Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Uniqueness and the Discourse of Authentic Leadership

ABSTRACT

The common and the ordinary must remain our primary concern, the daily food of our thought – if only because it is from them that the uncommon and the extraordinary emerge. Hannah Arendt.

In this paper, I examine the conceptual underpinnings of a new management theory called authentic leadership to discover why so little attention has been paid to gender. I argue that in much of the scholarly literature on authentic leadership, there is a failure to interrogate the complexities surrounding the concept of authenticity, especially as it relates to the diversity of lived experience. For example, a critical interrogation of the scholarly literature reveals that there is often an underlying presupposition that authenticity means the same thing to everyone, and manifests itself in the same way. I disagree with this viewpoint by considering how an Arendtian focus on uniqueness reveals problems with the assumption that a quality like authenticity is measurable, or can be defined in a specific way.

Following Arendt, I contend that each individual, because of her life experiences, has a unique way of perceiving the world. This uniqueness is filtered through the lens of the social world. Thus, our way of being is constantly impinged upon by social factors, many of which we remain unaware. Nevertheless, this background knowledge has an effect, not only upon the way that we perceive the world, but also on how we interpret the actions of others. In short, context matters. But context is often overlooked in much of the authentic leadership scholarship so that differences fade into the background. I suggest that Arendt’s concept of uniqueness can make a valuable contribution to the discourse of authentic leadership because it enables us to consider how the intersections of identity influence our life. This is important not least because in their desire to define authentic leadership, some scholars fail to interrogate the multifarious ways in which the intersections of identity have a bearing - not only on leadership - but on what it means to be true to ourselves.

In thinking through the connections among gender, authenticity and leadership, I complement my discussion on Arendt by sharing findings from a phenomenological study I conducted. In this study, I asked ten senior women leaders in higher education to describe their experiences of authenticity, (or lack thereof), within an institutional context. What emerges from these research findings is a much more expansive way of thinking about leadership. These women’s narrative accounts serve to complicate the notion of what
constitutes an authentic leader, and run contrary to most scholarship on authentic leadership especially as regards to the importance of self-knowledge. Their descriptive accounts reveal how gender differences reinforce hierarchies in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. As a result, a woman’s sense of belonging may be undermined by gender prejudice regarding normative ideas about what constitutes a good leader, which, in turn, may impede her ability to act in a manner consistent with personal conviction.

Through their descriptive accounts, these women also reveal how leadership is a relational enterprise, founded upon mutual respect and trust. Viewing authentic leadership through a relational lens allows us to see previously hidden aspects of leadership. This wider perspective enables us, as one research participant argues, to “explode the idea of being a leader as a thing created by a position.” As such, these women’s narratives complement Arendt’s work, and open up fruitful avenues of investigation from which to consider the interconnections among gender, authenticity, and leadership.