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‘Who am I and if so, how many?’¹ Notes on the myth of leadership authenticity

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Abstract

Authentic leadership appears as the solution to plenty of painful contemporary problems. Bad economy, bad organizational performance, bad culture would all become subject to change for the better if leaders behave more authentically, according to the line of discussion. However, the debate seems to stand on poor feet, since some core assumptions don't stand a closer viability check. This paper highlights two core problems in the foundations of the authenticity debate such as the belief in a stable core self and the trust in a homogenous organization. The paper demonstrates not only the fragmented and narrative constitution of self and organization, we show furthermore to which hidden problem the authenticity debate refers; to which the sheer existence of the debate is already a solution. It is complexity avoidance that the authenticity debate provides. It helps to re-install the myth of the influential leader in a situation, in which the opposite has become apparent.

Introduction

The behaviour of business leaders has become the focus of criticism following the on-going economic crisis. The question was raised which specific leadership behaviour could help to tackle given difficulties and prevent business and economy from such a disastrous turmoil. Repeatedly, the call for authentic leaders was presented as a solution (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Caza & Jackson, 2011) and became a highly ranked topic amongst scholars and consultants (Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2013, p. 39). Companies together with business schools started to overhaul their hiring procedures and training programs to strengthen appropriate leadership behaviour (Grey, 2004; Wright, Paroutis, & Blettner, 2013). However, we think, that this is just a rather simple excuse for not being willing to go deeper and for not tackling one of the most painful question in topical leadership and management studies. In line with other critical voices on authentic leadership (Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2013; Ford & Harding, 2011; Nyberg & Svenningsson, 2014), this article shows that the substantial argument of authentic leadership stands on rather weak feet, which are mainly the image of a 'true self' and additionally of a simplistic idea of a 'true' and homogenous organization as well. We add to this knowledge that this double blindness of the debate solves a rather different problem than it originally proclaims: It is less about making organizations better. Instead, leadership authenticity adds another page to the myth of the heroic leader, and another scent

to what is known since long as the ‘romance of leadership’ (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). With this provision, the debate returns to a position, especially a critical leadership view has criticized and departed from. We show this by firstly briefly characterizing leadership authenticity and expose its core assumptions: the presumption of an identifiable, stable self. Secondly, we demonstrate that this assumption is ill defined and ignores the conditions of modern individual identity, rooted in the multi-vocality of the individual self. Thirdly, we exhibit the same problematic assumption about the core context of leadership, the organization. By using insights from organization theory, we will show that organizations can be perceived similar to individuals as having plenty of identities and at least three different, incoherent and conflicting appearances, which we call ‘faces’. As a consequence, we show fourthly how different contradictory leadership roles as an answer to both, multi-vocal selves and polyvalent organizations appear and indicate in the fifth and final section which function the authenticity debate overtakes in the scientific discussion.

Authentic leadership – a brief characterization

The focus on how leadership should be executed best has changed throughout the last years. While the last decades mainly were dominated by the notion of transformative leadership (“be inspirational, give clear messages, engage in active management by exception”; Wilson 2013, p. 55; Jackson & Perry 2011), the idea of authentic leadership has become very popular especially during the last 10 years. Behaviours like “knowing yourself, ...using one’s own compass” (Wilson 2013, p. 55) are highlighted (Walumba et al. 2008), which marks a substantial difference to previously popular concepts. The authenticity discussion has strongly gained momentum by recognizing a malfeasance of leadership as trigger and driver of economic crisis. Authenticity is presented as a promising concept to identify and overcome current dysfunctional behavioural patterns and to prevent further leadership-induced crises. It is perceived as supporting organizational culture (Gardner et al. 2005, motivation, commitment work satisfaction (Eigel & Kuhnert 2005) and especially as preventing from morally gloomy behaviour (Avolio & Gardner 2005, Caza & Jackson 2011).

Historically, and according to Gardner and colleagues (2011, p. 3), the focus on authenticity has undergone a remarkable development throughout the last decades itself. It started already in the 1960’s by defining an “authentic organization” broadly as having an uncertainty-accepting, error- and community-friendly leadership (Rome & Rome, 1967, p. 185). By contrast, one of the most recent characterization focusses on authentic leaders (not on organizations anymore), who (1) are “self-aware, humble, ... (2) fosters high degrees of trust ...; and (3) [are] committed to organizational success within the construct of social values.” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 850)². Overall, contemporary authentic leadership definitions focus almost exclusively on *individual leaders* who share a more or less comprehensive list of features like being confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, giving priority to developing subordinates, using value- and belief-based persuasion instead of coercion (i.e. Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Additionally, authentic leaders are aware of a difference between self and the role they are enacting. They normatively tend to “exhibit salience of self over role” (Henderson & Hoy, 1983, p. 67f.), which means they reject to put up an artificial public profile or to apply intentionally certain behaviour only to meet other’s expectations. Authentic leaders are like they are (Caza & Jackson, 2011; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010), based on a knowledge about who one is (Kernis 2003). Whereas the first list of behavioural and attributive features of an individual embodies the rather common imagination of a good person, the second acknowledges a core difference between an internal psychic self-description and an external social expectation, bundled in role patterns. Accordingly, the core recommendation is to less care about what others might expect but to be what and who someone is instead. The hope of the authenticity debate is clearly to rely on that ‘self’ and the values it may contain and to “encourage followers to model themselves upon their leaders in a way that fosters followers into becoming more authentic followers and authentic leaders in themselves” (Alvesson & Svenningsson 2013: 42). By that means, the authentic behaviour turns from a purely individual to an organizational behaviour. However, we sense that in both, the understanding of the individual self and of organizations as such remain rather underdeveloped and contradicting to recent insights into individual and organizational identity dynamics.

The failure of authenticity (I): leaders’ identities beyond one single self

The authenticity discussion provides a strong call to carefully listen to the inner voice of a leader and to build upon, striving for consistency in thinking and acting, discovering inner core values and cultivating them to eventually overcome the pitfalls and moral hazards of daily life. The core problem of this call and discussion is rooted in two³ rather unchallenged and unexpressed assumptions: First, that there is a real inner self, and that this self can talk to its ‘owner’ in only *one* monolingual voice. Second: the surroundings of this homogenous self is homogenous as well. Organizations and

the context of organizations are unified (unifyable) entities, free of certain different expectations and free of developing contradicting demands to leadership behaviour. It is about one self and one role. By relying on these unexposed pillars, this thinking ignores at least two fundamental conditions of modern society, which we will introduce step by step.

First the imagination of a monumentally real and unified self has become highly questioned already with the raise of psychoanalysis (Ford & Harding, 2011). The unified self has been replaced by a significant insecurity about whether what one knows as self is already comprehensive, whether one has full access to the 'true' self at all, and whether the undiscovered realm of the self is in more control about oneself than expected. "In a turbulent and multifaceted world, identity becomes destabilized" Alvesson & Svenigsson (2003, p. 1167) claim, building upon a broad stream of research showing the restrictions of assuming a single, monolithic self in modern work organizations. This notion is connected with a perception that modernity is a polycentric and polycontextual society, which has developed multiple ways to observe individuals and to establish strong requirements for inclusion in social contexts (Luhmann, 2012; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Accordingly, individuals are thrown into a multiplicity of social expectations and observations, of which they are supposed to constantly make sense of (Jemielniak, 2008). Karl Weick formulated, that this environmental complexity is not processed by a single and monumental psychic identity, though by a rather multiple self instead: "The trap is that the sensemaker is singular and no individual ever acts like a single sensemaker. Instead, any one sensemaker is, in Mead's (1962) words, 'a parliament of selves'" (Weick, 1995, p. 18). The observable identity that someone exposes to her spouse is a different identity that she applies to her friends, to her boss, to her daughter or to her chess partner. These different identities *are produced* by means and through interaction (Ford & Harding, 2011), they are *the result* of social context and less the driving force (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Individuals can productively work with this self-multiplicity and apply for sensemaking efforts in daily life: The "more selves I have access to, the more meanings I should be able to extract and impose in any situation," and "the less the likelihood that I will every find myself surprised" (Weick, 1995, p. 24). Consequently, this idea of a multiple self supports an understanding, which includes that

- a) different internal selves may contradict and challenge one another (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998),
- b) not everything of the self is clearly approachable or known at all (Boje, Helmuth, & Saylor, 2013) and
- c) the establishment and maintaining of these selves is an effort on-going and unfinished, echoing the dynamics of social inclusion (it may happen that the boy of our farther by accident visits his farther at work and later confronts him with the differences he observed). It is actually a constant narration of the self (Sparrowe, 2005).

The result of this multivocal sensemaking-effort is a timely instable, fluid construction and re-construction of identity, even not being bound to the physical existence of a person's body (Roth 2013). The reflection and recognition of the own selves and of individuals is pure work, it is *identity work* (Beech, 2008). It is a "process in which individuals create several more or less contradictory and often changing managerial identities (identity positions) rather than one stable, continuous and secure, manager identity" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

The problem with authenticity comes in sight quickly. Authentic leadership discussions still remain in a rather simplistic approach of individuals having a core self, which can be internally described and consistently explained to others. Shamir & Eilam (2005, p. 396) for example clearly claim that "authentic leaders do not fake their leadership." Instead, they lead by their "true" and "real" self (citations from p. 397). Only a few attempts so far have been made to leave that classic stake. More modern perspective of describing authenticity has drawn to the processes that explain how people "discover and *construct* a core of self and how this core is maintained across situations and over time" (Gardner, et al., 2011, p. 4 italics by the authors). However, if a self is not like a core, if it is not a unity capable of being described but something polyphone, unfinished and incomprehensive, it is rather difficult to fix and to being put over something else. The possibility of authenticity almost vanishes among the contradictory and timely instable re-construction of identity. Consequently, and aside of simply being perceived as 'good' (humble, approachable, relationally aware, whatever) authenticity basically is impossible to maintain. To be more blunt: to look intentionally for one's own authenticity leads to basically infinite search, since there is none⁴.

By contrast, it probably leads into true trouble. Attempts to teach on how to be authentic maintain actually the opposite, since they try to instruct about how to follow the *social convention of becoming observed as being authentic*. This, in fact, is the very contrast of the promise. The expedition into authenticity becomes dangerous when it receives the taste of being visibly and intentionally used - as a tactic. For this to happen not much is necessary except the explicit

notion of the topic. When managers start to stress or even preach the relevance of authenticity, quickly the question arises what might have been in place so far and why it is being stressed right now (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014)⁵. Usually, it raises worries instead of suppressing them. The danger in applying authenticity therefore is that it undermines what leaders want to achieve, it turns efforts of internal consistency into the perceptibility of using a public, artificial mask and raises concerns of the leader being manipulative (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). Eventually, a manager will be observed of how authentically he/she does sell his/her authenticity, and that's the point where the paradox of authenticity finally paralyzes. In this respect, authenticity is the opposite of what it actually promises: "Authenticity is a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1086). It is then about "Authentication" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1090) as something which is granted by observers, not provided by the acting individual; it appears as a context phenomenon, not something stemming from an inner self. Since context dependence here refers to a labelling exercise, it is subject to deliberate creation, subject of "authenticity work" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1086), eventually risking to become part of a managerial effort of domination by means of moral communication (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). However, the paradox nature of authenticity and the complexity of inner selves is only one blind spot of the discussion. Another one refers to the context of leadership.

The failure of authenticity (II): oversimplifying the organization as leadership context

The second assumption we'd like to challenge is the understanding of the context of leaders. It is broadly known and acknowledged since long, that leadership theories lack sensitivity to context in general and to organizational context more specifically (Gordon & Yukl, 2004; Pillai & Meindl, 1998; Yukl, 2012)⁶. That leads necessarily to a rather undercomplex notion of organizations. Generally, organizations are perceived as having features, rather close to the perception of individuals. They do have a core identity, they are 'leadable' by giving decisions and checking results, just like an individual follower. And, almost more important, organizations become influenced by leaders and driven towards the decided goal, and not the other way around (Meindl, et al., 1985). However, with a closer look, this perception soon turns out to be another simplification. What we described with regard to the complexity of the self is generally the case for organizations too. Given this increased complexity of leadership context, there is a strong request to acknowledge how organizations predetermine leadership more than it is generally accepted. A clear organizational self, a core identity has come out of sight, (Gioia, 2000). Instead, it has become apparent how highly disparate and contradicting organizations are constructed, based on the understanding of society being polycontextural (Roth 2012, Andersen & Born 2007, Pors 2012). We will show this incongruence by picking three essential claims which have become prominent over the course of organization theory: the stake of the rationalist, the interpretative and the neo-institutionalist approach to organization. We briefly want to introduce the content of these three core claims, since we think that they correspond with three different core appearances or, as we call it, 'faces', which can be found in any modern organization (Kühl, 2014) and which furthermore coin generically and existentially the core frame for leadership behaviour.

First face: Formality

Formality refers to the most common notion of organization, to everything which is decided in an authorized manner. The notion of decision making premises by Herbert Simon comes in play here again: formality touches all decisions that shape, change and re-establish the premises of communication ways, programmes and personnel (Luhmann, 2000). Bluntly said, formality covers all decisions which affect hierarchy and chains of command, routines and procedures as much as decisions about personnel. That includes strategies and procedures for strategy definition, organizational charts, quality management handbooks and the official procedure to get a key badge, HR routines and controlling rules (Harris & Raviv, 2002, Sorensen 2004) or goal setting formats (Thygesen 2012). These appearances do all refer to the formal part of an organization. Formality is therefore not covered by the ubiquitous label of 'organizational design', but for all aspects which touch these premises by means of decisions. Accordingly, the core features of formality are rationality, consistency and objectivity. The classic 'engineers' and pioneers Frederic Taylor and Henry Ford have impressively shown how to capitalize on that. Still today organizational structure is perceived and evaluated according to these terms, it is the core of most of the fancy management concepts like Business Process Reengineering (Guha, Kettinger, & Teng, 1993), Rapid Prototyping or the x-step-approach to organizational change (Kotter, 1995). It is the oldest known face of organizations, still the most referred, and, until lately, the most preferred one.

Second face: Informality

That the formal appearance of organization is not the only possible and relevant one became clear in the 1950's latest with the well-known Hawthorn-experiments and the works of Elton Mayo (O'Connor, 1999). The accidental attention for workers triggered the discovery of a certain 'atmosphere', a specific 'culture' which could foster the execution of formality and the pursuit of overarching organizational goals. Additionally, later research showed that formal structures contain unavoidable gaps, like the necessary handling of the small surprises which occur if plans hit reality. Formality never could be complete. Finally, it turned out that deviations from formal rule lay an important part too, like the well-known 'silent short-cuts' of avoiding too long formal chains (Luhmann, 1964). These appearances became known as informality. It is a premise of decision making too, since it affects all decisions about hierarchy, programmes and personnel, though in a rather autonomous way. Informality, or organizational culture (Schein, 1985) cannot be decided about (Luhmann, 2000, p. 394). This undecidability stems from an emergent character. Informality can be formally described in 'Leitbildern', gaps in formal systems can be reduced by BPR-exercises and deviations from procedures can be formally punished. However, these measurements cannot cross the boundary of formality, they still belong to formality. How informal behaviour will react to this formalisms is not determinable by formal decisions themselves: A 'Leitbild' always stays away from daily practice, smokers simply flee to another time and location to do their exercise when the smoking corner has been removed. Informality can only be formally framed, observed and evaluated, but not controlled. Informality and culture emerge and develop autonomously. Nonetheless, due to this special feature, it provides an indispensable contribution to organizational continuation. Informality is the source of change, innovation and development, for example when members start to challenge and to deviate from formal rules. They meet first in the shades of the informal smoking zone before making formal suggestions. Furthermore, informality it is the 'location' where political alliances are built to grow important when the formal management is weak or wrong - or both (Pfeffer, 2013; Willmott, 2013). Informality is therefore another appearance, another face of organization, which creates and maintains a permanent challenge to formal structure. Accordingly, its main features are the opposite of the formal: here everything tends to be subjective, disordered and irrational, which is unavoidable to escape from the 'iron cage' of formal domination.

Third face: Façade

Most courses on organizational behaviour in universities and business schools leave it to these two representations of organization. Though, from the late seventies onwards, an increasingly impactful stream of thinking gained momentum, which was and is not much concerned about what is going on in organizations but about how an organization is perceived and legitimized by its environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Neo-institutionalist thinking discovered organizations do not only create and use formal rationality primarily for memorising and repeating things easily, though to show to outsiders that the organization would fully consist of this rationality. This presentation is given while internally, the presence informality with its deviations, improvisations and politickings produces a quite different reality, a practice that is decoupled from policy. This thinking claims that organizations need something, which its external audience could easily trust and believe in, something which can cover all the politics, all the gossip about clients and colleagues and all what externals better never get to know. It is especially necessary to have a sheltering outer surface of an organization, since the perspectives of externals tend to be inconsistent, if not contradictory. The expectation of a shareholder is quite different from the expectation of an environmental sensitive protest group or a union. An organization therefore faces the challenge to grasp the different perspectives, simplify the inherent contradictions and ease possible worries. It needs a capability able to de-couple (Bromley & Powell, 2012) internal practice from external demands. This is what PR-, CSR-, and customer-relation-techniques are all about, what sales- and press-conference-language is constructed of, and what explains the rise of corporate images throughout the last couple of decades (Marchand, 1998) as much as the rising visibility of leaders being the almost literal face of their company (Guthey & Jackson, 2005). By means of a façade, organizations answer the challenge that especially mass media raise. Both, companies and mass media collaborate therefore to idealize leadership and the individual leader (Boje & Rhodes, 2005; Chen & Meindl, 1991). These organizational activities contribute to an organizational front side, a façade, which almost no-one from outside can look through. Necessarily, the façade is different from formal decision-making and informal action (Brunsson, 1989). If formality is the skeleton of an organization and if informality is the flesh, than the façade represents the organizational skin. Like a physical surface, a

façade is the basis of simplification (no political rivalries visible), of unification (no different local rationalities sensible) of positive, convincing impression (no gossip about dreadful customers detectable). Eventually, it has to avoid to being discovered as a façade (Kühl, 2014). In that sense, the most important task a façade has to provide is to present the image of – being authentic (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013). Such a façade has become an indispensable part of modern organization. Each organization would cease to exist within days, if competitors could look into the R&D-department, a journalist could have insight into the private mail conversation of the CEO with his concubine or a guest would have direct insight into how his beef tongue is being prepared. There are things, which are better left veiled (Huzzard & Östergren, 2002). Furthermore, a façade is nothing an organization can choose to have or have not, as much as a body cannot choose to slip outside its skin. It's there, it is needed and it is inevitable, like informality and formality of an organization as well. Even it is a prerequisite to work in the direction of specific aspirations, as Brunsson (2003, p. 222) claims (see Christensen, et al., 2013, p. 318).

With this brief theory-picking exercise, it might have become clear, that organizations are not monolithic neither, though consisting of highly inconsistent and contradicting appearances and representations instead. Organizations are not unified entities, they are not accessible by one or two approaches. Instead, they need to be guided, managed and lead in a way, which could take care of this pluralism. Consequently, organizations could not contain an authenticity. Furthermore, such a constitution of organization has tremendous impact on the way leadership comes in sight, how it can operate and by which means it can relate to this context. It is the context that shapes the corridor of effective and impactful leadership. Without acknowledging this contextual frame, the remaining scope for leadership action cannot be described and enacted properly. As a next step, we want to explore, how this tripartite organizational context is linked to individual leadership action.

The outcome: contradictory leadership roles and puzzled leaders

To clarify the link between the context of the organization and the leadership behaviour, we re-activate an almost theoretically forgotten term: the notion of a social role. Role theory is a basic theoretical concept, originally developed by the American sociologist Robert B. Merton (Merton, 1957) which describes a bundle of behavioural expectations, a certain context provides for an individual to perceive and to act accordingly. Organizations shape one specific social context, each individual in modern society is confronted with. For the context of organizations, Merton's concept has been used and elaborated by several scholars⁷ who all basically claim that leader's behaviour is dependent from organizational role expectations, from leader's role perception and from role coping in case of role ambiguities and conflicts⁸. Roles are however (and in the meantime not really surprisingly) nothing stable or objectively given, though negotiated between the role set (organizational structures, employees, cultural conditions) and the role holder. Accordingly, role holders like leaders can of course influence the expectations addressed to him/her up to a certain extend. Roles can be adapted, rejected and negotiated between context factors (formal structures, informal cultures and external expectations) relevant actors (like peers, subordinates, supervisors) and the role holder. Role holder have impact on roles by their role-making/role-taking behaviour (Mead, 1962), and they even can distance themselves from their roles to fight identity threats (Goffman, 1958). Doubtless, organizational contexts provide strong frames for role adaptations and negotiations. To negotiate and construct a role is therefore a task to be executed very carefully.

Our description of organization shows that unavoidably organizations create specific constraints, restrictions and 'corridors' for leadership behaviour. Leadership has clearly to comply with the requirements of a formal part of the organization in order to provide guidance for effective strategic orientation, efficient work processes, and employee assessment. It furthermore has to provide an informal component in being able to deal with power games and politics, in being able to allow, silence and restrict rule deviance and to foster creativity and innovation. Thirdly, leadership is supposed to act as a proper façade towards external stakeholders like clients or the press as much as being a boundary spanner with networks and communities. This is nothing leadership can freely choose or ignore. These are the genuine contextual conditions of leadership.

According to the descriptions of the three faces, they do not provide one single and homogeneous role, since strongly contradicting expectations stem from the different conditions of each face. To illustrate these differences, we can rely on Gary Yukl's recent taxonomy of leadership behaviour (Yukl, 2012) and use it as a taxonomy of leadership role patterns. He distinguishes four different meta-categories of leadership behaviour with different sub-categories: task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented and external-oriented categories for leadership behaviour. These four categories with

its distinct patterns match almost completely the three faces introduced above, three out of four can easily and directly linked to the three faces:

- Formality requires planning, monitoring, problem-solving and clarifying behaviour. Generally, formal leadership behaviour is supposed to be objective and not influenced by subjectivity and personal relations to individual members.
- Informality, by contrast calls for supportive, developing, recognizing behaviour with regard to individual members and for political behaviour with respect to other interest groups in the organization.
- Eventually the front face requires networking, external monitoring and a representing behaviour. Here, leadership behaviour consist mainly of 'face-work', as intriguingly and intensively described by (Goffman, 2003) for individuals. The organizational 'face-work' is to be maintained mainly for the organization and less for the individual. The leader's behaviour becomes part of the organizational front, which restricts the individual behaviour strongly. Authenticity can only be absent here, since in the personification of leaders as the face of the company, it is the most elusive feature (Bligh, et al., 2011; Guthey & Jackson, 2005).

Given that all organizations appear in three different faces according to the conceptional body of organization theory, Yukl's taxonomy mirrors the role requirements strongly tied to that⁹. Additionally, the idea that leadership is not a homogeneous, monumental though tripartite challenge, is strongly supported by Hatch and colleagues too (2006), who describe "three faces of leadership", being manager, artist and priest. This comes extremely close to our understanding of organizations too. In their notion, leaders have to be rational (formality), creative (informality) and visionary (front), and they have to be performative in enacting all three different leadership faces. Based on Hatch et al., on Yukl's taxonomy and our own constitutive description of organizations, it becomes obvious that leaders are genuinely and almost unavoidably exposed to different organizational core roles. Consequently, leaders have to shift between roles, are engaged with "role transitions" (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Not surprisingly, Erving Goffman stated in 1959, that individuals 'play' with different roles and are constantly engaged with shifting and exchanging roles, just like 'masks'. Correspondingly, the most difficult task of modern leadership might not only be the enactment of the different roles but the shift amongst them, since role differences and contradictions lead unavoidably to role conflicts (Kahn, et al., 1964; Seeman, 1953) and role dilemmas (Neuberger, 2002).

Given these multiple roles, leaders have to cope with at least three issues:

- a) their inner inconsistencies and contradictions,
- b) the organizationally imprinted roles frames, which are contradictory and sometimes dilemmatic as well,
- c) the shift between preliminary, unfinished roles and the sustainability of a 'psychological well-being'.

Again, authenticity becomes not more than a desperate hope to escape from these settings, but to invest in deeper inquiry might not be very helpful.

Why the fuzz? The sublime function authenticity

The HipHop singer Nicki Minaj, who is known under names like Nicki Thereza, takes the authenticity fuzz like that: "They don't pay to see me rolling out of bed with crust in my eyes saying, 'that's me, authentic! They pay for a show'" (Rosenbloom, 2011). Recapitulating, authenticity does not work from our stance for two reasons. First, there is no clear self anymore, able to be treated consistently. Second, there is no uniform single role in relation to the organization, though a bundle of contradicting expectations and framing conditions, which are subject of infinite negotiations, confirmations and rebellions instead, evoked and channelled by the three basic faces of organization. The problem of authenticity then becomes crystal clear. Pragmatically, a leader only can fail in the search for authenticity, since monolithic homogeneity would breed the potential of misalignment with contradicting demands from external observers and the risk of weakening existing trustful relations. Authentic leadership strives to position a self-aware, value based leader in opposition to a malfunctioning world, putting expectations of how leaders should behave almost god-like (Wilson 2013). By that, it stands for a rejection of complexity, making observers suspicious of whether authenticity might only be an excusing debate, covering and preventing the exploration of a problem going deeper.

Leaders and managers as such are extremely useful to inhibit generic contradictions of organizations. As already seen, organizations are made of and ruled by contradictions (Cyert & March, 2001; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). They operate permanently and represent a structural condition of organizations. In most cases however, they remain veiled, since managers and leaders physically cover or ‘embody’ them (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). By glorifying individual leaders, these contradictions become personalized: “The marketing manager was never aligned with the mission of production, what else should be expected than an essentially blocking and dis-respectful behaviour. He will never learn it.” Or the opposite: Steve Jobs *is* Apple, he is a *natural* leader, able to solve all the problems by aligning all employees to one overall goal. Because leaders can be either or, sometimes shifting between both, it becomes possible that contradictions remain unnoticed, beneath the leader’s presence. Individuals become on the one hand the surface for projections and on the other one an effective cover for deeper conditions and managerial challenges.

The stake of authenticity is an extraordinarily strong means to support both, the projection and the cover of contradictions. It helps to idealize the leader as morally untouchable and to disassociate “any moral problems encountered in organizational practice... with the leadership concept in question” (Śliwa, et al., 2013, p. 861). It disconnects problems from persons, which turns persons as covers for unsolvable contradictions. In this respect, leadership and the personification of leadership is an emergent phenomenon, necessary to inhibit structural contradictions. It is not about the leaders, it’s about their context including their followers (to which the same holds true) which require them (Meindl, 1995, p. 332ff.).

In that sense, the authenticity literature takes an important stake in the effective veil of constitutive contradictions and of unbound complexity, although a reasonable part of current leadership literature has started to emphasize social context and behavioural conditions more than before (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Pillai & Meindl, 1998; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, the quest for authenticity stands contrary to this emerging contextualization by highlighting the central significance of the leader and its personal traits (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013, p. 42f.; Ford & Harding, 2011), and it is in fact a call to re-simplify the understanding of leadership, or, to put differently, it is an escape strategy of a scientific debate, fleeing from over-complexity and perceived academic helplessness during the on-going crisis.

Play out the difference!

Nevertheless, our critique of authenticity and our relativism/contextualization of leadership should not be misunderstood. Yes, there is a call for smart leaders and managers, perhaps more than ever. But they are needed for something quite different than they were expected for. They are required to partly cover omnipresent contradictions well and to partly expose the same contradictions to the staff at the right moment of time. They are needed to perform and to develop the faces of an organization to just keep it going. And they are required to deviate from these faces in order to keep organizations awake and resilient. Though to this apparently difficult and confusing task is another page as well. Leaders in fact are paid to *perform* the differences they contain. They not only can, *they are supposed* to link the different aspects of their identity, the different selves, to different requirements of their organizational roles, there is scope to contrast personal difference with organizational. This can be a relief. The quest for authenticity is a call for a morally contained iron cage of stability and re-confirmation. The acknowledgement of different organizational identities and “faces” provides space to perform and to play the own identity into action. The contradictions of organizational requirements and roles form the playground of enacted intra-individual difference.

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End Notes

- 1 The title stems from a recent and popular book on modern philosophy, written by Philosopher Richard David Precht.
- 2 The leadership authenticity debate has been only one palm of the “jargon of authenticity” (Adorno, 1964), which rolled through many modern discussions from philosophy to arts and literature, driven by the desire to find out who we really are (Spicer, 2011).
- 3 A third unchallenged assumption is the uniformity of values. That different values could contradict each other and paralyze action, is not acknowledged. However, it seems far from the problems of moral dilemmas and polycontextual modern society. See for the moral problems of authenticity, in fact, for its immorality (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013, p. 43ff.; Ford & Harding, 2011).
- 4 To put it differently: we are used to the expression of the In-dividual, which echoes a strong desire of not being divided between different selves and of having exactly this monolithic self. But it's a myth, which is nonetheless able to release most of the social energy this world is currently driven by.
- 5 The common experience reads like a wife after 20 trustful years of marriage being suddenly overwhelmed with expressive and expensive declarations of true love by her husband. It creates pressure of explanation more than it brings dispersal.
- 6 This does not mean that no context sensitive leadership research has been conducted. See additional to the sources already mentioned Osborn, Hunt, & Jaunch (2002) or Vera & Crossan (2004).
- 7 Like Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal (1964) or Perrow (1970) and more recently by Shivers-Blackwell (2004, 2006).
- 8 For a more elaborate model of leader behaviour determinants see (Yukl, 1989), for a broader overview of role-theoretical leadership-research see (Winkler, 2010, p. 75ff.).
- 9 The meta-category of change-oriented basically refers to the overall organizational development over time and the provision of change dynamics as much as stability provision once at a time, we don't focus here on this specific part of Yukl's suggestion.