Authentic leadership skills within a developing economy context

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Summary

Over the years, the gap between developed and developing countries has widened especially in the last three decades. This disparity is attributed to a failure of leadership and has been a subject of interest to scholars. This complexity has been amplified by the topical Covid crisis previously challenged by the rapid pace of change, competition from emerging economies, financial scandals, and in particular leadership malfeasance. Consequently, authentic leadership is proposed as an approach that will address leadership gaps within contemporary organisations. This leadership approach extends beyond attaining organisational outcomes to promoting the collective good within the society hence positioned to address the management malfeasance prevalent in Nigerian organisations.

Track: African Studies
Introduction
Economies are generally divided into two main categories; developing and developed countries by the United Nations. Developed countries are described as countries that have advanced in terms of industrialisation and economic reliance. While developing countries are described as countries that are at the early stages of industrialisation with low per capita income (Lin, 2012, Jeniček, 2011). The differences between the two have been particularly evident in the living conditions and economic power across the two groups. The disparity is also attributed to the industrial revolution which made some countries wealthy, leaving a substantial number of nations behind (Deaton, 2013). Consequently, conscious efforts are being made to reduce these gaps. Findings from a recent study conducted by Paprotny (2021) over 90 years; specifically 1920 to 2020 reveals that developing countries as a whole are advancing, however, this progress is unequally spread.

With specificity to Sub-Saharan Africa, extant literature reveals that the region has the highest time lag in catching up with developing countries, and the GDP per capita has consistently declined after its peak in 2001. Besides, corruption has also limited the growth of developing economies. This “corruption” influence varies across different developing nations and it has become necessary to investigate leadership within this context (Strauss, 2001, Cervellati et al., 2019). Furthermore, the efforts of a majority of leaders within Sub-Saharan countries have been counterproductive in fostering economic development. Nigeria as a developing economy provides an appropriate context for the examination of authentic leadership skills because the country has the largest population and the most dominant economy, in Africa. The country is described as a nation of traders, which may be representative of economic activities across West Africa (Omeihe et al., 2020).

Nigeria is estimated to have about 203 million people with projections to increase to 263 million people by 2030 (UNDP Human Development Reports, 2020). This country is Africa's leading oil exporter and has the largest natural gas reserves on the continent (World Bank, 2020). The Nigerian economy is categorised as a fast-growing economy and it accounts for about half of West Africa’s population. Yet, it is plagued with poverty, instability, and insecurity. The Boko Haram terrorists group has gained traction since 2011 and has consistently terrified the northern states within Nigeria. While the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that is prominent for the oil resources and reserves has been attacked by armed groups. This is not surprising as scholars argue that corruption, poor infrastructure and lack of expertise are prevalent in developing economies (Bardhan, 1997, Mauro, 1995, Luthans et al., 2000; Harrison et al., 2016). The country has experienced leadership instability in the political and organisational scene. Thus, the relevance of authentic leadership within this context.

The key subjects of the study are authentic leaders within Nigerian SMEs. With specificity to SMEs leaders within the Oil industry. Ordinarily, it appears that authentic leadership literature emphasises the leader's relationship with the follower. Hence in developing the relationship, relational transparency, influences the perceptions and acceptance by the followers. With little being known about the skills required by authentic leaders in ensuring appropriate self-disclosure when relating transparently and openly with their followers. As transparency may sound easy and accessible, however, these authentic leaders get into paradoxes and differences in context. Therefore, this study aims to examine authentic leadership within a developing economy context, to investigate the challenges authentic leaders, encounter within this context, and identify the key relational skills employed by authentic leaders when building relationships with their followers. In the wider context of extant literature, this study is unique as it focuses on a key aspect of authentic leadership development and it can serve as a framework for future studies on relational transparency.


**Authentic Leadership**

Similar to the challenges in Nigeria, the end of the 20th century witnessed a proliferation of ethical misconduct and instability within the organisations in the Western world (Sendjaya et al., 2016; Johnsen, 2018). This led to the call for a new leadership approach, with peculiar requirements (George, 2003) making the emergence of authentic leadership significant and well-timed (Lawler and Ashman, 2012). Hence, authentic leadership was proposed as an approach that can address leadership gaps within contemporary organisations (George, 2003; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014). This leadership approach extends beyond attaining organisational outcomes to promoting the collective good within the society hence this leadership approach is positioned to address the management malfeasance prevalent in Nigerian organisations (Avolio et al., 2004). Even with authentic leadership still being in its infancy both conceptually and empirically, a surge in research within western cultures has emerged (Avolio et al., 2009b; Qiu et al., 2019). Hence, very little is known about how it is perceived and how it works within a non-western environment (Eagly, 2005; Lyu et al., 2019).

A key drawback of this approach is that leadership theory has a strong bias towards the western culture (Dickson et al., 2003) even though it is argued that leadership processes vary significantly across geographical regions (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012; Banks et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, authentic leadership is associated with positive outcomes for leaders, followers, and organisations. For leaders; it has been linked to professional and personal benefits (George, 2003; Eigel and Kuhnert, 2005; Leroy et al., 2012). For followers, it has been linked to wellbeing (Ilies et al., 2005), job satisfaction (Černe et al., 2014), and commitment (Bandura and Kavussanu, 2018). For organisations, it has been linked to entrepreneurial accomplishments (Jensen and Luthans, 2006), organisational citizenship (Eigel and Kuhnert, 2005), and improved organisational culture (Caza and Jackson, 2011). All the outcomes above, demonstrate the potential value of the leadership approach. Walumbwa et al.’s (2008) conceptualisation of authentic leadership identifies four components namely self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of Information, and relational transparency. Self-awareness involves constant reflections and evaluations of these flaws and strengths, while internalised moral perspective describes the capacity of leaders to align their roles with ethical obligations that consider their diverse stakeholders such as followers, community, and society (May et al., 2003). With regards to balanced processing, the component considers all perspectives when processing information (Walumbwa et al., 2008). For relational transparency, the component is described as the portrayal of one’s self through open sharing of emotional states and information with others (Avolio et al., 2009a; Černe et al., 2013).

In this study, relational transparency has been carefully chosen for in-depth study. As scholars have suggested that this component lies at the core of authentic leadership (Ilies et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2018). Therefore, the study would be beneficial to practitioners, academics, and policymakers, as it will attempt to define authentic leadership within the developing economy context and uncover the authentic leadership competencies exploited in the authentic leadership process.

**Authentic Leadership Skills**

In describing the components of authentic leadership, Gardner et al. (2011) and Banks et al. (2016) suggest that studies that explore specific components would have important implications for leader and follower development. Relational transparency enables authentic leaders to establish and nurture meaningful relationships through personal disclosures that
facilitate honest interactions. In the same vein, Hannah et al. (2011) argue that relational transparency comprises behaviours of leaders that support positive relationships through disclosure, openness in sharing Information, views, and emotions. Relational transparency is characterised by openness, accountability, and honesty between leaders and followers (Seco and Lopes, 2013, Muntz et al., 2019) where expectations are set during social exchanges arriving at a psychological contract. Previous studies suggest that authentic leaders are transparent in expressing their true emotions and feelings to followers, while simultaneously regulating these emotions to minimize displays of inappropriate or potentially damaging emotions (Nicolai and Seidl, 2010).

Within extant literature, it has been affirmed that authentic leadership skills are crucial for success within organisations (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011). In particular, the development of the skills that leaders need to be effective in their particular contexts is crucial to success. Hence, a need to explore the specific authentic leadership skills that shapes a leader's behaviour with diverse environments such as a developing economy context. Interestingly, extant literature supports the notion that there are no specific skills, styles, or personalities for authentic leaders, instead, authentic leaders are moulded by their individual experiences which enable these leaders to adapt and respond to their environment appropriately (Covelli and Mason, 2017, George, 2010). Therefore, the development of authentic leadership skills is attained when individuals can incorporate new behaviours from the learning environment to the organisation (Baron and Parent, 2015). In the same vein, scholars argue that authentic leadership skills are not traditional leadership skills but the development of authentic leadership is based on the participants’ ability to amend and portray new behaviours because of increased self-awareness of themselves and others. These new behaviours are described as skills (Baron, 2012, Baron and Parent, 2015, Baron, 2016, Corriveau, 2020). Even though scholars have identified skills such as evaluation of Information, active listening, expression of sincere emotions as important skills that make leaders to be perceived as authentic, more empirical studies on skills are essential in the development of authentic leadership theory (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010, Peus et al., 2012, Liedtka, 2008).

In sum, it is argued that authentic leadership should not be conceptualised like other leadership approaches where traditional skills can develop as authentic leadership largely is contextual (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012, Fortin et al., 2018, Cooper et al., 2005). Consequently emphasising the significance of personal evaluations of authenticity to ensure learning interventions are genuine and appropriate for authentic leadership theory. As it is apparent that even though leadership and leadership development have been well researched, this comprehensive outlook has not been extended to the construct of authentic leadership. In adding precision to the argument above, Peus et al. (2012) calls for further examination on the skills that leaders require to be perceived as authentic as the findings of such studies will have both theoretical and practical implications for authentic leadership theory. It is expected that the findings of the study will also accelerate authentic leadership development. The next section provides an overview of the methodological choices that shape the study.

**Methodology**
The section unpacks the process of investigation; describing in detail how aspects of the unknown will become known. The term ‘research philosophy’ is an all-encompassing term that describes knowledge; its nature and how it is developed (Saunders et al., 2009, Saunders et al., 2016). It describes key assumptions about a researcher's worldview and how it shapes the philosophical choices that underpin a study (Easterby-Smith and Thorpe, 2002). Within
In this study, an interpretivist philosophy will be adopted in the investigation of authentic leadership skills as it enables researchers to immerse themselves into the social world of the subjects of inquiry to see and grasp the world from their perspective. Also, it will aid in the uncovering of the socially constructed meaning by local actors thereby offer thick descriptions of authentic leadership skills within the context of the study (Blumberg et al., 2014). With regards to the approach to reasoning, an abductive approach will be adopted as it offers a complimentary substitute to traditional inductive and deductive approaches to research (Suddaby, 2006, Saunders et al., 2016). This is a theory-oriented style to undertaking research inquiry that involves developing justifications from data to attain plausible conclusions. Authentic leadership is an emergent field within leadership literature, with little known about the construct outside western narratives. This study seeks to investigate perceptions of the authentic leadership construct within a developing economy context.

Within the context of the study, a qualitative research process will be adopted, using semi-structured interviews and observations, which will allow the capturing of rich descriptions of the local actors (Morse, 2015). This is appropriate as qualitative studies chart the path to the discovery of complex phenomena within given contexts (Cypress, 2017). Further, along these lines, qualitative studies will provide an open account of the research practices that will be adopted by describing the strategies to be considered within the research process. Due to the exploratory nature of the research and the need to assess the existing conceptualisations of authentic leadership, a phenomenological research strategy will be adopted as it will allow the researcher to address the research questions and also attain the research aim (Saunders et al., 2016). In sum, the research strategy serves as the methodological link between the philosophy and data collection techniques within a study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, Saunders et al., 2016). A phenomenological strategy offers the most opportunity to explore painstakingly the construct of authentic leadership within a developing economy context as it will enable the researcher to capture the unique experiences of the authentic leaders.

Finally, the study will adopt a data analysis approach that would treat the data impartially and produce convincing conclusions. Consequently, a thematic analysis will be adopted to identify patterns, trends, and key themes within the data set (Boyatzis, 1998). This analysis was judged appropriate as thematic analysis identifies, analyses, and reports patterns within data, but goes further to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Further Development

Scholars have affirmed that there is a paucity of qualitative research as compared to quantitative studies on authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011, Steffens et al., 2016). This is evident in the most prominent review with the authentic leadership domain conducted by Gardner et al. (2011). Within this review, there were 25 empirical publications with an uneven split of 16 quantitative and nine qualitative studies. This mirrors the dichotomy within wider extant literature. Hence, an urgent need for qualitative studies that will extend the current understanding of the construct. In the same vein, there have been calls for more qualitative studies to provide clarity on the complexity of authentic leadership, authentic followership, processes, and contexts from varied perspectives (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019). Insights into the authentic leadership skills need to be uncovered particularly empirical understanding that will further illuminate the authentic leadership development process.

The examination of authentic leadership skills behaviours through the lens of the leaders will be the subject of empirical research. More specifically, the research aims to explore three research questions: (1) What is authentic leadership; (2) What are the key competencies that
authentic leaders employ within a developing economy context; (3) What are the key challenges that authentic leaders encounter within a developing economy context? These questions will be explored through semi-structured interviews and facilitated discussions with leaders and followers. This study is at an emerging stage, therefore it is expected data will be collected in the coming months and findings will be presented at the British Academy of Management conference in September 2021. It is expected that this study will advance the authentic leadership domain and possibly provide a foundation for future empirical studies.
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