Academic Paper

Coaching women towards authenticity: An appropriate workplace environment

Sally Jackson ✉ (Sheffield Hallam University)

Abstract

This paper reports on a heuristic study with women in academia. Nine women collaborated as co-researchers to explore coaching women towards authenticity within higher education. The research was undertaken from a social constructionist perspective and used informal conversational interviews and thematic analysis. The findings suggest that coaching can provide support and contribute to women's development of authenticity. An area that can affect and influence women's authenticity is that of working in a safe environment.

Introduction

This heuristic study is situated within a group of English universities and focuses on coaching women towards authenticity within the workplace (Worth, 2012). There has been increasing legislation to support women's claims for equal opportunities during the last three decades. However, there is still an apparent imbalance between aspirational and actual achievement of women attaining senior positions in certain areas and sectors (Schein, 2007; Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). The 'Sex and Power' report (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011) highlights the armed forces, police, judiciary and higher education as areas where women's senior representation is still low.

In 2011, the 'Women on Boards' review was created (Davies, 2011). The panel's purpose is to identify barriers preventing women reaching the boardroom and make proposals to increase the proportion of women on boards. More recently, the Hampton-Alexander Report (2018) related some advancement of women however there is still extensive media attention on female under-representation (Strachan et al, 2016; Vinnicombe et al; 2015; Morley, 2014; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013). Research into higher education had previously suggested that barriers were evident for women advancing to senior levels of academia (Deem, 2007; 2003) while Doherty and Manfredi

(2010; 2006) posited that women experience career progression to the grade of senior/principal lecturer but then their advancement appears to stall.

In an attempt to redress this disproportion of staff in one university, coaching for some female academics was introduced. It became apparent that the perceived atmosphere of disaffection and distrust was causing difficulty for a few of the women. They were unable to be themselves and to be appropriately assertive which resulted in reduced confidence and self-esteem. Consequently, their ability to behave authentically was being eroded resulting in a deleterious effect on their self-perception of worth, power and influence. These were intelligent and ambitious people providing significant benefits to their students, institution and society. I was intrigued by the apparent issues experienced by some women trying to establish themselves within an overtly masculine environment and in doing so appearing to lose their sense of self and authenticity.

The issues affecting female academics are represented by women at senior levels in many organisations. The under-representation of senior women in universities is however "a systemic worldwide phenomenon" (Parker et al, 2018; Blackmore, 2014). The issues found in the Davies review (2011) have resonance with this inquiry in relation to the issues of supply. There are fewer women than men at the top level of organisations but additionally "…the challenge is around demand. There are women…capable of serving on boards who are not getting those roles" (p.3). It appears that women are not apathetic in their desire for achieving seniority but struggle with the attainment, although the reasons seem unclear (Morley, 2013).

The activities commonly recognised as aspects of the academic role are changing. Archer (2008) argues that these factors are "disrupting notions of professionalism, what constitutes academic work and what it means…to be an academic" (p.386). In challenging the nature of the academic role, the boundaries of the authentic self are confronted since authenticity is concerned with a genuine presentation of self and congruence between values and actions (Cranton, 2001). Authentic relationships are mutually beneficial and influence associations between people at individual and organisational levels. The power of authenticity within an organisation is extensive where parties treat each other with respect and without personal gain (Kets de Vries, 2010; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Peltier, 2001). Despite various forms of legislation to encourage equal opportunities there is a dearth of female academics securing senior positions (Doherty and Manfredi, 2010; 2006, Probert, 2005) and an even greater scarcity of women achieving the highest ranks while their male colleagues experience more success with promotions (Morley, 2014; 2013).

The next section reviews the key literature in three areas: Authenticity, Coaching and Women, following which the methodology is reported. The findings section identifies that coaching can provide support and contribute to women's development of authenticity. An area that can affect and influence women's authenticity is that of working in a safe environment. The conclusions feature the implications of coaching women towards authenticity within an appropriate workplace environment. Finally, limitations and areas of future research are considered.

Literature Review

For this study, the coaching literature stemming from organisational development and psychology are key strands and rooted in the importance of relationship. The literature reveals that relationship is an essential component for both productive coaching (Sieler, 2010; de Haan, 2008; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007; Bluckert, 2006; 2005) and authenticity (Roberts et al, 2009; Eagly, 2005; Gardner et al, 2005). It also suggests that relationship is fundamental to the way that women manage their working lives (Cabrera, 2007).

Authenticity

The literature on authenticity is copious and diverse. It is also complex and there are differing assumptions regarding its composition. There are numerous ways in which authenticity is addressed and some of the complication maybe in the nuances applied. Goffee and Jones (2000) regard authenticity as an ideal that should be aspired to; others take the view that authenticity is a moral virtue (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; George, 2003). Another debate is whether authenticity is a personal or relational construct with Erikson (1995) espousing that authenticity is established by an individual asserting personal moral standards that are owned and lived thereby being true to him/herself. The counter view is that authenticity is relational being established by the way in which involved parties are committed to clarity in their appreciative engagement of each other's strengths and deficiencies (Roberts et al, 2009; Lopez and Rice, 2006; Eagly, 2005). This view complements coaching where the relationship between parties is important. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) found that the relationship between the coach and coachee was important, dependent on trust and strengthened by transparency, two traits associated with authentic behaviour.

Western culture has welcomed the concept of authenticity (Trilling, 1972) and although it is still in its infancy, empirical work on authenticity in organisations has grown in the last decade (Avolio and Luthans, 2006; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al, 2004). Although leadership is outside the scope of this study, there are connections where, for example, the behaviour of the leader (whether authentic or not) acts as a catalyst to staff. Furthermore, some of the literature that focuses on authentic leadership has relevance to the core of authentic behaviour. For example, Avolio et al (2004) suggest that the essence of authenticity is to know, accept and remain true to one's self.

Coaching and Authenticity

There is a small amount of literature on the combined subjects of coaching and authenticity where the importance of being authentic to personal values is emphasised (Spence, Oades and Caputi, 2004; Seligman, 2002). Most of the literature that considers coaching and authenticity does so from the perspective of the authenticity of the coach not the coaching of authenticity. Being present and able to make connections with the innermost self are attributes of authenticity that are requisites of the coach (Bluckert, 2006; Block, 2000) however there is little discussion as to how coaches might help their clients and coachees with this concept. Zeus and Skiffington (2007) provide an overview of authenticity in relation to coaching in which they associate authentic behaviour with high self-esteem though here again the focus for the development is on the coach not the coachee. Kilburg (1997) suggests that successful coaching relationships are characterised by the coach engaging in an authentic manner. Peltier (2001) is noticeable by his apparent lone assertion that both coaches and coachees benefit in authentic work relationships where parties treat each other with respect and without duress (p.166). There is little said however, as to how coaching might assist in developing authenticity in relationships.

Coaching and Women

The literature written both by popular authors and academics extolling the progress that women are making in the workplace is extensive and yet invariably a caveat is present too; that although women are making headway, often their advancement wavers (Burkinshaw and White, 2017; Morley, 2014. This is no longer because of a lack of education or opportunity in their early career where progression seems assured. The attainment of the most senior positions for many however, is not forthcoming and the lack of formal support such as coaching may be a contributory factor. Kanter (1993) identified that a shortage of women could lead to various behaviours such as competitiveness, commitment and conformity deriving from issues of opportunity, power and proportion from both the predominant and minority groups.

Methodology

In this research I adopt a position of social constructionism implying that through interaction with others, meanings and realities are created and maintained (Cunliffe, 2008). This is concordant with some of the fundamental principles of coaching, with meaning and knowledge being created through social interaction and dialogue. By discussing the coachee's experiences, coaching can present different views and assist the coachee in realising that new interpretations can be made (Zeus & Skiffington, 2007).

The subjective nature of perceptions and experiences of authenticity suggests a phenomenological approach and for this study I chose heuristic inquiry. There are two primary aspects that distinguish heuristic inquiry from other phenomenological approaches in that the principal researcher must have personal knowledge of the phenomenon and intense interest in studying it and must select co-researchers who can engage in collaborative inquiry (Patton, 2002). In this study, the knowledge came from the combined experiences of nine women sharing the exploration as 'co-researchers'. All the women worked at an English university, either as a member of academic staff who had been coached, or as a professional coach.

Heuristic inquiry draws on a humanistic, person-centred approach to knowledge (Rogers, 1985) and on the concepts of "tacit knowledge" and "indwelling" (Polanyi, 1966). Crucial to heuristic inquiry are six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis which are illustrated by first-person accounts from co-researchers who have also "directly encountered the phenomenon in experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 38). When collecting the data, I conducted "informal conversational interviews", (Patton, 2002, pp.342-343) as these are recommended by Moustakas (1990, p.47) as being the most compatible with heuristic inquiry. Each co-researcher was interviewed three times with an interval of three months between each. This allowed reflection and self-observation whilst providing time for the transcription and data analysis before starting the next data collection cycle.

I personally transcribed the interviews and undertook thematic analysis, searching for patterns and clusters (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). The heuristic approach acknowledges that codes will evolve and that it is necessary to group and re-group the data to experience complete immersion.

Data Analysis

Seidel (1998) asserts that analysing qualitative data comprises three elements, "noticing, collecting and thinking about interesting things" (p.1). During the interviews some co-researchers shared with me notes and documents. Noticing, collecting and thinking (Seidel, 1998) came alive as while thinking about one aspect of one co-researcher's data, I noticed connections with other data collected from other sources. Willig (2008) suggests that data can comprise personal or official documents and be analysed in different ways. Official documents were provided in the form of e-mails, departmental meeting notes and letters. Personal data comprised pictures, poems and excerpts of text and references to pieces of music, songs, films and metaphors.

The data were stored with the transcription of the interviews as they were completed and returned to frequently. This is deemed essential so that a process of timeless immersion (Moustakas, 1994; 1990) is maintained. Notes were made throughout the interviews. These were not verbatim notes but were more in the form of a mind map with particular observations made to record gestures, facial and body movements.

Immediately after each interview I undertook a prima facie analysis on the data, spending time making notes and reflecting on what had been discussed. A subsequent interview with a different

co-researcher might raise an issue that I wanted to go back and discuss with the others. Thus the data collection was iterative and recursive (Seidel, 1998).

Langdridge (2007) asserts that transcription is important in phenomenological studies. I transcribed the data quickly after each interview and sent a copy to the co-researcher for verification of the content. I also contacted each co-researcher to ensure that they had not experienced discomfort from our conversations nor that they thought anything had been left unsaid or that they wished to retract.

I found the way that Moustakas (1994, 1990) describes the data organisation and analysis to be vague. On the one hand, Moustakas presents rich reproductions of transcribed interviews which demonstrate the "what to do" in terms of description and meaning of the experience but the "how to do" is given cursory explanation. I therefore adopted an inductive approach in searching for patterns and creating category clusters (Boyatzis, 1998). Miles and Huberman (1994) contend that an interpretivist approach is concerned with an understanding of meanings and action. Unlike objectivist codes where ambiguity is not a feature, a heuristic approach acknowledges that codes will change and evolve as the analysis develops (Seidel, 1998).

The analysis took a long time, and I was spending periods away in order to return, having absorbed and internalised the quantity and quality of the data. The process was iterative as ideas changed but facilitated the clustering of themes.

Within heuristic inquiry there are specific ethical issues to be considered as it is deemed important that co-researchers remain visible in the examination of the data and that they continue to be depicted as whole people (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). I resolved that the individuals would remain 'intact' but their identities would remain anonymous. Prior to the initial interview, a participant information sheet and consent form were discussed with each co-researcher and signed. Explicit in our arrangement was that they were free to withdraw at any time and that confidentiality was a priority throughout the research with no individual being identified or identifiable to anyone as they were code protected. Electronic and paper copies were kept under password control with the printed copy in a locked fire-proof filing cabinet.

The ethical considerations and processes detailed received formal committee approval to proceed. No ethical issues arose during the course of the interviews.

Findings

This section presents the findings and begins with a discussion of coaching and the workplace environment highlighting the difficulty encountered in behaving authentically. Three further sections follow concerning coaching and fear, a longer, important section on coaching and masks and finally coaching and authenticity.

1. Coaching and the Environment

There was a marked consistency of opinion by both coaches and coachees that the prevailing environment provides the backcloth of an institution. This climate then affects aspects such as the level of trust, how power and politics are deployed (whether for the greater good or self-seeking) the degree of challenge, not taking things for granted, being brave and unafraid of failure or being different. In acknowledging that their reaction to the environment was their responsibility the coachees described different ways of how they had created, or were still creating, ways of being themselves. One coachee experienced difficulty in adapting to a different culture of her previous institution and showed her appreciation of her coach's support "It's difficult here…nuances. X

(coach) is helpful…she listens and summarises and it seems straightforward. We agree on how I'm going to deal with…and I'm ready" (CRA).

Another coachee mentioned making the adaptation from one institution to another and the following reflections illustrate her difficulties whilst she adapted to her new institution's culture "survive…learn and not be upset…learn the game. Don't see it as anything other than the way of engagement" (CRB).

Whilst this last view might appear to be a contradiction, this co-researcher was being true to herself and displaying high levels of organisational understanding. In acknowledging her learnt behaviour she recognised how coaching had helped her engage with her institution:

> *It's having someone to reflect with. I'd have a maelstrom of things happening - and with apparently simple questions, she'd help me work through what the issue was and what I could do. So much is systemic - political and she's helpful. She gets it…she plays the game but is authentic. I've learned so much from her (CRB).*

In defining authenticity, this coachee linked her response to the environment of her institution "It's knowing that you are true to yourself and it's difficult here. I've struggled and colleagues…The environment is…political." (CRH).

It was considered that coaching provides assistance to women in the workplace as this coach reflected "Coaching is helpful and supports the individual – with finding her authenticity" (CRF).

This coachee appreciated the opportunity to speak to someone outside her immediate environment:

> *It's the external perspective. Someone to talk to who doesn't know the intricacies and I can talk confidentially. This world is changing fast and talking to someone who knows about strategy helps… I wasn't convinced before I met X (coach). (CRH).*

Trust and psychological safety in the work environment are requisites for coaching to be successful (Kets de Vries et al, 2010) and these statements highlight the issues of establishing a coaching culture within an organisation. The external and internal perspectives with the notion of "outsiders" and legitimate authority is in accord with the literature (Eagly, 2005). This raises questions as to the acceptability of coaching, owing to the necessity of its confidentiality and detached status (Hall, Otazo & Hollenbeck, 1999). At both an individual and institutional level, the independent nature of coaching is recognised as having value. However, introducing an external perspective raises issues of confidence as to whether the culture will be understood. For one coachee, it was that blend of extrinsic view and deep knowledge of organisational complexity that assisted her:

> *I thought I don't know…how to make a difference here. And X (coach) was so helpful…to have that conversation outside the organisation because you can judge what's wrong but I couldn't think who I could tell. X (coach) allowed me…to think through…what I was noticing…what I thought needed to happen and how to influence (CRB).*

The attitudinal "Catch-22" circle of coaching needing to be experienced before the benefits are recognised is difficult to break into. With coaching developing into a recognised academic specialism it may become easier to absorb coaching into the institutional environment.
This coach empathised with how coaching might be received within the senior levels of higher education "If I'm a senior academic…why would I want a coach? What can this outsider do? Do they understand our environment? It's about credibility…creating that relationship and rapport" (CRE).

The coaches mentioned the importance of the coaching relationship in setting the environment, detailing their approach whilst bringing themselves into the process. Commenting on what they notice was considered to add to the depth of the discussions in being reflected back to ensure understanding. As this coach explained: "it's a mirror from something going on outside" (CRG).

These findings demonstrate the requirement of trust and psychological safety within the workplace environment and the support provided by coaching in assisting women with behaving authentically.

The next section focuses on less appealing dimensions of environmental culture and how coaching can provide assistance when fear is experienced within organisations.

2. Coaching and Fear

Fear was mentioned by most of the co-researchers and whilst not favoured as part of organisational life, it was recognised as pervasive. It was acknowledged that in an environment where there is a continual push against boundaries of knowledge, ambition and intrepidity are to be acclaimed. However, there was a view that audacity could also be aggressive and regarded too highly which, whilst being motivational for the recipients, created despondency in colleagues. As this coachee explained "Research is everything. People get *huge* accolades which encourages this *fight*…it's relentless but X (coach) has been *so* helpful…her support has got me through" (CRA).

Another coachee reflected on the pressure of working in a research-intensive institution
"It's publish or perish" (CRH). Further discussions with the same coachee revealed that she kept to herself some of the behaviour that she encountered when working with her most senior colleagues "I shield stuff…unacceptable language, behaviour. I don't like it…it's difficult. Why would I pass it on? Some colleagues say…"I'm being kicked so I'll kick" (CRH).

Operating through fear can be both caused by and be a cause of inauthentic behaviour. The potentially circular relationship is interesting to consider both from the perspective of the coach as to how this affects their coachee and their coaching and also that of the client as to how to manage the culture. As this coach remarked "I have coached someone whose attitude was insupportable…I realised…he was as much a victim and he needed support" (CRI).

From these examples it would appear that the effect of a senior staff member intimidating peers or subordinates owing to their own fear creates a downward spiral. One definition of fear is "a feeling of distress, apprehension or alarm caused by impending danger or pain" (Hanks, 1990). Reflex actions and the primeval response of fight or flight are likely to be the immediate activity, not a thoughtful consideration as to what might be "true" at that time and there was recognition of this occurring as this coach remarked "when fear is involved something happens in relating to authenticity … it's not the immediate focus" (CRE).

There was agreement that fear is an inherent part of organisational life to a degree but that it is important to ensure that apprehension and anxiety are combined with excitement and discovery as with this coach "there *is* fear, when you make *big* decisions…it creates energy…it develops thinking power" (CRF).

It was considered that there is a difference in how to overcome fright depending on whether an individual believes they are on their own with fear of something happening to them personally compared to the security of being scared in a unified group. Coaching was believed to provide the difference in how occurrences of difficulty or extreme challenge might be received. As this coachee reflected "I see fear all the time here…and you know it is *really* fear. It's the organisational culture". (CRD).

It was considered that it was just these sorts of occasions where coaching could assist as this coach advised "Coaching helps women with their authenticity – when the politics start. I see the fear. It stems from their environment and sense of role" (CRC).

As a catalyst, fear was recognised as having immense power and, depending on the circumstances, can be used for positive effect and affect behaviour as this coach observed "fear harnessed well can be galvanising and the role of the coach is to ensure that it *is* harnessed well" (CRG). Another coach held a similar opinion believing that "fear drives all sorts of behaviours and … drives people to develop masks and ways of working that can work well for them" (CRC).

A few of the co-researchers initiated the idea of the wearing of masks whilst considering the environment and the drivers and barriers to authenticity. Holding "informal conversational interviews" (Patton, 2002, pp. 342-343) three times created opportunities for reflection and allow new ideas to be introduced. Areas that occurred under one subject [authenticity] might appear in a similar or different guise under another topic [coaching]. The use of masks was such an example and became a rich source of reflections and is the subject of the next section.

3. Coaching and Masks

The opinions on masks were not static and over the course of the interviews different thoughts showed many perspectives. One coach held a clear opinion initially saying "Authenticity for me is about not wearing masks', although recognised that 'sometimes we consciously put those masks on to behave in a particular situation and I'm aware that those masks come on automatically" (CRC).

Our next meeting revealed the following thoughts "the problem comes where there is some kind of emotional thing that kicks in and shuts you down or you feel that you're not allowed to be yourself or be of your best" (CRC).

The relationship of emotion and masks created an interesting paradox. It was believed that feeling and showing emotions created vulnerability. However, in feeling intensely and authentically it was considered necessary to wear a mask to conceal that vulnerability, authenticity and emotion. This might be because the prevailing environment does not allow emotions to be raised as this coachee advised "that's the way to survive…wear a mask. I have a smile on my face…I ensure that I don't share any emotion and I…*look* the part" (CRD).

There were many examples of when it was believed acceptable to wear a mask and behave authentically as these coaches asserted "people wear masks. We learn the social mores and coaching can help…maybe for someone who's reserved and needs resolve or to push back at someone who's strident" (CRE).

> *It's about the impression that you want to make, it's not false. It's you but sometimes, nerves… whatever get in the way and so you put on a veneer, a mask. In doing that you* authorise *yourself. You know it's something you don't do well but you're* genuinely *trying to do it better (CRI).*

There were also examples of when it was deemed inauthentic as evidenced by this coach "Can I play out the square peg in the round hole thing authentically? I find it really difficult and - probably *not*" (CRC).

Alternatively it was recognised that by managing the circumstances it was possible to make a potentially inauthentic situation wholly faithful as this coachee reflected "If I've put on a mask to do something consciously and I feel OK about having done that; that feels right. If I feel as though I've

been *forced* to put on a mask and I walk away feeling not fully intact, I've not been authentic" (CRH).

One of the coaches summarised the quandaries clearly "There are some masks that are legitimate and some that we are under the illusion of what we need for survival or impact or credibility. That's wrong but it takes guts not to wear the mask. You revert to fear. Am I prepared to take risk?" (CRF).

Both coaches and coachees agreed that the underlying intention was important in deciding whether a mask was being worn for authentic reasons. As this coachee commented "it's the spirit behind the act that makes something authentic or not" (CRA).

For this coachee the demands of working in a male-dominated environment were evident "Authenticity is not always comfortable. It can be quite dangerous…the times when you can be yourself and when you pretend…being the only woman creates limits to what I can do" (CRB).

The theme of pretending, whether having an opinion, assuming behaviour, taking on an identity or wearing a mask was a repeated pattern within many discussions. The continuum of pretence and deception appeared to be predicated by intent. Whilst pretence might be made for false purposes, it might also be to create harmony whereas deception has the objective of falsehood. This coachee considered that pretending helped her confidence levels "If you show your insecurity you would be doing yourself a disservice so sometimes you have to pretend that you are self-assured even if you're not" (CRD).

Another coachee confided "I pretend when I'm in department meetings. It's dangerous to say something out of line" (CRA). I became interested in the relationship between what might be the authentic culture of an institution and how that affects individual behaviour. Universities are competitive and a challenging environment is innate with personal, peer, positional and political credibility vital in securing academic leadership success (Kennie, 2009). From these examples it appears that overly-aggressive behaviour whilst possibly being authentic to the owner, can cause inauthentic behaviour in others as this coach remarked "authenticity thrives in the appropriate environment and it's keeping that in focus that's important. What's driving and what's detracting. Coaching can help keep balance" (CRE).

Cranton and Carusetta (2004a), focus on authenticity within teaching and the social norms of what a good teacher should be like (p.290). They posit that "if there is the expectation that the institution…has rules that one must live and teach by, authenticity is restricted" (p. 291). The experience of this coachee endorsed their assertion when she advised "I don't have as much freedom here. At Y (institution) I had autonomy. We *trusted* each other" (CRA).

However, in acknowledging that Cranton and Carusetta's (2004a) research focused on one aspect of work, this study found some differences in opinion as to what constitutes authenticity. Cranton and Carusetta (2004a) assert that "wearing a mask or a persona, as useful as that can be on many occasions, supports inauthentic practice" (p.290). The findings in this study suggest that whilst there may be times when wearing a mask is determined by inauthentic practice there are also occasions when the behaviour may be wholly authentic. As this coach commented:

> *It's about purpose…as long as you can recognise when you are wearing a mask…when it's appropriate to wear one. It might be that it's too uncomfortable or dangerous to take the mask off in that moment…and then you feel your way. Self-disclosure is important. The coach has great responsibility to create that psychological safety…for the mask to come off (CRE).*

Reflections were made on when it had seemed appropriate to work in a way that might not have been the most spontaneous or the most effective but that in needing to participate, some form of adjustment had been required. In adjusting behaviour, it was not believed that authenticity had

been thwarted although there was recognition of a mask being worn as these coachees commented:

> *I can wear that mask and it isn't about* not *being authentic … it's about…I* have *to play this game. This is the environment and I can take that mask off and I haven't…destroyed my values. I haven't been untrue to myself…but this is a part I have had to play (CRA).*

> *You do it* knowingly*…you're playing the game…you* know *that in order to survive this situation you need to wear this mask. To me that is authentic. You know what you're doing…you're doing it for an end (CRB).*

Both reflections consider that undertaking the action is acceptable providing there is a clear knowledge and understanding (by the perpetrator) that what is being done, is being done for a specific purpose. They might not agree with the idea but as long as the façade is in place and does not interfere with their core values and sense of morality, their sense of authenticity is not shaken. Whilst there is a sense of coercion behind both statements, this does also appear to endorse the sentiments discussed earlier that it is essentially the necessary congruence of head and heart in making decisions and the manner of the subsequent delivery that is important for authenticity. On another occasion, this coachee advised:

> *I feel discomfort…a lot. It's not lack of authenticity…if I felt* compromised *I would go. Discomfort a* lot *but that's part of the deal and…there are deal breakers that say…no further. That* is *about authenticity. If I can't do whatever…and respect myself for doing it then I have to walk away (CRB).*

How long the mask was worn and for what purpose determined whether the behaviour was believed to be authentic or not. This coachee summarised the sentiments succinctly in her musings "You put on a mask and you put it on short term…for a specific purpose. That doesn't affect your values or your authenticity" (CRH).

The use of masks originates in ancient theatre of the East, the American Indians and the Greeks where a small number of actors, playing many parts would wear different masks to denote the character (Hall, 2010). Literature relating to the use of masks appears in anthropology and semiotics as well as the subjects of drama, art and theatre history (Bell, 2001). The referral to the use of masks in the daily interaction of organisational life in relation to coaching does not appear to have been researched and yet the language parallels of "performing", "acting a part" and "playing a role" were expressions used in this study. This indicated the pressure sometimes felt to conform to the prevailing culture as this coachee indicated "I do often wonder whether I have performed at my best" (CRH). Another coachee advised "there are times when people are put into a situation where they think… the only way I'm going to be able to deal with this is to act the part" (CRD). For the coaches too there were occasions when the institution's environment created a feeling of unease as this coach remarked "I'm consciously aware that I'm playing a role" (CRC).

In discussing authentic behaviour, discussions were held as to how the co-researchers' presented themselves in different situations and how coaching had assisted. Despite initial misgivings by some, coaching was favourably regarded and particularly in recognition of the safe environment that coaching could create. The next section explores coaching and authenticity.

4. Coaching and Authenticity

The coaches recognised the combination of environment and people contributed to whether behaviour was authentic, as one coach remarked "An oppressive constrained environment is going to block authentic behaviour. The environment whether it's organisational, culture or people… coaching can help with" (CRF).

Howard (2002) posits connectedness and the interdependencies between environment, nature, other and self. The notion of spiritual phenomena examines wholeness in systems, their connectedness and indivisibility (Moxley, 2000).

For this coach authenticity and spirituality were connected. "Authenticity has a link to spirituality for me. Yes, it - probably does" (CRE). For another coach, strength was required too. "Spirituality, yes because it links and fits into something bigger than…that's my idea of spirituality. Authenticity brings strength. Is it strength to be true to your Faith?" *Absolutely* (CRF).

For another coach, it was the combination of many aspects that created the whole. "Holding different aspects of head and heart that creates the consistency, congruence…and spirituality revolves around that" (CRC).

Whilst thus far the positive attributes of behaving authentically have been detailed, the possibility of nefarious intent was introduced by one coach:

> *Was Hitler authentic? He had followers and he was successful for a while. What are the* values…*He restored* pride *to Germany…let's be* proud *and we can turn this country around. He did some* unspeakable *things. Wanting to be authentic got de-railed…and…in organisational life…poor feedback or surrounding yourself with people who think like you, therefore they might feed you with even more - and so on (CRF).*

Thus Hitler was an "authentically evil individual" (Chickering, Dalton and Stamm, 2006, p.8). Hitler illustrates the shadow side of authenticity. This aspect is given scant attention in the literature with Taylor (1991) recognising the connection of violence and authenticity being rooted in Fascism, nonetheless he regards the notion of evil authenticity as a deviant strain "forgetting about one whole set of demands on authenticity while focusing exclusively on another" (p. 66). Whilst debating the dark side of authenticity was valuable and appreciated for the breadth and depth of thought, a subsequent conversation revealed the following "Do I accept Hitler? No. Authentic, maybe, but his morals I cannot accept. The way we define authenticity is positive and often associated with transformational relationships" (CRF).

These opinions were consonant with other co-researchers who considered that being authentic demands congruence and consistency of beliefs, thoughts and actions combined with the critical element of productive relationship as the reflections of these two coaches illustrate "I see authenticity as positive…to the core and looking deeply at yourself and others and having that connection, combination and affinity" (CRE). "Authenticity is being true to yourself and the situation. not just being in touch with yourself. It's a more complex inter-relationship between what is impacting on me and on the other" (CRG).

Both within the workplace when trying to assert beliefs and also within the coaching relationship there were reflections on difficult conversations as these coachees reflected "There have been difficulties…when X has challenged…she's supportive and encouraging but she *makes* me go there" (CRA). "I have a better insight into…my need for authenticity. Whatever's going on at work it's not about who I am. You don't define who you are by your job" (CRB).

These experiences endorse the view of Walsh and McElwain (2001) that an authentic engagement will experience tension and at times conflict but that these encounters should not be avoided.

The findings illustrate how coaching can assist in supporting an individual having difficult encounters that affect their authenticity.

Conclusion

The first conclusion to be drawn from the study is the importance of the power of the organisational environment and the difficulty experienced by women. The findings suggest that oppressive, political environments are powerful drivers which can prevent authentic behaviour. Both the coaches and coachees recognised that to be authentic requires a congruence and consistency of action, belief, thought and productive relationship, underpinned by inner spirituality and moral code. However, at times fear permeates institutions creating a behavioural cycle where fear not only creates or contributes to inauthentic behaviour but is also caused by inauthentic behaviour. The coachees' perspectives suggest that coaching can productively harness the energy that fear can create and provide valuable support. In providing that support for the coachees there is an indication that focused coaching may assist in transforming fear into a galvanising force allowing excitement to be the prevailing emotion. Consequently, there are implications for coaches too where, in addition to individual coaching, group or team coaching could be considered as a positive contribution to organisational culture.

The creation of masks to protect vulnerability appeared to be common practice and was deemed to be a legitimate and authentic device. Positive intentions combined with values and beliefs underlying the actions of wearing a mask were considered to be the important justifying factors. The demands of working in a male-dominated environment were evident where being a woman in isolation rendered the ability to be authentic difficult. The dichotomous nature of coaching is brought into relief: for developmental purposes coaching can support the wearing of a mask, but conversely, coaching can also create the psychological safety for a mask to be taken off in order for the underlying reasons for wearing it to be explored.

The main conclusion to draw from this research is that coaching can assist women with their authenticity in the workplace. The study reveals the importance of coaching and provides empirical evidence of what the coaches give and the coachees get from the coaching whilst recognising the reciprocity involved in productive, authentic relationships. The positive aspects of coaching providing support are clear and it may be concluded that although behaving authentically is not always comfortable, coaching can have an influence by enabling behaviour change in women and helping them keeping balance and perspective.

Limitations and Future Research

As a study in professional practice a contribution has been made to the field of coaching by inquiring into coaching for authentic behaviour in organisations from the perspective of both the coach and coachee. However, further research is required in understanding the complexities of authenticity and how coaching might assist. The findings present a view of the work experiences of nine women. As with all qualitative studies that have a small number of participants, these findings cannot be considered as representative of all women, all female academics or all female coaches, nor exclusively the experiences of women and not men. The co-researchers' accounts are individual and within a time and context that prevents generalisation. However, these limitations may present opportunities for further research such as studies with men and women, academia and professional services, chartered and statutory institutions. Cross-sector research could be undertaken. Additionally, this study explored whether coaching can assist with development which might lead to promotion, not career coaching per se: further studies could focus on career coaching and authenticity.

References

Archer, L. (2008) 'Younger Academics constructions of Authenticity, Success and Professional Identity', *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(4), pp.385-403. DOI: 10.1080/03075070802211729.

Avolio, B.J., Gardner, W.L., Walumbwa, F.L. and et al, (2004) 'Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviours', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, pp.801-825. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.09.003.

Avolio, B.J. and Gardner, W.L. (2005) 'Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, pp.315-338. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001.

Avolio, B.J. and Luthans, F. (2006) *The high impact leaders: Moments that matter in authentic leadership development*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bell, J. (eds.) (2001) *Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects*. Cambridge, USA: MIT Press.

Blackmore, J. (2014) 'Wasting talent? Gender and the problematics of academic disenchantment and disengagement with leadership', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33, pp.86-99. DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2013.864616.

Block, P. (2000) *Flawless Consulting, a guide to getting your expertise used* (2nd edn.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Bluckert, P. (2005) 'Critical factors in executive coaching – the coaching relationship', *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 37(7), pp.336-340. DOI: 10.1108/00197850510626785.

Bluckert, P. (2006) *Psychological Dimensions of Executive Coaching*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Bluckert, P. (2010) 'The Gestalt Approach to Coaching', in Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (eds.) *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* . London: Sage, pp.80-93.

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. London: Sage.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, pp.77-101. Available at: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Burkinshaw, P. and White, K. (2017) 'Fixing the women or fixing universities: Women in HE Leadership', *Administrative Sciences*, 7(3). DOI: 10.3390/admsci7030030.

Canbrera, E.F. (2007) 'Opting out and opting in: Understanding the complexities of women's career transitions', *Career Development International*, 12(3), pp.218-237. DOI: 10.1108/13620430710745872.

Chickering, A.W., Dalton, J.C. and Stamm, L. (2006) *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cranton, P.A. (2001) *Becoming an authentic teacher in higher education*. Malabar, USA: Krieger.

Cranton, P. and Carusetta, E. (2004) 'Developing Authenticity as a Transformative Process', *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2(4), pp.276-293. DOI: 10.1177/1541344604267898.

Cunliffe, A.L. (2008) 'Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning', *Management Learning*, 39(2), pp.123-139. DOI: 10.1177/1350507607087578.

Davies, E.M. (2011) *Women on Boards*. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Deem, R. (2003) 'Gender, organizational cultures and the practices of manager-academics in UK universities', *Gender Work and Organization*, 10(2), pp.239-259. DOI: 10.1111/1468-0432.t01-1-00013.

Deem, R. (2007) 'Managing a meritocracy or an equitable organisation? Senior managers' and employees' views about equal opportunities policies in UK universities', *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(6), pp.615-636. DOI: 10.1080/02680930701625247.

de Haan, E. (2008) *Relational Coaching: Journeys Towards Mastering One-To-One Learning*. Chichester: Wiley.

Doherty, L. and Manfredi, S. (2006) 'Women's progression to senior positions in English universities', *Employee relations*, 28(6), pp.553-572. DOI: 10.1108/01425450610704498.

Doherty, L. and Manfredi, S. (2010) 'Improving women's representation in senior positions in universities', *Employee Relations*, 32(2), pp.138-155. DOI: 10.1108/01425451011010096.

Douglass, B. and Moustakas, C. (1985) 'Heuristic Inquiry: the internal search to know', *Journal of Humanistic psychology*, 25(39), pp.39-55.

Eagly, A.H. (2005) 'Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter?', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), pp.459-474. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.007.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2011) *Sex and Power 2011*. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Erickson, R.J. (1995) 'The importance of authenticity for self and society', *Symbolic Interaction*, 18(2), pp.121-144. DOI: 10.1525/si.1995.18.2.121.

Gardner, W.L., Avolio, B.J., Luthans, F. and et al, (2005) '"Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leadership development', *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), pp.343-372. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.003.

George, B. (2003) *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Goffee, R. and Jones, G. (2000) 'Why should anyone be led by you?', *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, pp.63-70.

Gray, D.E. (2009) *Doing Research in the Real World* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.

Gyllensten, K. and Palmer, S. (2007) 'The coaching relationship: An interpretative phenomenological analysis', *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2(2), pp.168-176.

Hall, D., Otazo, K. and Hollenbeck, G. (1999) 'Behind closed doors: what really happens in executive coaching', *Organizational Dynamics*, 27(3), pp.39-58.

Hall, P. (2010) *Exposed By the Mask, Form and Language in Drama*. London: Oberon Books.

Hanks, P. (1990) *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd edn.). London: Collins.

Kanter, R. (1993) *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

Kennie, T. (2009) 'Academic Leadership: Dimensions, dysfunctions and dynamics', in *Paper for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education*. London: LFHE.

Kets de Vries, M.F.R. (2010) *Reflections on Leadership and Career Development*. Chichester: Jossey-Bass.

Kets de Vries, M.F.R., Guillén, L., Korotov, K. and Florent-Treacy, E. (2010) *The Coaching Kaleidoscope Insights from the Inside*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Kilburg, R. (1997) 'Coaching and executive character: core problems and basic approaches', *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 53(4), pp.251-267.

Landridge, D. (2007) *Phenomenological Psychology, Theory, Research and Method*. Harlow: Pearson.

Lopez, F. and Rice, K. (2006) 'Preliminary development and validation of a measure of relationship authenticity', *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 53, pp.362-371.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.

Morley, L. (2013) 'The rules of the game: Women and the leaderist turn in higher education', *Gender and Education*, 25, pp.116-131. DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2012.740888.

Morley, L. (2014) 'Lost leaders: Women in the global academy', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33, pp.114-128. DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2013.864611.

Moxley, R.S. (2000) *Leadership and Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Moustakas, C. (1990) *Heuristic Research*. London: Sage.

Moustakas, C. (1994) *Phenomenological Research Methods,*. London: Sage.

Parker, P., Hewitt, B., Witheriff, J. and Cooper, A. (2018) 'Frank & Fearless: Supporting Academic Career Progression for Women in an Australian Program', *Administrative Sciences* , 8, pp.3-18.

Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3rd edn.). Sage: London.

Peltier, B. (2001) *The Psychology of Executive Coaching*. New York: Routledge.

Peterson, C. and Seligman, M.E.P. (2004) *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Polanyi, M. (1966) *The tacit dimension*. New York: Doubleday.

Polanyi, M. (1983) *The tacit dimension*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith.

Probert, B. (2005) 'I Just Couldn't Fit It In: Gendered Outcomes in Academic Careers', *Gender Work and Organization*, 12(1), pp.50-72. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00262.x.

Roberts, L.M., Cha, S.E., Hewlin, P.F. and Settles, I.H. (2009) 'Bringing the Inside Out: Enhancing Authenticity and Positive Identity in Organizations', in Roberts, L.M. and Dutton, J.E. (eds.) *Exploring Positive Identities and Organizations*. New York: Routledge, pp.149-169.

Rogers, C.R. (1985) 'Toward a More Human Science of the Person', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 25(4), pp.7-24. DOI: 10.1177/0022167885254002.

Schein, V.E. (2007) 'Women in management: reflections and projections', *Women in Management Review*, 22(1), pp.6-18. DOI: 10.1108/09649420710726193.

Sealy, R. and Vinnicombe, S. (2013) *The female FTSE Board Report 2013: False Dawn of Progress for Women on Boards?*. London: Cranfield Business School.

Seidel, J.V. (1998) 'Qualitative Data Analysis', in *The Ethnograph v5.0: A user's guide*. London: Sage, pp.1-15.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2002) *Authentic happiness: using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfilment*. New York: Free Press.

Sieler, A. (2010) 'Ontological Coaching', in Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (eds.) *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* . London: Sage, pp.107-119.

Singh, V., Vinnicombe, S. and James, K. (2006) 'Constructing a professional identity: how young female managers use role models', *Women in Management Review*, 21(1), pp.67-81. DOI: 10.1108/09649420610643420.

Spence, G., Oades, L.G. and Caputi, P. (2004) 'Trait emotional intelligence and goal self-integration: Important predictors of well-being?', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 37, pp.449-461. DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2003.09.001.

Stranchan, G., Peetz, D. and Whitehouse, G. (2016) *Women, Work and Universities. Where to from Here?*. Nathan: Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing.

Taylor, C. (1991) *The Ethics of Authenticity*. London: Harvard University Press.

Trilling, L. (1972) *Sincerity and Authenticity*. London: Harvard University Press.

Vinnicombe, S., Dolder, E. and Sealy, R. (2015) *The Female FTSE Board Report 2015*. London: Cranfield Business School.

Walsh, R.A. and McElwain, B. (2001) 'Existential Psychotherapies', in Cain, D.J. and Seeman, J. (eds.) *Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of Research and Practice*. New Jersey: American Psychological Association, pp.253-278.

Willig, C. (2008) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Worth, S.A. (2012) *An exploration of coaching women towards authenticity in the workplace: A heuristic study with women in academia (Ph.D Thesis)*. Oxford Brookes University. Available at: https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/07853e3f-ff06-cd2d-a613-e4f280e1125c/1/.

Zeus, P. and Skiffington, S. (2007) *The Coaching at Work Toolkit. A Complete Guide to Techniques and Practices*. Australia: McGraw-Hill.

About the authors

Sally Jackson (nee Worth) holds a Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring from Oxford Brookes University. She is the Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development at Sheffield Hallam University and teaches on their Coaching and Mentoring MSc.