Rethinking Authentic Leadership: Insights from a Study of Female Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The critiques of Authentic Leadership Theory (ALT) require us to reconsider the concept of authenticity in leadership. Through semi-structured interviews with 14 female entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom (UK), this study sought to establish whether the concept of authenticity in leadership has practical applicability for female entrepreneurs. Support was found for the strongest critiques of ALT, and a consensus was identified among the participants that being authentic in leadership is a balancing act between the values of the individual and the values of (and duties to) the organisation and its members. The study also found that, as entrepreneurs, the participants did not experience the challenges of being authentic leaders that extant literature has shown females in other roles to be experiencing. The findings lead to the proposition that the concept of ALT is abandoned and replaced by a more fluid understanding that acknowledges the complexities and subjectivities associated with the notions of 'leading with authenticity'.

Keywords: Authentic Leadership, Entrepreneur, Female Leadership

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Introduction

Authentic Leadership Theory (ALT) as conceived by Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008) has come under increasing criticism, with particularly pernicious critiques in recent years. Walumbwa et al. (2008) defines authentic leadership as, "a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development." (p. 94).

According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), a core component of authentic leadership is 'relational transparency' which they explain "refers to presenting one's authentic self (as opposed to a fake or distorted self) to others. Such behaviour promotes trust through disclosures that involve openly sharing information and expressions of one's true thoughts and feelings" (p. 95). Another core component for Walumbwa et al. (2008) is 'an internalised moral perspective'; in their own words, this refers to self-regulation, "guided by internal moral standards and values versus group, organisational, and societal pressures, and it results in expressed decision making and behaviour that is consistent with these internalised values" (p. 96). The combination of these two components alone requires the leader to share their genuine thoughts and feelings, without exception, and never yield to group or societal pressures. This sets the standard for authentic leadership at an unattainable level (before we even add the need for self-awareness and balanced processing) and suggests a model that, in practice, would be detrimental to the leader (Ibarra, 2015). This requirement not only leaves us with a concept without substance (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019; Kelly, 2014), it may cause harm to practitioners who are expected to meet the standard, whilst simultaneously be detrimental to the academic community promoting the concept (Alvesson & Einola, 2019).

Alvesson and Einola (2019) and Einola and Alvesson (2021) have put forward particularly strong arguments for the abolition of the concept entirely while other scholars such as Kempster et al. (2018) and Iszatt-White and Kempster (2019) have called for the concept to be redefined. Although proponents for the concept have mounted defences (see Gardner et al., 2021 which includes arguments from both sides) the critiques are difficult to be reconciled.

This study examines these critiques in relation to female entrepreneurs. Authenticity in the context of leadership has been shown to be highly prevalent

amongst entrepreneurs (Hmieleski et al., 2012; Jensen & Luthans, 2006; Leitch & Volery, 2017; McMullen et al., 2008) potentially because entrepreneurs can create their businesses in line with their own values (Cooper & Artz, 1995; Lewis, 2013; Sims et al., 2017). Alternatively, it could be because leaders may be perceived to be authentic when the best interests of the organisation are aligned with the interests of the leader (Eilam-Shamir & Shamir, 2013). Perhaps a combination of the two factors explains the findings but research in this area is not conclusive. Indeed, research on entrepreneurial leadership generally is limited (Leitch & Volery, 2017) and in the specific context of authentic leadership, there is little to draw on. As a starting point, this research seeks to explore the meaning of authenticity in the context of leadership from the viewpoint of practitioners pre-identified as being more likely to be authentic (i.e., entrepreneurs). Further, this research seeks to investigate whether the factors enabling entrepreneurs to be authentic leaders may also reduce the challenges that female leaders have been found to experience in being authentic leaders.

A more nuanced understanding of the concept of authenticity may have practical benefits in alleviating some of the challenges faced by female leaders and other groups that do not meet the straight, white, Western, male mould. The starting point for this exploratory research is to investigate the concept of authenticity amongst female entrepreneurs, to better understand what authenticity means, how the concept is perceived, and the experiences and dilemmas faced by female entrepreneurs through a series of semi-structured interviews.

Literature Review

Critiques of Authentic Leadership Theory

Early proponents of ALT imposed a moral component suggesting that the authentic leader must be ethical (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; May et al., 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This moral component may be traced back to Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) who defended the critiques of transformational leadership by distinguishing between 'authentic transformational leadership' in which leaders act on "modern Western" ethics (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 183) and 'pseudo-transformational leadership' in which leaders act in 'bad faith' (presumably covering anything that does not meet modern Western values) whether consciously or otherwise. Even at this early stage of the development of ALT, the imposition of a set of morals (particularly Western morals) was controversial, with many scholars arguing that imposing ethical standards detracted from the idea of individuals being true to themselves (Cooper et al., 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005).

Obviously, there is an inherent problem with the concept of morality in that there is no universally agreed code on which we can judge morals (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Jones & Grint, 2013).

Further, ALT is not based on empirical research (Larsson et al., 2021); it has been developed pulling together aspects of positive psychology (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). As Spicer et al. (2016) noted "in most cases empirical realities do not support intellectualism" (p. 237), ALT does not appear to be an exception. Attempts to provide empirical support for the concept have not fared well, essentially producing tautological arguments that authentic leaders are better leaders because good leaders are authentic (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Ciulla, 2013; Spoelstra & Ten Bos, 2011).

For example, Eilam-Shamir and Shamir (2013) interviewed 15 leaders in Israel and concluded that, despite the fact the leaders they studied showed many of the traits of authentic leaders, the leaders' motivations had nothing to do with ethics. The Israeli leaders were motivated by a desire for personal achievement often attributable to their own life experiences, even after fulfilling their goals and aspirations they would seek new challenges. Eilam-Shamir and Shamir (2013) report this finding as being common throughout their sample, the fact that the leaders shared the motivations of the organisations as a whole was simply down to the fact that their personal interests aligned with the good of the organisations they ran. Eilam-Shamir and Shamir (2013) argue that the concept of authentic leadership has been taken too far, which they suggest, is an attempt to improve on transformational leadership due to the popularity of the latter.

Therefore, although ALT appears to have been created as a model of perfect leadership which leaders may aspire to, even the most widely celebrated leaders fail to achieve it. For example, Mother Theresa has been cited by George (2003) as a "compelling example of an authentic leader" (p. 25) and as a 'model' of authentic leadership by Gardner et al. (2005). However, after her death it was revealed that Mother Theresa was unsure about the existence of God for a large part of her life though she continued to promote the Catholic faith (Jones & Grint, 2013), which would contradict both the 'relational transparency' and 'internalised moral perspective' components of the definition proposed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). Nelson Mandela and Abraham Lincoln were also cited by George (2003) as examples of authentic leaders and have also been shown to fall short of the mark by Ciulla (2013) and Jones and Grint (2013) respectively.

Attempts to measure authenticity, primarily based on the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ,Walumbwa et al., 2008), have also been heavily critiqued. Alvesson and Einola (2019) even went so far as to suggest that "the questionnaire almost tries to measure the opposite of authenticity" (p. 389), and they are not alone in this view (see also Tourish, 2019, for example). In fact, one of the primary problems with ALT is the idea that if an individual fails to conform to traits identified by authors such as Walumbwa et al. (2008), they are inauthentic, which must surely be a contradiction in terms (Jones & Grint, 2013; Gardner et al., 2021; Tourish, 2019). ALT also requires the followers of authentic leaders to emulate the leader and internalise the organisation's values, essentially promoting conformity and "an inability to distinguish between the self and the organisation" (Ford & Harding, 2011, p. 468).

Potentially Harmful Outcomes of the Authentic Leadership Theory

It is not just that ALT does not stand up to critical scrutiny; the concept is potentially damaging. It appears to be designed for white, heterosexual, male, Western leaders (Ladkin, 2021). As a result, leaders who belong to these categories, can better *conform* to the requirements of ALT, and therefore, may be termed by its proponents as 'authentic'. Thus, even if we set aside the contradictory nature of the concept and ignore the requirement for a credible theoretical model to be coherent enough to be refuted (Bacharach, 1989), ALT is perhaps best described using the words of Contu (2019): "a managerialist, patriarchal and paternalist fantasy" (p. 1451), which fails to consider the complexities and conflicts inherent within the field of leadership studies and in the nature of authenticity itself.

Ladkin (2021) and others (e.g., Gardiner, 2015; Sinclair, 2013) have pointed out that the concept of ALT creates barriers for those 'minoritised' – any group of persons not meeting the norm of "straight white manness" (Ladkin, 2021, p. 395) may experience challenges expressing themselves authentically in leadership roles. For female leaders pressures to conform to gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gardiner, 2015; Helgesen, 1995; Lewis, 2013), organisational dress codes (Sinclair, 2008; Sinclair, 2013), and behavioural expectations (Ladkin, 2021; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Mavin, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987) have all been cited as examples, though this is by no means an exhaustive list. Thus, it is said that ALT is a concept that "teaches us more about social conformity and gender socialisation than it does about authenticity" (Gardiner, 2015, p. 10).

Authenticity in Leadership

This raises the question whether we should separate the concepts of authenticity and leadership entirely or if there a place for authenticity in the context of leadership. The links between 'authenticity' and leadership go back considerably further than ALT. In the 1940s, Satre spoke of authenticity as "a dynamic state achieved through one's relationship with others" (as cited in Fortin et al., 2018, p. 247). In 1998 Barret-Lenard defined authenticity as occurring when "individuals are able to consistently integrate their feelings, perceptions and actions in their relationships with themselves and others" (as cited in Fortin et al., 2018, p. 247). In 2002, Harter described authenticity as acting "in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings" (as cited in Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2018, p. 356). Harter is also cited by Avolio and Gardner (2005) when discussing the origins of authenticity in this context. Similarly, Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) defined authenticity as "the extent to which one is behaving according to what one considers to be their true or genuine self – who one "is" as a person" (as cited in Lewis, 2013, p. 252).

Further, authenticity is a part of many cultures (Erickson, 1995), with relevance and practical applicability to the field of leadership. We can point to examples of inauthentic leadership leading to catastrophic consequences (the Enron scandal is an obvious and widely cited example, and the downfall of Wirecard, more recently, provides another). However, authenticity is a complex phenomenon that cannot be measured or assessed reliably.

Perhaps the most basic requirement in a definition of authenticity (in the context of leadership), cited by both Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008), is to be true to oneself, and this is inherently problematic (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). As Heil (2013) asks "what 'selves' is authentic leadership true to?" (p. 69). Gardiner (2013) cites the work of Heidegger and Arendt in explaining that the 'self', rather than being a fixed state of being, changes over time, is partially determined by our environment, and is most evident in our interactions with others. Different people in each of our lives see different versions of our 'true self' depending on our relationship with them. Further, scholars such as Sparrowe (2005) have highlighted the fact that the self is a "fluid, ongoing project" (p.83), and Adarves-Yorno (2016) in highlighting the paradoxes of authentic leadership, argued that "an individual can be authentic to multiple, and in some cases contradictory, identities" (p. 121). To illustrate this point, Adarves-Yorno (2016) gave the example of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an engineering company, with a background and commitment to a trade union through

her previous role. The CEO resisted the idea of hiring a female employee who was due to give birth, knowing that as a union leader, she heavily criticised firms that adopted the same policy. To further complicate matters, recent research by Larsson et al. (2021) suggests that authentic leadership does not emanate from the individual leader but is better thought of as a "collective and collaborative achievement" (p. 421).

In this backdrop, this research studied the 'meaning' of authenticity in relation to female entrepreneurs, and also investigated whether being entrepreneurs has reduced the challenges faced by females (in other roles) when they attempt to be authentic leaders.

Methodology

Although both dominant paradigms in the study of leadership, positivism and interpretivism, have their proponents, there have been recent calls for redefining authentic leadership (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019) with an interpretivist approach (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010), reflecting the shortcomings of the positivist approach which produced ALT (Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

This paper takes the ontological perspective that authentic leadership is a social construct. Therefore, the purpose was not to test the existing theory but to explore the concept of authenticity in the context of entrepreneurial female leaders without preconceived ideas of what an authentic leader should be. That said, some of the more credible claims within the extant literature, such as the claims that entrepreneurs are more likely to be authentic in their leadership roles and the findings of numerous researchers that female leaders face a number of challenges in being authentic in leadership roles (see above) were considered.

The sample comprised 14 female entrepreneurs ranging in age from 22 to 54, who were either owners or co-owners of a business based in the UK with at least 5 full-time employees. The term 'entrepreneur' is widely used and with varying meanings, but in this paper the more stringent definition is adopted which requires the individual to have established a business, to have an equity interest in that business and to be actively involved in running the business (Ben-Hafaiedh, 2017; Ucbasaran et al., 2003). Individuals meeting the criteria for the study were identified within the researcher's (and the researcher's wife's) professional networks. Of the 15 prospective participants invited to take part in the study, 14 agreed to do so.

In investigating the concept of authenticity in the context of leadership, it was important to understand what the term meant to the leaders themselves. The semi-structured interview format allowed for the research to address these issues specifically and with consistency between participants whilst also allowing scope for the participants to give their opinions in a broad and unrestricted manner. Despite the potential for problems arising from errors and biases, impression management, selective memory, self-serving bias, social desirability tendencies, and adaption to the interview situation, the potential for all of which Alvesson (2011) has covered as potential pitfalls, interviews offer a good starting point (Clarke et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2014).

Semi-structured Zoom video interviews lasting between 35 minutes and 80 minutes (although the majority were 50 - 60 minutes) were carried out between May and July 2020. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview questions allowed the participants to express their own understanding of 'authenticity' in the context of leadership, after which they were questioned about aspects of the concept of ALT such as whether being an authentic leader required one to have a certain standard of ethics. Questions were designed to expose participants to some of the critiques in the extant literature and to seek their responses, for example, if the participant had stated that being authentic in the context of leadership meant being true to oneself, the researcher might offer the challenge, 'to which 'self' are we to be true to?', (explaining the concept of multiple selves to the participant). Ideas were presented as they emerged to later participants who were given the opportunity to comment on the ideas emerging in earlier interviews.

The transcriptions were analysed by the researcher manually to ensure the context of the responses was not lost or misinterpreted. Themes were identified inductively using the six-step process advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings

The aims of the research were to discover whether the participants' understanding of authentic leadership aligned with ALT, whether the participants as women experienced challenges to leading authentically or whether, as entrepreneurs, they could more easily overcome these challenges, and most importantly, to gain the perspective of the participants about what authentic leadership means to them.

For the participants of this study authenticity in the context of leadership has meaning. None of the participants asked for clarification as to what was meant by the

term or seemed at all concerned that they were being asked to answer questions about a topic they knew little about. Their understanding of the term was not only clear to them individually, but they agreed with each other on the primary components of the concept. Five themes were clearly present in the data.

Authenticity and Ethics

The first theme supports the critiques of numerous researchers who have claimed that there is no requirement to include an ethical component in authentic leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Cooper et al., 2005; Jones & Grint, 2013; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005). All 14 interviewees agreed that any leader, good or bad, would be inauthentic if they were required to adopt a code of ethics, they did not believe in.

> *Participant #11: No… I don't think there is – we're talking about authentic, and authentic to me means genuine, as opposed to, you know, does that leader have empathy? Does that leader have social conscience? Does that leader have good ethical values? It's very different to being authentic, I think.*

> *Participant #10: No, I think authenticity is being true to who you are. If your ethics and values are X, then that's what you are; if they're Y, that's what you are. So, I don't think (pause), I mean, what is good anyway? That's a big question. There's no sort of, you know, (pause) good to some people can be bad to other people.*

Therefore, the participants were of the view that of we refer to authenticity in the context of leadership, we should not impose a code of ethics or moral standard as a prerequisite. The use of the term authenticity in the context of leadership should refer to the extent the leader is true to themselves, not the extent to which they meet standards that third parties set for them.

Authenticity and Entrepreneurship

The second theme supported claims in the extant literature that entrepreneurs are more likely to be authentic in their leadership roles. Of the 14 participants, 13 felt that it was easier to be authentic as an entrepreneur than as an employee (the other participant had never been employed, she started her business at the age of 18 and had been running it for over 30 years at the time of the interview). Many of the participants were emphatic on this point as indicated by the following response to the question, "Do you feel more able to be true to yourself as an entrepreneur than in previous roles?"

> *Participant #11: Yeah, it's like breathing. It's just being who you are. You know, you've got… restrictions… you've got obligations to clients, you've got obligations*

to a team… But I feel totally and utterly free and that's one of the most exhilarating things about it.

Participant #14: Hundred percent, absolutely. Do you remember the old film, Invasion of the Body Snatchers? The concept was that the human being was despatched and then an alien would take its place and it would be very cold and unfeeling. So, I think that at least in my profession, career progression seems to… at least as soon as people hit partner, they are morphing into a greyed-out version of who they were previously. Looking at the older partners in firms that I've worked at, they're either massively stressed and the impact of where they are and the expectations on them and the pressures on them are just too much, or they fully get into it and they become the arsehole they never thought they would be.

Having the freedom to create a culture that is true to one's own values was cited by many of the participants as being an enabling factor in being an authentic leader, which supports the findings cited in the literature review. While this may appear at first glance to be relevant only to leaders who are entrepreneurs, there may be a wider applicability of this theme. There is nothing prima facie to suggest that one needs to be an entrepreneur to contribute to the culture of an organisation. Of course, further research would be required to make any specific claims in this regard and there will inevitably be organisations that limit the ability of employees to contribute to the culture more than others but there is certainly scope to investigate this theme in more depth.

Authenticity and Autonomy

Many of the participants mentioned that having the freedom to make their own choices in their roles enabled them to be more authentic. For some, this was choosing which clients they meet or do business with, for some others, it was about the freedom to wear what they wanted, and for some others it was the freedom to choose who to employ. For example, in discussing the ability, as an entrepreneur, to create her own environment, Participant #1 was asked whether, when taken out of her own environment (client meetings were given as an example) she felt less authentic. She responded as follows:

I don't know if I see it any different really, because you can obviously choose the meetings that you want to go to, and you've got the control over that. I think to say that you go to a client meeting, and it makes you feel less authentic… it's not the meeting that makes you feel less authentic it's the fact that you have put yourself in that position and you've allowed that to happen.

Participant #7 expressed the importance of employing the right people in her organisation in relation to being authentic:

> *I probably, in the short-term, lost money by not hiring people. I turned down somebody last month who probably would have bought a turnover of an extra quarter million pounds a year into the business, but I could just see it being (pause) just not a good cultural fit and as a result of that, I think I'm able to be myself.*

As with the previous theme, which suggested that the ability to be authentic in one's leadership role may be linked to the ability to contribute to the culture of the organisation, this theme, while evidently and perhaps even obviously applying to entrepreneurs, may have wider implications.

Authenticity and Identity

The fourth theme related to the need to assess 'authenticity' in relation to a person's identity as a 'leader' rather than simply as an individual. All participants agreed that authenticity in the context of leadership requires being 'true to oneself'. To the best of my knowledge, the critique that there is no unitary concept of 'self' (Heil, 2013) and that leaders may need to navigate tensions between their personal interests and those of the wider organisation (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Clarke et al., 2013) has been left unresolved in the extant literature. The dilemma was reconciled in the first interview as follows:

> *Participant #1: You put authenticity and leadership together and being an authentic leader means something and being an authentic parent might be something else. I don't think authenticity is like the same for everything, and being an authentic friend, and you know, all that kind of stuff, it's all very different.*

This idea was discussed with the other participants and without exception it was agreed that being an authentic leader requires being true to oneself in one's role as a leader, thus differentiating authenticity in the context of leadership from other roles (or 'selves') the leader may have (parent, friend, spouse etc.). The idea of authentic leadership as an ongoing balancing act, rather than something that a leader either is or is not, was expressed by one of the participants when asked whether the business's interests should be placed above the individual's:

> *Participant #2: I think it's a question of degree…. it's how much your values are going to be violated.*

Participant 4 expressed her view of authenticity as a balancing act between being true to one's own values and one's duty of care as a leader as follows:

> *…you also have the value of 'I need to do what's sensible here, and actually if this business goes down then that means that other people's jobs will be lost, my job will be lost', and another value that I have is also the fact that I've got a duty of care towards this business and everyone else that it employs, its clients that it needs to serve, et cetera. So, I think you need to balance out your values within a context.*

The same theme was expressed succinctly by participant 10:

> *I think it's about being authentic to who I am, and to what my belief system is, and also to, you know, what the company's values are.*

Thus, to the participants of this study, authenticity in the context of leadership is not a fixed state of being, in the same way; we might describe someone as being a 'good leader' without meaning that everything they do, have done, or will do, is good. We really mean that the person is a good leader in a specific context, or that on balance they led well. Therefore, we cannot legitimately propose a set list of components of what makes an authentic leader.

Authenticity and Gender

A fifth theme to emerge from the research suggests that the results from extant research into gender as a variable in authentic leadership in large organisations may not be applicable to entrepreneurs leading Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In fact, some of the participants stated that they had specifically chosen to start their own companies because they did not like the pressures to conform placed on them in their previous roles as employees of larger organisations. One of the participants, when asked if she felt any pressure to conform in terms of her appearance contrasted her experience in employment with a large law firm as a trainee with her current role running her own law firm:

> *Participant #11: No. It was the case [in her previous role]. So, when I turned up for the first day of my training contract in a trouser suit, an equity partner didn't talk to me for two years. So, I have spent years being squashed and hating it… So, I'm just not going to put up with it. I'm not interested in trying to conform.*

The fifth theme to emerge from the research suggests that the challenges discussed in literature (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gardiner, 2015; Helgesen, 1995; Lewis, 2013) of the many ways in which female leaders have struggled with authenticity in their leadership roles are a result of specific cultural (organisational and societal) expectations clashing with the individual's own values and can be alleviated.

Discussion

Authenticity in the context of leadership as understood by the participants in this study is similar to the use of the term authenticity in organisational studies predating ALT, rather than what is presented in the ALT. For the participants of this study the consensus was that authenticity in the context of leadership is not a state of being – something you are or are not, with specific emphasis on the idea that one should not be bound to an ethical or moral code to which one does not subscribe. It is an ongoing process, a balancing act in which one weighs up their duties as a leader with their core values. This has been identified in previous research as well. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) and Ibarra (2015) cite examples of leaders describing the need to strike the right balance between being true to oneself and acting in the best interests of the organisation. Alvesson and Einola (2019) questioned how this balancing is done and went on to advocate the exploration of how leaders deal with the "dilemmas around perceptions and experience of authenticity" (p. 394). Some of the themes emerging from participants' responses to the interview questions suggest that when leaders are in a position to make choices that reflect their values, they can balance their own values with those of the business. One of the participants mentioned that this may lead to a short-term loss, but the gain in creating a culture in which both the leader and the employees feel aligned in their values and goals may make it a price worth paying. Previous empirical evidence appears to support this; for example, Cording et al (2014) found that performance and employee productivity were correlated with an organisation's consistency in meeting its espoused values. Similarly, Paarlberg and Perry (2007) found employees to be more motivated when their values aligned with those of the organisation.

If we are to abandon ALT and to accept that there are no requisite traits, nor moral code required to be authentic, a new working definition of authenticity in the context of leadership is required. Based on the findings of this study the following definition is proposed:

> Authenticity in the context of leadership describes the balance between being true to one's self and being true to the values of the organisation. To be acting authentically a leader must successfully navigate the tensions and paradoxes that arise between these different values and identities.

The proposed definition deals with many of the critiques directed at the concept of Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008). In answering the question (posed by Heil, 2013) 'to which 'self' are we being true?' the answer appears to be,

our 'leader self'. An individual's 'leader self' will, of course, vary over time and context, but the concept of authenticity proposed allows for these changes. It is not that someone is or is not an authentic leader, but whether a person has acted authentically in their leadership role. This can be assessed by taking into account the specific time and context. It would follow that 'authentic leadership' involves being true to a different part of the self than 'authentic friendship' or 'authentic parenting'. The proposed definition builds on several suggestions made by scholars critiquing ALT. Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) suggested that the requirement to be true to oneself should be re-defined as being true to oneself in context. Further, Kempster et al (2019) proposed the 'relational transparency' requirement of leadership should be redefined as 'fidelity to purpose', and Goffee and Jones (2015) argued that leaders must be themselves in context. Sims et al. (2017) use the term 'identity interference' to describe the conflict arising from one's role as a leader and one's own values. The ability to balance such conflicts as they arise is an antecedent of leading authentically, and the results of this research suggest that this is directly related to the level of autonomy the leader experiences. The higher the level of autonomy, the better able the individual is to lead authentically.

In response to the argument that being true to oneself is impractical (e.g., Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2013), the proposed definition adds the caveat that the leader must be true to oneself whilst at the same time balancing the varying and potentially conflicting, values and needs of those they serve. This is a little more specific than Goffee and Jones's (2015) rather vague suggestion that leaders should be authentic but "conform enough" (p. 109). Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) suggest that the paradox within authentic leadership that one's own values may not always be in line with what is best for the company makes inauthenticity inevitable for leaders. The findings from this research suggest that authentic leadership is a fluid concept, as a leader's authenticity is likely to vary over the course of their role dependent on the environment and challenges they face. However, viewing authentic leadership in this way does little to address the incommensurable nature of the concept.

One of the findings of the study also relates to the gender issues related to authenticity in leadership, although indirectly. Pressures to conform to gender stereotypes (Gardiner, 2015), organisational dress codes (Sinclair, 2013), behavioural expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987) etc. have all been identified as challenges in the literature, and many were applicable to the participants, although tellingly, only during prior roles in which they were employed. None of the participants experienced

these challenges in their entrepreneurial roles and this was largely attributable to the autonomy they experienced. Many of the challenges faced in being female leaders by the participants of this study were removed, according to the participants, simply through the increased autonomy of being self-employed. The entrepreneurs interviewed set their own dress codes, cultures, and expectations within their organisations. Applying the freedom experienced by the entrepreneurs in this study to leaders employed in other organisations may appear to many to be an extreme course of action but it is worth noting that some very successful progressive companies have done exactly this. Netflix is an example of a company which has from its early days adopted a culture in which its leaders and other employees are free to make their own choices and are held accountable for doing so (Hastings & Meyer, 2020).

Conclusion

The participants of this study have a clear meaning for 'authenticity in leadership'. However, their understanding does not support ALT. Authentic leadership, for the participants of this study has nothing to do with ethics, balanced processing, relational transparency or self-awareness. It is perhaps best described as a balancing act each leader encounters on a daily basis - the balancing of one's values with the best interests of the organisation. The balancing becomes apparent when the leader is faced with a particularly difficult dilemma such as the example given by Adarves-Yorno (2016), about the CEO of an engineering company resisting the appointment of a pregnant applicant despite having made clear that this went against her principles.

One of the goals of organisational studies according to Spicer et al (2016) is 'bullshit reduction'; that is the removal of concepts and theories that are neither valid nor credible. The critiques of ALT discussed at the start of this article present a compelling argument for its removal, but Spicer et al (2016) also advocate the articulation of less harmful alternatives. This research has aimed to contribute in this respect.

Redefining authentic leadership as proposed highlights the fluidity of the concept. As Algera and Lipswiesman (2012) pointed out, the goals and values of the organisation and leader are bound to diverge. The measure of a leader's authenticity is the extent to which these divergences are balanced. It allows for authentic leadership to relate to an individual but also for the term to relate collectively to a

team (as proposed by Larsson et al., 2021). The theoretical contribution of this research is in providing a proposed definition of authentic leadership which takes into account the critiques of ALT and is based on the perspectives of practitioners. Furthermore, the research contributes to our understanding of the challenges faced by female leaders in being authentic leaders. The absence of these challenges for the participants interviewed suggests that giving leaders increased autonomy in a culture that does not perpetuate stereotypes would reduce and potentially eliminate many of the challenges reported in the literature.

There are of course limitations in the research. In addition to the usual disadvantages of interviews such as participant and researcher bias, the small, homogenous sample provides a limited perspective. Although sweeping generalisations were not the aim of the research, the proposed definition would benefit from being tested by further research on larger, more diverse samples from other countries and cultures.

While authenticity in the context of leadership may not be quantifiable, this study suggests that it can at least be a valid notion within leadership, and we need not abandon the concept entirely on the basis of the critiques of ALT. There is a practical significance to authenticity in the context of leadership. The findings from this research suggest that rather than authentic leadership being an unrealisable goal, a leader with the autonomy to align the values of the organisation with their own values wherever practicable, may be able to maintain authenticity.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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