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

Objectives / Purposes

Living theory approaches to action research have been developed in a range of educational contexts, usually in response to professionals asking themselves questions of the kind: "How do I improve my practice?" The literature on living theory has been extensively developed by Jack Whitehead (1989), who developed the methodology when inquiring 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.

However there is little evidence of living theory being used in the service of adding to a wider body of knowledge, which has already been extensively researched in its own right. In this sense it has become rather compartmentalised, being viewed as relating more to the development of the individual than contributing to a wider body of knowledge (Noffke 1997). It is the view of the authors, though, that a living theory approach to action research could be more widely applied in a range of organisational contexts, and to provide a means of making an original contribution to bodies of knowledge that have previously been widely researched using more traditional forms of research. One purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how a living theory approach to action research be used to add to and enhance learning gained from other forms of knowledge generation; in this specific context, to the literature on authentic leadership in organisational contexts.

The concept of 'authentic leadership' has appeared relatively recently in the leadership literature, making its first appearance in the fields of sociology and education in the 1990's (Chan et al 2005). Since that time, it has attracted increasing interest (Gardner et al, 2005). Many writers suggest that the key components of authentic leadership are self-awareness, moral perspective and relationship transparency (Gardiner 2011). Shamir and Eilam (2005) state that self-knowledge and self-certainty are perceived as integral to an authentic leader's success. Despite this emphasis on personal processes which emphasise the 'knowing of self', most academic writing takes a third person 'objective' perspective in enquiring into authentic leadership, for example in discussing the relationship between the values, self-awareness and actions, (Chickering et al 2006, Cranton and Carusetta 2004) rather than drawing on the subjective experience of the leader as s/he seeks to develop their authenticity. It is argued here that more traditional writing provides an impoverished understanding of what it takes to be an authentic leader. The authors demonstrate how a leader can be helped to develop their authenticity through creating their own living theory of authentic leadership, in ways that are of benefit to the wider organisation as well as to themselves. A further purpose is to show how using a living theory approach offers a richer means of improving leadership practice than is provided by more traditional forms of research which do not have 'I' at the centre of the study.

Theoretical frameworks

Because the focus of this study relates to how a living theory methodology can make a significant contribution to the existing knowledge base of authentic leadership, the theoretical framing of the research includes both authentic leadership, and that which is relevant to an analysis of how living theory can contribute to an understanding of authentic leadership.

As part of this process, a survey of the academic literature, which identifies models of authentic leadership, is undertaken. This provides a grounding for the argument that a different form of research is required to support leaders who aspire to achieve greater authenticity in their professional practice. Boden et all (2003) review a wide range of leadership theories and frameworks, including how they are used in organisational practice. Kreber et al (2007) provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in educational environments; and Gardiner (2011) critiques the failure of the discourse on authentic leadership to take into account the social and historical circumstances affecting a person's ability to be a leader.

Although the greater part of the academic research is located within theoretical frameworks that are derived from conceptual analysis, or more conventional third person forms of research, there is literature that acknowledges that authentic leadership requires a first person perspective, including Coghlan (2008) who emphasises the value of using action research; and Sparrowe (2005) who promotes narrative research. Such writers, though, fall short of researching their own practice as a means of adding to the existing body of knowledge.

The use of a living theory approach to action research as a basis for our inquiry (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) is located within an autoethnograhic framework (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Whitehead (1989) contends that Living Theory allows for the generation of explanations of educational influence in one's own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of organisations. Such explanations are dynamic, generative and transformational; they support the learner to liberate and understand themselves in their own lives and learning, and in relation to others. Consequently it provides a useful framing for a professionals who are interested not just in developing their own authentic leadership practice, but in evidencing their influence in the development of the wider organisation.

Methods

An action research-living theory methodology (Whitehead and McNiff 2006) is used, with action reflection cycles integrated as a method to engage with the question of improving practice, and to clarify and evolve the meanings of explanatory values and understandings. These methods include procedures for strengthening the validity and rigor of the explanations with validation groups that focus on questions of comprehensibility, truth, rightness and authenticity (Habermas, 1976). Autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000), narrative research (Trahar 2006) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin 2007) are also used, where the researchers inquire into and share their own stories of developing authenticity in their leadership roles. In this they are in tune with NcNiff and Whitehead who state: "Stories need to be explanatory stories, that explain and contain the story-tellers own living theory within itself" (2010:226).

Visual narratives are included to provide a richer range of data, and to communicate more effectively the complexity and subtleties of relationships involved in being experienced as an authentic leader.

In sharing their stories with each other and identifying common themes that enabled the researchers to check out and validate their respective findings, they also engaged in a another form of action research, that is collaborative inquiry, based on Heron's idea of co-operative inquiry, where

> …two or more people research a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it …..(Heron 1996:1)

Data sources and evidence

The research is grounded in the personal experiences of the three researchers. The first researcher is Director of a research centre in a university, where the main aim is to generate knowledge that will improve the wellbeing of children; her 'sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of all'' is influenced by her early experiences of working with young people in the care system where she experienced depression as a consequence of her perceived failure to help them in any meaningful way. The second author is Manager of a Children's Services in a UK local authority; his sense of justice, fairness and compassion were initiated when as a child he witnessed events such as the suffering of children during the Vietnam War, and seeing the burning of a young girl running from a Napalm fire. The third is Chief Executive of a Carer's Centre; her passion for her work emerges from her own experience as a carer for her mother who has schizophrenia, depression and struggles with addiction to amphetamines.

Although the three researchers are located in very different contexts, they have a shared passion for being, and being experienced as, authentic leaders who are committed to making a positive difference in their organisations, with the ultimate aim of improving the quality of lives of all children, and eradicating poverty of all kinds, including educational, moral and economic poverty. They have gained data through a process of individual critical reflection, and through the systematic process of a collaborative inquiry over a twelve month period. They have also shared (including with others in their workplaces) their accounts of the educational influences on them, the influence they have had on others and on the social formations in which they work. Through this sharing, they have been able to identify common themes which have emerged through their respective inquiries. They have tested the validity of their findings through applying Habermas' (1976) four criteria of social validity by peer review. These criteria concern the comprehensibility, the adequacy of the evidence, the awareness of the normative background, and the authenticity, established through time and interaction. They have in addition made extensive use of video clips as a means of providing visual data which further support their claims to knowledge.

Substantiated conclusions

The results show that using an action research-living theory approach to developing authenticity as a leader provides a rich addition to the existing knowledge base of authentic leadership. In developing their respective living theories, the researchers agreed that the process of developing themselves in ways where they were experienced as authentic by others, was enhanced by being able to give an account of their values, the key events in their lives that had generated these values, and the ways their values influenced the decisions they made as leaders in their organisations.

A major finding of the research was that there were challenges in 'sharing stories'. One of these challenges was the feelings of vulnerability in the leader in revealing more of their personal selves than is normally seen to be acceptable in professional contexts. On a number of occasions, it also resulted in those listening being more preoccupied with the 'bravery' shown by the leader in sharing their story, and the leader feeling that the main message they were wishing to communicate had been 'drowned out', at least in the meantime.

However a further finding was, not only was it valuable to tell stories of these kinds, but it was also important to encourage others to share their stories as advocated by Walton (2011). The conclusions drawn from the individual inquiries of each researcher, and from their collaborative inquiry, indicated that the more leaders were able to both develop and share their evolving 'living theory' with others, the more they were perceived as authentic leaders. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, this encouraged colleagues who were influenced by the leader's authenticity to become 'brave' themselves, to engage more in a process of critical reflection around the translation of their values into practice, and in some cases to develop and evolve their own living educational theories. Hence the wider impact on organisational functioning could be observed and recorded.

Scholarly significance of work

Substantial literature exists on authentic leadership. Much of it is based on traditional approaches to research, which aim to describe and explain what authentic leadership means, and what attributes it includes. There is little that focuses specifically on how practice as an authentic leader can be improved, supported by evidence from practice which involves not just incidents indicating a 'smooth story of self' (McClure 1996: 283) but also includes 'narrative wreckage' (Whitehead 2009: 114). In relation to the methodology, no published research has taken place using an action research living theory approach to show how authenticity as a leader can be developed in a way that is evidenced in practice. The inquiry reported in this paper provides an original contribution to knowledge by demonstrating how creating a living theory approach to action research within a collaborative inquiry, offers a new way of researching authentic leadership in ways which influence the wider organisational context.

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Review #685341

Criteria	Rate
Objectives or purposes	2 / 5
Perspective(s) or theoretical framework	2 / 5
Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry	2 / 5
Data sources, evidence, objects or materials	3 / 5
Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view	3 / 5
Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work	2 / 5

Comments to the Author/Submitter
Notion of using personal living theory to influence organizational leadership offers a perspective useful in action research; details of case studies and the processes of applying experience to leadership in organizations have promise for further research; theoretical frameworks can be more focused to strengthen conclusions and significance for the research community

Review #685349

Criteria	Rate
Objectives or purposes	4 / 5
Perspective(s) or theoretical framework	4 / 5
Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry	3 / 5
Data sources, evidence, objects or materials	3 / 5
Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view	3 / 5
Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work	3 / 5

Comments to the Author/Submitter
The topic of the study is sound - relationship of living theory (action research) to authentic leadership is an important one. But the authors need to discuss what their research adds to knowledge about living theory and authentic leadership.

Review #685345

Criteria	Rate

Objectives or purposes	5 / 5
Perspective(s) or theoretical framework	5 / 5
Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry	4 / 5
Data sources, evidence, objects or materials	4 / 5
Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view	4 / 5
Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work	5 / 5

Comments to the Author/Submitter

The authors share an incredibly interesting and potentially powerful approach to examining routes for exploring and improving leadership. The focus on living theory as a strand of action research is well described. The work is provocative because the authors attempt to leverage their approach to research as a way to add to the existing literature as opposed to simply functioning as self-professional development. Due to space constraints (I'm assuming) the description of methods and data sources were sketchy. However, the authors shared enough of their experiences to persuasively support their thesis and findings.