The privilege to be authentic: Positionality and leadership

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Abstract

This paper pushes the conversation about authentic leadership by introducing the variable of identity. Recent discourse on authentic leadership identifies it as an effective and desirable approach to leadership, but to date the conversation has failed to acknowledge that some in leadership are more able to pursue authenticity given their privileged identities, and others in leadership face more risk in authenticity given their minoritized identities. Using key understandings of privilege and authenticity, along with personal testimonies, we provide recommendations for both those with privileged statuses and those with minoritized statuses on how to effectively embrace and employ authentic leadership.

Introduction

Authentic leadership is a leadership approach rooted in self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective. It emphasizes leading from a place of integrity and alignment with one's values, fostering trust and ethical behavior among followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leaders are characterized by a deep sense of self, honesty in interactions, and the ability to navigate complex environments while staying grounded in their personal and professional identities.

The construct gained momentum in response to widespread disillusionment with leadership scandals in the early 2000s and has since become a key framework in leadership and organizational studies (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). It argues that leaders who are true to themselves, and who encourage others to do the same, can create healthier, more effective organizations.

While authentic leadership is argued to help build trust and confidence, there is risk in the vulnerability of authenticity. This vulnerability may lead to undue familiarity, it may lead to a dislike or doubt in the person, as well as blurring and/or disrespect of the authority of the role. As such, there is a natural and understandable mindset of many in leadership to keep firm boundaries between their selves and their roles. Authenticity, or humanity, inherently uncovers fallibility, and fallible leaders may lose the ability to motivate, to enforce policy or changes, or to recruit and retain team members.

We will delve into how identity and positionality may or may not intensify these risks and whether that then leaves the benefits of authenticity to leaders with particular identities. Pulling from the experiences

of four leaders across academic leadership roles, with different identities, we assess the challenges and opportunities in authentic leadership and make recommendations for how current and future leaders might pursue it.

Authentic Leadership

Unlike other styles that may prioritize performance, influence, or goal-attainment, authentic leadership centers moral integrity, identity alignment, meaningful relationships, and bringing one's full/whole self to their role. It emphasizes self-awareness and a strong alignment between a leader's values, actions, and words. It is rooted in authenticity, meaning the leader stays true to their core beliefs and values while fostering trust and positive relationships with their team. It is not about emulating a specific leadership model but about developing an honest and contextually aware leadership practice that fosters inclusion and accountability.

Authentic leaders understand their strengths, weaknesses, values, and emotions, and they reflect on their behavior and how it impacts others – often openly for transparency and accountability. Authentic leaders are open and honest in their interactions with others, and they share their thoughts and feelings without regard to optics.

Authentic leaders are collaborative, considering diverse viewpoints before making decisions. They are objective and fair, ensuring all perspectives are evaluated and demonstrate a willingness to walk-back decisions and/or change directions. This includes acknowledging being wrong, apologizing, and recognizing different and better pathways. Similarly, often at the expense of their own recognition and noted successes, authentic leaders prioritize the development and well-being of their team members.

Privilege

Privilege refers to the unearned advantages or benefits that individuals experience based on aspects of their social identity, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ability, religion, or other identity markers. These privileges are often systemic, embedded in societal structures, and can go unnoticed by those who benefit from them.

Privileges are not earned through merit or effort but are granted based on societal norms or biases toward certain identities. The idea of privilege often receives negative reaction from those who have it, with many feeling that it implies that they have not worked for their place in life, that they have not endured struggles, or that they simply have not received direct benefit and thus should not have to apologize for their privilege.

Acknowledging privilege is not dismissing any hardships, challenges, etc. that one faces, it is acknowledging that those without privilege experience different hardships, challenges, etc. Doing so not only allows those with privilege to better understand their own positionality but allows them to better understand how others navigate the world.

One example of privilege that is relevant when discussing leadership is the privilege of feeling that leadership positions are normal for someone with your identity. In contrast, the term imposter syndrome describes the psychological state of someone feeling that they do not belong in a position, have not earned their successes, etc. Those with privilege can certainly experience imposter syndrome, however the likelihood of experiencing it is greater among those with marginalized identities. If you already feel like you do not belong in, or have not earned, a leadership position, allowing yourself to be authentic (and thus vulnerable) is that much more difficult.

While authentic leadership promotes congruence between identity and action, it cannot be fully understood without considering intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and the paradox of privilege. For individuals with historically marginalized identities – such as women, people of color, LGBTQ+

individuals, or religious minorities – being "authentic" in leadership often entails risk. These leaders may experience pushback, tokenization, or marginalization for exhibiting behaviors deemed "authentic" when incongruent with dominant norms (Brown, 2019).

At the same time, leaders from dominant social locations (e.g., white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied) may be afforded the privilege to be "authentic" without negative consequences. This results in a paradox: while authenticity is encouraged, it is unequally accessible based on systemic power dynamics (Eagly and Chin, 2010). Thus, authentic leadership must be practiced with a deep awareness of privilege and positionality, requiring leaders to continually reflect on how their identities shape their access to power, legitimacy, and influence. Embracing cultural humility (Tervalon and Murray-García, 1998) and being accountable to those most impacted by leadership decisions are essential to mitigating the harms of performative authenticity.

Reflections

In academia, authentic leadership has been linked to transformational outcomes for faculty, staff, and students, particularly in fostering inclusive, ethical, and resilient academic environments (Shorey and Lopez, 2009; LaFasto and Larson, 2001). Academic leaders who practice authentic leadership often prioritize transparency in decision-making, build trust across institutional hierarchies, and empower diverse voices within academic spaces (Taylor, 2020). This model aligns with pedagogical approaches that value reflexivity, social justice, and student-centered leadership. Furthermore, authentic leadership in academic institutions has been found to support faculty engagement, increase retention, and promote psychological safety – especially for those navigating marginalized identities (Gardner et al., 2021).

In the spirit of self-awareness and authenticity, and with a nod to testimonio as a methodology, we are providing reflections on our own experiences of positionality and authentic leadership. The use of lived experiences in research via testimonio originated in researchers with marginalized identities who demonstrated that our everyday experiences are the basis for theorizing and informing practice (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hurtado, 2003). Testimonios were first used to connect personal experiences of oppression to the larger socio-political context, the intention being to serve as a tool to connect individual stories to collective history and experiences (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). For the context of our current work, we use our own testimonios or lived experiences as the foundation for analysis and recommendations. The authors represent different identities and different leadership roles across different campuses, and in each section the author is addressing the questions of "what does authentic leadership mean to you and how have you used that in your leadership role?" and "how has your positionality influenced your navigation/deployment of authenticity?"

School Director

As a Palestinian, Muslim woman in my late 30s, my journey through leadership in academia has been a profound exploration of authenticity, belonging, and resistance. I came to leadership with a deep awareness of my positionality – my identity, experiences, and values shaping not only how I lead but how I am perceived as a leader. In many ways, I found myself navigating between worlds: the Eurocentric models of leadership that dominate Western institutions and the collectivistic, relational principles that ground my own cultural and spiritual upbringing.

Growing up in a collectivist culture, leadership was never about authority – it was about accompaniment. It meant walking with others, not ahead of them. In my view, leadership is about relationship-building, mutual care, and the collective pursuit of justice. Western leadership models, by contrast, often emphasized hierarchy, decisiveness, and the kind of command-and-control ethos that felt antithetical to who I am. I was fascinated, and often perplexed, by how rigidity, individualism, and

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detachment were seen as signs of strength and credibility. I knew from early on that this was not the kind of leader I wanted to be.

Instead, I leaned into a leadership philosophy shaped by consensus-building and communal responsibility, while refusing to compromise the core of who I was. Consensus mattered, but not at the cost of integrity. In this process, I often found myself returning to the leadership model of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), a model grounded in humility, justice, and compassion. The Prophet was known for his gentleness and emotional intelligence. He consulted his companions regularly, even in matters of great significance, such as the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah. This act of consultation – *shura* – was not performative; it was genuine, and it empowered others to feel invested in decision-making. Even those who disagreed with him could never accuse him of injustice or arrogance. He walked alongside the marginalized, listened before he spoke, and modeled leadership not through dominance, but through service.

At the same time, I am constantly checking my privilege. I recognize that I can sometimes navigate academic and professional spaces without others fully knowing my identities unless I choose to share them. My phenotypical characteristics often shield me from the immediate racism that many of my colleagues of color in leadership face. I do not wear a headscarf, and my accent is not marked in the way that others' might be. These factors afford me an ease of entry into certain spaces, a kind of camouflage that is not available to all. I am deeply aware that this is a privilege, one that requires vigilance and accountability. It reminds me to hold space for the experiences of colleagues who are racialized the moment they walk into a room. I try to use that unearned protection to push for more equity, more justice, and more disruption of the assumptions that shape who gets to belong.

I do, however, find myself constantly navigating how much of myself I could bring into spaces where my identities were already politicized. Could I be humorous, gentle, and warm – the way I naturally communicate – or did I have to adopt the stoicism and emotional restraint that is so often conflated with professionalism? Could I speak from a politicized place – rooted in my values and advocacy for justice – without being dismissed as biased or even accused of being antisemitic?

My political identity is inseparable from my professional one. To advocate for human dignity, to resist apartheid, to speak out about the occupation of Palestine, these are not extracurricular values. They are central to how I live and how I lead. Yet I was acutely aware that, unlike some of my white, Western colleagues, my politicized stance could easily be dismissed as overly emotional, extremist, or lacking neutrality. I found myself caught between being perceived as an "activist" versus being taken seriously as a fair and balanced academic leader.

This tension came into even sharper focus during the ongoing genocide, as concluded by Amnesty International, in Gaza. Leading a school of social work as a Palestinian and advocate for human rights during a time of such profound violence and injustice felt, at times, unbearable. There was pressure, spoken and unspoken, to remain silent or to adopt a depoliticized tone for the sake of institutional harmony. But silence would have made me complicit. I knew I had to lean into my authentic self and trust that leadership, at its best, requires moral courage. I was fortunate enough to be at an institution where there was value alignment and support for student-based activism calling for a ceasefire.

Authentic leadership, as defined by scholars such as Avolio and Gardner (2005), emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective. But too often, authenticity is framed as a neutral, apolitical stance – as though leaders can "just be themselves" without grappling with how race, religion, gender, and geopolitics shape what kinds of "selves" are considered legitimate. My experience suggests otherwise. To be an authentic leader from the margins is to resist the idea that neutrality is the gold standard. It is to embrace the discomfort of being fully seen, even when being seen is a risk – or just exhausting. Ultimately, I have come to understand leadership not as a position, but as a practice – one

rooted in accompaniment, justice, and the radical belief that who I am is enough. That my voice matters. That there is, in fact, a place for me to lead – not despite my identities, but because of them.

Academic Dean

I recently had coffee with a young alum and upon learning that I was now the Academic Dean, she said, "You're like the boss lady! I'm not surprised at all. You're a natural fit." While her comment was likely influenced by her perception of my personality and skills, it also implicitly reflected the power of my identities as an educated, U.S.-based, white woman. My journey toward leadership has been shaped by both visible and invisible factors, often placing me in positions of power, whether earned or unearned.

When I was training to be a therapist, we learned that "therapeutic common factors" like genuineness, self-awareness, and self-reflection contribute to positive outcomes (Sprenkle, Davis, and Lebow, 2009). These factors form the foundation for building trust, which is vital for any relationship. One of these common factors, *authenticity,* or congruity, is when our inside matches our outside; when others perceive us as being "real" (see Hopwood et al, 2021 for a discussion of realness and perceived authenticity). I've found that authenticity in leadership – being true to myself while considering the impact on others – fosters trust in my decision-making process and helps others give my ideas a chance. It also creates space for forgiveness and repair, both essential in leadership roles like mine.

Authenticity requires self-reflection. Raised in a working-class turned professional-class family, I was exposed to both economic privilege and struggle. In one generation, my mother went from a child of nine on a Montana farm with no indoor bathroom to a professional with a second home in the mountains. Class differences are still ever present to my mother. She adds water to the soap bottle when it gets low, fixes broken shoes that are decades old to avoid buying new ones, and still eats dinner with a speed that suggests there might not be seconds. However, my experience was vastly different from hers. This gap makes it difficult for me to fully understand the economic challenges others face. At the same time, I also have a mild reading disability – mixing up left and right, struggling with spelling, and failing to learn a second language despite multiple attempts. As a leader, I try to openly acknowledge these struggles and seek help when needed in my efforts to create an environment that celebrates neurodiversity. Personal challenges, educational privilege, and financial security all shape my worldview and intersect with authenticity to influence the way I lead.

Empirically supported therapies emphasize that authenticity is necessary, but not sufficient, for positive outcomes. In therapy, authenticity does not treat anxiety or depression, but it is essential for effective treatment. Similarly, in leadership, authenticity and genuineness guide my approach to situations but they are rarely sufficient by themselves to resolve complex issues. Leadership requires more than being "real;" it demands thoughtful action and engagement.

Authenticity is also not always appreciated in leadership. I am an external processor; I tend to talk through decisions which can be perceived as indecisiveness or "wishy washy." My sense of humor and laid-back approach can be experienced as irreverent or dismissive of serious situations, even though they are authentic to me. I must be mindful that authenticity does not mean expressing all my emotions, especially when they may not be helpful. For instance, "white tears" (Hamad, 2020) can be emotionally authentic but rarely productive in conversations about race and power. Self-awareness is critical to ensuring that my authenticity doesn't harm others or inadvertently shift power. Privilege plays a role here too. Those with dominant identities, like mine, face fewer negative consequences for expressing their authenticity. Even as a woman, I can be "justifiably" or even "righteously" angry with less fear of repercussions than others because the rest of my identities do not disrupt the leadership construct – in fact, they are a "natural fit."

Some argue that authenticity means not needing to code switch linguistically or culturally, but I find this definition troublesome. For many, code switching is essential for survival. Just ask my mom, or any first-generation college student, how they successfully navigated college without alienating their families and communities. Code-switching can be a form of biculturalism, where a person presents different parts of their identities in different situations. It's not about being inauthentic, it's about adapting to the environment. A lack of environments in which people can bring their full authentic selves is the problem.

As a leader, I strive to bring my authentic self to the table while being mindful that I do not silence voices, shut down conversation, or otherwise inadvertently take away power. If I am successful as a leader, I am creating spaces where authentic voices are valued. I am cultivating relationships in which colleagues feel comfortable pointing out when I've mis stepped, not because it's their responsibility to do so, but because they believe our relationship is worth the potential disruption and they trust I will respond positively. Ultimately, the best version of authentic leadership is one where both my own authenticity and that of others are welcomed, heard, and celebrated.

Vice Provost and Chief Diversity Officer

When I began thinking about my leadership, I was confident in my authenticity. I stay true to my moral compass, I lead with intention, I do my best to promote those around me without seeking attention, and so I must be an authentic leader. Yet, I have realized that my leadership style is more complicated. As a Mexican American woman from a working-class family, I have navigated academia as a first-generation college graduate acutely aware of my differences. While these differences have presented challenges in my leadership journey, they have also served as my superpower, holding me "accountable" to my values.

In my family and community, we often say that *we are our ancestors' dreams.* Growing up, I absorbed the belief that education was our ticket to opportunity. Through my family, I learned that true leaders were those like Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Bobby Kennedy who stood up for "our people." I internalized these values, and as I advanced my education, I promised to stand up for the historically excluded. These powerful convictions have fueled my leadership style.

Yet, at the same time, I have been keenly aware that my brown skin, my Spanish surname, my femaleness, and my working-class and first-generation sensibilities precede me, whether I enter rooms for meetings, to teach, to present, or just to socialize with faculty colleagues. Before entering those spaces, I often note who is there and what assumptions they may carry. While my need to anticipate others' assumptions is more pronounced in certain settings, it has been reinforced by experiences through the years. For example, when I received my tenure letter, my chair told me that "at the time [he] couldn't believe they hired someone like [me]" and that I had done so well. His assumption, clearly, was that I would not do well. And his reasons for thinking this were obvious to me.

I was keenly aware that such stereotypes would follow me, perhaps more so, in my move into administration. After the provost asked me for the fourth time to apply for the position, I decided to do so. My hesitation to apply came not from a lack of ambition or drive to learn new things, but rather from witnessing the antagonism of the administration-faculty relationship. Further, though tenured, I still felt I did not fully belong with the faculty, much less administration. I saw no one with my background in university administrative positions. Yet, I felt called to serve others, particularly students from minoritized backgrounds.

As I navigated my transition from faculty to Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion, I began with little leadership experience; however, I carried a strong commitment to justice and a knowledge of United States history, which shaped my work. In this new role, my social identities played a more pronounced role, making me more aware of both their limitations and their power. In the fast pace of my work, I instinctively

leaned on allies, strengthening already strong relationships on campus. Though I did not realize it until later, I was developing a collaborative and relationship-based leadership style that I practice today.

It took three years for me to lean into a more confident, self-reflective, strategic, and authentic leadership style. While my Latina identity and first-generation and working-class sensibilities will always precede me and will sometimes elicit unwelcomed assumptions, my ability to work around and through those has grown. I have learned to read rooms more quickly and to respond to negative, even racist, comments more gracefully, hiding my strong emotions. I respond with restraint so as not to sever relationships. There are times when I choose not to challenge in the moment, especially if it is me who is the target of such comments. In these moments, I assess the costs of responding. If I deem it more strategic to "choose my battles" in pursuit of other objectives, then I look to other ways to address the issue. For example, when a group of White women faculty/staff wrote a scathing mass email about administration's response to a campus incident, a Black woman administrator and I were scapegoated. While I wanted to take to my keyboard and defend myself and my colleague, I exercised restraint and asked a White ally to confront those individuals, calling them on their bias. They apologized, acknowledging their misplaced privilege. In such situations, I could have chosen to confront those individuals, but I made a strategic decision. I felt that a White ally would be more effective in addressing the women, and the emotional labor of such a confrontation would have drained my energy and perhaps damaged my reputation. The risks of speaking out in self-defense are indeed much greater for someone with my social identities, even if justified. Employing White allies minimizes vulnerability and protects the work.

I often compare my work to walking a tightrope. On either side there are pitfalls. If I lean too far into authenticity, I risk the work, and that would hurt students. If I lean too far the other way, I lose my authentic commitment to ethical and values-based leadership toward a more transactional style that lacks character and creativity. While I strive to be authentic, I know that as a Latina leader, I cannot always indulge my full authentic self in work that is inherently political. There are too many variables in the work, and I must consider all of them. When I look around at peer institutions, it is impossible not to notice the high turnover in Chief Diversity Officer roles. Those who have lasted in their leadership positions are those who temper authenticity with strategic savviness and a commitment to prioritizing the work over complete authenticity.

Provost

As a white heterosexual cisgendered male, I have a combination of privileged identities, to include the privilege of an executive leadership position. Those privileged identities do not determine my approach to leadership but have shaped how I think about leadership and my place in it. I have always pursued authentic leadership, through a mix of intentionality and organic naturality. Prior to higher education I served in the military where on one hand there is a lack of authentic leadership given the formulaic and hierarchical access points to leadership positions. On the other hand, there is a pragmatism in military service that creates space for authentic leadership because there is not time for and too much risk in performative efforts. I think this pragmatism, along with a desire to serve others and continuous pursuits of my "true self", have allowed me to lead with authenticity. I must acknowledge that "pursuing one's true self" is itself aided by privilege. When you have privileged identities, and therefore you are not constantly in social situations and interactions where your identities are being told to you, you have more space and energy to consider alignment of selves.

When I left the faculty, I was determined to not fit into any particular box of leadership. I think this had more to do with being a Sociologist than with being a white heterosexual cisgendered male. I had an inherent aversion to what I perceived to be the facades of administration and decided that if I were going to venture into this space – I was going to do it by continuing the pursuit of my core beliefs and values. To

this day, when a student or colleague comments that "you don't talk/act like a Provost", I feel validated in my authenticity and free from dissonance – even if it is not always meant as a compliment.

I do not believe my privilege blinded me to the risk of authenticity; I was fully aware that I might not last in the role. What my privilege did do is influence my calculus of that risk. Meaning, I recognized I might not fit into the ideal leader box, but I was okay if I did not fit. My privilege allowed me to not worry about whether my success, or failure, would represent all white heterosexual cisgendered men. I did not worry that reactions to my choices would be indictments on my character or core personhood, they would just be indictments on my decisions. It can be argued that my privilege allows me not to be authentic, to be a very sterile and unapproachable leader, as trust or accessibility do not matter for someone with privilege. I would counter that with the argument that the very privilege that protects me from having to be seen, allows me and calls me to risk being seen.

The above has benefited me in other ways too, including granting me the ability to understand the difference between my positionality and my role. For example, I understand that some people interact with me as my authentic self, some interact with me as Provost only (not seeing the person for the role), and some interact with me as a white heterosexual cisgendered male. The above breakdown is true for any person of any positionality in any leadership role, but for me I would suggest that the latter identities are less salient for me and therefore I have more freedom to consider and pursue my authentic self. Finally, it should be noted that there is the potential privilege in being your authentic self when that version of selfhood is acceptable/favored. In other words, I wonder if the risk is less in being authentic and more in being authentic when your manifestations of your self do not fit dominant expectations.

What inspires my involvement in this piece is less about how my privilege has allowed me to be authentic, it certainly has – but privilege does not eliminate the risk in authenticity, it changes it in different ways depending on the person. What I do want to highlight is the extent to which authenticity (aided by privilege) has allowed me to find objective success as well as to be celebrated, or at least freer from criticism. I, like any leader, feel the pressure to take unpopular or risky stands – for example, how do I support students advocating for a justice issue that aligns with my values, but that will create fallout among parents, donors, etc.? The difference for me is that my privileged identities allow me to make that decision without much consequence. If I avoid potential fallout, I am abandoning my values – but I am not criticized for betraying any of my identities. If I stand with the students, then I am perceived as a brave ally and my identities either protect my leadership role – or at worst I have a softer landing.

To this freedom to take risks, when leaders are praised for their authenticity, I would reiterate that for those with the privilege of being able to be themselves in most any setting – they should not just be able, but should be expected to be themselves in a leadership setting. All identities may not be privileged, but all are privileges – they give people strengths. If we do not just celebrate someone being authentic, but celebrate who they authentically are, then we are not denying their strengths – we are empowering them.

Recommendations

Authentic leadership is a valuable approach in academic and professional settings, particularly when integrated with an understanding of privilege, positionality, and intersectionality. While its emphasis on self-awareness and transparency can create more equitable and trust-based environments, its application must be nuanced and reflexive, especially for those navigating leadership from marginalized positions. As institutions navigate diversity, equity, and inclusion in a changing socio-political environment, authentic leadership – with its moral and relational commitments – offers a pathway to leading with both integrity and impact.

Accountability, Allyship and Accompaniment from those with Privileged Identities

For those with privileged identities, it is recommended that they model authentic leadership. A key part of authentic leadership is self-awareness, and one of the strongest realities of privilege is the lack of self-awareness of one's own privilege. Therefore, it is recommended that those with a privileged positionality spend time and effort to understand that positionality, and then to acknowledge it as they lead. This does not mean to be embarrassed or apologetic for privilege, but to understand its existence and to navigate it throughout decisions and interactions. This self-awareness requires vulnerability, as does most authentic pursuits, but it is important for both the individual and for the unit.

Embracing authenticity not only creates the benefits in leadership discussed throughout this paper, but it creates space for those with marginalized identities to pursue their own authenticity. This form of accountability creates a culture of authenticity, leading to better production and performance, but better team development and ultimately better retainment of talent.

Owning one's authenticity is not just being accountable, but it is being an ally. Part of allyship is risking one's status, and there is risk to those with privileged identities being authentic. The privileged identities allow them to be whatever kind of leader they want, including allowing them to hide their identities behind a role/title. As discussed, there is no one way to be authentic, someone might be authentically compassionate, and another leader might be authentically distant. Yet we recommend that all leaders, especially those with a privileged identity, authentically pursue allyship. Standing with those with marginalized identities and risking one's political/professional and social capital to do so, is impactful authenticity.

Finally, this accountability and allyship can manifest in the form of accompaniment and sponsorship. Direct and explicit support for direct reports to be authentic, backing and correcting dissenting comments from others about the authenticity of direct reports and creating spaces and opportunities for safe/supported displays of authentic selves can all provide the accompaniment, or co-conspiratorial actions, that will enable colleagues to safely be authentic.

Strategies for those with Minoritized Identities- Leading from the Margins

For scholars within the academy from marginalized backgrounds – including those who are racialized, queer, disabled, immigrant, Muslim, and/or first-generation – authentic leadership is both a powerful form of resistance and a deeply vulnerable endeavor. Structural barriers such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and settler-colonial ideologies can inhibit the ability of these individuals to lead authentically without consequences or barriers (Ahmed, 2012; Smith et al., 2016). Despite these challenges, a growing body of scholarship identifies strategies that marginalized academics can employ to cultivate authentic leadership and resilience within oppressive institutional environments.

Authentic leadership for marginalized individuals begins with cultivating critical consciousness – the awareness of one's social location and how systemic oppression shapes one's lived experience and leadership journey (Freire, 1970; Dugan, 2017). This also involves deep reflection on positionality and the intersectional dynamics of power, privilege, and vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1991). Leading from this place of self-awareness allows marginalized leaders to align their values with their actions, even when those values challenge institutional norms.

Creating and participating in *counterspaces* – spaces that affirm marginalized identities and disrupt dominant narratives – offers psychological safety and community support (Case and Hunter, 2012; Solórzano and Villalpando, 1998). Counterspaces allow marginalized leaders to strategize, heal, and cultivate political clarity. Strategic coalition-building with allies and co-conspirators across racial, gendered, and disciplinary lines is also crucial for amplifying impact and reducing isolation (Tuitt et al., 2018). Authentic leadership must move beyond individualistic notions of success. Scholars such as hooks (2003) and Patel (2016) argue for a shift toward *community-accountable leadership* – leadership that prioritizes

collective liberation over institutional accolades. This may involve centering student needs, modeling ethical dissent, and redistributing resources to underserved communities. By anchoring their work in accountability to movements for justice, marginalized leaders disrupt the white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal logics embedded in the academy (Patton and Catching, 2009).

Marginalized leaders often face institutional gaslighting, tokenization, and retaliation when they speak out against injustice (Ahmed, 2012; Perez Huber and Solorzano, 2015). Naming these violences—publicly when safe, or within trusted networks—can be a powerful act of reclamation. Strategies for navigating these harms may include documenting incidents, using tenure or shared governance protections when available, and engaging external advocacy groups when necessary (Zambrana, 2018).

Discussion

We end this paper by placing the issue of authentic leadership and identities within the sociopolitical climate in the United States that is increasingly shaped by intensifying polarization, authoritarian discourse, and attacks on academic freedom. Authentic leadership – a model grounded in self-awareness, transparency, and moral courage – offers a powerful yet vulnerable stance in times when universities are being pushed to align with state ideologies at the expense of intellectual freedom and justice (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Shamir and Eilam, 2005).

The resurgence of authoritarian populism has created a chilling effect on political speech. As part of this trend, recent proposals from lawmakers suggest criminalizing or defunding universities that permit pro-Palestinian activism or language critical of the Israeli state (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2024). In many instances, these measures are framed as efforts to combat antisemitism, yet they dangerously conflate legitimate political critique with hate speech, thereby silencing dissent and violating principles of academic freedom (Butler, 2020; AAUP, 2023). These dynamics place university leaders, particularly those committed to anti-oppressive and justice-oriented practices, in a precarious position. Authentic leadership requires the courage to speak and act in alignment with one's values – even under threat. But as Giroux (2020) reminds us, dissent in authoritarian regimes often carries personal and institutional consequences. In this context, authentic leadership becomes not only a practice of ethical integrity but an act of political resistance.

The academic landscape has increasingly become a battleground where ideas are policed, faculty are surveilled and calls for equity and justice are framed as ideological extremism (AAUP, 2023). In this climate, authentic leaders must embody values of justice and transparency while recognizing the very real consequences of dissent. Leaders from marginalized backgrounds such as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, or Muslim individuals face heightened scrutiny, often risking their credibility, job security, or safety when engaging politically or personally in institutional spaces (Patton, 2016). For these leaders, authenticity is not merely a leadership style but a form of resistance, often enacted at great personal cost (Eagly and Chin, 2010). As Crenshaw (1991) theorizes through intersectionality, these leaders often experience multiple forms of structural vulnerability, which are amplified in times of political repression. For these individuals, the decision to lead authentically can mean choosing between personal safety and professional security on the one hand, and moral clarity on the other (Patton, 2016; Ahmed, 2012).

Therefore, leaders with privileged identities such as white, tenured, male, or cisgender individuals must act as co-conspirators in vulnerability. Authentic leadership requires not just standing with marginalized voices but actively working towards the redistribution of risk, the challenging of institutional silence, and the creation of policies that affirm academic freedom and collective safety (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017; Eagly and Chin, 2010). The responsibility of those with institutional power is to ensure that campuses do not become sites of state-sanctioned censorship. Moreover, authentic leaders must challenge the "both sides" discourse that often dominates administrative responses to campus controversies.

Upholding "neutrality" in the face of genocide or repression is itself a political stance – one that sustains the status quo and contributes to harm (hooks, 2003). Instead, authentic leadership calls for moral discernment: the ability to take a position grounded in human rights, even when it is unpopular or professionally costly.

In moments of escalating repression, authentic leaders are needed more than ever. They must articulate a vision of higher education as a space for critical inquiry, dissent, and justice. They must also model what it means to be accountable to the communities they serve – especially those most vulnerable to state violence and surveillance. This means not only defending the right to speak but actively enabling conditions where that speech is protected and nurtured.

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