Chapter Eight

Michelle Obama’s Embodied Authentic Leadership

Leading by Lifestyle

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In February 2012, Michelle Obama did twenty-five push-ups on national television with Ellen DeGeneres. In April 2012 she worked out for twenty minutes at the White House with contestants on the reality weight loss show The Biggest Loser (Smith, 2012). Additionally, Obama rises early to exercise (Vaccariello, 2009a), and the first family does not eat dessert on weeknights (Moskin, 2010). Obama does all these things to model a healthy lifestyle and encourage Americans to become more healthy and active. Although such performances are rarely considered in studies of leadership, they are central to Obama’s rhetoric and style of leadership and are marks of authentic leadership (AL).

In general, the body has received little attention in leadership studies (Sinclair, 2005a). By studying leadership in a disembodied way, scholars suggest that leaders are somehow superhuman and insusceptible to the limitations of the body (Sinclair, 2005b). Indeed, many past studies of the body in organizations have been centered on how bodily categories like race or sex limit actors’ possibilities (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). However, rather than being a necessary constraint or an

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The author thanks Robin Jensen for her comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.
inconvenience to be overcome, the body can present a resource for leaders (Ladkin, 2008, 2012; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Sinclair, 2005a). Specifically, in studies of AL, and its concern with congruency among a leader’s actions, goals, commitments, and morals, the role of the body is important but undertheorized (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

To explore the role of the body in leadership, especially AL, I use a critical rhetoric approach, working from the premise that the body can persuade and communicate. Throughout this chapter, I use the term enacted rhetoric to describe how Obama makes arguments through her bodily activity. This concept is drawn from Campbell and Jamieson (1978), who defined enactment as “a reflexive form... in which the speaker incarnates the argument, is the proof of the truth of what is said” (p. 9). Enacted rhetoric is an embodied way to gain credibility, a performance of argument without words. Obama enacts her rhetoric by continually presenting her lived experience, including its mistakes, as a persuasive appeal.

The overall purpose of this chapter is to extend scholarship on the role of the body in AL. To do this, I examine First Lady Michelle Obama’s rhetoric in conjunction with her anti-childhood obesity campaign, “Let’s Move!” Specifically, I suggest that Obama is an authentic leader and that her embodied performances demonstrate her AL style. Additionally, as Obama presents an Othered body and subject position (female and black), she uses these to her advantage, suggesting that the body may actually enable women to be authentic. Through this example, I address some of the complexities of embodied leadership, particularly how to integrate personal weaknesses (Diddams & Chang, 2012) and Othered subject positions (Eagly, 2005) into AL theories. In this, I hope to extend AL scholarship by showing that the body can be an important rhetorical resource that strengthens leaders’ arguments and followers’ identification.

### About Let’s Move!

In February 2010, Obama began the Let’s Move! initiative with the goal of ending childhood obesity in America within a generation (“Let’s Move! accomplishments,” n.d.). The program aims to bring stakeholders together to make small changes that will result in healthier children and a stronger nation (“About Let’s Move!,” 2011; Obama, 2009). Although the program is relatively new, it has already achieved many goals, including passage of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act; a partnership with Walmart to make fresh produce more affordable and increase the nutritional value of processed food; and a plan to add salad bars to the cafeterias of six thousand schools (“Let’s Move! accomplishments,” n.d.). Obama said that she hopes, through these and other programs, “to change the way a generation of kids thinks about food and nutrition” (Obama, 2010b).

But as Let’s Move! has made steps toward changing the future for American children, Obama has found herself the target of criticism from opponents who feel that it is the role of parents, not the government, to make choices about their children’s health (see, for example, Behrendt, Nelson, & Bruce, 2010). Many of these critiques accuse Obama of inauthenticity as her adversaries search for inconsistencies between the way that she lives her life and how she tells others to live theirs. This has resulted in increasing surveillance of Obama’s everyday activities. In response, Obama seems to have turned this scrutiny into a persuasive boon by drawing attention to her body and performing a healthy, balanced life to lead and persuade the nation.

### Authentic Leadership and Body Possibilities

Although there has been a range of approaches and exact definitions presented for the term authentic leadership (Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005), scholars generally agree on
a core set of characteristics that mark AL (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). In this section, I discuss these defining traits and show that they could be enhanced by considering the body's role in AL. In this I extend Ladkin and Taylor's (2010) work to provide a more comprehensive integration of AL and embodiment. As I review past work on AL, I hope to show that the body fits naturally into this theory and that including it will enhance our understanding of leadership.

First, AL begins with the issue of authenticity. As Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, and May (2004) have written, "The essence of authenticity is to know, accept, and remain true to one's self" (p. 802). Authentic leaders act from core convictions rather than a desire for self-promotion (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Authentic leaders lead from their strengths, values, and goals while inspiring their followers to be authentic (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). The identity of leader becomes an important part of an authentic leader's self-concept, and leadership is more than a role that can be put on and off (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Looking at a leader's body, then, we should see consistency and a performance that is consistent between word and deed.

Second, authentic leaders have a high level of self-awareness. Authentic leaders can critically evaluate their personality and know their strengths and weaknesses (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). Additionally, authentic leaders self-regulate their behaviors to meet their goals and model positive behaviors (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). However, this is more than impression management; it involves leaders' actually living out and enacting their values through behaviors (Hannah, Lester, & Vogelgesang, 2005). How one chooses to "do" one's body communicates about oneself to others (Butler, 1990). It seems that an authentic leader's embodied behaviors would be consistent with what she purports her values, goals, strengths, and weaknesses to be.

Third, authentic leaders act because they are truly passionate and have goals derived from personal convictions and beliefs (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). This should result in a concordance between authentic leaders' internal beliefs and their external behavior (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Authentic leaders behave in a "self-expressive" manner that reflects their internal motivations (May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003; Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 399). Some scholars have been concerned that in seeking authenticity, leaders might feel obligated to fit a certain model of leadership that would result in inauthentic behaviors or emotional labor (Eagly, 2005; Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009). However, an authentic leader has the goal of being true to oneself, not fulfilling expectations of leadership (Gardner and others, 2011).

In terms of the body, Ladkin and Taylor (2010) have suggested that it is through bodily cues that authentic leaders' consistency between the internal and external may be most clearly judged. Although AL scholarship differs on what the specific leadership behaviors of authentic leaders are (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), it seems that the external actions of authentic leaders cannot be manifest just through words, but that the authentic leader, acting from true convictions, would present a consistent bodily performance. Authentic leaders lead by example (Avolio and others, 2004), which entails doing, an inherently embodied activity. However, previous AL scholarship has neglected to describe exactly how authentic leaders lead by example. How is their behavior on display to their followers? It is at this point that AL scholarship has neglected to explore the central role of the body in the performance of leadership.

Fourth, authentic leaders have distinctive relationships with their followers that are based on trust and transparency and encourage authenticity in their followers (Avolio and others, 2004; Gardner and others, 2005). Human relationships, including those between leaders and followers, so often happen
Critical Rhetoric

To analyze Obama's leadership, I take a critical rhetoric approach. Critical rhetoric seeks to understand and uncover power, especially in relation to social change. As such, it is an appropriate approach for understanding how Obama's embodied subjectivity affects her leadership (McKerrow, 1989). The study of a leader's rhetoric to understand leadership practices follows a discursive leadership approach: leadership is contextually bound and socially constructed (Fairhurst, 2008, 2009; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Additionally, critical rhetoric emphasizes that power is not fixed or constant and one can impose power even while being the subject of power (McKerrow, 1989). Obama has power as first lady of the United States, but she is also African American and a woman, subjectivities with a long history of subordination.

Doing critical rhetoric entails analyzing multiple fragments of texts to understand an overarching rhetoric (McKerrow, 1989). Studying Obama's lived experience requires such a method, as knowledge about how she lives does not exist in a unitary form. Therefore, studying Michelle Obama's unique rhetoric must go beyond reading transcripts of her speeches. I do draw from speeches Obama has made in conjunction with Let's Move! (for transcripts, see Obama, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b), but I also look at news stories and press releases to understand how she lives her life and "does" her leadership and persuasion. The scope of this chapter is limited to Let's Move! because it is within this context that her embodied AL is most apparent. In this, I assume the perspective of a follower to her leadership, using the information about Obama's embodied behaviors that have been mediated and are publicly available. Through studying the information that Obama divulges about her life, we can see the body possibilities of AL.
Michelle Obama’s Authentic Leadership and Enacted Rhetoric

This analysis of Michelle Obama’s AL and enacted rhetoric is divided into three sections. First, I describe her AL and enacted rhetoric, providing examples to illustrate this concept. Second, I demonstrate how Obama performs her weaknesses through her body, contributing to her authenticity. Third, I discuss how Obama’s embodied AL challenges cultural norms about the Othered body and allows her to draw on her body as a rhetorical resource.

Obama’s Authentic Leadership

One of the primary marks of Obama’s AL and enacted rhetoric is modeling the behavior she would like to see in her followers (Gardner and others, 2005). The title of her campaign is Let’s Move! rather than, for instance, You Move!, suggesting that Obama is also active. Rather than telling Americans what to do differently to end childhood obesity, she shows them, providing her audience with the knowledge and tools to do the same: “When I do these things, I’m thinking, ‘If people see me—the First Lady—with my shoes off, running around with kids, sweating, jumping around, making a fool out of yourself, then maybe more moms and dads will say, ‘I can do that, and actually that looks fun’” (“First lady making strides,” 2011). Sloop (2000) has suggested that “those things that one displays externally are taken as signifiers of impulses ‘in’ the body (e.g., body orientations, personality traits)” (p. 133). Here, Obama’s outward displays are intended to reflect her inner character and motives, suggesting, for example, that she is not a detached leader but a caring, maternal figure. This atypical performance for a first lady may also demonstrate authenticity to her followers who can see how personal these issues are to Obama.

However, it is not only in public contexts that Obama enacts her rhetoric and models behavior for her followers, but also in her daily habits. Even though the Obama family has a team of chefs at their command and a personal trainer, Obama identifies with the average American by emphasizing her choices. For example, despite having a devoted pastry chef, the Obama family does not eat dessert on weekdays; “otherwise it’s not a treat; it’s just something that you do” (Kohan, 2010; Moskin, 2010; Obama, 2009).

Additionally, both Barack and Michelle Obama work out for an hour most days, getting up as early as 4:30 a.m. to do so (Vaccariello, 2009b). Despite having a gym and a personal trainer, the Obamas still need to choose to get up early and exercise. Although these choices are probably made for their own health, they serve to model this behavior for the American people. Michelle Obama expressed this goal when she said, “If the President of the United States can sit down with his family and have dinner, hopefully more Americans will find time to do the same thing” (“The story of the White House garden,” 2009). Obama has stated that telling people how to behave will not be effective: “There is no way that the First Lady can or should go into someone’s house and tell them what to eat—it doesn’t work. It wouldn’t work in my household—in fact, I would resent it” (“First lady making strides,” 2011). Instead, Obama leads by example, modeling healthy habits for the rest of America. However, as an authentic leader Obama goes beyond being a role model, and increases identification with her followers, as she lives and demonstrates the choices and struggles involved in living a healthy life.

Authenticity and Personal Weaknesses

Although AL takes the approach from positive psychology of focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses (Avolio and others,
2004; Seligman, 2002), how authentic leaders deal with weaknesses is important (Diddams & Chang, 2012; George, 2003). Authentic leaders must accept their weaknesses without defensiveness (Diddams & Chang, 2012). Additionally, if authentic leaders seem flawless, followers will not be able to identify with them (Ford & Harding, 2011). When leaders admit their weaknesses, they encourage the development of authentic followers who are more willing to be vulnerable and enter into trusting relationships (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). When authentic leaders are transparent about their weaknesses, they will not lose the consistency between their values and actions, which is central to AL (Diddams & Chang, 2012). Obama demonstrates this by being honest about her weaknesses and reframing them as aspects of humanity rather than flaws. Although this results in accusations of inconsistency from her detractors, I argue that it actually enhances her AL.

While Obama's performance of leadership is centered on modeling positive, healthy behaviors, some disagree that Michelle Obama presents good habits. In public performances of identity, society holds one accountable, as critics look for inconsistencies (Force, 2010). For example, when the Obamas' 2011 Super Bowl party menu included cheeseburgers, deep-dish pizza, beer, and ice cream, the Obamas found themselves defending the food (CNN Political Unit, 2011). The White House faced criticism from opponents who labeled the menu hypocritical for a family concerned about both their personal health and the health of all Americans. For example, the Fox News website gave its story about the menu the headline, “Michelle Obama's Shocking Anti-Obesity Super Bowl Menu” (2011).

Obama responded not by denying her weaknesses but by arguing that life is about balance, and occasional treats for special occasions (like the Super Bowl) are fine (Kohan, 2011; Sweet, 2011). Obama enacts moderation, living by the “ninety-ten rule”: watch what you eat 90 percent of the time, and enjoy special foods the other 10 percent (Moore, 2011). Through this, Obama publicly acknowledges that she is not a perfect model of health and frames these indulgences not as failings to be hidden but as occasional and anticipated pleasures. It seems that this portrayal of her human side would increase identification among followers who may have trouble identifying with someone who is superhumanly perfect (Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000).

There are more examples of this criticism (see, for example, Bershad, 2011), which draw attention to the surveillance and objectification that Obama faces. Responses like this make her aware of the attention paid to her body and reinforce the potential that her embodied AL can have when her behavior is observed. Additionally, these examples serve as an exigence for enacted rhetoric, demonstrating the need for public figures to lead by example rather than telling their constituents what to do. In both her strengths and weaknesses, Obama leads authentically with consistency among her values, goals, speech, and action while helping her followers relate to her as she performs her humanity and ordinariness in mundane activities like eating. Her embodied weaknesses, rather than hurting her rhetoric, allow her followers to relate to her even more as they relate their embodied experiences to hers (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

The Othered Body as Rhetorical Resource

The fact that Michelle Obama’s body is Othered in multiple ways cannot be ignored. The fact that one physically exists as a black woman suggests a position with different possibilities, even if race and gender are not salient (James, 1999). As an African American woman, Obama has a body that has been historically constrained. However, through her AL and enacted rhetoric, she reconstitutes her raced and gendered body as a rhetorical resource that can speak in a way that a white, male body could not. Like when using her weaknesses to her advantage,
Obama is able to use her Othered body in a transformative way. Eagly (2005) has expressed concern that female authentic leaders might need to change their leadership style so much that they would not remain authentic. Obama’s example demonstrates that the body and the subjectivities that accompany it can be a rhetorical resource, not a barrier.

As Obama enacts a healthy life, she repeatedly tells the story of what brought her family to their current lifestyle, making it clear to her audience that she has not always behaved the way she does now, again increasing identification. In this version of her narrative, Obama emphasized her position as a regular mom:

It wasn’t that long ago that I was a working mom, struggling to balance meetings and deadlines with soccer and ballet. And there were some nights when everyone was tired and hungry, and we just went to the drive-thru because it was quick and cheap, or went with one of the less healthy microwave options, because it was easy. And one day, my pediatrician pulled me aside and told me, “You might want to think about doing things a little bit differently.” (Obama, 2010a)

As a result, she made changes to her family’s habits, and the pediatrician saw her daughters’ health improve. Obama repeatedly tells this story to demonstrate that she is motivated by personal values and change that she genuinely wants to see take place—marks of AL (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Her current behaviors were learned following failure to ensure her daughters were as healthy as they could be. She does not share her story out of judgment, but to show that anyone can make healthy changes to his or her life. By using this story, Obama explains her current actions and uses narrative to share her sense of self and develop her position as an authentic leader (Shaw, 2010; Sparrowe, 2005).

In this story, she also uses her gendered and raced body to increase follower identification by emphasizing her position as a mother. By speaking as a parent, she makes her arguments more personal and she appeals to the sensibilities of other parents. This frame has been emphasized in the media, and Obama has not shied away from it. Her official White House webpage begins with this description: “When people ask First Lady Michelle Obama to describe herself, she doesn’t hesitate to say that first and foremost, she is Malia’s and Sasha’s mom” ("First Lady Michelle Obama," n.d.). This description acknowledges and emphasizes her family and traditionally gendered roles.

Additionally, Obama often draws from racial assumptions about mothering, such as the African American community’s focus on parenting in which “other mothers and nonparents” have rights in raising other children (Collins, 2000, p. 182). She is not only Sasha and Malia’s mother, but also the mother of all American children. In this way, her enactment of motherhood is based in both gender and race. Obama uses this role to identify with many of the women in her audience, but in varying ways. In assuming the mother persona, Obama continues her AL, not speaking as a politician but living as a caring parent.

In this, Obama bridges the public and private, an act that is also rooted in her subjectivity as a black woman. Although the first lady is a public figure, her role is often perceived as primarily private (Watson, 2000). However, within the African American community, such public/private distinctions have historically not been possible (Collins, 2000). Black women have worked in public since slavery, and gender roles in the African American community have not always been defined based on division of labor to the extent that they have been in white culture. From a black perspective, the conflation of mother and politician, private behaviors and public surveillance, is not unusual.
This is thus another way that Obama leads from her embodied black subjectivity. She is true to her body and uses it as a site for authentic relationships with followers.

In addition to her speaking as a mother and an African American, Obama's more general enacted rhetoric is predicated on her female body. Because of the surveillance and gaze that fall on the female body (Mulvey, 1975), it would not be possible for her to enact her rhetoric in the same way from a male position. The historic objectification of women's bodies has opened to include larger questions about how they obtain that body: “the topic of how beautiful women eat has become something of a chronic national obsession” (Gordinier, 2011). The fact that a research project like this is possible is thanks to media and public interest in and surveillance of Obama's body and related actions. Still, surveillance is often viewed negatively because of the self-regulation that it encourages, especially for women (Foucault, 1977).

At the heart of all these forms of action is Obama's attempt to enact normativity, leading by modeling behavior to her followers. Despite her Othered position, she seeks to be perceived as normal, less regarding her race or sex but more in relation to general embodiment. In an environment in which disordered eating is increasingly normalized, a "normal" diet or weight can be difficult to attain or even understand. Although a few critics have labeled her as fat, most agree that Obama is a healthy size, neither impossibly thin nor overweight. As one observer wrote, "Nor, with her solid 5-foot-11 frame, does Mrs. Obama, who is 45, have a typical runway model body. That makes her image even more admirable to many women, and perhaps even attainable" (Robbins, 2009). Accessibility is what Obama seeks: she has crafted her lifestyle not to show off or craft her personal identity, but to lead in a way that aligns with her embodied subjectivities. By living her arguments and performing them in her body, Obama is an authentic leader who leads from a moral center and demonstrates that her values and actions align at the most basic levels.

Although Obama's leadership and rhetoric have been successful, they do introduce some complexities. Even as she capitalizes on structures that generally oppress the Othered body, her use of personas like black mother or woman as the subject of a male gaze reifies their employment. Many scholars have criticized the patriarchal factors that construct expectations for docile female bodily performance (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 2004; Butler, 1990; Heyes, 2006; Warin, 2011). Through practices like diet, exercise, makeup, and fashion, women's bodies are subjected to surveillance from the self and others. As women are reduced to an ongoing concern with their appearance, they sacrifice the resources they might devote to political issues (Trethewey, 1999). It is important to consider that Obama's use of these bodily tropes might be problematic, especially as followers might imitate them (Peck, Freeman, Six, & Dickinson, 2009).

Still, Obama does reappropriate these historically oppressive body positions as she demonstrates "an embodied sense of rhetoric as a performance that one does, rather than as an analytic, objectified extension of who one is" (McKerrow, 1998, p. 323). In this, she shows that rhetoric is connected to everyday life and one's "true self," which can be manifest in leadership behaviors (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Seen this way, speech through embodied practices is not always a site of constraint but potentially a way to enact political power.

**Implications of Rhetoric, Embodiment, and Authentic Leadership**

Through Obama's rhetoric, I demonstrated how she leads by example through her embodied behaviors, uses her performances of weakness as a rhetorical example, and turns her
Othered subjectivities into rhetorical resources that increase follower identification and augment her authenticity. My goal in this chapter has been to expand AL theories by showing how many characteristics of AL are in fact enacted through the body. The body, rather than being a site for leaders to accidently reveal weaknesses, can be a resource for more effective leadership.

Specifically, I have shown how the use of the body augments AL theory for non-normative subjectivities or weaknesses that have previously been problematic for AL (Diddams & Chang, 2012; Eagly, 2005; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Shaw, 2010). Through embodied acts like eating French fries, Obama's presentation of her weaknesses creates a site for follower identification. Rather than being a detached leader who talks without action, Obama displays her life so that her followers can sense an authentic relationship. Additionally, Obama draws on tropes of race and gender, using her embodied subjectivities as an aspect of her authentic self. Scholars had previously questioned whether weaknesses and minority leaders could be part of AL theory (Diddams & Chang, 2012; Eagly, 2005), and Obama's example seems to suggest that they can.

More generally, Obama's example shows the role that the body can play in AL. It is through the body that leaders can show that their talk and action are not distinct, but that they live their arguments, heightening authenticity. In turn, it is through this authenticity that leaders can create relationships with their followers. As humans relate to each other through common bodily experiences, leaders can use their embodied performances as a way for followers to feel connected. As Obama makes her private life public, she shows that for her, there is not a disconnect between what she says and how she lives; she is an authentic leader. Leaders who are more open will be more persuasive (Quinn and others, 2000), and audience identification also increases persuasion (Burke, 1950). Obama performs a form of AL that positions her not as a distant and aloof leader but as a normal American.

In addition to extending scholarship on AL, I have also used a critical rhetoric approach to study Obama's leadership (McKerrow, 1989). Studying rhetoric, particularly embodied arguments, provides a focus for examining a leader's behavior. By examining Obama's leadership from a rhetorical perspective, I have been able to focus on how the use of her body in argumentation indicates that she is an authentic leader. Rhetorical methods could be used in future AL studies to continue to isolate action and persuasion.

Michelle Obama, through her AL, identifies with her audience and shows that she is not asking Americans to do something that she herself is not participating in. She uses bodily performances and embodied subjectivities to demonstrate her authenticity as a leader, more effectively persuading her public. This demonstrates the importance of considering the body in AL scholarship. By living her leadership and persuasive appeals, Obama identifies with her audience on a new level. Her goals as first lady are ambitious, and she needs an unprecedented form of leadership to match as she enlists followers.

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Part Three

**Leadership By and Through the Body**

Antonio Marturano

Though the practice of leadership development acknowledges some aspects of the body, with programs that focus on body language or incorporate physical activities, embodiment is a neglected topic in the academic leadership development literature. According to Walsh (2012), because leadership theories are coming from what is a hyper-rational, leader-centric, cognitively biased worldview, this is, perhaps, not surprising.

In Part Three, four chapters offer ideas on embodiment in leadership development ranging from body language to metaphorical notions, providing fresh, unconventional, theoretically informed additions to the discussion. All the chapters offered here focus on leadership (not just on leaders) by exploring new ways to understand leadership embodiment.

Julie Burge, Ray Batchelor, and Lionel Cox deal, in their chapter, with leadership learning by using the tango, not only metaphorically but also in a way that allows people to understand deeply the real nature of the leader–follower relationship.