Identity work and authentic performance in leadership emotional labour

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Introduction

Leadership as emotional labour (Humphrey, 2008; Iszatt-White, 2009) is now a recognised species within the emotional labour genus, with the emotion work required of leaders also gaining attention in the leadership literature. This comes at a time when authentic (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) and other forms of positive (Cameron, 2008) leadership are also receiving significant attention. The juxtaposition of these two aspects of leadership work is viewed as problematic for the practicing leader, needing to perform the required professional ‘display rules’ (Ekman, 1973) and ‘emotion work’ (Bolton and Boyd, 2003) of modern leadership at the same time as appearing (and feeling) authentic. Also problematic is the question of who gets to define what it is to be authentic. Is authenticity an innate quality of the person being described as authentic or something that must be attributed to them by others (Goffee and Jones, 2005)? And if the latter, then what are the properties and consequences - for them and for others - of an ‘authentic performance’ (Bulan, Erickson and Wharton, 1997) and what does this really signify? This paper seeks to explore the discourses through which leaders address the tensions implicit in this juxtaposition, and the discursive strategies they utilise in convincing themselves (and others) that their performances are authentic. In presenting an empirical exploration of such discourses, the paper seeks to show authenticity as a practical accomplishment, into which the performance of emotional labour is
somehow fitted and how discourses are used to construct identities as ‘authentic leaders’ which include the performance of emotional labour.

**Authenticity and performance: Competing demands of modern leadership**

As has already been suggested elsewhere (Izatt-White, 2009), it can be seen that in professional domains such as the practice of leadership, the complexity of the emotional labour practitioners are required to perform and its relation to underpinning values differs markedly from the commercialized ‘service with the smile’ typical of emotional labour in the service roles (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983) where it has more traditionally been studied. The very different relationship between performer and recipient in the two contexts and the more complex and varied species of emotional labour which leaders are required to perform make this unsurprising. The more value-driven, less commercially instrumental aspects of leadership work are also an important consideration in understanding the character of emotional labour in this context. The ongoing relationships of shared endeavour, encompassing a wide range of interactions aimed at achieving complex goals, is a far cry from the one-off service encounter and can reasonably be expected to raise different performance issues and create different underlying tensions.

Authentic leadership has been claimed (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) as the ‘root construct’ which underpins the other forms of positive leadership (Cameron, 2008; Greenleaf, 1977; Spears and Lawrence, 2004; Reave, 2005; Dent et al, 2005; Ciulla, 2005). Derived from the writings of the humanistic psychologists (primarily Rogers, 1959 and Maslow, 1968) on the development of fully functioning or self actualized persons – and arising as a backlash to the often unfortunate consequences of charismatic and transformational leadership (see, for example Tourish and Vatcha, 2005, for an account of the part played by charismatic leadership in the demise of Enron) the key dimension of authentic leaders is said to be that
they are ‘anchored by their deep sense of self’ (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), and live out their values and beliefs in their actions. The positive moral perspective (Luthans and Avolio, 2003) inherent in positive approaches – and authentic leadership especially – runs deliberately counter to the more questionable morality of its inspirational predecessors. (Michie and Gooty, 2005). Thus positive approaches bring together discourses of authentic leaders as being values-driven, non-conformist, true to themselves, not afraid to do what is right, and directed by their personal values and convictions in choosing how to act (Shamir and Eilam, 2005).

There is an inescapable tension between these two juxtaposed themes in current leadership writing: the requirement to perform emotional labour in support of organisational goals and the call for authenticity. If authenticity occurs when ‘one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings’ (Harter, 2002:382) then the issue arises as to how leaders can construct leadership identities for themselves that are at once authentic and that admit of the need to perform emotional labour.

**Identity work**

In recent years, there has been a move away from essentialist approaches to identity and identity work and towards more processual approaches which acknowledge the need for constant struggle (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) in the construction and maintenance of coherent managerial identities. Within this work, it has been suggested (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006) that leadership ideas – and in particular contemporary leadership discourses of vision and transformation – can be seen as a kind of fantasy related solely to identity work, rather than having substance in actual practice. Identity work itself is seen as necessarily contextual, involving as it does the positioning of self within organisational and wider societal managerial discourses (Down and Reveley, 2009). At the same time, the frequently
confusing or incommensurable discursive resources within the organisational setting – in the present case, those of emotional labour performance and authenticity – have been shown to require an iterative interweaving of self-narration (drawing on available managerial discourses) and dramaturgical performance (in which the desired managerial identity is verified in interaction with peers and subordinates by reference to their reactions) (Down and Reveley, 2009) by way of ‘narrative anchoring’ in order to stabilize a fragile and difficult narrative identity.

There is debate within the literature as to the potential dissonance arising from this type of identity struggle. On the one hand, the process of self-verification through the responses of others is said to reduce or eliminate such dissonance (Down and Reveley, 2009), whilst the retention of an ‘inner jewel’ (Hochschild, 1983) of integrity – a place where an authentic sense of self can be maintained – can enable workers to live with the front stage/back stage divide. On the other hand, there has been postulated a form of discursive self-alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009) in which the boundary between ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ cannot be successfully maintained and managers experience reflexive moments in which they become aware that their lived identity fails to reflect their narrated ‘imaginary’ (Roberts, 2005) of authenticity and that they have, in fact, become the alien corporate identity from which they were seeking to dis-identify themselves. Alternatively, the contextual nature of identity work is pursued, somewhat more optimistically, by Watson (2009) in bringing together the three concepts of narrative, identity work and the social construction of reality in order to situate leaders’ ‘managerial identities’ in the context of their whole lives and their relatively stable self-identity. Amongst the themes which are seen to recur within this constantly constructed life narrative is that of establishing oneself as a ‘good’ person and a moral agent.

The Current Study
The data underpinning the current paper derive from a collection of interviews conducted to explore the inter-related issues of how leadership practitioners undertake emotional labour, how authentic they feel when doing this, and the extent to which value congruence mediates the feelings of emotional dissonance which may be occasioned by the performance of this labour. The interviewees are comprised of a wide range of public and private sector, middle and senior managers, gathered from postgraduate students registered at Lancaster University. Interview transcripts were analysed through close reading and rereading (Ford, 2006) resulting in the emergence of a rich and detailed resource in relation to discourses surrounding the production of emotional labour and its implications for feelings of authenticity. An additional layer of analysis is now proposed in relation to the identity work implicit (or explicit) in these transcripts.

**The authentic performance of emotional labour in leadership work**

Analysis of the data suggests a number of themes which speak to the tensions felt by leaders in relation to the need to combine the performance of emotional labour and a desire to feel authentic as leaders. In some instances the ‘little d’ discourses (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) of their talk can be seen to reflect the ‘disciplinary’ (Foucault, 1980) influence of wider ‘big D’ Discourses (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) present in the literature and, more often, promulgated by leadership ‘gurus’, government policies or peer pressure. On other occasions, the talk-in-interaction (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) illustrates the sense of tension felt by managers recognising that they are not ‘living up to’ the required ‘display rules’ (Ekman, 1973) or seeking to express the ambiguity of their identity as a leader within the complex context of modern leadership. Four potentially contradictory discourses are drawn from the data, reflecting in one case – *professionalism* – the continued existence of ‘pre-affective’ leadership Discourses and in the remaining cases – *being true to oneself* (and hence,
potentially unprofessional), sense of fairness, and taking action as dictated by conviction – Discourses aligned with the tenets of authentic leadership writing.

**Giving authentic performances, creating authentic identities**

In their use of these four discourses, the transcripts show evidence of managers drawing on ‘antagonistic discursive resources’ (Clarke, Brown and Hope Hailey, 2009) in a process of ‘bricolage’ (Down and Reveley, 2009) aimed at constructing a moral managerial identity which is commensurate with their wider self-identity. So delivering redundancies are seen as ‘part of my role as a professional manager’ and performing emotional labour is ‘an effort, but one I am able to make’. Managers talked about ‘compartmentalising’ their emotional responses much of the time, but occasionally ‘letting the mask slip’. They balance being able to implement difficult decisions because they are convinced that they have been arrived at fairly, with having to ‘stretch’ their values or beliefs rather than leave an organisation or jeopardise their livelihoods. In constructing and enacting the identities expressed in these narratives, they find means of ‘squaring the circle’ between the performance of emotional labour and a relatively stable sense of an authentic self. Throughout the transcripts, there is evidence of managers succeeding in retaining a back stage ‘inner jewel’ (for example, relating to how an unpalatable situation was handled rather than what was actually done), rather than arriving at a position of self-alienation. More explicitly, in situations where the tension between emotional labour and authenticity was most powerful (redundancies, disciplinary situations or being on the receiving end of verbal attacks from bosses or clients) the managers cast themselves in the role of creating a ‘holding environment’ (Heifetz, 1994) in which trust, nurturance and empathy could support positive change, or acting as ‘toxic emotion handlers’ (Gallos, 2008) by taking on themselves the emotional baggage of those
around them – these roles were narrated as being authentic even though there was a requirement to perform emotional labour to accomplish them.

Conclusion

The themes explored in this paper speak to the contextual nature of identity work in organisational settings, and its undertaking as an ongoing practice. To the extent that the identities discussed here are managerial in nature, it serves to contribute to our ‘contextual understanding of the social processes of leadership’ (conference call, 2014) and hence falls within the broad theme of the conference. These linkages will be further developed in the final paper.

References


