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Can I really be me? The challenges for women leaders constructing authenticity

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PART V

Authenticity at the intersection of identity and institutions

18. Essay: Can I really be me? The challenges for women leaders constructing authenticity

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Australia's first woman prime minister, Julia Gillard, like many women in leadership, has been subject to intense media scrutiny. This scrutiny focuses on her body and what it says about her and her (lack of) qualifications for leading. The occasion of her 50th birthday was no exception. A letter to the editor in *The Age* newspaper (4 October 2011) captures the conundrum:

> While interstate I heard a radio discussion about Julia Gillard's 50th birthday. The woman said Julia looked good for her age, at which her male companion concluded she'd either had botox, implying that any appearance of youthfulness was fake, or that she looks good because she has no laugh lines, implying that she is a humourless spinster.
>
> In Melbourne I heard a discussion about Gillard's grey hair roots. The caller came up with two lose-lose conclusions: she is showing her grey on purpose to garner sympathy (so is insincere) or is showing a lack of care (so is sloppy) (Hopkins 2011).

Despite substantial research urging authenticity as an ideal in leadership, there are few theoretical or empirical accounts about the role gender plays in the attribution of authenticity. Is authentic leadership deliverable for women and men in the same ways? In this chapter I argue that authenticity is judged through a gendered – not gender neutral – lens (Acker 1990). Further, women leaders are both made more visible and judged more on their bodies, which are seen as a marker for their identity (including morality, trustworthiness and leadership) in a way that men's bodies are not.

Beginning with a brief overview of authentic leadership research, I seek to show that gendered embodied performances are potentially central to the production of authenticity but that most accounts treat authenticity as if it is primarily a gender-neutral, individual cerebral or

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cognitive accomplishment. Drawing on a number of examples, including two autobiographies of women leaders, Australian former chief police commissioner Christine Nixon and New Zealand former public sector chief Christine Rankin, I highlight the gendered pressures women face in leading in a way that feels, and is deemed, authentic. In both examples, these women sought not to reproduce the 'look' of male leadership and made considered decisions about presenting themselves (including their bodies) and their leadership values with honesty and openness. Yet, in contrast to the disembodied way authenticity is usually calculated for male leaders, the 'authenticity' of these female leaders was judged through the lens of their gender as women and their bodies. They were punished harshly for being themselves, and these assessments spilled over into assessments that they were 'lacking' leadership. These examples show that not all displays of 'authenticity' are equally valued.

AUTHENTICITY, BODIES AND GENDER

Curiously enough, in most studies and research of authenticity, there is little about the role of physical presence in its construction. Models of authenticity in leadership typically emphasize what comes out of a leader's mouth, and perhaps how that translates (or not) into action. This applies both in academic, often psychologically based scholarship (Avolio and Gardner 2005; Gardner et al. 2005) and in more popular managerial accounts of 'presence' (George et al. 2007; Goffee and Jones 2006; Senge et al. 2005). Ladkin and Taylor have argued the need to redress this neglect, recognizing that 'it is the leader's body and the way he or she uses it to express their "true self" which is the seemingly invisible mechanism through which authenticity is conveyed to others' (2010, p. 65). While bodies seem to remain largely 'invisible' in scholarship of authentic leadership, as the following cases suggest, gendered bodies are central for leaders and their audiences attributing and evaluating authenticity.

Guthey and Jackson (2005) capture a key conundrum for leadership: the 'authenticity paradox'. They note that 'visible presence has functioned as a traditionally accepted pre-requisite for authenticity', yet increasing and sometimes desperate efforts to shore up a company's image and CEO authenticity through photographs and portraits actually lead to less, not more, authenticity (2005, p. 1057). Photography and portraiture bring with them stylistic conventions which emphasize the constructed nature of the identities represented. Viewer, photographer and leader are all aware that the leader is being 'framed', either as someone

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different from who he or she 'truly' is or, if you accept postmodernist assumptions, as just a fleeting performance of continually constructed, ultimately unverifiable identities.

A wide range of research now challenges the idea that leaders can produce and project a single, coherent 'authentic' identity in order to serve the interests of their leadership or their organization's purpose (Ford and Harding 2011; Sveningsson and Larsson 2006). These more critical accounts build on earlier work which shows the essential contradiction in, on the one hand, advocating 'how to become oneself' and, on the other, inevitably offering performative prescriptions about how one must *be* to 'be oneself' (Garsten and Grey 1997; Townley 1995). These arguments are located in a larger postmodern critique which argues that the production of an 'I' is itself socially mandated, rather than of any particular overriding moral value. For these scholars, the 'I', and returning to it through the means of authenticity, is not the starting point, but the effect of the modernist theories, the performative regimes and the preoccupations that precede it (Butler 1990; Foucault 1988; Rose 1996).

Rather than simply urging authenticity on leaders, we are thus encouraged to step back and take a wider, critical look at how such a manoeuvre panders to a certain view of leadership. For example, in an exchange in the pages of the *Leadership Quarterly*, Beyer (1999) argues that notions of charisma and authenticity have been appropriated to suit contemporary romanticized and individualized notions of leadership. We are also urged to look more closely at the impact of advocating authenticity. For example, instead of inviting more freedom and meaning for the leader and his or her followers, it may render them more of an 'abjected object' (Ford and Harding 2011, p. 476).

Authenticity is then not a property available for the individual leader to craft but rather a relationship in which followers play a key role (Ladkin 2008). Further, authenticity is allocated, or not, by followers according to often unconsciously held cultural and societal norms about how the members of certain social groups should look and behave. For example, brilliant philosophers of the twentieth century Jean-Paul Sartre and his long-term companion Simone de Beauvoir were committed to presenting the truth of themselves. Yet she, not he, was tightly monitored and mercilessly attacked for offering the truth of her experiences (Rowley 2007). In understanding authenticity we need to focus less on what the leader does – or is – and more on mapping the norms which bestow a likely or expected authenticity on leaders with particular gender and cultural characteristics.

In respect of the role of bodies in leadership, the last decade has seen much new interest and research (Hansen et al. 2007; Ladkin 2008; Ropo

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and Parviainen 1999; Ropo and Sauer 2008; Sheridan and O'Sullivan 2006; Sinclair 2005, 2011). This interest has often grown out of scholarship investigating the functioning of the body in establishing a gender regime (see for example Butler 1993) and the role of bodies in organization (Acker 1990; Harding 2002; Hassard et al. 2000; Trethewey 1999). What scholars are keen on tracking is not individual bodily performances in leadership (though these are often richly revealing) but the gendered norms that determine how bodies are made visible and judged. This research finds that white male leader bodies usually enjoy the privilege of not being 'seen': they are often pictured suited and covered up, and they are rarely publicly assessed for their fitness (physically or otherwise) for the top job (Sinclair 2008). Where they are revealed, these bodies are more likely to be portrayed in ways which conceal physical weaknesses and reinforce masculinity and athleticism (Sinclair 2005; Wukko 2011). Often there is a mythology of physical strength that is carefully cultivated; for example, American president Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was paralysed and in a wheelchair during his presidency, was always photographed standing (propped up by a colleague) or swimming (Rowley 2011).

In contrast, and as we saw in the opening example about Australia's prime minister, Julia Gillard, women's identities, gender and bodies are routinely tied together and attributed meanings antithetical to leadership. Gillard was rendered more vain, more womanly and less leader-like through public commentary of her roots and wrinkles (Rayner 2011). Women, including women leaders, are often appraised as bodies first. They are also viewed not as representing their own identities but as women more broadly, including carrying sexualities, pregnancy and mothering (Höpfl and Kostera 2003; Sinclair 1998). One way to undermine their aspirations to leadership is to draw attention to these roles. For example, during her presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton was stalked by a critic who yelled 'Iron my shirt!' throughout her speeches. 'Reducing' women to their bodies and gendered roles is a time-honoured way for audiences to cope with anxieties about women with power.

The following two cases of Christine Nixon and Christine Rankin bring into focus the ways in which authentic leadership is more complex for women. Their experiences reveal how these leaders were consistently judged against gendered norms of women and their bodies, as they sought to 'be themselves'. The cases are based on published materials and should not be read as assessments of these women's leadership performance or success. Not only would it be unfair to do so, but it would reproduce aspects of the very problem I am seeking to critique.

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CHRISTINE NIXON[1]

A central part of how Christine Nixon went about her leadership roles, as a senior and rare female police officer in the New South Wales police, in 2001 as Victorian police commissioner and in 2009 as head of the Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, was how she brought herself to the job, including her values of treating people decently and with dignity. She also emphasized and practised care and the value of mothering, which she argued the leadership literature 'resisted recognising' (Nixon and Chandler 2011, p. 222). As an example, one of her early actions in Victoria police was to properly recognize those police who had died on duty and to support their families.

Early on in her career, Nixon experienced many lessons about the consequences of her forthrightness and honesty in the media. After being awarded a Harkness Fellowship she gave an unguarded interview in which she declared her ambition to lead the police one day and that she was a feminist. These comments were duly published in the article that followed, along with the information that 'she has long blonde hair, blue eyes… [and] last week she was drifting around police headquarters in a black dress and a gold neckchain' (McGregor 1984, cited in Nixon and Chandler 2011, p. 210).

In her swearing-in speech as police commissioner, she began 'First, I am a woman' and then went on to outline the role of caring and compassionate values in good policing (Nixon and Chandler 2011, p. 126). She also warned the audience not to confuse these values with 'softness' – which inevitably some stakeholders did. Nixon came under great pressure to play the 'hard cop', and she admitted her life would be much easier if she did. However, she continued to 'work hard to be authentic'. By this, she meant to speak truthfully of her feelings and to uphold values that others might regard narrowly as too feminine (and therefore 'too soft'). Eventually, in her later years in policing, she observes she had 'invested so many years in authentic behaviour' that she wasn't frightened of risks to her reputation.

In reflecting on women and leadership and the extra scrutiny that they get, she writes:

> I know I can do the job, and that I can do it as a woman should – not as a bloke might, and not as someone else might, just as me. I know some women adopt the model of looking like the blokes, but I don't think that's the way for women to progress and so, as a role model, I try to just be me – unashamedly, honestly me (2011, p. 221).

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The most public vilification of Nixon came later, when she found herself before the Bushfires Royal Commission. Just as she was due to retire as police commissioner in early 2009, bushfires raged across a huge geographical area of Victoria, and Nixon was asked by the premier to chair the Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority. Her later appearance before the Commission was in her prior police role as overall head of emergency services, and Nixon had expected to be asked about her well-developed and internationally validated strategies for crisis management. She argued that she believed in devolution and had confidence in the police and the senior officers to whom she had delegated key roles. While many experts agreed that clear delegation was the only way to deal with crises, this issue was lost in the ensuing attack on her for not showing leadership by 'taking charge' of the bushfire 'incident'. There was a strongly gendered flavour to the attack. Media coverage centred not on the delegations she had put in place but the fact that, on the morning the bushfires started, she had a meeting with her biographer and later went out to dinner. The *Herald Sun* page one headlines trumpeted 'Told Victorians could die in the fires, Christine Nixon … WENT OUT FOR DINNER' (cited in Nixon and Chandler 2011, p. 309). Caught off-guard by a journalist, she protested 'I had to eat.' More invective followed, directed to the fact that she is well built and perhaps likes to eat too much.

CHRISTINE RANKIN[2]

In 1998 Christine Rankin was regarded as amongst the highest-performing of New Zealand bureaucrats and became chief executive of Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ), a merger of New Zealand Income Support (NZIS), New Zealand Employment Services (NZES) and two other social service providers, and the country's largest government department. Her first task – to amalgamate 6000 staff from four organizations into one, within 12 weeks – was accomplished on time and on budget, despite encountering union opposition.

Born in 1954 in a remote South Island mining community, Rankin was abused by her father along with her mother and siblings. In her autobiography *Light the Flame* (2008) she says that she initially internalized her father's view of her as worthless. After leaving school at 16 and a brief period working as a clerk and modelling, Rankin became a single parent. Trying to get support was a harrowing experience, but it catalysed her into a job in the very Department of Social Welfare where she had

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once been a desperate client. She climbed rapidly in the department, becoming its youngest director in 1987.

In her leadership, Rankin followed in the footsteps of her mentor, George Hickton, who was famous for his adventurous team-building exercises and for urging managers to use their judgement and cut through red tape. At the heart of Rankin's initiatives was a commitment to empower staff to deliver better client service, to people who, as she had once been, were desperately vulnerable. In particular, she argued that the best performance would come from passionate leaders who excited and inspired their teams to 'light the flame': 'Your own boundaries should be the parameters of what you want to achieve. In effect, you are telling your staff: "I trust you. Do anything necessary, within our ethical boundaries, as long as you get the result we all want"' (Rankin 2008, p. 119).

Despite her critics, Rankin's results were outstanding. For example, she brought together a project team to cut waiting times for prospective clients which sometimes billowed out to months. Empowering and training front-line staff meant that most applications were answered within 24 hours: 'we reduced our costs, while increasing our performance, all because we dared to think differently. More importantly, it meant our clients were getting a faster, better and more accurate service – fulfilling our vision' (Rankin 2008, p. 114).

When dealing with poor performance, Rankin's first approach was always to try to 'light the flame' of inspiration in her employees. But she was also clear with people in the organization that they shouldn't stay around if they weren't prepared to change. At one stage she was dubbed 'the Queen of Dismissals'. By the late 1990s, Rankin was beginning to be attacked for what her critics saw as her extravagance and the unsuitability of her leadership style. The then Labour opposition led a campaign against her when it emerged that her department had spent $220 000 on a conference.

After Labour won office, it did not renew her contract. Rankin recalled that state services commissioner Michael Wintringham met her in November 2000 to tell her, informally, that her contract would not be renewed and identified three reasons: her overseeing of dramatic change in a controversial department, which had made her a political liability; her appearance; and the conference overspend. However, when she received the formal notification in December, the letter made no mention of these reasons, citing instead her failure to establish a good working relationship with the minister and her lack of policy capability.

Rankin lodged a claim in the Employment Court for unfair dismissal, seeking reinstatement and $1.25 million in damages. The court case

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received a good deal of publicity, with rumours circulating that having Rankin in the room proved too distracting to male public servants and visiting politicians. She lost her case.

Throughout and following this difficult period Rankin was criticized for her appearance and her private life. She didn't dress like a 'suited' bureaucrat, instead favouring earrings and skirts which she said looked short because of her long legs. Rankin argued that she was unfairly targeted in both her role and the court case because she did not conform to a sober, masculine public sector image. Recalling a meeting with her minister she says: 'I felt victimized and intimidated. In my view, it was blatant sexism. I do not believe for one moment that any minister would have dared speak in this way to a male CEO, regardless of what the government thought of his wardrobe' (pp. 1, 67–8). Throughout the two-week hearing Rankin said she often cried at night, but was determined not to cry in public:

> During my evidence in court, I maintained my composure – but it didn't help my public image; I realised later that because I didn't weep, the public assumed I was unfeeling and cold. I wonder what would have happened if I had sobbed in court. Probably, I would have been perceived as a weak woman who couldn't handle a high-pressure job (Rankin 2008, pp. 181–2).

She reflected on her time in the public service: 'If I were a man, I'm sure my job would have been safe; my risk-taking and unconventional approach would have been seen as bold, not dangerous, and my colleagues would have stood beside me.'

While Rankin was devastated by these events, she continued to enjoy considerable public support. A Christine Rankin Day was organized across New Zealand, with men and women wearing skirts and large earrings in support of her. She re-emerged later in several positions, including being appointed to the Families Commission and elected as a regional councillor. However, she continued to be criticized, for example, when appointed to the Families Commission, for her 'serial marriages' and not providing a model of stable family life.

The case of Christine Rankin shows how a woman leader's efforts toward authentic leadership – especially when they involve the performance of an embodied sense of self – are not read as authentic. Rather, such efforts may be seen as disruptive and dangerous to the established patriarchal order. Leadership development approaches that went unquestioned when undertaken by her male mentor, Hickton, came under a different kind of scrutiny when undertaken by Rankin. She was vilified

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for taking pleasure and pride in her appearance. Her leadership performance was constantly undermined by cultural stereotypes of women with power that were exploited by the media: the ruthless 'Queen of Dismissals', the provocative model, the marriage-wrecker. The 'problem' that men around her were distracted by her was solved by getting rid of her – a time-honoured means of locating the problem of sex on to women.

Partially because of her traumatic history, Rankin had battled to build a sense of herself as of value. This self was tied to projecting a distinctive and attractive physical self and it was equally tied to her deep moral convictions about who the public service was for and what it should be aspiring to do. Critics might, and did, say that she should abandon the earrings, lengthen her skirts and just focus on her core values. After the court case when asked whether she would change the way she dressed, Rankin retorted that she would not, that her dress was an important part of who she was and what she brought to leadership. However, even if she had succumbed to pressure and adjusted her clothing, such a move ignores the evidence that these dynamics of appearance are not for the leader to craft but are a product of social and cultural projections, including a deep discomfort with female power and sexuality. Even with a changed look, Rankin was likely to continue to attract sexualized speculation.

DISCUSSION

These two cases suggest that enacting or being recognized as enacting authentic leadership is more complex for women, and that they are more likely to be criticized for trying to 'be themselves' in a leader role. I have argued that partially this is because women's authenticity is judged against norms that highlight their bodies and gendered roles. One way to undermine their leadership capabilities is to reduce women to their bodies and bodily weaknesses: for Rankin her earrings and marriages, for Nixon as needing to eat.

What does this mean? Undoubtedly for some – media advisers and so on – it means more careful wardrobe choices, more media training, better stylists and a tighter image management. In this vein, one of the other accusations made of Julia Gillard has been 'Where is the *real* Julia?' The widely aired complaint was that her performances were so tightly scripted and orchestrated that the electorate didn't know her and – importantly – couldn't trust her. Opportunities were duly created for more of the 'real' Julia to appear, for example to talk about her decision not to have children (another highly gendered preoccupation, as few male

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leaders are asked this question). One former Labour leader promptly observed that this decision not to have children showed she didn't have much love in her.

Anecdotally (though I do spend time watching and researching leaders), I cannot recall seeing a male political or institutional leader publicly attacked for his marriages ('serial' or otherwise), his dining, his dress, his capacity to love, or whether he has children. Indeed, male political leaders such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Tony Blair seem to have been admired for the virility demonstrated in a new wife and a new baby respectively. Male CEOs more often benefit from being able to attract younger 'trophy wives' (Townley 1995). As for the focus on what women leaders wear, it is interesting to note that former Australian prime minister Paul Keating's preference for stylish Zegna suits was not detrimental to assessments of his seriousness as a visionary political leader.

Despite the evidence about the difficulties in constructing authenticity, women leaders don't seem to want to abandon this notion as an ideal. Rather, they remain attached to the idea that authenticity is a worthwhile and important quality to aim for in leadership. Why? I think there are three key reasons. First, authenticity seems a valuable ideal because it has connections to integrity, honesty and being straight with people. In a world where so much of leadership seems to be about dissembling and spin, authenticity orients itself towards values that are more ethical and enduring. Second, many women's personal experiences in leadership are that authenticity is often helpful for followers. Media images aside, in more direct relationships, followers can 'smell' the prospect of authenticity and they typically respond (Ladkin 2008). Where this potential for an authentic relationship is present, it helps followers develop trust and self-respect, reminding them about their own values and purposes and supporting them to face important challenges. Clearly this was the case for many staff and other stakeholders who came into contact with Christine Nixon and Christine Rankin.

The third reason why authenticity remains resonant is the evidence that many women want to do leadership differently, perhaps more in keeping with feminist or feminine values (Sinclair 1998). Women recognize the dominant masculine path to leadership in most organizations, and they know that conforming to this path often involves a high level of physical and emotional censoring and suppression (this is not to say that men are not also subject to these processes, but decades of evidence indicate it is more so for women; see, for example, Eagly and Carli 2007; Eagly and Johnson 1990; Sinclair 1998). Authenticity is a guiding value for women leaders who want to enact some transparency and who want to be present

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for those around them, perhaps also doing leadership in a way that captures some deeply held beliefs about who they seek to be and how they want to make a difference.

Authenticity is not a template nor a set of prescriptions that individuals can simply follow. As I have attempted to show, it is collectively constructed. Leaders and followers would do well to notice the way gendered stereotypes and norms come into play in assessing authenticity. Insights from feminism, critical identity theory and related fields can assist with deepening understandings of these processes. These fields might also be taken into leadership development contexts. For example, recently in an MBA class a student volunteered the example of a friend of his from Somalia who had sent out 250 job applications, getting no replies. This person changed his name to something more Anglo and got responses to all five of the letters he sent. This provided an opportunity to discuss the evidence that, while for some enacting an authentic self is relatively unproblematic, ethnocentrism means that for others active self-management, such as changing a name, may be necessary to get past the most basic hurdles of acceptability.

The path forward then is to work towards notions of authenticity and authentic leadership that are informed by feminist and critical research, including exposing the way authentic leadership scholarship has contributed to the selective invisibility of some gendered bodies. The phenomenon of authenticity is co-constructed and co-produced: it is not outside gendered norms and stereotypes, and we need to acknowledge and reform sexualized, derogatory representations of women that remain pervasive in leadership as elsewhere in societies. Further, rather than urging women leaders to adapt and perform to masculine norms of authenticity, we need to move towards a radically different gender-aware understanding of authenticity and its role in leadership.

NOTES

1. Information for this profile comes primarily from Christine Nixon's autobiography, *Fair Cop* (2011), co-authored with Jo Chandler, but also from my long research association with her as Victoria's first female police commissioner (see Sinclair 2005, 2007).
2. Information for this profile of Christine Rankin comes from her autobiography, *Light the Flame* (2008), and from the Australian and New Zealand School of Government case study (2011) 'A question of style: the leadership of Christine Rankin' and teaching note authored by Dr Todd Bridgman. I am also grateful to Todd Bridgman for further information and discussions about the Rankin case.

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