True to what *We* stand for: Championing collective interests as a path to authentic leadership☆

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ABSTRACT

Growing evidence points to the role of authentic leadership in enhancing followership. Yet little is known about the factors that determine whether followers perceive leaders as displaying authentic leadership. In the present research, we examine the impact of leaders' championing of collective (group) interests on authentic leadership. Study 1 shows experimentally that compared to a leader who advances personal interests, a leader who advances the interests of a collective is (a) perceived as offering more authentic leadership and (b) more likely to inspire followership. Findings are followed up in a field study revealing that leaders' championing of collective interests is associated with greater perceived authentic leadership and followership (in terms of voting intentions). Furthermore, results indicate that shared self-categorization is a boundary condition of these relationships such that the relationship between a leader's championing of collective (group) interests and authentic leadership (and followership) is more pronounced for perceivers who self-categorize as members of the group that a leader is leading (rather than of a different group). In sum, findings suggest that leaders are regarded as more authentic to the extent that they are true to the *collective* identity of the group that they lead.

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1. Introduction

The Chairman and CEO of the pharmaceutical company Novartis, Dan Vasella, has been lauded as a highly successful CEO whose success is often described as being intertwined with his willingness to "follow his heart" and "walk the walk", as exhibited through his compassionate attempts to help those suffering from life-threatening diseases (George, 2007). Similarly, Myanmar's first democratically elected stateswoman, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been heralded as a leader who passionately stands up for her firm beliefs in freedom and peaceful social change. Recent theory and research demonstrate compellingly that leaders like Vasella and Suu Kyi who are seen as "authentic" are able to inspire a range of positive outcomes — for followers, for groups, for organizations, and for leaders themselves (for a comprehensive review, see Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). Yet despite significantly advancing our understanding of the consequences of authentic leadership, researchers have devoted less energy to investigating the factors that shape followers' perceptions of authentic leadership. What specific behaviors lead people to view

leaders as authentic? Such an understanding is critical both for practical development of authentic leadership, as well as for a theoretical account of the effects of authenticity.

According to authentic leadership theory (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Gardner et al., 2011; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), leaders are deemed authentic when their actions are seen as consistent with their personal values and beliefs; and it is this authenticity that inspires positive outcomes. However, a leader's values and beliefs also tend to stand for the vision and mission of the group and the organization they lead; as such, an authentic leader can be true to both him- or herself and broader organizational values. For example, Vasella's compassion for people in need and his goal of substantially increasing investments in pharmaceutical innovations might reflect his personal values and business philosophy as shaped by his personal experiences of suffering during his childhood. Yet this might also reflect his engagement with the broader vision and mission of Novartis as the company has evolved (a mission that distinguished the company from rival companies): "As CEO, I have the leverage to impact the lives of many more people. At the end of the day the only thing that matters is what we do or omit to do for other people" (cited in George, 2007, p. 49). Likewise, Suu Kyi's willingness to champion the cause of freedom and democracy might arise from her personal experiences and beliefs. However, it might also reflect the will and interests of the Burmese people (in contrast to those of the Burmese military). Indeed, as she put it: "The best way to help Burma is to empower the people of Burma, to help us have enough self-confidence to obtain what we want for ourselves" (Globalpost, 2010). In other words, perceived leader authenticity may follow from leaders being authentic to their own beliefs, and/or their being authentic to a broader group vision that they represent (and that differentiate their ingroup from rival outgroups). Moreover, both may be embodied in followers' perceptions of a leader's relationship to the collective identity, and of their actions in relation to that identity.

In the present research, we use self-categorization theory as a theoretical basis for understanding authentic leadership perceptions as potentially originating from a leader's pursuit of both individual and collective interests. A core tenet of this theory is that a person's sense of self is flexible and, depending on features of the prevailing social context, can be defined at different levels of abstraction (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; after Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Turner, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). At a lower level of abstraction, a person's sense of *personal identity* (as "I") is defined exclusively in terms of idiosyncratic traits and attributes; at a higher level of abstraction, a sense of *social identity* (as "us"; e.g., "us leadership scholars") is defined inclusively in terms of characteristics (e.g., norms, values, and goals) that are believed to be shared with fellow ingroup members (for reviews, see Ellemers, 2012; Postmes & Branscombe, 2010; Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010).

Integrating ideas from work on authentic leadership and self-categorization theory, we propose that followers' perceptions of leaders' authenticity are partly shaped by followers' perceptions of the leader's relationship to a collective identity, and followers' own relationship to that identity. More specifically, we propose that followers' perceptions of leaders' authenticity will vary as a function of the degree to which leaders are seen to enact a *collective* self by advancing the collective interests of their ingroup (i.e., so that they are seen to be championing that group rather than other groups or themselves as individuals; Giessner, van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Sleebos, 2013; Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). Thus, it is not only personal self-consistency per se that inspires authenticity judgements, but also collective self-consistency. We first test the proposed model in an experimental study to address issues of causality and then follow up the results in a second study to examine these relationships in the field.

The research aims to make at least three important contributions to the literatures on leadership and followership. First, our goal is to shed light on the origins of authentic leadership perceptions. As noted above, this is important because we know relatively little about the factors that shape these perceptions. Second, we attempt to expand upon suggestions that authentic leadership is affected by followers' perceptions of leaders' relationship to their inner (personal) self by providing evidence of the extent to which authentic leadership is also affected by followers' perceptions of leaders' orientation to a collective (group) self. Third, by examining authentic leadership perceptions and followership simultaneously, we seek to identify the conditions under which these two processes are (and are not) aligned.

1.1. Conceptualizations and antecedents of authentic leadership

In the last decade, the impact that authentic leadership has on followers and on organizations has been a major research focus for the leadership literature. Although authentic leadership has been defined in a range of different ways, conceptualizations center on issues of truth and fidelity to the self, as captured in phrases such as "saying what one means" and "being true to yourself". The model by Avolio and colleagues integrates early approaches to authentic leadership, offering what is now the most widely tested conceptualization of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). They conclude that "the essence of authenticity is to know, accept, and remain true to one's self" (Avolio et al., 2004, p. 802).

The majority of research has focused on discussing authentic leadership as a general factor (Gardner et al., 2011). Nonetheless, various models propose that this general factor consists of lower-level sub-components. For example, the widely used model of Walumbwa et al. (2008) (see also Neider & Schriesheim, 2011) considers four sub-components that together make up the general factor of authentic leadership. These are: (1) *self-awareness* (i.e., being aware of the way in which one derives meaning from the world and of the impact one has on others), (2) *relational transparency* (i.e., presenting one's authentic, rather than fake or distorted, self to other people as well as minimizing displays of inappropriate emotions), (3) *balanced processing* (i.e., objectively analyzing all data before making decisions as well as soliciting feedback that challenges one's own views), and (4) *internalized moral perspective* (i.e., being guided by moral standards and behaving in ways that are congruent with internalized values rather than yielding to group, organizational, and societal pressures).