



## Enriching the concept of authentic leadership in project-based organisations through the lens of life-stories and self-identities

Natalya Sergeeva<sup>a,\*</sup>, Dicle Kortantamer<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London, London, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Brighton Business School, Centre for Change, Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management, University of Brighton, Brighton, United Kingdom

### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**

Authentic leadership  
Project-based organisations  
Narratives  
Self-identities  
Stories

### ABSTRACT

The tendency to present authentic leadership as a set of project manager attributes (e.g., characteristics, behaviours, competencies) limits the potential of this concept to help address the challenges of contemporary projects. Using the lens of self-identity and drawing on life-story interviews with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of public project-based organisations in the UK construction industry, this paper offers an enrichment of the authentic leadership concept that takes into account situated nuances and struggles encountered in the lived experiences of leaders. The findings reveal a dialogical process between more coherent narratives and personalised stories articulated by the leaders, continued interweaving stories of self and the context, and ongoing efforts to cope with relational anxieties, authenticity and self-identity struggles. It is shown that these processes are situated in cultural values, roles, institutionalised views of leadership and the broader context, and shape the contextual conditions for project work.

### 1. Introduction

In line with the growing interest in authentic leadership within the leadership literature (e.g., [Alvesson and Einola, 2019](#); [Avolio et al., 2004](#); [Avolio and Gardner, 2005](#); [Cooper et al., 2005](#); [Gardner et al., 2005](#); [Crawford et al., 2020](#); [George et al., 2015](#); [Ilies et al., 2005](#); [Ladkin and Taylor, 2010](#); [Nyberg and Svenningsson, 2013](#)), the concept of authentic leadership has made inroads to the project management studies ([Drouin et al., 2021](#); [Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011](#); [Toor and Ofori, 2008](#)). Following the debates in the leadership literature, authentic leadership was viewed as a ‘root construct’ ([Avolio and Gardner, 2005](#); [Toor and Ofori, 2008](#))[Toor and Ofori, 2008](#) in terms of providing positive psychological attributes that act as a basis for other leadership theories such as transformational leadership or servant leadership. Authentic leaders are anchored by their own deep sense of self: they are self-aware about who they are, what they believe, what their values are, and they can act upon these beliefs and values. Their positive emotions and well-meaning values such as honesty inspire trust and commitment in their teams ([Avolio and Gardner, 2005](#); [Nyberg and Svenningsson, 2003](#)).

In the context of complex contemporary projects authentic leadership is seen crucial for delivering them successfully ([Lloyd-Walker and](#)

[Walker, 2011](#); [Toor and Ofori, 2008](#)). The deep sense of self, self-awareness of own and others’ identities, beliefs and values of authentic leaders have been recognised as important for leading projects. A growing stream of project management literature has been drawing attention to the emotional and moral attributes of leaders that play a key role in dealing with complexities inherent in such projects (e.g., [Berg and Karlsen, 2014](#); [Todt et al., 2019](#); [Walker et al., 2014](#); [Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2014](#)). However, the tendency of this stream of literature to conceptualise authentic leadership as a contingent set of project manager attributes (e.g., characteristics, behaviours, competencies) has produced important blind spots that limit the potential of this construct to help deal with challenges of contemporary projects. Although some research has begun to reveal the complexities of exercising authentic leadership in practice ([Raiden, 2016](#); [Sankaran, 2018](#); [Sergeeva and Davies, 2021](#)), we still lack an understanding of the situated nuances of practicing authentic leadership, self-identity related anxieties and struggles leaders encounter in constructing an authentic self, and how they cope with them. By identity anxieties and struggles we mean leaders questioning themselves, their identities, and the context and system within which they operate ([Alvesson, 2010](#)). This identity work is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of authentic leadership ([Ibarra, 2015](#)). Moreover, the preoccupation with project

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [n.sergeeva@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:n.sergeeva@ucl.ac.uk) (N. Sergeeva), [kortantamer@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:kortantamer@brighton.ac.uk) (D. Kortantamer).

managers and understanding the role of authentic leadership in dealing with project complexities has meant that there has been a relative neglect of macro level leaders and concerns (Geraldi and Söderlund, 2018). We do not have a sufficient understanding of the ways in which project-based organisations can be led authentically despite the recognition that authentic leadership of project-based organisations has positive effects on employee creativity (Mubarak and Noor, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to address these omissions, and thereby enrich the concept of authentic leadership in the project management literature. To do this, the paper follows scholars taking a life-story approach to understanding authentic leadership (Nyberg and Svenningsson, 2013; Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Shaw, 2010). Stories play an important role in social construction of authentic leadership. They are the means by which leaders socially construct meanings to their experiences and life incidents, and express their thoughts and feelings. Stories have emotional elements that engage attention of listeners. Together with other rhetorical resources such as narratives and metaphors they provide a comprehensive understanding of what makes leaders authentic (Sergeeva and Davies, 2021).

Empirically, the paper draws on life-story interviews with four Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of public project-based organisations in the UK construction industry. Public project-based organisations in the UK construction industry provide an intriguing context to explore self-identity struggles and experiences encountered in the exercise of authentic leadership. Multiple accountabilities of civil servants in the UK produce the demand for performing multiple identities – an agent of government delivering policy intent, an agent serving citizens, a public servant accountable to the bureaucratic mechanisms of the government, a partner that cuts through bureaucracy to get things done, and an organisational leader (Newman, 2004). Construction of a consistent and coherent self-identity is also made difficult by the ongoing efforts to transform the UK construction industry (Sparrowe, 2005). This industry is often perceived as inherently conservative with institutionalised practices which are slow to change; and largely male-dominant. Recently, however, there have been significant efforts to improve productivity that have led to the dominance of the narratives of collaboration, value creation (Green, 2011), and the enhancement of innovation capabilities for environmental sustainability and digital transformation (Sergeeva and Winch, 2020).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides the theoretical background. The methodology section describes how the life-story interviews were conducted and analysed. The empirical section outlines how the interviewed leaders (a) constructed their authenticity in relation to their formal roles and accountabilities; (b) constructed themselves as good leaders; (c) coped with self-identity struggles and tensions. The empirical materials are then discussed against the theoretical background. The paper concludes with key theoretical and empirical contributions.

## 2. Authentic leadership

### 2.1. Authentic project leadership

The origin of project management research on authentic leadership can be traced to the work of Toor and Ofori (2008), proposing authentic leadership as a root construct for project leadership that captures the positive psychological attributes of project leaders and arguing that authentic leadership is crucial for the dealing with the socio-political, cultural and economic challenges of the construction industry. Drawing on the multi-component conceptualisation of authenticity proposed by Kernis and Goldman (2005), Toor and Ofori (2008) define four authentic leadership behaviours: 1) self-awareness: having trust in motives, feelings, desires and self-relevant cognitions, 2) unbiased processing: processing self-relevant information without bias, 3) behaviour: behaving in line with one's values, preferences and needs, 4) relational orientation: valuing and accomplishing openness and truthfulness in

relating to others. In this formulation, trigger events, a supportive organisational context and external environment is an important antecedent to developing these authentic leader behaviours.

Since then, various studies have been examining authentic project leadership. There is a tendency of project management research to identify the behaviours, competencies and styles, or in other words a set of attributes that make leaders effective (e.g., Geoghegan and Dulewicz, 2008; Lundy and Morin, 2013; Müller et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2017; Shao, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). These studies have been largely preoccupied with outlining authentic leader attributes that improve the performance of projects. They have been identifying authentic leadership attributes required for building trust, shared values and commitment in project alliances (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011). These studies have pointed out that authentic leadership behaviours help in multiple respects:

- Help respond to emotional demands of stakeholders in post-disaster recovery projects (Walker et al., 2014);
- Help increase confidence and trust in the governance system with respect to dealing with ethical dilemmas (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2014);
- Help develop positive meaning, emotions and relationships in project teams (Berg and Carlsen, 2014);
- Help develop followers' positive psychological capital and performance (Tak et al., 2019);
- Help strengthen innovator resilience potential by emotional support innovation setbacks by enabling leaders to provide emotional support and establish a climate of learning when innovation setbacks occur (Todt et al., 2019).

This stream of the project management literature has been invaluable for demonstrating the value of the authentic leadership construct for project management research and articulating normative expectations from project managers. Yet, despite drawing attention to the importance of leaders being self-aware of their own needs and suffering (Todt et al., 2019), it has been relatively silent on the real-life challenges of practicing authentic leadership. There has also been a relative neglect of the nuances in the situated practices of authentic leadership that are produced in the construction of self in relation to interactions with others and context.

Arguably, these omissions can be traced to the dominance of the 'deficit model' (Grint, 2007) of leadership in project management research, orienting research towards identifying attributes that make project managers effective in specific contingencies (e.g., Geoghegan and Dulewicz, 2008; Lundy and Morin, 2013; Müller et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the value of this approach in terms of articulating normative expectations, it does not provide the conceptual resources that sufficiently capture the complexities encountered by leaders in their efforts to enact these normative expectations (Bolden and Gosling, 2006).

A handful of research has begun to address these omissions. Raiden (2016), for instance, offers a more nuanced understanding of these challenges by revealing situated gendered strategies employed by a project manager in enacting authenticity. Here, the emphasis is placed on context and the dynamics nature of gendered identity work. This study is an important stepping-stone in shifting the attention to context-sensitive identity work in developing the construct of authenticity in project organising. More recently, Sergeeva and Davies (2021) have argued that it is personalised, and reflective stories is what makes megaproject leader authentic. They have found a strong connection between self-identity and organisational identity. However, we still do not have a sufficient understanding of the situated nuances of practicing authentic leadership and self-identity related anxieties and struggles of leaders in practicing authentic leadership.

Debates in the leadership literature suggest that these are crucial omissions. Whilst it is commonly understood that authentic leaders are

'original', 'real' and 'true to themselves' (e.g., Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2013), it is of course tricky, if not impossible, to know what 'true' or 'real' self is (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Being 'true' to oneself calls to draw on the very essence of self-identities, values, beliefs, principles and morals. Leaders often struggle with authenticity for various reasons, but it is these struggles that are vital for the development of effective leadership (Ibarra, 2015). They are expected to construct a clear and firm sense of self to make everybody in the organisation to buy-in and sustain a coherent visioning narrative; but at the same time, self-identities are multiple, fluid and dynamic and often expressed through self-identity stories and storytelling of everyday experiences (Alvesson, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Practicing authentic leadership is also made difficult by the need to construct the self in relation to followers and broader context – not just as executives but as ordinary people with their personal interests and stories.

Indeed, authentic leadership research has been drawing attention to the identity struggles leaders experience in relating to followers (Kempster et al., 2019; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2013; Painter-Morland and Deslandes, 2017), as well as the difficulties of constructing a consistent and confident self in terms of the conscious efforts of leaders to connect their ideal-self and situated action (Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Shaw, 2010) and to respond to narratives of those around them and wider context (Sparrowe, 2005).

Accordingly, important questions remain open in the conceptualisation of authentic leadership in the project management literature. Principal among those are: How do leaders construct an authentic self in real life situations? What are the self-identity related anxieties and struggles leaders encounter in constructing an authentic self, and how do they cope with them?

Another important omission in the conceptualisation of authentic leadership in the project management literature has been a macro level analysis that takes into account challenges encountered, for instance, at the level firm, project portfolios or programmes (Geraldi and Söderlund, 2018). This can possibly be linked to the tendency to focus on the project manager or the project team as the unit of analysis in project management research concerned with leadership. There have been calls and efforts to extend study of leadership to the macro level by focusing on the leadership of project portfolios and programmes (e.g., Clegg et al., 2018; Kissi et al., 2013; Shao, 2018). Following this line, this paper turns its attention to the leadership of project-based organisations. Previous research has already suggested that authentic leadership of project-based organisations has positive effects on project members' performance (Mubarak and Noor, 2018). Building on this work, this paper takes the position that there is a need to consider this macro level in addressing the questions the key that remain open about authentic leadership.

In responding to these important omissions, this paper draws on the authentic leadership literature with specific reference to the role of narratives and stories in social construction of authentic leader self-identities that largely has been neglected by the project management literature. By providing more insightful and nuanced understanding of authentic leaders, their self-identities and stories we will improve our understanding of the construction of authentic leadership in project-based organisations. The next sections elaborate on the theoretical background offered by this literature.

## 2.2. Authentic leadership and self-identity

It is commonly accepted that authentic leaders are anchored by their own deep sense of self (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2003). They are self-aware about who they are, what they believe, what their values are, and they can act upon these beliefs and values. The theoretical foundations for a number of existing studies on authentic leadership and followership development are grounded in the literature on the self and identity. Personal identity concerns the

meanings that individuals reflexively link to their selves through processes of social interactions (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2015). This paper, following this stance of work, rests on the theoretical position that authentic leadership can be explored through individual perceptions of leaders' own selves and self-identities (Peterson, 2005) and in response to the narratives constructed by followers and wider context (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Sparrowe, 2005).

Gardner et al. (2005) have been particular influential in proposing a model of the processes underlying authentic leadership that builds on and extends the multi-component conceptualisation of authenticity. The first theoretical cornerstone of this model is self-awareness, referring to the active efforts of an authentic leader to develop personal insights about their values, emotions, identity, and goals. The second theoretical cornerstone is self-regulation, a process consisting of four key elements: 1) internalised regulation: refers to regulation being guided by core self, 2) balanced processing of information: refers to the unbiased collection and interpretation of self-related information, 3) authentic behaviour: refers to actions being guided by personal values, beliefs and emotions, and 4) relational transparency: refers to displaying high levels of openness, self-disclosure, and trust in close relationships. This model assumes that the leader's personal history (family influences, early challenges, educational and work experiences) and key trigger events (including crises as well as positive trigger events such as a promotion or stretch assignment) serve as antecedents for authentic leadership:

"One's personal history of life experiences are stored in memory and self-knowledge (self-schema) and serve to shape one's identity as one seeks to answer question, 'Who I am?'" (Gardner et al., 2005: 344)

Michie and Gooty (2005) who conceptualise authentic leadership as high consistency between values and behaviours further propose that self-transcendent values and positive other-directed emotions are important elements of authentic leadership. They define self-transcendent values as the values of benevolence and universalism, and positive-other directed emotions as feelings, states, behaviours or experiences oriented towards gratitude, goodwill, appreciation and concern for others. Klenke (2007) reinforces that spirituality is at the core of authentic leadership. She introduces a model of authentic leadership that includes self-identity, leader-identity and spiritual identity systems. The self-identity system encompasses the intra-personal self-defined by internal abilities, dispositions and dynamics. The leader identity system reflects the inter-personal self as defined by the leader's relationships with others. Both of these systems are embedded in the spirituality identity system.

It is commonly recognised that the leader-follower relationship is crucial to authentic leadership. Ladkin and Taylor (2010) argue that although authenticity may be defined in self-referent terms, it is the way in which 'true self' is enacted which is critical to followers' experiences. Contending that authentic leadership involves balancing and resolving struggles and tensions, they call for empirical research in this area. Hinojosa et al. (2014) demonstrate the ways in which authenticity of leaders and followers is influenced by their personal histories. Personal histories include a range of previous life experiences involving family, childhood, culture, education, roles etc. They may be expressed through life stories told by leaders which can be used to help leaders develop greater self-awareness and thus become authentic.

Ongoing struggles and ambiguities are seen to be central in the process of authentic leader self-identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008; Lewis, 2000; Lord and Hall, 2005). Nyberg and Sveningsson (2003) demonstrate an irony of authentic leadership: whilst leaders claim it is their natural selves that make them good leaders; at the same time, they must keep under control their claimed authenticity in order to be perceived as good leaders. This generates tensions that undermine the social construction of a more stable and coherent leader self-identity:

"Authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as heads.

They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results." (George et al., 2015: 1)

Authenticity can be hence seen as a continuous dialogical process of self-construction in relation to societal norms of the ways in which things have been done. Gutney and Jackson (2005) demonstrate the authenticity paradox of top executives and CEOs in CEO portraits. They highlight that CEO portraits often appear to project corporate identity, but they tend to be so similar that they generally lack a humanising effect. Emphasising that authenticity is socially and symbolically constructed, they call for further research into how CEOs themselves make sense of their own portraits and identities.

### 2.3. Stories of authentic leader self-identity

People tell and share stories on the basis of their memories, present experiences and future expectations (Somers and Gibson, 1993). Stories are the means by which individuals ascribe meaning to their experience (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 1995). Experience is constituted through individual stories about 'self', others and social situations and events. To formulate identity story about 'self' or others, people draw from their past experiences, present circumstances and future imaginings. Authentic leader self-identities are constituted by life stories that leaders construct during their lives.

Sparrowe (2005) offers the framework of the narrative self-perspective on authenticity in leadership. Applying Ricoeur's (1992) theory of narrative identity, the framework suggests that authenticity can be understood through stories of a life. This conceptual work stimulates reflection on identity as a narrative construction, capturing the constancy of the self in the context of dynamic lived events and the unity of the self in terms of enduring character. Shamir and Eilam (2005) offer a life-story approach to the authentic leader's self-concept. They argue that authentic leadership rests heavily on the self-relevant meanings the leader attaches to his or her experiences, and these meanings are captured in the leader's life-story. They demonstrate that leaders who are authentic possess a psychologically central leader identity. Hence, a life-story is at the core of authentic leadership. Life-stories express the storytellers' identities which are products of life experiences. Shaw (2010) also focuses on the life-stories approach and how it functions giving leaders access to their 'true' stories. He clarifies that the life-story is a subjective construct that reveals the 'true' values and goals of the leader. Identity stories are inherently emotional in nature. They can be expressed with different intonations and inner feelings.

Shamir and Eilam (2005) further argue that authentic leaders are likely to express their self-concept, shaped by life-stories, through a formal leadership role. This argument is consistent with the considerations of the concept of role in theorising about identity. An example of this is the work of Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2016). They clearly distinguish between formal roles of individuals associated with organisational positions and more informal role identities which are filled with meaning by actors enacting them. Drawing upon a longitudinal study of an organisational change they demonstrate how roles and identities co-evolve over time and how roles and role transitions figure in the identity work.

Clifton (2013) argues that leader identities are performed through storytelling in organisational life. Clifton distinguishes between big stories which can be glossed as life stories, autobiographies or dominant organisational discourses and small stories of everyday workplace interaction. Small stories are seen as fluent, fragmented and dynamic constructions. Clifton (2013) argues that participants have discursive identities (such as teller, listener etc.) which reflexively make relevant situated identities (such as manager, leader, follower etc.). Empirical research conducted by George et al. (2015) supports this argument. They interviewed people with reputation for authenticity and found that leadership emerged from life-stories. Interviewees were constantly

testing themselves through real-world experiences and re-framing their life stories to understand who they were. Their work reveals that life story provides a context for experiences and can be inspiring and engaging.

Drawing from the above studies, it can be argued that stories are the primary means through which leader perceive and present themselves as authentic to themselves and others. Thus, identity stories can be considered as an important way of developing explanations about authentic leadership. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to identity stories in theorising about authentic leadership in the project management literature. While Raiden (2016) has taken an important step in this direction by analysing story lines about gender and work, Sergeeva and Davies (2021) shared the life story told by authentic leader of High Speed 2 megaproject, much remains to be understood about authentic leader self-identities constructed through life stories.

## 3. Research design

The life-story interview method was used to explore the social construction of the self as an authentic leader. We followed this approach as suggested by authentic leadership scholars (e.g., Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Shaw, 2010). Life-story interview enables to explore the ways authentic leaders are anchored by their own deep sense of self: their self-awareness about who they are, what they believe, what their values are, and they can act upon these beliefs and values (Atkinson, 2007; Brannen, 2013). Our study follows previous studies on authentic leader identity that have relied on a collected data from a very small sample (e.g., Nyberg and Svenningsson, 2013; Sergeeva and Davies, 2021). There have been previous organisation studies conducted on identity work using a very small sample size (e.g., Fernando et al., 2020; Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Watson, 2009). This approach is based on the argument that each interviewed individual, situated in a particular setting, is a case that requires intense engagement, and the very small sample size allows for focusing on self-identities and stories of individuals (Crouch and MacKenzie, 2006). The aim of this research study is to explore self-identities and stories of authentic leaders and hence our sample is small. Of particular interest is how authentic leaders socially construct personalised stories and more coherent narratives based on their experiences and reflections on the past, present and future.

The life-story interview situation is viewed as a social interaction between the interviewee and interviewer. When interviewing CEOs about leadership, depending on the questions, we can expect them to construct personalised stories, to talk about themselves and their experiences, and their responses to broader contextual narratives and other discourses about leadership. The interview talk does not objectively reflect the reality beyond the interview situation. The interviewer of course influences which stories are mobilised (De Fina, 2009; Quasthoff, 2013). It is important to acknowledge that a different researcher would inevitably elicit a different set of stories and self-identities.

### 3.1. Data collection

The empirical data is based on life-story interviews with four CEOs from UK construction and infrastructure public organisations. The interviewees were purposefully selected on the basis of their formal leadership roles and extensive experiences working in the sector (more than ten years on average). The sample represents highly publicized organisations appearing in the social media. In order to ensure anonymity, the four CEOs in this paper are given the pseudonyms of Charlie, Harry, Oscar and Emily. The first author has established a long-term relationship with the leaders interviewed by conducting interviews with them on various other topics in the past, regular attendance of the events where they performed public speeches, and other teaching-related work activities. The continuity of contact with these leaders established a certain level of familiarity and trust between the researcher and the executives interviewed. This provided a foundation

for asking CEOs to talk about themselves, their leadership and experiences more openly and authentically. We were also focusing on CEOs' perception of followers and followership rather than followers themselves. The total amount of audio-recorded interview data is between 2 and 3 hours with each leader. All interviews were conducted in the CEOs' offices (except the second interview with Harry was taken place in local café). The interviews were fully transcribed by the researcher.

The life-story interview questions were open in nature, which are likely to elicit personalised identity stories and general reflections on leadership. The interviews were formed as conversations about leadership touching upon formal and informal roles of leaders and personal experiences. The CEOs were asked to describe themselves and their leadership approach. Examples of interview questions included, but were not limited to: Could you please tell me about your professional background and role? Many people recognise you as a leader. How would you respond to that? Do you feel as a leader? What counts as a 'recognised' leader? "What challenges do you have as a leader? Identity stories can be accessed through questions about personal experiences and feelings about leadership roles. The guiding life-story interview questions are provided in the Appendix. The in-depth conversations intended to develop an understanding of how CEOs made sense of their formal and informal roles as leaders in relation to past, present and future experiences, and their self-identities. The small number of interviews allowed space for in-depth analysis of identity nuances and struggles. The set of interviews presented in this paper offers rich and interesting case for analytically in-depth examinations of how leadership narratives and stories are used in identity work.

### 3.2. Data analysis

The analytical process involved identifying identity stories through searching for natural linguistic expressions and words used by the interviewees. Personalised stories were constructed around individual experiences, circumstances in life histories and reflections of past, present and future. Stories were about CEOs' self-identities, specific life events and general reflections on leadership. Such stories were identified in the interview transcripts by searching for introductory phrases such as "My role is", "I do", "I have been for some time", "I think I am one", "Every Friday", "I can tell you a story", "I can find myself", "When I have been in". Authenticity of leaders was evident through phrases such as 'I just relate to what I do', 'in all honesty', 'being genuine', 'being authentic' and through self-awareness of who leaders are, their self-identities and what they do. More coherent narratives were also evident as outcomes of dominant structures, political actions, script-following, performance, organisational and industry identity works (Alvesson, 2003). The analysis required better understanding of the context within which interviewees operated. This involves reading industry and company reports, brochures, strategies. Self-identity struggles and tensions were identified on the basis on interviewees' critical thinking and questioning themselves and the context within which they operate. Self-identity struggles were identified in the interview transcripts by searching for phrases such as "I guess", "the argument I had with myself", "I find difficult", "I find myself being critical", "I think it is a challenge". The self-ascribed roles and self-identities became central in understanding authentic leadership. The interpretative approach to the analysis of the life-story interviews was combined with the thematic analysis. The common themes across all four interviews are presented below as sub-headings, and within each theme we demonstrate personalised stories and self-identities with nuances and struggles.

## 4. Identity stories of CEOs

### 4.1. Being formally accountable and authentic

All CEOs interviewed initially referred to their formal organisational leadership roles and associated responsibilities. At the same time, they

talked about more informal roles they play that reflect on their personal beliefs, goals and experiences. Below we present stories about each CEO.

Charlie is the CEO of a government-owned company with main responsibility of managing road network in England. Charlie has placed a lot of emphasis on the differences between private and public sector organisations. He explained that the primary purpose of the private business is to gain profit and earnings per se, and the secondary objectives are client recognition and wider reputation. In case when a private business loses reputation, it is not going to generate next business for next year or year after. Public business, on the other hand, does not have a return on share. Scorecard is one of the ways of measuring business performance of a public organisation. A sense of what really matters for end users is also seen crucial objective for running the public organisation. Charlie articulated the formal and informal roles he plays in the public sector organisation as:

"I just relate to what I do. A little bit comes with a job. Part of the Chief Executive role, the job description, is to lead. You have decisions to make and they get brought to you."

Charlie further suggested that otherwise it is down to personality and communication with people. In his view, people understand what they need to do and what the priorities are. He believes people need minimum instructions in their work. Charlie saw himself as '*empathetic*' leader who has genuine interest in his team members lives and feelings. He puts effort in understanding their situations and what they are going though in order to support them. Charlie also uses regular blog in being a role model for organisational members, in their project related problem-solving activities. He gave an example of a group of middle managers and senior staff sitting and trying to sort out a specific problem. He has heard them saying: "What would [Name] do?" He felt happy of the ways people aligned their thinking with his own in solving everyday problems. Here is his story:

"It is down to personality, talk to people, communicate. I do a blog every Friday and it is just setting the tone. How others think of us? What is good, what is not good? It is all about just getting people think in a same way. Hopefully, when we ask to solve a problem they will react as they have been told."

Harry is the CEO of construction member organisation, a leading figure in the UK construction industry, and is a passionate champion of change and collaborative working. He has had a hand in setting up a number of reform initiatives in the sector. On the basis of the privilege of formal CEO position, Harry has set up a vision and directions for the organisation and the sector as a whole. As a Chairman and Chief Executive Harry's formal job is to implement the decisions to the board:

"Leadership is about setting a vision and getting people - leaders and followers. So, yes, I guess on the basis of the privilege of the organisation to set up a vision and direction that must make me a leader."

The above story is about the importance of defining a desired future and getting others to engage with it. The more informal role Harry self-ascribed to himself is a '*champion of change*' in the construction industry. He argues that there are people who work in the industry full-time putting an enormous amount of time. For them to be champions of change in addition to their formal role is recognised as remarkable. Harry argues that if he leaves his job, the advertisement will be the CEO of change and innovation. "What is not to like, and actually being paid to do these stuff"? "Whereas the majority of people in the industry are doing it because they see it as part of their formal roles" said Harry. He characterised his role as fascinating, privileged and rare. Harry also talked about his recognition overseas building upon the continuity of his seniority and work experience. Harry is truly passionate about his leadership role; he sees himself as a charismatic leader. He was seemingly honest in telling the interviewer that he has been given the same presentations thousands of times. He believes that a lot of people still do

not hear his message. Hence Harry has got to repeat the same narrative over and over again. He believes that the contexts change over time, but not the narrative.

Oscar has led a number of high-profile infrastructure megaprojects both in the UK and overseas. As an engineer by his background, he is passionate about the critical role infrastructure plays in social and economic welfare. Oscar is personally convinced that there are only two things that leaders need in the infrastructure world:

“One is to create a culture that empowers people to be the best they can be and genuine. Second, the theory I have been using for some time, I am convinced there are no more than 10 decisions. It does not matter what the subject is, there are no more than 10 things you need to get right. And the trick is knowing what they are and knowing when to make them right because the timing is important as well. As a leader my job is create a culture and to do what I can do to allow the team to be the best they can be which is primarily culture-based. And then with my experience knowing what those ten things are and you will not have a list when you start with, but you just know. I think that is when age and experience come in, something loom out.”

As Harry, Oscar also sees himself as a charismatic leader. He uses the self-identity label ‘*show man*’ to describe his leadership style. Oscar places an emphasis on behaviour and its alignment with the culture he creates and promotes in the organisation:

“Do you need to be a charismatic leader to lead? I think I am one. Is it necessary? No. I do not think you need to be a show man – it suits my style. But what is way more important is how you behave, and being constantly on your guard, constantly challenging. Am I behaving in a way that describes the culture that I said I want to create? Because if I am not, I am wasting my breath. If I am not people will not believe me.”

Oscar is keen to champion a movement which recognises the inputs or contributions people early in their careers can have on the industry. The discussion Oscar has had with himself for twenty years has been: “Do you have to be old to lead big construction projects? Do you have to have a lot of experience?” It appears unusual in the construction industry to see younger people in senior positions. In other industries you can see younger people to be promoted quickly; there are various fast-track schemes and high potentials for promotions. Yet it is very unusual to see that in construction. Oscar argued that the construction industry is typically led by elderly people. It is typically perceived as quite a conservative, traditional industry, and it is not the one where change is necessary encouraged or welcomed, or certainly promoted. Oscar always thought that it was wrong. He hence invited early career professionals to form a collective to consider what they might like to do to further their progress, but also contribute to the industry. He explained culture and its change and the role of examples and stories:

“The more you want to create a culture or change the culture – the more you can deliver your thoughts and provide examples of how we should behave or what ‘good’ looks like. Receiving that message in a form of stories, that is how we have done it for millennium. There is some biology and evolution in this. It is also about behaviours.”

Emily is a CEO of a multinational construction company. Her leadership style can be described as self-deprecating, collaborative, hard-working and humble. A major aspect of her approach is that people are held accountable for their actions. Emily believes in a high degree of humanity, a sense of humour and a preparedness to speak to people on all levels. Throughout the interviews, Emily portrays herself as a ‘reflective’ leader. She felt comfortable and confident to be in a senior position in male-dominant construction sector. She generally has found the construction sector to be welcoming, not just for women, but to anyone who has the talent and the aptitude to succeed. She is keen to support a movement for more women in senior positions in the

construction sector. She has been actively engaging in organising events and writing reports about more women in construction. Social networks have been emerged around women in leadership in construction with the tendency of the employment rate continue to grow. Emily has reflected on the role of storytelling and narration in her role:

“I think storytelling is one of the things that has helped because other system has not been there to allow information-in-use to be transferred between people. Storytelling should be interesting to make people remember. If it is really interesting and dramatic people will remember. If not people will remember because they heard it 10 times. So, something that is quite mundane you have got to repeat. But something that is exciting you know people will remember because it is interesting story to listen to.”

#### 4.2. Being a ‘good’ leader

While talk about leadership differs among the four CEOs interviewed, they all talked about ‘good’ leaders. Emily described a ‘good’ leader as following:

“Open-minded, prepared to learn, having a nice ambition, and relative ego, but not to be dominant to think that it is the only thing that is important. I find that people who push for title or financial recognition quite often become disappointed because it is never enough. Whereas if you, every day, think “I have done everything that I could” that is not a bad place to be. Then you have done better again, you have done better again. Then you are pleased with what you have done other than disappointed. I am not saying it is an essential for leadership.”

Charlie’s approach which he thinks works well for ‘good leadership’ is about building trust and a bit of empathy. He only does things which he really believes in, which he thinks is a bit ‘altruistic’. He just cannot engage with them otherwise. Charlie is really proud of the road that he runs and the service they give. He can really get into it. Charlie thinks that genuine commitment to the business comes across in all the communication he has with people. ‘Making it personable’ is his ego. Charlie explained that people realise that he is dealing with exactly the same things as they are. He argues that trust is important and then you build on your actions all the time. It is seen as a long-term process. Charlie also argued that leaders have to be relaxed walking and talking to people. If they are very shy it is difficult to do. He believes that people in a ‘big role’ have impatience. They want to do things, to change things. In Charlie’s view people want to see a leader who “gets things and does things”.

Harry has a strong position that all good leaders in construction project-based organisations are passionate and motivating to be with. He found it interesting that there are generic textbooks on leadership but there is a scope for exploring construction industry leader. Harry believes that one of the characteristics which is different is the proportion of leaders who come up through the construction industry who have done the actual work and then been promoted. This is in agreement with Oscar who emphasised that in construction industry practitioners often become promoted quite late in their careers.

#### 4.3. Experiences of self-identity struggles

All interviewees recognised that they were inevitably drawn into situations where maintaining a positive sense of self could be challenging. Portraying himself as a champion of change in the conservative construction sector, Harry found it very challenging to sustain positive emotion, especially during the economic problems the industry faced during the recession times:

“Always be positive, this is a tricky one. Always be honest, but put positive sign on it. My face betrays me often. A lot of it is acting. A lot

of it is whatever the internal emotion you have to be positive. You have got to because you have got to keep this consistency of vision. I am not great actor. I am ok at it."

He further questioned himself about how to engage people with the passion and enthusiasm in such circumstances. The answer he offered is through storytelling as an important leadership skill:

"How do you set the vision? How do you do it with passion that engages people? Answer is you have to be storytelling. Storytelling is a classic leadership skill. And by the way I am not necessarily great at it. One of the reasons I use slides is that I find it easy to keep the story on track. I can tell a good story using slides."

Harry acknowledged that he is not necessarily great at telling stories. He prefers to use slides as a way of telling and sustaining stories. In the context of the construction sector, practitioners typically use visual images and pictures (especially in architectural practices) as a way of telling stories about past projects or events. Harry adopts a critical position to the industry clients, supply chain and academia. At the same time, he believes in continuous improvement of the industry:

"We have equal pressure from all these different stakeholders that allows to find you a space in the middle to effectively find positive solutions: win-win. I spend some of my time criticising government. I spend some of my time criticising clients, industry. I can find myself being critical to academia as well. But always with this sense that the industry is got to be a better place. It is a lot of ideas here, a lot of legislation."

Oscar talked about his worries of people getting into a position of authority in their 40s, as they may forget some important things. They can become 'blind' to some of the things that always have been logical. Oscar argued that people may lose some natural 'inquisitiveness' that they have when they are younger. In relation to leadership, Oscar talked about the biggest nightmare of not having followers:

"You have got to have a vision, you have got to be confident, believe in themselves and all of that. But we are talking about what is your biggest nightmare and we both concluded that it was being a leader and turning around and see nobody in there. They are not following you, they are not with you and you think they are but they are not. Because how you suppose to know what leadership is, how you suppose to know? And even if you have read every book on leadership how do you suppose to know if you are good at it. I think it is something that becomes apparent over time, and probably you are not the best person to judge whether that is the case."

Oscar's self-ascribed identity is a 'reflective' leader who challenges and question himself. He believes that 'good leadership' becomes apparent though time and experience.

Emily sees herself not as a charismatic leader who speaks publicly well, but as a person who likes to communicate ideas person to person or in a small group. She can influence a small group of people, and together as a team they have all complementary skills. Emily contrasted herself with other 'great' charismatic leaders who are good at performative public speeches and influencing bigger groups. She seemingly tried to justify herself, arguing that there are different leadership styles, and there is no one medium and by explaining that 'good' leadership as having complementary skills in a team:

"A good leader tends to have in a team what they do not have. I am not a charismatic leader who can speak publicly really well. I am not that sort of leader. But I have colleagues who are good at that. I like communicate ideas person to person, or in a small group. Some people are great leaders because they can influence a big group and others can influence a small group, and some of their teams can influence a big group. It is complementary skills. You do not have to have it yourself."

In addition, Emily stressed a shortage of talent and the strategy of being more structured around individuals who show real potential and the work experiences so that they are able to take a leadership role sooner in their careers. The working life of Emily can be characterised by the idiosyncrasies of women in the construction industry lacking confidence in getting to the top management of organisations:

"There are also different agendas. Men generally think they are ready for next job, women generally think they are not."

Charlie also believes that he has changed the business to perform better. The business has had some significant problems. Government wanted to deliver the work. They had a sense of urgency in a business, whereas normally they have one or two years to plan then a year or two to deliver. During the recession times they had to really put back all expenditures and check everything that goes out. Over the last few months Charlie found it challenging to build it all up. He emphasised quite demanding customers. He further stressed uncertainty because they do not necessarily know where the next project is going to be. They change senior team, change people, structure. Even in a steady-state business is seen as quite dynamic. Charlie argues that in infrastructure bills are very high and if something goes wrong it is 'very-very public'. He gave an example, if he works in big supermarket or retailer, and he orders 100 containers of wrong furniture, the worst that happens is his boss says: "Why do we have all these containers that we cannot sell, and it is going to cost some money?". If he ordered a layout that does not work, or build a piece of road that is empty, his name is on the newspapers on Monday morning. He had a road-signal project few years ago. At weekend they did some work, on Monday morning it did not work properly. That was on national television news. Charlie argues that he is in that environment where experience really does help. He believes he has got enough experience around the business. He gets a sense of how long it takes to do something. He gets a sense when someone comes to him with a project financial forecast and says: "It is going to cost £100mln". With probably three questions he will then have a good sense of whether £100mln would be the right number or inaccurate. Charlie thinks that that is where leadership experience comes in. "It is not actually knowing what to do, it gives you sense to look for vulnerability if you like." Charlie talked about other challenges he and other leaders face:

"We have 24 hours. When I started my career, I had to design a small project to manage. I do the job and go home. And now the real challenge is I still have 24 hours a day and I need to sleep for 7 hours. So, how do I prioritise for available working time? I think it is a big challenge for all of us. It needs to be quite dynamic; circumstances change, events change. Prioritising is a big challenge."

He further emphasised that the interactions with others appear to produce identity struggles and anxiety in relation to leadership behaviour:

"Communicating to people is really difficult. My business is not that big. But I have people spread across the country with different interests, different ways of taking the information. Getting them all behind you, and actually doing the right thing for the business is challenging."

Charlie has found communicating with his project team and making them follow his vision challenging because of their spread across the country and differences in interests and ways of perceiving an information. At the end of the interview Charlie reflected on past, present and future generations of leaders. Charlie believes that the generation before him had a clear path of work and ability depends how far on the path you are. In his generation people have to manage own careers far more. For the next generation he believes it will be spotting new technologies, different social networks, recognising the diversity of skills and experiences.

## 5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate the need for a nuanced understanding of the situated practices of authentic leadership that are produced in the construction of self in relation to interactions with others and context. They show the importance of authentic leaders in project-based organisations, their deep sense of self, self-awareness of own and others' identities, beliefs and values. This enables them to get their teams engaged with a vision, role model performance, and interpret and shape the broader environment within which they are situated. Our empirical findings reinforce and extend the project management literature that increasingly recognises the importance of authentic leaders for motivating the teams of complex contemporary projects and project-based organisations (e.g., Berg and Carlsen, 2014; Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011; Toor and Ofori, 2008).

The findings critically confront the relative silence on relational experiences in the conceptualisation of authentic leadership by the project management literature, as well as the relative neglect of the context or its treatment as an antecedent or effect of authentic leadership (Berg and Carlsen, 2014; Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011; Tak et al., 2019; Todt et al., 2019; Toor and Ofori, 2008; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2014; Walker et al., 2014). Instead, they show a continuous dialogical process between more coherent often repetitive narratives and personalised stories articulated by the CEOs. Stories have essential emotional and spiritual aspect (Klenke, 2007; Michie and Gooty, 2005) that engages attention of audiences. Whilst the CEOs needed to sustain coherent narratives necessary for performing formal job roles, they placed an emphasis on engaging stories which bring them closer to their followers. For example, Emily has explicitly talked about storytelling and narrating and their importance in the context of project-based organisations, the first as more interesting and exciting and the latter as more repetitive and strategic. This is in alignment with the growing project management literature that focuses on lived experiences, stories and self-identities of megaproject leaders (Drouin et al., 2021; Sankaran, 2018) and oscillation between narratives and stories constructed by executives (Sergeeva and Green, 2019). It is also in line with the recognition in the leadership literature that inter-personal self as defined by the leader's relationships with others is an important aspect of authentic leadership (Klenke, 2007; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). Of particular note is that all CEOs interviewed value a degree of humanity, a sense of humour, personal touch evident in personalised life-stories and metaphors.

Whilst referring to their formal roles in organisations, the CEOs also talked about informal roles they play that are grounded in self-identities reflecting on their personal beliefs, experiences, critical thinking and actions. The formal roles of CEOs are associated with attributes constructed as confidence, consistency and coherence. The informal roles are seen as mediators in identity work which are filled with meanings ascribed by actors enacting them. As evident, Harry saw himself as a 'champion of change', Oscar as a 'show man', Emily as a 'reflective' leader and Charlie as 'empathetic' leader. This observation is in keeping with authors such as Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2016) who conceptualise formal and informal roles in a similar way, and Sergeeva and Green (2019) who show the ways senior managers in the construction industry oscillate between performative narratives of innovation and personalised stories in constructing their self-identities. This interweaving of self-identities associated with formal and informal roles in which the informal roles become the primary arena for self-awareness and self-regulation suggests that it is the informal roles and self-identities that are at the core of authentic leadership.

Interweaving of the stories of self and context can also be observed in the quest for authenticity – being oneself and acting accordingly (Davies and Sergeeva, 2021; Sparrowe, 2005). For example, it is possible to connect Oscar's definition of his informal role as being a 'champion of change' to the broader industry narrative of transformation. Each CEO brought self-reflection upon their past, present and future experiences

into this broader industry narrative of transformation. They authentically talked about the self-discussions they have had in the past few years with themselves. They were self-critical, taking a critical stance in questioning themselves and the ways the industry operates.

Additionally, the attributes of confidence, consistency and coherence explained in relation to the formal role can possibly be linked to the narratives about what leadership means in the UK government - inspiring and empowering others and being honest in communications (e.g., Civil Service, 2016). For example, Charlie seeks to achieve consistency through continuous communications with people that are based on trust and empathy. He makes his stories personal so that his subordinates realise they deal with exactly the same problems. These are slightly 'softer' attributes than reported by Nyberg and Sveningsson (2013) who found that when managers talked about their managerial career and hierarchical status, they socially constructed themselves as bossy and dogmatic.

All CEOs interviewed also talked about being a 'good' leader. This is not a surprising observation, as others have noted previously (e.g., Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio and Gardner, 2005). But what is noted here is that CEOs interviewed broadly share an undertone of altruism. This appears to reproduce the institutionalised value of integrity in the UK civil service, referring to putting the obligations of the public service above personal interests (e.g., Civil Service, 2015).

It is also important to note that, although the CEOs interviewed often refer to heroic leadership attributes such as charismatic leadership styles, their interpretations of a good leadership tends to be relatively humble. For example, when Emily talked about 'good' leaders she described them as open-minded, prepared to learn, having a nice ambition and relative ego. These attributes seem to reflect a person not as someone who is over-confident or ambitious, but rather a humble, reflective and collaborative person. Arguably, this approach reconciles the demand for being an organisational leader with charismatic attributes as well as a public servant that serves the bureaucratic mechanisms of the government and citizens through the civil service value of integrity (Newman, 2004).

Moreover, the findings reveal self-identity struggles and anxieties experienced in practice. Self-identity struggles were evident in stories mobilised by CEOs about their difficulties and anxieties in relating to others. For example, Harry believes he is a charismatic leader. He gives the same presentation thousands of times. He sees storytelling as a classic leadership skill. However, he demonstrates authenticity in acknowledging that he is not necessarily great at it. He found it useful to use visual storytelling (e.g., PowerPoint slides) in addition to the verbal form to tell stories to the audience. Another example is Emily not seeing herself as a charismatic leader. This indicates that she is true to herself and to the interviewer by saying that she prefers to communicate ideas person to person or in a small group. She believes 'great' leaders are charismatic and able to influence a big group; but justifies herself by arguing that members of a collective in organisations should have complementary skills. Oscar has also explained that his biggest nightmare (likely to be a nightmare for many leaders) is turning back and not seeing followers. Charlie has pointed out to challenges associated with his team being spread across the country, the diversity of his team members in terms of differences in interests and ways of engagement. It is also possible to identify self-identity struggles associated with gender. For example, Emily generally believes that women need more confidence in such a male-dominant sector.

The stories mobilised by the CEOs also draw attention to the authenticity paradox that has been previously discussed by various scholars including Guthey and Jackson (2005), Nyberg and Sveningsson (2013) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003). This refers to the paradoxical demands on leaders in terms of expecting them to conform to institutional or organisational discourses, but also, sustain an authentic self. The difficulty Harry experienced in sustaining positive emotions in relating to his subordinates during periods of difficulty experienced by the industry resonates with the authenticity paradox grounded in the

tension between the need to regulate negative emotions that can have damaging effects and being honest about vulnerabilities and anxieties (Kempster et al., 2019; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2013). The struggles in Charlie's stories also suggest an authenticity paradox grounded in conflicting expectations associated with leader accountabilities (Painter-Morland and Deslandes, 2017). Charlie's stories draw attention to the paradoxical demands of different stakeholders – constraints to the time for planning and funding set by the government, and the public demands for keeping to plans and satisfying diverse stakeholder needs. They also point out the tension between the demand for achieving financial certainty that is associated with public scrutiny and the need to cope with the uncertainty that emerges from not knowing where the next project is going to be. Indeed, project scholars have long highlighted that projects present a paradox, in terms of their promise of a robust method for controlling change and their messy reality - particularly when they are highly political and complex (e.g., Brady et al., 2012).

Of further note, all CEOs interviewed believe in sustaining consistency of their messages. This is probably owing to their formal role of setting a strategy and organisational vision that everybody follows. It also reflects the need for coherent and consistent narratives in temporary project environment where team members may shift and change over a life of projects. But at the same time, they also value personalised stories and activities. All CEOs interviewed found it challenging to sustain positive self-ascribed identities. This is consistent with previous work that found identity tensions and struggles in maintaining a coherent leader identity (Avolio et al., 2004 Lewis, 2000). This is especially challenging in the context of the construction sector which is perceived as conservative and slow in changing institutionalised practices. Of further note is a way Oscar challenged conventional norms of the sector. For the past twenty years he asked himself: "Why it is appeared to be unusual in the construction industry to see younger people in senior positions?" He is keen to encourage younger people to be confident enough and to work as a collective to find ways of contributing to changes in the industry. This purpose of challenging existing norms is a key aspect of authenticity as a number of authors suggest (George et al., 2015).

The indications of experiences of struggles among the interviewed CEOs perhaps rest of an assumption of many contemporary ideas in leadership. More specifically, the self-identity struggles evident in the data can be categorised at macro- and micro-levels and their interactions. The self-identity struggles at macro-level refer to the broader context within which CEOs operate. This refers to the specific context of the construction industry; tensions within an organisation and projects in terms of collaboration and communication between colleagues. The self-identity struggles at micro-level refer to individual concerns of prioritising time, work-life balance, behaviour and beliefs. Both macro- and micro-level self-identity struggles, and the dialogue between them, form social identity construction.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper contributes to enriching the concept of authentic leadership in the project management research (e.g., Berg and Carlsen, 2014; Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011; Tak et al., 2019; Todt et al., 2019; Toor and Ofori, 2008; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2014; Walker et al., 2014) by critically confronting assumptions underpinning this concept and offering conceptual resources and analytical extensions that can help address the current blind spots in capturing the complexities of practicing authentic leadership in project-based organisations. By inquiring into an underexplored senior leadership position in project organising, the CEOs, the paper also contributes to the ongoing efforts in the literature concerned with leadership in projects to extend the analysis beyond the analytical level of project managers (e.g., Clegg et al., 2018; Kissi et al., 2013; Shao, 2018).

The paper problematises the tendency in the project management literature to implicitly assume that authentic leadership is a set of

attributes that can be easily applied in practice. The in-depth empirical material of this exploratory study demonstrates that authenticity is at the core of the social construction of self-identities through stories. The findings reveal the continuous process of a dialogue between formal and informal roles, continuous efforts to cope with relational anxieties and authenticity struggles as well as macro- and micro-level identity dialogues. They demonstrate a need for a nuanced understanding of the situated practices of leaders that are produced in the construction of self in relation to the interactions with others and shared background understandings. By better understanding authentic leaders and their self-identities we enrich our understanding of how they lead their teams and make sense of themselves, others and the context of project-based organisations. Learning from their experience can inform and guide future generations of leaders in project-based organisations.

The findings show that institutional values and discourses can encourage the practice of authentic leadership, but also give rise to authenticity struggles. Understanding the role played by context in the social construction of identity is crucial for explaining differences in the practice and perception of authenticity in a specific situation (Sparrowe, 2005). The study suggests paying particular attention to cultural values, institutionalised views about leadership, roles, the conditions of project organising and the broader context (Winch, 2014). This implies a need for sensitising the theory and practice of authentic leadership to the role of contextual conditions in pursuing authenticity. This exploratory study shows the lens of self-identity, a perspective that has been neglected in the study of leadership in projects, can be invaluable for producing such nuanced understandings of authentic leadership practices.

A key implication of this for the theory and practice of authentic leadership is the need for shifting the emphasis from the 'know how' and 'know why' of authentic leadership to the practical wisdom of authentic leadership (Grint, 2007). This is not to say that the 'know how' and 'know why' of authentic leadership are not important, but rather that they alone are insufficient for realising the normative ideals promised by authentic leadership.

The paper demonstrates the value of extending the scope of project research on authentic leadership to include macro-level concerns associated with project-based organising (Geraldi and Söderlund, 2018). The findings draw attention to the active efforts of CEOs to shape the contextual conditions for project work within their project-based organisations and the broader industry in terms of, for instance, addressing issues of diversity, role modelling problem solving approaches, and empowering people to be the best they can be and genuine. It is within this contextual conditions that project portfolio managers, programme managers and project managers attempt to practice authentic leadership for dealing with complexities of contemporary projects. Future research can build on and extend investigations of macro level issues by investigating how programme or portfolio managers practice authentic leadership and the effects of organisational and institutional level leaders' authenticity on these practices.

The paper also makes contributions to the broader literature concerned with leadership in projects. Importantly, the paper is an important stepping-stone towards moving beyond articulating normative expectations from project, programme or portfolio managers. The paper builds on and extends previous research on the social construction of leadership (e.g., Bresnen, 1995, Packendorff et al., 2014) by demonstrating that using the lens of self-identity to hold the conceptualisations of authentic leadership to close scrutiny can help develop more comprehensive understandings that can guide the theory and practice of project leadership. The paper highlights the importance of developing situated understandings of a dialogical process between coherent narratives and personalised stories articulated by leaders, continued interweaving narratives of self and the context, and ongoing efforts to cope with relational anxieties, authenticity paradoxes and identity struggles. Future research can further develop situated dialogical understandings of leadership and examine their implications for leading projects, programmes or portfolios.

Drawing on the debates on the concept of authentic leadership in the broader literature on leadership, the paper starts developing conceptual resources that can be useful for understanding and guiding the practice of authentic leadership in the context of project-based organisations. Crucially, the lens of self-identities and stories reveals leaders' practical wisdom about the ways in which leaders construct authenticity in relating to their followers and the broader context. The paper also draws on the leadership literature to introduce the terms 'authenticity paradox', a powerful vocabulary for understanding the contradictory demands on leaders that give rise to identity struggles in the practice of authentic leadership.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. Our study is limited in providing insights into the ways authentic leadership in project organising is practiced and experienced over the period of time. In order to better understand the processes of change in self-identities, stories and narratives, more longitudinal research could further shed some lights into this. This could provide insights into future trends and strategies for practices and policies. Further study could focus on followers and followership in order to get more insights into their experiences of practicing authentic leadership in project organising.

## Appendix Guiding life-story interview questions

- Q1. Could you, please, introduce yourself?**
- What is your role in the organisation?
  - What is the nature of the enterprise within which you operate?
  - How many years of experience do you have?
  - What are your previous positions?
  - What are the sources of predominant workplace interactions (academics, practitioners, government)?
- Q2. Do you see yourself as a 'leader'? Could you please describe the way you have developed your identity as a 'leader'?**
- Q3. What is your leadership style?**
- Q4. What is distinctive about 'temporal leader' or leader in projects as temporary organisations?**
- Q5. What challenges do you face as a leader?**
- Q6. Who do you recognise as a 'leader' in the industry? Do we need more leaders?**
- Q7. Have you developed other identities in different situations (contexts, work environment), dealing with different people? How your identity has changed over time?**
- Q8. To what extent retrospective thinking (looking backwards) and prospective thinking (looking forward) play a role in your identity construction?**
- Q9. How does learning become transferred between generations of leaders and through time?**
- Are there any other issues/thoughts you would like to highlight/emphasise?**
- References**
- Alvesson, M (2003). Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organization research. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(1), 13–33.
- Alvesson, M (2010). Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers, sufferers and others: Images of self-identities in organization studies. *Human Relations*, 63(2), 193–217.
- Alvesson, M, Ashcraft, KL, & Thomas, R (2008). Identity matters: Reflection on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies. *Organization*, 15(1), 5–28.
- Alvesson, M, & Einola, K (2019). Warning for excessive positivity: Authentic leadership and other traps in leadership studies. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(4), 383–395.
- Atkinson, R (2007). The life story interview as a bridge in a narrative inquiry. In D J Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 224–246). London: Sage Publications.
- Avolio, BJ, Gardner, WL, Walumbwa, FO, Luthans, F, & May, DR (2004). Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviors. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(4), 801–823.
- Berg, ME, & Karlsen, JT (2014). How project managers can encourage and develop positive emotions in project teams. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 7(3), 449–472.
- Brady, T, Davies, A, & Nightingale, P (2012). Dealing with uncertainty in complex projects: Revisiting Klein and Meckling. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 5(4), 718–736.
- Brannen, J (2013). Life story talk: Some reflections on narrative in qualitative interviews. *Sociological Research Online*, 18(2), 48–58.
- Bresnen, MJ (1995). All things to all people? Perceptions, attributions and constructions of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(4), 495–513.
- Brown, AD (2015). Identities and identity work in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 17(1), 20–40.
- Boje, DM (1991). The storytelling organization: A study of storytelling performance in an office supply firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36(1), 106–126.
- Civil Service (2015) The Civil service code. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code/the-civil-service-code> (Accessed on 22 October 2020).
- Civil Service (2016) Civil service leadership statement. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-leadership-statement/civil-service-leadership-statement> (Accessed on 22 October 2020).
- Cooper, CD, Scandura, TA, & Schriesheim, CA (2005). Looking forward but learning from our past: Potential challenges to developing authentic leadership theory and authentic leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 475–493.
- Clegg, S, Killen, CP, Biesenthal, C, & Sankaran, S (2018). Practices, projects and portfolios: Current research trends and new directions. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(5), 762–772.
- Clifton, J (2013). Small stories, positioning, and the discursive construction of leader identity in business meetings. *Leadership*, 10(1), 99–117.
- Crawford, JA, Dawkins, S, Martin, A, & Lewis, G (2020). Putting the leader back into authentic leadership: Reconceptualising and rethinking leaders. *Australian Journal of Management*, 45(1), 114–133.
- Crouch, M, & MacKenzie, H (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45(4), 483–499.
- Czarniawska, B (1997). *A narrative approach to organization studies*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Fernando, M, Reveley, J, & Learmonth, M (2020). Identity work by a non-white immigrant business scholar: Autoethnographic vignettes of covering and accenting. *Human Relations*, 73(6), 765–788.
- Gabriel, Y (1995). The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity. *Organization Studies*, 16(3), 477–501.
- Gardner, WL, Avolio, BJ, Luthans, F, DR, May, & Walumbwa, FO (2005). Can you see the real me? A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 343–372.
- Geoghegan, L, & Dulewicz, V (2008). Do project managers' leadership competencies contribute to project success? *Project Management Journal*, 39(4), 58–67.
- George, B, Sims, P, McLean, AN, & Mayer, D (2015). Discovering your authentic leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(2), 129–138.
- Gerald, J, & Söderlund, J (2018). Project studies: What it is, where it is going. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(1), 55–70.
- Green, SD (2011). *Making sense of construction improvement*. Sussex, UK: Wiley & Sons.
- Grint, K (2007). Learning to lead: Can Aristotle help us find the road to wisdom? *Leadership*, 3(2), 231–246.
- Gutney, E, & Jackson, B (2005). CEO portraits and the authenticity paradox. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), 1057–1082.
- De Fina, A (2009). Narratives in interview – The case of accounts: For an interactional approach to narrative genres. *Narrative Inquiry*, 19(2), 233–258.
- Drouin, N, Sankaran, S, v, Marrewijk, & Müller, R (2021). *Megaproject leaders: Reflecting on personal life stories*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Hinojosa, AS, McCauley, KD, Randolph-Seng, B, & Gardner, WL (2014). Leader and follower attachment styles: Implications for authentic leader-follower relationships. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(3), 595–610.
- Ibarra, H (2015). The authenticity paradox: Feeling like a fake can be a sign of growth. *Harvard Business Review*, 93(1), 52–59.
- Illes, R, Morgeson, FP, & Nahrgang, JD (2005). Authentic leadership and audaemonic well-being: Understanding leader-follower outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16 (3), 373–394.
- Järvenpää-Thesleff, R, & Tienari, J (2016). Roles as mediators in identity work. *Organization Studies*, 37(2), 237–265.
- Kempster, S, Iszatt-White, M, & Brown, M (2019). Authenticity in leadership: Reframing relational transparency through the lens of emotional labour. *Leadership*, 15(3), 319–338.
- Kernis, MH, & Goldman, BM (2005). Authenticity: a multicomponent perspective. In A Tesser, J Wood, & D Stapel (Eds.), *On building, defending, and regulating the self: a psychological perspective* (pp. 31–52). New York: Psychology Press.
- Kissi, J, Dainty, A, & Tuuli, M (2013). Examining the role of transformational leadership of portfolio managers in project performance. *International Journal of Project Management*, 31(4), 485–497.
- Klenke, K (2007). Authentic leadership: A self, leader, and spiritual identity perspective. *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 3(1), 68–97.
- Ladkin, D, & Taylor, SS (2010). Enacting the 'true self': Towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(1), 64–74.
- Lewis, MW (2000). Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 760–776.
- Lloyd-Walker, B, & Walker, D (2011). Authentic leadership for the 21st century project delivery. *International Journal of Project Management*, 29(4), 383–395.

- Lord, RG, & Hall, RJ (2005). Identity, deep structure and the development of leadership skill. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 591–615.
- Lundy, V, & Morin, P (2013). Project leadership influences resistance to change: The case of the Canadian public service. *Project Management Journal*, 44(4), 45–64.
- Michie, S, & Gooty, J (2005). Values, emotions, and authenticity: Will the real leader please stand up? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 441–457.
- Mubarak, F, & Noor, A (2018). Effect of authentic leadership on employee creativity in project-based organizations with the mediating roles of work engagement and psychological empowerment. *Cogent Business and Management*, 5(1), 1–14.
- Müller, R, Geraldi, J, & Turner, JR (2012). Relationships between leadership and success in different types of project complexities. *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, 59(1), 77–90.
- Müller, R, Packendorff, J, & Sankaran, S (2017). Balanced leadership: A new perspective for leadership in organizational project management. S Sanakran, R Müller and N Drouin (eds). *Cambridge Handbook of organizational project management* (pp. 186–199). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Newman, J (2004). Constructing accountability: Network governance and managerial agency. *Public Policy and Administration*, 19(4), 17–33.
- Nicholson, H, & Carroll, B (2013). Essay: So you want to be authentic in your leadership: To whom and for what end? In D Ladkin, & C Spiller (Eds.), *Authentic leadership: Clashes, convergences and coalescences* (pp. 286–302). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Nyberg, D, & Sveningsson, S (2013). Paradoxes of authentic leadership: Leader identity struggles. *Leadership*, 1–19.
- Packendorff, C, Crevani, L, & Lindgren, M (2014). Project leadership in becoming: A process study of an organizational change project. *Project Management Journal*, 45 (3), 5–20.
- Painter-Morland, M, & Deslandes, G (2017). Authentic leading as relational accountability: Facing up to the conflicting expectations of media leaders. *Leadership*, 13(4), 424–444.
- Peterson, RA (2005). In search of authenticity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), 1083–1098.
- Raiden, A (2016). Horseplay, care and hands on hard work: Gendered strategies of a project manager on a construction site. *Construction Management and Economics*, 34 (7–8), 508–521.
- Ricoeur, P (1992). *Oneself as another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rumens, N, & Kerfoot, D (2009). Gay men at work: (Re)constructing the self as professional. *Human Relations*, 62(5), 763–786.
- Quasthoff, UM (2013). Positioning as membership management: The case of narratives about public authorities. *Narrative Inquiry*, 23(1), 132–153.
- Sankaran, S (2018). Megaproject management and leadership: A narrative analysis of life stories – past and present. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 11(1), 53–79.
- Sergeeva, N, & Davies, A (2021). Storytelling from the authentic leader of High Speed 2 (HS2) Ltd. Infrastructure megaproject in the United Kingdom. N Drouin, S Sankaran. *A van Marrewijk and R Müller Managing mega-projects: Leadership of major infrastructure projects* (pp. 47–61). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Sergeeva, N, & Green, S D (2019). Managerial identity work in action: Formalised narratives and anecdotal stories of innovation. *Construction Management and Economics*, 37(10), 604–623.
- Sergeeva, N, & Winch, GM (2020). Narrative interactions: How project-based firms respond to Government narratives of innovation. *International Journal of Project Management*, 38(6), 379–387.
- Shamir, B, & Eilam, G (2005). What's your story? A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 395–417.
- Shao, J (2018). The moderating effect of program context on the relationship between program managers' leadership competencies and program success. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(1), 120, 108.
- Sparrowe, RT (2005). Authentic leadership and the narrative self. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 419–439.
- Sveningsson, S, & Alvesson, M (2003). Managing managerial identities. *Human Relations*, 56(10), 1163–1193.
- Tak, J, Seo, J, & Roh, T (2019). The influence of authentic leadership on authentic followership, positive psychological capital, and project performance: Testing for the mediation effects. *Sustainability*, 11(21), 6028.
- Todt, G, Weiss, M, & Hoegl, M (2019). Leading through innovation project setbacks: How authentic leaders keep their innovators resilient. *Project Management Journal*, 50(4), 409–417.
- Toor, S, & Ofori, G (2008). Leadership for future construction industry: Agenda for authentic leadership. *International Journal of Project Management*, 26(6), 620–630.
- Walker, D, & Lloyd-Walker, B (2014). Client-side project management capabilities: Dealing with ethical dilemmas. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 7(4), 566–589.
- Walker, D, Steinfort, P, & Masqood, T (2014). Stakeholder voices through rich pictures. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 7(3), 342–361.
- Watson, TJ (2009). Narrative, life-story and manager identity: A case study in autobiographical identity work. *Human Relations*, 62(3), 425–452.
- Winch, GM (2014). Three domains of project organizing. *International Journal of Project Management*, 32(5), 721–731.
- Zhang, L, Cao, T, & Wang, Y (2018). The mediation role of leadership styles in integrated project collaboration: An emotional intelligence perspective. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(2), 317–330.