Authenticity and woman's leadership: a qualitative study of professional business services in the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the research question: how do women leaders in the professional business services (PBS) sector develop and approach workplace (in)authenticity?

Design/methodology/approach – Ten senior women leaders in the Midlands region of the UK were purposefully selected and interviewed. A semi-structured approach meant that the author adopted a social constructionist paradigm and feminist interpretation. Questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions from the participants. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to address the study's purpose.

Findings – Four themes were important to women when they developed and approached workplace (in) authenticity: (1) Power Structures, (2) Fit to Belong, (3) Influential Femininity and (4) Through Her Evolution. Women described masculine-majority organisations exerting power. They were pressured into altering their behaviours to "fit" into workplaces. When women had the latitude to be themselves, their leadership excelled. Women's authenticity developed through increased self-knowledge, helping them to overcome workplace challenges. The study concluded that women face complexities when developing and approaching their constructions of authenticity, namely in the barriers and ramifications they face.

Practical implications – The study suggests several implications for practice and theory concerning enablers and barriers to women leaders' workplace authenticity. The link between authenticity and workplace gender equity needs to be investigated.

Originality/value – The study provides evidence that women are challenged when becoming authentic, therefore, altering their careers irrecoverably in some cases.

Keywords Authenticity, Women leaders, Gender, Qualitative

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Workplace authenticity suggests that individuals have self-knowledge, are themselves and enact their values at work (Avolio *et al.*, 2004). This study investigates women leaders' accounts of their workplace authenticity contextual to the professional business services (PBS) sector in the Midlands region of the UK participants in the study were women senior executives. PBS includes accountancy, legal, financial and marketing practices (House of Commons, 2017). Over 13% of UK employees work in PBS (Department for BEIS, 2020a). This sector, therefore, represents a significant proportion of the UK's workforce.

The sexes are disproportionately represented in PBS, with 30% of women holding director positions (Catalyst, 2021) declining to 19% in consulting firms (Grant Thornton, 2017; cited in Dudley, 2017). Becoming more authentic arguably benefits women leaders' careers. For instance, follower performance and well-being arguably increase with authentic

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leadership (AL) (Gardner *et al.*, 2011; Jacobs and Barnard, 2022; Ladkin, 2021). However, women's authentic behaviour can be problematic in male-dominated sectors (Gaines, 2017).

Scholars (Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2015) have challenged AL by arguing its gendered nature. For example, women face resistance when behaving leader-like since it is seen to breach feminine norms (Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015). Agentic and masculine leaders are often preferred (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Women, therefore, face a difficult choice between performing leader-like and being themselves. Either portrayal may be met with bias. Women can be left feeling like an imposter (Clance and Imes, 1978) when experiencing bias impairing their self-efficacy (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Similarly, the theory of The Glass Cliff suggests that women are more commonly appointed to leadership roles during organisational crises since they are considered more authentic; the catastrophic organisational context limit women's chances of success from the outset (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Furthermore, male dominance can be perpetuated by "Gendered Organisations", further harming women's careers (Acker, 1990). Overall, these attributes combine adding to the challenges women's careers face.

New approaches are being researched regarding the problem (see Jacobs and Barnard, 2022). The solutions proposed include coaching, leadership training and re-prioritising goals (Eagly, 2005; Jackson, 2019) as well as the more complex task of addressing organisational bias and power (Fox, 2017). Government protection of maternity and gender characteristics provides little defence. To illustrate, women held 37% of board positions at financial times stock exchange (FTSE) 350 companies, declining to 14% for chair roles in 2021 (Department for BEIS, 2020b). Similarly, the gender pay gap for higher earners is 16% with leaders categorised in this group (ONS, 2021). This study heightens the focus on women's workplace authenticity as a vehicle to support greater gender equity at the senior level.

The literature demonstrates that women's workplace authenticity remains problematic for practitioners and scholars (see Adisa *et al.*, 2019; Jacobs and Barnard, 2022; Ladkin, 2021). Today, women's embodiment of authenticity, as socially constructed by popular beliefs, appears to be altering, however. The pandemic necessitated video communication inviting people into our homes and non-work lives, making it harder to conceal the real us. Additionally, more arguably authentic women figures are emerging in public life, such as England women's football coach Sarina Wiegman and former New Zealand Prime Minister Jasinda Arden; these leaders help shape other women's behaviour. Given this development, it is timely to investigate the enablers and barriers to women leaders' workplace authenticity. This study investigates qualitative accounts offering insights into women leader's lived experiences. Similarly, it aims to develop existing knowledge regarding how employers can support women leaders facing challenges associated with workplace authenticity.

The research question is how do women leaders in the PBS sector develop and approach workplace (in)authenticity? The research objectives are:

RO1. To identify what factors influence women leaders to become or show (in)authenticity

RO2. To identify barriers faced by women leaders when developing workplace authenticity

RO3. To identify any career implications faced by women leaders whilst developing and constructing their workplace authenticity

Literature review

The current literature does not fully investigate women's leadership authenticity. To date, only a few studies (see Eagly, 2005) have considered the gendered construction of authenticity. Other scholars' work consists of essays or reviews rather than research papers (see Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015; Sinclair, 2013). Furthermore, many papers have grown outdated; most are over 20 years old. The subject appears to be garnering recent interest, however (see Jacobs and Barnard, 2022). A summary of the literature is presented in Table 1.

Women's authentic leadership	
Enablers	*Benefits*
Self-awareness (Avolio *et al.*, 2004)	Societal thriving, equity and representation (Eagly, 2013)
Switching behaviours (Bosak and Sczesny, 2011)	Improved well-being and performance (Gardner *et al.*, 2011)
Gender stereotypes changing outcomes (Priyashantha *et al.*, 2023)	Pro-societal behaviours (Kernis and Goldman, 2006)
Barriers	*Limitations*
Gendered organisation (Acker, 1990)	Overworking (Fox, 2017)
Imposter Phenomenon (IP; Clance and Imes, 1978)	Women considered authentic during crises (Glass cliff; Ryan and Haslam, 2007)
Impression management (IM; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008)	
Role incongruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002)	
Lack of fit theory (Heilmann, 1983)	

Source(s): Table created by author

Table 1.
Literature review summary

Authentic leadership: concept and problems

Scholars have previously suggested that AL is desirable. Research suggests that this sincere and values-driven leadership produces greater well-being, work engagement, job performance and supervisor ratings (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Ilies *et al.*, 2005; Peus *et al.*, 2012). However, it appears harder for scholars to define AL.

Luthans and Avolio (2003) developed the initial AL theoretical model. Later, AL was extended to include self-knowledge and self-consistency as antecedents (Peus *et al.*, 2012). This concept's validity is debatable, however. AL conceptualisations arguably include all facets of effective leadership, therefore, conflating with other variables such as transformational leadership (Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015). Additionally, Gardner *et al.*'s (2011) review quoted no fewer than 13 definitions from 91 papers. Researchers do concur, however, that authentic leaders: (1) understand and enact their values, (2) embody high morals, (3) develop follower trust and (4) have self-awareness (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Gardner *et al.*, 2011; Ilies *et al.*, 2005; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010).

AL has further limitations. Poor evaluations or rejection could occur if one's action conflict with espoused leadership norms (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Similarly, gender norms arguably inform organisational customs; women's behaviour is therefore considered unexpected when it breaks convention (Eagly, 2005; Heilman, 1983). Consequently, women leaders find it more complex to enact AL than men.

Critique of authentic leadership: overlapping gender

Critics concur that AL is not compatible with gender. For example, AL is considered gender-polarising (Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015; Ladkin, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Sinclair, 2013). AL tends to be reserved for majority and privileged groups, mainly white heterosexual men. This could be due to several explanations. Firstly, AL requires one to act both leader like and their true self (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). This is challenging for women due to role incongruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002). This posits that women face prejudice since they are considered less leader-like than men. Many perceive their behaviours as communal not agentic with agency considered prototypically leader-like (Heilman, 1983). This is exacerbated by the theory of the "gendered organisation" (Acker, 1990). Acker suggests that organisations are not gender-neutral and perpetuate inequalities by congratulating the imaginary incumbent worker.

AL thus means that women often switch identities rather than exhibiting one consistent example (Ladkin, 2021; Sinclair, 2013).

To illustrate her relational authenticity theory, Eagly (2005) cited the case of Hopkins versus Price Waterhouse. The court ruled that Ann Hopkins was subjected to sex discrimination when she was not promoted to partner (Price Waterhouse versus Hopkins, 1989). Whilst this was some time ago, the prevalence of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs; Percival and Gibbons, 2021) makes it hard to find more recent cases, although similar cases still occur (see The Guardian, 2022). The court reported that Hopkins was competent, goal-focused and high-achieving, attributes rewarded in men but shunned when enacted by women. Similarly, in Liu *et al.* (2015), Gail Kelly (bank Chief Executive Officer) was recognised and portrayed by the media as authentic. This was characterised as being nurturing and interpersonal. However, criticism followed that she was indecisive. These examples signify that AL is arguably unachievable for women.

Women leaders thriving or not: an authenticity and contextual lens

Women often prefer to avoid male-driven tactics like striving behaviours to gain superiority (Castro and Holvino, 2016). Conversely, imposter phenomenon (IP) theory (Clance and Imes, 1978) suggests that those experiencing IP tell others what they want to hear rather than being considered outspoken. Women's authenticity is ultimately compromised by speaking incongruently with one's values. Similarly, impression management (IM) means one cultivates an image that convinces their supervisor that they are professionally desirable. IM is, however, enacted by fewer women than men, with women preferring to rely upon hard work and dedication rather than pursuing strategic games (Singh *et al.*, 2002). Like IP, in IM, others' perceptions go unchecked against biases. These phenomena make it difficult for women leaders to be authentic whilst advancing their careers.

Studies suggest that gender stereotype change over the past 50 years has shifted women's employment and equality outcomes (Priyashantha *et al.*, 2023). To illustrate, women have experienced greater full-time employment, upgraded their knowledge and faced fewer barriers to entering male-dominated sectors (Meza-Mejia *et al.*, 2023; Priyashantha *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Bosak and Sczesny (2011) suggested that society's perceptions have altered regarding female congruency and leadership. Whilst empirical evidence suggests that career outcomes are improving for women, less is known about how women leaders experience working authentically. It is relevant to explore women's perceptions of their (in)authentic behaviours alongside their experiences of equity (Meza-Mejia *et al.*, 2023).

Women leaders potentially conform to a stereotype of normative expectations from external forces. To illustrate, entrepreneur Karen Brady's (see Kapasi *et al.*, 2016) autobiography celebrates her "determination, [sic] steely core and can-do attitude" (Brady 2013 cited in Kapasi *et al.*, 2016 p. 348). Kapasi and colleagues suggest that rather than revealing her true self, she constructed an identity that embodies society's leadership norms. Some women are promoted into roles but only when conforming to a biased standard. Castro and Holvino (2016) suggest that firm practices prioritise middle-class graduates and women who display femininity, arguably perpetuating an elite image. A study showed similar findings after interviewing women (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008); it suggested the importance of conformance and illusive conscientiousness when securing promotion. Overall, authors are attracted to investigating PBS due to its masculine narrative where women leaders arguably struggle to be authentic. They face a dichotomous choice between advancing and being themselves. Conversely, there are theorised advantages to being a women leader.

Some studies suggest that women make successful leaders, even demonstrating an advantage (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Firstly, women leaders may be considered the antithesis of risky prototypical masculine leadership and, consequently, more authentic in times of crisis

(known as the Glass Cliff; Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Secondly, women exhibited more transformational leadership qualities than men (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Only a five-percentage point difference was discovered, challenging whether this meta-analysis did suggest that women were more effective leaders than men. Followers completing self-report scales concerning their managers may apply a double standard towards male and female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly *et al.*, 2003). This could explain the small difference between genders. Followers may be more likely to associate male leaders with transactional rather than transformational characteristics, thus biasing their answers.

Apart from training (Eagly, 2005) and psychotherapy (Clance and Imes, 1978), which focus on the individual, scholars (see Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015) offer minimal recommendations for eradicating bias in societies and organisations. Some sectors with greater female leaders, such as academia, have attracted more studies (see Meza-Mejia *et al.*, 2023). Other sectors remain under-researched. Articles mostly originate from Australia or the USA (see Eagly, 2005; Sinclair, 2013), not the UK. Existing studies have not isolated women's accounts to understand how they want to be perceived at work and if authenticity is important to them.

Methodology

Design

This study used qualitative methods to achieve in-depth accounts of women leaders' experiences (see Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Tatli *et al.*, 2016). This explorative approach elicits comprehensive descriptions from participants, imperative to understanding the gendered construction of AL. There are two reasons why a social constructionist (Cohen *et al.*, 2004) paradigm is relevant. First, the study examines women leaders' accounts contextual to their geographic, cultural and organisational settings, the UK's PBS sector. Second, the study is concerned with examining knowledge that develops via the participant's social processes and subsequently informs their actions.

Inductive methods (Symon and Cassell, 2012) were chosen helping to examine in-depth accounts of women leaders and their constructions of authenticity. The author developed themes non-a priori focussing on the qualitative data whilst acknowledging the prevailing theories during the interpretation (Given, 2008).

Participants

Purposeful sampling (Robinson, 2014) was chosen to directly target women executives, working in PBS in the Midlands region of the UK The author invited prospective research participants from their extended network (via email and LinkedIn), except for one participant. One black and minority ethnic interviewee was approached through a referral since the author was unsuccessful in recruiting from this group. The final sample size developed reflexively (Braun and Clarke, 2006), resulting in ten research participants (see Table 2).

The participants included a cross-section of senior managers, directors and managing directors aged between 35 and 59 years. They had between three months and 15 years of tenure in their current roles. The participants recruited provided rich data. Fewer CEOs participated from larger firms since they were the hardest to secure appointments with.

Before the recruitment, ethical approval was granted from Birkbeck College. Participants were briefed concerning the scope, expectations and consent. Participants were debriefed after the interview.

Procedure

This study used semi-structured interviews. Interviews were held via Microsoft (MS) Teams, according to guidelines from the college, each lasting between 50 and 60 minutes. The author

Pseudonym	Job title	Industry	Age	Ethnicity	Tenure current role (years)
Beatrice	Consultant and Non-Executive Director	Legal	58	Black	10 and 3
Becky	Director	Marketing	59	White	2
Caroline	Director	Accounting	35	White	2.5
Danielle	Partner	Legal	42	White	15
Kathryn	Head of Compliance	Finance	47	White	3
Lara	VP Business Development	Finance	54	White	0.4
Michelle	Associate Professor	Learning and Development	58	White	3
Sally	Regional Manager (Europe)	Logistics	51	White	2
Tania	Managing Director	Consulting	40	White	3
Yolanda	Director	Consulting	47	White	2.5

Table 2.
Research participants

Source(s): Table created by author

transcribed the data with the help of MS Teams. They created rapport by putting the participants at ease by explaining the interview process.

The author was conscious of influencing and co-constructing knowledge within this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, biases developing from similarities between the author's and participants' careers. The author responded through reflexive scholarship via a diary.

Interview questions were informed first by the literature review and second by three pilot interviews. They were designed to elicit comprehensive descriptions from the participants regarding enablers, barriers and limitations of workplace authenticity considering the research objectives. Questions included "What does being authentic in your work mean to you?" And "What major factors have influenced your authentic behaviour at work throughout your leadership career?" What questions prompt "spontaneous descriptions" (Kvale, 1996). Therefore, this guide provided a combination of dynamic and thematic questioning to encourage participants to talk about their experiences (Ferraro and Andreatta, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility to alter the number or sequence of questions *in situ* depending on the participant's accounts. This was important because the interview needed to draw out subjective experiences by following the participants' conversational flow (Symon and Cassell, 2012). This was essential because feminist interpretation, as selected by the author, requires women's voices to be signified (Corlett and Mavin, 2018; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Data analysis

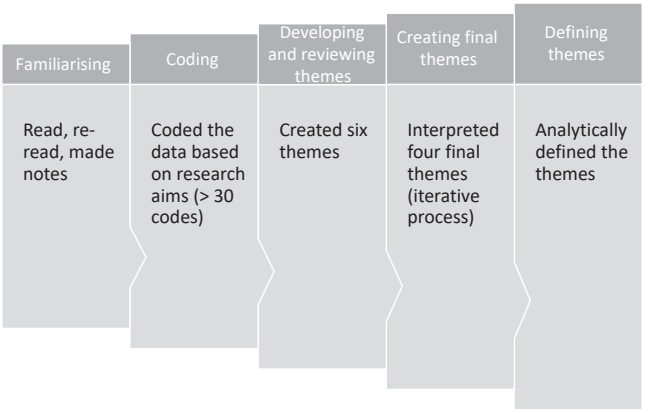
The author transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. The author used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis (TA) method (see Figure 1). Authors that have used TA in qualitative and socially constructed studies include Cohen *et al.* (2004), Castro and Holvino (2016) and Martinez-Martinez *et al.* (2021).

Findings

Using the TA method (see Figure 1), the author interpreted four major themes; each has multiple sub-themes. The themes are presented in Figure 2 below.

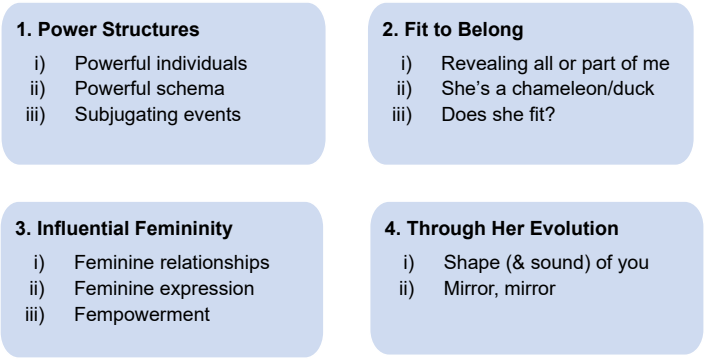
Power structures

Nearly all women spoke about their authenticity being affected by dominant contexts characterised by powerful individuals or organisations. This theme was interpreted because



Source(s): Figure created by author; TA process inspired by Braun and Clark (2006)

Figure 1.
Data analysis procedure



Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 2.
Thematic map

most participants responded to powerful structures by withholding their true feelings for fear of being reprimanded if they spoke out. Participants predicted the consequences of challenging the boss's opinions. These included losing their jobs and, therefore, the time and money invested in their careers and education. Several women spoke of experiencing injustices or discrimination. They avoided challenging such events, however. Danielle explains

> I was so desperate to qualify, desperate to get out of the [deprived] area I grew up in, I would have done anything to [keep] that job. To rock the boat, even though what was happening was wrong. I just daren't do it because what would happen if I lost this [career] opportunity? It was just unthinkable. All that money, all that time at university. Just suck it up [I thought]. They had that power, but they knew [it].

Her repetition of "desperate" indicates the gravitas of the repercussions for Danielle. Her admission that her employer knew its power over her appears to subjugate Danielle. She faced a debilitating choice between challenging others' inappropriate actions or lifting herself to become socially mobile via her profession and earnings. Ultimately, her apprehension

to keep her behaviour consistent with the norms of the organisation motivated her to be inauthentic. This example is mirrored across several of the participants. Overall, powerful structures influenced how women leaders develop and approach authenticity. In many cases, this influenced women to forge a better fit between themselves and their workplaces.

Fit to belong

This theme was interpreted because all participants described altering their behaviour to achieve a fit between themselves and workplace norms. For some participants, this manifested in them withdrawing or modifying features of their authenticity due to workplace pressures. Pressures stemmed from perceptions of an archetypal and fictional vision of a professional, a lawyer or an accountant. Conversely, most participants constructed authenticity as being their true selves and revealing all of them. They were most animated and relaxed when they described this state. Several women chose to leave jobs they no longer fit whilst others reported altering their behaviours to "fit in".

Sally readily spoke about how she considers herself authentic. Conversely, here she explains presenting as a "duck":

> He [a former boss] bought me a book. In it he wrote, walk like a duck, talk like a duck eventually, people will believe you're a duck. He was basically saying we show up dressed for the boardroom, use the correct vocabulary and language, and people will naturally perceive that you're in that position.

The duck is a euphemism for acting a part persuasively, including a suitable costume and demeanour. This infers that she constructs authenticity as having a choice. In other words, when she chose to alter her dress and approach, she did so autonomously whilst recognising its merit. She does not view a departure from her innate persona as inauthentic. Alternatively, participants resisted requests to tone down their feminine behaviour.

> I'm quite high energy and quite bubbly. I've always been a mother [figure]. I can remember someone saying, 'If you don't change your attitude you're not going [to] progress the ladder quickly.' (Caroline)

When Caroline heard this from a male superior, she interpreted it as being asked to "play down" her female characteristics. She had to be perceived as less feminine to progress in the organisation. She saw her caring and nurturing behaviour as helping the organisation, but her superior did not. Later, she realised that she would need to "play the game" to get promoted. Achieving a promotion was at the unimaginable cost of her authenticity.

This theme describes the participants' tendency to do one of three things responding to fit (1) adapt to fit their environment, (2) ritually alter their persona when required and (3) alter how they construct their authenticity.

Influential femininity

This theme was interpreted because many participants consider their authentic femininity an asset to their leadership style. When women had the latitude to communicate and lead whilst expressing emotion freely, they perceived additional team and client outcomes. Several participants explained that their mothers, siblings and children had influenced their authenticity. Many constructed their feminine traits as a resource to be exerted and not suppressed. The theme "power structures" is a barrier to authenticity, whereas "influential femininity" is an enabler.

Several participants constructed authenticity as supporting others to feel empowered. Michelle explained

> I'm always on my toes trying to be responsive [in return for employee loyalty]. I naturally give; this engages people. I can't even quite put it into words. They know that I'm always really busy, [but] I will always give them time.

When she says "on her toes", it indicates a moral duty. She is giving her team time, but being overworked spills into her non-working hours. Because she cannot articulate the nature of the exchanges, this could mean that there is a natural trust that exists almost unwittingly. Conversely, when women became conscious and felt safer exerting their feminine behaviours, they used this self-knowledge to increase their leadership effectiveness.

Through her evolution

This theme was interpreted because all participants in the study describe growing increasingly conscious and more comfortable being authentic as they get older and their career progress. This internal surety, characterised by authenticity, appears to counter any external pressures arising from the concept of "fit". However, they describe this consciousness as undulating and paradoxical rather than linear and universal. For example, one participant still sometimes felt intimidated to speak up in meetings. The majority, however, agree that they have become more self-serving than people-pleasing as they age. This may be due to the women becoming more relaxed since they have more "confidence" and "fewer consequences".

Participants commented on the importance of self-realisation when constructing authenticity. In other words, they act and speak congruently with their own wants and desires. Becky explained

> So authentic is about being me. It's about being truthful to yourself about what you want as well, it's about being honest. Being real. And about managing expectations both of yourself and potentially of your clients.

She described understanding what motivates her; she uses this to help her reach her goals. Her account infers that she places high expectations upon herself. Conversely, being "honest" involves leaving space to live whilst serving her clients. She imagines a boundary around her "real" life, a border between that of family and friends and work in her construction of authenticity.

Talent programmes, awards, board nominations or supervisor plaudits supported women's authenticity. These circumstances and people were able to hold a mirror to the women to help them achieve greater results in their careers. Some women consequently described having a more authoritative voice and avoiding staying in the background. Kathyrn described her experience:

> This [talent management programme] gave me that boost to believe that I could be more. Avenues were open [to] me. I could develop and learn [new skills]. I [then] made the decision to move out of this comfort bubble [towards promotion].

Kathryn was able to be in the foreground after this experience. She developed more agency and an authentic presence. It was the impetus that helped her discover greater career potential whilst still constructing herself as authentic.

This theme was characterised by women's growing consciousness of being authentic over time through reflection or cataclysmic events. External recognition and validation, particularly from mentors and awards or executive board nominations, supported their emerging self-concept, motivating them to achieve better career outcomes.

This analysis indicates that authenticity is complex, possibly because the study overlaps the construct with gender. Therefore, some participants told stories where they regularly varied their authentic selves. Inspired by Pratt *et al.* (2006), this study considers the connection between the four themes (see Figure 3). The participants' evolving authenticity is the heroine, helping women feel increasingly comfortable being themselves. Power structures challenge participants' evolving authenticity, often destabilising it. Fit and authenticity developed simultaneously as participants grew (un)comfortable being themselves. Finally, influential femininity is a resource that helps participants evolve and make sense of their authenticity.

Discussion

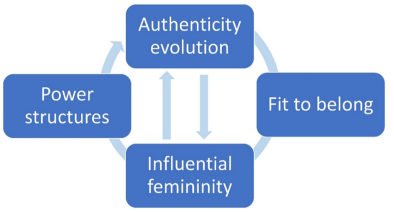
This study demonstrated that when participants grew conscious of their authenticity, they were able to be themselves more at work. This suggests that they perform better and are happier (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). Being wholly authentic, however, came with several barriers created by a dominant masculine majority (Eagly, 2005). This is characterised within the context of the PBS sector in the UK.

Factors influencing authenticity

Women spoke of organisational contexts often suppressing their authenticity. Many spoke about legacy and present-day masculine or patriarchal influences (Acker, 1990). They were subjected to implicit and explicit biases, resulting in them altering themselves to adhere to stereotypes (Castro and Holvino, 2016). Theory supports these findings, suggesting that a gendered and arguably anti-neutral workplace impacts women's opportunities (Acker, 1990). Furthermore, the participants experienced biases likely due to role incongruity and lack-of-fit theories creating a mismatch between a women's gender and leadership personas (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983). Participants were pressured into behaving less feminine to meet a stereotype (Eagly, 2005). Similarly, women spoke of women executives "out manning the men" (see Bosak and Sczesny, 2011).

Few spoke about feeling more comfortable in a male setting, arguably because this became normalised as they performed different roles with new responsibilities (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Similarly, Sally constructed authenticity as being knowledgeable and having a track record in her industry. Authors suggest that gender stereotype change can be explained by women upgrading their knowledge to advance their employment status (Priyashantha *et al.*, 2023). Conversely, literature suggests that women are more likely to overwork in senior positions, causing inauthentic IM (Kossek and Lee, 2022). Sally's account suggested that she congratulated herself on her expansive know-how whilst men may face less scrutiny over their intellect (Sieghart, 2021).

Some responses struck the author as emanating from a privileged position. For example, Caroline said that no one should alter who they are. Critically, Tania, Yolanda and Caroline were the most vocal about this subject. They can now be wholly authentic since they have the education, agency and means to start their own small business (Lewis, 2013). Similarly, Sally spoke about "not trying to be something you're not". She achieved a level of privilege with her status as a senior executive; consequently, she can be who she wants, unlike women in junior positions without the power (Bosak and Sczesny, 2011). Minoritised women may feel pressured into acting congruently with the majority since authenticity is more problematic for marginalised groups (Castro and Holvino, 2016; Jackson, 2019). Beatrice was the only participant who was satisfied with being inauthentic. Beatrice introduced herself as "a black female lawyer". She remarked that she is used to "over-preparing" more than the "archetypal blonde haired blue eyed" employee who has the freedom to be authentic (Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015).



Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 3.
Conceptual interaction between themes

Most women spoke about "self-knowledge" when being authentic. Furthermore, this is an essential component of the heroine "*Through Her Evolution*". In other words, the theme is a resource supporting the participants to grow increasingly conscious of their authenticity and, therefore, be at liberty to be themselves at work. Authors (Jacob and Barnard, 2022; Kernis and Goldman, 2006) agree that self-knowledge connects to authenticity and leads to an understanding of self and others equating to leadership outcomes.

Barriers faced when demonstrating workplace authenticity. A dominant leadership style often sets the backdrop for business operations and behaviours (Castro and Holvino, 2016). This can perpetuate norms and stereotypes of male leaders, causing women to develop IP (Clance and Imes, 1978). Several women in the study noticed IP impacting their authenticity and, therefore, well-being and performance (Gardner *et al.*, 2011; Ilies *et al.*, 2005). This manifested in them not recognising their achievements or not speaking up in meetings. In other words, they used counter-IM techniques to conform to a stereotype of a woman leader (Eagly, 2005; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Combatting IP is, therefore suggested to be imperative to women becoming authentic.

Career implications and work outcomes resulting from authenticity

Several participants started their own small businesses. Like in Lewis's (2013) study, participants rejected the dominant masculine paradigm of entrepreneurship, instead preferring an authentic feminine identity as a business owner. Alternatively, others made efforts to grow secure in their roles optimising the components of "*Through Her Evolution*". Several participants described orchestrating major transformation projects such as mass redundancies and setting up departments at the start of their tenure. Both women expressed their appreciation for these roles and the "opportunity", notwithstanding the magnitude of the tasks. This demonstrates the Glass Cliff theory (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). These women accepted these questionable assignments.

This study extends earlier works (see Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015) and more recent studies (see Jacobs and Barnard, 2022), highlighting the significance of women's authenticity in helping to address workplace inequity. Uniquely, it suggests that growing consciousness helps women leaders be their true selves; greater authenticity could influence becoming more secure at work.

Conclusion

This study investigated how senior women leaders in the PBS sector in the UK develop and approachworkplace (in)authenticity. This paper contributes to research on women leaders' construction of workplace behaviour. Uniquely, the study examines women's perceptions of workplace authenticity in the PBS sector in the UK, impacting the way they experience their careers.

Four themes were interpreted: (1) power structures, (2), fit to belong, (3) influential femininity and (4) through her evolution. Factors influencing women to become or show (in)authenticity were often borne from powerful schemas propelling a necessity to "fit" in. Conversely, advocates, recognition and family helped women combat systemic setbacks to their authenticity. They were subjugated, moved sideways or resigned. Women grew conscious of their authenticity over time, making them feel more secure being themselves. One group maintained their careers growing more assured as authentic. The second group rejected traditional employment to start their own wholly authentic small businesses. The problem is complex; senior women still face an impossible choice between advancing their careers and being themselves.

Implications of the study

This study provides relevant findings concerning women leaders' authenticity. Is not intended as generalisable; therefore, further research is required to extend this study.

Research is required to explore any empirical link between women leaders' authenticity and gender equity in the workplace, for example, a correlation between women leaders' perceived authenticity and their intention to quit. Additionally, more studies must examine how authenticity impacts minoritised groups (see Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015) since this study investigated a homogenous sample. Research is needed to identify whether fewer systemic barriers to workplace authenticity lead to better career outcomes for women. Interventions could be developed and empirically tested via longitudinal methods.

The study has several implications for theory. It extends earlier authors' work (see Eagly, 2005; Sinclair, 2013) by signifying the women's voices regarding their experiences of workplace authenticity. It demonstrates, therefore, that the social constructionist paradigm contributes to existing findings on this subject. This study begins to bridge the gap between theory and practice, particularly via the participants' recommendations for improving access to enablers of authenticity for women leaders discussed next.

Participants made relevant suggestions for practice. Organisations, managers, educators and practitioners may consider interventions including creating a community, developing a business case, improving confidence, increasing the role of male Allies (see Drury and Kaiser, 2014) and greater education. For instance, teaching institutions are reminded to recognise socio-normative barriers to women's workplace authenticity regarding *"Fit to Belong"*.

The study's findings suggest inequalities. Public policymakers are advised, therefore, to emphasise reducing barriers to workplace authenticity, especially to reduce discriminatory behaviours arising from role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Audiences outside the UK could explore interventions and research consistent with this study's findings. These would benefit from being consistent with their national or regional workplace gender cultural nuances and systemic barriers.

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