

STUDENTS' POTENTIAL FOR AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

To know yourself and to act accordingly has been seen as a moral imperative throughout history.

The aim of this research was to determine potential of students for authentic leadership and relation between their authentic personality and potential for authentic leadership. The sample consisted of students (N=133) from Serbia (male – 59% and female – 41%). The average age of students was M=21.9.

Instruments used were Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008) and Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire (ALQ – Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authenticity scale had three subscales – authentic living, accepting external influence and self-alienation. Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire had four subscales – self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing and relational transparency.

Results showed that students are authentic persons - M=43.16 (with theoretical range of scores from 12 to 84) and have a potential for authentic leadership – M=57.41 (with theoretical range of scores from 16 to 80). Authentic

personality in students is not a predictor of authentic leadership ($R^2=.001$, $F(1,132)=.08$, $p<.05$). Correlation analysis showed that individual's authentic living is positively correlated to leader's self-awareness ($r(131)=.360$, $p<.01$), internalized moral perspective ($r(131)=.378$, $p<.01$) and to relational transparency ($r(131)=.194$, $p<.05$). Also, accepting external influence is negatively correlated to internalized moral perspective ($r(131)=-.178$, $p<.05$).

This research has confirmed theoretical implications that if a person behaves and expresses emotions in a way that is consistent with his/her physiological states, emotions, beliefs and cognitions, then he/she will be perceived by others as being aware of their own and others values, knowledge and strengths, of the context in which they operate and capable of ethical and transparent decision making. Furthermore, a person more susceptible to the influence of others and to the belief that one has to conform to others' expectations is less capable for authentic and sustained moral actions.

Keywords: *authenticity, leadership, students*

JEL Classification: L2, L31, L29

INTRODUCTION

When discussing authentic leadership, it is necessary to start from the concept of authenticity itself.

Authenticity as a construct dates back to ancient Greeks, and the time it was first recognized in their timeless piece of advice – Be honest to yourself (Harter, 2002). Within the realm of positive psychology, authenticity is defined as having personal experience, acting in accordance with one's own thoughts, emotions, needs, interests or beliefs, and stemming from the need for a person to know oneself and act in accordance with one's true SELF (Seligman, 2002).

Even though the very concept of authenticity is not new, in recent years, we have witnessed a revival of interest for the elements of authentic leadership in literature dealing with applied (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004; George et al., 2007; George, 2003; May et al., 2003) and academic management (Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Avolio & Walumbwa, 2006; Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). All these authors conclude that authentic leadership is a multi-dimensional construct of a higher order, which further reflects in the development of the theory of authentic leadership following the

interrelations occurring between leadership, ethics and positive organizational behavior (Avolio et al., 2004; Cameron et al., 2003; Cooper & Nelson, 2006; Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

One of the results of such an increased interest in this new construct is the emergence of several new models of authentic leadership in literature. The first one is the model (Avolio et al., 2004) which defines authentic leadership as a process stemming from positive organizational behavior, trust, new achievements in the field of leadership and emotions, identity theories developed to describe the processes through which leaders transfer their influence on the attitudes of their employees such as job satisfaction, and behaviors such as work results. This model also includes the outcomes of the employees which reflect in their performance, extra performance and their withdrawal behaviors such as absence and lateness. Further research brought authors to a better-focused model of authentic leadership which also includes self-awareness, impartial processing of information, authentic behavior, and authentic relational orientation (Ilies et al., 2005). Gardner and associates (2005) tried to integrate these different perspectives and definitions of authentic leadership and suggested the model of processes which happen in authentic leadership and work. This model is based on the idea that one of the key factors which contribute to the development of authentic leadership is the leader's self-awareness which includes their personal values, emotions, identity and goals. The second factor is self-regulation which involves internalized regulation, balanced processing of information related to the persons themselves, authentic behavior and relational transparency, which implies that the leader shows a high level of openness and trust in close relationships. According to this model, the personal past of the leader (influences of their family members, educational and professional experience) and key events (personal crises and positive events such as promotions) are a pre-condition for authentic leadership. Later, authors (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) came to conclude that authentic leadership also involves positive moral perspective which is characterized by high ethical standards affecting the making of decisions and behavior. Here, self-awareness and the process of self-control are reflected in the internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency as the key components of authentic leadership.

This kind of definition shows that authentic leadership shares some characteristics with other contemporary perspectives of positive leadership such as transformational, spiritual and servant leadership. Authentic leadership justifies

its place among these forms of leadership with the fact that researchers started to make difference between it and similar constructs by putting it in theoretical frameworks and searching for its confirmation in empirical researches. Transformational leaders are, the same as authentic leaders, described as people full of optimism and hope, people of high moral character and oriented towards development (Bass, 1998). Also, transformational leadership has opened up a way towards a complex moral specter with which most leaders combine their authentic and non-authentic behaviors, which leads to differentiating between authentic transformational leader who expands the domain of freedom and conscious acting and a pseudo or non-authentic transformational leader who strives to justify their own narcissism, authoritarianism, and need for power. Still, other authors (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) state that authentic leaders, unlike transformational leaders, can but don't have to be oriented towards developing their employees into leaders, even though they themselves have a positive influence on their employees through the model of roles. On the other hand, similar to authentic leaders, servant and spiritual leaders show explicit or implicit self-awareness, and focus on integrity, trust, courage and hope (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). However, these components of servant and spiritual leaders still lack theoretical and empirical background. Therefore, authentic leadership can encompass transformational, servant, spiritual, and many other forms of positive leadership. Even though it is still necessary to define authentic leadership, Avolio and associates (2004) state that the main element which differentiates authentic from other forms of leadership is the fact that it lies at the base of contemporary positive leadership regardless of the form it appears in.

Characteristics of an authentic leader as a person are discussed and explained by George (2003). In his view, authentic leaders strive to serve others through their leading activities. They are more interested in how to encourage their employees to make a change, than they are interested in power, money or their personal status. They are driven by their personal desires and feelings rather than by their sense. However, authentic leaders are not born that way. Lots of people have natural qualities for leadership, but they need to develop all their capacities in order to become excellent leaders. Authentic leaders use their natural abilities, and they recognize their disadvantages and work hard on overcoming them. Their leadership is purposeful, meaningful and based on values. They are persistent and self-disciplined. When their principles are tested, they make no compromises. Authentic leaders are committed to their personal de-

velopment, because they know very well that leadership implies lifelong growth and development. The basic quality each leader needs to possess is being honest to oneself in every situation. The best leaders are autonomous and independent. Those who are over-sensitive to the needs of others are more prone to be beaten by opposite interests, to stray from their chosen course or be reluctant to make tough decisions in fear of offending others. In order to be effective leaders, authentic leaders first need to discover the purpose of their leadership. If they fail to do it, they will find themselves in the grip of their own ego and narcissistic needs. Acquisition of these characteristics is not a sequential process, every leader develops them throughout life.

George himself (2003) gave a description of the traits of an authentic leader, thus touching on the story of an authentic personality, a construct which psychologists of many different orientations (humanist, existentialist, positive psychology) are trying to define more clearly.

In the person-directed concept, authenticity was defined as a three-part construct by Barrett-Lennard (1998, p. 82) who emphasizes the balance between the three levels of a person – (a) personal experience (the real SELF, including the current emotional state and beliefs), (b) symbolic consciousness (experience represented in the cognitive sphere) and (c) external behaviors and communication. The first aspect of authenticity (*self-alienation*) includes the inevitable inconsistency between the consciousness and the current experience. Perfect harmonization between these types of experience is not possible and the extent to which a person experiences self-alienation in the relation between consciousness and the current experience (true SELF) by shaping the first aspect of authenticity leads to psychopathology. The second aspect of authenticity (*authentic living*) involves harmonization between one's consciously perceived experience and behavior. Authentic living implies behavior and expressing emotions in a way consistent with the conscience of psychological states, emotions, beliefs and thoughts. In other words, authentic living means being honest to oneself in most situations and living in accordance with one's own values and beliefs. The third aspect of authenticity (*accepting the external influence*) involves the extent to which one accepts the influence of others and the belief that one needs to adjust to other people's expectations. People are basically sociable beings, and thus both self-alienation and authentic living fall under the influence of the environment. Accepting other people's perspectives and accepting external influence affects both one's feeling of self-alienation and the experience of

authentic living. Taking all of these together – self-alienation, authentic living and the acceptance of external influence creates the three-part construct and a person-oriented perspective of authenticity which offers the widest and clearest explanation of authenticity.

In this article, the author describes the research aimed at determining the potential of students for authentic leadership and the relation between their authentic personality and their potential for authentic leadership.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to determine potential of students for authentic leadership and relation between their authentic personality and potential for authentic leadership.

The sample was consisted of students (N=133) from Serbia (male – 59% and female – 41%). The average age of students was M=21.9.

Instruments used were Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008) and Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire (ALQ – Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Authenticity scale had three subscales – authentic living, accepting external influence and self-alienation.

Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire had four subscales – self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing and relational transparency.

Results shown in Table 1 show that students are authentic personalities – M=43.16 (with theoretical range of scores from 12 to 84).

Table 1. Authenticity Scale

		N	Minimum	Maximum	AS	SD
Scale	Authentic personality	133	23	67	43,16	7,79
Subscales	Authentic living	133	4	28	22,84	4,39
	Accepting external influence	133	4	28	10,25	4,86
	Self-alienation	133	4	28	10,07	5,15

Students achieved best scores on the subscale Authentic living, which implies that they are honest to themselves in most situations and that they live in accordance to their own values and beliefs.

Table 2. Authentic leadership Scale

		N	Minimum	Maximum	AS	SD
Scale	Authentic leadership	133	36	74	57,41	7,61
Subscales	Self-awareness	133	8	20	14,91	2,73
	Balanced processing of information	133	4	20	13,17	2,97
	Relational transparency	133	6	20	14,05	3,05
	Internalized moral perspective	133	8	20	14,88	2,62

Results achieved on the scale of authentic leadership in Table 2 show that students have the potential for authentic leadership – $M=57.41$ (with theoretical range of scores from 16 to 80). They achieved the highest score on the subscale Self-awareness, which implies the existence of a continuous process during which a student develops their conscience and understanding of their own talents, strengths, purpose, values, beliefs and desires. Students also achieved a high score on the subscale of Internalized moral perspective characterized by highly ethical standards which affect their decision making and behavior.

Table 3. The results of linear regression with the criterion of authentic leadership

	B	SE	b
Authentic personality	-,037	.09	-,038

Note: $R^2 = .001$, $F(1, 132)=,168$, $p < .05$

Linear regression analysis (Table 3) shows that the students' authentic personality is not a predictor of authentic leadership. Even though authenticity is a concept which stands at the foundation of both constructs, statistic analysis shows that they do not necessarily have a causal connection.

Table 4. Pearson's correlation coefficient

	Self-awareness	Balanced processing of information	Relational transparency	Internalized moral perspective	Authentic living	Accepting the external influence	Self-alienation
Self-awareness	1	,229**	,388**	,355**	,360**	-,126	-,275**
Balanced processing of information	,229**	1	,351**	,081	,060	,022	-,136
Relational transparency	,388**	,351**	1	,235**	,194*	,013	-,167
Internalized moral perspective	,355**	,081	,235**	1	,378**	-,178*	-,311**
Authentic living	,360**	,060	,194*	,378**	1	-,251**	-,40**
Accepting the external influence	-,126	,022	,013	-,178*	-,251**	1	,502**
Self-alienation	-,275**	-,136	-,167	-,311**	-,40**	,502**	1

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Pearson's correlation coefficient represented in Table 4 shows that there exist statistically significant correlations between some (most) subscales of authentic personality and authentic leadership.

It is interesting to notice that balanced processing of information which implies making decisions based on personal beliefs is not connected to personal ethical standards or any other indicator of authentic personality (authentic living, accepting external influence, self-alienation). Also, relational transparency is not statistically significantly connected to either accepting external influence or the feeling of self-alienation as indicators of an authentic personality. Therefore, the connection between balanced processing of information and relational transparency is statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Based on these results, we can conclude that students as future authentic leaders would rely on the following when making decisions: their personal beliefs (self-awareness) and opinion of their close colleagues (relational transparency), whereas they are still not ready for conformism, i.e. non-critical adjusting to common norms (accepting external influence). It is important for them as authentic leaders to maintain their creativity, leadership, activism, independence and self-respect oriented towards change and progress (without the feeling of self-alienation).

This article describes a research aimed at determining the students' potential for authentic leadership and the relation between their authentic personality

and their potential for authentic leadership. The research sample consisted of students from Serbia (N=133). Average age of respondents was M=21.

The results showed that students are authentic personalities, that they are honest to themselves in most situations and that they live in accordance with their own values, with the highest scores achieved on the subscales expressing their clear self-awareness and moral perspective.

Even though the results show that an authentic personality is not a predictor for authentic leadership, the analysis of Pearson's correlation coefficient showed that most subscales of authentic personality and authentic leadership are in a statistically significant correlation. Furthermore, the results show that students as future authentic leaders are not ready for conformism, i.e. non-critical adjusting to common group norms (accepting external influence). It is important for them as authentic leaders to maintain their creativity, leadership, activism, independence and self-respect oriented towards change and progress (without the feeling of self-alienation).

All of these results can be viewed as a confirmation of the model of authentic leadership suggested by Avolio and Gardner (2005) as well as the characteristics of the person of authentic leadership suggested by George (2003). The research described in the article confirms the model of authentic leadership suggested by Avolio and Gardner (2005). According to that model, basic components of authentic leadership are self-awareness and self-regulation which involves balanced processing of information, relational transparency and internalized moral perspective. Students achieved high scores on each of these subscales of the scale of Authentic leadership (ALQ – Walumbwa et al., 2008), thus confirming the suggested model of authentic leadership.

The research described also confirmed the characteristics of the personality of authentic leadership suggested by George (2003). In his view, authentic leaders are committed to their personal development, since they know very well that leadership demands lifelong growth and development. The basic quality each leader needs to possess is to be honest to themselves in each situation. The best leaders are autonomous and independent. This claim is used to point out the authentic personality (self-alienation, authentic living and accepting external influence) as an important segment of authentic leadership (self-awareness and self-control). The students involved in the research showed that they are authentic personalities and that they have the potential for authentic leadership.

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