

Using a living theory approach to action research to develop authenticity as an organisational leader

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Introduction

In this paper we share the reasons why we believe that leaders researching their experience of authenticity in their own practice can make an original contribution to knowledge. The contention is that most research focuses on academics inquiring into what constitutes authentic leadership through observing, questioning and interviewing others; but does not include **how** to develop as an authentic leader through the first hand exploration of their own practice. We discuss what is involved in researching our practice, what it has to offer that is of social value, and the implications for others who might be interested in this approach to knowledge creation concerning authenticity and leadership.

Joan – Director, Centre for the Child, Family and Society, Liverpool Hope University

Perhaps I should start by setting the context for this dialogue, so that the reader understands how we come to be talking together, and what our shared interests are.

We each see ourselves as leaders: Sonia as a Chief Executive of a Carers' Centre, Nigel as an Education Inclusion Service Manager within a local authority children's services department, and myself within a research centre of a university.

Our conversation, focusing as it does on a new way of generating knowledge about being an authentic leader, needs to be located within a wider debate about 'the nature of research' (Brew 2001). This question merits wider discussion than can take place in the current paper. However for the present we are accepting the following definition: "Research and experimental development is formal work undertaken systematically to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications" (OECD 2002)

I am particularly interested in challenging the traditional paradigm of 'scholarly research' which privileges third person methodologies for knowledge generation over first and second person methodologies. This paradigm is still dominant within many universities. It means that the learning which emerges from the experience of professionals as they research their own practice, and continuously seek to improve what they do, is in many academic contexts still challenged as having relevance only in relation to the personal development of individuals, and to the immediate context in which they are working.

Nigel, on the other hand, has had concerns for some time that 'academic' research often has little bearing on improving the practice of, for example, teachers. He has found that often a real change in practice comes from 'reflective in and on practice' (Schon 2011); and that through discovering how we might improve practice, we can then share our experiences with others and add to the knowledge base of a particular discipline e.g. the pedagogy of teaching. In challenging the traditional paradigm, we might also be challenging what we value as research itself.

Sonia is looking at the significance of self-study in researching her authentic leadership. She has found that by sharing her story with the staff, volunteers, trustees, carers and their families whom she supports, they are able to experience her authenticity as a leader. They also see that is leading in a way that is true to her core value of participation. Sonia has found she agrees with Clandinin and Rosiek, (2007), when they say that these findings have 'wider insights useful not only to the person himself or herself but also to the wider field of social science scholarship generally.'

Although coming from different perspectives and experiences, the three of us are agreed that we need to find ways to communicate and evidence knowledge gained from first-hand experience and practice, such that its social value is recognised and accepted as having academic credibility. If we do not achieve this, we believe that we are denying the kind of knowledge needed if we are to deal with the many crises currently facing humanity - such as the lack of trust in those who have led us into the current world economic crises.

The zeitgeist of the past decade has been characterized by a loss of trust in corporate and political leadership and a concomitant desire for a more simple, transparent and trustworthy leadership style. (Diddams & Chang 2012: 593)

Thus, there is a strong moral impetus motivating us to engage in research of this nature. We do not believe that invalidates what we do; to the contrary, we consider that there needs to be more effort made to develop research methods which aim to enhance human flourishing across and between all professional contexts.

Each of us believes that taking a living theory approach to action research provides us with a means of researching our own practice which achieves this outcome. Living theory was initiated and developed by Whitehead (1989) when he began to inquire into what he needed to do to improve his practice as a science teacher in the late 1970's. Since then, many postgraduate students have used living theory as the basis of their masters and doctoral research, much of which is freely available on Whitehead's website (www.actionresearch.net). Consequently, there are substantial numbers of 'living theory theses' where the researcher's aim of improving their own professional practice is the focus of their study.

In the particular context in which we are working, we are interested in taking a living theory approach to developing our respective leadership roles. Living theory is a values based form of research which has 'I' at the centre; the researcher aims to understand the educational influences on their own learning, and to provide an evidenced account of their influence on the learning of others and on the learning of the social formations in which they live and work. In order to achieve this, they work through a series of action reflection cycles, where they identify and address issues of professional concern (Whitehead & McNiff 2006).

Another factor we each had in common was a wish not only to recognise the values that underpinned our practice, but to show how our values influenced us in our leadership roles. We were interested in being authentic leaders. We resisted the view that 'authenticity' was a quality that you could attach to the leader, that when leader you could 'step into' those qualities, then leave them behind when you moved into another role. Rather, we wanted to demonstrate that as leaders we were being authentic to the values that guided us as individuals; there was a sense of coherence between the personal and the professional.

The academic literature includes discussions on how, and indeed whether, a person can be accurately judged to be truly authentic. Some people may be so good at acting a role that they succeed in their aim to communicate authenticity, despite in fact behaving in a manipulative way for outcomes favourable to themselves.

The three of us agreed that one way of enabling others to judge whether leaders were being true to their values was to tell the story of how they had come to hold their values, and how their experiences influenced their behaviour as leaders. In this paper, both Nigel and Sonia give such an account, an important aspect of which is an explanation of the relationship between early childhood events and how they approach their current leadership roles. The contention is that in giving an evidenced account of this relationship, and in developing their own dynamic living theories based on researching their own practice, they are making an original contribution to knowledge.

Sonia Hutchison, Chief Executive, Carers' Centre, Bath and North East Somerset

I believe that in telling my story, I am providing a good example of how researching own practice can have a valid role to play in the generation of knowledge that has academic credibility.

In my role as Chief Executive of a Carers' Centre, the principle that guides me in my leadership role is that of encouraging the active participation of all stakeholders in the organisation. I have a theory of practice, which I articulate as follows: I believe that if I stay true to my value of active participation, then the organisation will benefit from the viewpoints and experience of all who have an interest in it, and as a consequence the organisation, the carers and their families, the volunteers and the staff will thrive.

I recognise that this is a generalised statement, for which I am gaining supportive evidence through my research. It is a theory that has emerged from my own experience; and I continue to explore it in my current role. In that respect, then, I am researching my own practice, using evidence from my experience to either support or refute my theory.

I am also working within a social policy context where key policy documents clearly show the mounting desire of recent governments to ensure people actively participate. Putting People First highlights the importance that services offer carers choice and control. The way the Department of Health sees this happening is that 'real change will only be achieved through the participation of users and carers at every stage.' (p.2) However, it is not clear in these policy documents how this is to be achieved in practice. Therefore I believe my research can have a real impact on creating a body of knowledge to make active participation a reality, and learn what it means to authentically lead an organisation with active participation at its heart.

I am committed to communicating to others what I learn from my continuing inquiry, both in terms of presenting a case for the importance of encouraging the active participation of all stakeholders in any context, and (perhaps more importantly) exploring how this can actually be achieved in practice. A major aim is to communicate that learning in a way that is of value to others, and can provide a basis for them to build on, should they too wish to encourage the active participation in any context. I believe that making my evidenced and validated account publically available will provide an original contribution to knowledge; and as a result can be seen as research that has social value.

My belief in participation has its roots in my own childhood experience. I was not able to live with my family of origin from the age of three and a half, and was placed in a foster home. Whilst I was not able to make this initial decision I always believed I should be listened to as a child. From the age of 5 years, I was asked by social workers what my opinions were, and these were taken into consideration. My foster parents also encouraged and respected my views. Whilst other children may believe they have the right to be heard, I think I felt this more strongly, as being in care meant I was in the unusual position of seeing social workers

who could make decisions that affected where I lived and with whom, from a very young age. At age 12 I was given a leaflet about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The social worker particularly pointed out Article 12, which Alexander Nurnburger, aged 9 had translated into plain English and said: 'Whenever adults make decisions that will affect you in any way, you have the right to give your opinion, and the adults have to take that seriously'. This articulated the belief I already had: that is, that my participation in decision-making processes was a right; a right I could assert in any situation, whoever my social worker was. I found being listened to throughout my childhood very empowering and despite my situation of being fostered, I was a confident child.

When I was 16, my ability to influence decision making was increased, when my social worker asked if I wanted to be a co-opted member of the social services board. This led to being visited by the Director of the Social Services Department, who explained what my role would be. As a representative of foster children, I was permitted to make comments on any paper being discussed. I found this extremely empowering. I was motivated to read all the papers despite their substantial length, highlighting what I felt was important, and preparing comments. My role was not a tokenistic one, and I often gave my views at Board meetings, which were always taken seriously. The councillors would tell me afterwards what they had learned from my contributions, so I knew I was making a difference. This supported the growth in my own self-belief, and reinforced my increasingly passionate belief in the importance of active participation.

Entering into the world of work, my primary incentive for climbing the 'career ladder' was to find a way of increasing my power and influence so that I in turn would be able to open doors and empower those with whom I worked. In my earlier jobs, I experienced frustration in a number of roles where the organisational leader did not empower me, nor create a context where the full participation of all staff and service users was encouraged. Consequently I was not able to encourage the involvement of the beneficiaries of the organisation as much as I would have liked. If I were to use my own learning in a way that would influence the wellbeing of others through actively encouraging their participation, then I needed to gain a position where I had executive decision making power. I needed to be a leader.

Gaining the position of Chief Executive of the Carers' Centre has given me this leadership opportunity. In telling the story of my childhood experiences in the care system, I am providing a rationale for why my value of empowering people through participation guides my actions as a leader. It also provides an explanation for my discovery that traditional forms of research do not help me in understanding how I can be the kind of leader I want to be, the kind of leader who empowers. Nor do they help me be a leader who clearly lives their values in a way that is experienced as authentic.

An explanation for this is given in a recent Harvard Business Review. It reported that in the last 50 years, more than 1000 studies have been undertaken by leadership scholars. Despite aiming to identify definitive styles, characteristics, or personality traits of great leaders, none has been able to produce a profile of the ideal leader. They suggest that you cannot be authentic by trying to copy someone else. You can learn from the experience of others; but to be a genuine and authentic leader, you need to 'be who you are', and not imitate anyone else.

Despite this conclusion, the same Harvard Business Review went on to report on research that had been undertaken to discover how people became and remained authentic leaders. In what they claimed to be the largest in-depth study of leadership development ever carried out, they confirmed that they could not determine any universal characteristics, traits, skills or styles that contributed to their achievements. Instead, they came to the conclusion that...

... their leadership emerged from their life stories. Consciously and subconsciously, they were constantly testing themselves through real-world experiences and reframing their life stories to understand who they were at their core. (Harvard Business Review 2007)

This confirmed for me that I would not 'learn' how to be a leader through reading accounts of behaviours that others claimed would make good leaders. I knew exactly what kind of leader I wanted to be. I had become committed to the value of empowering others through supporting their active participation. This was a personal value which I wanted to live out in the world in the best possible way that I could. I wanted people to know who I was, and where I was coming from, so that they would understand what I was trying to achieve. They would also know that when I was encouraging them to participate, I genuinely meant it, and there would be real benefits, rather than them suspecting that the initiative was superficial, short-term, and/or tokenistic.

I wanted them to see that I was an authentic person, and that my role as a leader was being guided by the values that were integral to me in all parts of my life. My consultation of the research concerning authentic leadership affirmed that authentic leadership is about your actions being based on your values and convictions (Shamira and Eilam, 2005). What I could not find, however, was the knowledge base to tell me how to live my values to enable the participation of others in an organisation.

This is the source of my own research question. I wanted to discover how to improve my values-based practice as a leader, to enable the participation of all those connected to the Carers' Centre, including staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. I did not have a fixed theory at the outset as to what I needed to do to empower others through their active participation. Through researching my own practice, though, I could develop my own 'living theory' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006) to help me understand how to achieve my goals. I could, in consultation with others, learn what actions encouraged participation, and what actions discouraged it. The feedback from staff, volunteers and beneficiaries would be essential in this, and would provide me with evidence concerning the extent to which I was successful in what I was aiming to achieve.

As my living theory has developed, I have increased the range of opportunities for carers to participate in processes central to the running of the organisation, such as recruitment, training, decision making forums, and being on the Board of Trustees. I have discovered that the more I empower carers, they express feelings that I felt as a child; that is they tell me how good it feels to have control over their lives, so that they can influence the decisions that affect them.

I am using multi-media approaches as part of the evidence I produce, as a means of researching whether I embody my values as an authentic leader. Huxtable argues, 'living educational values are dynamic and relational and are not adequately communicated through 'fixed' forms of representation' (Huxtable, 2009:12). Using multi-media approaches helps me to develop my epistemology in authentic leadership, not just theoretically but by checking the validity of my claims in my practice:

It isn't simply that I need to work with video and multimedia forms of representation to express more clearly what is being done, it is that watching the video changes the nature of knowledge itself and allows its development. (Laidlaw, 2008:17)

I have found evidence through conversations with carers, volunteers and staff that I am empowering carers, volunteers and staff. I have chosen one video clip to show an example of the evidence the videos are providing. This video is with Rosie, a carer and a trustee

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyHP-554ilg>, where Rose provides her validation that I am living my values through my authentic leadership in the embodiment of my values.

Some examples I identified, have been agreed by Rosie when she says I 'give tremendous leadership' (1:55), that I am 'very inclusive of everybody' (2:05), and that 'staff, volunteers, trustees, everybody is included' (2:16). This demonstrates that Rosie has observed my active participation values in action in my leadership.

Later Rosie talks about my style, that 'my enthusiasm comes through but it isn't overbearing' (5:17), and that my 'sincerity comes through ... honest and trustworthy because you mean what you say' (5:23). Rosie is again validating that she has seen my authenticity in action.

Rosie talks at the end about how the carer involvement work at the centre 'empowers carers to become spokespeople ... you can see their confidence grow.' (15:40). This mirrors my experience of being listened to and actively participating as a child.

As well as using video to research my leadership, I am researching with carers what impact being involved in social work education has on the students and on the carers who are involved. We have used meetings which use action-reflection cycles to plan sessions, review what we have learnt from the sessions, share what we have learnt and then use our learning to plan the next sessions. The sessions have identified that having carers involved in social work student education has a major impact on the students' learning which we have measured through students rating their understanding before and after sessions. Also the carers involved have identified that they feel empowered by participating. However, the carers, as they have had time to reflect, have suggested a number of improvements which can be extended to all areas of participation in the Centre. Through this project we have all, through these action research processes, learned a vast amount. This enables me to improve my leadership in taking forward how we support carers to actively participate in the Centre.

I find I am challenged at times by carers, volunteers and staff and can find myself to be a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989). By encouraging people to give feedback and actively participate, means I also receive criticism when I am not fully living my values. Staff have fed back through team meetings when they feel they are not being fully involved and say they feel disempowered when this happens. I find this helps me to reflect on my practice. I have learnt that enabling people to actively participate means I need to create the time and space to listen and involve people. When I allow myself to become too busy 'doing', that is when I stop living my values fully and the impact is that we can waste time doing things carers don't want or need, and staff morale reduces. When this happens, I reflect internally that I feel uncomfortable with the way things are going. I then use supervision, senior management meetings, team meetings, and planning meetings to explore what is going wrong, which brings me back into the processes which ensure people have time and space to fully participate, and hence remind me to live my values fully.

Nigel Harrison, Education and Inclusion Service Manager, Bath and North East Somerset

As indicated previously, I too have strong feelings about the validation of scholarly research that is grounded in professional practice. I have recently retired from 43 years in public service of working with children in various roles, the final one being as Education Inclusion Service Manager with a well performing English local authority, where I worked for the past nine years. Throughout my professional life, my abiding principle has been to focus on the wellbeing of the child: whatever else is going on in the wider organisation, to always

remember that there is a 'child in the centre'. Even in these tough economic times where we all must be mindful of using public money well, it has become a kind of mantra for me that I repeat regularly when working with others: "Where is the child in this?" For me, I see children and young people as the emerging future of humanity. It is a vital part of who I am; I do what I can to ensure children and young people are protected, encouraged and educationally nurtured toward the life they want to live. I have had this sense of who I am and what I want to be like in the world since I was very young. Like many others I have been on professional development courses; many of them involved acquiring new declarative, procedural or strategic knowledge and as such were reasonably effective; however, there were courses that 'told' me what the traits of a 'good leader' might look like. For example Diddams & Chang suggest that...

...authentic leaders promote trust among their followers because their deep self-knowledge of both their strengths and weaknesses creates a non-defensiveness that allows for them to be consistent across situations and transparent with their followers regarding the reasons for their actions. (2012: 594)

Putting the issue of the context in which leaders lead aside, I can understand this but I have always been puzzled by the 'how'? How do I as a practitioner leader, aiming to be authentic, promote trust? How do I gain self-knowledge of my strengths and weaknesses? Am I transparent with my followers and if so, what is it that I do? (Because if I knew, I might be able to do more of it, or even spread the word by contributing to a body of knowledge!)

Like Sonia, what I have discovered is that my values (which are the principles by which I live my life) are grounded in my childhood experiences; although unlike her, I came from a stable family of origin, and generally experienced considerable love and security from my parents, relatives and local community members. We were not materially well off, but in terms of quality of relationships, I experienced tremendous riches. This has led to my core value being that of positive relationships; the other values I aim to live by, such as being open and honest, and being committed to social justice, act to support and promote that core value.

A comment that made a great impression on me when I was a teacher at an early stage of my career was when a colleague said: "The difference between me and you is that I teach a subject and you teach children". This made me realise that it was the quality of relationship that was of primary importance to me; and I believed that if I paid attention to the relationship, the child would be in a more conducive emotional state to learn. However focusing on developing a positive relationship with each individual meant that I had to be uniquely responsive to each situation I was in. I could be taught a set of skills that told me how to plan a curriculum, present teaching materials, and assess work; but I could not be taught a set of skills that told me how to develop a good relationship with each and every child I encountered. I had to learn how to do that as I went along, taking into account the complexity of the situation, the personality characteristics of the other person, and my own personal qualities and awareness.

Using Schön's ideas of reflection-in-action, I would be thinking about what I was doing in each interpersonal encounter: was I being genuine? The young people I was working with were very sensitive, even hyper vigilant, to others and particularly if someone was not being genuine. Was I accepting of the young person and their family, regardless of what had happened in their past? Was I truly and warmly offering that acceptance or was I doing it because I 'thought' it was the right thing to do?

And so the questions and self-examining would continue. Every day, I would explore (research) ways to improve my practice in support of my conviction that by working at developing genuine relationships, I could influence the lives of some young people. In

undertaking that exploration via action reflection cycles, I believe I was able to improve my relationships and hence, improve my practice. I was also able to share my 'learnings' with others, not only in relation to the methodology but also in terms of outcomes.

My belief in positive relationships also applied to my connections with colleagues. For example, when working as a behaviour support teacher in a large comprehensive school, a major aim was to reduce the high numbers of exclusions in that school (the highest in the city at the time). I liaised with the teachers and the head teacher in such a way that they were encouraged to develop good relationships with each other and with the children. There was evidence that this approach was effective in that when I left the school, it was the lowest excluding school in the city.

My experiences in schools and other institutions led to me to wonder how I could encourage the development of positive relationships not only within my own personal context, but within the wider organisation however large. Consequently, I was fascinated by the concept of a Learning Organisation when I encountered it whilst studying for a Masters in Leadership and Organisation in Public Services. I read a vast amount of literature which aimed to tell me what a learning organisation was. For example, Argyris (1999) talks about:

...ideas of systematic experimentation, movement "from superficial knowledge to deep understanding", "comprehensive frameworks" for the evaluation of progress and the "opening up of boundaries (to) stimulate the exchange of ideas" (p1)

I was in total agreement with these ideas and others I read about. However although I was presented with many good notions about what to do, again, they did not tell me how I could do it. Any guidance could only be in a generalised form, and could not take into consideration the unique person I was, or the unique professional situation in which I was working. I could only discover this through focusing on my own practice, and learning what I needed to do through my own experience, using feedback and evaluation from others to help me to reflect and continuously improve.

Thus, like Sonia, I too found that it was through researching my own practice, through developing my own living theory, that I could discover how I could develop a learning organisation which would achieve my core value of developing positive relationships, which would always have the child at the centre.

Schein comes close to supporting the idea of leaders researching their own practice when he states that they must...

... look inside themselves to locate their own mental models and assumptions before they leap into action (1992:373)

One of the criticisms of trying to transform an organisation through 'hard' mechanisms such as restructuring, change management programmes or introducing different rules and protocols is that, after an initial period of destabilising, they are designed to put the organisation back into stability. Eventually, the organisation settles down into working within the new structures, or to the new rules, and becomes stable again, and potentially unable to respond to changes in the outside environment. This then prompts further and possibly more regular restructures and increasingly new or different rules. I discovered that the only way to create sustainable change was to facilitate a process where all involved understood the reasons for the change, and were prepared to work together to achieve it. This took me back again to my core value: the need to develop positive relationships and work with people in way that they experienced as open, honest and fair.

For me, several themes intertwine; the notion of living theory approach to action research, the notion of authentic leadership and the development of a learning organisation. Indeed, many researchers who write about learning organisations also write about authentic leadership and many directly see the two going hand in hand e.g. Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2008); Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Walumbwa, F. O., Luthans, F., & May, D. R. (2004); Avolio, B. J., Griffith, J., Wernsing, T. S., & Walumbwa, F. O. (2010); Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O., & Weber, T. J. (2009); Walumbwa, F. O., Wang, P., Wang, H., Schaubroeck, J., & Avolio, B. J. (2010). However, the missing piece of the jigsaw for me is discovering the 'how'; from a practitioner view point it is no use telling me that a good leader has certain traits (as if I could improve my practice by ordering them through Amazon), as I don't know what to do with that information!

What I need is a way of..."...systematically increase[ing] the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications" (definition of research –Wikipedia) This research, I believe, can be achieved through the systematic application of action reflection cycles; introspective description and explanation of my actions and the origins of my decision making and other behaviours, that lead to my practice and to enable me to develop my practice. Having carried out my research I can share my learning with others, contributing to an established body of knowledge, "...and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications." (Wikipedia).

Joan

This is very much 'research in progress' as the three of us aim to make a useful contribution to the scholarly literature on authentic leadership. However Shamir & Eilam (2005) demonstrate the restricted view that is often taken in such research. In their article "*What's your story? A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development*", they undertake a detailed conceptual analysis of the terms authentic leader and authentic leadership. They also characterise the kind of qualities that an authentic leader requires, suggesting they are portrayed as:

...possessing self-knowledge and a personal point of view, which reflects clarity about their values and convictions. They are also portrayed as identifying strongly with their leadership role, expressing themselves by enacting that role, and acting on the basis of their values and convictions. Any discussion of authentic leader development has to focus on how these characteristics are developed. (p. 396)

Shamir and Eilam continue by proposing how an effective form of leadership development would include leaders constructing their own life stories; and the life-story could provide a useful source of information for others to make judgements about the leader's authenticity. Finally, researchers would have a wealth of information which they could use to develop a greater understanding of what contributes to a leaders' authenticity.

There is a clear differentiation in the article between leaders providing an account of the experiences that have influenced the formation of their values and how they apply their values to their practice (which is classified as staff development); and those who observe and question those leaders and their 'followers', in order to understand more about authentic leadership (which is identified as research).

Our contention is that a valuable contribution will be made to an understanding of the development of authentic leaders, by those aspiring to be leaders researching their own practice. Further, if those leaders shared their experience and learning with others who are

also researching their own practice, our theory is that a much richer and more practically useful body of knowledge is likely to emerge.

In writing and presenting this paper, we as co-researchers have started a dialogue based on our individual personal and professional experiences. We see this work progressing as a collaborative inquiry, which will continue to offer an original contribution to knowledge about developing authenticity as a leader.

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