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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking authentic leadership: An alternative approach based on dynamic processes of active identity, self-regulation, and ironic processes of mental control

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Abstract
Despite its popularity, authentic leadership remains enigmatic, with both advantages and disadvantages. The connection between authenticity (an internal process) and leadership (an external influence process) is complex. We introduce a theory that connects these processes through self-regulation, suggesting that authenticity results from managing multiple identities regulated by factors such as active self-identity. Using ironic processes theory, we propose a model that encourages leaders to focus on their active self rather than suppressing misaligned aspects. We present authenticity as a dynamic process, adaptable across individual, relational, and collective levels, with self-identity shifting contextually. This perspective offers insights into developing leader authenticity, addresses the limitations of the authentic leadership approach, and provides a roadmap for future research.

Keywords: authenticity; authentic leadership; active identity; self-regulation; ironic processes of mental control; concentration strategy; suppression strategy

> *[…] my experience is that there is no fixed self. There is no-one whom I can locate as the real me, and dissolving the search for the real me is relaxation, is the content of peace. But these recognitions are temporary and fleeting, then we go back to thinking that we really know who we are. — Leonard Cohen (Interviews by Stina Dabrowski, 2001)*

Introduction

The advice to 'embrace your authentic self' is a common refrain in self-help books. While it may appear somewhat vague, its message carries significant value. In fact, the idea of 'being true to yourself' is a recurring theme in nearly half (48%) of college commencement speeches (Partch & Kinnier, 2011, p. 1). Oprah Winfrey (2018), during her acceptance speech at the Golden Globe Awards, took this concept a step further by asserting that 'expressing your genuine truth is our most powerful tool' This is because honesty concerning one's identity and core values reflects an essential aspect of what is seen as being authentic. Authentic leadership (AL) focuses on 'authenticity' in leadership, representing one of the most contemporary, and frequently researched leadership styles in the literature (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bishop, 2013; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Gardner, Karam, Alvesson, & Einola, 2021).

Despite the impressive advances made both theoretically and empirically over the past 20 years, researchers have expressed concerns regarding the contribution of AL theory to the leadership literature (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008), and some critics have even suggested that the AL construct should be abandoned (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). One critical issue is that the AL literature focuses on outcomes such as experienced authenticity – being true to a fixed self – rather than the underlying processes that produce these outcomes. Vendette, Helmuth, Intindola, and Spiller (2022) argued that an improved AL theory could be achieved by understanding authenticity as a developmental construct and leadership as a context-dependent process (Bunjak, Bruch, & Černe, 2022), where authenticity has the potential to be developed as AL processes unfold.

Our purpose is to challenge and advance this line of research by proposing a theory where authenticity and AL could be studied using a dynamic model of leader authenticity based on active self-identity and self-regulatory process perspective (Dietl & Reb, 2021). We maintain that both the self and leadership are grounded in dynamic internal (i.e., values), social, and contextual factors. We stress the significance of remaining authentic by understanding one's values, beliefs, and active self-identity, and ensuring that one's external actions mirror one's internal qualities. Ultimately, the practice of AL entails leaders putting these principles into action and the cultivation of authentic organizational cultures (Mille, Devlin, Buys, & Donoghue, 2020; Yıkılmaz & Sürücü, 2023). Although early research (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) recognized that self-regulatory processes were critical to AL, no overarching self-regulatory framework was developed that informed AL theory. We advance the field of AL by drawing on a more general theory related to self-regulatory processes grounded in the active self-identity. We incorporate theories such as ironic processes of mental control (Wegner, 1994a), regulatory focus (Higgins, 1996), and the role of identity in self-regulation (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Markus & Wurf, 1987) to explain authenticity and various aspects of AL theory. Based on this perspective, *we advocate an integrative approach that defines authenticity and AL as an outcome based on active self-identify, regulatory focus, and self-regulatory strategies as an evolving alignment between self, others, and social norms.*

We propose a dynamic model of AL consisting of (1) antecedents (active self-identity and regulatory focus) and (2) mediators (self-regulation strategies), which directly affect the outcome of authenticity and AL. Furthermore, we argue that this model addresses many of the criticisms of AL theory raised previously. After reviewing these criticisms, we introduce the dynamic model of AL, starting with its most core components. In presenting this dynamic framework, we develop specific testable propositions that aim to advance AL theory. We finish by discussing the critical practical implications for both AL theory and organizations more broadly. In doing so, this paper blends three unique elements into one: (1) a historical coverage of the fundamentals of authenticity as a concept, (2) application of these ideas to AL, and (3) a theory of the dynamic occurrence of AL over time.

The core ideas of AL theory

Background

Ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates talked about authenticity. Socrates said that living without reflecting on your life is not meaningful. They also wrote 'Know Thyself' on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi to emphasize the importance of self-awareness. From a more contemporary perspective, Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) focuses on the ways in which individuals manage their self-presentation and social interactions, emphasizing the role of impression management and the construction of social identity. Modern insights on authenticity in psychology largely come from these ancient philosophical ideas. These ideas suggest that authenticity happens when people freely choose to be themselves and take control of their actions. In modern discussions on leadership, authenticity is highly valued. More and more leaders are trying to become authentic by being self-aware and accountable. This is a shift from the past when authenticity was mostly about individual virtues and ethical choices in philosophy, and individual traits and identities in psychology

(Novicevic, Harvey, Ronald, & Brown-Radford, 2006). However, researchers in AL are struggling to balance the tension between a leader's internal values (authenticity) and their actions, which signal to the external world and originate from within.

Concept clarity

One of the initial problems related to both authenticity and AL theory is the lack of definitional clarity of the construct (Cooper et al., 2005; Iszatt-White, & Kempster, 2019; Vendette et al., 2022). The major problem appears to be an insufficient definitional agreement around AL, and authenticity, overall. Prominent psychologists and philosophers, such as Abraham Maslow and Jean-Paul Sartre, consider knowing oneself and, thus, perhaps reaching authenticity as a life aspiration goal that only a few, if any, can ever reach. Similarly, Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, and King (2009) pose the question rooted in existentialism – 'could you ever know who you really are?' While these insights help clarify the meaning of authenticity, they do not address how individuals might experience authenticity through self-regulatory processes, nor do they clarify how experienced authenticity aligns with externally perceived authenticity. Other authors focus on elements of self-regulation, but none presents a comprehensive model linking self-regulation and authenticity. For example, Kernis and Goldman (2006) portray authenticity as emerging when individuals voluntarily dedicate themselves to actively participate in their endeavors, effectively shaping their own sense of self. That is, authentic actions are self-determined rather than being imposed or forced (Ryan & Ryan, 2019).

This self-determination focus resurfaces in many definitions of authenticity and AL as other scholars have struggled with defining the more specific concept of AL, yielding a range of diverse definitions (Novicevic et al., 2006), ranging from reflection of the leader's genuine nature (Brumbaugh, 1971) to commitment to continuous self-development, recognizing that leadership demands a lifelong journey of personal growth (George, 2003). For example, Luthans and Avolio (2003) argued that personal experiences and trigger events act as catalysts, fostering positive self-development through 'self-awareness' and 'self-regulation behavior', ultimately leading to the cultivation of authenticity in individuals. Similarly, Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) described self-awareness as closely linked to self-reflection, a process that nurtures authenticity in leaders while enhancing clarity and alignment with 'their core values, identity, emotions, motives, and goals' (p. 347). They also introduced a 'regulatory system' believed to be internally driven by a leader's intrinsic or core self, rather than external influences or expectations. In short, although there is diversity in defining authenticity and AL, self-awareness and self-regulation are predominant themes.

Challenges of AL

AL theory and its models come with additional problems, many of which are tied to its overreliance on positive psychology (Bradley-Cole, 2021; Ford & Harding, 2011). It has also been argued that AL is not an all-or-nothing condition; rather, leaders may adapt their behavior based on the specific situational context, aligning with either personal or other values (Helmuth, Cole, & Vendette, 2023; Vendette et al., 2022). Therefore, a theory grounded solely in positive psychology risks oversimplifying the complex nature of the AL phenomenon.

Furthermore, due to situational factors, leaders may struggle with a dissonance between their authentic selves and their actions. This discrepancy arises from the idea that AL may not comprehensively consider the unconscious dynamics influenced by an individual's value system, which can significantly influence a leader's choices and behaviors (Kernis, 2003). This notion gains further credence from the argument that AL can inadvertently prompt leaders to suppress certain aspects of their identity to conform to a specific image of authenticity imposed by their work environment or peers. Additionally, the conceptualization and measurement of AL face challenges in adequately addressing intra- and interpersonal processes (Alvesson & Einola, 2019).

Similarly, AL falls victim to the broader limitations of leadership doctrine (Crawford, Dawkins, Martin, & Lewis, 2020). A recent critique found that the concept of AL is unclear, repeats itself, is driven by specific beliefs, and is not suitable for in-depth research (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). For instance, if a leader's genuine self is negative and leads to behaviors like being overly critical, not communicating well, or being judgmental, they might be true to themselves but not exhibit positive, AL qualities, and he/she could be viewed as untrustworthy.

In addition, in a more recent paper, Einola and Alvesson (2021, p. 5) maintain that leaders as individuals will struggle immensely to cope with being authentic while adapting to situations that require 'flexibility, diplomacy, and compliance'. Extending these concerns, critical leadership scholars argue that it is not possible for leaders to possess one 'true self' as depending on specific situations, leaders have to accommodate different expectations that may conflict with a core truth and one's different identities (Ibarra, 2015; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Further, individuals have multiple selves that are situationally dependent and may vary across work situations (Alvesson & Einola, 2022; Vendette et al., 2022). Also, AL theory tends to overlook contextual factors, neglecting the environmental, organizational, and cultural factors that play an essential role in how AL is perceived and developed (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Liu, Cutcher, & Grant, 2017).

In sum, current challenges in AL highlight the need for alternative perspective on authenticity that addresses a number of concerns. First, there is tension between being an authentic leader and achieving social acceptance. AL is defined as a values-based signaling of marked by self-awareness, moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Lux & Lowe, 2024). However, if a leader's values are socially undesirable – like self-protection or entitlement – this can diminish trust and foster social isolation, suggesting that authenticity is not always beneficial, especially when it conflicts with group values. Additionally, the transparency and consistency of AL may produce inflexibility. Leaders striving for consistency may struggle to adapt to changing demands, potentially reducing their effectiveness. This raises important questions about how much of one's true self should be expressed at work and how organizations can create environments that accept diverse authentic expressions. Hence, there is a need for a more flexible approach to AL, explaining how leaders can adjust their authentic selves in response to external demands while maintaining core values. Addressing these issues requires an expanded view of AL theory.

Extending the critical view of AL theory

Compounding these concerns, we believe three core issues have not been adequately addressed, creating an unnecessarily fragmented and inconsistent literature on AL. First, early research on authenticity was primarily concerned with internal processes related to an individual's true self (Kernis, 2003), yet it provided the basis for four conceptual dimensions for AL (self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective, Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Leadership, however, is inherently a social influence process where followers' perceptions (i.e., external processes) are critical and what leaders signal to others through their behavior may be a critical aspect of AL (Lux & Lowe, 2024). This schism led to two different AL definitions (experienced authenticity and externally perceived authenticity), and separate literatures with different sets of antecedents, outcomes, and moderators (Cha et al., 2019), yet both perspectives are important in work settings. Recent overviews that link authenticity to the leadership literature (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021) show that the field would benefit if leaders could find a way to reconcile the experienced authenticity (self-evaluation) with externally perceived authenticity (others-evaluation).

Second, although largely unintegrated in the scientific literatures, in practice, leaders must address both experienced and externally perceived authenticity. They must address varying role demands while still being true to themselves. Hence, self-regulatory processes are necessarily integral to AL processes. This dual focus creates a well-recognized difficulty for leaders (Gardner et al., 2021). The paradox emerges when leaders are authentic in social interactions, which contributes to their personal

well-being (Cha et al., 2019; Sutton, 2020), but may not align with favorable organizational outcomes (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2). At the heart of this dilemma is the understanding that leadership involves revealing only a partial aspect of one's authentic self.

Hence, leaders must use self-regulation, defined as the regulation of the self by the self (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Carver & Scheier, 1981), to express only *parts of* their 'real selves' that are true and consistent with externally perceived authenticity. In such work settings, leaders need to articulate authenticity with their dynamic and active self-identity (often called the working self-concept; WSC), which is a conduit for core values (Lord & Brown, 2001; Zheng, Epitropaki, Graham, & Caveney, 2021), and a subjective sense of being authentic (Ebrahimi, Kouchaki, & Patrick, 2020). One can still be authentic and not express all aspects of oneself in a particular situation; the critical issue is whether the expressed aspects are genuine rather than forced by external demands (Ryan & Ryan, 2019).

Moreover, and in connection with the earlier issue, it is important to address how leaders can effectively manage this internal process involving active self-identities and external processes while remaining authentic. We maintain that self-regulation is a crucial underlying mechanism linking one's identity and authenticity, and for leaders, this occurs within significant social and situational constraints. In general, we posit that how one grounds situational adjustments in active identities impacts feelings of internal control and authenticity, which may produce important signals to others. In particular, we use the literature on ironic mental processes of control, which sometimes produces effects that are opposite to those intended (Wegner, 1994a), and one's regulatory focus on either achieving desired outcomes or preventing undesired ones (Higgins, 1996) as a basis for understanding how self-regulation by the leader can feel authentic or inauthentic.

Identity research also recognizes that the active self-identity changes with context (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Lord, Gatti, & Chui, 2016; Markus & Wurf, 1987) and that the self can be represented at personal, relational, and collective levels (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lord & Brown, 2004). Similarly, authenticity may vary depending on the context and specific situation (Gardner & McCauley, 2022; Vendette et al., 2022). Thus, the active self-identity provides a dynamic linkage between internal and externally oriented processes related to authenticity in that individual identities are internally focused, but relational and collective identities have an external focus. We develop this perspective and integrate it with the effects of regulatory focus, which has been shown to affect the experience of authenticity (Akfirat et al., 2016; Kim, Chen, Davis, Hicks, & Schlegel, 2019).

Third, some researchers portray AL as 'aspirational', being grounded in enduring personal values and positive psychology (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 1), while others suggest a more contextual aspect to AL and emphasize a more situated self (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2). Similarly, it has been proposed that identity represents something we do rather than something we are (Van Zoonen, 2013). This distinction raises the question of whether AL should be viewed as traits that define a leader (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) or as a temporary state shaped by the leader's approach to self-regulation (Fladerer & Braun, 2020; Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2; Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016; Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017). Cha et al. (2019) also labeled this distinction as trait versus role authenticity. Our emphasis on self-regulation concerning active self-identities can link trait and state processes because identities provide stable trait-like mental structures. However, their selection as a guide to information processing and behavior depends on activation from an organizational context. Nevertheless, this activation-based selection process produces substantial within-person variability in activated identities and behavior. An individual could activate only a specific identity cued by the context and still be able to express the authentic self in that context. Therefore, we maintain that authenticity depends on *how the self is expressed not which self is expressed*, and that depends on both the self-regulatory approach taken and the extent to which a situation allows one to be self-determined in behavior. Consequently, while our perspective can link past conceptions of authenticity (e.g., trait and state), we view it as a state because it results from a dynamic self-regulatory process, which can change with different contexts and self-regulatory strategies.

In summary, there are many unresolved issues associated with AL which are addressed by our dynamic model. It contributes to the literature by focusing on how active self-identity can vary over time and across different contexts, considering levels such as individual, relational, and collective identity. This distinction originates from the identity literature (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) and parallels a recently developed integrative framework for authenticity research (Lehman, O'Connor, Kovacs, & Newman, 2019). This framework organizes the research based on consistency with one's internal values and external expression (individual identity); connections between an entity and a person, place, or time (relational identity); and conformity to the norms of a social category (collective identity).

To understand how active self-identity interacts with and shapes AL, we emphasize self-regulation over time, drawing on concepts from ironic processing theory and regulatory focus. As we explain in the following sections, as the level of identity changes, so too does the meaning of authenticity, shifting from an emphasis on individual values to one's relationships with others and their benefits, and finally to alignment with collective norms. Considering ironic processes help us understand how self-regulation can access and express only part of one's identity in ways that may signal authenticity or inauthenticity.

In the following sections, we present 16 propositions based on this framework that explore authenticity and AL, aiming to establish a self-regulatory theory of active self-identity for both concepts. We begin with our definitions of authenticity and AL, then explore the antecedents and mediators of this self-regulatory process. Propositions 2–4 provide the foundation for our conceptual framework, while Propositions 1 and 5–16 examine specific mechanisms – such as social and individual processes – that clarify authenticity in the leadership context. This theory broadly focuses on authenticity and its application to AL.

Dynamic model of authenticity and AL

To integrate a wider range of psychological literature, we draw on the broad literature related to authenticity in the propositions below, although we note that most also apply to AL. We emphasize leadership implications sparingly, reserving detailed coverage of leadership applications for the 'Discussion' section.

Definitions of authenticity and AL

The prevailing and the most general psychological definition of authenticity is a match between one's internal sense of self and outward appearance (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2018; Harter, 2002), which implies an underlying regulatory process that attempts to create this match. Nevertheless, different streams of authenticity research have developed (Cha et al., 2019). One stream argues that the authentic self is represented by the extent to which one is true to him/herself – *experienced authenticity*. Hence, the authentic self may be hidden from others and not be accessible for external evaluation (Golomb, 2012), but it would be internally experienced and internally regulated. Another literature stream argues that other-evaluated authenticity is a more relevant perspective – *externally perceived authenticity*. Others' perceptions are an important basis of leadership and power, and positive evaluations by others facilitate effective leadership and validate one's identity. Therefore, we believe that externally perceived authenticity depends on a social authenticity regulation process.

A third stream of thinking focuses on alignment with socially acceptable standards (Potter, 2010) – *normative authenticity.* Normative authenticity should be most important when cognitions emphasize interdependent self-knowledge, which occurs when collective identities predominate (Kuhnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001), implying authenticity regulation by cultural processes. Sutton (2020) notes that authenticity research is limited by focusing on Western/individualistic conceptualizations and measures. Similarly, contextual factors (e.g., gender, environment, organization, and structural constraints; Bunjak et al., 2022) play an important role in how authenticity and leadership are enacted

and perceived (Johns, 2006; Liu et al., 2017). Thus, including normative authenticity creates a structure relevant to Asian cultures and cultures that emphasize interdependence, collective norms, and collective identities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

We view all three perspectives on authenticity as valid and important in challenging the definition of AL. As noted previously, we advocate *an integrative approach that defines authenticity and AL as an outcome based on active self-identify, regulatory focus, and self-regulatory strategies as an evolving alignment between self, others, and social norms*. One may be more or less authentic at different times or in a different situation, yet there may also be long-term developmental trends. Thus, authenticity and AL involve a dynamic and continuous process requiring self-regulation and evaluation relative to (1) the self (experienced authenticity); (2) others (externally perceived authenticity); and (3) social norms (normative authenticity), although the activation of these aspects may also vary differentially over time and contexts as aspects of identity change. Leaders may need to engage in self-regulatory processes differentially depending on active self-identity and external situations. These ideas lead to Proposition 1.

Proposition 1: Authenticity and AL result from a dynamic self-regulatory processes and an active self-identity that align the self, others, and social norms, which can vary over time and context.

Antecedents in a dynamic model of AL

Active self-identity, authenticity, and AL

Following Markus and Wurf (1987) and subsequent research, we view the self not as a unitary, monolithic entity but rather as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves diverse mental structures (i.e., images, schemas, goals). These aspects can differ in their temporal focus (past, present, future), positivity, or negativity. The multifaceted self is dynamic in two respects. One is that it develops over time as one makes sense of experiences, and the other is that various aspects of the self take prominence in different situations. That is, not all aspects of this structure are active at any moment, but it is the active portions that regulate intra-personal and inter-personal behavior. This online or highly accessible aspect of the self varies with a particular context and has been labeled the WSC by Markus and Wurf (1987). The WSC has broad effects, regulating information processing, motivation, and social processes.

This variability in active identities creates problems for AL research focusing on being true to a fixed self. We maintain that it is more helpful to focus on understanding how leaders self-regulate regarding conflicting demands than emphasizing the degree of authenticity. Understanding the many alternative views on authenticity is facilitated by recognizing that there are multiple selves or WSCs. When active, these self-schemas influence an individual's sense of identity, shifting one's psychological state and self-presentation (Stern, 1985). These multiple selves can be represented at alternative levels – individual, relational, and collective (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2003). *Individual-level representations* emphasize the comparison of self-views to others and activate a social motivation based on self-interests. In contrast, *relational levels* exhibit enhanced sensitivity to how specific others view us and a motivational focus on benefits to others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Grutterink & Meister, 2022; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord et al., 2016). A relational self-representation also emphasizes roles and positively reflected appraisals from others as the basis for self-evaluation rather than individual-level traits. Finally, identities can also be represented at the collective level, representing group, organizational, or societal identities. Here the self is defined in terms of membership in the *collective*, the predominant motivational focus is the collective welfare, and self-evaluation involves comparison to a group prototype.

It is crucial to distinguish our approach from the constructs of social identity theory and personal identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ozyilmaz & Koc, 2022). These theories emphasize that identities can involve different levels of aggregation (group vs. individual), but they focus on the content at each level. For example, social identity theory emphasizes group norms (prototypes), which may interact to

either reinforce or counteract individual tendencies, that are often represented in trait-like variables (Ozyilmaz & Koc, 2022).

In contrast, our approach focuses on the activation of different identity levels. The main idea of our theorethical proposition is that when one level of identity is highly active, others are less likely to be active. In this way, identity levels may *interact within individuals over time, rather than across individuals*. This means that authenticity and AL effects associated with one level of representation may be less prominent when other levels predominate. That is, one level can at times or in specific contexts, moderate the operation of processes at another level. Therefore, in our hypotheses testing, interactions among different identity levels should be examined across time and contexts. Our conceptual model is also proposing that these processes are dynamic within individuals and vary with context, unlike social identity theory and personal identity theory, which focus on stable individual differences, that is, between-person effects.

There is good theoretical and empirical support for this proposed alignment of the level at which identity is presented and aspects of authenticity and AL. First, research has shown that individual-level identities accentuate the importance of internal norms and values (Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998), consistent with experienced authenticity. The linkage between relational identity and externally evaluated authenticity is consistent with social-cognitive theory, which maintains that significant others have profound emotional-motivational significance that activates evaluative standards (Shah, 2003) and can help shape identities (Finkel, 2019; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Finally, Ybarra and Trafimow (1998) found that when collective identities are salient, people give more emphasis to norm compliance, which is consistent with the concept of normative authenticity. The same logic applies to AL. Thus, self-regulation changes over time and contexts in terms of its internal, social, or normative grounding depending on the level of the active identity. These dynamics are emphasized in Proposition 2.

Proposition 2: Individual, relational, and collective identities emphasize experienced, externally perceived, and normative authenticity and AL, respectively.

Dynamic and authentic identity

As mentioned above, it is important to note that not all aspects of the self are active at any time; thus, we introduce the construct of dynamic and authentic identity in our AL theory. The active portion of the self or WSC depends on social and organizational contexts. It gives us selective access to self-relevant information, which defines authenticity and creates one's subjective experience of who one is (Chen, 2019). This conceptualization of the dynamic self-concept has important implications for understanding AL. The self is a fundamental mental structure consisting of expansive and richly connected brain networks that provides an 'integrative glue' that gives coherent meaning to internal and external information and the temporal flow of events (Sui & Humphreys, 2015). Many AL researchers (e.g., Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sutton, 2020) maintain that constructing such a coherent meaning manifests one's true self. The critical point often missed by critiques of the AL construct is that as contexts change and the active self-changes, one can still behave in a self-authored and genuine way that involves different forms of self-representation. For example, when leaders' relational identity is shaped by significant others, leaders may become more concerned with meeting expectations and creating harmony in relationships than with distinguishing themselves from others. This adaptation process provides an opportunity for leaders' self-transformation and the adoption of different self-identities in various contexts, ultimately resulting in a dynamic and authentic identity. These ideas lead to Proposition 3.

Proposition 3: Activation of different identity levels by context influences the aspects of the self that are most salient and relevant to authenticity and AL.

Regulatory focus

Higgins (1998) has developed a theory concerning the motivational underpinning of goal pursuit linked to different identities. He maintains that seeking to attain an outcome is associated with an ideal self, which is a desired self that one aims to achieve, and results in a *promotion regulatory focus*; whereas seeking to avoid an outcome is associated with an ought self, which is a duty or obligation that one feels compelled to be (Carver & Scheier, 1998), and is associated with a *prevention regulatory focus*. Ideal selves are also associated with an eagerness to attain outcomes and a global orientation in contrast to ought selves which are associated with caution in pursuing outcomes and focusing on details. Regulatory focus also may be related to chronic levels of identity. Specifically, in five studies, Lee, Aaker, and Gardner (2000) found that individuals with dominant independent self-construals emphasized a promotion regulatory focus. In contrast, individuals with a dominant interdependent regulatory focus emphasized a prevention regulatory focus. These findings imply that one needs to consider identity level and regulatory focus in testing our propositions on authenticity and AL because activating a particular identity may also activate associated regulatory focus. Leaders with a promotion focus value personal growth and are inclined to seek opportunities that align with their values, passions, and genuine selves. As a result, they express their true selves and pursue goals that resonate with their authentic identity, thus experienced authenticity and AL.

On the other hand, prevention-focused leaders may prioritize conformity and avoiding mistakes over personal expression and externally perceived authenticity and AL. Consequently, they often feel more pressure to conform to external standards or rules, which can sometimes conflict with experienced AL but resonate with externally perceived and normative AL. It is important to note that regulatory focus is separated into both chronic focus, with is treated as a trait, and situational focus, which is a state. As such, while chronic focus is often represented as an antecedent or moderating factor in models, situational focus is generally represented as a mediating mechanism (Kark & Van Dijk, 2019).

Proposition 4: The regulatory focus of a leader is related to his/her self-identity. Leaders who align with (a) an ideal self-concept and (b) an independent self-construal will tend to exhibit a promotion regulatory focus and experienced authenticity and AL, whereas, leaders identifying with an (a) ought self-concept and (b) an interdependent self-construal will tend to display a prevention regulatory focus and externally perceived and normative authenticity and AL.

The mediating mechanisms in a dynamic model of AL

Ironic processes of mental control

In general, the theory of ironic processes holds that normal and successful mental control occurs through two processes that work together to promote desired mental states: an *intentional operating process* that consciously searches for the mental contents that will yield the desired state and an *ironic monitoring process* that unconsciously searches for mental contents that signal the failure to achieve the desired mental state and thus need to be suppressed (Wegner, 1994b; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). In other words, ironic monitoring processes search for the presence of to-be-suppressed thoughts, the errors in self-regulation that need to be corrected.

The ironic processes occur when mental load interrupts the conscious, intentional operating process that searches for self-distractions from unwanted thoughts (Wegner, 2009, p. 7). This is a problem because several studies show that thoughts, emotions, or actions we try to suppress, in contrast, just *gain activation* (Klein, 2007; Lord & Harvey, 2002; Wegner & Erber, 1992). For example, in a word association task, when under time pressure, people asked *not* to think about a particular word tended to offer precisely the forbidden word as a solution to the problem (Wegner & Erber, 1992). As Alvesson and Einola (2019) and Gardner et al. (2021, Letter 2) point out, self-regulation failures can harm leaders in organizations, limiting their influence and career growth, and leading to feelings of losing

control and low self-confidence (e.g., emotional instability; Soral, Pati, Singh, & Cooke, 2022). Hence, leaders who suppress authentic aspects of their inner self (e.g., doubt and negative emotions) to conform to contexts may express these aspects under high cognitive load and challenging circumstances. Accordingly, we suggest the following proposition:

Proposition 5: Attempts to suppress activated aspects of the self are more likely to fail under high cognitive load, causing leaders to experience inauthenticity and self-regulatory failure. However, it allows others to see a leader as authentic.

It is important to note that ironic processes may also allow leaders to become more authentic over time as they go through different experiences in life (Vendette et al., 2022). Ironic processes can help align a leader's active self-identity with their outward actions by guiding authentic choices that reflect their core self, promoting personal growth and transformation. In this sense, ironic processes are valuable in authenticity overall as they induce leaders to intentionally or unintentionally be authentic, independent of external recognition. Thus, we propose the following proposition:

Proposition 6: Ironic processes can cause leaders to act more consistently with their active self-identity, increasing experienced authentic, independent of social expectations.

Self-regulatory strategies of mental control

Self-regulation is the heart of authenticity and AL, and it can facilitate consistency between one's inner self and outward expression (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Collins & Jackson, 2015; Kernis, 2003; Sparrowe, 2005; Yeow & Martin, 2013). However, self-identities are complex and socially constructed, and not all aspects are active at any one time to guide self-regulation (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Gardner et al., 2021; Lord et al., 2016; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Consequently, there is an unavoidable selectivity of the active aspects of a leader's identity that relate to self-regulation at a specific moment and in a particular context. We theorize that how this selectivity occurs has critical effects on a leader's authenticity.

More precisely, stemming from the theory of ironic processes of mental control, leaders may engage in one of the two possible self-regulatory strategies – a *concentration* or *a suppression* strategy relative to authenticity. (These strategies are often called identity manifestation and identity suppression in the identity literature; Cha et al., 2019; Madera, King, & Hebl, 2012) A *concentration* strategy enables mental focus on desirable thoughts, that is, being and acting in a way that reflects leader's active self. When engaging in a concentration strategy, the disruptive ironic processes of mental control are less likely to occur, and the expression of leader's active self should proceed smoothly. A concentration strategy also emphasizes consistency with an active self-identity and the feeling that this identity authors behavior in a self-determining way. Although leadership scholars emphasize the expression of the active aspects of a true self, this concentration strategy would be particularly difficult in some contexts and for a member of a stereotyped group (e.g., gender, racial, sexual identity). Expressing their identity and value may have negative social consequences, such as a failure to achieve relational transparency with others (Eagly, 2005). However, hiding their true identity creates tensions and the potential for ironic processes.

A *suppression* strategy pertains to rejecting thoughts or actions consistent with the active self-identity, such as when conforming to social or organizational demands that may conflict with the active self-identity or doing something with purely instrumental value. Consequently, a suppression strategy, besides requiring additional cognitive resources, denies self-determination and implies external control. Therefore, it would likely produce feelings of inauthenticity in a leader. Suppression may be common in organizations because of the need to comply with strong contextual standards supporting organizational values and identities, an emphasis on displaying positive

rather than negative emotions, or conformity to behavioral or other social norms (Cha et al., 2019). Thus, we predicted the following propositions:

Proposition 7: A concentration strategy supports alignment between a leader's active self-identity and actions, reducing ironic process occurrence and increasing feelings of authenticity.

Proposition 8: A suppression strategy tends to produce misalignment between a leader's active self-identity and action, which (a) decreases authenticity and (b) increases the likelihood that ironic processes will occur.

Lux and Lowe (this issue) emphasize that AL has important signaling consequences. However, it is not clear what specific leader behavior signal AL if one's active self-identity varies across contexts. Considering the benefits of concentration and suppression strategies may help reduce this ambiguity. We propose that the smooth, relatively effortless, and perhaps automatic processes that generate leadership behavior when following a concentration strategy would signal authenticity to others, whereas the effortful, deliberate, careful, and controlled process that generate leadership behavior when following a suppression process would tend to signal inauthenticity to others. That is, *how* one produces leadership behavior may be as important as *what* behavior actually occurs in signaling authenticity.

Authenticity, however, is not just an internally-based process, whether generated by concentration or suppression processes. Indeed, external perceptions regarding AL, that is, externally perceived authenticity and normative authenticity, are also important. There are many reasons for leaders to be concerned with how others in the workplace perceive them. These beliefs about how others see us are integrated into meta-perceptions with personal significance (Grutterink & Meister, 2022). In turn, these meta-perceptions affect the social construction of identities (Asforth & Schinoff, 2016). Hence, authenticity and AL may benefit from meta-perceptions that align with active self-identities.

We expect that the consistency of behavior would be a key determinant of external perceptions as it would lead to trait rather than situational attributions because concentration strategy would lead to consistent behavior grounded in the self rather than context. Suppression strategy may promote less externally perceived and normative AL because they provide little information about what leader should do (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and, therefore, less behavioral consistency than concentration strategy. Such inconsistency would likely be reflected in others' perceptions, making social aspects of identity construction less clear. Observers may also view behavior that seems natural as authentic. Because it is tied to a specific active self-identity, behavior produced by a concentration strategy may be more practiced and natural, and as just discussed, this aspect of underlying processes may signal authenticity. Further, suppression strategy requires more cognitive resources and thus may seem slower, effortful, and perhaps somewhat clumsy, signaling inauthenticity. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following proposition:

Proposition 9: The correspondence between experienced, externally perceived and normative authenticity and AL will be (a) increased by concentration strategy and (b) reduced by suppression strategy.

Regulatory focus and use of self-regulatory strategies

Individual differences relate to self-regulation and authenticity, which we believe also are highly related to concentration versus suppression strategies. We propose that promotion-focused leaders will tend to emphasize a concentration strategy which may help them translate positive psychological capacities (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism) into AL (Fladerer & Braun, 2020, Study 2). In contrast, a prevention-oriented leaders will favor a suppression strategy that narrows leader's focus to reduce ambiguity and avoid errors. Promotion concerns are associated with growth and

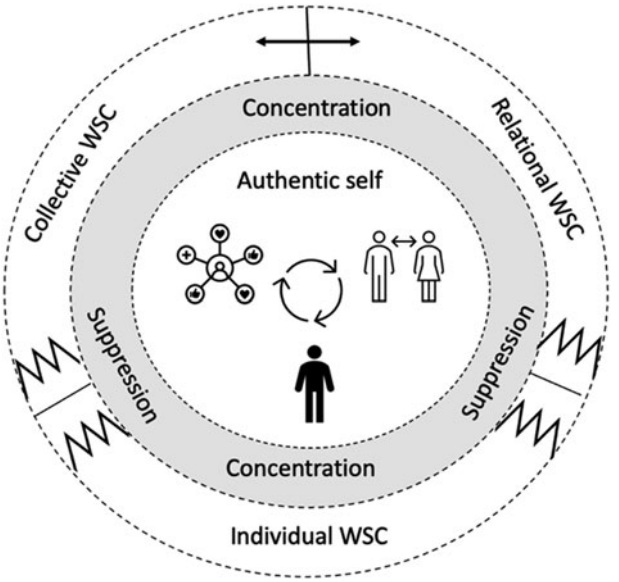

Figure 1. Authenticity and authentic leadership components, self-regulation strategies, and active identities.

Note: – Self-evaluation; – Other-evaluation; – Social norms; WSC – Active identity; – Conflicting area; – Overlapping area.

advancement, while prevention concerns emphasize safety and security (Higgins, 1997; Förster & Higgins, 2005; Förster, Higgins, & Bianco, 2003). Also, supporting this proposal, Kark and Van Dijk (2007) examined the motivation of leaders. They maintained that promotion focus emphasizes openness and self-direction, whereas prevention focus was associated with safety and conformity. Thus, chronic differences in regulatory focus may influence leader's strategic approach to self-regulation and, ultimately, authenticity. Because these effects reflect chronic individual differences, they can be sufficiently practiced that they occur without much conscious awareness. Thus, we predicted the following propositions:

Proposition 10: A promotion regulatory focus is associated with a concentration strategy toward regulating behavior and increased leader authenticity.

Proposition 11: A prevention regulatory focus is associated with a suppression strategy toward regulating behavior and reduced leader authenticity.

In sum, there are process-related aspects to self-regulation (concentration vs. suppression) and authenticity. In addition, there are individual differences related to active regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention), and these aspects may also vary with identity levels, as previously noted. Figure 1 depicts the self-regulation strategies for active self-identity levels, showing that concentration strategy can occur with all active self-identity levels but that suppression strategy is likely when individual identity and either relational or collective identities are simultaneously activated.

Whatever the active self-identity, it may influence information processing by limiting the domain of self-aspects that ironic processes of mental control search. Identities also help leaders formulate context-appropriate goals, limiting automatic mental activities (Johnson, Chang, & Lord, 2006). However, it is also important to recognize that tasks, social relations, organizational roles, and other aspects of organizations may sometimes simultaneously activate aspects of multiple identities, which

we show in Fig. 1 as potentially conflicting areas bounded by wavey lines. For example, a leader may need to manage norms associated with organizational identities, specific role relations associated with relational identities, and his/her values associated with individual identities when dealing with subordinates. We think a suppression strategy is particularly likely to be used in such conflicting situations. Because relational and collective identities reflect interdependence (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), they may coexist without much conflict (represented by overlapping area on Fig. 1). In contrast, individual/relational or individual/collective identities may reflect incompatible values and competition between personal and social identity, creating more significant mental regulation challenges. Thus, we propose the following propositions:

Proposition 12: A leader's exclusive emphasis on individual, relational, or collective identities is associated with concentration strategy and increased authenticity and AL.

Proposition 13: When individual identities are co-activated alongside relational or collective identities, leaders are more likely to use a suppression strategy, which can lead to decreased authenticity and AL.

It is important to recognize that as the context changes, leaders need to adjust their identity, raising the question of how they maintain authenticity throughout a workday, which typically shows substantial variation in state authenticity (Fladerer & Braun, 2020; Lenton et al., 2016). Such daily changes would be less of a problem for leaders high in active self-identity integration and for whom authenticity is more consistent (Ebrahimi et al., 2020). We would expect that leaders with high self-integration would be prone to use promotion focus due to the coherent nature of the active self, whatever the identity level. With an integrated identity, activation could spread from one aspect to another, creating coherence and a sense of approaching an ideal self grounded in consistent values a leader aspires toward. In contrast, leaders with lower identity integration often have to suppress aspects of their previously active self-identity that are not suitable for the current context. This can lead to more frequent ironic processes, where their active self conflict with external expectations. This situation reflects the concept of the 'ought self' and a prevention focus, emphasizing compliance with shifting norms influenced by social dynamics. However, we propose that this conflict is less likely to arise when a leader's identities are fully integrated. Hence, we propose the following proposition:

Proposition 14: Identity integration is (a) negatively associated with the occurrence of ironic processes, (b) negatively associated with a prevention focus for regulating authenticity and AL, and (c) positively associated with a promotion focus for regulating authenticity and AL.

The propositions we have developed reflect the assumptions that active self-identity and regulatory focus are causally antecedents to regulating AL. Furthermore, we suggest that concentration and/or suppression strategies serve as mediators, bridging the gap between the aforementioned individual characteristics and the outcomes of AL. From this logic, it follows that identity is dynamic, changing the meaning of authenticity (experienced, externally perceived, or normative) in different contexts and over time. Ironic processes of mental control and regulatory focus help to define how active self-identities are translated into authenticity and AL, both cognitively and behaviorally. Furthermore, these strategies represent central mediating mechanisms in the process of a leader experiencing different forms of authenticity.

Figure 2 depicts the theoretical perspective in a dynamic authenticity and AL model that we have developed. It shows two antecedents (level of active self-identity and regulatory focus) and two mediating strategies related to ironic processes of mental control theory (concentration and suppression). It also depicts three outcomes of the self-regulatory processes (experienced, externally perceived, and normative authenticity and AL).

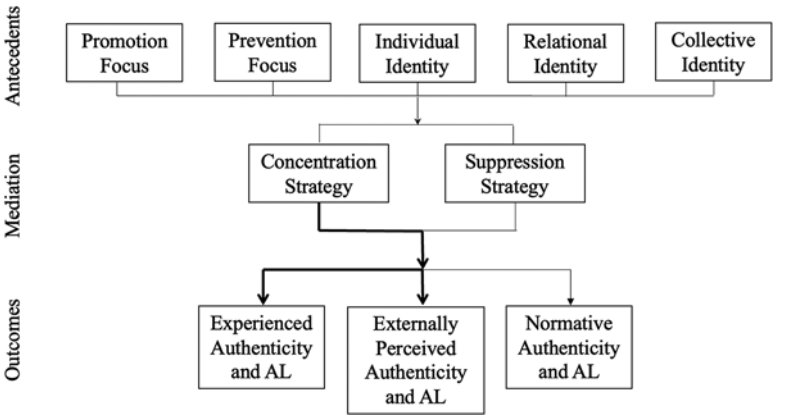

Figure 2. Flow chart of theorized authenticity and authentic leadership.
Note: The thicker lines convey stronger effects of concentration strategy on experienced and externally perceived authenticity and authentic leadership (AL).

AL and process perspective

AL components and identity level

As initially framed in the leadership literature (Walumbwa et al., 2008), AL may be explained by four dynamically interrelated components that were generalized from Kernis and Goldman's (2006) work on authenticity: awareness (understanding of the self), unbiased processing (the evaluation of ego relevant information), moral behavior (alignment between thoughts and deeds), and relational transparency (sharing the information openly with others; Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 3). We explain these components of AL by examining the dynamic interplay between internal processes, such as self-awareness and balanced processing, and external processes, including moral perspective and relational transparency. As described by Gardner et al. (2021), self-awareness reflects a leader's 'understanding' of meaning-making processes, but this can involve both personal and collective self-awareness; balanced information processing refers to 'unbiased' evaluations of both positive and negative self-relevant information, as well as an openness to alternative views from others (Steffens et al., 2021). Further, we maintain that self-awareness and balanced information processing gain activation depending on a leader's active self-identity. At the individual level, we expect leaders to manage self-awareness regarding their core values and goals effectively, but personal self-awareness can accentuate this effect (Steffens et al., 2021). At this level, leaders would commit to their core values rather than fully adjusting to external demands, and they are likely to emphasize a promotion focus and a concentration strategy. Also, their actions may be oriented toward achieving an ideal self. Further, self-awareness is expected to accentuate the discrepancy-reducing aspects of self-regulation (Carver, 2012).

In contrast, balanced processing might be easier to navigate when relational and collective identities are active and emphasize feedback from others creating a collective self-awareness (Steffens et al., 2021). Here two distinct processes are involved; one is revealing aspects of the self, and the other is receiving feedback from others. Surprisingly, due to ironic processes of mental control, a suppression strategy might eventually lead one to reveal more about the self due to ironic expressions of to-be-hidden aspects. Ultimately, that may become a basis for a more genuine, open relationship with other people. For example, attempts to suppress emotions in the workplace may cause others to perceive leaders as cold or uncaring. Still, ironic processes of mental control of such emotions may lead others to perceive a leader as more human. Thus, broadening the basis for social exchanges.

Unlike internal antecedent processes, relational transparency and internalized moral perspective refer to self-regulatory outcomes with an important social component (Cheng, Usman, Bai, & He,

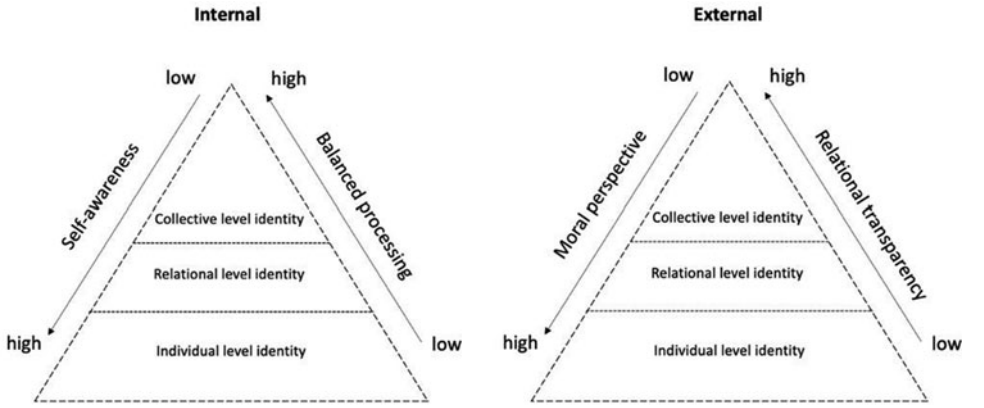

Figure 3. Active identities and internal and external process perspective of authentic leadership.

2022; Kalay, Brender-Ilan, & Kantor, 2020; Lux, Grover, & Teo, 2023). Gardner et al. (2021) describe relational transparency as a 'sharing of genuine thoughts and feelings openly…' and they represent an internalized moral perspective in terms of a 'demonstration of commitment through words and deeds …' (p. 15). Thus, both describe outcomes of a process that has social aspects and thus could be facilitated by relational and collective identity levels. Indeed, sharing genuine aspects while maintaining appropriate dignity involves a focus on other individuals or groups and demonstrates an inclusiveness that characterizes social identities. Thus, relational transparency should increase with relational or collective identity activation when externally perceived or normative authenticity are emphasized. However, relational identity also implies a particular aspect to relationships that involve suppression of some aspects of the self to accommodate the preferences or expectations of others, particularly when coupled with a prevention regulatory focus, as well as one's tendency to use a concentration strategy for actions attempting to benefit others. Concentration coupled with a promotion regulatory focus may yield greater consistency across contexts and a sense of experienced authenticity. Because there is more normative uniformity with collective than relational identities, we would expect that a concentration strategy focused on enacting collective norms would be common.

Although demonstrating commitment through words and deeds implies an external consequence of leadership actions, an internalized moral perspective also emphasizes one's core values most consistent with individual identities. Thus, we expect moral perspective to include less social components when individual identity and experienced authenticity are salient. Here a concentration strategy and promotion regulatory focus also seems likely. In contrast, leaders who prioritize relational or collective identity – focusing more on externally perceived or normative authenticity rather than their own experienced authenticity – may more frequently feel a 'loss' of their uniqueness and core values, leading to a greater sense of alienation. In Fig. 3, the right panel illustrates how outcome-related aspects of authenticity relate to identity from an external process perspective. In contrast, the left panel of Fig. 3 displays the internal antecedent process perspective, specifically focusing on active self-identity.

In sum, as Fig. 3 shows, we expect that all the components of authenticity typically addressed in the leadership literature also vary as identity processes change. Thus, variability in the active self-representation components may be a key to understanding how the components of AL change over time. These ideas lead to Proposition 15.

Proposition 15: Authentic leadership is jointly determined by active self-identities, internal (self-awareness and balanced processing), and external (relational transparency and moral perspective) processes.

Stability and variability in AL

Our process perspective applies that authenticity and AL are better conceptualized in state than trait terms. Figures 1–3 put all the components we discussed into a comprehensive context that changes as identity activation changes throughout a workday as individuals address different events, interact with others, and fulfill different social roles (Nieberle, Acton, Braun, Lord, & Fu, 2023; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). These variations would likely also create variation in a leader's active self-identities, regulatory strategies, and authenticity. Consistent with this expectation, experience sampling research (Lenton et al., 2016) shows that more than twice as much variance in state authenticity is associated with within-person compared to between-person differences. Other research showed less but still substantial percentages of within-person variation (37%; Fladerer & Braun, 2020). Thus, the effects of short-term changes in context appear to produce substantial variation in state authenticity.

Consistent with the state perspective, organizational theorists (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Lord et al., 2016) maintain that identities are situationally constructed, and the construct of a WSC (Chen, 2019; Markus & Wurf, 1987) has a long history. This unique, situated identity makes a specific subset of self-knowledge accessible, ideally knowledge needed to address leadership challenges. It is this short-term experience of the self to which authentic individuals are aligned (Chen, 2019), and this emergent self can be an ideal self that gives rise to a promotion regulatory focus or an ought self that elicits a prevention orientation. Further, depending on context and stable individual differences, the emergent self can reflect an individual, relational, or/and collective identity. The crucial issues for authenticity are whether this situated self elicits a subjective experience of being true to who one is or whether it is alienating (Vess, 2019); and, finally, *how* behavior unfolds signals authenticity to others. We maintain that authenticity and AL tend to be associated with concentration rather than suppression regulatory strategies.

However, attempted mental control may produce ironic processes if we suppress aspects of the self which are supported by social expectations or a coherent life story because they may be highly activated. As previously mentioned, when trait-like or situationally activated content reflects an inconsistent mixture of these processes or an overlap of the individual/relational or individual/collective selves, managing the activated content can be particularly challenging because of ironic processes of mental control associated with suppression. More specifically, multiple and strong retrieval cues may activate the to-be-suppressed information, leading to suppression difficulty or rebound effects, and feelings of inauthenticity. These ideas lead to Proposition 16.

Proposition 16: Ironic processes are most pronounced when trait-like or/and situationally activated aspects of the self are suppressed to achieve consistency with social expectations or a coherent life story.

Discussion

Enhancing understanding of AL theory

In summary, the literature on active self-identity provides a foundational framework for understanding representational differences that dovetail with different emphases in the authenticity and AL literature. However, being a more fundamental framework, considering how identity is represented and activated also helps us understand the meaning-creation process central to authenticity. Further, active identities help organize and regulate many cognitive and social functioning aspects, including leadership processes.

In the following sections, we will apply our theoretical approach to leadership processes and elaborate on it in more detail. This discussion is grounded in recognizing that authentic selves are dynamic and contextually embedded structures (Chen, 2019; Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 3; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Vendette et al., 2022). We posit that leaders manage the alignment between authentic self, other evaluation, and social norms (i.e., the center of Fig. 1). In separate sections, we discuss the

implications of each authenticity definition for leadership. However, we posit that these processes are integrated over time and by complex self-relevant brain structures (Sui & Humphreys, 2015). Contextual factors activate these components, which, through ironic processes of mental control, elicit two distinctive self-regulatory strategies: concentration and suppression. Leaders employ these strategies for self-regulation, with a concentration strategy generally resulting in higher experienced, externally perceived and normative authenticity. We propose that individual differences, such as regulatory focus and chronic differences in the level of identity representation, will also influence the activation of these strategies above.

AL and experienced authenticity

Experienced authenticity is a self-referential concept (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). If leaders want to be considered authentic, their core values and beliefs should be transparent and not be compromised. This approach would seem to describe leaders who regulate by focusing on active identity elements. Individual identities direct one's attention inward toward personal values and self-enhancing motivation. This orientation can also elicit self-views as a leader and an associated motivational orientation toward the personal achievement (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) and affective motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). In other words, when individual identities are activated, leaders are motivated to distinguish themselves from others and exhibit their core values. This expectation could be tested in future research through methods discussed in a subsequent section.

Regulatory focus also has implications for understanding this aspect of leadership. As Kark and Van Dijk (2007) theorized, a leader's chronic regulatory focus interacts with their values to influence their motivation to lead. Leaders with a promotion regulatory focus tend to be self-directed and open to change. They are motivated mainly by internal motives like growth and self-actualization, and they tend to lead for internal reasons such as enjoyment, which reflects an affective motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Thus, chronic individual identities and a promotion regulatory focus would elicit a concentration strategy that focuses inwardly and promotes experienced authenticity, but also signals authenticity to others. These factors would also engender a sense of autonomy which Ryan and Ryan (2019) theorize is a necessary component of experienced authenticity.

Leaders who emphasize the importance of their experienced authenticity may not be very attuned to what other people think or say about them. Thus, they may make moral judgments freely and independently of significant others or the collective (Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2019). However, knowing oneself does not necessarily mean acting genuinely in all situations. For example, when in public, whether in a restaurant or at the workplace, people tend to adjust the expressed self for social utility. Such social issues might have increased meaning for leaders who tend to be under the spotlight of other peoples' judgments and must embody a well-established code of conduct. Thus, even promotion-focused leaders with an active individual identity may occasionally choose conformity and hypocrisy over authenticity (Hewlin, 2003) or consciously display values not aligned fully with their genuine personal values (Cha et al., 2019). As shown in Fig. 1, an overlap between individual and relational or collective identify activation can increase this tendency to rely on a suppression strategy when individual identities are active occasionally. However, this suppression strategy has the potential costs associated with the ironic processes of mental control and unintentionally expressed authentic self. It is important to recognize that all social processes need not be constrictive; they can support one's identity (Ryan & Ryan, 2019) and help one discover or co-create oneself (Finkel, 2019).

AL and externally perceived authenticit

We noted earlier that the self is socially constructed (Asforth & Schinoff, 2016), and others help shape authentic identities (Finkel, 2019). These processes are likely strongest when relational identities are active. In this state, leadership processes may be geared toward benefiting others, gaining social

approval, and creating a harmonious work atmosphere (e.g., non-calculative motivation to lead; Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Thus, we acknowledge that external evaluation and identity verification provide essential feedback about leader's authenticity compared to when authenticity is only self-evaluated or evaluated solely by others (Alvesson & Einola, 2022). West (2017) illustrates illusionary self-presentation through a cartoonish example in which the outside world may better understand who we are than we do. He describes an individual who genuinely thinks he is Napoleon and acts out this belief. Nevertheless, observers know he is not Napoleon and seem to have an advantage in knowing who he really is. Due to an inclination toward wishful thinking and the desire to be perceived as authentic by others (i.e., a focus on the ideal self), a leader's authenticity sometimes may be misinterpreted by the self (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 4; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016), and gauged more accurately by others.

The evaluations of others may also be related to the importance of claims and grants of leadership. Using DeRue and Ashford's (2010) framework, claiming leadership may be most likely when individual identity is active. In contrast, leadership grants may have their greatest effect when one is focused on feedback from others as an indication of authenticity. This idea could be tested by manipulating individual versus relational or collective identities. It is also likely that the link between relational identities and a situated, authentic self may be more fluid (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2) for salient relational and collective identities compared to salient individual identities.

Active relational identity can orient leaders toward social feedback, balanced information processing, and improved relational transparency (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 3). Feedback from others can also help resolve uncertainty and indicate the areas a leader should concentrate on to foster authenticity at work (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 1). Significant others may also help one discover or create one's identity (Finkel, 2019; Ryan & Ryan, 2019), mainly when relational identity is active. In short, externally perceived authenticity and feedback from others can provide a critical aspect of the self as 'a process rather than a fixed entity' (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2), which can facilitate personal growth and identity integration, particularly when a concentration self-regulatory strategy is used.

AL and social norms

A third aspect of authenticity involves conforming to social norms, which is a tendency we proposed is most likely when collective identities are active. Cha et al. (2019) note that experienced authenticity only pays off when what feels authentic matches the prevailing organizational norms, or in other words, when social norms are personally accepted. This may also indicate the aspects of the self one should concentrate on when regulating behavior. We would expect that a normative emphasis is particularly strong in collective societies or when leaders value collective well-being more than individual prominence. A prevention regulatory focus can also facilitate a collective orientation. Indeed, Kark and Van Dijk (2007) maintain that prevention-focused leaders are motivated by external factors, obligations, and social responsibility, and they emphasize conservation values such as safety and conformity. These factors provide stability in social structure, but they may limit a leader's potential for growth. This sense of authenticity also is consistent with a social-normative motivational orientation (Chan & Drasgow, 2001).

It has been argued that leaders may experience significant difficulties when aspiring toward authenticity due to their company's social and political norms (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2). Leadership is about influence, thereby leaders' core values often may be the subject of change and require adaptability when socially interacting (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Einola & Alvesson, 2021). Furthermore, being in charge of a group or team means dealing with followers with different backgrounds, cultural norms, and expectations on how a leader should look and behave. Thus, it might be that leaders, more than other employees, are pressured to follow social norms and align with established prototypes of collectives (Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2018). Contrary to this normative orientation, Alvesson and Einola (2019) note that some leaders may take advantage of their position and impose their values and goals on followers, compromising their externally perceived

and normative authenticity. Similarly, followers who stick to core values and refuse to comply with social and political norms may experience serious career consequences (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2). Both for leaders and followers, such behavior suggests active individual self-representations and an overemphasis on experienced authenticity.

In this sense, both leaders and followers who are not able to match personal values with social conventions may choose to engage in conformity and hypocrisy (see the overlapped areas of Fig. 1), thus inauthentic behavior, because they would suppress personal goals to appear as if accepting the organizational ones (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin, 2003). The pressure to accept social norms and display agreement in the form of outward appearance (e.g., verbal expressions, outfit, head-nodding) but not being able to express what we think or feel again would tend to evoke ironic processes of mental control associated with suppression self-regulatory strategy. As noted previously, there are both personal and social costs associated with this approach. This process echoes the 'surface acting' difficulties described in the emotional labor area (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Lowe, 2019). As with emotional labor, a 'deep acting' approach emphasizing concentration strategy on areas where norms align with one's internal values can work much better and signal AL.

Contributions and implications for theory and research

First, we contribute to the literature on authenticity by shedding light on paradoxical effects that may occur when individuals tend to engage in the self-regulatory strategies of concentration versus suppression. The aspects one intends to suppress often become unintentionally expressed, so-called ironic processes. To understand this phenomenon, we drew on a theory of ironic processes of mental control (Wegner, 1994a), anticipating that individuals will often have difficulty acting authentically, particularly if they are trying to adjust to external reactions because of ironic processes involved in suppressing aspects of an active self. Shifting organizational roles require a selective emphasis on various aspects of the active self-identity (Gardner et al., 2021). How this emphasis occurs has consequences for self-regulation and signaled authenticity in that it can produce unintended effects (Wegner, 1994b) and interfere with a smooth adjustment to contexts. Further, many organizational pressures (e.g., a dominant cultural identity and strong organizational values) induce identity management, suppressing some aspects of one's true identity (Cha et al., 2019).

Second, and on a related note, we consider self-regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998, 2012) as a potential individual difference in the strategy that individuals tend to employ when potentially resolving the tension between active self (who they are in a specific context) and public self-presentation or enacted roles (what they do). We propose that promotion-oriented leaders emphasize concentration strategies for enacting and conveying aspects of one's self that are relevant to an organizational role and have higher intrinsic motivation (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010). On the other hand, prevention-orientated individuals will tend to suppress central aspects of the self that are unrelated or inconsistent with their values and instead focus on a sense of duty (Johnson et al., 2010), often leading to an ironic expression of the very effects one intended to suppress.

Third, with our conceptual model that links authenticity, AL and active self-identities, we contribute to the growing literature on the importance of self-regulation for AL (Cha et al., 2019; Dietl & Reb, 2021; Fladerer & Braun, 2020; Nübold, Van Quaquebeke, & Hülsheger, 2020) and more general leadership processes. Identities vary across contexts in the extent to which they are activated (Chen, 2019; Ebrahimi et al., 2020; Markus & Wurf, 1987), and the active self is a conduit for core values (Lord & Brown, 2001; Zheng et al., 2021) and when a concentration strategy is used, a subjective sense of being authentic (Ebrahimi et al., 2020). Concentrating on an active self-identity reflects an inward grounding in values and self-knowledge (Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012) and external social construction processes (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). It also provides a basis for contextualized self-regulation and understanding identity consistency (Ebrahimi et al., 2020).

Fourth, we recognize that self-identities can exist at multiple levels of representation (individual, relational, collective; Brewer & Gardner, 1996), with the active self being dynamically constructed

from multiple identities (Swann & Bosson, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) which can also activate a different set of values and norms (Burke & Stets, 2009; Ebrahimi et al., 2020; Lord & Brown, 2004). Hence, we provide a framework for addressing the abstract question of which situated self a leader should be 'aware of' and 'true to' raised by Alvesson and Eniola (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2). Most authenticity research identified by Cha et al. (2019) pertains to individual identities (authentic personality, authentic self-expression, authentic functioning) or relational identities (role authenticity, leadership authenticity). Yet, many pressures for identity suppression of social identities stem from collective identities (e.g., conformity to group prototypes or organizational values). Thus, the level of one's active self-identity helps define the focus for authenticity and the strategy used in pursuing authenticity and AL (e.g., focus on an ideal or ought self). It also relates to one's receptivity to feedback from others, which is a necessary aspect of AL (Gardner et al., 2021).

A fifth contribution is that we have specified antecedents to authenticity (identity levels and regulatory focus) that can be manipulated, allowing one to construct causal models in testing the propositions we have proposed, advancing theory on AL (Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018). Further, the dynamic nature of identity and authenticity suggests that experienced sampling studies may help unravel causal dynamics. Still, here we caution researchers that relevant time frames for sampling are minutes and hours rather than days or months (Beal & Gabriel, 2019). Additionally, we proposed that ironic processes of mental control can occur less frequently if leaders experience integrated identity (Ebrahimi et al., 2020) in specific contexts, hence authenticity that could be tested and achieved via specific trainings over time.

Our sixth contribution lies in creating a broader framework for thinking about AL and the importance of contextual factors (Liu et al., 2017; Vendette et al., 2022). Sutton (2020) notes that authenticity research primarily reflects a Western/individualistic perspective, although recent research has broadened this perspective (Braun & Nieberle, 2017; Steffens et al., 2021). In contrast, for several decades, identity research also has emphasized an interdependent self that is predominant in Asian cultures (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, recognizing the importance of relational and collective identities to self-regulation broadens our definition of authenticity and our understanding of AL dynamics, increasing the cross-cultural relevance of AL theory and research.

Finally, our theory contributes to an important stream of research on inauthenticity. In contrast to authenticity, inauthenticity is represented by characteristics such as being deceptive, defensive, and false by not revealing the true self (Kernis, 2003). Our theory shows that ironic processes of mental control often reveal one's intentions to 'hide' the true self even when an individual does not initially plan this. While in the short term, this might bring adverse reactions and consequences because being inauthentic has negative connotations as it is associated with one's moral failing (Taylor, 1992). However, we believe that ironic processes of mental control in the leadership context can be a double-edged sword, bringing both benefits and burdens. This is to say that failing to effectively suppress aspects of the self in the near term may allow one to develop, grow and change over time and thus eventually become more authentic.

Process view of AL and dynamic self-identity system

We discussed the leadership implications of each definition of authenticity in conjunction with our description of ironic processes of mental control theory, as we advocate a more integrative view of authenticity (see Figs. 1–3). Ideally, integrations occur in conjunction with the situational construction of individual, relational, or/and collective identities (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Chen, 2019; Lord et al., 2016) which foster associated definitions of authenticity. That is, who one is and what one does now changes with contexts, and adjustments to these contexts can occur without being inauthentic. Table 1 summarizes our 16 propositions and provides the core for a theory of dynamic AL, reflecting active self-identities effects on self-regulatory processes and AL as an outcome.

Table 1. Propositions for a dynamic theory of authenticity and self-regulation

Propositions	Components
1. Authenticity and AL result from a dynamic self-regulatory processes and an active self-identity that align the self, others, and social norms, which can vary over time and context.	Authenticity AL Identity Self-regulation
2. Individual, relational, and collective identities emphasize experienced, externally perceived, and normative authenticity and AL, respectively.	Identity Authenticity, AL
3. Activation of different identity levels by context influence the aspects of the self that are most salient and relevant to authenticity perceptions and AL.	Identity Authenticity, AL
4. The regulatory focus of a leader is related to his/her self-identity. Leaders who align with (a) an ideal self-concept and (b) an independent self-construal will tend to exhibit a promotion regulatory focus and experienced authenticity and AL, whereas, leaders identifying with an (a) ought self-concept and (b) an interdependent self-construal will tend to display a prevention regulatory focus and externally perceived and normative authenticity and AL.	Identity Self-Construal Level, Authenticity, AL Regulatory Focus
5. Attempts to suppress activated aspects of the self are more likely to fail under high cognitive load, causing leaders to experience inauthenticity and causing self-regulatory failure. However, it allows others to see a leader as being authentic.	Authenticity, AL, IP
6. Ironic processes can cause leaders to act more consistently with their active self-identity, increasing experienced authentic, independent of social expectations.	Authenticity, AL, IP
7. A concentration strategy supports alignment between a leader's active self-identity and actions, reducing ironic process occurrence and increasing feelings of authenticity.	Identity, IP, Authenticity, AL
8. A suppression strategy tends to produce misalignment between a leader's active self-identity and action, which (a) decreases perceptions of authenticity and (b) increases the likelihood that ironic processes will occur.	Identity, IP, Authenticity, AL
9. The correspondence between experienced, externally perceived and normative authenticity and AL will be (a) increased by concentration strategies and (b) reduced by suppression strategies.	Self-regulation Authenticity, AL
10. A promotion regulatory focus is associated with a concentration strategy toward regulating behavior and increased leader authenticity.	Self-regulation Authenticity, AL
11. A prevention regulatory focus is associated with a suppression strategy toward regulating behavior and reduced leader authenticity.	Self-regulation Authenticity, AL
12. A leader's exclusive emphasis on individual, relational, or collective identities is associated with concentration strategy and increased authenticity and AL.	Identity, Self-regulation Authenticity, AL
13. When individual identities are co-activated with relational or collective identities, leaders are more likely to use a suppression strategy which can lead to decreased authenticity and AL.	Identity Self-regulation Inauthenticity, AL
14. Identity integration is (a) negatively associated with a the occurrence of ironic processes, (b) negatively associated with a prevention focus for regulating authenticity and AL, and (c) positively associated with a promotion focus for regulating authenticity and AL,	Identity Self-regulation Authenticity, AL IP
15. Authentic leadership is jointly determined by active self-identities, internal (self-awareness and balanced processing), and external (relational transparency and moral perspective) processes.	AL Identity Self-regulation
16. Ironic processes are most pronounced when trait-like or/and situationally activated aspects of the self are suppressed to achieve consistency with social expectations or a coherent life story.	IP Self-regulation Suppression

Note: IP: ironic processes of mental control; AL: authentic leadership.

Two aspects of this theory should be emphasized. First, it is process-oriented, addressing processes that lead to successful and unsuccessful self-regulation. In this vein, our dynamic model extends the process perspective on AL (Vendette et al., 2022) by indicating the importance of understanding authenticity as a dynamic characteristic that can be developed over time based on

self-regulatory processes. Second, it is testable because all the components – cognitive load, active self-identity level, regulatory focus – have been manipulated experimentally, and sound measures of key components exist. Thus, it is possible to create experiments that test components and allow clear causal interpretations.

With this framework in mind, it is useful to consider the criticism of leadership authenticity theory that it reflects 'amalgam thinking' (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 2) because it lumps together four unrelated qualities (self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective) that are not easily combined into a higher order factor. We emphasize that resolving this issue comes from realizing that different aspects of authenticity pertain to aspects of the self-regulatory processes we have described. More specifically, self-awareness and balanced processing are likely antecedents to AL, whereas relational transparency and moral perspective will likely be outcomes of this process (Fig. 3).

Opportunities for future research using the dynamic model of leader authenticity

Our conceptual model of AL is based on testable assumptions. Dynamics, temporality, and context are essential concepts in our conceptual model. These are built on the idea that authenticity is a process that changes and develops over time in a leadership context. By highlighting the development of authenticity in the context of leadership and beyond, we respond to a recent call for an authenticity process perspective (Vendette et al., 2022) and offer propositions that scholars can test and draw realistic conclusions in their future research. The central part of our model focuses on self-regulatory strategies (specifically, concentration and suppression) and their relation to ironic processes of mental control. We demonstrate how these processes can have both positive and negative implications, influencing both authenticity and inauthenticity. These insights are valuable as we highlight that the negative psychological experiences of authenticity may be a potential mechanism for helping people develop and change over time.

Future research should examine these relations using experience-sampling research designs and experimental manipulations. This work should be particularly attuned to the recommendations regarding how different experience sampling methodologies align with different temporal frames (Beal & Gabriel, 2019). For example, as the temporal period for these processes likely unfold at the level of milliseconds, utilizing Continuous Rating Assessments could be a fruitful method for the future study of authenticity (Gabriel, Diefendorff, Bennett, & Sloan, 2017). In addition, the relation of authenticity to one's tendency to use concentration and suppression strategies should be examined. Finally, we recommend testing the connection between active self-identity and impression management strategies (Grutterink & Meister, 2022) that leaders employ.

Regarding active self-identity and authenticity, it is important to stress that not all aspects of the self are operational at any time. The dynamic portion of the self (i.e., WSC) may depend on context (social or organizational), or it can be manipulated experimentally (Johnson & Lord, 2010). There are many ways to manipulate collective versus interdependent identity activation, for example, by having subjects focus on a team versus individual goals respectively (Lee et al., 2000). Further, independent versus interdependent identities have differential effects depending on gender (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999), with interdependent identities activating relational self-construals, emotional experience, selective memory, and behavioral intentions for females, but more collective self-construals, emotional experience, selective memory and behavioral preferences for males. Thus, both causal manipulations and exogenous variables affect multiple aspects of self-regulation regarding identities. They could be used to study authenticity outcomes from a strong causal perspective in which identities were antecedent variables.

It has been shown that training can develop authenticity and increase authentic functioning (Kipfelsberger, Braun, Fladerer, & Dragoni, 2022). Thus, it would be possible to test via experienced sampling methodology (Beal & Gabriel, 2019) whether training on identity, self-regulatory strategies

(e.g., concentration vs. suppression), and authenticity could lead to higher levels of identity integration across various situations. Similarly, although research is mainly concerned with realism, little work has examined its opposite psychological experience – inauthenticity. Research indicates that inauthenticity is connected to stress reactivity (Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Because stress reactivity levels can be manipulated experimentally, it provides a potential tool for examining the causal dynamics associated with inauthenticity and ironic processes of mental control.

Potential moderators

Finally, we note that all these areas represent future areas of exploration in our framework. This includes the potential for numerous moderator effects and boundary conditions in our model of AL. Nevertheless, to avoid unnecessarily complicating our framework, we focus on core mechanisms, and recommend authors seek out discussion of moderators of self-regulation and authenticity in other works, including in this special issue (e.g., Lux & Lowe, 2024).

Practical implications

Concentration and suppression strategies

Our framework implies that a concentration rather than a suppression strategies enable an authentic self-presentation and helps overcome ironic processes of mental control. We showed that leaders might experience ironic processes more frequently due to the lack of transparency at the individual identity level than when engaging in relational or collective identities where external demands are established and their importance is emphasized. Also, overlapping activation of personal/relational or individual/collective identities from context may create inconsistencies that require active management. Relying primarily on experienced authenticity can be a poor strategy since the lack of information from the outside world increases the chances of poor evaluations by others. As we noted before, a leader trying to avoid specific thoughts may paradoxically engage more in such action later on (Erskine & Georgiou, 2011). Because concentration and suppression strategies are also likely to vary with regulatory focus, certain types of leaders (e.g., prevention-focused leaders) may be especially prone to ironic processes of mental control. Such leaders might benefit from training in more effective ways to express identities and achieve authenticity. Suppression strategy would be less of a problem for individuals high in identity integration (Ebrahimi et al., 2020).

Cognitive load

Thought suppression occurs not only about socially desirable goals but can often be linked to personally imposed goals (Wegner, 2009). Thus, leaders with strong personal motivation to hide their active selves from others would be prone to reveal the signs of their (self)deception. The harder leaders try to hide a salient self, the more susceptible they may be to the ironic or rebound effects.[1] Overall, leaders who suppress the less desirable aspects of the self under load may behave more authentically due to ironic processes of mental control, but their reputation may suffer.

Effects of stress and ironic processes of mental control

Researchers indicate that little work has examined the physiological concomitants of stressful events and their consequences for AL (Alvesson & Einola, 2022; Ryan & Ryan, 2019; Vendette et al., 2022).

[1]Examples of suppression errors and rebound effects are common in the literature, often reflecting powerful psychological processes. For example, Fyodor Dostoyevsky addresses this issue in the classic novel Crime and Punishment. He depicts the mental dilemma of his fictional protagonist, *Rodion Raskolnikov*, who acts in a utilitarian but immoral way and subsequently cannot manage this self-deception as attempts to suppress the consequences of his act (murdering the pawnbroker) keep haunting him over time. The harder he tries to suppress these horrific thoughts and images, the more they dominate his thinking, which aptly illustrates the paradoxical effects of suppression (ironic rebound effects) we have discussed.

However, leaders are exposed to stressful events frequently, and worries are shown to be triggers for ironic processes (Koster, Rassin, Crombez, & Näring, 2003; Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1993) in part because they sap processing resources. Here, it could be most beneficial to accept the situation as it occurs, or when problems arise, disclosing them openly (Wegner, 2009) instead of trying to mask the reality and act inauthentically. Wegner (2009) further suggests that the best strategy to overcome ironic processes of mental control is *to avoid avoiding*. Thus, the trick leaders may use to avoid ironic processes, especially under cognitive loads, might be concentrating on authentic aspects of a situation or reframing the situation to better align with the self. A promotion regulatory focus would trigger these strategies, whereas a prevention regulatory focus can accentuate reactions to adverse events or situations. Another practical approach to reducing the occurrence of ironic processes, hence achieving consistency in authenticity, would be to engage in both/and rather than either/or thinking (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This would mean that leaders, rather than masking aspects of themselves, would engage in open communication and not try to sugarcoat issues. This approach would also mean that leaders can consider the alternatives over cut off solutions, increasing the chance for optimal decisions while not 'hurting' themselves.

Feedback from others

Besides increasing the chances for ironic processes, lacking feedback from others would jeopardize self-growth, thus undercutting a leader's aspirational endeavors toward improving authenticity at work (Gardner et al., 2021, Letter 1). On the other hand, leaders who make sense of the active self based on externally perceived and normative authenticity would be more open to receiving feedback from others and allow themselves more opportunities for self-growth (Finkel, 2019; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). We also showed that feedback from significant others as well as established social norms, provide a focus for a concentration strategy that is generally acceptable, which decreases self-regulatory errors and increases the opportunity for concentration strategy to be employed. From the feedback perspective, leaders who emphasize experienced authenticity would most likely fit with individualistic organizational cultures, where top-down opinion on core-self values and goals is dominant and resistant to frequent changes. Encouraging a collective sense of authenticity would fit the collective organizational cultures that are de-centralized and support diversity or more Asian cultures. There are also limits on the willingness of others to provide negative feedback, particularly when the power associated with organizational hierarchies is emphasized. However, leaders whose salient active identity is relational or/and collective identity likely would experience less trouble receiving feedback from others.

Leadership training

Our framework also has implications for potential interventions and training. For example, a helpful approach would involve leaders in self-control training, which may involve different practices that enhance mental control and awareness of what is happening in the present moment. In this sense, a specifically helpful guideline at the workplace might be the practice of mindfulness which purposely brings one's attention to the present moment (Good et al., 2016; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Vess, 2019), similar to self-leadership concept practices (Knotts et al., 2022; Manz & Sims Jr, 1980) or career and personal development program that can develop authenticity in young adults (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). Indeed, Nübold et al. (2020) showed that mindfulness predicted authenticity through both correlations and experimental manipulations. Practice emphasizing concentration rather than suppression strategies may also be associated with activating a WSC at the appropriate identity level, hence authenticity. Leaders can also prime identities in others (Lord & Brown, 2004). Training in these aspects of leadership may be beneficial.

Conclusions

We have described a general self-regulatory approach to understanding authenticity and AL, which addresses many of the criticisms directed at this construct (Alvesson & Einola, 2019: Eniola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021; Gardner & McCauley, 2022). It also incorporates ironic processes of mental control theory and the role of one's active self-identity in understanding self-regulation with respect to dynamic authenticity. Our principal contribution, however, pertains to creating an alternative understanding of AL. We maintain that a fundamental problem with the prior AL literature was to see it as more of a characteristic of some leaders than an outcome of a dynamic, self-regulatory process that can unfold in different ways depending on self-regulatory strategies, which have consequences for authenticity perceptions of both actors and observers. We contribute to the literature on authenticity and self-regulatory processes by showing when paradoxical, ironic processes may occur and suggesting what might be the most effective cognitive strategy for leaders to attain a sense of felt authenticity and avoid ironic processes of mental control. We also maintained that active self-identities are highly contextual and can exist at multiple levels of representation (individual, relational and social), accentuating alternative definitions of authenticity. In addition, our theory showed the importance of the interplay between self-regulatory focus and external contextual factors in activation information that could be consciously integrated in a way that was experienced as being authentic. Finally, recognizing that most theoretical propositions in reviews are never tested (Edwards, 2010), we have also indicated ways that the theory could be tested rigorously, allowing trimming or modification of some propositions.

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