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# REFLECTIONS ON AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

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In recent decades there have been increasingly loud calls for 'authentic leaders'. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the emerging field of authentic leadership. It begins by identifying how authentic leadership has been defined. It then highlights some epistemological challenges of this definition. Finally, it discusses some implications of these challenges for authentic leaders and for the study of authentic leadership.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, Leadership, Authentic leadership, Epistemology, Value

## INTRODUCTION

It ought not be surprising, in an era in which corporate crimes, political pork, and ethical embarrassments are seemingly on the rise, that more and more people seek a different kind of leader—someone who is true to self, free of hyperbole, and transparent in deed. This authentic leader stands in stark contrast to the leaders of the past, who felt compelled to emulate those whom society revered as the leadership greats. This is good news for would-be leaders who no longer “need to be a clone of Baroness Thatcher or Sir Richard Branson to succeed” (De Vita, 2007, p. 25).

The scholarly consequence of this pursuit of authentic leaders has been the emergence of the field of authentic leadership, which focuses primarily on whether or not leaders are authentic (Northouse, 2010). From the pioneering research

by members of the *Positive Organizational Scholarship* group at the University of Michigan, to the training activities of such entities as the *Center for Authentic Leadership* and the *Center for Creative Leadership*, to the more mainstream writings of authors like Robert Terry, David Campbell, and William George, authentic leadership has gained broad appeal among researchers and practitioners alike.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to reflect on the emerging field of authentic leadership. Specifically, it aims to:

- Identify how authentic leadership has been defined;
- Highlight some epistemological challenges of this definition; and
- Discuss some implications of these challenges for authentic leaders and for the study of authentic leadership.

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## AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is not a new concept. According to Nehemas (1998), the central philosophical concern of Plato in his works was to distinguish the real from the fake, the original from the forgery. Since Plato's time, other philosophers, from Saint Augustine to Rousseau, have dabbled in authenticity. But as a character ideal—as a social goal—authenticity is a relatively new notion in the Western World, dating back only a few centuries (Trilling, 1971).

The concept of authenticity is certainly not limited to leadership. The broader question “What is authentic?” has been the subject of much discussion and debate in a variety of scientific disciplines. In gastronomy, for example, authenticity “is a ‘soft’ concept, usually referring to the appropriateness of linking a specific ingredient, technique, or recipe, or a relation between dishes or between a wine and a dish, to a particular time and place” (Weiss, 2012, p. 74). Authenticity has been a central concept in humanistic and existential philosophy (See Heidegger, 1962, for example.), with authenticity serving as a kind of barometer for a person's well-being and freedom from psychopathology (Wood *et al.*, 2008). And for researchers in cultural studies, literary criticism, art history, ethnic studies, education, nursing, even tourism, authenticity has played a central, if not controversial, character (See Lindholm, 2008; Orvell, 1989; Johnson, 2003; Hermans and Fiske, 2009; Petraglia, 2010; and Grayson and Martinec, 2004, for examples.).

Nor is the concept of authenticity confined to the philosophical realm. Indeed, practitioners in many fields are concerned with the authentic. A 2011 article in *The Economist* about the Republican primary race illustrates this concern:

What is it that turns Republicans off Mr Romney? Apart from being dull and being Mormon, which still fans suspicions, the famous flip-flopper is also—with the exception of his fellow Mormon, Jon Huntsman—the least *authentic* conservative in the race (p. 34, my emphasis).

In my own field of marketing, claims of authenticity have often been made by companies. In late 1999, for example, Jill Lynch and her team at Levi Strauss & Co were forced to rethink the ‘soul’ of the iconic brand. Countless competitors had emerged in the jeans market, and the stock price of Levi-Strauss had fallen to its lowest point since the company's founding in San Francisco in the early 1850s (Downey, 2008). So, after much deliberation, the team settled on 5 components: originality, individuality, sexiness, rebelliousness, and *authenticity* (Cateora and Graham, 2002, my emphasis).

Similarly, Coca-Cola has over the years continually leveraged its pure-bred image, creating slogans for American and global markets alike which claim its authenticity in the cola industry. It began as early as 1945 with “Coca-Cola is Coke!”, but was epitomized with the now famous 1969 hit “It's the real thing”. More recent examples include 1999's “Always Coca Cola” which was used in Japan, and 2009's “Real Taste” which was used in Australia and New Zealand.

This brief survey of the literature on authenticity suggests that, by and large, the various scientific disciplines and practical fields adhere to the common usage of the concept of authenticity. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, for something to be authentic, it must be genuine—“really coming from its stated, advertised, or reputed source” (1995, p. 581). In other words, it must be true to its origins.

So, using an example from the automotive world, a 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster is authentic only to the extent that it is a genuine 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster, that it is the car which was designed by Ferdinand Porsche himself, and that it was produced in 1955 in the factory in Stuttgart, Germany. As such, the glut of so-called kit cars which recreate the Speedster, and which often make veiled and sometimes even outright claims of authenticity—“Vintage Speedsters is the world’s largest manufacturer of the timeless 356 Speedster.”, for example ([www.vintage-speedsters.com](http://www.vintage-speedsters.com))—are just that, recreations.

## THE VALUE OF THE AUTHENTIC

Implicit in this common usage of the concept of authenticity is the notion that the authentic is more valuable. Indeed, “it is commonly assumed that authentic works and performances are inherently superior to imitations, simulacra, counterfeits, and other items that might be passed off as originals” (Guignon, 2008, p. 278). This additional value is derived not because the authentic work or performance delivers more functionality, financial benefit, or time savings, but instead because authenticity is itself valuable.

This notion of inherent value corresponds to an objectivist conceptualisation of value which centers on the idea that value is intrinsic to the object—that there is something in the object which makes it valuable to humans. Beck (1925), for example, suggested that “all objects which have self-value have that value insofar as the pleasure-element is actually intrinsic to them” (p. 14). According to Hartman, value is the correspondence between the characteristics of an object and the characteristics of the concept of that object (Edwards, 1991). That is to say, the

value of an object is measured by how well it matches the conceptual category to which it belongs. For example, if the intension of ‘chair’ is ‘a knee-high structure with a seat back’ then a thing which is called a ‘chair’ will be more valuable a chair the more of the chair properties it has, and the less valuable a chair the fewer of the chair properties it has. A chair which has no seat is not a *good* chair but a *bad* chair (Hartman, 1973, p. 39).

The more authentic an object is, therefore, the more valuable it is. In the example of 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster, its value corresponds to genuineness. More specifically, its value is measured by how well it matches the colour, construction, character of an original 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster.

An alternative epistemological perspective, however, suggests that subjectivity “is the ultimate reality, that there is no real world that is wholly independent of the ‘subject’ that knows or experiences the world” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 148). Meaning, therefore, is created “out of our dreams, our primordial archetypes, religious beliefs, conjunction of the planets. Meaning comes from anything *but* an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Consequently, the line between knower and knowledge disappears.

With respect to value specifically, subjectivism “entails the belief that the source of value is *within* the inner world of the agent” (Bond, 1983, p. 138). Indeed, Parker (1957) invoked the “seeming existence of values without objects” (p. 40). And as suggested by Lamont (1955), there is always a subjective activity involved in value. Value, therefore, inheres not in the object; indeed, objects of the world are valueless. Instead, values

arise as the result of human experience. They are considered to be those subjective opinions, preferences, or other affective, conative, or cognitive responses which are projected upon the neutral world (Allen, 1993).

The value of an authentic object, therefore, is a figment. It is contrived in the conscious mind, without correspondence to any object in reality. Authenticity is thought to be valuable in and of itself, irrespective of the so-called authentic object. So, forget the 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster...it is really authenticity which you want.

A third epistemological perspective, interactionism, posits that knowledge of the world is neither objective nor subjective; meaning does inhere in the objects of the world, nor do humans create meaning from some netherworld. Instead, interactionism claims that the "objects of the world are indeterminate. They may be pregnant with meaning, but actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Knowledge, therefore, is not discovered, nor is it created, but instead constructed at the nexus of subject and object. Indeed, "[k]nowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of what there is, but a reflection of what we make of what there is" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 20)—it is the content of consciousness (Alicke, 1983). The relationship between knower and knowledge, therefore, is characterised by intentionality.

In terms of value, interactionism asserts that value depends on both an object and a subject. An object by itself has no intrinsic value (Aschenbrenner, 1971). And if we remove consciousness from valuation, we remove the possibility of value (Santayana, 1896). As summarised by Frondizi (1971).

[i]f we examine the relationship between the valuable object and the subject that values it, we will notice clearly...that the value can exist only in relation to a subject that values it...No matter how deep one may go in the analysis, there is no possibility of disconnecting the object from the subject...value is a relational notion requiring both the presence of the subject and the object (p. 146).

The value of an authentic object, therefore, is not valued because it is inherently valuable. Nor is it valued because authenticity itself is thought to be valuable. Instead, an authentic object is *deemed* to be valuable by someone. In other words, a person perceives the object to be valuable because to him/her, authenticity confers some psychological, physiological, functional, financial, or temporal consequences which are, likewise, perceived to be consequential. The 1955 Porsche 356 Speedster is valuable because its authenticity confers status, for example, or is a better long-term investment.

## IMPLICATIONS

The immediate implication of this epistemological dance around the value of the authentic is the question which it raises in terms of the source of value for an authentic leader. Objectivism, for example, would suggest that an authentic leader is valuable to his/her followers because a leader who is genuine is inherently more valuable. Subjectivism would lead to the conclusion that followers simply believe that authenticity is valuable. And interactionism would rely on whether or not followers deem the authentic leader to be more valuable because of his/her perceived authenticity.

This epistemological dance is not so obvious in the broader area of authentic leadership. But

closer inspection reveals that the authentic leadership models which are presented in Northouse (2010) assume that authentic leaders are inherently valuable, and are considered as such by their followers. Consequently, these leadership models emphasize the traits or characteristics of authentic leaders. The conclusion which can be drawn, therefore, is that the field of authentic leadership leans towards an objectivist epistemology.

This leaning, however, parallels the problem of entification in the broader leadership literature. That is to say, the literature treats authentic leaders as if they were entities themselves, which can be created and controlled, and which exist irrespective of the leadership context or their followers. Moreover, the leaning towards an objectivist epistemology raises a tautological hornet's nest—that authentic leaders are authentic because of their authenticity is a sort-of self-fulfilling logic.

Of course, it is possible to envision a subjectivist version of authentic leadership. But it is difficult if not impossible to study. Additionally, it seems less useful from a practical perspective, because its focus on followers provides little or no prescription to leaders.

An interactionist epistemology, however, is not only viable but might also offer the most interesting approach to authentic leadership. Its focus on the confluence of leaders and followers suggests two fundamental questions which ought to be addressed: 1. How do followers authenticate the leader?, and 2. How do followers value this authenticity?

The first question reminds me of a research project stemming from my Ph.D. dissertation which I conceived (but never began). As

background, I explored the concept of consumer values, using the high-fidelity audio microculture as the research 'vehicle'. In it, I adopted a postmodern view of consumers which proposes that postmodern consumption is dominated by five characteristics: hyperreality, fragmentation, reversal of production and consumption, decentered subject, and juxtaposition of opposites.

With respect to hyperreality specifically, modernity was transfixed by science, as evidenced by the effects of the industrial revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Milner, 1994). With postmodernity, however, came the proliferation of technologies which enabled the replication of products, texts, information, etc. (Eco, 1986). According to Gottdiener (1995), therefore, contemporary life became dismantled and reproduced in facsimile form—re-constituted as simulations which can be purchased and consumed. When one of these simulations is adopted “by a community, its members begin to behave in ways that *authenticate* the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the community” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995, p. 252, my emphasis). In other words, postmodernity has led to manufactured experiences which are more real than reality itself—that which Baudrillard called the hyperreal (Connor, 1989).

The phrase “behave in ways that authenticate the simulation” is the thing which caught my interest. And I began to think of instances in our postmodern world where this authentication has transpired: Las Vegas, fake Christmas trees, real estate staging, pornography, reality television. Consider two other examples of authentication. Jimmy John's sandwich restaurants in the United States use “Yummy Home Baked French Bread”.

And Wrigley has launched a new brand of gum which is called 5 senses, with flavors including Rain, Cobalt, Flare, Zing, and Solstice.

A third example, however, was especially intriguing to me, and became the subject of the proposed research project...scrapbooking, or more specifically, the ways in which scrapbookers have authenticated scrapbooks as their social reality. Briefly, scrapbooking entered the English vocabulary as a verb in the early 1990s, brought on by the renewed popularity of documenting life's special moments in scrapbooks. Scrapbooking is now a \$2.5 billion industry in North America alone, and is spreading quickly throughout the world. There are countless blogs on the subject and numerous internet

merchants. Scrapbooking conventions pack stadiums, and organized tours for scrapbookers are thriving. Traditional art suppliers have aisles of scrapbooking materials. And Walmart and Target big-box retailers carry a scrapbooking selection. The leading brand in the scrapbooking industry is a company by the name of Creative Memories (Figure 1), which has 90,000 scrapbooking global consultants who operate in a Mary Kay/Avon/Tupperware fashion.

I contend that scrapbooks have supplanted the actual life events which they are designed to chronicle. And in doing so, the scrapbooks have become hyperreal. That is to say, scrapbookers become so passionate about their scrapbooks that they begin to cherish and protect them, more

Figure 1: Creative Memories



Source: <http://www.creativememories.com>

than the events which are documented within. With a clever hyperreal twist, I entitled the project *Creating Memories*, an obvious pun on the popular brand name.

It is a research project like this, however, which I believe would benefit the field of authentic leadership immensely. Indeed, exploring the mechanisms and processes by which followers authenticate their leaders would make valuable contributions to our understanding of authenticity. Paralleling Karl Weick (1969), who called for more research on organizing rather than organization, it would foreground authentication rather than the authentic.

Naturally, such a research project would demand a more postmodern view of leadership wherein the authenticity of authentic leaders is not a given, but instead granted that status by followers—a reversal of production and consumption, in the words of Firat and Venkatesh. Additionally, it would require corresponding hermeneutic research methods which aim to reveal the eidos—the *logic*—of the mechanisms and processes of authentication.

Through a research project of this sort, the second question “How do followers value this authenticity?” would also be addressed. Intimate understanding of the mechanisms and processes of authentication would likewise lead to an understanding of the value of the authentic leader to a follower. Value here is defined as the meaning which is ascribed to the leader as a result of the follower’s valuation of him/her. It would be constructed within a leadership context, and would guide the follower’s attention toward, and responses to, the leader.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

On a recent trip to Riga, Latvia, I enjoyed a wonderful evening with friends in a restaurant which promised an authentic Uzbek experience. But what exactly makes the experience authentic? Is it the food? The ambience? The physical environment? And equally important, does it matter? Indeed, is my sensory enjoyment, my gustatory pleasure, my customer satisfaction greater because of the authenticity of the experience?

It seems to me that these same issues vex the field of authentic leadership. Indeed, in this article I have raised three important questions: 1. What makes an authentic leader authentic? Are authentic leaders more valuable?, and 3. If they are more valuable, why? I reflected on these questions from three epistemological perspectives. And finally, I proposed a new research agenda which focuses on the mechanisms and processes of authentication rather than on the traits or characteristics of authentic leaders. But at the end of the day, it might all be moot...give me a 1955 Porsche Speedster, and I would probably follow someone anywhere!

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