational goals. We think that these two concepts should by definition be kept separate as the combination just messes things up and misleads practitioners. Even though who we really are obviously influences how we lead and follow just like it affects every other aspect of our lives, the authenticity-leadership link is too ephemeral, and the phenomenon is too fluctuating and difficult to grasp quantitatively for causal modeling to be meaningful—or even possible.

The four perils of ALT

We hold that ALT is perilous for the following:

1. Undermining academic work—we as academics risk coming out as naïve and out of touch with work life reality.
2. Delegitimizing our institutions—universities and business schools may in the short term benefit from the cash flow from paying students and all the hype, but in the long term, they risk losing credibility and respectability as scientific institutions.
3. Making false promises to organizations—we may risk propagating, supporting, or legitimizing pseudosolutions.
4. Causing identity trouble—managers and others overeager to live up to the proposed formula, may experience adverse consequences from being “too authentic,” or their narcissistic tendencies may be reinforced with an incessant focus on the “self.”

Let us now address these issues one by one

Undermining academic work

The construct *authentic leadership* was not masterminded by researchers engaged in intensive fieldwork and mingling *in situ* with practitioners leading and following, nor discovered in a research lab. The genealogy of ALT arises from the weaving together of principles of positive psychology (e.g., Luthans and Avolio, 2003) and experiences and ideas of one inspired and insightful businessman. We see no problem with the not-invented-here phenomenon per se. Imitation and traveling ideas have been key to human development, after all. The problem is that George and Sims' version inspired by business practice is not a *theory*, and the proponents of the current version of the ALT (i.e., Gardner and Avolio, 2005) have not, at least in our view,

demonstrated that such a theory is either viable or credible (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Spoelstra et al., 2016; Tourish, 2019).

We find that an influential and large group of scholars standing so solidly behind and contributing to such an unconvincing theory as ALT is harmful to us as an academic community. All the hectic activity around what to us is clearly an ill-conceived idea that represents a significant opportunity cost in terms of new insights and exciting theories that could have been discovered with all the time and mental effort spent churning out authentic leadership studies anchored in its current theoretical framing. After an intense and decades-long dive into theories about authenticity, leadership, identity, authentic leadership, and having had our fair share of experiencing organizational life out there, we think: Why bother? The original version is much more inspiring!

George and Sims' book holds countless intriguing and promising clues for an inductively oriented, curious social scientist. Among these clues are observations such as: leadership is not about "I" but "we," one becomes a leader by trial and error as one develops over time, the importance of integrity and of overcoming challenges, failures and personal crises, learning to balance different aspects of life, everyone has his or her own path, there are no recipes, leadership is a process not a destination ... As researchers, we are fascinated by the untapped potential that both the 125 interviews and George's own lived experiences represent. However, like any well-trained researcher knows, there are major problems with all this simple one-time interviewing and an uncritical focus on individuals' historic accounts. Errors and biases, such as impression management, selective memory, self-serving bias, social desirability tendencies, adaption to the interview situation, and the want to tell an interesting, well-packaged story are common (Alvesson, 2011). Any good academic study cannot just line people up for interviews and take accounts more or less at face value. Source critique is necessary for good research but not common in management and organization studies (Schaefer and Alvesson, 2020).

Delegitimizing business schools and universities

Business schools and other institutions eager to attract students, patch their budgets, and have something timely to offer to managers may in the short run benefit from promoting leadership teaching and research. We have seen the explosion of leadership education and research over the years, with an ever-increasing number of positions like "professor" or "lecturer" in "leadership." There is, however, very little effective scrutiny of the meaning, substance, and outcome of all this activity. The leadership field is very much about market orientation, image and grandiosity, and of career-minded academics becoming leadership scholars to appear relevant making them more employable, promotable, and sellable as consultants. Over time, this may lead to the erosion of our institutions. Critique of leadership theory and pedagogy is profound and devastating (Alvesson et al., 2017; Learmonth and Morrell, 2019; Tourish, 2019).

Authentic leadership theory promises enormous advantages for leaders, followers, and organizations. There are hundreds of studies supposedly demonstrating its benefits, but most are simple questionnaire-based correlational studies indicating that people who assess their manager as highly authentic and likable also tend to report positively about whatever positive leadership outcome variable the study has chosen to measure. This is not particularly credible (Alvesson, 2020; Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Fischer, 2018; Tourish, 2019). ALT can be considered as a prime example of how the work we do at times symbolizes problematic developments of business schools and make these extra vulnerable to eventually losing at least some of their (remaining) legitimacy. One can consider all the buzz around authenticity as its polar opposite, inauthenticity, indicating a gradual erosion of authenticity in academia and elsewhere.

To reduce the age-old maxim *Know Thyself*, many people in search of wisdom have been inspired and tormented by through millennia to a set of Likert scale questions answered by someone else than the person in question is not, in our view, an indication of advancement of science—or wisdom for that matter. The relentless present-day obsession with measuring, modeling, and quantifying all kinds of social relations and organizational phenomena, no matter how trivial or unreliable the results are, implies shifting our attention away from genuine understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Inevitably, this limits the options we can imagine for our future and reduces the standing of leadership studies as an intellectual enterprise.

Making false promises to organizations

Scholars conducting work on authentic leadership believe that the recent upswing in corporate scandals and management malfeasance indicate that a new perspective on leadership is necessary (Cooper et al., 2005).

Statements like this one where all the ills of organizations can be fixed if one type of people, leaders, subscribe to an “x” type of leadership, are common. We find it extremely naive to claim that a new leadership type riding on the trend can be the main solution to the problems facing the corporate world.

Unethical behavior, corruption, mismanagement, corporate malfeasance, narcissism, and instrumentalism are problems the uprooting of which would require much more than what can be delivered by the ALT. We may as well start with taming financial markets, changing international law, abolishing our obsession with quarterly results, adopting a more humane version of global capitalism, promoting whistle-blowing instead of punishing individuals for bringing up managerial malpractice, as well as radically changing our understanding of workplace relations and modifying mainstream business school curricula and executive training.

The propagation of ALT and its sibling theories may create far-reaching difficulties for companies and public sector organizations relying heavily on leadership education dispensed by business schools to solve real problems. Companies investing resources in recruiting, training, and promoting people based on authentic leader or other recipes and templates may suboptimize performance and risk cultivating counterproductive leadership fantasies and workplace relations. These elusive ideals may produce what Zaleznik (1997) called psychopolitics—managers and others focusing very much on the self and relations and less on work, customers, and results. Indeed, ALT has very little to say about the latter.

Causing identity trouble

Research in the field of psychology has shown what common sense confirms that genuine people who do not fake it too much are likely to feel and perform better than those who pretend to be someone they are not (Gino et al., 2020). However, moderation is called for, especially when it comes to the context of leadership. We see a great risk for those people, in particular, who take the message of ALT very seriously and not just as yet another leadership fad that one after reading the book loosely adopts for a short time—picking up and using the right language—and then moves on to something else. A credulous believer may consider ALT as a prescription for how to be or become a leader of true grit. An uncompromisingly authentic person may have some wins at the workplace but will also most likely get in trouble (Jackall, 1988). The ALT is notoriously silent

about possible negative outcomes, including tensions and conflicts and great problems at adapting to work situations calling for flexibility, diplomacy, and compliance. This omission is highly deceptive.

Authentic leadership has been positively linked to desirable work outcomes including follower trust, leader and follower well-being, job satisfaction, employee voice, organizational commitment, work engagement, empowerment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee, team, and organizational performance; it is negatively related to turnover intentions, antisocial behavior, and burnout (Avolio and Walumbwa, 2014; Gardner et al., 2011). An endless number of good things appear to be related to authentic leadership. It seems almost as if AL can fix everything. The rhetoric may be irresistible for a manager aspiring to become a true leader, an enthusiastic educator, or an HR person uncritically trusting leadership theories and consultants. People believing in leadership ideology and eager to show that they have what it takes may assume that the ALT prescription is the standard they need to live up to. Wannabee leaders are easily caught in ideals and expectations leading to identity regulation where the individual tries to make her or himself into the kind of human subject that is prescribed (Foucault, 1980). Deviation from the prescription of an “authentic leader” may engender a lurking sense of failure for not living up to the ideal.

Knowing oneself, remaining true to one’s values, engaging in balanced processing of ego feedback, and being transparent in one’s relations (all key components of ALT), *all at once and at all times* raise the bar very high for individuals, even if this ambition is a mere aspirational goal.

Authentic leadership theory emphasizes not so much what the leader does but who the leader is, or should be. The focus here is on the self and not on one’s role as, for instance, a new sales director expected to take drastic measures like firing or demoting underperforming employees. Sennett (1977) sees the social development of the 20th century as moving away from earlier norms about a degree of social distancing and people using roles as a way of approaching situations and relations in a more cautious and self-protective way. The celebration of “the authentic self” makes people more exposed and vulnerable. Who you *really* are should come out without much constraint, caution, or censorship. This tendency makes people vulnerable. At the same time, an unreflective, self-focused, or narcissistic person who genuinely themselves believes to be highly authentic but who actually is not may not even recognize these challenges. But then there is a risk that the outcomes may not be aligned with the promises of ALT. Clashes are common between managers with a positive self-view wanting to see themselves as great leaders and people around not confirming this, which may lead to severe identity problems (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016).

Epilogue

We think that we, academics, need to develop a stronger sense of collective consciousness to weed out theories scoring higher on ideology than intellectual qualities. We find that the absence of in-depth, varied, and rich explorative multi-method fieldwork, including observations combined with interviews with managers and their presumed followers, alongside or preceding efforts to build quantifiable constructs, is a significant missed opportunity to understand authenticity in the workplace. We could, for instance, do exemplary work like Jackall (1988), uncovering dilemmas and traps in corporate life and promoting understanding of what may happen when people try to navigate in contested, ambiguous, and multi-moral organizational terrains. It is tempting to jump on the bandwagon and follow fashions. What in our view is an authentic scholarly attitude should trigger skepticism toward a lot of the leadership studies that are presently carried out, published, and

communicated to practitioners. Leadership studies need to diversify and raise the bar for what academic knowledge work is and better distinguish it from pseudoscience, pop-management, consulting, and entertainment.

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Note

1. Information retrieved from Peter Sims' homepage, <http://petersims.com>, on January the 1st, 2021.

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