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The gaslighting of authentic leadership 2.0

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Abstract

This article is a response to Bill Gardner and Kelly McCauley's 'gaslighting' critique of our text on the perils of authentic leadership. Against gaslighting 1.0 (evilily trying to convince people to doubt their perceptions), we propose gaslighting 2.0 (enlightenment). We argue that organizations face severe problems and challenges that cannot be solved by motivating managers to engage in introspection and being overly preoccupied by their own authenticity. A search for one's true self is a personal journey of inner growth and heightened self-awareness that individuals, leaders and non-leaders may engage in and find highly beneficial, but outside any notion of exercising influence or power on others to reach career objectives or corporate goals. The broad use of simple recipes with claims of overwhelming positive effects is problematic. Leadership research is often based on highly problematic measures, making most efforts to capture the core phenomenon unreliable. That many people are attracted by simplistic, positive-sounding and ego-enhancing formulas is not the same as evidence for theoretical value and relevance of a truth claim. Taking aspiration as a critical element would call for the development and study of Aspirational Authentic Leadership Theory, which would be something quite different from the static study of how managers score in terms of being true to their values, a core self, and so on. In-depth process studies of managers trying to be authentic navigating dilemmas at work could be an alternative to focus further research on.

Keywords

Authenticity, authentic leadership, gaslighting, critical management studies

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Exploring the metaphor of gaslighting in the study of leadership

Any history or arts aficionado walking through the streets of old Madrid cannot help paying attention to the elaborate, elegant streetlamps that decorate its buildings, streets and plazas. These are called *faroles*¹ (See [Figure 1](#)). They can also be found in other cities like Paris, London or Baltimore, but for us, Madrid and its rich history carries a special meaning, having been the hometown for one of us.

We learn from [Teodoro \(2017\)](#) that on the March 2nd in 1832, over hundred *faroles* were lit on the principal streets and plazas of Madrid, to celebrate the birth of Infanta Luisa Fernanda, the daughter of Fernando the VIIth. A technological innovation, gas light, made this public manifestation of royal grandiosity possible². Until then, the streets of the Spanish capital had been dark – oil and petrol lamps not having the same qualities to bring light to darkness as the newly invented gas light. Joan Carles Alayo, a PhD in industrial engineering and an expert in the history of electricity and gas, tells us the following:

“The interruption caused by gas made a huge difference... it allowed people to leave behind a country in which reigned darkness.” (from [Teodoro, 2017](#))

This important invention was, however, only one in a chain of many. Gas lights were gradually replaced by a superior technology, electricity, during the latter part of the 19th century ([Guerrero Fernandez, 2009](#); [Teodoro, 2017](#)).

But why do we immerse ourselves in nostalgia and romanticize about *faroles* in *Leadership*? We were inspired by the metaphor of *gaslighting* introduced by [Gardner and McCauley \(2022\)](#) in their piece we are here responding to. They express very strong critique of our recent piece, where we warn against the perils of authentic leadership theory ([Einola and Alvesson, 2021a](#)). They feel that we overstress a critical position and manipulate people that find authentic leadership theory (ALT) great. We learn that our ‘*arguments are at odds with the experiences of authentic leadership that both practitioners and scholars have personally encountered. In essence, through their critique, Einola and Alvesson are engaging in the practice of gaslighting, as they try to convince others to doubt their perceptions of and experiences with authentic leadership*’ (p. 801).



Figure 1. *Farol* at the Plaza de la Armeria in Madrid, Spain (from [Guerrero Fernandez, 2009](#)).

We have expressed our views on authentic leadership theory (ALT) in particular and positive leadership psychology in general at length in other articles (e.g. [Alvesson 2020](#); [Alvesson et al., 2017](#); [Alvesson and Einola 2019](#); [Einola and Alvesson 2021a](#); [Gardner et al., 2021](#)), so we wonder how much *more* can possibly be said about authentic leadership theory. We are not asking organizational practitioners and researchers to doubt their perceptions and experiences of usefulness of either concept, leadership or authenticity. We have no idea what precise perceptions and experiences people may have. Our skepticism is directed to a specific notion of AL as a theory and the way it is packaged in a specific set of attributes. We do see the point in people gathering in seminars, retreats and discussion groups to explore one's various experiences with authenticity/inauthenticity, both positive and negative, as a means for professional development and personal growth. As scholars and practitioners, we find both authenticity and leadership interesting topics of study and deep reflection, in particular in our world with so many drivers pushing people away from authenticity. What we have a problem with is when these two concepts are packaged into an attractive sounding, overly simplified concept, lumping cause (authenticity) and effect (some leadership outcome), and when proposing a measuring instrument that just does not work. That there are so many scholars standing behind this thinking and claiming all this is science, offering the great solution to human problems at work, makes us pick up our pen and write a critical piece. Claiming that our criticism is evil gaslighting, is really far out.

When we read the word *gaslighting*, trying to search for its meaning (neither of us is a native English speaker), our thoughts reached those *faroles* on the streets of Madrid, turned on one special day in early spring almost 200 years ago to impress the citizens of the Spanish capital. These lights can also be understood symbolically, both as a celebration of the genius of our species and as a reminder of the temporal and fickle nature of any human knowledge. In our imaginary, we saw those 19th century gas lanterns on one day generously shedding their gentle light and turning what had been a dark, dangerous city that shut its doors at sunset into a vibrant space even at night, and on another being quietly removed and replaced by electric lights.

We propose that just like gas lights were turned off following the progress of science, students of leadership turn their attention to something more promising than the authentic leadership theory (ALT), and its sibling theories. Hopefully, completely new types of ideas, shaking the way we understand leadership today, will emerge out of our collective imagination.

A lasting memory of 19th century gaslighting is, however, the illumination effect. We can refer to this, in opposition to Gardner and McCauley's notion of evil-doing (gaslighting 1.0), as part of the enlightenment project and talk about gaslighting 2.0. Here critical reflection is key, including the questioning of taken for granted, authoritatively mediated truths, so common in leadership theory and practice.

Being a gadfly

We do think there are good reasons to raise warning signals against authentic leadership theory and the type of thinking that led to this and other similar theories. While most leadership researchers seem to go with what is fashionable, sounds good and offers simple and popular solutions, we belong to a minority that points at basic problems and uses the strategy of the gadfly³ in our effort to provoke the change we think is badly needed.

The piece we wrote ([Einola and Alvesson, 2021a](#)) sought to engage with a *Leadership* special issue on the topic of authentic leadership ([Iszatt-White et al., 2021](#)), and it is not a continuation of our recent exchange of letters ([Gardner et al., 2021](#)). Our intention, indeed, was to write as *provocateurs* to stir further debate with broader audiences because we think the field of leadership studies needs

a radical change. This will not happen organically, nor will it emerge from the mainstream. This type of ‘agenda’ is in line with the profile of *Leadership* that explicitly describes itself as a journal particularly interested in critical approaches to leadership, and it openly encourages debate⁴ – something several other scientific journals (as well as many scholars) seem to avoid. Thus, the field of organizational scholarship is fragmented into niches of researchers with similar worldviews and personal preferences with very little inclination to look outside or engaging in broader critical reflection or self-scrutiny.

Unlike coal gas, electricity, black holes, electromagnetism, melting polar ice caps or mass extinction of dodo-bird populations, leadership as a phenomenon is a social construction- a product of our culture. It cannot be studied the same way as the physical world we are immersed in. But even though the *problem of leadership* cannot be deductively solved with a mathematical formula, and even though it does not exist as an unambiguous objective phenomenon we can observe with a magnifying glass, telescope, test tube, measurement tape or thermometer to understand its essence, for us leadership does exist in the ways we collectively and individually choose to represent or understand it. Because of the nature of authentic leadership theory (ALT) and the lack of credible or possible measurements, we cannot follow falsification methodology proposed by Popper to end the discussion. We do not have tools for proving it wrong just as the proponents do not have tools to prove it right. All we have is our rhetorical skills to share with others what we think.

When accusing us of wilful manipulation of those who believe in ALT, Gardner and McCauley recur to the term ‘gaslighting’ as initially portrayed in the 1938 play *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton. On page 802 we learn that the term ‘gaslighting’, according to Cambridge Dictionary, is to be understood as... *the process of causing someone to doubt their own thought, beliefs and perceptions*.

In life and research, there is the danger that we see what we believe in. Hence, *doubting thoughts, beliefs and perceptions* is an essential part of what it is to be a researcher, interested in a given phenomenon. This is the core of reflexivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Doubt is good and necessary to generate new ideas and to weed out ideas that do not work. This doubt accompanied by intellectual curiosity is what allowed gas lights to be replaced by electric lightbulbs. When building our critique, our interest was chiefly the *authentic leadership theory* (ALT) as it is depicted in the many articles published using the construct, not any precise audiences or groups neither of us is an insider in anyway. We simply apply the principles of the Cartesian doubt, anchored in the traditions of the scientific revolution that started in the late 18th century in which scientific authority replaced the religious one.

Doubting is an essential part of what being a scholar means to us and to others (Locke et al., 2008). It has not been our intention to manipulate or gaslight any one person, in the sense of *psychological abuse or tricking or controlling someone by making them believe things that are not true, by suggesting that they may be mentally ill*⁵ (gaslighting 1.0). Our interest is in the phenomenon of authenticity applied to the field of leadership theory, and in the authentic leadership theory as understood in the current mainstream leadership scholarship.

Gardner and McCauley also propose that we may be caught up in our roles as critical theorists and that we took a devil’s advocate position to an extreme to then propose ‘*counterintuitive and somewhat nonsensical arguments about the dangers of ALT*’ (p. 802). We are not critiquing the authentic leadership theory because we like to dig our heels in a critical position for the sake of being critical, and because we are intellectually trapped in a critical-scholar-cave and refuse to see the light. We are simply broadly interested in the millennial concept of authenticity and the rather young academic field of leadership – past and beyond any one theory or leadership idea, such as authentic leadership theory (ALT). When it comes to the merit of our arguments, we have laid them out in detail in Alvesson and Einola (2019) and Gardner and colleagues (2021), and have not seen evidence appealing to our intellect that our arguments are nonsensical.

We do admit though that calling *any* leadership theory perilous can be seen as an exaggeration. We do realize that there are much bigger dangers than *authentic leadership theory* threatening the humankind, such as global pandemics, mass extinction of species, cyber-attacks destabilizing our democratic societies, narcissism of unstable political leaders, threats to democracy and rising sea levels. We might be wrong, but we suspect that any leadership theory is too inconsequential to really be dangerous, at least in comparison to the field of economics that produces a constant flow of recommendations, models or “best guesses” that policy makers and regulators then follow with at times disastrous consequences. Indeed, the economist Friedrich von Hayek warned the general public against the dangers of economics and other sciences of man such as psychology, sociology and history. In the very beginning of his 1974 Nobel Memorial Lecture, he calls the then recent establishment of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science, a “*significant step in the process by which, in the opinion of the great public, economics has been conceded some of the dignity and the prestige of physical sciences*”. But he then continues by dedicating his whole speech to what he calls the *Pretense of Knowledge* and asks the economists to sort out “*how to extricate the free world from the serious threat of accelerating inflation which... has been brought about by policies which the majority of economists recommended and even urged governments to pursue.*”

Students of management do not have the same clout as students of economics in the sense that our theories and recommendations are typically rather inconsequential to policy makers and do not lead to global financial crises, excessive public debt, massive unemployment and street protests, at least not directly. Rather, our theories tend to progress following the spirit of the times in increments and, unfortunately, with very little radically new thinking. In this fashion, authentic leadership theory built on transformational leadership theory, that absorbed key elements of charismatic leadership theory and so on. The huge popularity of authentic leadership even outside academia is, however, in large part due to work by the Bill George, a businessman turned author and a senior fellow teaching at Harvard as we learn from his web page. When his 2003 book *Authentic Leadership* was published, one of us was working in a large company in North America and read it back-to-back with IBM former CEO Lou Gerstner’s 2002 book *Who says elephants can’t dance?* that came out around the same time. Like so many others, he found the tales of these two ‘heroes’ inspiring. However, the direct association between the personal, experience-based account by Bill George of *authentic leadership* with what gradually became the *authentic leadership theory* with all the truth claims around it, is quite disturbing as it undermines academic work and organizational scholarship as we described as one of the ‘perils’ in our recent piece (Einola and Alvesson, 2021a).

Despite all this, we still think that leadership studies and practice, matter. Many of the present day (and future) decision makers in both government and business have been (or will be) trained in our business schools or have attended our executive training programs. Misleadingly presenting our theories as hard evidence-based science is perilous, especially when none of these is critically discussed, falsified or dropped from the repertoire of the continuously expanding *smörgåsbord* of leadership theories. We think that us, scholars, may be in fact misleading the students and practitioners we teach and coach with our lack of modesty and insufficient critical scrutiny of our theorizing. Here it seems that the temptation to solve the gap between what the public hopes to know and what we as social scientists can really deliver by resorting to the pretense of knowledge maybe be too great to resist. As Hayek observes, “... it is often difficult enough for the expert, and certainly in many instances impossible for the layman, to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims in the name of science” (Hayek, 1974). In fact, we think that this scholarly short-sightedness can also be seen as a form of misguidance based on what Hayek calls *scientistic prejudice*⁶ or what we could also call *science washing* of popular, attractive sounding, trendy concepts to meet what the layman public (or our clientele) wants to hear – and not what it would benefit from considering and

knowing. And yes, we think this dynamic is perilous in the way we described in our piece (Einola and Alvesson, 2021a).

We now go back to the comments made by Gardner and McCauley, and engage with those issues we find most pressing to advance the conversation.

The Solution is part of the problem

We all seem to agree that many problems in our world require fixing. But to put this burden on a given leadership style as a fix is extremely naïve. Avolio and Walumbwa (2014) claim triumphantly that “the world simply can’t wait any longer for more authentic leaders and leadership” (p. 353). We have also been informed that ‘the authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders ...’ (Luthans and Avolio, 2003: p. 243). Authentic leadership is then the great savior and authentic leadership theory, books and consultancy a means to get there. Of course, the authentic leadership recipe strongly appeals to managers eager to see themselves in a good light. It easily becomes an exercise in self-confirmation bias. For all managers having difficulties in appearing charismatic or intellectually superior to others or being effective in the management of meaning, it must be very comforting to imagine that you are more authentic, ethical, true to your values and so on than others, in particular the followers who are implicitly less so and react positively to the leader goodness. You can only applaud this character, being so good. But deep reflection, critical scrutiny and realism are absent here. And as we see it, genuine authenticity work has nothing to do with a will or want to influence others, and even less with corporate goals – precisely what leadership is supposed to be about.

Outcomes are, perhaps needless to say or investigate, also very good. Caza and Jackson (2011) see authentic leadership as ‘a powerful response to the entrenched skepticism and suspicion towards established leaders and it accords with a general desire for selfless, enlightened leadership’ (p. 361). The authentic leadership is then supposed to lead to all kinds of positive outcomes. Followers are assumed to exert greater effort, engage in organizational citizenship, experience improved attitudes and mind-sets, increase trust, have positive emotions, well-being, higher motivation, engagement, more satisfaction, greater empowerment, moral development and improved well-being and increases in psychological capital (claims made by various authors, summarized by e.g., Caza and Jackson, 2011, p. 355, with no signs of irony).

Here we find *The Solution*. If people get it, and enough effort – presumably meaning a lot of resources allocated to authentic leadership advocates in research, education and consultancy—the economy, organization and working life finally will leave much of the exploitation, alienation, stifling bureaucracy, corporate bullshit, organizational politics and powerplay, oppressive forms of management behind, and be saved by authentic leadership. We are slightly exaggerating and a bit ironical here, but not much. What happens then to all the hard, mundane work needed to influence subordinates and others to get the job done when the energy and focus appears to be predominantly on the leader authenticity, rather than on those supposed to be served by the organization? We wonder what this type of authentic leadership does, if anything, apart from leaders being perceived as radiating goodness, and being self-obsessed and moral in the right ego-boosting way. Introspection appears to be more important than actively working with others and focusing on results. Being truth to yourself appears as more vital than attending to the needs and wants of others. Of course, an interest in being authentic does not exclude other types of engagements but authentic leadership in its mainstream formulation claims to capture the core element of leadership and thus diverts attention away from other interests and activities.

It can be argued that authentic leadership theory is innocent and harmless. But contemporary forms of power often work through the regulation of identities and normalization of power (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Foucault, 1980) and through ideals and standards for how people should be. Psychologists, management gurus and others express templates for ideal and normal being, and insert guilt and shame on people explicitly and implicitly falling behind the template. People are easily caught in idealized traps for being. We have an enormous focus on the 'leaderization' of the world, implicitly supporting elitism and ideas of some people being superior in a wealth of respects, legitimizing privileges, and turning the majority into followers, thus cultivating passivity and dependence. Of course, in the best of worlds we have great leaders and 'followers' that are not really 'followers', but autonomous professionals working horizontally in making organizations work, but the very idea of leadership presupposes followership, some being active and superior in key respects, some others less so. If authentic leadership is key, then the idea is that 'leaders' are great, and others are small.

Leaders are assumed to be overperforming others, 'followers', in authenticity and morality. But are people scoring high on authenticity then typically the leaders? Does anyone really believe this? What about if a recognized leader scores lower on authenticity than the followers or when a follower is clearly more authentic than the leader (which may well be one reason why he or she has not been promoted to a leadership position in the first place)? One could argue, as Gardner and Karam (in [Gardner et al., 2021](#)) do, that authentic leadership is not about formal management. Yet, the empirical work and measurements typically focus on the formal manager or supervisor and the subordinates, not on careful inquiry finding out who the 'real' leader is or who is the person scoring highest on various authentic leadership components, and then perhaps being the 'real' leader due to extreme authenticity.

Dangers, perils and provocations

We of course agree with Gardner & McCauley and all others who think that some authenticity exercises and being tuned to one's values at workplace may be beneficial. Who would propose that people at work should be inauthentic, untrue to their values, into extensive role playing, and promoting low self-awareness, and so on? But this is not the same as supporting authentic leadership theory in its current framing and as a sum of its four components as a distinct leadership form or ideal. There is plenty of faulty theorizing, unsubstantiated truth claims and tautological reasoning, and little more than variations of themes perhaps so far best outlined by the businessman Bill George in his works.

We are certainly not claiming, as Gardner & McCauley write (p. 801) that 'Einola and Alvesson suggest that encouraging leaders to strive to be authentic by enhancing their self-awareness, processing positive and negative self-relevant information in a balanced fashion, establishing open and transparent relationships with followers, and living by their core values, is *dangerous*.' We wrote the piece ([Einola and Alvesson, 2021a](#)) to be read as a whole, and not to be fragmented in this way to distort what we are saying. Warnings about a specific leadership formula is not the same as being against some virtues. We are from alone in raising the warning flag. [Collinson \(2012\)](#) talks about 'Prozac leadership' in which an extreme positive focus 'creates a dangerously inaccurate impression on the part of leaders about their own efficacy and the health of the organizations they lead' (p. 165). [Tourish \(2019\)](#) also warns about idolization and writes that 'it seems that authentic leaders are paragons of perfection and candidates for canonization' (p. 165), and 'business leaders are encouraged to regard themselves in a messianic fashion. Their job, essentially, is to save the world' (p. 167).

In order to raise a critical perspective, one often works with unpacking concepts and negative dialectics, underscoring a counter perspective. Power often means ordering and claiming reality in a specific way that is difficult to resist, thus leading to the creation of a specific way of defining oneself, others and the world. This is what Foucault (1977, 1980) refers to as normalizing power. A part of this is the structuring of the world in a persuasive and seemingly natural and self-evident way where per definition good things automatically lead to other good things. This type of thinking calls for critical scrutiny as it is typically more about ideology than research. We find that in general, the strong ideologization dominating leadership studies is highly problematic, especially when accompanied by the pretense of knowledge we discussed earlier, just as is the bizarre obsession of leadership scholars with metrics trying to make leadership studies *look like* it belonged to the realm of natural sciences, where the unmeasurable is transformed into presumably precise and trustworthy numbers (Einola and Alvesson, 2021b).

Here, we admit, it is easy to engage in hyper-critique and to be excessively negative. We have warned against this, too (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2012). But given the rather extreme popularity of the authentic leadership theory, and a naïve embracement of it, we think that a strong counter perspective is motivated. Often what appears to be a good thing, is in fact not and problems remain hidden. This does not mean that we are unaware of the provocative nature of our writing. We do recognize and agree with some more moderate and nuanced voices. But we find it is useful for researchers belonging to a dominant group to consider radically different voices, which tend to remain unheard if too modest and weak. This type of dialectic is part of what makes science stronger.

Tautologies and confirmation bias

A major problem of authentic leadership theory concerns the formulations of the phenomenon itself. It is a hotchpotch of quite different, very complex and difficult to assess orientations that are oversimplified and trivialized, formulated in a celebratory manner and with ways of being that are lumped together and targeted for superficial measurements, in most cases questionnaires. Yet, already the early pioneers in studying authentic leadership, Henderson and Hoy (1982) stated the following in their opening paragraph of a study that introduced yet another now forgotten operational measure of the phenomenon:

“Authenticity, more precisely leader authenticity is a slippery concept lending itself easily to neither definition nor measurement.”

These days, many use the authentic leadership questionnaire (e.g. Braun and Peus, 2018).

Here we find items such as these:

(1) self-awareness (e.g., “My supervisor knows when it is time to re-evaluate his or her positions on important issues”), (2) relational transparency (e.g., “My supervisor says exactly what he or she means”), (3) internalized moral perspective (e.g., “My supervisor makes difficult decisions based on high standards of ethical conduct”), and (4) balanced processing (e.g., “My supervisor listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions”).

What do responses to these items really say? Thoughtful people in average corporate situations probably would find it very difficult to answer these types of questions. (1) For example, does the supervisor really know when to re-evaluate his or her positions? How do the questionnaire-fillers know that the manager really knows? And is not the key thing in leadership less about self-awareness than about the important issues to work with, e.g. knowing about subordinates, customers, technical problems and other pressing things typically requiring re-evaluation? Re-evaluations may come

from external feedback and pressure and have little to do with the self. And of course, these re-evaluations may not be accurate. Good judgement is fine, but what has this to do with authenticity?

(2) Who always or even often says “exactly what he or she means”? Or is the item a measure of perceptions of language skills? Most people have some problems in translating what one means in words. After all, few are poets and much is ambiguous, and meanings, just like words, are often not so clear cut and precise. Almost all sensible people are quite cautious and diplomatic a great deal of the time. It is impossible to know if a person says “exactly what he or she means”, as it is typically difficult to know exactly what s/he really means and compare this with what is said. Would a person who actually says what s/he really means thus insulting others or making them unhappy, (e.g. through honest but harsh critique or by making politically incorrect/socially unwelcome statements), be assessed as scoring high on the item? Or would the negative assessment of the person or the unwelcomed statement influence where the X would be put on the questionnaire?

(3) Making decisions with high standards of ethical conduct seems highly difficult in business and politics. What is “ethical conduct”, and according to whom? A person wanting to minimize bad effects on the environment, animal cruelty, manipulation of customers, sticking to Christian/Islamic values, strongly embracing feminism or family values, consumer orientation, and so on, will often have a hard time. Non-mainstream or different values are typically a source of conflict. Junior people exposed to a boss with a different view of ethical conduct may have a difficult time, not only in reality but also when trying to respond to the questionnaire. Occasionally you may respect a person with different ethical standards than your own, but most people see people with other ethics than their own as having odd ideas or being very ideological rather than having ‘high standards’.

(4) Listening carefully to different points of view sounds good, but most managers are short of time, so this is often not possible or practical. It often means long meetings, disliked by many. And the perception of ‘listening carefully’ may say more about whether the respondent gets recognition and acceptance for his/her view or not. A manager listening to others, that are perceived as having ‘wrong’ ideas may not trigger the assessment ‘listening carefully’. It is often impossible to know what a response stands for: the actual thing, correctly measured, the effective impression management of the manager, or a generally positive relationship depending on a favorable bonding between the manager and a subordinate.

All the items appear as a combined description of a behavior and the evaluation of the behavior, an evergreen and a basic problem with most positive leadership work (Fischer, 2018). Mocking this tendency, Tourish notes that ‘in a stunning display of confirmatory bias, they now design studies where only positive results are possible’ (p. 184). We are thus highly skeptical of all studies measuring authentic leadership and then relating it to some other variable. Although we realize that there are exceptions, we see many studies only or mainly studying how people fill in questionnaires (Einola and Alvesson, 2021b), not even perceptions and even less ‘objective’ things out there, such as a leader really saying what he or she really means. If you have a favorable opinion of the supervisor you may agree with most measures, but if you for whatever reason, have a less positive view, you are probably likely to not agree with the statements as they may reflect more general sentiments than any deeper insights about the true nature of the authenticity of the leader. Much research, in fact, seems to be studies of popularity of managers, cognitive dissonance of questionnaire respondents and questionnaire filling behavior rather than real life assessments of things ‘out there’ in organizations.

We realize that various design and technical means are sometimes used to counter these issues, but studies appear of limited value if the core phenomenon is not conceptualized and captured in a rich and precise way. Having said this, we agree with Gardner & McCauley that there are some studies that are a bit more ambitious and try to relate authentic leadership to outcomes measured independently. Clapp-Smith et al. (2009) for example use AL measures and then relate these to

increases in sales. Here AL is correlated with the latter. But it may well be that this says little of causalities. If you have good results, it is probably easier to live up to good authentic leadership scores. Authentic leadership, if it could be identified and really form a ‘whole’ or a distinct, coherent quality, may be an outcome of social circumstances more than some internal, fixed traits of the manager. As [Tourish \(2019\)](#) has observed, managers may come across as authentic when they have the ‘right’ followers, people that are loyal, committed and easygoing. Also, a favorable external situation, growing local markets, weak competitors and so on may lead to success and then it is probably easier to be (seen as) ‘authentic’, stick to values, be transparent, etc. To say exactly ‘what you mean’ is much easier if there are few or no problems, but if subordinates appear incompetent, lazy or have very different values than the manager, s/he may be wise to not say exactly what s/he means, part of the time, but carefully think about the effects of the words being used and perhaps postpone any urge to be authentic until things possibly have improved. This is also the case if there is diversity in the group and it may be difficult to predict exactly how people will respond, some may be offended by what you say and see it as racist, sexist, insensitive to feelings and so on. Here, being very careful about saying ‘what you mean’ may be a survival mechanism. Paradoxically, this inauthenticity may also increase the chance of being rated as authentic on questionnaires.

A major problem is that authentic leadership theory (as well as most other upbeat leadership theories) is detached from real life and real organizations. Researchers typically live in a world of questionnaire filling and processing of unreliable data, only engaging in short-term interactions with managers in workshops, or in education where customer-satisfaction is a key objective for academics and where consultants get high fees for their services. Sometimes research is focused on junior managers/leader-wannabees in various training programs. Here they have often been exposed to the theories that are being investigated and tend to respond accordingly. (There are exceptions, but we are here focusing on some typical patterns, just indicating why we should be cautious accepting all the studies seemingly supporting ALT.)

All this is very different from thorough in-depth studies of managers and subordinates in interaction and having a relationship of some kind. We strongly advocate qualitative work, possibly but very cautiously combined with quantitative tools when appropriate, where managers and their subordinates are interviewed in depth, the context is seriously considered and some observations of managers in action are made. These studies are more demanding, do not rely heavily on quantities and can be seen as difficult to generalize from, but nevertheless give a much richer and more realistic picture of the problems managers face. Our findings are typically that managers and subordinates do see the leadership quite differently and that few managers come near the ideal and it is very difficult to assess their ‘authenticity’ ([Alvesson et al., 2017](#); [Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018](#); [Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016](#)). Managers generally like to believe that they are highly authentic, but sometimes when they try hard to demonstrate this, the subordinates are not convinced and there are various views on the subject matter.

The gaslighting problem

In a rather unexpected, not to say bizarre accusation, we are criticized for gaslighting the *believer* in authentic leadership theory. Gardner and McCauley use strong, pejorative words:

‘Einola and Alvesson’s reliance on inflammatory language and accompanying inaccuracies and misrepresentations of authentic leadership theory, malicious form of manipulation is a particularly sinister form of emotional abuse ... propose counterintuitive and somewhat nonsensical arguments about the dangers of ALT.’ (p. 802)

Gardner and McCauley claim that we are tricking people into not believing in their senses or confidence in personal experiences and that all that is an illusion. For us an important argument is that authentic leadership theory is too nebulous to be real, and those researchers who do believe in it are themselves, perhaps, being seduced away from or forgetting to apply the principle of scholarly doubt in the practice of their profession.

Gardner & McCauley present the reader with this statement:

Do you, when put in a leadership position, seek to learn and grow in this role through self-reflection? Do you consider your core values when making ethical decisions as a leader? Do you attempt to be open with those who might follow your lead, at times making yourself vulnerable, to earn their trust? And, bottom line, do you consider yourself to be an authentic leader, or at least someone who strives to lead in a fashion that reflects your best self? If you responded “yes” to some or all of these questions, perhaps there is something to this construct of authentic leadership, and the constructs of authenticity and leadership are not so incompatible and dangerous after all (p. 804).

We are of course not saying that all this does not sound fine. It appears great and nobody can object to these formulations. All the positively loaded terms are there. Nothing neutral or precise is mentioned, encouraging careful scrutiny and openness. It is almost impossible not to nod in agreement and we all respond with a Big Yes. We do believe! But we believe in good things associated with authenticity – not *authentic leadership theory* as a leadership type and as it is presently constructed.

This type of argument is at the heart of our critique. Authentic leadership theory is formulated and measured in such a way that you can't but agree. Who would argue that you should not learn and rather regress through mindlessness? That you should disregard values and make unethical decisions? Go for closure in interactions? Disregard trust? Be inauthentic and lead in a way that reflects the worst version of you? There is a strong confirmation bias and invitation to not think about what all this means and the seductive simplifications covering complexities, ambiguities and dilemmas. This is, in an academic and intellectual context, dangerous. If we follow Gardner and McCauley's reasoning, then presumably all critique of theories or ideas what people like to believe in is gaslighting. Just think of critical research showing that we are not so rational in our decision making, that we have racist, sexist ideas and prejudices, that consumption is not necessarily the road to happiness, that we may be inclined to blindly follow authority and be very obedient (Milgram, 1974), and so on. Is all this gaslighting? If half of the people think a controversial leader is authentic and half of the people that he or she is an authentic idiot – then whose view prevails? Who gaslights who? It is the task of research to not just confirm what people like to believe in and to win popularity contests through offering 'seductive truths', but illuminate a given phenomenon, as part of what we see as the still ongoing enlightenment project. This calls for critical assessment.

That many people feel positively about something is not the same as a theory being solid and that one should just accept it. Many of the worst dictators in the world have had many devoted followers. People jump on and off fashions with great enthusiasm. When Gardner, McCauley and other advocates of authentic leadership theory meet managers and others, it is presumably those with a favorable and uncritical take on the issue. Often managers are inclined to self-serving bias, identifying with something positive and ego-boosting. Subordinates too may have the hope of the really good leader emerging and easily be seduced by something that sounds really good, all trusting those authors with PhDs in their titles.

Gardner and McCauley refer to a great body of researchers advocating authentic leadership theory. We are indeed puzzled by these numbers and hence embarked on writing our original piece (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). We do wonder how many seriously believe in this theory rather than

just follow fashion, choose low hanging fruits in terms of using questionnaires highly likely to lead to ‘positive’ outcomes in terms of publications, and earn quite a lot from telling managers what they like to hear, about recipes for success that they may easily identify with without demanding so much. It is indeed hard to find a manager who confesses being *inauthentic*. But many researchers not in this camp are deeply skeptical. Outside the field of leadership studies, academics are often critical, partly of the entire domain of leadership studies (seen as US driven and advocating ideological notions on work life). Also, within leadership studies, there are many unbelievers. Our strong critique of authentic leadership theory was voted the best paper in *Leadership Quarterly* in 2019 by the editorial board of the journal (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). Are all these leadership scholars supporting Gaslighting 1.0 (perpetuators of evil manipulation) or Gaslighting 2.0 (critical enlightenment)?

As for the practitioners who have candid experiences of organizational life being rife with ethical dilemmas, compromises, opportunism, conflicts, impression management, role play, exploitation of subordinates, managers saying something then doing something else, political correctness, fashion sensitivity, skillful maneuvering, engagement in corporate politics and power play... are these notions perhaps gaslighted away by idealistic insistence of managers being or aspiring to be authentic creating superior performances? Would perhaps Gardner and McCauley see also this shift of focus as a ‘*malicious form of manipulation*’ and ‘*a particularly sinister form of emotional abuse*’?

Authentic leadership as an aspiration?

To further build their case of ‘gaslighting’, Gardner and McCauley, 2022a, write on page 805 that ‘in their article, they (us) assert that ALT scholars suggest that people have to be authentic “*all at once and at all times*” (p. 488; italics in the original). This is intellectually dishonest.’ The argument moves on to say that since both sides in an earlier exchange of letters acknowledged the aspirational nature of authentic leadership, we should let this topic be.

The full phrase in our original text goes like this: “Knowing oneself, remaining true to one’s values, engaging in balanced processing of ego feedback, and being transparent in one’s relations (all key components of ALT), *all at once and at all times* raise the bar very high for individuals, even if this ambition is a mere aspirational goal.” (Einola and Alvesson, 2021a: 488).

What we – rather obviously, or so we thought – tried to do is to problematize the idea of a very high level of ‘authenticity’ *even when it is an aspirational goal*. It becomes sort of meaningless to try to sort out if someone is 100%, 97% or 25% authentic in a given moment, especially considering how all the four components of ALT come together. Of course, no one believes or argues for rigid fanaticism on this point. Here we agree with Gardner and McCauley. We are not surprised to see that a Baptist pastor does not spend a Sunday afternoon roping a steer on the church property but rather adjusts to his role of a pastor and first cares for those mourning their loved one to then share the happiness of the parents of a baby during a ceremony of baptism (p. 805–806). We would be surprised if it was not like that, given the nature of the profession of a priest. This pastor may be perfectly authentic in his or her role (only this priest can know for sure), despite some burdens involved when dealing with the emotional rollercoaster moving from a rodeo to baptism to funeral may involve. But perhaps like doctors working in ER get used to their emotionally challenging work environment and crime scene investigators and undertakers to theirs, things are not very different for priests.

Being authentic may be an aspiration as Gardner et al. (2021) emphasize, but this is not really the same as what most authentic leadership authors say. Being something and aspiring to be this something is not the same. Trying to be and actually being charismatic are quite different. Being aspirational makes it easier to conceal acts and ways of being quite far from being authentic as defined and measured by questionnaires. Intentions can be good, yet the actual authenticity

performance may be ambiguous. Here the gap can be explained away by the reference to the aspirational nature of the phenomenon. People can get away with ambiguous behavior being labelled as authentic: bad temper can imply being true to one's feelings, micromanagement can be seen as valuing details and being close to operations. Sometimes glaring discrepancies surface – and here the notion of aspirational authentic leadership can support hypocrisy. 'Aspirational' is thus quite problematic, it is a rubber construct, marginally softening the unrealistic idea of people generally scoring high as authentic leaders. So what does being aspirational mean? Having a minor ambition to be authentic, and just when it is easy and without any risk of facing disapproval from superiors, customers or subordinates? Or having a very strong inclination to be a peak authentic leadership performer, and only sometimes adapting to strong situational constraints or pragmatic circumstances? The measures don't say anything about aspirations. Being aspirational is a dynamic process idea, calling for assessments of situations, but apparently to be measured in a static way. Take indicators of self-awareness and insert the word 'aspires', for example: "My supervisor aspires to know when it is time to re-evaluate his or her positions on important issues". Who would then not score high on aspirational authentic leadership? With aspiration as key element, all people – apart from mythomaniacs and psychopaths – are probably top performing aspirational authentic leaders.

But importantly, what is then the requirement for talking of authentic leadership? When it is in action some of the time, when things are favorable like with shared preferences, harmless situations and smooth relations, and when there are no conflicts or risks? Or when people exhibit a minor, 'suitable' or major degree of AL? All people are presumably sometimes a bit authentic, sometimes not. Few people would aspire to say things they do not mean. Regardless, authenticity seen as an aspirational goal to strive towards rather than a fixed state is, we think, an under-represented aspect in the authenticity theory development and empirical work. If aspiration was to be a key element, the entire approach needs to be rethought. Perhaps one could go over to *aspirational authentic leadership theory* (AALT), being something else than the authentic leadership theory. But we suspect that those questionnaires would be even more problematic than the present ones, as the respondents would be asked also to assess motives and aspirations as part of the picture.

We tried to problematize the ideal, a very high level of authenticity, which presumably is called for to separate authentic leadership from something else, like transformational, charismatic or transactional leadership, for instance. We do not think this point has been concluded, especially as there are hundreds of researchers conducting research in this field as well as many other critical voices in addition to ours, emphasizing different aspects. Affirming and further developing one's point of view is not gaslighting or being dishonest – at least not when it comes to scholarly work. We hope this discussion will continue and that more people will take part in it.

An empirical illustration

The huge problem of sorting out if people are – or aspire to be – authentic or not can be illustrated by concrete examples. These are typically ambiguous about the degree or aspiration of authenticity, its relation to leadership outcomes, and difficulties in assessing the phenomenon (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). A typical example is Henry Harding at Big Technology Ltd, who during a set of interviews indicating himself being very much an authentic leader. Henry is critical of the value of talking about company culture:

'I don't believe you change anything by talking about it, you have to live it. If you don't live it as a manager, then you can try to change any programme you like, but in the end you won't have changed anything. I support my co-workers by doing things. I don't stand around chatting with the engineers.'

Show them the way instead, that you're making changes – make sure that we gain a market acceptance and that we're doing things properly. I don't talk about cultural change – if that's what we really want, then we have to do it and live it. I live cultural change and support it as best I can.'

On another occasion he says:

'We change the culture through what we do. I don't believe in cultural change programmes, I believe the management team must be role models. They have to take the culture into their own hands and change the culture through their daily work. You shouldn't go to a consulting firm, you have to be the role model and show in your daily work that you really mean what you want to do. That's real cultural change.'

Managerial life here is not a question about acting a role in a remote and fake way; it is about identifying with the job in a way which makes others believe in you and have faith in the way you work. 'Role' here refers to the fact that there is an external world – an audience – which observes and reacts to the manager, who is, it is understood, the central actor in this situation. But the leading actor must be one with the role, and through identification and commitment make sure that it is an expression of their true identity. It then becomes less of a role – rather, it is about the individual expressing what they stand for a little more clearly, more dramatically. (p. 109)

He stresses being a role model:

'Being a role model is not about acting but about really putting your heart and soul into it. Being a role model means more than just playing a superficial game. It's a question of identifying with what you do, you have to believe in what you're doing if you are going to be an effective role model.' (p. 151)

Harding acts as a substantial, engaged person expressing himself in a way that can inspire others, scoring high on authentic leadership.

But what do others think of this? Do Harding's co-workers in fact see him as a role model, someone they look up to and whose actions can serve as an example for how they themselves act in relation to others? There is no clear answer to this, since Harding's co-workers vary in their view of him and his influence. There are some positive views of Harding. Some people are drawn to his ability to make decisions and get things done, which demonstrates a consistency between the way his management is formed as a role model and the interpretations by others. They see him as honest, straight-talking and reliable person. Others don't describe him in these terms, but say that:

'Harding is dictatorial and authoritarian, but he can't do everything himself. He's going to have problems, because he can't do everything on his own. Shaking up people the way he does only works up to a point, and then it backfires on you.'

Another co-worker expresses a similar view:

'He undermines and takes decisions away from people, he doesn't empower the people below him, and how long can you run an organization in that way?'

'I think it's sad that one person can have so much influence. He changes direction every time we meet, and he shouts and screams at people, and we'll have problems with this guy before too long.' (p. 272)

Is Henry Harding an authentic leader then, engaging in balanced processing of ego-feedback and everything else? Yes, probably very much so according to himself and some of his subordinates, but not according to many others who would describe him in very different ways. He probably tries to be true to himself (whatever that means), but his openness for feedback and self-awareness seems to be discussable. Given the frustration and dissatisfaction of some of the subordinates, the assessment of his authenticity, its value and success is out for the jury to decide upon. (p. 252)

Is Henry Harding an unrepresentative example? Would a great majority of managers be more easily classified in terms of their qualities as authentic leaders? The in-depth cases in [Sveningsson and Alvesson \(2016\)](#) don't include any clear-cut examples. Having, for example, read a carefully researched and detailed book about Steve Jobs ([Isaacson, 2012](#)) does not give us any clear answers either.

A methodological illustration

We can imagine something quite different from authentic leadership theory, but also formulated in positive ways. Consider what we call *pragmatic leadership* (PL). In current times of multiple challenges on a global scale, realism and stability is needed! Here is our questionnaire:

- 1) my supervisor sticks to a well thought through line of working and does not change course all the time,
- 2) my supervisor is sensitive to the feelings and views of others and approaches others respectfully without insisting on expressing his/her own views and values,
- 3) my supervisor encourages thought diversity,
- 4) my supervisor has a realistic understanding of the world of business and realizes that a high moral profile may far from always be possible and is pragmatic more than ideological,
- 5) my supervisor is an effective decision maker and refrains from long, unproductive meetings where things are discussed in length until all of us agree on the way forward.

It is likely that items with the mentioned formulations would correlate with people producing positive assessment on a range of issues, including satisfaction, organizational identification, trust, commitment and perceived success of the unit. Our *pragmatic leadership* (PL) is almost the negation of authentic leadership. But as nice-sounding formulations are persuasive we anticipate that most people would agree that PL is good and if they rate the manager high in terms of PL they would put high scores on all the variables that indicate something else good. So, people could well align themselves behind authentic leadership *and* its opposite pragmatic leadership, at more or less the same time. More neutral or negative formulations of authentic and pragmatic leadership would probably lead to other results. We like people that are open and express their views, but also those being tactful and diplomatic. We like people with high ethical standards, but not when they clash with our own. At the same time as people may like authentic leadership (as formulated it is too easy to find it good), a more neutral or negative wording of a similar orientation would most likely lead to a mixed response or a dislike. In a sense much leadership studies, including AL, is just a matter of positive wordings being in circulation, creating near-tautologies guaranteeing positive 'results' ([Fischer, 2018](#)). (Another illustration of easily produced positive links is provided by [Tourish, 2019](#), referring to 'athletic leadership'.)

Final words

We see authentic leadership theory as an example of highly problematic theory in leadership studies. It is not necessarily worse than other versions of positive leadership ([Alvesson, 2020](#); [Antonakis,](#)

2017; Fischer, 2018), and it may be unfair to single out one theory like this. But this theory is very popular, having so far not received the same devastating critique as for instance transformational leadership (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). So there are reasons to turn a skeptical eye to it, partly to show broader problems with leadership studies in general, dominated by ideology, heroization of leaders and leadership, portraying a smooth and friction free world somewhere within our reach, based on a set of problematic assumptions and methodology, and directing attention away from important and complicated real world issues (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016; Learmonth and Morrell, 2019).

Tourish (2019) points that a good theory needs to consider both what is good and bad about it, and that without scrutiny, there is only pseudo-science. He suggests that authentic leadership researchers have fallen into this trap and show little interest in escaping it. The gaslighting metaphor suggested by Gardner and McCauley may be valuable, but hardly for defining and vilifying all critical research for not accepting and confirming current ideologies, fads and wishful thinking. Many leadership scholars may have reasons to reconsider the Gaslighting 1.0 type of claims before accusing those who point at severe issues such as confirmation bias and tautological thinking of unfairly making people doubt their experiences and senses. The Gaslighting 2.0, despite its imperfections (and there is much critique of the enlightenment project), tries to illuminate and problematize how we tend to relate to the challenges of the empirical world in research. Organizations face severe problems involving struggles much more complicated than managers engaging in introspection and being overly preoccupied by their own authenticity struggles can ever solve. And spending huge resources and much faith in, for instance, authentic leadership theory is hardly helpful, neither for organizations nor managers led to believe that ‘authenticity’ is what it takes to solve the problems of our contemporary organizations.

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Notes

1. A *farol* or *farola* is a decorative streetlight or lamp made of glass and iron.
2. Gas lights were not invented in Spain. According to Sweeney (2019), in 1792, William Murdoch, a Scottish inventor, equipped his home with pipes that delivered coal gas to lamps. The coal gas combined with oxygen in the air to produce carbon dioxide, water vapor, heat and light. Gradually, this invention spread to elsewhere and soon the city streets across the world were populated by gas lights.
3. Here we refer to the Socratic tradition of systematically asking stinging questions (Drengson, 1981) to thoroughly examine ideas and their validity.
4. Please see the homepage of *Leadership* at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/description/lea>
5. The Cambridge Dictionary defines gaslighting as: *The action of tricking or controlling someone by making them believe things that are not true, especially by suggesting that they may be mentally ill*: Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse/His gaslighting was a deliberate attempt to convince her that she was losing her grasp on reality. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gaslighting>

6. Hayek in his 1974 lecture uses the concept “scientistic prejudice” without giving it a precise definition, but it refers to a tendency to apply a ready-made technique or imitate the form rather than substance of scientific procedure, as if “one needed only to follow some cooking recipes to solve all social problems”, and “...it sometimes seems almost as if the techniques of science were more easily learnt than the thinking that shows us what the problems are and how to solve them.”

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