Exploring Individual Leadership Journeys through Authentic Leadership Theory

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*Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,*
*That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,*
*And then is heard no more: it is a tale*
*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*
*Signifying nothing.*

(William Shakespeare, Macbeth, V. V. 24-28)

Introduction

To date, leadership theories and models can appear unhelpful in relevance and application to practicing leaders. Leadership research has tended to neglect subjective realities of ‘becoming’ a leader by failing to consider individual leaders’ journeys. As a result, when leaders evaluate themselves against models and theories, leaders can feel frustrated, confused and/or compelled to adopt the latest leadership ‘trends’. While some models of successful leadership are often seductive, self-evaluation by leaders can often result in a ‘strutting and fretting’, inauthenticity or excessive plasticity on the part of the leader (Seeman, 1960). The quote from Macbeth therefore resonates when reflecting on the leadership literature, likening it to ‘a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’. Indeed, many leadership theories express a relationship between attributes and outcomes and this is generally the best you can do when you do not understand what causes a given outcome (Christensen and Raynor, 2003).

Leadership theories have generally focused upon more cognitive elements, while the theory and measurement of affective processes has been ignored, or alternatively has emphasized attitudes rather than basic emotional processes (Lord and Brown, 2004). Avolio and Gardner (2005) argue that the existing frameworks are not sufficient for developing leaders of the future.

To enable exploration of the often unheard of, individual experiences of ‘becoming’ a leader; ‘a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,’ we turned to recent work on authentic leadership. Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn (2003) view authenticity as owning one’s own personal experiences; be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences and acting in accordance with one’s own true self, expressing what you think and feel and behaving accordingly. Authentic leadership, in theory, is achieved through self awareness, self acceptance, authentic actions and relationships, whilst remaining cognizant of one’s own vulnerabilities (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders are portrayed as being highly self aware, having clearly defined and therefore strongly articulated values; what they say is consistent with what they believe (Shamir and Eilam, 2005), with ongoing drive and motivation towards natural goals and the ability to harness followership.

While authentic leadership is positioned as the ‘root construct’, for other forms of positive, ethical leadership, (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans and May, 2004), it is based upon little empirical data.
The following paper provides an overview of authentic leadership from Gardner et al’s (2005) framework; the research approach is outlined, based upon a qualitative empirical study which engages UK senior leaders in semi-structured interviews, generating individual life stories and experiences of establishing and sustaining leadership. We re-present narrative extracts from senior leaders’ life stories and our interpretations using elements of the authentic leadership framework. Within this paper, we focus specifically on elements from authentic leadership: antecedents, life trigger events, values, feelings and emotions. We do not consider aspects of followership.

Our primary contribution is to breathe life into an otherwise theoretical approach to authentic leadership by analyzing empirical data from senior leaders in organization and enabling current leaders to share practitioner perspectives. Indeed, Shamir and Eilam (2005) call for the conceptual framework of authentic leadership to be substantiated and tested. Within our research we do not aim to ‘test’ authentic leadership, nor do we aim to establish whether senior leaders are ‘authentic leaders’ by evaluating experiences against authentic leadership theory; rather our aim is to explore resonance in practice, providing leader practitioners an alternative lens through which to understand experiences of a leader’s role. We are particularly interested in exploring leadership theory in practice as informing leaders’ development.

A final contribution concerns the impact of the research process on the leaders involved; the research enabled them to reflexively engage with their life stories through re-telling their stories to us as researchers and when reading the transcripts of their interviews. Rather than focusing solely upon traditional models and theories of how to ‘be’ a leader, a more powerful approach to leadership development is to enable leaders to reflect upon their own life stories and to enable aspiring leaders to share in others’ life stories, so that they may engage in meaning making of their leader approach and identity.

Leadership Approaches

Often leadership literature purports dimensions of leadership in a clinically prescriptive way, seeking to define and then categorize leadership as an aspirational ‘end point’ through approaches such as leadership behaviour, contingency theory and trait theory (e.g. Lewin and Lippitt, 1938; Fiedler, 1967; Burns, 1978). Seldom does mainstream leadership research reveal the internal angst, emotions, self questioning, self doubt or the thoughts and feelings associated with different experiences of becoming a leader. Research often overlooks subjective experiences of a leader’s life story. While Gardner et al (2005) suggest that the challenges of knowing, showing and remaining true to one self have never been greater for leaders.

Goleman’s (1990) concept of emotional intelligence and Binney, Wilke and Williams (2005) ‘Living Leadership’ explore leadership from perspectives of individual leaders and begin to raise the unspoken, social elements of leading in organization. ‘Authentic leadership’ is of particular interest as it focuses upon such individual subjectivities. There is no single accepted definition of authentic leadership nor authentic leader and researchers use the terms in different ways (e.g. Bennis, 2003; Bennis and Thomas, 2002; George, 2003, Luthans and Avolio, 2003) (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Authenticity is usually understood as not fake but genuine and original. Authentic leaders do not fake their leadership, nor do they take on leadership roles for status, honor or personal rewards (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggest leaders achieve ‘authenticity’ through self awareness, self acceptance, authentic actions and relationships.

Authentic leaders are often portrayed as identifying strongly with their leadership role, expressing themselves by enacting that role and acting on the basis of their values and convictions (Shamir and Eilam, 2005:2). “Leadership is an eudaimonic activity for authentic leaders in that they are true to one’s self and their personal life activities are congruent with their deeply held values” (Shamir and Eilam, 2005:3). An empirically grounded perspective is offered by Kernis (2003:1) who defines authenticity as “the unobstructed operation of one’s true or core, self in one’s daily
enterprise”. Authentic leaders remain cognizant of their own vulnerabilities and openly discuss them with associates. Vulnerability is an important aspect of authentic leadership and particularly under researched. Shamir and Eilam (2005:4) define authentic leaders on the basis of their self-concepts and the relationships between their self-concepts and their actions. Gardner et al’s (2005) conceptual framework of authentic leadership concerns authentic leader and follower development (see figure 1) and is grounded in self and identity.

**Elements of an Authentic Leadership Framework**

*Antecedents and life trigger events*

We begin by exploring antecedents and life trigger events within Gardner et al’s (2005) framework. Trigger events constitute dramatic and sometimes subtle changes in the individual’s circumstances that facilitate personal growth and development (Gardner et al, 2005: 347). Shamir and Eilam (2005) draw upon Bennis and Thomas (2002), Gardner, (1995) and Tichy (1997), suggesting that leaders acquire certain characteristics by constructing, developing and revising their life stories. While Kegan (1982) argues that life stories can provide leaders with a ‘meaning system’ enabling them to act in a way that gives their interpretations and actions a personal meaning. Shamir and Eilam (2005:13) suggest that the events and experiences chosen by authentic leaders to appear in their life-stories reflect their self-concepts and their concept of leadership, enabling them to enact their leadership role. They argue that leader’s life stories account for and justify their ‘leadership’, identifying leadership development out of ‘struggle’ as an important aspect (Shamir and Eilam, 2005:13). Struggle relates to events that have created significant impact which have jettisoned the leader to a different place and continued to be a motivation behind ‘leading’. These experiences enable fine tuning of qualities such as determination, drive, commitment, independence and toughness.

Gardner et al (2005) view leader’s life stories and key trigger events to be antecedents for authentic leadership development. Trigger events within life stories are deemed to trigger personal growth, development and serve as catalysts for heightened levels of leader self awareness.
Trigger events involve crises and events which continue to shape the leader’s development in that they are reflected upon and interpreted in terms of self (Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans and Avolio, 2003, Bennis and Thomas, 2002). Lord and Brown (2004) discuss how positive and negative events can trigger deep change in an individual's self identity, bringing into clearer focus alternative ‘possible selves’ that may eventually replace the individual’s actual self. Indeed Avolio (2005) suggests that authentic leadership starts with how individuals interpret accumulated life experiences.

Through empirical research we explore how the re-telling of life stories can enable leaders to reflect upon their values, emotion and to define anchor points from which their leader approach and identity develops and grows. This is through genuine personal experience rather than against manufactured leadership attributes and outcomes. Indeed, we know or discover ourselves by the stories we tell about ourselves (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998). However, recounting some impactful experience is not enough; the experience must be reflectively worked into the life story, such that the story and identity is revised or redirected (Pallus, Nasby and Easton, 1991).
Values
The second element of the authentic leadership framework we explore relates to values. Kernis (2003) argues that behaving authentically means acting in accordance with one’s values, preferences and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others, attaining rewards or avoid punishments through acting falsely. Values are lasting beliefs that certain modes of conduct are more desirable than others (Rokeach, 1979), with authentic leaders guided by values oriented towards what is ‘right’ and ‘fair’ for all stakeholders. Gardner and Avolio (2003) suggest that these values include trustworthiness, credibility and moral worth. Shalim and Schwartz (1999:24-25) understand “values as conceptions of the desirable that guide the way that social actors select actions, evaluate people and events and explain their actions and evaluation”. When values are internalized, they become integral components of self (Erikson, 1995a, 1995b).
As Shamir and Eilam, (2005:397) suggest “authentic leaders are originals not copies, they hold their values to be true, not because these values are socially or politically appropriate but because they have experienced them to be true”.

The values and convictions of authentic leaders are highly personalized through their lived experiences, experienced emotions and active process of reflection on those experiences and emotions. Luthens and Avolio (2003) and Harter (2002) believe that this is what is meant by authenticity as ‘the owning of one’s personal experiences’. Schwartz (1994) categorized authentic values as ‘self enhancement’: values of achievement, pursuit of personal success, power, dominance over others, personal gratification, hedonism and ‘self transcendence’: benevolence, concern for immediate others and universalism concerned with the welfare of people. Leader values are expected to vary on a continuum anchored at one end by self enhancement success centered values and at the other self transcendence system centered values (Schwartz, 1994). Mitchie and Gooty, (2005) argue that authentic leaders will have both values but will give a higher priority to the latter (Rokeach, 1979). However, it is the moral wisdom of authentic leaders that keeps personalized power and self aggrandizement in check (internal regulation) (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999).

Within our research we aim to explore whether leaders’ trigger events compound this internalization process and whether in practice a leader becomes resistant to social and situational pressures to compromise their values.

**Emotion**

Emotion is the third element of the framework considered. Emotional self-awareness is a basic component of emotional intelligence, one determinant of effective leadership (Gardner et al, 2005). Turnbull James and Arroba, (2005) argue that it is important for leaders to understand the emotion and emotionality within the organizations they lead. Emotionality, understood as behaviours that are observable and theoretically linked to underlying emotion, exists within an organizational system (Reber, 1995). Emotion is motivation (Gabriel, 2000); it is what creates, perpetuates and holds together both individuals and organizations (Vince and Saleem, 2004). Beatty and Brew, (2004) argue that while emotions of leadership are implicit in much extant literature, the historical emphasis on only the behaviour of leaders is insufficient to deal with the complexity of today’s organizational life (Turnbull James and Arroba, 2005).

Leadership research often portrays emotions as culprits that impair or distort an individual’s perceptual and cognitive faculties (Beyer, 1999, Kant, 1963). Here, emotions should always be repudiated or kept under control to attain a clear appreciation of reality (Mitchie and Gooty, 2005). There is pretence that leaders, whilst allowed to be ‘emotional’ in their abilities to inspire, motivate and ‘lead,’ do not experience personal emotions and in particular, negative emotions.
Emotion is experienced as ‘bad’ while rationality is split off as ‘good’ (Carr, 1999). For example, leadership research in general implies that leaders do not experience the primitive anxiety surrounding survival that can be experienced in times of re-organization or mergers or when promotion and pay are an issue (Turnbull James and Arroba, 2005) and yet Kets de Vries (1991) argues that it is a myth that ‘executives’ are rational.

It is becoming increasingly recognized that leaders need to contribute by relying on their personal authority and that they must bring more of themselves into the workplace: their ideas, feelings and values, excitement, enthusiasm and inner authority to guide their decisions and choices (Turnbull James and Arroba, 2005). Leaders are emotional beings who come to know and experience leadership through personal emotional journeys. Within the authentic leadership framework, Gardner et al (2005) argue that leaders will be relatively transparent in expressing their true emotions and feelings to followers, while simultaneously regulating such emotions to minimize displays of inappropriate or potentially damaging emotions.

Hirschorn (1997) contradicts Gardner et al’s (2005) view suggesting that in taking up leadership roles people are more personally exposed and vulnerable which requires leaders to be more psychologically resourceful and to carry a robust and integrated sense of self into their role (Turnbull James and Arroba, 2005:305). We are interested in how this manifests in practice, given the failure of the literature to explore the ‘strutting and fretting’ of leaders. Turnbull James and Arroba (2005:300) argue “emotion and emotionality in the system of leadership is complex, paradoxical and ‘hidden beneath the surface’ of individuals in ways that do not invite rejection or resistance”.

In reviewing elements of the authentic leadership framework (Gardner et al, 2005) a number of issues emerge. Firstly life stories and trigger events may enable leaders to develop certain characteristics, one being enhanced self awareness. However, as this is lacking empirical data, we aim to explore this in practice with senior leaders. This approach may also provide an opportunity to enable others to share in leaders’ life stories, engaging in meaning making of their own leader approach. Secondly, values play a fundamental role for an ‘authentic’ leader and can be held to be ‘true’, as they are lived, experienced and owned. Research suggests that self transcendence values take priority but we question the likelihood of this in practice. Finally the emotion literature throws up the dichotomy between rationally controlled leaders and those viewed as authentic when ‘appropriately’ expressing their emotions and feelings; we explore realities of this in practice.

The Research Approach

A research objective was to gather rich qualitative data by exploring life stories and experiences of senior leaders, focusing upon how they establish and sustain leadership in organizations. The research was informed by a subjective epistemology, acknowledging that multiple realities exist (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), focusing upon the meaning-making of the individual leader in co-constrcuting their experiences.
Life stories are a recognised method of enquiry, however we had a number of aims in collecting life stories of senior leaders; life story as a research method enables the individual leader to be grounded in their personal context, preventing fragmentation and we wanted to gather data reflective of the subjective realities of senior leaders. As life stories are continuously constructed and revised, the ‘lessons of experience’ (McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988) can be learned, not only close to experience but also much later (Shamir and Eilam, 2005:16); we aimed to generate life stories from current senior leaders as a means of reflexive learning. We wanted to offer the resulting life stories to other leaders as part of their own leadership development journey. The principle that lives are not only constructed as stories but also lived, and that people shape their biographies and construct them into life stories (Avolio, 1999) underpinned our research. We have assumed that one of the functions of life story is to justify the leaders’ position and that life-stories can be analyzed and compared to others’ stories to discover the answers that leaders give to questions such as ‘how have I become a leader’ (Shamir and Eilam, 2005:19).

To date 22 senior leaders from the North East of England have engaged in the research. Participants were chosen for their senior leadership positions across sectors and willingness to become involved in the research project. The interviews specific to this paper were conducted in 2005-6 and changing the names of participants and neutralizing organizational details has ensured anonymity. We used semi-structured interviews to develop individual case studies of senior leaders, which we analyzed to produce subjective narrative texts. Narrative is particularly valuable for shedding light on aspects of individual sense making, involving interpretive processes and meaning production resulting in inter-subjective accounts (Currie and Brown, 2003). As part of our authorial strategy the narratives re-presented are those which most clearly convey elements of the authentic leadership framework discussed here. Narrative extracts from 12 senior leaders (Managing Directors, Chief Executives, Chairpersons and Directors), 7 from the Public Sector (4 women and 3 men) and 5 from ‘Corporate’ organizations (2 women and 3 men) have been included to illustrate their experiences in organization. As a final step, we drew upon conceptual cohesion with reference to elements of authentic leadership to provide a framework for interpretation.

**Elements of an Authentic Leadership Framework: what happens in practice?**

Senior leader’s narratives were interpreted by drawing upon elements of Gardner et al’s (2005) authentic leadership framework to explore leadership theory in practice.

**Life stories and trigger events**

The narratives of senior leaders concerning their leadership journeys re-presented here are grounded in their life stories. Returning to Gardner et al’s (2005) framework, participants told stories and described trigger events which indeed had a major personal impact and were offered as explanations for ‘leadership drive’ and current leadership roles.
When asked to tell her story, Rose (CEO) comments,

“When I was quite a latecomer to a career. One of seven, parents divorced, lived on income support basically and public funds. I cleaned the floors at the local Co-op in the mornings and during the day I went to work in a tobacconist and then I had work cleaning someone’s house in the evening so that’s actually three jobs in order to make sufficient income. So not your traditional start point! I went back to education when I was 24, my daughter was four years old and I realized that this was the rest of my life if I didn’t do something about it now… I was disadvantaged, I had hand me downs, and we just lived on the bread line all the time. So it is this constant ‘I am never ever going to be there’”. Rose (2006)

Rose articulates a set of circumstances, the trigger being her return to education and the determination to move away from her current situation, reinforcing Lord and Brown’s (2004) suggestion that positive and negative moments and events can trigger deep change in an individual’s self identity, bringing into clearer focus alternative possible selves. While Gardner et al (2005) refer to negative trigger events which continue to shape the leader’s development. Natalie (Chairperson) shares a similar experience to Rose,

“After that first terrifying moment where I was being made redundant and I was a single parent, that absolutely terrified me – it really brought home the responsibility that I had for my son... You are now wholly responsible financially, you have got to work’. And I think a lot of my drive and what you said, goal-orientation, was staying in work and that was very difficult over the years…There were redundancies on a six-monthly basis, there was another cull and another cull. So I spent most of the eighties and the early nineties expecting to lose my job and success for me was staying in work”. Natalie 2006

The emphasis is upon a negative event triggering deep change in self identity which provides a focus. Fraser (CEO) comments that ‘something fundamentally happens to you’ and tells the following story,

“I had a big stark awakening on the last day of my apprenticeship they came into the cabin and paid everybody off - it’s a bit of a shock for a 19 year old lad just saying, ‘right you’re all finished,’ and on the dole and something fundamentally happens to you and I think I said to myself that’s never going to happen again I need to take control of my own destiny as opposed to having it done to me.” Fraser 2006
A further example is provided by David (CEO),

“I never had anything as a kid. The initial drive was purely thinking of ways that you can make money, honest ways of making money and as I was becoming more exposed to more successful people and realizing how little I had it in comparison to them, as you get introduced to successful people you don’t know what you don’t know until you are introduced to it”. David 2006

Avolio (2005) suggests that authentic leadership starts with how individuals interpret accumulated life experiences. Gardner et al (2005) suggest that the events themselves are deemed to trigger personal growth and as such are antecedents for authentic leadership development. Interpretations are fundamental; the stories create intrigue as to how the values and emotions of these leaders have developed as a result. In relation to these leaders, their experiences appear to have triggered deep change which has sustained as a basis for their leadership career history. Other narratives from leaders represented feelings of being the ‘underdog’ in a number of situations early in their careers which provided ‘drive’ and ‘determination’ to ‘make a difference’ and ‘to succeed.’

Values
In terms of values, Rose (CEO) highlights characteristics of ‘authentic leadership’ clearly in her narrative and actually draws upon authenticity to describe her views on leadership,

“It’s something about acting with integrity and I think acting with authenticity. In times of change I think people sometimes think the answer is out there but usually my experience has been that the answer is in yourself or in other people and I think it’s retaining that self-belief when perhaps round about you things are getting very very difficult. So I think that would be one of the values for me. That authenticity and integrity I think are extremely important”. Rose 2006

The senior leaders’ values were explicit in their narratives and demonstrated that some have developed resistance to compromising their values (Erikson, 1995a, 1995b). Natalie (Chairperson) comments,

“Honesty and integrity. I don’t think I ever promise what I can’t deliver. But I think it’s about honesty and not being frightened to say ‘I don’t know, I haven’t got a clue’. I don’t think there’s any shame about not knowing something, we can’t all know everything.” Natalie 2006
Other leaders also comment upon honesty, trust and integrity as fundamental values to their views of leadership.

“I tend to be honest.” *Steve (MD)* 2006

“Honesty, integrity, trust, fairness. I think that the honesty and the integrity are probably key ones.” *David (CEO)* 2006

“I think you have to keep it simple and be honest and operate with integrity and values. ‘Values’ is a greatly used word but people don’t walk the talk with them.” *Fraser (CEO)* 2006

“So my core values are in accordance with those and I’m probably known most for the valuing people one – hopefully the integrity and the excellence as well”. *Mary (Director)* 2006

On discussing their career moves in their stories, some leaders were clearly uncomfortable when their values of honesty and integrity were not shared in their organizations. This is illustrated by Karen (Director) who comments,

“I felt uncomfortable because their values were not mine.” *Karen (Director)* 2006

Our leaders’ narratives highlight that their values and convictions are highly personalized through their lived experiences and experienced emotions. However, at times the environment makes it difficult. Luthens and Avolio (2003) and Harter (2002) believe that this is what is meant by authenticity as ‘the owning of one’s personal experiences.

“At times I feel I cannot deal with things because of my values and what I was involved in previously. It is hard to release that”. *Tom (Director)* 2006

Rose’s narrative echoes the perspective of Shalim and Schwartz (1999:24-25) who argue that values are conceptions of the desirable that guide leaders’ actions. Rose has spent her leadership career feeling that she was not achieving at the rate of her school friends. A school reunion challenged her perception and created another trigger event, leading to a new path of personal challenge.
In other words, her conception of the desirable changed, with values that now focus upon drive, challenge and success.

“I am an incredibly driven person. I think that has a lot to do with how I started out. I've been playing catch up with my assumption of where everybody was, so I'm looking back on that and thinking that was such a false assumption. I'm now on a path and driven to continually challenge myself and succeed”. Rose (CEO) 2006

Emotion
As Turnbull James and Arroba (2005) argue, leaders need confidence in their capacity to contribute by relying on their personal authority, bringing in more of themselves into the workplace to guide their decisions and choices. However, while leaders are often constructed as inspirational, motivational, charismatic and visionary; descriptive processes which draw upon emotion for authenticity and success, individual leaders are rarely 'allowed' to express individual emotion.

The narratives revealed significant internal dialogues and internal regulation processes to maintain the external impression of the leader. This supports Hirschorn’s (1997) argument that on taking up leadership roles people are more personally exposed and vulnerable, they need to be more psychologically resourceful and develop an integrated self.

In particular Natalie’s narratives highlight emotionality when re-presenting her story of taking on her Chairperson role, particularly in terms of finding it 'hard' and 'tough'. Natalie also reveals levels of vulnerability; of feeling exposed and being out of comfort zone in comments such as ‘I had no knowledge,’ ‘I didn’t know anyone,’ ‘I didn’t have a clue’ and also levels of personal distress in comments such as ‘the worst six months of my life’.

[When taking on the Chairpersons role] “This was even harder. I think this was even harder… So I had no handover at all. So I just came in… I had no knowledge of the public sector never mind this specific organization really… I found it very tough at first. I found it very tough indeed… So I started off life… I didn’t have a clue, I mean not a clue. I didn’t know anyone in the organization I didn’t know who to send anything to. I couldn’t reply to these letters because they were technical… The first six months I would have said were the worst six months of my life, they really were… What he needed like a hole in the head was a new Chairman who really didn’t know the role. So I found it very very tough but you’ve just got to get on with it haven’t you and ask questions and make it my business to find out, meet all the important people in the place like security, cleaning and catering.” Natalie 2006
Joanne’s narrative also reflects emotionality and vulnerability in the first few months of her Chief Executive role.

“I made loads of mistakes, that’s the first thing. When I first came I thought that to be a Chief Executive you had to wear severe suits and know everything that there was to know about X…that lasted for about six months and I was worn out. I should’ve really stuck to being me and I am flawed therefore you need to make sure that within the team that you work with there are people that are really good at the things that you are really bad at…. For the first six months I thought I had to be able to do all of those things and people expected me to, so I had a very uncomfortable time for the first six months and I was quite pompous and I think made lots of mistakes as a result of not acknowledging those areas where I am able to lead and those areas where I am best keeping out of it.” Joanne 2006

An important emergent theme from our empirical data concerns how vulnerable the senior leaders have felt at times during their leadership journeys. They experience great ‘worry’ behind the scenes of the performance of leadership and emotional vulnerability about processes of becoming a senior leader. The leadership literature does not recognize such ‘flaws’, however in practice we were offered numerous examples of vulnerability by senior leaders,

“You will be vulnerable and you will be exposed. Its how you deal with it that separates the leader from anybody else”. David (CEO) 2006

“I suppose these left of centre influences that come and go you almost feel that you’re in control of your own destiny in terms of managing this business but quite easily somebody with a stroke of a pen could say, we don’t need this person anymore.” Tom (Director) 2006

“I think we do have to keep performing in this office and I guess that’s when I feel the most vulnerable. If I spend weeks on a big tender and we don’t get it a) I feel gutted and b) I do feel vulnerable because someone in the office or the organization may well say why didn’t we win it?” Nick (Director) 2006

“I feel vulnerable that I might have upset or done something negative without knowing it. So I feel a bit vulnerable about that. Somebody says to you oh you know that fella he is a horror and he is a nightmare because he said this and did that and this happened to me, that would make me feel terrible if I didn’t know about it, so I feel vulnerable about unforeseen consequences about what we are doing”. Edward (MD) 2006
Discussion

Self awareness, values, self regulation, vulnerability and drive emerged from leaders' life stories and related experiences. The re-telling of the life story can enable researchers and, leadership developers to listen, reflect and learn from leader realities. For the leaders themselves it facilitates the reflection on personal leadership approaches and leader identity. The narratives of senior leaders demonstrate that their life story and trigger events, specifically highlight 'struggle' (Shamir and Eilam, 2005), provide the foundation to other aspects of their leadership journeys and other elements of the authentic leadership framework. Indeed, negative trigger events, impact upon self-awareness, drive, values, and emotion. It is evident that these trigger events contribute to the development of senior leaders’ identities, creating a clearer focus for alternative ‘possible selves’ (Lord and Brown, 2004) as they develop as leaders. Rather than displaying attributes and leadership ‘outcomes’ manufactured against rational models of leadership, our leaders prioritized their own subjectivities and the often unheard of, hidden aspects of leadership resulting from their personal experience. In this research, the elements of life trigger events in Gardner et al's (2005) authentic leadership framework have resonance in practice.

The research has also highlighted how trigger events compound internal regulation processes so that leaders becomes resistant to social and situational pressures to compromise their values (Erikson, 1995a, 1995b). The narratives reveal that for some senior leaders they have developed a level of ‘authenticity’ in that they are able to uphold their values without compromise, whilst for others, the internal regulation is more of a struggle depending on context. As noted earlier, Schwartz (1994) refers to values on a continuum with self enhancement at one end and self transcendence at the other. We suggest that leaders fluctuate between the two and return to the self enhancement arena to recharge themselves during their leadership journeys.

In terms of emotion we were particularly interested in how the framework element of emotion and vulnerability manifests in practice, given the relative failure of the extant literature to explore the ‘strutting and fretting’ of leaders. The senior leaders did surface emotion and emotionality in their narratives. One senior leader supported Gardner et al’s (2005) concept of emotional regulation, in that once internal dialogues are complete they ‘just get on with it’ (Natalie, 2006) whilst the majority of narratives revealed feelings and thoughts relating to vulnerability, isolation and emotion which may be suppressed but are nonetheless felt, when performing as leader. For these leaders, their emotions may remain hidden beneath the surface in practice. However, as we did not explore whether the senior leaders shared their emotions, vulnerability or feelings with others as leaders, we are unable to discuss whether this element of authentic leadership resonates in practice, rather we are left with questions in this area. Whilst emotion and vulnerability was shown in the research relationship, how feasible is it for leaders to display these feelings in practice?
A final area for discussion is the impact of the actual research process on the leaders concerned. Engaging in this research enabled leaders to reflect on their life stories through a process of reflexivity, on re-telling their stories to us as researchers and when reading the transcripts of their interviews. The resulting life stories and trigger events offer enormous insight into realities of leading for the individuals themselves and for others, and perhaps offer reassurance in relation to the thoughts and feelings associated with what appears to be the inevitable ‘strutting and fretting’ in a leader context.

We argue that rather than introducing leaders to traditional models and theories of how to ‘be’ a leader, a more powerful approach to leadership development is to enable leaders to reflect upon their own life stories and to enable aspiring leaders to share in others’ life stories, so that they may also engage in meaning making. Shamir and Eilam (2005:15) argue that a life story approach to authentic leader development suggests that self-knowledge, self-concept clarity and the internalization of the leader’s role into the self-concept are achieved through the construction of life stories; returning to the experience, replaying it in the mind and recounting it to others, attending to the feelings accompanying the experience and its memory, re-evaluating the experience and drawing lessons from it. Therefore an important area for practice is to include the facilitation of, and the sharing of, such life stories in leadership development programmes. This can be achieved through guided reflection and reflexive processes. This is a powerful tool and an alternative to traditional leadership development approaches.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore elements of the framework in practice. The narratives of senior leaders highlighted that life stories experiences and in particular trigger events, are worthy of serious exploration and further research. These fundamental experiences are significant to the performance of leadership and leadership development. Further research is necessary in relation to leaders’ experiences of isolation and vulnerability, their emotional displays or emotion work and any impact on the performance of leadership in practice. Without further empirical data in these areas, the authentic leadership framework appears over simplified. If, as we propose, it is often politically naïve and unrealistic for leaders to share their emotions and vulnerability in relationships at work then we potentially return at this juncture to the ‘poor player strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage.’ However, what the authentic leadership framework does offer in practice is an alternative to prescriptive leadership theories which present leadership as a necessary ‘end point’ to be achieved. The framework provides a vehicle to highlight the often unspoken and unheard of aspects of leadership, rather than assessing leaders against manufactured models.
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