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Warning for excessive positivity: Authentic leadership and other traps in leadership studies

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A B S T R A C T

We study authentic leadership as a prominent but problematic example of positive leadership that we use as a more general "warning" against the current fashion of excessive positivity in leadership studies. Without trying to cover "everything", we critically examine the principal tenets of mainstream authentic leadership theory and reveal a number of fundamental flaws: shaky philosophical and theoretical foundations, tautological reasoning, weak empirical studies, nonsensical measurement tools, unsupported knowledge claims, and a generally simplistic and out of date view of corporate life. Even though our study focuses on authentic leadership, much of our criticism is also applicable to other popular positive leadership theories, such as transformational, servant, ethical, and spiritual leadership.

Introduction

We live in an age where appealing images and impressive claims regarding leadership are central. Consultants, educators and publishing houses offer seductive solutions to problems and make organizations and work life appear in a positive light, if only their solutions are implemented. Leadership also represents a straightforward springboard for many scholarly careers. The field is very much part of the "positive scholarship" turn in organization studies where we find a range of broadly similar theories. Some researchers group transformational, ethical, authentic, and other similar approaches as "newer genre" leadership theories (Hannah, Sumanth, Lester, & Cavarretta, 2014). Others combine ethical, authentic, and servant leadership theories as" moral approaches" (Lemoine, Hartnel, & Lercy, 2019) that all are claimed to lead to an enormous number of good outcomes.

Unfortunately, dominant versions of positive leadership score higher on appearing good and reflecting people's interest in easy, ideologically appealing solutions than on offering a qualified understanding of organizational life and manager-subordinate relations. In fact, over-emphasizing the person of the leader can make matters worse. It may lead to losing consideration of leadership as situated acts of purposeful and systematic influencing of subordinates to reach concrete, task-related goals, as well as missing the relational nature of leadership altogether. Ideologies may be inspirational for research and make it catchier on the surface, but they "can become a stultifying straightjacket in relation to research …and make one's research a prisoner of that ideology" (Eagly, 2016, p. 12). Although the positive leadership "recipes" offer hope and inspiration in terms of idealized role models in the midst of what is often a messy and ambiguous practitioner daily work life, they are far from being anchored in solid theoretical foundations based on a thorough understanding of leader-follower/manager-subordinate relations and of what it takes to get tasks done in various contexts of modern work life.

Popular theories like transformational and authentic leadership are seriously flawed (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Spoelstra, Butler, & Delaney, 2016; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999). The intellectual foundations they stand on are too shaky to warrant the popularity they have inspired within the scientific community. They are also unhelpful in organizational practice beyond the appeal of pop-management books and inspirational talks that have little to do with serious academic knowledge work. More than anything, their appeal is to mass audiences eager to learn from, be inspired by, or mimic those who are perceived as successful in business. Given the popularity of these concepts borrowed from positive psychology and their persistent nature, in our view, the entire field of leadership studies risks failure as a serious scholarly enterprise. The field is strongly in need of replacing upbeat ideologies fueling fantasies of the morally grounded, ethical, good, powerful leader being the central subject creating all sorts of positive outcomes through adopting the right leadership formulae, with theoretically more solid and less ideological research.

Our aim is to raise the flag against what we consider an excessive positivity that has been a fashionable trend in leadership studies for over 15 years. We focus on the popular but problematic concept of authentic leadership (see also Pfeffer, 2015; Spoelstra, 2018). The Disneyland-inspired good leader, a moral peak performer, may not find most organizations a hospitable environment to begin with. But

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apparently the leadership community and its journals do, despite – or possibly because of – flawed theory development, widely used but poorly operationalized methodology (see e.g. Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), a limited sense of realities of organizational life, strongly focused idealized imaginary, and unrealistic expectations on human nature. The choice of authentic leadership seems appropriate here because it is frequently referred to as the "root" of other positive forms of leadership studies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), such as transformational leadership it perhaps stands closest to conceptually. It is also fashionable. Despite a number of retractions (Atwater, Mumford, Schriesheim, & Yammarino, 2014) and serious concerns raised with fundamental issues such as theoretical foundations, empirical evidence and construct overlap even by its proponents (c.f. Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011), truly critical studies discussing authentic leadership are few (Ford & Harding, 2011; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Spoelstra et al., 2016 are notable exceptions). Yet, to our knowledge, none has been published in *Leadership Quarterly*, the leading publication in the field of leadership, so far (Sidani & Rowe, 2018, is to some extent an exception).

In our view, one fundamental problem that should be countered is that the research community is divided in partisan tribes, which seriously impedes the development of leadership studies as a scholarly field of study. In fact, Banks, Gooty, Ross, Williams, and Harrington (2018) report that construct redundancy remains problematic for the leadership literature *in general*. Intellectually, in our view, the situation can be likened to a pending state of bankruptcy. Whether the sad state of affairs is due to inherent weaknesses in the theories or in their poor operationalizations or researchers simplifying and distorting the original ideas, can be debated (Hannah et al., 2014). We see problems in all these areas. Our position is to a large extent consistent with a broad critique of leadership studies lacking rigor (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016: Antonakis, 2017) and being highly uncritical (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Learmonth & Morrill, 2017).

We find that the tremendous attention authentic leadership has received is the result of an unreflective sense of excitement among leadership scholars and practitioners (Gardner et al., 2011), as well as consultants in search of new, attractive-sounding leadership theories to make them into a lucrative enterprise (Gardiner, 2011), rather than an outcome of rigorous academic scholarship. We disagree with authentic leadership enthusiasts who feel – or at least write – that "there has been an extraordinary amount of progress" in the area since its inception (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014, p. 352). Table 1 below summarizes the main problem areas we have identified and have chosen to study in detail in our paper.

Despite taking a critical perspective and showing how authentic leadership suffers from fundamental shortcomings, we suggest ways to preserve what we find is useful in the study of authenticity associated with leadership, followership, and workplace relations in general. Some of the issues that researchers of authentic leadership point to are valuable (Hannah et al., 2014). The research community needs to start considering real-life contradictions and dilemmas instead of being misled by ideology. We propose that authenticity is not a reflection of the noble leader radiating the right qualities emerging from an inner essence unleashed for the benefit of solely positive follower responses and organizational outcomes. Rather, it is a social phenomenon where people are struggling with a variety of ideals and pressures, making authenticity a contested terrain and a "cultural minefield" calling for insightfulness, negotiations, pragmatism, and work with organizational culture. The socially and historically constructed nature of authentic leadership needs to be re-considered (Liu, Cutcher, & Grant, 2017).

Leadership is about dealing with social norms and navigating in complicated and contested moral terrains (Jackall, 1988), not just having and expressing the right leader disposition or one's "true self". With this starting point, our study makes four contributions: (1) it reviews critically the problematic assumptions and knowledge claims of authentic leadership theory, (2) it relates this review to other related streams of positive leadership theory, (3) it gives substantive insights about authenticity and moral issues in managerial and organizational life, and (4) it offers ideas for the productive study of "authenticity" in leader-follower relations.

Our paper starts with an examination of the fragile foundation authentic leadership stands on. We show how AL has rather little to do with the origin and use of the concept 'authenticity' in philosophy and psychology, and how it became popular in the contemporary social context characterized by increased skepticism and cynicism. We then explore more basic theoretical problems and address methodological flaws in authentic leadership research. The following part considers authenticity in the "real" world of organizations, often offering an unwelcome habitat for people trying to be authentic at work. We then discuss authentic leadership in relation to other positive leadership theories, and finally suggest research ideas on how to study authenticity as it is expressed or bypassed in organizational settings.

Authentic leadership theory and its less than solid foundation

In 2005, *Leadership Quarterly* published a highly influential special issue, "Authentic Leadership Development" (Volume 16, Issue 3), which helped define what the mainstream scholarship on the topic gradually became and signaled the emerging prominence of authentic leadership as a "hot" academic field of study (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Ford & Harding, 2011; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008). Authentic leadership continues the trend of so-called positive forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), such as ethical, transformational, servant, and spiritual leadership, with which, it is claimed, it shares similarities yet has distinct features making it a stand-alone "construct" (Lemoine et al., 2019; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), useful for understanding and improving how leaders lead others, usually referred to as followers, in modern organizations. According to some, the field now shows signs of maturation (Gardner et al., 2011); more empirical studies are being published and the number of scholars working in this area is increasing. There are also voices considering the recent retractions of studies on the topic published by some of the most prominent proponents of the concept as a sign of maturity (Atwater et al., 2014), a claim others have contested and instead interpreted as a signs of a field in crisis (Spoelstra et al., 2016). In the following pages, we are going to argue why the field of authentic leadership (AL) may not be entering a phase of maturity but be standing on shaky foundations altogether. It should perhaps better be seen as being in a permanent stage of immaturity – in terms of assumptions, theory, knowledge claims, and methods used. Our view is that, to save what is good in the interest of authenticity when it comes to workplace relations, serious efforts to reorient the field are needed.

The concept

We now discuss some general aspects that make "authentic leadership" a problematic field of academic study. Authenticity is in itself a tricky concept in the sense of "know yourself" and "act according to your true self".

The Tension between job-based roles and the authentic self

Striving towards knowing oneself requires significant, self-reflective, critical, and continuous work and struggle with the *self* as a whole. In this sense, there is no distinct external work-self and professional-self. Indeed, most philosophers consider knowing oneself (and thus perhaps reaching authenticity) as aspirational goals only a few humans, if any, can ever reach. Leadership, another significant but admittedly a more accessible challenge related to one's professional role, requires influencing *others*. Combining both, authenticity and leadership, in one concept becomes an endeavor only heroes from

Table 1
Main problem areas of authentic leadership.

General problem area	Description	Argument
Foundations of authentic leadership	The concept, while semantically appealing, does not offer a solid foundation for serious knowledge work.	There is unsolvable tension between job-based *roles* and the authentic *self*. Authenticity has been conflated with honesty, sincerity, and other common words. AL suffers problems related to a priori positive framing. AL is a reaction to a zeitgeist, a result of the popularization of the ancient term "authenticity", and reflects a general disillusionment with business. It responds to a human tendency to hang on to an ideology where leadership is seen as the "savior". AL relies on a shaky and uninformed philosophical anchoring.
Theory development	Authentic leadership stands on a shaky theoretical foundation.	AL represents a grouping of unrealistic ideals. It can be seen as a mere moral washing of transformational leadership. The four constitutive elements of AL do not form a solid theoretical construct and a logical whole. Definitions of authentic leadership also include outcomes – cause and effect are lumped together. To measure AL is a mission impossible.
Authentic leadership in practice	Modern workplaces are seldom hospitable environments for personal authenticity projects.	Authenticity is often unwanted at work and may distract from what is required to align people and get tasks done. To *lead authentically* may be a subtle invitation not only to moral behavior, but also to narcissism and other pathologies. Being authentic leads to personal vulnerability. Sticking to one's authentic self may be accompanied by conservatism and inflexibility.
Authentic leadership in relation to other *new genre* leadership theories	Problems of authentic leadership also apply to other areas.	Authentic leadership is just an example. Many of its flaws are symptomatic of positive leadership studies as a whole, even though there is variation within the field.

mythological realm can ever aspire to successfully overcome.

The two terms do not combine well semantically either. Authenticity in the meaning it is framed in the study of leadership is self-referential and self-developmental, even though individual authenticity projects inevitably develop in social contexts. There is no outside influence (positive or negative) implied directly swaying one's authenticity. In contrast, leadership by definition is a process of social influence. For leaders to be considered as authentic, having personal core values that should not be compromised is key – but the same is true for subordinates who have their own, equally legitimate paths to authenticity they may want to pursue in life. Following instructions from their manager may be only something they do as part of their job. Generally speaking, adapting to social and political conventions and norms is a deviation from the genuinely personal (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), because such adaptation would imply playing a role rather than being oneself. Being an authentic leader means constantly striving to be oneself, which is assumed to be reflected in the efforts to personify managerial work, something that seems to be common, but mainly as an aspiration, claim, or a belief (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). The opposite of these circumstances is often regarded as an expression of bad, false, or non-authentic management and leadership (Fairhurst, 2007). Thus, on a superficial and common-sense level, authentic leadership may appear to make sense – but a critical scrutiny shows the opposite.

Conflation of authenticity with honesty, sincerity, and other words of common usage

Even though there have been recent efforts to map the study of authenticity in the field of organizational studies into sub-fields and categories (Lehman, O'Connor, Kovacs, & Newman, 2019), the term "authenticity" is used in so many different contexts that it may very well resist definition (Golomb, 2012, p. 1). Even though there are many lexical variations of what is meant with "authentic" in organizational studies leading to confusion, usually authenticity refers to that which is "real", "genuine", or "true" (Lehman et al., 2019). Scholars seem to broadly agree that authentic entities, whether they are individuals, collectives, or objects are what they appear to be or are claimed to be (Lehman et al., 2019; Trilling, 1972, p. 92). However, there is a significant difference if authenticity is understood to refer to coherence between one's internal values and external expressions, or if it is referred to as a reflection of one's conformity to the norms of a given social category. While in the first case the root of the authenticity attribution is within the person (did I act in accordance with my true self when I gave feedback to John today?), in the second case it resides outside of the entity (is Lisa an authentic jazz singer? Is your new bag an authentic Gucci?). Hence, as Lehman et al. (2019) point out, it becomes paramount to define the root of the authenticity attribution: a meaning of real, genuine or true/what an entity is? Authentic leadership theory points at an internal consistency: a person is an authentic self in his or her leadership role. "Self" is a philosophical or psychological concept (see also Kernis, 2003) whereas "role" is a response to external expectations. In our view, this attempt to combine the authentication of the self with a role becomes a don quixotic task unless a person's occupation perfectly reflects his or her true self an elusive situation for most of us working in business or any other type of organization.

Authentic leadership theory tends to treat authenticity, honesty, and sincerity as synonyms. However, there seems to be somewhat of a consensus outside the field of management studies that these concepts are fundamentally opposed and should not be regarded as equivalent or synonymous. Regarding *honesty* and referring to Hegel, an honest individual fails at breaking prevailing rules and is actually a hypocrite lacking real freedom because honesty is more about living by the norms than breaking them. For Hegel, "honesty is a sham because consciousness must be aware that the claim to impartiality and disinterestedness underpinning its claim to honesty is contradicted by its activist social idealism" (Forster, 1998, p.345). Trilling's (1972) influential book *Sincerity and Authenticity* is frequently referred to as one of the root sources of the concept of authentic leadership. Trilling makes important distinctions between sincerity and authenticity. He maintains that authenticity is a more strenuous moral experience than sincerity, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life. Whereas sincerity is judged by the extent to which the self is represented accurately and honestly *to others*, authenticity refers to the extent to which

one is true *to the self*. Hence, sincerity can in principle be objectively tested—for example, by checking whether a person's outward behavior is consistent with public declarations. "Sincere" in this sense is synonymous with "true" and "honest" however, "authentic" is a hard-to assess, continuous process internal to each individual rarely if ever fully understood even by individuals themselves. Hence, by definition, authenticity is hidden and does not lend itself to external assessment (Golomb, 2012) and definitively not, as we will show, by questionnaires to subordinates (or others).

Problems with positive framing

Authentic leadership is supposed to lead to all kinds of positive outcomes. Followers are assumed to exert greater effort, engage in organizational citizenship, experience improved attitudes and mind-sets, increased trust, positive emotions, well-being, higher motivation, engagement, more satisfaction, greater empowerment, and moral development, and increases in psychological capital (claims made by various authors, summarized by e.g., Caza & Jackson, 2011, p. 355, with no signs of irony). In short, AL promises dramatic benefits. Advocates have problems coming up with disadvantages. Caza and Jackson (2011), for example, only mention vaguely that authentic leadership may not always be beneficial and that it may be possible to be "too authentic" (p. 361).

Imagine framing things differently. We can propose "realistic leadership" with five "anti-AL" (or at least quite far from it) elements: A leader a) focused on tasks and the social world rather than preoccupied with self, b) being diplomatic and considering the needs and wants of others rather than eager to express the self, c) using sound self-defensive mechanisms at times avoiding considering and being overly sensitive to the opinions of others, and not being over-focused on feedback realizing that it is always flawed, d) giving priority to balancing and questioning one's internal needs/wants/beliefs to regulate, for instance, narcissistic or abusive impulses over balancing one's self in relation to others, and e) keeping one's own moral stances associated with religion, politics, environmental concerns, rule-following, and political correctness out of the situation and focusing on the needs and requirements of key groups (like superiors, subordinates, and customers). It is not unlikely that studies adopting this conceptualization would show a correlation between responses and many positive outcomes. One could even imagine that the same people that would link AL with job satisfaction, trust, extra effort, and so forth would do so with virtues that are close to the opposite, given the "right", positive framing, in conceptualizations as well as measurements.

The origins

To understand the interest in authentic leadership in particular (and to some extent in positive leadership studies more broadly), we need to consider the contemporary social and business context, philosophical roots of the theories (or at least references given to these roots), and the development of leadership thinking. No doubt, there are scholars with a genuine interest in furthering knowledge and a want to have something new to say. But there are also signs of a thirst for novelty framed as theoretical breakthroughs and the need to keep the large community of leadership scholars busy with research focusing verification and replication rather than engaging in developing more imaginative approaches to scholarship (cf Antonakis, 2017). We are now briefly going to discuss some factors that influenced the birth of authentic leadership.

The general disillusionment

The theoretical interest in authentic leadership was spurred by deep-rooted concerns about the un-ethical conduct of today's leaders that led to corporate scandals, widely spread public mistrust in big business in particular, and a financial crisis with global implications. In this context, we see signs of an increase of disillusionment and cynicism (Alvesson, 2013; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Naus, van Iterson, & Roe, 2007). Historically, this type of zeitgeist is a terrain ripe for the rise of authenticity as a concern or as an identity project for intellectuals and business elites. In the words of Golomb (2012, p. xii), as he talks about post-modernism and Nietzschean terms "twilight of the idols" and the "death of God" as a reaction to a decline in the powerful and long-enduring ethos of objectivity, rationality, and enlightenment, the quest for authenticity becomes especially pronounced in extreme situations that include not only personal and external, but also significant social, economic and historical crisis.

Leadership as the savior

Signs of us living in an increasingly fake world are endless. There is frequent talk about "business bullshit", nice-sounding but meaningless talk (Spicer, 2018), as well as featherbedding (creating artificial jobs for partisan interest) and goldbricking (avoiding work). Another expression is "empty labor" or "pseudo-work", people being at work without doing anything productive, but just pretending to work to, some extent reflecting a sense of work not being meaningful (Normark & Jensen, 2018; Paulsen, 2014). These types of discourses affect perceptions and ideas about leadership and provide a context for the launching of simple recipes against all this misery, one prominent example being authentic leadership. AL implies, vaguely referring to a concern for the social good, that managers and others supposed to do leadership are true to themselves and act with a strong sense of morality. One could perhaps argue that senior managers and others doing "leadership" are responsible for many of the perceived imperfections and contemporary ill-doings, whereas people in the leadership industry – with a vested academic or business interest – are more inclined to see leadership, at least of the "right type", as the solution to problems. There is a rapid increase of texts including references to both corruption and authentic leadership (Wilson, 2013), the idea being that if only managers would be or become authentic then all kinds of positive outcomes will appear, including trust. Avolio and Walumbwa (2014) go as far as to advertising that "the world simply can't wait any longer for more authentic leaders and leadership" (p. 353). AL is then the great savior – reflecting an evergreen in leadership studies about the great leader doing the right things and solving all or most problems.

Popularization of the concept 'authenticity'

The concept of authentic leadership was first popularized by well-known leadership authors from business practice and consultancy who called for a new type of genuine and values-based leadership (Gardner et al., 2011) as an antidote to corporate malfeasance. However, echoing Gardiner (2011), these early calls for leaders to have more integrity, although laudable per se, seem to have become mixed up with stories of individual success. Business is an awkward companion of the millennial philosophical question of morality and authenticity. The primary purpose of any business is to make that business thrive, not to exist solely for the public good or as platforms for self-expression for corporate leaders. Indeed, according to Cooper et al. (2005), authentic leadership is *not* a way to mend corporate malfeasance.

Beyond the rather narrow field of leadership studies, authenticity is an increasingly popular topic in a number of fields from psychology to marketing to sociology to management. As Lehman et al. (2019) put it, "one does not have to look far today to find self-help books focused on the 'true self', organizations touting themselves as 'authentic', and ongoing debates about who and what should be called 'real' versus 'fake'. For Potter (2010, p. 4), authenticity is "one of the most powerful movements in contemporary life". It may less reflect the "existence" of it, but rather increasing impossibilities of living an authentic life, where so many forces regulate us in terms of being adaptive to others and live up to the templates (buy into corporate visions, political correctness, have a personal brand, develop life styles, follow fashions, do the right impression management, convey an impressive appearance in social media, etc.) (Alvesson, 2013). The norm of being an "authentic leader" may be part of this inauthenticity: providing an idealized template for

how one should be that appeals to fantasies more than reality.

The philosophical foundation

When introducing the notion of authentic leadership, authors typically trace the philosophical foundations of the concept to classical and 20th century continental philosophy. The works of Socrates, Aristoteles, Sartre, Ricoeur, and Heidegger, for instance, are cited. However, authentic leadership scholars so far have failed to explore the meaning these influential thinkers attach to authenticity in any depth and how this meaning may or may not be related to the notion of leadership. The Socratic maxim that an "unexamined life is not worth living" (see Ricoeur, 1986) is a recommendation to live a philosophical life, to engage in constant self-exploration, to help men to rise above beasts in an attempt to reach towards a morally worthy existence – the type of spiritual practice that is in a different realm altogether from executing mundane organizational tasks one engages in to make a living, such as salary negotiations, KPIs, sales calls, budgeting, dealing with market fluctuations, lay-off rounds, and the messy swamp everyday organizational life is in general. When it comes to 20th century existentialists, post-modernists, and phenomenologists, authenticity is a core concept in their thinking. It represents an uneasy transition from objective sincerity (alignment of the self or compliance with norms) to personal authenticity that expresses, among other things, revolt against the traditional conception of truth and the ideal of sincerity (Golomb, 2012). A struggle for authenticity reflects an individual's innermost desire to break free from rules of society, with no prescribed intentionality to make others follow or become "converts".

Heidegger (1927/1996) argues that for the most part, we live inauthentic lives because the authentic self is subsumed by the activities of our everyday, inauthentic self. The reason why the inauthentic, "the they" self, is inauthentic is because it spends its time fitting in with the desires of others (see also Gardiner, 2011). Because authenticity implies constant movement, self-transcendence, and self-creation, identifying an authentic person or even describing what authenticity is becomes/impossible (Golomb, 2012). Authors studying the theme of authenticity, typically recur to fictional characters whose troubled stories depict struggles they endure in their quest to become authentic. Their typical fate is marginalization, outsidership, agony, struggle with faith, public ridicule, or even death. These characters can be religious leaders expressing unwavering faith in a deity (Biblical Abraham and Moses, for instance), Nietzsche's Zarathustra who is the prototype of the Ubermensch or the unattainable superior human being, or the worldlier Don Quixote by Cervantes whose life's journey takes him from one mishap to another, or the character Meursault in Camus' novel *Stranger* whose unwavering authenticity leads him to the guillotine. In any case, their stories are hardly inspirational for leadership enthusiasts in a more material realm of human existence. An often-heard point in philosophical debates about authenticity is that the distinction between the authentic self and the socially formed self is implausible to begin with: what makes humans human is our bonds to others—these bonds shape who we are. When we uphold the claim of being authentic, we run the risk of self-deception in thinking that our core values are truly our own or that we can avoid role-playing in social life (Spoelstra, 2018).

In this light, we concur with Gardiner (2011) in that leadership scholars seem to use these philosophers simply as mere "sound bites" to give their empirical claims more purely cosmetic theoretical weight. This type of conceptual maneuvering has very little to do with serious knowledge work. It is unlikely that an individual's (leader or any other kind) authentic self, once identified, would be aligned with the demands of business life and that the person would be able to transform others to align their true selves in a way compatible with a firm's goals as well. Even if that was the case, the whole concept of authenticity would dissipate and conforming clones would be the result – an antithesis of what being authentic is in the sense implied in the leadership literature.

Shaky theory development

Leadership studies seem to be inclined to follow trends and fashions and be heavily reliant on prevailing dominant ideologies rather than genuine theoretical breakthroughs. Theories come, linger, and go just as fads, leaving an endless smorgasbord of leadership theory and literature that is never falsified in their wake (see also Spoelstra et al., 2016). In this section, our focus is on the academic field of study of authentic leadership.

Conceptualization and definition

In their 2005 editorial, Avolio and Gardner (2005) gave a promising initial statement to counter fashion-following and to deliver a more nuanced, theoretically solid, and empirically grounded leadership theory based on the idea of authenticity:

> We have found that over the last 100 years, most leadership theories have been originated without a focus on the essential core processes that result in the development of leadership that would be characterized by those models, e.g., a path-goal leader. As a consequence, there has typically been no attention to development or we find post hoc conceptualizations and testing with little rigor. We have chosen the opposite approach and conceived of the model of authentic leadership starting with and integrating throughout our conceptualization of the dynamic process of development in context. (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 317).

Despite a number of original authors highlighting the relational, dynamic, processual, developmental, power-sensitive, and contextual nature of the phenomenon, these good intentions have later been largely replaced by static, entity-oriented, fixed, and de-contextualized conceptualizations and empirical studies. Let's examine the definition Walumbwa et al. (2008) propose to facilitate a rigorous study of authentic leadership. A scrutiny is particularly important given that the ALQ scale they developed and that is widely used in empirical studies to assess to what degree a person is authentic or not, is based on this definition:

> We define authentic leadership as a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater a) self-awareness, b) an internalized moral perspective, c) balanced processing of information, and d) relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94)

This definition, with small modifications, is based on Kernis' (2003) work on "optimal self-esteem" to which he included authenticity that he characterized as the "unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 1). There is nothing in this conceptualization borrowed from the field of psychology that suggests that the construct would be of use in processes of social influence, such as leadership, although it may lead to individual level outcomes, such as well-being, irrespective if the person is a "leader" or not (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). One could ask why not just use the original concept and scale in its original meaning? Kernis' definition is also in stark contrast to the philosophical underpinnings authentic leadership is said to be standing on as we discussed earlier and that advocates of authentic leadership also refer to. These underpinnings – and most observers of organizational reality – object to any idea of *one's true or core self in unobstructed operation* because humans are always products of the contexts they, in existentialist terms, are "thrown into" at birth. Also, from a philosophical standpoint, accessing one's true self and applying it in daily enterprise in a business context, being truly consistent with

who one really is, may not be much more than an elusive ideal. The various individual elements in the definition above are also problematic. Let's take a closer look at these.

Self-awareness

Sceptics tend to point at the self not being unitary and consistent, but multiple, socially contingent, dynamic, and shifting (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Ibarra, 2015). According to Jopling (2002), self-knowledge is something that can only be had by working at it. It is an achievement and not a given. Being oneself is thus rarely unambiguous (Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Managers' attempts to exercise authentic leadership are filled with conflict because it involves contradictory identity ideals (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). Which self? Is a good question. Rather than to see the self as a "clearly defined, well-bounded entity", it is better to understand it as fluid work in progress formed in relationships (Ladkin & Spiller, 2013, p. 2) and over time with new job tasks and circumstances (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Ibarra, 2015). People are quite different in different contexts (Price & Bouffard, 1974), and situations (Mischel, 1977). Focusing on finding out about the true self in one's organizational role may not be a productive way of spending one's time.

Of course, learning about one's leadership behavior through 360 degrees feedback, working with the Johari window, or other modes of feedback seeking behavior (e.g. Ashford, 1986; Luft & Ingham, 1955), may be fruitful, but may be more relevant if it targets leadership behavior and other forms of workplace acting rather than the self. Here, the link to "authenticity" is, at best, tenuous.

Relational transparency

Relational transparency is also tricky, partly because the self to be transparently expressed in interactions and relations is not unitary, but multiple and situationally constructed. People are not necessarily like chameleons – although some may "authentically" be very socially sensitive, responsive, and eager to get along – but only that we are social beings, not packages of essential psychological traits, in particular in work contexts, where relations are typically not of our own choosing. Most professionally and socially successful people adapt to circumstances and to the people around them and adjust their behavior. Conventions and norms prevail, and much acting is based on roles, calling for the self being moved to the backstage, whereas "customer service smiling", performance of management, or behaving in line with sex, age norms, and hierarchical position are expected at workplaces. In addition, interactions are seldom transparent, and people involved tend to perceive and evaluate the "transparencies" based on their frameworks, values, emotions, and cognitive limitations. Managers and subordinates often assess their relationship in different, inconsistent ways. Research on leader–member exchange indicates a rather low correlation of how the relationship is assessed (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014; Gerstner & Day, 1997). Different views may be a problem solvable by theories originating in positive organizational scholarship emphasizing harmony and alignment, but it may be also a realistic assessment of social life in all its imperfections and ambiguities and not seen as fixable through, for instance, authentic leadership. With "too much" authenticity, workplace climate may be harmed, and conflicts emerge and escalate.

Balanced processing

Balanced processing is per definition right, at least better than "unbalanced" processing. But, in practice, balanced processing is not easy. Close up studies indicate that giving feedback is very complicated, replete with politics, social considerations, and self-serving bias. It is hard to know how to assess someone, how to formulate and communicate precise feedback, and how to interpret it, in particular when feedback concerns complicated issues and is negative (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Tourish, 2013). Of course, balanced processing sounds appealing, but the idea of an objective balancing act is quite unrealistic. Valuing feedback from others may facilitate other-directiveness (Riesman, 1950), where we are very sensitive to and try to adapt to the views of others, hardly in line with authenticity.

An internalized moral perspective

There are different moralities in business and working life, and ethics easily become relativistic (Skrutkowski, 2017). A concern for the common good is fine, but which common good? And good for whom? Echoing philosophical differences between utilitarianism and deontological ethics, do noble ends benefiting the majority justify the means – or does doing good also imply the imperative of having good intentions and noble moral values? Companies are sites for the clashing of different moral ideals (Jackall, 1988). Some authors say that "moral" is in the eyes of the followers (Hannah et al., 2014), but most of the literature indicates loosely a more absolute type of moral good, sidestepping the likelihood of varied views on morals. Yet, organizations are often full of diverse moralities: doing good for owners, for subordinates, for colleagues, for customers, for the planet, for taxpayers, or for specific interest groups? One moral code may be free and open speech, another avoiding anything that may be perceived as hurtful or politically incorrect for anyone. Human history is full of "altruistic" motives where people have killed others for the sake of the country, the king, the tribe, the ethnic group, the political ideology, and so forth. Also, loyal organizational members may be committed to "altruistic ill-doings", like cheating and corruption for the benefits of the organization and perhaps its survival (Schwartz, 1987). As most people having worked in organizations would agree (and using the word "authenticity" in its more common language form), there are also those who may be characterized as *authentic jerks*, as well as managers whose "authentic" engagement in decision making may do more harm than good, or solve surface problems only to create bigger ones underneath (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

Authentic leadership as moral washing of transformational leadership

Authentic leadership is not only an effect of peculiar and far-fetched jumps from claimed philosophical and psychological sources of inspiration, but also has an origin within the more related, not to say crowded, terrain of leadership studies. In particular, it needs to be understood in relationship to transformational leadership. For some time the most prominent theory of heroic leadership was (and possibly still is) transformational leadership (TFL). There are different views of what TFL includes (Sashkin, 2004), but typically individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence (charisma), and inspiration are seen as ingredients. The advocates of transformational leadership assume that the so-called leader has significant influence on followers' self-confidence, enthusiasm, identification with the group/organization, and voluntary compliance. However, charisma – a key component of transformational leadership – is a potentially dangerous force, because followers become disinclined to think for themselves. Powerful leaders may create catastrophes as much as triumphs.

Proponents of transformational leadership, such as Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), argue that to be *truly* transformational, leadership must be grounded in moral foundations to avoid the dark side of charismatic leaders. According to Parry and Bryman (2006, p. 453), by distinguishing between authentic-transformational and pseudo-transformational leadership, they have thus partly rectified the problem of insufficient attention to the negative aspects of transformational leadership in its original formulation. Truly transformational leadership is not a matter of behavior per se, but rather contrasting the noble respectively murky motives driving the leader. The authentic transformational leader focuses on universal values, addresses real threats, and develops followers into leaders, whereas the pseudo transformational leader highlights "our" values against "their" values, manufactures

crises where there are none, and develops submissive disciples (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Authentic transformational leaders have high moral character, "admirable values", and use ethical means (Caza & Jackson, 2011. p. 353). Some may find this distinction reassuring, but others could say that by just inserting "authenticity" into the definition there is a safe-sounding formula for a powerful but good leadership, but reflecting an arbitrary and useless distinction. Here, another warning is in order. We as scholars should ensure we use words and terms for what they were intended, and not reinvent or repackage them to reify a particular normative position or ideology. As per dictionary definitions, the word "authentic" can be traced to the Latin *authenticus* and Greek *authentikos*, simply meaning "principal" or "genuine", with no relation whatsoever to "inherently good" or "moral".

It is possible to view transformational and authentic leadership as very different (Wilson, 2013), with authentic leadership being much more modest and egalitarian, more inspirational than transformational, and focusing on the self of the leader more than on the direct influencing of followers. Yet many others see authentic leadership as strongly overlapping with transformational leadership. This overlap can be seen in the original conceptualizations of authentic leadership, where the difference between the two is mainly that of scope and nuance (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 323; Walumbwa et al., 2008, p.102). Banks et al. (2016) for example point at the partial redundancy between the two concepts.

According to Sidani and Rowe (2018), the claimed effects of AL and TFL are very similar (see also Lemoine et al., 2019 on common characteristics and common outcomes). One way of understanding authentic leadership is that of it being introduced as a new leadership theory, but, in reality, being more of a moral washing of the older concept of transformational leadership. By severing the words "morality" and "authenticity" from their millennial roots and inherent conceptual complexity and pasting them onto a new leadership concept, the "good" in transformational leadership was rather arbitrarily coupled with "good-doing" and respectively disassociated from "bad-doing" leaders. With this conceptual maneuvering, artificially simplifying the inherently complex and adhering to ideology rather than serious effort to understand social relations at work, the area of "authentic leadership" has developed into its own area of hope-based language game rather than serious scholarly inquiry promising a superior type of leadership.

Measurement of authentic leadership – A mission impossible

For scholars of authenticity from Kierkegaard, Camus, and Sartre to Nietzsche, the notion "authenticity" signifies something beyond the domain of objective language. It is different from the notions of sincerity and honesty that have to do with attributes to which language can refer directly … but any positive definition of authenticity would be self-nullifying (Golomb, 2012, p. 1). Thus, although sincerity could lend itself to objective assessment, authenticity does not. How to study authenticity then, when authenticity is virtually unknowable? How can we observe, let alone measure, that a person is true to himself or herself when this quality tends to be out of reach even to individuals themselves? Research and consultancy on authentic leadership is typically about subordinates attributing authenticity scores to leaders or leaders assessing themselves. Whether people really are true to themselves is not easy to know. A person good at impression management may probably score high on other-assessed authenticity, whereas a person truly "authentic" may not be seen as such but bad in playing the leader role (Ibarra, 2015). This obvious consideration is not addressed much by authentic leadership advocates. Let us take a closer look.

Just like with other forms of positive leadership studies, authentic leadership scholars have a strong belief in numbers and the measurability of the valuable essence "authenticity" and its effects. However, it is very difficult to objectively study phenomena that are unmeasurable by definition. Recognizing the self-referential nature of authenticity is critical to understanding the concept. That is, in contrast to sincerity, authenticity does not involve any explicit consideration of others; instead, the authentic self is seen as existing wholly by the laws of its own being (Erickson, 1995, p.125). Thus, authenticity (and let alone the even more complicated construct of authentic leadership), can neither be externally assessed nor experimentally manipulated. Similarly, its causal effects on other variables cannot be readily estimated. In our view, scarce resources should be used for much more productive purposes than for training of authentic leaders (or followers), and any corporate policies to hire or evaluate managers based on authentic leadership assessments, should be revised.

Cooper et al. (2005) point out that an initial conceptualization of AL was multi-dimensional. It contained elements from diverse domains—traits, states, behaviors, contexts, and attributions. Moreover, the observers or perspectives involved vary from the leader, to followers (at various distances), to possibly additional audiences. They also expressed concern that authentic leadership is posited to operate at the individual, team, and organizational levels, among others. Measurement difficulties that arise from the adoption of such broad definitions and levels of analysis are unavoidable. In our view, these authors are absolutely correct in that challenging measurement and other methodological issues lie ahead, but that is what would be required to fully understand what constitutes authentic leadership *development* (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

In fact, the nature of authenticity is such that it cannot be measured at all. The idea of others "knowing" an individual's authenticity introduces a basic contradiction between the phenomenon and the way it is studied. But even if we disregarded the problem of others' being able to assess authenticity and would accept to focus our studies on followers' *perception* of leader authenticity (i.e., not on leader authenticity per se, as defined by authenticity scholars), there are fundamental difficulties. The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) questions (as in Walumbwa et al., 2008, p.121) are broadly as follows.

Self-Awareness

1. Seeks feedback to improve interactions with others.
2. Accurately describes how others view his or her capabilities.

Relational transparency

3. Says exactly what he or she means.
4. Is willing to admit mistakes when they are made.

Internalized moral perspective

5. Demonstrates beliefs that are consistent with actions.
6. Makes decisions based on his/her core beliefs.

Balanced processing

7. Solicits views that challenge his or her deeply held positions.
8. Listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions.

One could ask *what these questions have to do with authenticity*? Most questions concern the perceptions of others about social responsiveness and what is viewed as acceptable social behavior. One could say that the questionnaire almost tries to measure the opposite of authenticity. If we look at the various statements, agreements or disagreements contain possibly multiple meanings. A person seeking feedback to improve interactions with others may do so to increase the likelihood of having the optimal influencing or manipulation effect, for example, to craft a message to be optimally persuasive. Saying exactly what one means may be less about relationality than narcissism and disregard of context and others. Demonstrating beliefs that are consistent with actions

indicates a simple relationship between beliefs and actions as if the latter were a direct outcome of beliefs rather than a multitude of considerations and forces, including organizational contingencies: corporate policy, superiors' requests, corporate culture guidelines, customer demands, the views of subordinates, and so forth. Inconsistency between beliefs and actions is unavoidable, in order to convey an impression of such consistency would call for a low or moderate level of relational transparency. Taken the views of others carefully into account sounds good, but it is difficult to see what sensitivity for feedback has to do with authenticity. Arguably, one can practice participative leadership without being strongly feedback-seeking, saying exactly what one means, or wanting to be consistent in beliefs/action. Actually, being into participation would mean an inclination to sometimes follow the views of others as much or more than one's own beliefs. There is a tension between participation and being sensitive to the views of others about self, and being authentic.

It is thus very difficult to see any clear link between the ALQ and the ideas of authentic leadership it is supposed to refer to. ALQ aims to measure perceptions of feedback-interest, truth-speaking/lack of diplomatic skills, consistent/in-flexible behavior and participation; a set of diverse and not particularly authenticity-related phenomena.

Other drawbacks

There are many other fundamental problems with the idea of authentic leadership, some of which have been addressed in the literature, either as general problems with contemporary versions of leadership studies or as distinct to authentic leadership. Here we mainly deal with authentic leadership, but most of these issues are common for leadership studies in general (for other critical reviews, see e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Sidani & Rowe, 2018).

Many definitions of authentic leadership also include outcomes. This is a result of what MacKenzie (2003) refers to as poor construct conceptualization and failure to adequately specify the conceptual meaning of the study's focal constructs. Cause and effect are lumped together. This is common for much leadership studies in general, for instance on creativity (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman, & Legood, 2018) and transformational leadership (Yukl, 1999). Such lumping violates any reasonable way of using concepts in research (Sidani & Rowe, 2018). It also leads to inbuilt “proofs” that authentic leadership leads to positive outcomes. In fact, the value-based and moral behavior models of leadership in general tend to correlate heavily with constructs traditionally examined as outcome variables (e.g., trust, LMX, justice) and thus are carriers of endogeneity bias (Banks et al., 2018). Given how the theory is formulated it seems almost impossible that not good outcomes would be produced or reported: (perceived) self-awareness is better than being self-unaware, honesty is better than fake acting, a balanced view of relations is better than a biased view, and decent moral values are appreciated more than indecent selfishness and immorality. If one assesses one's manager as high on authenticity, one is likely to respond with high indicators on such outcomes as good efforts, trust, well-being, or something else positive as well. There does not seem to be any need to study AL or the claimed outcomes: how people respond is more or less obvious (although outcomes of empirical studies are always uncertain, as respondents may find questions ambiguous and even totally misunderstand them). The problem is that the framing – and the normative element – produce a strongly loaded response inclination, far from being a truly open study (Sidani & Rowe, 2018). Rather than sound reasoning and serious empirical studies, we find tautologies: results are given in definitions but are then repeated as evidence. Tautologies are common in “positive” leadership studies (Alvesson, 1996; Antonakis, Basardoz, & Shamir, 2016; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Moreover, and as it is the case of authentic leadership, an overreliance on survey measures, cross-sectional designs, and single source data, and an almost complete lack of causally identified studies, qualitative studies other than in the positivist tradition (Gardner et al., 2011), limit the possibility to develop the field further through in-depth understandings, either through longitudinal or (field) experimental research.

Authentic leadership represents a problematic mixture of different and possibly unrelated ideals. The four elements the concept is made of are seen as coming together in the form of “authentic leadership” as something distinctive and unique, but there is no reason to assume that they hang together and form a concept or a construct (see also MacKenzie, 2003). Self-knowledge does not necessarily mean acting in a genuine way, and a person may be just good at controlling or concealing his or her weaknesses – either for one's own sake or the benefit of others (that could be protected from a bad temper, intolerance, or other “non-positive” inclinations). Caring about how others see one's self or being essentially good (having an internalized moral perspective) may also be unrelated. A person eager to be authentic may be fairly indifferent to views of how others see her or him: “authentic leaders thus make moral judgments freely and independently, without concern for potentially opposing normative or external social pressures” (Lemoine et al., 2019).

In particular, the connection between self-knowledge and being moral strikes as unrelated. One could assume that a person with a strong moral compass is not that concerned about self, relational transparency, or balanced processing. Some advocates of authentic leadership leave morality out of the picture (Sidani & Rowe, 2018), whereas others define AL as a moral approach to leadership (Lemoine et al., 2019). Can one be authentic and/or engage in AL without being moral? It is a matter of definition, but many people that appear to be genuinely authentic in many respects may have no overall moral purpose (Eilam Shamir & Shamir, 2013; Golomb, 2012). Empirically, it may be the case that the virtues proposed by authentic leadership theory are unrelated, although it is not impossible that people's perceptions (and in particular their questionnaire-filling) may suggest otherwise as there is an inclination to want to link good things with other good things thus avoiding cognitive dissonance. Empirical “evidence” of elements of authentic leadership hanging together may thus be misleading.

It is virtually impossible to live up to the requirements of authenticity in leadership, whatever precise meaning the concept is supposed to carry, unless authenticity is seen in a “weak” way, that is, that a person with some self-knowledge and some sense of moral is more appreciated than an immoral person with a very bad sense of self. Very few people score consistently high in most respects and not all or most of the time under all circumstances. In particular in business life and in large complex organizations, the environment is often not friendly towards the expression of authenticity. The latter may be an espoused value, and no doubt many fill in questionnaires in such a way that they themselves or their well-liked managers may appear as authentic, but such questionnaire-filling does not say much. The espoused and the enacted often diverge. In a way, there is in most samples probably no authentic leadership to study, real people in real situations tend to fall short of the heavy burden being authentic imposes. To put it harshly, authentic, morally good leadership may not exist, at least not in most business organizations among senior people being reasonably well adjusted to managerial life and its specific cultural rules (Jackall, 1988).

The above is not to say that there are no situations, domains or relationships where we can find examples of self-awareness, straight exposure of a self, receptiveness for feedback, and an explicit moral stance. But situational authenticity – indicators of something authentic leadership-like in specific moments in the eyes of specific people (with a specific notion of morality) – is very different from authentic leadership as a stable essence, consistent orientation, and set of observable behaviors.

Authenticity in organizational settings

Authentic leadership or authenticity in general is often unwanted. It is great of course when a person with what others think are good qualities express these, but most people have many less sympathetic "authentic" orientations, for example, bad temper, poor social skills, neurotic and narcissistic orientations, intolerance, non-mainstream political or religious orientations, problems with the other sex, a dislike for certain professions or functions, and other views that make collaboration difficult if these come out in full bloom (of course, some of these qualities may be applauded and lead to positive responses from certain followers, e.g. sharing homophobic, sexist, or nationalist inclinations may be applauded in a specific setting as part of a possible authenticity). Some forms of what some may experience as sexual harassment or bullying may be seen as expressions of authenticity. A senior person exhibiting uncertainty and anxiety about the job may trigger negative responses from subordinates, as Ibarra (2015) shows. Too much transparency is not necessarily welcomed. Also, many moral views are not so easy to stick to and express. At many workplaces, it may be wise to hold back strong convictions associated with being a vegan, a militant environmentalist, a very religious muslim, or strongly favoring (or not favoring) gender equality. Organizations are often sites for ethical closure, that is, more or less systematic denials of the application of moral vocabulary and, thus, informed ethical judgment (Jackall, 1988; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2010).

Related to dominating norms, *being authentic may be an effective career-stopper in most organizational settings*. Authenticity is sometimes likely to create social problems and lead to suspicion. A person may be trustworthy in terms of being transparent and predictable and having a clear morality, but that may also be seen as a source of lack of trust in a work and business setting. Trust may require being perceived as flexible, willing to comply and make compromises, fulfill role requirements and job expectations, as well as being loyal with the in-group rather than insisting on being true to self and having a strict moral conviction and agenda (Jackall, 1988). Even if being highly moral is respected, people may feel that the organization is not the right place to express personal authenticity and morality. As Jackall writes, "adeptness at inconsistency, without moral uneasiness, is essential for executive success" and cites a senior manager saying that "people up high … are able to speak out of both sides of their mouth without missing one step" (p. 160).

The ideal of being an authentic leader may invite and reinforce narcissism. A strong preoccupation with oneself and one's connection to and expression of an elusive true self may be problematic in a social setting where getting organizational tasks done with others is or should be the primary preoccupation. A task-orientation and rallying the troops behind common goals calls for explicit efforts towards self-scrutiny, social sensitivity, and downplaying possible narcissistic inclinations and everything else in terms of personal meaning and relevance of existence to self. Of course, AL (and other "new genre" types of leadership) may be seen as not replacing but adding to or being combined with instrumental, transaction, task-focused work (Hannah et al., 2014), but if taken seriously AL is not just a supplementary smoothener to a wide set of other leadership orientations and behaviors. AL calls for time, energy, focus, and priorities. All leadership ideals and behaviors are to some extent at the expense of something else. An authentic person focusing highly on self-awareness – key in AL according to, for example, Lemaine and colleagues (2018) – may put him or herself in the center of the universe.

Being authentic also means making oneself vulnerable. Being genuine at work and placing one's self and morality – rather than job role and work contingencies – in the center means that everything tends to reflect back on the self and become personal. The role can protect people – sometimes of course in a negative way as people take less responsibility for their doings, but often it also takes some of the pressure of an overexposed self away. Leadership involves many painful activities: sanctioning people, refusing advantages and privileges, rewarding some employee that perform below average, giving unwanted work tasks, asking employees to comply with management or customer demands even if they find them unreasonable, and so on. If one can see all these tasks as part of the role and less as an expression of one's true self, the vulnerability may be reduced. Sennett (1977) points at how a culture of self has meant that the distance and protection accomplished by roles have lost significance, fueling narcissistic vulnerability. If the self is all the time present and in focus, everything becomes very personally sensitive. Bureaucracy is often favored, as it makes things impersonal and thus easier for people to cope with.

Adhering to authentic leadership as it is conceptualized is also a source of conservatism and inflexibility. Being true to one's values is perhaps fine in a specific setting but changing circumstances or starting a new job may call for significant revisions and developments of one's sense of self and the embracing of other values and priorities. As Ibarra (2015) notes, authentic leadership can be problematic. For example, the option of adhering to one "true self" flies in the face of much research on how people evolve with experience, discovering facets of themselves they would never have unearthed through introspection alone. And being utterly transparent – disclosing every single thought and feeling – is both unrealistic and risky (Ibarra, 2015, p. 55). People at workplaces seldom find a perfect match between who they think they are and job requirements. With development and new tasks there are often requirements to learn and change. If a person has got a job and social relations that are in line with a true self, it may not last. Most people want to progress and there will always be new people as superiors, colleagues, and subordinates calling for constant, sometimes radical, adaptations to a variety of demands and thus sometimes revisions of the self. These may be framed as learning opportunities people take as such – or not (Ibarra, 2015).

Authenticity is contingent on power relations and hierarchies. What rank one occupies in the corporate hierarchy matters when it comes to a leader's possibility to express his or her true self at work. A WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) owner/co-founder of a fast-expanding American technology firm has probably more degrees of freedom and agency than a newly hired, young, Asian, female section manager in the subsidiary of the same firm in Sub-Saharan Africa. Gardiner (2011) considers the discourse of authentic leadership as deeply problematic because it fails to consider power inequities and how social and historical circumstances affect a person's ability to be a leader. Authenticity manifests itself differently depending upon a person's place in the world, and institutional biases adversely affect who gets access to leadership roles in the first place and influences a person's ability to take up space in this world. Eagly (2005) refers to boundary conditions of authentic leadership when it comes to a leader's capability to establish relational authenticity in particular. In cases where the leader belongs to a minority group or the majority of followers does not share the same value base as the leader, it may become difficult for the leader to gain legitimacy and thus express authenticity.

Authentic leadership and its many siblings

The strong critique raised above is on the whole valid also for other positive versions of leadership theory with at times eerily faith-based discourses that represent a poor fit in any enterprise positioned as "academic". We see authentic leadership as an example of and symptomatic of leadership studies as a whole, even though we of course acknowledge the great variation within this vast field. The majority of all versions of ethical, charismatic (insofar as traditional notions are concerned), spiritual, servant, and transformational leadership all claim seemingly superior formulae for different kinds of good outcomes. Let us here only briefly summarize the critique of transformational leadership. Yukl (1999) points at ambiguity about underlying influence processes, overemphasis on dyadic processes, ambiguity about transformational behaviors, insufficient specification of negative effects, and

heroic leadership bias. van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) echo and expand on many of these points, summarizing their (devastating) critique of one of the many proposed versions of the new genre of leadership studies, charismatic-transformational leadership, as follows:

> The conceptualization of the construct is seriously flawed, with no definition of charismatic-transformational leadership independent of its effects, no theory to explain why it consists of the dimensions proposed and how these dimensions share a charismatic-transformational quality that differentiates them from other aspects of leadership, and no theoretically grounded configurational model to explain how the different dimensions combine to form charismatic-transformational leadership. (p. 45).

Alvesson and Kärreman (2016) emphasize the ideological nature of the leader-hero through transformational leadership turning "self-centered individuals into being committed members of a group" (Sashkin, 2004, p. 175). Through transformational leadership practice, employees perhaps otherwise concerned with autonomy, wage, work conditions, promotion, and other "basics" are expected to de-emphasize such issues and become loyal and committed followers to the leader doing what are perceived as extra-ordinary things, turning the lazy into committed and the self-centred into leader-centred and devoted organizational citizens. It sounds impressive but may be easier to teach and preach than practice. Another major problem is the tautological and ideological nature of the concept:

> The assumption is that leadership must be something good. And in the event that it turns out to be bad, one might always argue that one did not witness the true concept of, let us say, "transformational" or "authentic" leadership. The concept is never to blame. Its beauty is always conceptually guaranteed because it is self-referentially true. (Spoelstra & ten Bos, 2011, p. 183)

Much leadership studies have a strong religious, even messianic overtone (Alvesson, 2011; Spoelstra & ten Bos, 2011; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002), often overlapping with hero qualities. Yet, authenticity can also be addressed without directly invoking heroism in the sense of powerful action – and heroes don't have to exhibit transparency. Reassurance of the qualities of our elites – in a time full of moral uncertainty, doubt and worries offers us comfort. Leaders, at least those deserving to be seen as "real" leaders, are not only powerful, they are powerful in a right, moral way. Effective leadership is for example married with integrity – as Palanski and Yammarino (2009) write, this marriage is almost an axiom in leadership studies. If leaders are power-oriented, it is only for the good of the organization. Good leaders are authentic, they have integrity and a sense of moral purpose making them capable of increasing the moral standards of followers. If people in powerful positions are not of the true grit, they are not really leaders, but something else: tyrants, inauthentic, simple managers and so on (Burns, 1978; Jackson & Parry, 2008). Hannah et al. (2014) suggest that "non-good" leadership should be referred to as, if not directly bad, as "supervision". Leaders and leadership – at least "true" and not pseudo or inauthentic – are preserved for something pure and morally high-standing.

Broadly similar, but with an even stronger emphasis on the moral element in leadership are ideas of "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1977). Here we find statements like "servant leadership requires that leaders lead followers for the followers' own ultimate good" (Sandjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008, p. 403) and that the "*sine qua non* of servant leadership is followers' holistic moral and ethical. ... development" (p. 403). This formulation sounds really appealing and comforting – at least for followers. Whether organizations (management, colleagues, shareholders) and those these are supposed to serve (people in need of health care, social services, customers etc.) see it in the same way is uncertain, but the complexities around doing servant leadership for the serving of the recipients of an organization tend to be bypassed. Some expand the notion of "servant" to refer to all stakeholders (Lemoine et al., 2019), neglecting the problems of conflicting interests, of difficulties to navigate between different notions of the moral good and making everyone happy. Making efforts to serve "everybody" may call for extreme altruism, possibly rare among people in business.

Much of present-day leadership theory sounds very uplifting. Indeed, these forms of leadership studies can work as Prozac (Collinson, 2012) for practitioners, aspiring leaders, and perhaps also leadership scholars, possibly too eager to engage in "feel-good studies". But they don't facilitate our understanding and they are hardly helpful for managers and others trying to deal with real life situations rich with dilemmas and difficulties.

What to do then?

The reader may find our tone negative and unconstructive. We see critique as extremely important and sometimes absolutely crucial in order to set social research on a better course. Authentic leadership as it is currently practiced in leadership studies is not helpful. It is a pseudo-solution, risking making organizational life even more full of faking and contradictions camouflaged by rosy images than it already is. AL easily legitimizes and supports what may be experienced as corporate "bullshit" (Spicer, 2018).

Our ambition with this study is to encourage critical awareness and basic rethinking around issues of authenticity and leadership in organizations. There are more realistic, less ideological and less contradictory views on leadership available (e.g., Alvesson, Blom, & Sveningsson, 2017), although some of these are more about management than leadership (e.g., Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). However, few take the authenticity (and related concepts of morality, self-awareness, integrity and sincerity) seriously. We do agree with some scholars of authentic leadership about the need to consider issues around in/authenticity much more in research. On a more positive note:

> Theories such as transformational, ethical, authentic, and other "newer genre" leadership theories have helped to address previously neglected topics, such as leader visionary and inspirational messages, transparency, emotional effects, morality, individualized attention, and intellectual stimulation. (Hannah et al., 2014, p. 615)

However, this calls for a grounding in organizational reality, not in sagas about a bright new leadership practice, accomplished by the right leadership package. What to do then? Here we point at a few options for more realistic studies of authenticity and related topics at work.

Studying struggles with contrasting ideals

Few people have a simple, integrated set of beliefs and morals that can just be expressed and lead to positive responses. Here investigations of contradictions and compromises can be helpful. Many leadership scholars work with the assumption of a firm, stable and basically contradiction-free set of values informing the (good) manager. Yet most studies of managers in real life show the difficulties of working with clear and consistent values. A manager we studied points out the dilemma of combining the natural role of leader with seeing other people's needs for acknowledgement and recognition:

> I try to take it easy, but I can't. It's a question of what you do with your leadership so that you don't use it to dominate and take time from other people, because that's not good. I have to find a balance between taking up time myself and allowing others to do that – take up time when necessary and let it go when necessary. I end discussions to keep to time, and it feels terrible. Once I told myself not to say anything, not to be visible, not to exist and to let other people take center stage. It was really tough, but I don't want to be the one who dominates and is the centre of attention. (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 184)

In a similar way Ibarra (2015) refers to a manager who describes managing tension between authority and approachability:

> To be authoritative, you have to privilege knowledge, experience, and expertise over the team's, maintaining a measure of distance. To be approachable, you emphasize your relationships with people, their input, and their perspective, and you lead with empathy and warmth. Getting the balance right presents an acute authenticity crisis for true-to-selfers, who typically have a strong preference for behaving one way or the other. (p. 56)

Assuming that organizations and people have diverse and often conflicting ideals means that issues around authenticity call for complicating working through and balancing these. How is this balancing done? What is happening with self-knowledge, true-to-self (selves), relational ideals balancing feedback and moral convictions/flexibilities under these (realistic) circumstances?

Focusing on followers and leader/follower relations

In line with Gardner and colleagues (2011), we propose a sharper focus on subordinate/follower experience, perception and reasoning. Sidani and Rowe (2018) suggest a model for how followers perceive AL and how this leads to legitimation. The emphasis on followers – whose responses and acts are crucial for any possible outcome of leadership – seems much more fruitful and relevant than focusing on the presumably (in)authentic leader. Here broad assessment of managers on relevant issues and possible consequences can be explored. Such studies need to carefully avoid superficial answers and try to take the broader considerations of followers and their relations with the leader seriously. How do they see and assess their managers? In what way do they believe that they are influenced by their managers (or vice versa) and how is this influencing related to authenticity? Is the latter central or is it less of a concern? Perhaps other issues – effective management, support, knowledge, communication, trust, political skills (e.g. for securing resources) – may matter more? A focus on topics with little consideration of what followers may find important and relevant may give a misleading impression of leader and followership. Within a broadly defined "authenticity domain" a formal change of focus to follower perceptions as well as leader/follower relations also means that we should shift the discussion to leader-follower aligned, diverse or fragmented sense-making and understandings of trust, sincerity or integrity or something else instead of authenticity "as such".

Zooming on the self and its development

A closer scrutiny of dynamic, developmental and situational nature of self and authenticity concerns at work and in a career context is called for (Ibarra, 2015). One may also study how people relate to their self-conceptions in stable versus different situations. Ibarra (2015) suggests a distinction between work calling for improvement and for change, with clear implications for how to work with, know and act in line with a sense of self.

> As we strive to improve our game, a clear and firm sense of self is a compass that helps us navigate choices and progress toward our goals. But when we're looking to change our game, a too rigid self-concept becomes an anchor that keeps us from sailing forth. (Ibarra, 2015, p. 55)

She then goes on to suggest using several role models, working on getting better and not sticking to "your" story, and an "adaptively authentic" way of leading, which requires a playful frame of mind. Ibarra suggests that we should think of leadership development as trying on possible selves rather than working on yourself—which, lets face it, sounds like drudgery. But "when we adopt a playful attitude, we are more open to possibilities" (p. 58).

Sometimes people may benefit from overcoming their self, to not get closer but to be different from self in given situations. The self is of course not a source of only good things, but also constraints and limitations. It may thus mean constraints for learning to master a role that is not in line with one's natural feeling of selfhood. How does one's authenticity change when one switches from being an engineer to being a manager, or from being an analyst to being an account director? How are people struggling with being eager to express their self and values versus wanting to question themselves, learn and change?

Studying when, why and how to be authentic

If we bypass authentic leadership as a static essence and consider in particular managerial work calling for situated action rather than a consistent style, we could look at authentic leadership as actions and episodes. Arguably, a significant part of work runs reasonably smoothly and can even be carried out almost mindlessly (Ashforth & Fried, 1988), but in some situations, interactions and episodes being authentic may be somewhat of a problem. When does authenticity become an issue? When do people stop acting without self-awareness and start considering *who am I, is this really me, what is reasonable to feel and do*? Feelings of fake and pretense or moral doubt may be salient. Fear, shame and guilt may be part of the picture. In/authenticity then becomes a concern, not just part of what is taken for granted. How is an experience of faking or loss of integrity dealt with, in terms of acting" authentically" – leading to anguish, conflict and sanctions, or respect and self-esteem? If a person for instance speaks up, how do other people respond?

Facing negative consequences of authenticity

The – arguably significant – negative effects of managers ambitiously trying to be authentic could also be investigated. If managers (and others) would take authenticity seriously it would be a radical break with dominant conventions at work, organizations and society. The act of putting one's self in the center, expressing what one really thinks, and insisting on acting in line with one's moral convictions would sometimes be appreciated, but would often also lead to confusion, conflict, exits, tough choices, dilemmas, the undermining of trust and authority and, as a result of all these experiences, a risk for an existential crisis (or being fired or otherwise marginalized). Unless one's self, values and beliefs are perfectly aligned with all the requirements of various interest groups, including senior managers, colleagues, subordinates and customers, there will be plenty of frictions. Normally people just accept and downplay these and try to adapt, but a truly authentic person will experience, acknowledge and act according to self and moral imperatives, often against the will of significant others. Such acting may lead to productive dissensus but often the personal and social costs for the authentic person may be high. A study could trace examples of people perceived as acting clearly authentically in a way that is not adapted to what all agree with but shows clear integrity. What is happening then? What are the experiences and processes following from what are experienced as authentic acting?

Conclusion

Authentic leadership is generally treated as a stable, fixed essence or quality. This view reflects psychological reductionism and a limited understanding of the phenomenon in terms of social contingencies, workplace dynamics and varied constructions of what is authentic. "Leadership" is hardly referred to at all in authentic leadership theory; there is almost nothing on how the authentic leader is supposed to act. It is fine if people try to know themselves, have transparent relations, be consistent and the like, but this perspective is quite different from doing management of meaning, encouraging people to make an effort, be more creative, raise their spirit, try to make sure there are good results, and so forth.

Despite our strong skepticism of authentic leadership – and of positive leadership studies more broadly – we are in full favor of efforts to develop knowledge of how people in managerial and other jobs should try to deal with dilemmas around perceptions and experiences of authenticity, perhaps better framed as morality, sincerity, ethics, integrity, being genuine/fake and work relations in general. As a contrast to recent discourses on the importance of work being meaningful (and for some it is, of course), many find limited meaning at work, and are disillusioned and cynical. These negative experiences as well as managerial misconduct and moral failures need to be taken seriously and call for investigations into organizational cultures, social practices and societal changes.

We would like to have a better world, too, but do not see authentic leadership recipes – or other positive theories – being the way forward. Authentic leadership is far from alone as a deeply problematic leadership theory. Many concepts are ill-defined, tautological, ideological and resist rigorous study. Confusions around notions like charisma and transformational leadership has made the fog over the leadership landscape thicker still (Antonakis et al., 2016, p. 294), and with the contemporary popularity of authentic leadership and its siblings, uncritical thinking in dominant leadership theory radiates triumphant.

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