

# Women's Authentic Leadership Development (WALD)

Natasha Mantler, PhD<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This qualitative study used Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social construction of authenticity and how this is experienced throughout the stages of adult development. In particular, the intent was to augment women's leadership development programs to prevent further entrenchment of gender and leader biases. Initially, 33 women who had already completed a developmental STAGES assessment, completed a survey about authentic leadership experiences. Using unified stratified sampling, 10 women were selected from the 33 for interviews, spread evenly across different developmental levels. Data were analyzed using the four processes of phenomenology: epoche, reduction (textural), imaginative variation (structure), and synthesis (composite). Findings indicate that women leaders experienced and understood authentic leading and leadership differently throughout developmental stages with more advanced stages being more complex with ever-widening perspectives and understandings. Women leaders with a *socialized mind* had a theoretical understanding of authenticity with momentary experiences of the phenomenon. The embodied experience of authentic leading arose in the *self-authoring mind*. Awareness of gender biases related to leadership became objective within the *self-transforming mind* accommodating the very insidious nature of biases. The sole women leader with a *self-transcending mind* (a neologism introduced in this research) understood authentic leading as unity within body, mind and soul. These phenomenological findings and their interpretation contribute to understanding women's authentic leading characterized by the pervasive nature of gender and leader biases.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, gender and leader biases, women's leadership development.

## Introduction

Women are highly underrepresented in leader roles (Catalyst, 2016). Despite half a century of equal employment legislation in the United States (US), women's opportunities for leader positions are anything but equal (Rhode & Kellerman, 2006). Although the share of women in senior positions is increasing incrementally, globally, less than one third (29%) hold senior management positions. Within the corporate world, only 5.2% of women hold Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions (Catalyst, 2019).

Academic scholarship from a variety of disciplines (e.g., business, psychology and leadership) has exposed pervasive unconscious gender bias related to leadership (herein called leader bias),

---

<sup>1</sup> **Natasha Mantler**, PhD, is a coach, consultant, and researcher for Women's Authentic Leadership Development. She earned her MBA from the U. of Victoria and her coaching degree from Royal Roads U. She began her career in her family's real estate company, which incorporated a more teal-like structure, then became a sustainability analyst, before engaging in her doctoral research and championing women's authentic leadership development. She and her husband, Eric Reynolds PhD, own and operate Integral Leadership Review.  
natashamantler@gmail.com



double-bind dilemmas, and in-group favoritism that women face within gendered organizations. The unconscious process of stereotyping (oversimplified conceptions) promotes a bias (preference) that promotes a masculine, heroic, individualist, and normative emphasis for leadership (Grint, 2011). This bias is so pervasive that male leaders are usually rated more effective than female leaders under all conditions (Rhee & Sigler, 2015).

Additionally, when male CEOs act decisively, they are seen as authentic (Liu, Cutcher, & Grant, 2015). They explained that because authentic leaders “have a deep awareness of who they are, [they are willing] to act upon their core values while transparently interacting with others. [They are also] guided by an internal moral compass with their decisions reflecting a high ethical standard” (p. 237). When female CEOs act decisively with resolve and certainty, they are seen as inauthentic (Liu et al., 2015). Inauthentic leaders would not be true to themselves (their values and principles) and would come across as false, not genuine and not legitimate. Liu et al. (2015) concluded that people judge leaders' authenticity in relation to gender norms. The attendant social construction of authentic leading and leadership may subject women leaders to even more stereotyping than men (Eagly, 2005). Appreciating that (a) women leaders do not want to abandon the authentic leadership ideal and (b) authenticity provides women with opportunities to *do* leadership differently (Sinclair, 2013), research needs to focus on women (a) engaging in leader roles authentically and (b) internalizing a leader identity that feels authentic and is received authentically.

## Theoretical Framework

In that spirit, this study operated at the intersection of leadership theory, authentic leadership, and constructive developmental theory. Regarding the former, most leadership theory literature describes effective leaders as being purpose driven with a clear vision and strategy, self and systems-aware, authentic and courageous with integrity, emotionally intelligent, and rationally competent. They foster teamwork while mentoring and developing others.

Authentic leadership theory in particular assumes that leaders pursue purpose with passion, practice their values and exert self-discipline, lead with the head and heart, focus on relationships, and emphasize a long-term perspective (George, 2003). Their leadership behaviour “draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency [leading to] self-development” (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94).

Constructive developmental theories also underpinned this research because they provide a pathway to more holistically understand the nature of women's authentic leadership development (WALD). In general, constructive developmental theories focus on the underlying structures of adults' meaning-making systems, whereby the complexity of one's thinking can potentially move sequentially through qualitatively different orders of consciousness (see examples at Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2004, 2013; Kegan, 1980, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; O'Fallon, 2013; Torbert, 1987; Torbert & Cook-Greuter, 2004).

As a caveat, these various theories have different names and category boundaries, but there is general agreement on how they correspond to each other. This research design mapped O'Fallon's (2013) adult stages of development with Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness (see Table 1). Other scholars often equate Kegan's SM, SA and ST with O'Fallon's Diplomat, Achiever, and Strategist stages. In a unique contribution to the literature, this research design broke away from this tradition (see Table 1) by realigning several orders and stages and adding a new order of consciousness to Kegan's approach called *Self-transcending mind* (STC) equating it with O'Fallon's *Universal* stage of adult development. This theoretical initiative and neologism were inspired by conversations with Eric Reynolds (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

**Table 1.** Theoretical Framework for Women's Authentic Leadership Development (WALD)

Order of Consciousness (Kegan)	Stage of Adult Development (O'Fallon)	%*	Description	Findings % N=10
Socialized Mind (SM)	3.0 Expert	36.5%	<i>Theoretical</i> understanding of authentic leading with nominal experience in this arena	30%
	3.5 Achiever	29.7% (66.2%)		
Self-Authoring Mind (SA)	4.0 Individualist	11.3%	<i>Embodied</i> understanding of authentic leading while still experiencing gender and leader bias	30%
	4.5 Strategist	4.9% (16.2%)		
Self-Transforming Mind (ST)	5.0 Construct Aware	1.5%	<i>Embodied and systemic</i> understanding of authentic leading; objective understanding of gender and leader bias	30%
	5.5 Transpersonal	0.05% (1.55%)		
Self-Transcending Mind (STC)	6.0 Universal	**	<i>Embodied</i> experience of authentic leading as the <i>unity</i> of body, mind and soul	10%

\*Note: Estimated percentages from Cook-Greuter (1999) do not total 100% because two levels (15.6%) are not in the table

\*\*Note: Cook-Greuter (1999) did not conceptualize *Universal* so she could not estimate percentage

In a culture deeply conflicted by women's authority, most (80%) of the population operates from the *socialized mind*, where one's thinking is shaped by the opinions and expectations of *others*, primarily forming how one behaves, thinks and feels (Berger, Hasegawa, & Kegan, 2007). People's resultant unconscious biases, matched with the gendered nature of organizations, complicated by the complexity of the social construction of authenticity, lends itself to using developmental theory to understand women's leadership. Results can be used to propose new leadership development agendas and curricula for women. To that end, this study explored the research question: *How do women develop and experience authentic leading and leadership throughout the adult stages of development?*

## Method

This qualitative study employed the phenomenological approach, collecting data from women who self-identified as being familiar with and having experienced authentic leading and leadership. Specifically, Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological method was utilized. This method focuses more on the participants' descriptions of their experiences rather than the researcher's interpretation. Findings contribute to developing a clearer description of the *essence* of the experience. Essence refers to the most important qualities or nature of something that makes it what it is (Creswell, 2007).

Initially, 33 women who already completed both O'Fallon's (2013) developmental STAGES Assessment, then completed a 7-question survey about their experience with the phenomenon, which was administered using Survey Monkey. Using unified stratified sampling, 10 women from the 33 were selected for interviews, spread evenly across different developmental levels. Study participants were aged 33-63 years with a minimum of 10 years experience in leader roles in for-profit, non-profit and governmental organizations.

The phenomenological approach strives to understand the universal *essence* of a phenomenon by addressing the *what*, *how* and *where* (context) of research participants' experiences with it (Moustakas, 1994). To that end, the interviews began with questions addressing the *what* and ended with *how* and *where* questions about leading authentically. I was shielded from the participants' developmental level as part of the research design. Interview times ranged from 30 to 90 minutes.

Data analysis of the taped and transcribed interviews involved employing four processes of phenomenology: (a) epoche (setting aside presuppositions, predispositions and prejudices to make room for new things to emerge); (b) reduction (textural - *what* people experience), (c) imaginative variation (structural - *where* and *how* they experience it); and (d) synthesis (composite essence) (see Moustakas, 1994, for details). The final composite provides a comprehensive and holistic synthesis of the *essence* of these women's authentic leadership development experience.

## Findings

The following four composite summaries provide a distinct narrative and unique description of the phenomenological *essence* of the experience of authentic leading at each stage of adult development for women leaders (see Table 1). A fuller description of the links between data, discussion points and conclusions is available at Mantler (2017) replete with evidence (especially direct quotes) to support the composite summaries.

A key finding was that although the themes were similar throughout the levels, perspectives of authenticity increased in complexity and understanding. And, in addition to *socialized*, *self-authoring*, and *self-transforming* orders of consciousness (Kegan, 1994), another order was added to incorporate a late stage recruit, named *Universal* in O'Fallon's (2013) STAGES theory but *self-transcending* in this study. As noted, this neologism and its conceptualization emerged from conversations with Eric Reynolds (personal communication, April 7, 2017). Each finding

accommodates what constitutes an authentic leader, authentic leadership, the experience of authentic leading, and the impact of gender bias.

### **Socialized Authentic Leader**

In this sample frame, Kegan's (1994) *Socialized* Authentic Leader (i.e., O'Fallon's, 2013, Expert and Achiever stages of development) understood authentic leadership from a theoretical understanding (i.e., abstractly but not much experience with it). These three study participants had momentary experiences of leading authentically. Their description of authentic leaders mirrored the definition of authenticity within the authentic leadership scholarship (e.g., George, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Previous research suggests authenticity is attributed to leaders performing authentically in alignment with gender norms (Liu et al., 2015). Likewise, for these particular participants, assumptions and beliefs about gender and leaders appeared to operate below conscious awareness, thereby exposing them unnecessarily to discrimination as they strived to gain acceptance as an authentic leader. At the *Socialized* mind order of consciousness, people need external validation and do not have a strong sense of an independent self. They take too much responsibility for how others view them and get their beliefs and thoughts from external sources instead of from inside (which happens at the self-authoring stage) (Kegan, 1994).

### **Self-authoring Authentic Leader**

Self-authoring means people are capable of defining who they are without being defined by others, relationships or the environment. In this study, the *Self-authoring* Authentic Leader understood authentic leadership as an embodied perspective, wherein they began the process of self-authoring their way of being an authentic leader (i.e., they made authenticity a key part of their leadership style). For these three participants, leading authentically emerged more inwardly at the Individualist stage and expressed itself more fully at the Strategist stage. The phenomenological tradition of this study facilitated the differentiation between the theoretical understanding and embodied experience of leading authentically. At this stage of adult development, participants understood the situation objectively (i.e., a fly on the wall) and expressed their own personal authority with confidence; they lead by taking charge and setting direction. Despite having objectively witnessed stereotypes affecting other women, these participants said they had not personally experienced gender and leader biases; but at least they were aware of it. This gendered awareness enabled them to better explore their thoughts and feelings, creating their own sense of authority or voice.

### **Self-transforming Authentic Leader**

The *Self-transforming* Authentic Leader understood authenticity from Heidegger's (1992) perspective; that is, people self-author their being *while* concurrently assuming responsibility for themselves in relation with others and "Being-in-the-world." For these three women, the embodied experience of authentically leading came from their *whole* being, being in relation with others, holding a multiple systems perspective, and cultivating respectful containers for the facilitation of systemic transformation (Kegan, 1994). These participant leaders (at O'Fallon's, 2013, Construct-Aware and Transpersonal stages of development) authentically engaged in

leadership roles by accessing parts of their wholeness in the moment appropriate for the system. They clearly understood gender and leader biases despite these stereotypes being deeply entrenched and understated in the system. This clarity was possible because their sense of being and self was *not* tied to their leadership role but instead constantly created and honed through exploring their leader role through interactions with others.

## Self-transcending Authentic Leader

As noted, a new order of consciousness called *Self-transcending* (STC) was created for this study correlating with O'Fallon's (2013) *Universal* stage of adult development (see Table 1). In this study, one participant fell into this stage, which correlates with Cook-Greuter's (1999) suspected population percentage at near to zero percent (see Table 1). This *Self-transcending* Authentic Leader understood authentic leading as the unity within her body, mind, and soul. Her focus was on creating and holding containers of equanimity (composure, levelheadedness) that served as instruments for transformative processes. Compared to other participants, she was more able to speak to the nuances of gender and leader biases, particularly about how much women have internalized them both individually and culturally and are thus subjected to these stereotypes. This participant acknowledged gender bias from an individual and collective perspective, emphasizing the importance of choosing consciously and strategically how to lead authentically. She fully appreciated how much women will need to be awakened to and thus how much shadow needs to be integrated to lead authentically in gendered organizations and society in general (see Mantler, 2017 [pp. 99-104, 108] for evidence of this novel finding).

## Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative phenomenological study revolved around the research question "How do women develop and experience authentic leading and leadership throughout the stages of development?" The study was designed to address the *essence* of women's authentic leadership. Appreciating the convention that percentage should be avoided when presenting qualitative findings from a small sample frame (McGregor, 2018), comments are offered on, what might be, a novel pattern for women authentic leaders. Per Table 1, over two thirds of the general population operates at the *Socialized mind* order of consciousness with low incidence of more advanced levels (Cook-Greuter, 1999). In this study, utilizing stratified sampling, the women leaders were evenly spread among the conventional three orders of consciousness with one instance of the recently constructed highest order, the *Self-transcending* mind. Future studies need to explore how authenticity emerges in the self-authoring mind and what is there about the self-transcendence character that leads to authenticity in leadership roles informed by the systems?

As a caveat, the findings do not support the idea that authentic women leaders move through different levels of consciousness because no one person was followed over time. Perhaps future research will support the following supposition. Authentic women leaders would follow a path toward wholeness, a developmental process that would be described as the *heroine's journey*. Women leaders' definitions of authenticity, authentic leaders and leadership, and their experience of leading authentically would become more complex with ever-widening perspectives and understandings. They would initially be theoretical, then embodied, followed by

the integration of shadow thus creating more facility and spaciousness to facilitate systemic transformation (see Table 1). Evidence of one participant clearly positioned at the highest level bodes well for other women leaders striving for authenticity to evolve as well.

Findings do show that women leaders at different developmental levels understood authenticity differently. They were all able to complete the seven-item survey about authentic leadership and express their lived experience with it, but some were much savvier around the concept than others. The following text recaps overall findings with suggestions on how to tailor authentic leadership programs depending on the participants' developmental stage.

For the *Socialized mind*, leaders derive their sense of authority and knowledge from outside sources (Kegan, 1994), which suggests that it would be beneficial for leadership curricula and worksites to create an environment where vertical development is encouraged. Second, facilitating an objective understanding of both context and personal levels of consciousness may be beneficial as well because *Socialized* minds depend on others for their identity and role behaviour; they derive their sense of authority and knowledge from outside sources (Kegan, 1994). Women leaders at this stage of adult development will not hold sophisticated notions of what constitutes authenticity leaving them open to inauthentic leadership despite best intentions. To progress to the *Self-authoring* stage or beyond, leadership programs must ensure opportunities for women leaders to move beyond theoretically understanding the constructed nature of reality, so they can uncover and experience their authentic self in relation with others. This would involve leadership curricula teaching the process of self-authoring.

Participants at the *Self-authoring* level understood the conventional leadership paradigm and expressed their own personal authority with confidence by taking charge, setting direction and focusing their attention on their embodiment (personification) of authenticity. However, although they objectively witnessed stereotypes affecting other women, it became clear that some study participants were still experiencing gender and leader biases themselves and may even have internalized oppression. Women leaders are seen as belonging to an outsider social group and face greater difficulty obtaining acceptance as leaders (Eagly, 2005). By association, it makes sense that striving for authenticity and being received as authentic would also be challenging. Authentic leadership programs thus need to appreciate this reality. In particular, curricula need to focus on the way gendered stereotypes and norms come into play in assessing authenticity in women's leadership. Appropriate theories to explore this phenomenon include feminism, critical identity theory and related fields (Sinclair, 2013).

One participant operating from the *Self-transforming* mind acknowledged the importance of objectively understanding context and leaned toward the dominant behavior of the organizations she interacted with in a way that still *felt* authentic to her. This strategy reflects a keen desire to *be* authentic even in the face of resistance to authentic women leaders. This phenomenological evidence suggests that leadership programs need to cultivate women leaders' contextual awareness so they can engage in leader roles more authentically and be perceived as doing so. As women leaders become contextually aware, and the prevailing general-populace consciousness evolves from the *Socialized* mind to higher levels, there will be many more moments of women leaders being received authentically.

At both the *Self-transforming* and *Self-transcending* levels, gender and leader bias were viewed objectively (i.e., with detachment). These participants (few in number) focused on systems and recognized the wholeness and development levels of others who were engaging within these systems. These participants said they were able to facilitate system-wide transformation. At the new *Self-transcending* level of consciousness, the sole woman leader engaged in roles authentically by accessing parts of her wholeness in the moment for what was right for the system. Her heroine's journey had evolved to aligning her body, mind and soul in service as an instrument for transformation of the whole in every moment. Leadership programs need to be prepared for the reality that some women might actually evolve to this highest level and plan curricula accordingly.

Utilizing the phenomenological approach and applying constructive developmental theory to women's experiences of authentic leading and leadership also led to the understanding that authenticity is a line of development, meaning it represents growth. Although this study did not track each participant's progression or evolution through developmental stages, women at advanced stages did appear to have markedly more sophisticated notions of authenticity in leadership contexts. To illustrate, the *Self-transcending* mind perceived authenticity as holistically tied to mind, body and soul while the *Socialized* mind could only theorize about being authentic. The *Self-transforming* mind could objectively (with detachment) understand gender and leader bias while the *Self-authoring* mind could not. Although the latter women were aware of gender bias, it still informed their identity.

The findings also uncovered the deeply extensive and subtle nature of gender and leader bias for some of the women. The *essence* of the heroine's journey requires examination and reflection of stereotypes and initiatives to move assumptions and beliefs from the subjective to the objective realm. As one participant explained, efforts to expose and critique bias will facilitate the emergence of women's authentic leadership - the emergence of the feminine - which would then create capacity and spaciousness to facilitate more women successfully engaging in authentic leadership.

In conclusion, phenomenologically framing and interpreting women's leadership through the intersection of authentic leadership theory and constructive developmental theories proved beneficial to generating new insights into the *essence* of this phenomenon. Remapping conceptual development theory (i.e., Kegan and O'Fallon) to include the neologism the *Self-transcending mind* is a unique conceptual contribution that merits further consideration.

## References

- Berger, J. G., Hasegawa, B., & Kegan, R. (2007). *How consciousness develops adequate complexity to deal with a complex world: The subject-object theory of Robert Kegan*. Retrieved from Terry Patten website: <http://terrypatten.typepad.com/iran/files/KeganEnglish.pdf>
- Catalyst. (2016). *Statistical overview of women in the workforce*. Retrieved from Catalyst website: <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/statistical-overview-women-workforce>
- Catalyst. (2019). *Pyramid: Women in the S&P companies*. Retrieved from Catalyst website: <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-sp-500-companies/>



- Cook-Greuter, S. R. (1999). *Post-autonomous ego development: A study of its nature and measurement* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 993312)
- Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2004). Making the case for a developmental perspective. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 36, 275-281.
- Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2013). *Nine levels of increasing embrace in ego development: A full-spectrum theory of vertical growth and meaning making*. Retrieved from Cook-Greuter and Associates website:  
<http://www.cook-greuter.com/Cook-Greuter%209%20levels%20paper%20new%201.1%2714%2097p%5B1%5D.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Eagly, A. H. (2005). Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter? *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 459-474.
- George, W. (2003). *Authentic leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Grint, K. (2011). A history of leadership. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson, & M. Uhl-Bien (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of leadership* (pp. 3-14). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Liu, H., Cutcher, L., & Grant, D. (2015). Doing authenticity: The gendered construction of authentic leadership. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 22(3), 237-255. doi:10.1111/gwao.12073
- Loevinger, J. (1976). *Ego development*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Mantler, N. (2017). *A path to wholeness: Women's authentic leadership development*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (ProQuest Number: 10289370)
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2018). *Understanding and evaluating research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Fallon, T. (2013, July). *The senses: Demystifying awakening*. Paper presented at the Integral Theory Conference on MetaIntegral, San Francisco, CA. Retrieved from <https://www.stagesinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ITC-13-OFallon-Senses-Demystifying-Awakening.pdf>
- Rhee, K. S., & Sigler, T. H. (2015). Untangling the relationship between gender and leadership. *Gender in Management*, 30(2), 109-134.
- Rhode, D. L., & Kellerman, B. (2006). Women and leadership: The state of play. In B. Kellerman & D. L. Rhode (Eds.), *Women and leadership: The state of play and strategies for change* (pp. 1-52). New York, NY: Jossey-Boss.
- Sinclair, A. (2013). Can I really be me? The challenges for women leaders constructing authenticity. In D. Ladkin & C. Spiller (Eds.), *Authentic leadership: Clashes, convergences, and coalescences* (pp. 239-251). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Torbert, W. R. (1987). *Managing the corporate dream*. Homewood, IL: Dow Jones-Irwin.
- Torbert, W. R., & Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler.

---

Walumbwa, F., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W., Wernsing, T., & Peterson, S. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, 34(1), 89–126. doi:10.1177/0149206307308913