

Gender, Authenticity and Leadership: Thinking with Arendt

by Rita A. Gardiner (Palgrave, February 2015)

JULIA: Hello, my name is Julia Storberg-Walker and I have the pleasure today of interviewing Rita Gardiner, who is a member of the International Leadership Association and the author of *Gender, Authenticity and Leadership: Thinking with Arendt* published this year by Palgrave.

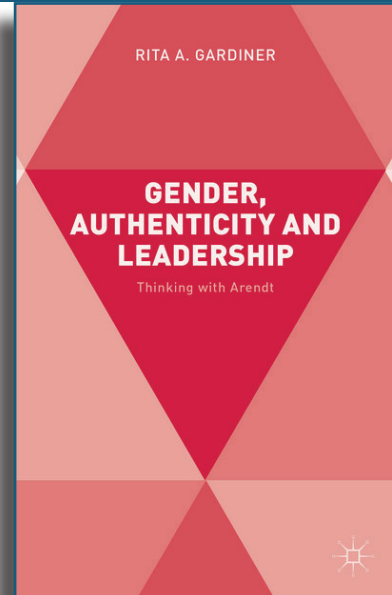
I'd like to begin by giving our readers a brief overview of the book. *Gender, Authenticity and Leadership* attempts to trace the conceptual underpinnings of authentic leadership by exploring Western notions of authenticity and gendered subjecthood from about the 18th century onward. Rita, like Hannah Arendt, believes that by examining the past, we can learn more about problems in the present.

Welcome, Rita, and thank you so much for agreeing to this conversation.

RITA: It's lovely to have the opportunity to talk about my work.

JULIA: Rita and I spoke during a pre-interview and created a loose outline of our talk for today's conversation. Both of us are committed to having an informal dialogue about the book, but we wanted to give you, the reader, an overview of the five key topics that we hope to address today.

Rita will first give you a brief overview of the ideas of Hannah Arendt. The second thing we'll cover is a critique of authentic leadership theory and leadership studies, in general. We'll then discuss the gendered nature of the world and its history, followed by the ethics of leadership. Finally, Rita will touch on the findings of a study she did and its implications for women in leadership. Of course, these topics may intertwine during our conversation. They all are interrelated and interconnected to the broader issues of gender and authenticity.



Rita A. Gardiner teaches leadership ethics, women's studies, and feminist theory at The University of Western Ontario and King's University College in London, Ontario. Her publications focus on women's leadership, and the work of Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir. In 2014,

Rita received the Paul Begley Award for her outstanding contribution to postgraduate research in educational leadership, presented by the University Council for Educational Administration's Consortium for the Study of Leadership and Ethics in Education. A feminist theorist, Rita is also interested in the ways in which authentic leadership could be informed by a relational ethic in tandem with existential, hermeneutic phenomenology.

Julie Storberg-Walker is an associate professor in the Executive Leadership Program of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University, and an affiliate faculty at George Washington's Global Women's Institute. Prior to her service in academe, she served at Deloitte & Touche, LLP and Deloitte Consulting in multiple roles and locations. Julia's has published and presented globally on theoretical and conceptual development for applied disciplines. She is the recipient of multiple awards including the Early Career Scholar Award (2011) from the Academy of Human Resource Development. She currently serves as editor-in-chief of *Human Resource Development Review*.



Rita, is there anything else you want to add at this point?

RITA: That sounds perfect.

JULIA: Excellent. Rita, a lot of us may not know about Hannah Arendt. Please tell us about her. What were her key contributions to authentic leadership theory? How did you make the connection between Hannah Arendt, who I read in political science class, and women and leadership?

RITA: Arendt, for those who might not have heard of her, was born in 1906 in Germany, the only child of a Jewish couple. She was a very bright young woman at university and studied with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Then, in the early 1930s, when the Nazis came into power, she had to escape Germany moving to Paris where she spent eight years meeting people like John-Paul Sartre and becoming very good friends with Walter Benjamin. After Paris, she moved to the U.S. and spent most of her time in New York City.

It wasn't until Arendt was in her mid-40s that she published her first book in 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The book is a very powerful examination of what had happened in Germany as well as what was happening in Stalin's Russia at the time. It traces the origins of totalitarianism, which she sees as very different to other similar ways of leading, such as tyranny. Then, in 1956 she published *The Human Condition*, which is one of the books that most people come to know Arendt through.

One of the things that I love about *The Human Condition* is Arendt's notion of narrative and how narrative is key to the ways in which we understand human existence. My mother was Irish and I grew up learning lots of different fairy tales — all ones that she made up — because that was part of her oral tradition. I think one of the things that Arendt wanted to do in her work was to remember the rich oral tradition that was part of the Jewish community, much of which was lost due to the Holocaust.

Fast forward a bit. Those two books, *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, make Arendt famous. However, she was to become infamous in 1963 when she published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. *The New Yorker* sent Arendt to Jerusalem in order to cover the war criminal Adolf Eichmann's trial. One of the things that Arendt said, to many people's horror, was that although Eichmann's deeds were heinous, his evilness was banal. People like him in the Nazi regime were banal because they were thoughtless. This question of thinking, in an Arendtian sense, is tied up with the notion of critical thinking. That is, one doesn't just go

along with what is socially acceptable without reflecting upon what it means. Arendt was a scholar who was not drawn to a particular ideology. She was not interested in being perceived as a liberal or a conservative. She wanted to understand the world in her own very particular way, and she encouraged everyone else to do that, too.

She died in 1976 while she was writing *The Life of the Mind*, considered to be her most philosophical text. In *The Life of the Mind*, she had sections on thinking, willing, and what is the most Arendtian way of looking at the world, judging. Unfortunately, she died while she was working on judgment. It's only thanks to the novelist Mary McCarthy, who was a great friend of Arendt's, that we actually have the text of *The Life of the Mind*.

So, that's about it, in terms of her background. Obviously she was very influenced by existential hermeneutic phenomenology, as am I in my work. To get back to leadership studies, per se, what Arendt's work can give us is a way of thinking about leadership that really takes in diverse perspectives. She's trying to think about leadership not just in the past but also about how leadership works in the present. She's trying to think about some of the problems as well as some of the opportunities with leadership.

JULIA: How you described her comment on Eichmann was fascinating to me. So many would have seen Eichmann as an evil leader, but that wasn't Arendt's position.

RITA: Why does she say he's banal? Because she's at the trial — and the trial goes on for many, many weeks — and one of the things that Eichmann does is talk in clichés. He hasn't got an original idea. For our readers, I would like to suggest they go see a fantastic movie by Margarethe von Trotta that came out in 2012 about Hannah Arendt and specifically about the Eichmann trial. Arendt's view was seen as appalling by many in the Jewish community. She was vilified, absolutely vilified. She received hate mail. Yet, she doesn't waver from what she thinks. In her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, she begins again in trying to think about why people perpetrate great evil. And she says it's because they don't think. They're thoughtless. They choose to be thoughtless. They choose to go along with any regime, just because it's easier that way and they can go up the hierarchy.

JULIA: Yes. Connecting this to what we'll talk about later, it's almost as if today's organizations allow and condone that kind of non-thinking anonymity for leaders, which Arendt will talk about.

RITA: Yes.

JULIA: How did she process or what did she think about this backlash against her?

RITA: Here's the thing about Arendt. One of the things she says about the way in which she worked is that what she's trying to do with any problem is to understand. She writes to understand. So for her, once her work goes out into the world it's for others to make a decision about it. At that point she's finished with it. She comes back to topics such as leadership and evil in her later work, but her finished writing has an existence independent from her.

JULIA: Interesting. Your background on Arendt and her history lays the foundation for our next topic, which you hinted at it. That is, what made you, as a scholar, take that information and connect it to authentic leadership theory and gender?

RITA: I should back up a little bit and tell you that prior to going back to school to do a PhD I was a university administrator at a liberal arts women's college with a very strong social justice mission. One of my tasks was to set up an institute for women in leadership and the connection between gender justice and social justice was very important in the way that we thought about leadership. One of the things I noticed was that women who came to the conferences and workshops we hosted were very interested in this question of how one could be a genuine human being while being involved in a bureaucracy with the problems that can sometimes arise.

That led me to go back to school to do the PhD. I wanted to look at gender authenticity and leadership. I want to say here that I was really influenced by the work of Alice Eagly. I think the article she wrote in 2005 looking at relational authenticity is fabulous. It got me thinking about questions of relationality, not from a social psychology perspective as with Eagly, but from a feminist theory and phenomenological perspective. That's how I connected with Arendt, who I should mention is not someone who had strong feminist leanings. For instance, in an interview she gave with Günter Grass around the mid-60s she said she didn't think women should give orders!

But what Arendt shows us is that even though she was old fashioned in the way she thought about women's place in the world, nevertheless, she herself showed leadership constantly. So you have that paradox between what she sometimes said and how she acts. I think this is important. In *The Human*

Condition, I believe, she quotes Cicero who said something along the lines of "I would rather go astray with Plato than keep with people who dislike him." If you are a thinker of the highest order, and I would place Arendt in that sphere, you often, in your own work, change the way that you think. As readers, we can see that in the thinker's work itself. If you look at Arendt's work, she sometimes says things that, to me as a feminist theorist, are somewhat infuriating, but her work is so rich that I keep going back to her. For anyone who gets slightly interested in Arendt by this interview, I would suggest that a great place to step into her work is with her essays. She wrote a book of essays titled *Between Past and Future* where she looks at questions such as what is authenticity, what is freedom, what is education, etc. That's a very long explanation, Julia. [Laughs]

JULIA: No, that's really good. Rita, we've talked a bit about Hannah Arendt and the connections that you drew and you've also given us some good resources, including the Eagly article and Arendt's essays. Let's move to the topic of the critique of contemporary authentic leadership theory and leadership studies. Help us understand this critique that your book makes.

RITA: To start we have to look at the body of work that has been created by Bruce Avolio and others where there's a real concentration on specific characteristics that they say make someone authentic.

JULIA: Like the four characteristics.

RITA: Yes, the four characteristics — self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced information processing, and internalized moral perspective. When I read their work, I found it puzzling. How do these characteristics necessarily mean that someone is or isn't authentic? Looking at this through an Arendtian lens, one thing she does is try to get us to see that we often construct specific models to understand the world. This is something that happens consistently in social science research. But, when we do that, she says, we confuse knowledge with meaning.

What I'm trying to get at with my book is how to understand the different ways in which authentic leadership manifests itself in the world and how it affects gendered relations. It's a really different approach to thinking and one that obviously is influenced by philosophy and also, from my perspective, by feminist theory — specifically intersectionality. Intersectionality, for me, gives us a way of really thinking through some of the problems with authentic leadership when it's constructed or modeled in a particular way.

Specifically, intersectionality allows us to understand situational context in a much deeper way. How in one instance, a man might feel prejudice because of race or because he's gay, while in another a woman might experience prejudice because of her age or because of her gender. It's this complexity that we need to think about when we think through authenticity and leadership and its connection to gender. Arendt, in my opinion, allows us to do that.

JULIA: A big element in your book is about ethics in authenticity, as well. One of the questions you pose that really struck me was, "if you imagine a world full of authentic leaders, will it necessarily be a better place?" There seems to be a default assumption in much contemporary, authentic leadership scholarship that authenticity means good and there's actually no theoretical justification for that.

RITA: Right. Right. I think this is one of the other things that we need to think about when we write on authentic leadership. We need to think about how not all people who say they're authentic in their leadership are good. Believing that authenticity equals good leadership doesn't allow us to look at questions of evil or questions of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is something that Arendt looks at in her work, as I do in mine. It's really important that we get a much more nuanced way of thinking about whether authenticity is actually good for leadership, and if it is, in what ways?

My thinking on ethics is very much influenced by the work of two scholars, Joanne Ciulla and Donna Ladkin. What I find when I read the literature on authentic leadership is that we see questions of efficiency almost obscuring notions of ethics. While I can understand that you often need to be efficient to be successful, what I want to say, in concert with Joanne Ciulla, is if ethics is at the heart of leadership, then we need to spend more time really thinking about what authenticity does and what it does in different contexts.

JULIA: Very interesting. Beyond authenticity, how would you present an Arendtian critique of leadership studies just in general?

RITA: Oh, nothing but the big questions here! [Laughs] With regards to leadership, I think one of the things that Arendt would have a problem with is the way that there is often — and by no means am I the first scholar to say this — too much focus on the leader. One of the things we see, if we read with Arendt, how we can trace this notion of the heroic leader all the way back to Athenian thought and to Plato. One of the things that Arendt says, that some of our readers will know, is that after the death of Socrates, what Plato did was put the

notion of law and order into Athenian society. What this did, according to Arendt, is to deny the fact that leadership is not just about a singular person, it's connected to action.

One of the things that Plato disliked was the fact that we can never know the outcome of action. We may think something is going to happen as a consequence of a particular action, but we can never know. Arendt writes about how Plato saw people as puppets on a stage controlled by the whims of fate. So, he downplayed the role of action — action is not important; what is important is law and order. Arendt is a good existentialist and in her analysis she says the questions of freedom or questions of what action does within a broader context get lost. We need to rethink the way in which the original notion of leadership from the Greek *archein* means to begin and to lead, that is, to put something forward, to bring something into life, if you will. That's something that was really important to her.

JULIA: Very interesting. She seems very much positioned in opposition to the binaries and the categories that we see in a lot of traditional western thought.

RITA: I'm not certain it's opposing so much as just bringing forward different perspectives. You know, she loved Socrates. She loved Socrates because, she says, one of the things Socrates does is go out into the marketplace and ask questions. He never really has the answer because people might dispute an answer. Instead he asks, what is truth? And he'll have a conversation on truth. Then, at the end, he'll say, "well, I don't really know," and the conversation will end. It's this kind of aporetic conversation that gets us to think a little bit more deeply about questions that we maybe don't think about, questions such as what is authenticity. Thinking more deeply about that is one of the things that I'm trying to do in my book.

JULIA: Speaking of history, there's a big focus in your book on the role of gender in history and leadership. How has gender been portrayed, or how has Arendt talked about it?

RITA: I try to understand how we got to the place of authentic leadership being perceived in a certain way. I wanted to look at authenticity historically. I trace the concept of authenticity back through time to the 18th Century, which is when modern notions of authenticity come into play. Question of authenticity — and if anyone's interested, the work of Lionel Trilling is a fantastic place to start — are really tied up with notions of bourgeois subjectivity. Very briefly, what I argue in my book is that what we see happening is that the middle class, the bourgeoisie, try to

distinguish themselves from the aristocracy and what they see as the aristocracy's lack of morals. The way they do this was to take up the notion of virtue. For a man virtue was seen in his actions, in what he did. We see this in Rousseau, who's really important here. But for a woman, virtue depends on how others see her. This is a huge problem, and it's one that Mary Wollstonecraft rails against in her work.

I should just say right now that Mary Wollstonecraft is one of my heroines! My students probably get fed up with me talking about Mary Wollstonecraft, but she is critically important in understanding what is happening in the 18th Century. We have this notion from Kant where he says the most important thing is for people to judge for themselves, yet for women it's the judgment of others that matters. This is a problem, and I argue that this gender prejudice still has sway in current ways of thinking about women's leadership.

JULIA: What is the connection between gender prejudice and the idea of authentic leadership scholarship today?

RITA: I think it's because we think about leadership in overly defined ways. Because of that we don't understand — and this goes back to my comment about intersectionality earlier — how different situations play out in different ways. Even though I'm a theorist, one of the things that I really wanted to do was interview women leaders. I wanted to hear from them to see if I was off-base. For me, the interviews I did with woman leaders, as well as looking at the literature, is how I connect the dots. I have a whole chapter where I look at the literature on women and leadership taking up leadership scholars who work in this area, but also feminist theorists who I think can give us insights that perhaps have been overlooked.

JULIA: This is a good segue to talk about your study. What would you like us to know about the findings of your study?

RITA: The women who I interviewed had very different ways of thinking about authenticity and leadership. For some, authentic leadership was something that they found connected with them in a very deep way. For others, the term was

totally useless, in their opinion, to the way in which they led.

There are two chapters in my book devoted to the study, one where I look at narratives that women told me, and another where I look at themes. Some of the themes that came up will probably not be a surprise to many people. Questions of gender and embodiment, for example, and how wardrobe issues still matter, having gray hair is still a no-no, how we have to conform to a particular ideal way of looking as a woman leader and how problematic that is. Now, one could say that men have to contend with this also, but the women I interviewed said there was more pressure on them to do so.

The other thing I think is critical from my study is that I wanted to look at how women leaders experienced authenticity or the lack of authenticity within an institutional framework. I interviewed ten women leaders, vice presidents, presidents, and I went in assuming they were going to talk to me about institutional issues. Well, they do, but they also talked to me about their childhood. I think it was Susan Madsen who said that a woman's childhood is really important to understanding her leadership. This comes out through my work. What I saw was this powerful connection that some of these women felt to their mothers. I don't think there's enough that has been written about that yet, about this connection between a woman's mother and her desire to lead.

For example, I interviewed one woman who talked eloquently about how her mother was a union organizer and how she worked with her mother in the summers in a factory. What she sees growing up is how her mother tries to deal with issues of class, issues of gender, in a very powerful way. For this woman,

this is what made her want to lead. She was following her mother. Another very different example is from someone who was born and lived as a child in a rural Jamaican village. She grew up watching the women in her village, who didn't have power in a sociological sense, do things. They acted. This takes us back to Arendt. It's how we act in the world that matters. This woman talked with me about how, after a hurricane, her mother helped organize the community to rebuild the school and the church. It's these actions, these

Advancing Women in Leadership: Waves of Possibilities

Meet Rita and Julia at ILA's 2nd Women and Leadership conference, taking place June 7-10 at the historic, ocean-side Asilomar conference grounds in Pacific Grove, California.

With dynamic keynotes, 50+ concurrent sessions, and unique opportunities for rejuvenation and networking, this conference is a must-attend event for all those interested in women and leadership.

Follow the links and view the complete program, including Rita's and Julia's sessions, at www.ila-net.org/WLC.

[Register Today](#)

actual practical actions that had a powerful effect on the women leaders I interviewed. It was amazing to me. My research took me to places that I hadn't expected.

Now, some people would say that's a problem [laugh] that maybe I should have had different research questions. The good thing about phenomenology is that this is not a problem. In fact, it's what you should expect to happen and it's very good. Patricia Benner says, for example, that research should move you to a different place because if you haven't, you really haven't thought through the problem. Certainly what these women did for me was to take me into the world, if you will, and show me that we spend too much time and too much effort thinking about leadership within the sense of the corporate or the bureaucratic workplace and we forget about all the leadership that takes place as volunteers such as in the church and in other places. When we do that, we're missing most women's leadership, and that's a problem.

JULIA: Your study is fascinating. I'm in the middle of a literature review for another project I'm working on and I want to see if I've distilled your findings correctly. Basically what you've found is there's a primacy of action, there's an influence in early childhood of mothers, and, in particular, context really matters — the idea of relationship really matters. None of these factors seem to be explored in contemporary scholarship, do they?

RITA: No, they haven't been. I think the concept of authentic leadership is such a powerful one, and I think the work that has been done up to now is fine, but we need to move it further. In your terms, Julia, we need to move the needle further. There are a lot of places that we can go, but we really need to critically think about what it is we're doing when we confine ourselves to particular models, when — as I said earlier — we confuse knowledge with meaning.

JULIA: That's a great segue to my last question. How do you want your book to contribute to future women and leadership actions and theorizing? Pretend you're coaching me on my research project. How, specifically, could your book help me?

RITA: One of the things I mentioned earlier that is critical to Arendt — and actually now to me, though perhaps it has always been to me — is this notion of understanding and the

idea that we write to understand something. How do I want my work to be read? I want my work to be read in many different ways. I would love it if people disagreed with me. I would love it if people emailed me (rgardin2@uwo.ca) about things that they enjoyed or things that they didn't enjoy. I want my work, like any author, to be read. I mean, that would be good. [Laughs] But in terms of where it takes women's leadership theory, I hope that it's a springboard for other ideas, for more critical thinking, for more reflexivity. That's what I hope.

JULIA: That's very cool. Rita, we're at the end of our questions. Is there anything else that you want to share that I haven't asked about?

RITA: I want to add one additional thought. We need to think about why it is someone who was as thoughtful and courageous as Hannah Arendt, both in her work and in her life, is not taken up in leadership studies. I want to really encourage people to think about Arendt. I want to encourage people to think about Simone de Beauvoir, who also writes about leadership. There are people in different disciplines, be it political theory in Arendt's case or philosophy and women's studies in Beauvoir's, who can really add to and deepen our understanding of leadership. I think we are at a critical place and we need that critical thinking to help us.

JULIA: It's not only in different disciplines. Mary Parker Follett is a woman whose voice wasn't heard when she first published. She's being brought up more now, but it's a similar phenomenon. Why aren't more people turning to those voices?

RITA: Right. Is it because they're perceived as feminists? Is it because they're marginalized? One thing we didn't get to, but that Arendt would say, is that being on the margins helps you to understand societal problems in a way that you can't when you're in the center. I often wonder why it is that some brilliant thinkers — another one would be Dorothy Smith in sociology — are not being taken up by women leaders. I think it's our duty, if you will, to get their voices heard.

JULIA: I absolutely agree. Rita, this has been outstanding. Thank you very much for taking the time.

RITA: My pleasure.

ILA Members download the Chapter 5, "Authenticity, Ethics, and Leadership" from *Gender, Authenticity and Leadership*
Log in at: <https://ila.memberclicks.net/chapter-downloads->