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Received: 27 June 2023 | Revised: 6 September 2023 | Accepted: 7 September 2023

DOI: 10.1002/job.2752

POINT-COUNTERPOINT

WILEY Journal of Organizational Behavior

Is authenticity a "true self," multiple selves, behavior, evaluation, or a hot mess? Response to Helmuth et al.

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Funding information
There are no funders to report for this submission.

KEYWORDS: authenticity, leadership

1 | INTRODUCTION

We agree with Helmuth et al.'s (2023) assertion that authentic leadership (AL) has had a meteoric rise in attention and continues to appeal to the hearts and minds of many scientists and practitioners. Helmuth et al. (2023) further noted that AL is likely being applied in policy-related decisions, and as such, a renewed scientific conversation on the topic is warranted. That is, given the ubiquity of AL and its operationalization, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ), it is important that we as a community consider what exactly AL is (and is not), how we are measuring it, and what "good" might come of it. There has been no dearth of critiques of AL, and the concept is quickly rivaling emotional intelligence (Antonakis et al., 2009; Dasborough et al., 2022; Murphy, 2014) and Leader–Member Exchange (Gooty et al., 2012; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Schriesheim et al., 2001) in the attention (and criticism) it is garnering.

Despite noteworthy and unique new insights from Helmuth et al. regarding the separation of AL and authentic action, we suggest that this clarification is currently insufficient for building a strong theoretical foundation for the domain. In our response to the focal article, we first note some points of agreement, followed by points of disagreement and our view of the future of the popular but troubled concept of AL. As a preview of our counterpoint, we call for a deeper engagement with the assumptions underlying the notion of authenticity in the AL domain. This includes addressing a conflation of concepts (e.g., behaviors, evaluations of the intentions of the behavior, and evaluations of the behavior itself) and recognizing AL's reliance on the existence and knowability of a true self.

Such an engagement opens a dialectical view of authenticity (Nguyen et al., 2022). It remains to be seen if such a dialectical conceptualization of authenticity, while intriguing, is necessary in leadership science. If it is, questions remain regarding how it might be reconciled with and explored via the dominant empirical approaches that the mainstream leadership sciences are built on.

2 | AUTHENTIC ACTION AND AL: POINTS OF AGREEMENT WITH HELMUTH ET AL.

We agree with Helmuth and colleagues that a return to the theoretical foundations of authenticity is warranted. The roots of authenticity are in existential humanist philosophy, despite the argument (in Walumbwa et al., 2008 and elsewhere) that it lies in social psychology or in positive psychology (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). These arguments are somewhat misleading because the development of authenticity in social psychology (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006) explicitly drew from existential philosophical roots. Thus, we agree with Helmuth et al.'s contention that the roots of AL are in existential philosophy. Helmuth et al. draw on those roots to lay out a distinction between authentic actions and authenticity, and they use data to explore whether the former has unique value over the latter both empirically and conceptually. We commend Helmuth et al. for

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exploring this question and providing evidence for their ideas. We are also hopeful that this separation will inspire future work that might map the nomological network of AL. For instance, research might explore authenticity as social cognition of the leader (self-referential), authentic actions as their actual behavior (self-referential), and perceived authentic action of a leader as a judgment or evaluation of observers (relational view of authentic action).

With these points of agreement and convergence, we believe that a strong foundation for a conversation is in place, and we now turn to points where our views diverge or extend in new directions from Helmuth et al.

3 | COUNTERPOINT 1. CONFLATION OF CONCEPTS: TRAITS, SKILLS, BEHAVIORS, EVALUATIONS, AND NONUNIQUENESS

One point of concern that remains in the discussion of authentic action is the matter of conflation of concepts (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). There are multiple ways authenticity and AL could potentially be conceptualized. First, the degree to which a person lives up to their authentic self could be an individual difference. That is, one's "true self," (Helmuth et al., 2023) or construction of "multiple selves" (see counterpoint 3 below) may be an exogenous concept in a leadership process model. Across contexts, there may be invariance on these selves. There are perhaps genetic and environmental components to how this trait is formed, similar to the personality trait extraversion. This trait could be measured via a questionnaire, and all the normal psychometric standards around reliability and validity (e.g., convergent, discriminant, criterion) would apply.

Second, authentic action could comprise some type of knowledge, skill, or ability (KSA) that an individual possesses. If this were the case, leadership training and development programs could teach someone to use such KSA's regarding authentic action through education. An individual could read about authenticity, learn skills about it, and be tested on their knowledge of how to act in alignment with themselves. This would require conceptualizing authentic action as a set of trainable skills.

Third, authentic action could be conceptualized as leader behavior. Behaviors can be defined as "the internally coordinated responses (actions or inactions) of whole living organisms (individuals or groups) to internal and/or external stimuli, excluding responses more easily understood as developmental changes" (Levitis et al., 2009: 103). We suggest that authentic actions are regularly conceptualized as a leader behavior (Banks et al., 2016) but rarely meet standards for behavioral research (Banks et al., in press).

Fourth, authentic action could be conceptualized as an evaluation. Here, the theoretical construct of interest is a leader or followers' assessment of the extent to which oneself or one's leader acted authentically. To compare and contrast behaviors and evaluations, imagine that a leader expresses emotional support for the work of a project team by smiling. Some project team members may evaluate this emotional display (a behavior) as highly authentic. Conversely, other project team members may evaluate the exact same behavior as low on authenticity. The leader's smile is the behavior, and the different assessments by the followers are evaluations of authenticity.

Again, authentic actions are most commonly conceptualized as behavior but most frequently measured as evaluations of behavior (for a meta-analytic review, see Banks et al., 2016). This creates a theory-measurement misalignment. Helmuth et al. addressed this issue via the self-referential and relational view of authentic actions. However, their account does not take into consideration another type of conceptual confusion: Evaluations of authentic actions via the relational view and the perception of authentic action in the self-referential view could also be theoretically conflated with other leadership styles (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). In reality, followers likely experience a leader enacting a number of behaviors simultaneously (some positively valanced, some negatively valanced). Followers may evaluate the authenticity of all these behaviors (e.g., of ethical leadership, of empowering leadership). It is questionable whether AL can be considered a leadership "style" separate from the perceived authenticity with which leaders engage in a range of leadership behaviors.

As it stands, Helmuth et al. (2023) made an implicit assumption that authentic actions are a unique set of behaviors. We do not yet see evidence that they are unique; they may be conflated with evaluations of every leadership style of behavior (e.g., authenticity of evaluating visionary or ethical leader behavior). Essentially, conflation may occur within authentic actions (individual differences, KSAs, behaviors, and evaluations) as well as across leadership "styles." Given the current state of the literature, these questions remain unanswered.

4 | COUNTERPOINT 2: THE TRUE SELF IS A CONTESTED ASSUMPTION

Another point of concern that remains is the literature's reliance on the concept of a true self. Dominant conceptualizations of AL and Helmuth et al.'s reformulation both rely on the assumption that a true self exists and is knowable. When researchers conceptualize authenticity as consistency between a person's "inner" values (convictions, personality, etc.) and external behaviors, they are invoking the idea of a true self (Lehman et al., 2019). Walumbwa et al. (2008: 92, our emphasis added) did so explicitly in their formulation of AL:

> "Authenticity can be defined as 'owning one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know oneself' and *behaving in accordance with the true self*" (S. Harter, 2002: 382).

Even in Helmuth et al.'s reformulation, an action's authenticity must be judged in reference to its alignment with an actor's inner values, convictions, and so on (i.e., with their true self). The

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assumption that a true self exists underpins almost all research in the AL domain. Despite this reliance, it is rare to find a paper that defends the assumption. There are, however, strong reasons to break with the assumption that a true self exists and is knowable.

For instance, although philosophy is often invoked in AL research (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008), relevant philosophical critiques of base assumptions are not. This is not due to a lack of availability; philosophers and researchers from a variety of related domains have offered strong critiques of the assumptions AL relies on. As one example, Bialystok (2014: 273) reviewed various conceptualizations of authenticity and concluded that the "demand to identify a true self, combined with the impossibility of conclusively doing so, spells trouble for all accounts of authenticity." Or consider Foucault's (1983) scathing characterization of Carl Rogers and his counterparts as "the Californian cult of the self" (cited in Strohminger et al., 2017: 552). Of note, Rogers' ideas on authenticity and the true self influenced Kernis (2003: 15) who in turn is credited by Walumbwa et al. (2008) as generating the theoretical foundation for AL.

We highlight these arguments because it is important for any research domain to be aware of critiques to their base assumptions and subsequently provide justification for them. As it stands, the AL literature has adopted a bold and largely unverifiable assumption that a true self exists and has taken few steps to explain or justify this assumption. Even if we were to adopt the true self-assumption, another problem remains. We not only must believe that a true self exists; we must believe that people can *know* their true self. In Helmuth et al.'s (2023: 6) proposed reformulation, a person needs to know when they are "falling" to social pressure and when they are acting in line with their true self.

The knowability requirement is similarly hard to justify. Consider the work in our own discipline that has been conducted on concepts like ideology (Seeck et al., 2020) and culture (Barker, 1993). People do not always know where their ideas, values, preferences, and so on, come from. Even when we believe our ideas or values are innately *ours*, how can this be? All people are born into a society during a particular historical period. This context fundamentally shapes the language we have access to, the ideas and values we consider, and the "pool of possible selves" available to us (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 954). The notion that any person, let alone the majority of people, can know their true self is thus highly questionable.

The AL literature currently rests on the assumption that true selves exist and are knowable by the majority of the population. The reliance on these assumptions remains whether the target is an individual or an individual's actions. While there is no strong defense of these assumptions in the AL domain, strong critiques exist in both philosophy and in science (e.g., Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Bialystok, 2014). In the absence of better argumentation or evidence, we align with Strohminger et al.'s (2017) conclusion that the true self is a fundamentally unknowable and unverifiable concept.

5 | COUNTERPOINT 3: A DIALECTICAL VIEW OF (IN)AUTHENTICITY AND THE MULTIPLE SELVES

We argued above that the assumption of the true self is problematic. In this section, we attempt to resolve that problem by putting forth a dialectical view of inauthenticity (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2022).

While we are no existential philosophers, what if we as humans (and by extension, leaders) have multiple constructed selves? Whether they are true or not is unnecessary for leadership science in our view: Leading others is about having influence. Thus, a leader must have some degree of clarity on what they stand for (values), who they are (identity), and correspondingly the behaviors they might enact in a situation (context). We think that people are rarely able to turn "off" the multiple values, ideals, identities, and emotions that make us humans. That is to say, when anyone occupies a leader role, they do not automatically leave all other identities (e.g., parent, activist, student) (e.g., Cha et al., 2019), ideals (e.g., benevolence, honesty), and emotions (e.g., pride, grief) behind. Further, these multiple selves might occasionally be in conflict. Leaders are routinely forced to prioritize between multiple and at times paradoxical ideals (e.g., balancing safety versus keeping business open during Covid) and emotions (e.g., optimism about vaccines and grief from loss) (Bedeian & Day, 2004; Collings et al., 2021; Giustiniano et al., 2020). Helmuth et al.'s assertion that authentic actions are aligned with the true self and inauthentic actions are aligned with the Other is an overly simplistic view of the complexity of human experience.

We do, however, empathize with Helmuth et al.'s position, as it aligns with our tendency in leadership science to "resolve" paradoxes and present a unitary way of moving forward. However, we propose that a more fruitful path forward for research on selves and authenticity in leadership is to embrace the reality of paradoxes and complexity. For instance, actions aligned with the Other may not always be inauthentic; the self is not always "falling" (Helmuth et al., 2023: 6) in such cases. It is possible that acting in accordance with the Other is good or generative for society and that this action aligns with one of the leader's multiple selves. Such a dialectical view moves away from the implicit assumption made in Helmuth et al. and earlier works regarding inauthenticity. We seem to assume that acting in lines with one's (phantasmal) true self is authentic and inherently good (Strohminger et al., 2017); conversely, acting as others might want us to is inauthentic and inherently bad. This view places a rather disproportionate weight on the individual while simultaneously rejecting the common, collective good as the "other".

Three theoretical pathways arise if we adopt a dialectical view of the self as being multifaceted and reject the assumption that inauthenticity is bad or undesirable. First, what we currently label as inauthentic action could be growth and development, moving outside one's comfort zone, doing things that do not necessarily align with one of the multiple selves (Ibarra, 2015). Perhaps a key leader development goal is to get comfortable with the paradoxical demands that multiple selves impose. Second, we would move away from the unrealistic (or impossible) expectation to know one's true self. A relaxation

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of this assumption then humanizes the leader role and makes it more viable for everyone. Third, we begin to introduce the uncommon messiness of paradoxes as a key leadership strength not a weakness (Zhang et al., 2015). We as a science prefer straight line thinking and thus assume that inauthenticity should be reduced or a that it is an undesirable feature – what if it is not? What if it is a key survival strategy for nonprototypical or first-time leaders? What if it represents an evolution of one's leadership capacities and a move away from an obsession with the "self"?

6 | COUNTERPOINT 4: THE RELEVANCE OF AUTHENTIC ACTIONS FOR LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Being authentic may be good for psychological well-being, but is authentic action good for leadership effectiveness? Research on AL supposes that such leadership has a positive effect on leadership effectiveness (as would be evident in indicators of leadership effectiveness as subordinates' leadership evaluations, job attitudes, and performance). As Helmuth et al. argued, however, the ALQ does not measure authenticity itself. Moreover, observers' perceptions of authenticity should not be equated to authentic action. Thus, evidence relating the ALQ to indicators of leadership effectiveness does not justify the conclusion that authentic action as a leader has a positive effect on leadership effectiveness. Instead, we would venture that the question we raise here does not have a clear answer in the evidence base.

This is no trivial matter or merely griping about measurement issues; the more fundamental issue here is conceptual. It is intuitive that people generally do not like people they perceive to be "a fake." All other things being equal, being *perceived* to be authentic might be better for leadership effectiveness than being perceived to be inauthentic. It is flawed logic, however, to conclude from this that authentic action is necessarily a positive influence on one's effectiveness as a leader. What is authentic action for the leader is not necessarily received positively by subordinates. For instance, if being authentic means engaging in abusive supervision, this is likely negatively related to leadership effectiveness (Tepper, 2007; Zander, 2013).

AL research appears to assume that authentic action excludes authentically displaying undesirable behavior. It is questionable whether this assumption is justified. Perhaps this explains in part why, as per Helmuth et al.'s analysis, authenticity was replaced by internalized morality in AL theory and measurement. In effect, this replaces claims to authenticity with claims to desirable behavior. Thus, a first conceptual qualification of the notion that authentic action would be a positive influence on leadership effectiveness is that this is contingent on the behavior. In fact, it would be more accurate to propose that it is the nature of the behavior that drives the influence on leadership effectiveness and perceived authenticity of the behavior would enhance (i.e., moderate) the effect of the behavior. For instance, when empowering leadership can be expected to have a positive effect, being perceived to be authentically empowering would enhance the effect of empowering leadership. This is an important qualification of current notions in two ways: by putting the emphasis on *evaluated* authenticity rather than on *acting* authentically and in shifting the emphasis from the presumed effectiveness of authenticity per se to the moderating influence of evaluated authenticity. The latter also raises the question whether behavior with negative effects like abusive supervision has stronger negative effects the more it is evaluated to be authentic (Zander, 2013).

There is also an important diversity issue to consider in relation to the presumed effectiveness of leader authenticity. Acting authentically in the leadership role can be more challenging for leadership effectiveness the more leaders deviate from traditional leadership prototypes that tend to favor men and stereotypically masculine traits and behavior. It is well-documented that responses to leadership are informed by implicit beliefs about leadership, even when these beliefs are not accurate in capturing what makes leadership effective (Epitropaki et al., 2013). This research also shows that such implicit beliefs favor White men; in the United States, for instance, implicit beliefs about leadership tend to be more aligned with what is seen as stereotypically masculine than with what is seen as stereotypically feminine and with what is seen as stereotypically White as compared with Black or Asian American (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rosette et al., 2016).

Given findings from recent replications of the white male standard for leadership that show that the prototype still exists (e.g., Petsko & Rosette, 2023), observers are more likely to evaluate white men leaders' behavior as authentic. That is, if white men are already seen as "natural" fits for leadership positions, their behavior within those positions is likely to be judged as similarly "natural." What this means is that a call for authentic leader behavior has to go hand in hand with the creation of more inclusive work environments. If this condition cannot be realized, the risk is that calls for leaders to act authentically will privilege one demographic group over others.

7 | IS THERE A FUTURE FOR AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHENTIC ACTIONS IN LEADERSHIP SCIENCE?

We believe that Helmuth et al. contributed to the AL domain by clearly separating authentic actions from AL and authenticity. We went a step further and (1) raised the issue of theoretical conflation within the concept of authentic actions, (2) challenged the core assumptions that a true self exists and is knowable, (3) opened the door to a dialectical view of authenticity, and (4) questioned the importance and possibility of authenticity for leadership effectiveness and nonprototypical leaders. From our perspective, authenticity of actions is best studied as an outcome, an evaluation that leaders and followers make of their own and others' behaviors. Perhaps, there is value in studying the authentic action as such an evaluation in the future. However, verifying the "actual"

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authenticity of a person's actions would require insight into their true self. There is no compelling theoretical or empirical argument that we have access to these insights, which necessitates the study of authenticity as an evaluation. We outline other future steps for the AL domain below.

1. ***Theory-measurement alignment***. Moving forward, we call for those who wish to study authenticity or authentic actions to clearly specify if it is an individual difference, KSA, behavior, or evaluation. Our view is that it is best studied as an evaluation; perhaps there is room for exploration of authenticity and evaluation of authentic action as a KSA or a trait. Based on this theoretical specificity, scholars should ensure that their measures correspond to the concept of interest. Further, they should defend their conceptualization given the points we and others have made above.
2. ***Back to the drawing board***: Develop the notion of authenticity or authentic actions in relation to the nomological network of major leadership theories and frameworks. Does it have face value as a stand-alone concept over and above related constructs such as integrity, ethical behavior, and honesty? Is it conflated with our evaluations of all leadership styles? Does it contribute anything over and above liking for the leader?
3. ***Inclusive theorizing and considering counterfactuals***: Many leadership theories including AL and authentic actions are designs to explain the "average" leader in the workplace. The "average" leader has been a white male for a very long time (Gooty et al., 2023; Petsko & Rosette, 2023). We know quite little regarding the antecedents, contextual constraints, and consequences of the continued push for authenticity for those leaders who are not prototypical. We also know quite little regarding the social sanctions such leaders might face when their own perceived authenticity violates prototypical authenticity. As such, we believe we could be prescribing a dangerous pill (authenticity) to the patient (leadership scholars and practitioners) without fully understanding its side effects. We encourage such dialectical thinking, perspective taking, and reflexiveness in future work in this area.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this response to Helmuth et al. (2023), we note points of agreement and four counterpoints. Based on our counterpoints, we outline three specific and plausible directions for future research on authenticity and leadership. With that said, we remain skeptical of the value of metaphysical concepts such as authenticity in leadership science. Indeed, we took the position that this approach could even be harmful to leaders who do not conform to implicit leadership prototypes. Authentic action might hold promise as an evaluation of behaviors, yet it is muddled with its foundations in authenticity and existential philosophy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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How to cite this article: Gooty, J., Banks, G. C., McBride, A., & van Knippenberg, D. (2023). Is authenticity a "true self," multiple selves, behavior, evaluation, or a hot mess? Response to Helmuth et al. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2752

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