A Critique of the Discourse of Authentic Leadership

Rita A. Gardiner
The University of Western Ontario
1285 Western Road
London, Canada
E-mail: rgardi@uwo.ca

Abstract

This article suggests that the new management discourse of authentic leadership is deeply problematic because it fails to take into account how social and historical circumstances affect a person's ability to be a leader. It examines some of the arguments made by proponents of authentic leadership theory, and contrasts these claims about authenticity with Hannah Arendt's concept of uniqueness, as well as considering Heidegger's notion of authenticity as resoluteness. It also looks at the ways in which authentic leadership fails to address issues related to power and privilege by looking specifically at how silence operates. The author argues that it is vital to consider how authenticity manifests itself differently depending upon a person's place in the world, and looks at how silence influences notions of autonomy, and a person's ability to take up space within the public sphere.

Keywords: Authentic Leadership; Heidegger; Arendt; power; privilege; gender; silence.

Over the last decade, a new theory has emerged in management studies called authentic leadership. Authors assert that the key components of authentic leadership are self-awareness, moral perspective and relational transparency. According to Shamir and Eilam (2005), self-knowledge and self-certainty are perceived as integral to an authentic leader's success. Being resolute in their actions and speech are perceived as integral leadership attributes. Similarly, Levy and Bentley (2007) contend that authentic leaders are true to themselves and act upon their beliefs for the common good. What these definitions fail to acknowledge is that truth, like authenticity, is a contestable concept. Such an approach to the study of leadership ignores power inequities, and does not acknowledge how institutional biases adversely affect who gets access to leadership roles. Furthermore, as Eagly and Carli (2007) point out, there is a failure to take into account the complexities related to gender and power. This failure to address issues of privilege stems from the fact that the discourse of authentic leadership is based on the Enlightenment notion of an all-knowing subject, which serves to privilege self-knowledge at the expense of relationality.

My purpose in this article is twofold. First, I will show that the new management theory of authentic leadership is deeply problematic because it fails to take into account how social and historical circumstances affect a person's ability to be a leader. I will examine some of the arguments made by proponents of authentic leadership theory, and contrast their claims about authenticity with Hannah Arendt's concept of uniqueness. As an instance, some authors maintain that personality traits reveal a person's authenticity and, thus, constitute the uniqueness of each individual (Chan, 2005). In line with Hannah Arendt, however, I will argue that a concentration on personality traits fails to convey a person's uniqueness, and hence is a poor indicator of a person's ability to enact authentic leadership. A recurring theme in Arendt's work is an insistence that we misunderstand who someone is because we concentrate on their "whatness," that is, we think about someone not in terms of their distinctness, but rather by making comparisons between people in terms of their talents or shortcomings. Moreover, she argues that a person can never know herself in the way that proponents of authentic leadership suggest. How we appear to others will often differ from how we see ourselves (Arendt, 1958). Thus, for Arendt, self-knowledge as the sole basis for thinking and action is deeply flawed. What appears to be self-understanding in the claims made by authentic leadership theorists would, from an Arendtian perspective, constitute a case of "mistaken identity".

Second, I want to consider issues related to power and privilege by considering how silence influences notions of autonomy, and a person's ability to take up space within the public sphere. To illustrate my argument, I will consider narrative accounts of Irish women living in England during a period of intense ethnic tension in the 1970's. I will argue that when the self, but not world, is taken into account, silence seems to have little significance. When the world is considered, however, silence takes on important meanings that have hitherto been ignored. Throughout this discussion, I want to explore what it means to be authentic, and how this affects notions of leadership. I will argue that authenticity manifests itself differently as a result of a person's spatial and temporal position. As such, I believe it is time to rethink notions of authenticity by paying attention to the many forms of silence in the public sphere. For only with this fuller knowledge will we ever have the opportunity to understand what constitutes an authentic leader.

I will begin with a brief background to the topic of authentic leadership. The first monograph to appear on this was written by R.W. Terry in 1993. This was followed up a decade later by Bill George, who popularized the concept of authentic leadership in his book <u>Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value.</u> Due to the increasing pervasiveness of corporate scandals, George argued that leadership needed to be completely rethought. What is required is a new kind of leader who embodies such qualities as integrity and a deep sense of purpose (George, 2003). Since George wrote this "business" bestseller, there have been extensive empirical studies in this area, and authentic leadership theory is being taught in some business schools and leadership programs.

Authentic leadership rests on the belief that a resolute stance and confidence in one's speech and action is indicative of strong leadership. Such leadership theories of the self are never neutral, that is, they always take place within systems of power. Hence, authentic leadership is just one example of a discourse of privilege that stems from an intrinsic belief in self-worth. For example, in Western society, certain kinds of leadership are privileged over others. The self-made man is often regarded as the epitome of the strong, successful leader. It is commonplace to read about an individual who was able to succeed through sheer willpower. Yet every person needs others to help them attain their goals, something that is missing in most discussions of authentic leadership. Furthermore, a leader's success is often measured by how well she attains corporate goals, however, because all actions are unpredictable, it is impossible to control the outcome of any act (Arendt, 1958). Thus, awarding huge bonuses for outcomes is, in part, nonsensical because however much we will something to happen, that intent can always be thwarted.

In introducing the topic of authentic leadership, many authors cite the work of Heidegger and, occasionally, Sartre, although so far I have failed to discover a sustained discussion of either thinker's notion of authenticity. Oftentimes, these philosophers are used as "sound bites" to give empirical claims more theoretical weight. As an instance, Chan, Hannah and Gardner (2005) contend that the essence of authenticity "is manifest in the wholesomeness of one's internal self." However, they fail to explain what they mean by the term "essence of authenticity." Instead, they focus on how authenticity can be a vital addition to a leader's toolkit because it serves as a "leadership multiplier." The implication here is that if a leader appears to be authentic, she will be able to achieve more for her institution. Similarly, Avolio, Gardner and Walumbwa (2004) argue that authentic leadership can improve "psychological capital," and, therefore, have a positive effect on a leader's performance. This has the added benefit of giving any company who has the insight to hire a self-declared authentic leader a competitive advantage over their rivals. Thus, simply by appearing to be authentic, a leader can improve upon the corporate raison d'être, that is, increase the profit margin.

I want to pause my discussion of contemporary theories of authentic leadership to explain what it is about Heidegger's notion of authenticity that I think proponents of authentic leadership find so appealing. The guiding thesis in <u>Being and Time</u> is that "the "essence" of Dasein lies in its existence" (1962: 280). Heidegger argues that everything related to Being can be understood if we consider the question of who we are, both ontologically and existentially. Heidegger uses the term "Dasein" to denote human existence. Dasein is formed from two separate German words, Da (there) and Sein (being). He maintains that each living person shares Dasein in some way. Heidegger regards Dasein, not as a form of consciousness; rather, Dasein is the "essential realm in which man stands as man" (1962: 283). Thus, the primary relationship is between man and Being, not man and men, as Arendt would argue in <u>The Human Condition</u>. Heidegger argues that, for the most part, we lead inauthentic lives. This is because the authentic self is subsumed by the activities of "the they" self, meaning our everyday, inauthentic self. The reason why "the they" self, sometimes left untranslated as *Das Man*, is inauthentic is because it spends its time fitting in with the desires of others.

For Heidegger, it is only possible to experience authenticity in those moments of anxiety when we recognize the inauthenticity of our everyday life. We do this by answering the call of conscience. It is important to note that the only way that we can hear the call of conscience is through what Heidegger describes as "the uncanny mode of *keeping silent*" (1962: 277). This uncanniness reveals itself through feelings of anxiety. The call of conscience is inextricably linked to the concept of guilt. In turn, guilt is fundamentally connected to Being, and each person's potential to be authentic. He argues that there are three different ways in which we can hear or ignore the call of conscience. The first way is revealed when we realize that we are guilty of something. The second is when we obtain a warning as to the possibility of being guilty, and the third way is when we receive an affirmation that we are not guilty (1962: 281). An example of being guilty is when we owe a debt for an action which has deprived someone else in some manner. Another instance is by being responsible for causing something to happen. Guilt can also manifest itself as "lack," that is, a failure to do something that manifests itself in some kind of regret.

According to Heidegger, because we can hear the call of conscience, we know that we are guilty and responsible before we undertake a wrong deed. However, the call's purpose is not to be critical so much as to remind each individual of their potentiality for being. In his opinion, *Being-guilty* is more primordial than any *knowledge* about it. Heidegger states that this "discourse of the conscience never comes to utterance" (1962: 342). The reason for his insistence on a silent call of conscience is that when we speak, we share a language such that the words we utter are not unique to each individual. Hence, what is crucial about this call of conscience is that it is always a silent call. By choosing to hear the call, *Dasein*, his term for individual being, becomes enthralled to "*its ownmost possibility of existence*" (1962: 287). Thus, the purpose of Being-guilty is to remind *Dasein* that she has the potential to choose her own path or, alternatively, to keep on the inauthentic path of "the they." It is her decision, alone, as to whether or not she chooses an authentic route.

It is through the recognition and acceptance of personal guilt that we can take up an authentic stance, a way of being consistent with our own beliefs. As a consequence of owning up to our guilt, we can become authentic. Heidegger refers to authenticity as resoluteness which he regards as the most primordial truth because it is an individual response to the call of conscience. This does not mean that it is separate from the world. Quite the reverse in fact, as he maintains that authentic Being-one-Self is firmly rooted within the world, as he states, "resoluteness as authentic disclosedness, is *authentically* nothing else than *Being-in-the-world*" (1962: 348). This resoluteness manifests itself in everyday action as a determination to be true to ourselves, and to take responsibility for our actions. It is this stress on resoluteness that leadership theorists have found appealing in Heidegger's approach to what it means to be authentic. What is downplayed by authentic leadership theorists, and central to my argument here, is that authenticity manifests itself differently in individuals because of each person's particular history. That personal and social history plays an ongoing part in influencing thoughts, speech and action.

Like Heidegger's notion of authenticity, the theory of authentic leadership is an example of a discourse of privilege that stems from an intrinsic belief in self-worth. For example, in Western society, we privilege certain kinds of leadership over others. The self-made man is often regarded as the epitome of the strong, successful leader. Again, it is commonplace to read about an individual who is able to succeed through sheer willpower. A leader's success is often measured by how well she attains corporate goals. However, because all actions are unpredictable, no person, no matter how authentic they may seem, can totally control the outcome of any corporate strategy. Thus, awarding huge bonuses for outcomes is, in part, nonsensical because no matter how much a person wills something to happen, that desire can always be thwarted.

As I mentioned earlier, corporate malfeasance was the primary reason that authentic leadership became a subject for theoretical attention and debate. However, George's original call for leaders to have more integrity seems to have become mixed up with ideas about individual success and corporate profitability. If the primary motive for trying to create "authentic leaders" is for the public good, then this would seem to be a laudable aim. However, I would argue that we need to be cautious about such theories because leadership is big business. It is important to underscore this point because, as Barbara Kellerman argues in her book on why there are so many bad leaders, leadership consultants make a great deal of money, far more than they ever could from their academic jobs (Kellerman, 2004). Hence, any new leadership theory that captures the imagination and pocketbook of corporations has the side effect of being a very lucrative enterprise.

In contrast to this focus on the self, Arendt regards plurality as fundamental to human existence (Arendt, 1958). She contends that action and speech form the basic building blocks of individuality because deeds and words enable others to comprehend who we are. They are what make us human. Each time we act and speak, we do so within an already existent web of human relationships (Arendt, 1958). Indeed, it is through actions and speech that we manifest ourselves, sometimes in quite a different manner than what we intend. This is because we can never control fully how our words and actions will be taken up by another individual no matter how resolute our stance. In The Human Condition, Arendt argues that the best place to see individuality within the public realm was in ancient Greece, specifically in city states such as Athens. At first this seems an odd claim because ancient Greece was hardly a land of equal opportunity. However, her point is that for those men who were citizens, the public space was one of openness and equality.

For the Greeks, the word "public' had two distinct meanings. The first meaning of public relates to being seen and heard, that is, how a person appeared before others. The second meaning of "world" was that which is common among men. World represents the sum of human activity, and the space that resides between them. A concrete example of this shared space is a table that men sit around in order to conduct business. This in-between space constitutes human interaction because it is an intersubjective place. Arendt uses the term "interspace" or "inter-est" to refer to the in-between place where a multiplicity of opinions can be heard and considered (Arendt, 1958). Intrinsic to such a multifaceted arena is the place for discord. Indeed, a democracy

thrives upon argumentation; such discord is crucial because it helps ascertain different people's understanding of what is true. Thus, dispute and conflict are necessary so as to admit and respect difference. However, such necessary dissent can only come into appearance when people feel able to speak their minds. This ability to speak is dependent to a certain degree on how comfortable you are in a particular social situation.

The Greeks believed that it required courage to devote oneself to city affairs because it meant that you were willing to share your opinions with others. The Greek *polis* was defined as the exclusive realm of freedom because the men who were part of the political arena did not have to concern themselves with life's necessities. Anything that was conducted within the political sphere was equated with the highest form of existence. Conversely, any activity that was necessary to the maintenance of physical life, such as childrearing or cooking, was undertaken by women and slaves, and, was defined as being outside the realm of freedom. Privacy, and all the activities that took place within the private arena, were supposed to be kept hidden from the public space. A minority of people had privileged status in the public arena while the majority lived outside of the realm of the public in a private space that was regarded as worthless because it had no wordly value. Such distinctions have a lasting effect upon how society is organized.

Notions of privilege are intricately interwoven with a person's place in the social order. Who gets to speak and who remains silent is never neutral but rather dependent upon a person's ability to take up a resolute stance that others will recognize as such. For example, a person's social position has many implications for the lives they lead. If you are a leader of a company, chances are likely that your employees will respond to most of your requests. Your words may be granted more gravitas because of your privileged place in the corporate hierarchy. Depending upon your place in the social and institutional order, it may be easier to get served in a restaurant, not have to wait in a queue, or, conversely, be picked up by the police or be sexually harassed. I would argue that fear adversely affects some bodies' ability to take up space in the public realm, while at the same time enabling other bodies to luxuriate in a place of freedom. Feelings of alienation can have a profound effect on how people act in the public sphere, and, ultimately, who gets to be a leader. Thus our sense of place in the world has a significant effect on how people comport themselves in the public sphere. Rather than a compendium of individual character traits, as authentic leadership theorists suggest, a person's sense of self is influenced deeply by a myriad of circumstances outside of our control.

Heidegger's notion that each person is "thrown *into existence*" is useful in underscoring how social and historical circumstances constantly shape how we live and how we act. How we live our lives determines who we are, in his words; "one *is* that with which one concerns oneself" (1962: 322). This personal history forms the backdrop of our lives and influences our relationships and our actions, however, for the most part, invisible to us. While we carry this knowledge with us, it recedes into the background so that we often fail to comprehend its relevance to our everyday life. I would argue it is time to rethink the ways in which historicity plays a part in individual notions of authenticity. One way is by paying attention to the many forms of silence in the public sphere. To illustrate my argument, I want to explore personal history to see whether it can tell us anything about how a sense of self is deeply interwoven with notions of privilege. Having an Irish mother and English father, difference was ever-present in the sounds I heard and the stories I was told as a child. My mother's lilting voice identified her as distinctly different from her English neighbours. Growing up in England in the 1970s, my Irish maternal roots were not something to boast about. This was because of the ethnic tension that existed between the English and the Irish due to what has become known as "the Troubles'. In the 1970's, there were extensive civilian casualties in England because of IRA attacks on the British public. Following the Birmingham bombing in 1974, police action intensified so that at any time an Irish home could be raided and suspects arbitrarily detained. What resulted was an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that pervaded both public and private spaces. These experiences had a negative impact on some people's sense of freedom, especially when, like my mother, their speech identified them as different. Recently, Irish women living in England during this time were interviewed by a sociologist, Bronwen Walter. These women described how in order to keep safe they altered their movements, and changed the places that they shopped in. One woman stated that: "[w]hen there was a bombing here, I always kept quiet on buses and trains;" another woman, commenting on the situation in Birmingham, said: "It was dreadful. I never opened my mouth for a week." A third interviewee recalled "the wave of anti-Irishness was horrific...I was made to feel that being Irish was a bad thing. I tried to hide my accent" (Walter, 2001: 172). In these personal narratives, we learn how a person's ability to be who they are is restricted. These women talk of how they felt inhibited within the public sphere and of their inability to speak and act as they wished because of fear that they would be identified as Irish. Remaining silent in public spaces was a strategy they adopted so that their voices did not give away their ethnic difference. Their decision to remain silent in public spaces and to avoid usual places reveals how a person's sense of self is constrained by fear.

On the one hand, this bodily restraint is brought about by the mistrust and hatred fueled by ethnic tension. On the other hand, this restriction reveals itself as self-enforcement, that is, this invisible fear caused these women to take disciplinary action on themselves. Walter comments that "the imagery used to describe this avoidance strategy vividly links silence with bodily retreat into invisibility" (2001: 172). She argues that until recently there has been little public discussion in Britain concerning the relation between gender, whiteness and ethnic tension. Instead, such experiences, for the most part, remain hidden under a public veil of silence. That these women were able to recall this silence so vividly more than two decades' later is an indicator that these negative memories affected their sense of freedom within the public realm. Such silences, I would argue, have a revelatory quality for our understanding of authenticity. Indeed, if we read these silences alongside Heidegger's discussion of authenticity, I would contend that these women's silences constitute a call of conscience, which represents the basis for authenticity (1962: 342). As noted earlier, Heidegger is adamant that this "discourse of the conscience never comes to utterance" (1962: 342). The reason for his insistence on a silent call of conscience is that when we speak, we share a language where the words we utter are not unique to each individual. For authenticity to be unique, this call of conscience has to be silent. Yet rather than revealing itself as resoluteness, which Heidegger regards as the basis for authentic action, here, authenticity takes the form of speechlessness and an inability to act as desired. This would suggest that authenticity shows up differently depending upon your place in the world. Hence, resolute action is only one way of experiencing what it means to be authentic. If this is the case, then any theory that considers the concept of authenticity must be attentive to the myriad ways in which power and privilege is manifested.

In her article on freedom, Arendt begins by saying that thinking about freedom is like trying to square a circle. This is because there is a difference between thinking about freedom and our lived experiences in the world. While politically we say that human freedom is a self-evident truth, in science, we maintain that freedom is subject to causation. She looks to Kant who argued that freedom was twofold: it could be understood in terms of an inner sense as well as by external reality. So when we talk about freedom, there is always a tension between the inner world and our everyday experiences of freedom. Further, Arendt maintains that the ancients didn't worry about individual freedom, which came about through early Christianity's focus on the inner will. She quotes Epictetus who, in common with Aristotle, believed that "a man is free if he limits himself to what is in his power" (1993: 147). The ancients thought that man could only liberate himself from necessity when he had power over other men, so being free meant, as we saw earlier, that you had a place in the world and were liberated from life's necessities.

Arendt argues that courage is essential if we are to regain a sense of a shared future. Heroism does not consist only of bold actions, but in having the mettle to take a public stand. If this is the case, how do we think about those Irish women who chose not to speak, preferring the safety of anonymity? Could we view such a refusal to speak as an authentic desire for recognition as who they are rather than being identified by their "whatness," in this case, their ethnicity? Or is their lack of speech a result of not having the psychic freedom to take up a place in the public sphere? In either case, I suggest that social injustice can play such a deep role in the psyche that it is hard for most people to gain the necessary freedom to lead an expansive life in the public realm. These women are caught up in a struggle of belonging to themselves, their homeland and their ability to be seen and heard. A free Eire represents what was and what could be; however, their lives exist in the now of the regime that for centuries has constrained Ireland's ability to be what it could be. Agency is thus undermined by centuries of force, and fear of being singled out in an alien context. Arendt argues that freedom can only make an appearance if there is "a worldly space." Freedom arises from a "politically guaranteed public realm," something that is denied these women, partially by history and also by their own inability to move past this restriction. That being said, Arendt's focus on the importance of speech and action leads her to downplay the ways in which silence operates in the public sphere. For example, in *On Revolution*, she maintains that because man is possessed with speech, and is, therefore, a political being, he cannot remain silent in the public sphere. She argues that "silence is a marginal phenomenon in the public realm" (1976: 9). Yet this statement fails to account for the myriad ways that silence does manifest itself in the public sphere. Arendt's somewhat blinkered view of silence derives from her argument that, since Plato, philosophers have chosen private contemplation over public action. She contends that Western philosophers have often maintained that it is by walking away from public life that one can find freedom. Rather than freedom being gained through thought, Arendt argues that freedom is an integral part of our human conversation. It is not through an inner dialogue that we will find our true humanity, but via communication with our fellow human beings.

A failure to recognize the myriad ways in which social inequality affects people's lives results in a society that is lacking openness and honesty about itself. Rather than acknowledging past and present injustice, what remains are the prejudices and privileges that shore up institutional inequities. Indeed I would argue that

leadership can never be authentic until it acknowledges different forms of dissent such as silence. In closing, Arendt suggests that it is possible to "humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human" (1968: 231). As I have shown, however, it is not always easy to speak the truth, and there are times when silence conveys more than words.

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