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Authentic leadership: Centering context to critically examine authenticity

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Abstract

Conversations on authentic leadership development all too often are devoid of contextual considerations. Little attention is placed on how authentic leadership is actualized by individuals who hold marginalized and minoritized social identities and/or whose lived experiences diverge from the privileged majority; and therefore, must strategically negotiate facets of self to "do leadership." This article illustrates how facets of one's lived experiences, social identities, and worldviews significantly shape and guide how "authentic" leaders show up and practice leadership authentically. This article highlights how elements like code-switching and impression management challenge preconceived notions of what it means to be "good" and "genuine" as a leader to better understand how a theory like authentic leadership gets operationalized. This deeper analysis of authentic leadership provides a nuanced perspective to inform curricular and co-curricular designs that are mindful of context, power, and privilege as well as the uniqueness of the individual.

INTRODUCTION

Goodness. Honesty. Genuineness. Morality. Ethics. These are just some of the traits that are expected, and at times demanded, of those who are perceived to practice authentic leadership and of individuals who possess the title of authentic leader (whether self-imposed or externally granted; Dugan, 2017). Much of the interpretations of authentic leadership rest on the idea that it is the responsibility of the leader to embody traits of authenticity that would promote a perception of an authentic leader to followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005;

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Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). While still a young and evolving leadership theory, there is much to understand regarding the theory and its utility, evaluation, and application to practice (Northouse, 2021). What is often missing in conversations on authentic leadership development is context (Gardner et al., 2021; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017); it matters! There is little attention placed on how authentic leadership is actualized by individuals who hold marginalized and minoritized social identities and/or whose lived experiences diverge from the privileged majority and must negotiate facets of self to strategically "do leadership."

The concept of authentic leadership is one of privilege. Like leader[ship] prototypes, authenticity as a leader metric is similarly rooted in normativity and whiteness (Dugan, 2017). I approach this article with the recognition that my social location, my lived experiences, and my irreducibly complex minoritized identities as a cisgender Black woman, to name a few, do not receive the same level of acceptance, understanding, and grace when it comes to perceptions of authenticity as a leader. Scholars continue to highlight the inherent obstacles women, communities of color, and other minoritized communities like the LGBTQIA+, experience when engaging in leadership practice; namely how behaviors, values, and practice are benchmarked against dominant norms and values (Jones et al., 2012; Jourian, 2014; Miller & Vaccaro, 2016; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Overlaying "authenticity" with leadership practice makes both markedly more complex.

I am aware of the limitations of existing studies on authentic leadership and their inability to situate all of me in their interpretations and proposed actualization of this leadership theory. As a holder of multiple minoritized identities, I do not actualize the core competencies of authentic leadership (i.e., self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dugan, 2017; George, 2003) in the same ways as individuals with dominant social identities. My degree of self-awareness is anchored by the very real lived experiences navigating society as a Black woman and society's perceptions of my Blackness in various spaces. My relational transparency is contingent upon safety, protection, acceptance, and support in those contexts. My internalized moral perspective is guided by my Christian faith and informs how I traverse external pressures and their congruence or incongruence with my core beliefs and values. Finally, my ability to process with balance or objectively assess before acting is contingent upon having access to all the information first and foremost; a feat that can be challenging to accomplish as a leader when others may be intimidated or threatened by your social identities. I center all of this, and all of me, to authentically engage with authentic leadership theory and offer pedagogical design considerations that are both nuanced and critical. It is my hope this discussion provides a more dynamic understanding and application of authentic leadership theory which is useful to all.

OVERVIEW OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Local, national, and global upheavals, social and political unrest, police brutality, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and widespread war, are all phenomena that draw leadership practice into question (Priest et al., 2021). Constituents are finding themselves negotiating and reconciling poor choices, inauthentic behavior, dishonesty, and lack of transparency from leaders. This has resulted in increased demand for leadership which is, and leaders who are, honest, "good," and have the best interests of their constituents in mind, denying selfishness while centering benefits for others. This is at the heart of authentic leadership.

Authentic leadership theory (ALT) captures leadership behaviors, practices, and capacities reflective of genuineness, realness, and trustworthiness. On the most basic level, ALT endeavors to situate leaders as inherently good and aligned with their truest selves,

with leadership practices rooted in one's morals, values, and lived experiences (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). While the concept of authenticity has been around for centuries, with origins in Greek philosophy and significant presence in positive psychology (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), ALT is comparatively new as a theoretical perspective and continues to evolve with each researcher's interpretation and each leader's implementation. The scholarship of George (2003), Luthans and Avolio (2003), as well as Avolio and Gardner (2005), along with others, have greatly influenced the infusion of leadership and authenticity; comprising what we recognize today as ALT. Although there is increased adoption and theorizing about authentic leadership, it remains a leadership theory that necessitates further exploration to create shared understanding, measurements, and implementation in practice.

Some terms affiliated with authenticity as a positive construct are: honest, genuine, reliable, trustworthy, real, ethical, transparent, and confident. Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggested authenticity was, ''…both owning one's personal experiences (thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, "the real me inside") and acting in accord with the true self (behaving and expressing what you really think and believe)'' (p. 242). Through this understanding of authenticity, it is interesting to see how authentic leadership has been tethered to the "good" parts of oneself. If the idea is to be the "real you" and align with one's beliefs, values, and experiences, this could inherently be both "good" and "bad," depending on one's values. Further, how others observe a leader's actions and the weight placed on those values and actions, shape how authenticity is ascribed to an individual.

Although a younger theory, scholars have sought to establish a shared definition, core competencies, model, and/or measurement tool for authentic leadership. Some of the first scholars credited with making these efforts include: George (2003), Kernis (2003), Luthans and Avolio (2003), Avolio and Gardner (2005), and Walumbwa and colleagues (2008). The four key tenets or competencies that have been consistently associated with authentic leadership have focused on self-awareness, relational transparency, unbiased processing, and being guided by one's internal moral values to self-regulate actions (Kernis, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). A brief overview of each is below.

- **Self-Awareness**. The recognition of one's strengths, weaknesses, abilities, values, beliefs, and sense of purpose. Through engagement with others, individuals become aware of how they interact with others. There is a clear understanding of how one makes meaning of the world around them and how possessed knowledge informs actions.
- **Relational Transparency**. The opportunity and desire to present an authentic and true self externally. This includes the ability to establish trust, openness, and vulnerability through the sharing of one's lived experiences; as well as the capacity to empathize and sympathize with others while balancing one's emotions and avoiding displays of insincerity.
- **Unbiased (balanced) Processing**. The gathering of multiple perspectives, data, and information to make informed decisions while also being aware of one's own limitations and biases.
- **Internalized Moral Perspective**. An individual's ability to allow their values, beliefs, and morals to guide their behaviors and actions without being influenced by outside pressures and factors.

Eagly (2005) extended these capacities and offered a relational definition of authenticity, examining the relationship between leaders' enactment of values and followers' perceptions of those values, to determine how authenticity may be ascribed and measured. This distinction is critical when examining how and to what extent the "authentic leader" label is assigned.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Authentic leadership sounds like a novel style and one that many would aspire to utilize. Few leaders wouldn't want to be their true and genuine selves, while many strive to cultivate relationships to lead with honesty, empathy, and toward the best interests of those they serve. The challenge, however, is determining how to match impact with intention and determine how such leadership is best assessed and evaluated.

Limitations/critiques of authentic leadership theory

Scholars have highlighted several limitations of ALT. First, there is no consensus on how to measure and assess the theory (Dugan, 2017; Northouse, 2021). The dualistic premise of ALT, that a person is either entirely good "authentic" or completely bad "inauthentic," stifles the nuance required to accurately center a "true self" in leadership. In addition, after a review of existing literature, there lacks a consistent core definition, framework, competencies, or capacities associated with ALT. Furthermore, there are competing understandings of the best method for implementing this theory into practice.

From a critical perspective, there is a view of authentic leadership devoid of context for individuals who reside in the margins and hold multiple minoritized social identities given the constant negotiations and management of self that daily occur (Jones et al., 2012; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) highlighted the nuances of authenticity and proposed a more dynamic analysis of authentic leadership positing,

> Authenticity is complex, because it has to be enacted within specific contexts, in relationship with other actors—such as peers, students/followers, other leaders within hierarchical organizational structures—and therefore, being authentic leaders cannot simply be a matter of knowing oneself and acting true to that self-knowledge. The role of others and the context in which relationships are enacted are critical elements of the equation. Together, they contribute to perhaps a more fluid definition of authentic leadership. (p. 397)

Limited research exists focusing on how those with non-dominant positionalities practice and experience authentic leadership (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Power dynamics, identity, and cultural expression impact an individual's, "…capacity…to influence their authentic leadership narratives" (Liu et al., 2015, p. 714). The under-exploration of ALT across gender, race, sexual orientation, and other social identities has narrowed the scope of fully understanding how a diversity of individuals operationalizes authentic leadership capacities, and in turn, how they are perceived or labeled as authentic leaders. The notion that authenticity is achieved when individuals' actions are, "…guided by internal values versus external threats, inducements, or social expectations and rewards," is clearly missing the contextual lived experiences of minoritized individuals who are constantly negotiating aspects of self and traversing external threats to live, let alone lead. (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 93). With all of this, ALT is still a desirable leadership theory.

The limitations shared reveal how authentic leadership emboldens privilege and power while perpetuating normative assumptions about leadership and leaders. It is essential for leaders to be both authentic and agentic in their practice. To do this, we must challenge the static nature of "self" that is a core part of "authentic leadership." Leading to affect change is hard, and it is even more difficult when leaders are perceived as inauthentic, not because of their incongruence, but due to the mismatch between their social identities and the implicit bias of who leaders are. Being able to lead in ways most congruent to one's

identities, values, and beliefs can make it more rewarding if only given the opportunity and range to truly do so. Authentic leadership theory would benefit from a critical reframe to operationalize this theory more fully into modern-day practice.

Particularly for marginalized communities, reframing authentic leadership through the juxtaposition of phenomena like code-switching and impression management paints a more robust picture to understand how individuals successfully engage in leadership practice congruent to who they are, their values, and lived experiences. Constructs like code-switching and impression management are often theoretically discussed or situated within professional practice; however, they are infrequently tied to leadership broadly, and authentic leadership specifically (McCluney et al., 2021; Turman, 2017). When it comes to leadership development, concerted focus has been placed on capacity building, but no attention is paid to factors like code-switching and impression management that could inhibit capacity building (Guthrie & Osteen, 2012). Often, it is easier to promote capacity building versus understanding how social forces shape leaders' identity and overall experiences with leadership practice. Helping leaders name, understand, and interrogate how code-switching and impression management manifests within their social interactions and leadership practices are useful strategies to dismantle hegemonic norms within leadership and broaden the conceptualization of authenticity in relationships.

Impression management & code-switching as necessary means to an "Authentic End"

Code-switching and impression management shine light on tactics leaders employ, often because of their identities, position, and access to power, to appear authentic. Often used interchangeably, code-switching and impression management reflect behaviors (muting aspects of self, silencing self, adjusting external features, modifying written or oral communication) marginalized people use to navigate unfamiliar spaces and emit a perception of fit in various contexts (McCluney et al., 2021; Vecchio, 2007). The main goal of impression management is to project a favorable version of oneself that will render positive outcomes in social situations. Leadership experiences are such social situations.

Research shows constant engagement in code-switching and impression management may lead to emotional/psychological fatigue and make it challenging for individuals to be fully present and authentic in leadership spaces (Beatty & Lima, 2021). Yet, these tactics have safeguarded those practicing leadership from overt harm and marginalization based on their social identities (Turman, 2017). Further, for minoritized individuals, it becomes difficult to cultivate self-awareness, one of the core competencies of authentic leadership, alongside, "…the racialized subtexts that accompany interactions in the United States" (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017, p. 398). Leaders who hold marginalized identities often experience microaggressions and struggle to embrace and share all aspects of their identity in spaces that were not designed with them in mind.

If one is always concealing, can true authenticity ever be achieved? If one views code-switching through the lens of performativity, agency—not inauthenticity—becomes the by-product. When individuals have the agency to show up in ways most authentic to them, code-switching becomes an asset, not a liability (Turman, 2017). The next section will explore an application of authentic leadership in curricular and co-curricular program design to illustrate how powerful these concepts are and their ability to deepen our understanding of authentic leadership.

APPLICATION OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP TO CURRICULUM OR PROGRAM DESIGN

Given the infancy of authentic leadership as a theory, there does not exist one "right way" to apply, assess, and measure it. Authentic leadership has been examined across industries and disciplines (Johnson, 2019), cultural contexts (Kim, 2014), and more recently within the context of dynamic identities (Jones, 2016; Jourian, 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). The application discussed in this article is one approach to begin the discourse around how to assist learners in cultivating their version of authentic leadership. The activities highlighted address the acontextual nature of authentic leadership, as well as the paucity of diverse perspectives being centered to fully understand the nuances of enacting authentic leadership. The insights shared are not meant to be prescriptive; they can and should be reimagined for context congruence and integrated into both academic and co-curricular program design.

Curricular & co-curricular application: "Identity politics, authenticity, and leadership"

Whether in a classroom environment or a board room, facilitating dialogue about authenticity and leadership practice is a delicate task. What has been a helpful approach, in either context, is prioritizing introspection, reflection, and dialogue; all essential ingredients to facilitate a significant learning experience. Fink (2013) posited, "…significant learning is learning that makes a difference in how people live" (p.7). Such impactful learning experiences should enhance our own lives, enhance relationships with others, and ultimately shape how we engage with the world around us. Introspection, reflection, and dialogue provide space for meaning-making, shared learning, and an opportunity for individuals to paint a more holistic picture of their authentic leadership journey.

The curricular/co-curricular experiences discussed below were designed to assist learners in exploring their own leadership lens, discovering the core competencies of authentic leadership, and cultivating skills to critically interrogate and reimagine leadership styles, practice, and theories. The hope is learners will be able to apply practices from research to better engage in leadership in a student-centric or professional context as well as cultivate a greater awareness of the ways phenomena like code-switching, impression management, micro/macro-aggressions, and identity politics, inform and shape how authentic leadership is operationalized and perceived by others.

Introspection: Individual leadership stories

Ely et al. (2011) posited, "How people become leaders and how they take up the leader role are fundamentally questions about identity." (p. 476) An individual's unique social identities and social location color and shape every facet of their being, including how they engage in leadership. Establishing an opportunity for self-reflection positively contributes to self-awareness, relational transparency, and space to examine one's moral perspective in community with others. Further, self-reflection establishes a personal baseline when engaging with the elements of a leadership theory, like authentic leadership, that is fundamentally anchored to who individuals are and how they engage with others.

A useful starting point is one that creates opportunities for understanding why the concept of leadership is a worthwhile topic. Remind learners that leadership engages our values; it is a medium in which one can contribute and engage in the world around them; it

assists in addressing social, political, and scientific issues; and it facilitates the alignment of one's desired and actualized values. To initiate the process of introspection on the concept of leadership, consider asking reflective questions like: What is your definition of leadership? What are some leadership stories you heard growing up/ have been taught? How, if at all, have these stories informed your own leadership journey and perspective? How, if at all, have your social identities (e.g., gender, race, ability, social economic status [SES] , nationality, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation) shaped your leadership journey (either your leader identity formation or engagement in leadership practice)? Questions like these provide an opportunity to consider one's lived experiences in relation to how they've come to understand themselves and the phenomenon of leadership. When the exploration of leadership is personalized in this way, it renders more authentic and transformative insights and makes learners more comfortable to dialogue with others; learning within and across differences.

Reflection & dialogue: Context-rich interactive activity "Masks Off"

After garnering a better understanding of self, one can then engage in deeper reflection and collective dialogue to further unpack what it means to be an authentic leader. Authenticity is often attributed to this idea of "realness" or being one's "true self" (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). When leadership is framed through a lens of authenticity, there is an assumption that all leaders have the agency, at all times and in all spaces, to actualize authenticity in their practice. The reality is this is not true for all. Some individuals find themselves needing to utilize various tactics like impression management or code-switching to navigate leadership spaces and engage in leadership practice. These tactics help people navigate unfamiliar spaces and reflect a perception of fit in that space (McCluney et al., 2021; Vecchio, 2007). Code-switching affords the opportunity to "speak" the language of the dominant culture to successfully navigate environments. The main goal of impression management is to project a favorable version of oneself that will render positive outcomes in social situations. These tactics can include, but are not limited to, adjusting verbal, nonverbal, and written communication language, altering physical appearance (e.g., attire, hair), style of dress (Newman, 2014; Vecchio, 2007), conforming to stereotypical gender roles (Turman, 2017), and tempering emotional expressions, such as assertiveness, to avoid stereotype threat (Turman, 2017).

The elements of code-switching and impression management, at face value, do not appear to embody "realness" or "authenticity." Yet, many individuals who engage in such tactics may self-identify, or be externally viewed, as an authentic person and leader. The reality is that authenticity is, and should be nuanced. Minoritized individuals find themselves utilizing tactics like code-switching and impression management as strategies to successfully engage in leadership to fit the standards of leadership as outlined by the dominant group. In many circumstances, for folks who reside in the margins, these strategies are not optional, but a requirement to "do leadership."

Gloria Anzaldúa (1990, 2012) describes this unique tension or space as the mestiza consciousness. Borderland theory reflects the "mestiza consciousness" (Anzaldua, 2012, p. 99), a space of duality or "in between" multiple worlds/spaces (Naples, 2010). Borderland theory validates the multiplicity of identities and the ways in which individuals occupy or "show up" in spaces and recognizes that there is a unique perspective or vantage point from those who reside in the "in between." A leadership theory like authentic leadership rests on a leader's ability to know themselves and present the most genuine version of themselves, in all spaces, always. But how is this achieved when one possesses

a social location and identities that are in multiplicity, compounded, predicated by power dynamics, contextually bound, and simultaneously fluid?

Anzaldúa critically examined the impact racialized and gendered perceptions of self, others, and the environment had on womxn of color; characterizing this tension as having to "'change faces'…forced to adopt a face that would pass" (1990, p. xv). The concept of changing faces, or adopting a face to pass, speaks to the constant struggle that racially minoritized individuals experience when navigating predominately White spaces. These tactics, or identity politics, become protective practices to lessen vulnerability to marginalization and oppression. Further, these tactics capture how vastly different leading can be for minoritized individuals (Turman, 2017). Concepts like code-switching and impression management are often not centered in leadership education, theory, or practice; yet they manifest daily for leaders. Understanding authentic leadership through a critical lens of mestiza consciousness and tactics like code-switching and impression management reveals how ALT can be understood and applied intersectionally and contextually.

Questions that can facilitate a deeper understanding of how these tactics relate to ALT include: Do you always bring your WHOLE AUTHENTIC SELF in every space? Have you ever "censored" yourself (e.g., modified your language, tone, appearance, perspective) to display an image of fit in a space? Are you cognizant when you engage in these tactics? These are deep questions that require vulnerability, safety, and support. However, reflecting on them allows the individual space to interrogate and examine their own behaviors, perceptions, and cultivate a sense of self-awareness necessary to assess their authenticity as a leader.

An activity that has proven successful in both curricular and co-curricular spaces is when learners identify their own tactics and display them on a mask to reflect the "changing faces" they adopt to "do leadership." Learners are given a printed paper mask to reflect one side (front of the mask) on how they show up externally to others juxtaposed to their inner self or most authentic self (back of the mask). See Appendix A: Sample Mask for "Mask Off" Activity.

In past facilitations, learners were asked to reflect on their external self-presentation. They identified words, phrases, or competencies they desired of others to believe they possessed. This activity required individuals to reflect on how they managed others' impressions of self in relation to their self-awareness of their own feelings, thoughts, and preferences. Learners discovered which traits, behaviors, tactics, and characteristics manifested when attempting to externally reflect an idea of fit or authenticity. They were also given space to examine the circumstances where these behaviors were adopted. Through small and large group discussions, learners reflected on their reactions to the activities, paying attention to things that surprised them, made them uncomfortable, or more introspective. Learners considered why they chose to hide a part(s) of themselves. Ultimately, they reflected on whether others' perceptions of their authenticity as a leader depended on what parts of themselves were centered or moved to the peripheral.

After engaging in activities like the ones presented in this article, individuals were better primed to consider how they can expand their leadership stories. In particular, learners discovered ways to leverage their cultural capital and lived experiences to lead authentically. Furthermore, learners cultivated the skills necessary to engage in critical leadership practice and discovered ways to use their privilege, access, and positionality to positively impact their and others' leadership experiences. Implementing a group dialogue/post-activity reflection assists learners in evaluating how they embody authentic leadership in their day-to-day practice. Establishing short- and long- term individual goals allows individuals an opportunity to cultivate authentic leadership considering their social identities and lived experiences.

IMPLICATIONS AND IMPACT OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP THEORY

The approaches shared above diverge from the traditional conceptualization of ALT by prioritizing the individual, context, and acknowledging how leadership does not occur in isolation, but in community. To fully understand this divergence, consider juxtaposing an early-stage authentic leadership assessment tool like the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa et al. 2008), alongside some of the aforementioned context-rich critical applications of authentic leadership. The 16-item assessment tool is one evaluative medium to reflect on the four components (i.e., self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective) attributed to authentic leadership. According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), completing this questionnaire assists an individual in determining the strength or weakness of their authentic leadership. A 16-item Likert scale tool, though targeted in its questions, lacks the nuance, depth, and individual-centric lens that a more critically grounded, context-rich approach could offer. It begs the question, is this an effective way to measure an individual's leadership authenticity?

Being able to bring one's whole self to spaces, and show up in the most authentic ways, are privileges. There is an expectation that those whom we appoint to serve and lead will do so with integrity, honesty, and with their good values-centered. The reality is, embodying authenticity, being perceived as authentic, and knowing one's true self, are not always congruent. However, when authentic leadership is contextualized and lived experiences as well as identities foregrounded, leadership enactment can manifest in more inclusive and liberatory ways. While just a singular example, the interactive curriculum shared in this article demonstrates how one might operationalize authentic leadership. Tactics like code-switching and impression management are useful to disrupt normative assumptions around authentic leadership. The agency afforded to individuals who are cognizant of how to control, project, and perform their identities can be empowering. Chaudhry (2006) posited, "The freedom to perform our identity gives us the power to define its meaning" (para. 20). This is what a liberatory reframe of authenticity in leadership looks like. While aspirational, it is a worthwhile endeavor and one that will return dividends to expand and diversify leadership practice and leader prototypes.

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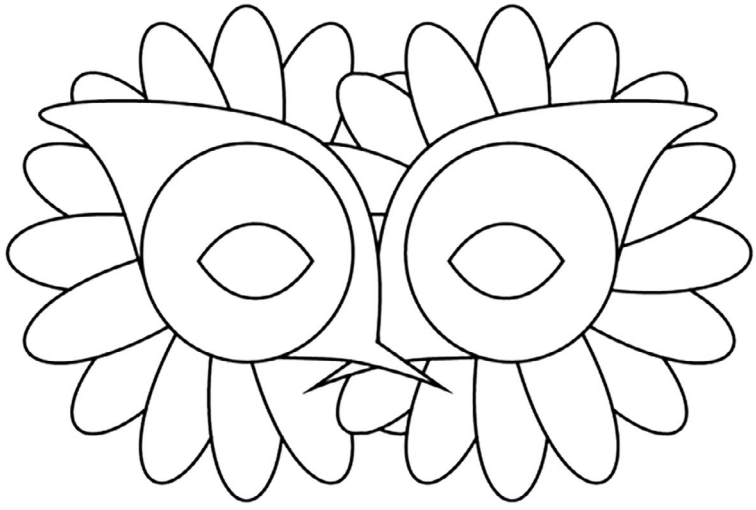
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APPENDIX A

Sample Masks for "Mask Off" Activity





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