

The coach as conformist or reformist:

a critical study of group coaching in women-in-leadership
programmes across Europe

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Abstract

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This thesis explores my work as a group coach in women-in-leadership development programmes across Europe. As organisations increasingly turn to group coaching as part of leadership development programmes aimed at women, in pursuits of gender equity goals for 2026, the practice of coaching is itself being critically contested. Surprisingly little research has been done on the practice of group coaching within these programmes and even less from the view of the group coach. Drawing on my own experiences over three years, I explore how strong emotions, resistance and power dynamics play a constitutive role in the ethical dilemmas that arise in these interventions. I argue from the perspective of pragmatist philosophy, process sociology, complex responsive processes of relating, group analytics and critical feminism that the experience of group coaching in these programmes is not simply a facilitating process of following sequential process steps. Rather, I see it as an ongoing negotiation of inclusionary and exclusionary power dynamics that are reflected as part of everyday organisational life. As a result of these dynamics, the group coach is often caught up in competing ethical dilemmas which are shaped by ongoing claims of fairness, inclusivity and some of the assumptions implied by gender diversity. Rather, than assuming group coaching to be a neutral, or technical process, this study engages with a more critical view of the complex, relational and contested role of the group coach, especially in women-in-leadership development programmes. As a contribution to practice theory and the current debates on the purpose of coaching and gender diversity programmes, this thesis provides a new way of thinking about the ethical challenges that emerge. I conclude with an argument for group coaches, clients, coachees and researchers to become more reflexive and to take a critical view of what social order is potentially being reproduced by these interventions. Ultimately, I am suggesting taking micro-moments of resistance seriously within coaching groups, which can foster an alternative emergent ethical view of the possibilities of reform within group coaching in women-in-leadership programmes, rather than reinforcing dominant established norms.

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1. Introduction

Arriving at the Doctorate in Management (DMan) at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) in 2022, I was reluctant to even discuss the topic of women-in-leadership. I had imagined the theme had been debated and talked about so often in organisational life that there was nothing left to inquire into. It turns out that I was quite wrong and the barriers to progress for women in organisational life are not so invisible after all.

I started work in the UK in 1980, when stories of how white, educated women like me were *breaking the glass ceiling* and *having a seat at the table* were pervasive. These stories were a rally cry for the few women who made the climb up from the ranks of the organisational hierarchy. Over the decades since then, progress has been slow and seemingly stalling (UN Women, 2023). In response to legal and social pressure, organisations have introduced a range of initiatives aimed at promoting more women into leadership roles. One of these initiatives involves selecting (a few) women for promotion and assigning them an executive group coach as part of gender diversity leadership training programmes. Management scholars have argued that women tend to develop narrower, less strategic networks than do men (Ibarra et al., 2011). It is posited that group coaching can help women overcome this issue of having narrower and less strategic networks by supporting them in building a stronger leadership identity (Seiler, 2024). At the same time, questions divide organisational and feminist theorists on the meaning of the term ‘gender’ (Fotaki and Harding, 2018). Given that the term ‘leadership’ is itself vague and lacks a widely accepted theoretical framework (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), often the purpose of group coaching for women is also unclear. Perhaps we are offering women the opportunity to be coached without any agreement about what we, as coaches, are trying to achieve.

Drawing from a three-year study, this thesis examines coaching groups in women-in-leadership development programmes from the perspective of a group coach. My inquiry addresses how group coaches make ethical choices when faced with the many complex (and often competing) views on what is implied by gender diversity, as well as how group coaching as a practice is organised. As I began to reflect on the ethical dilemmas faced by the group coach, speaking as a woman, I ran into troubling assumptions embedded in women-in-leadership initiatives. Multiple questions arose in response to engaging with the literature: what understanding of ideology is being reproduced when we speak of and research women-in-leadership? What ideological work is being carried out in the framing of women as subjects of coaching? Who authorises the coach to speak, and in whose voice are they authorised to do so? Do these programmes disrupt existing power relations, or do they serve to discipline the group to accept existing leadership ideologies and norms? If they do disrupt power relations, how do they disrupt them?

My search for a better understanding of the assumptions and unintended consequences of certain coaching frameworks illuminated taken for granted ways of thinking within current practice and research on coaching. A small but growing group of researchers is also questioning the ethical implications of coaching in the context of orthodox thinking. For both individual and group coaching some troubling assumptions have been revealed buried within coaching frameworks (Bachkirova, 2024; Fatien-Diochon et al., 2022; Hurlow, 2022; Louis and Fatien-Diochon, 2018; Seiler, 2024), especially when aimed at women. My research is in no

way an in-depth inquiry into the complex themes of gender and the organisation. Far more experienced researchers have already addressed such themes. Rather, my work is an invitation for group coaching practitioners and researchers to be more open to a critical, plural and social perspective by looking at practice-based research. The value of more practice-based accounts; where coaches, coaching clients and organisational researchers can increase their awareness of how the professionalisation of coaching practice and the drive to use digital coaching tools might actually be limiting the spaces for women to speak, is highlighted throughout this thesis. Drawing on more critical feminist thinkers, pragmatist philosophy, social theories, complex responsive processes of relating and group analysis my research highlights how adherence to conformity is encouraged in group coaching sessions and how noncompliance or speaking out in criticism of diversity efforts is suppressed. My research takes up the themes of what is being reproduced when we speak of gender diversity, and the relation to power, resistance and ethics, which are intricately linked to the professional context in which I work as a freelance coach. I will first explain this, before continuing with a brief introduction to the research approach and to my research question.

Professional context

Organisational coaching developed in the 1980s alongside the rise of the private business school. Business schools were instrumental in the positioning of organisational coaching ‘as a human relations development process that involves a structured approach to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the client’ (Cox et al., 2018, p. xxix). The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the source of one of the assumptions about who is the client being coached. The main assumption is that the coachee (the recipient of the coaching) is an independent agent who can maximise their potential through the coaching process (ICF, 2024). I trained in 2018 with the ICF, one of several professional coaching bodies that offers an accreditation service. Coaching methods and frameworks rely on a host of theories, many of which are based on the thinking that human development is an individual planned, controlled change process (Cavicchia and Gilbert, 2019). It is accepted that the coach, who is expected to be value-free and neutral (Hurlow, 2022), can work with the coachee through a series of methodologies or process steps to reach an agreed outcome and ‘unlock’ the coachee’s previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity, and leadership (ICF, 2024).

In this thesis I refer to the ICF definition of coaching as ‘partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential’ (ICF, 2024). Accreditation claims to legitimise the practice of coaching by introducing more professional standards and to regulate the services offered by the coach on behalf of the client. It is interesting that despite the widespread use of group coaching in leadership development, the ICF is relatively quiet on the theme of the differences between individual and group coaching, aside from defining a group as a collection of individuals. What is not often addressed is who is authorising group coaching. My training also relied on many ideas and methods developed by Kets de Vries (2005; 2006; 2014). He emphasises the importance of understanding group psychology, given that group coaching often brings out collective issues that affect the dynamics within the group. To date, surprisingly little research has been

done on group coaching, and even less has been done on how the practice of a group coach has developed when coaching women (Seiler, 2024).

The growth of coaching interventions aimed specifically at women has coincided with a global drive to increase the number of women in senior positions (through, for example, the European Union (EU) economic legislation [Directive EU 2022/2381]), concerning the introduction of compulsory quota systems and corporate governance directives. Across the EU, the aim to ensure that 40% of all non-executive director positions in publicly listed companies are held by underrepresented genders, meaning a focus on women. Under the directive, European companies have until 2026 to achieve these targets. Since the directive came into force, there has been more critical interest in how coaching is contributing to the narrative of advancing women into senior positions. It is assumed that the aims of the coaching sessions for women are based on ideas of personal goal setting and the achievement of organisational objectives (Bierema et al., 2023; Fatien-Diochon et al., 2022). Such claims place the organisation – and not the coachee – at the centre of the work of a group coach. Hence, the coach is often not sure who is being served by group coaching interventions, which adds complexity to the question of whose voice the coach speaks in and to the question of what work is being carried out?

Organisational coaching does, however, lack a robust theoretical base, and it has tended to rely on positive psychology and psychotherapy (Cavicchia and Gilbert, 2019). Group coaching has developed from a mix of, among other ideas, systems theory, group analysis, dyadic coaching models and facilitation (Seiler, 2024). I have approached theorising about group coaching in this inquiry both through the lens of my ICF training and by drawing on insights from the group analytic tradition (Foulkes, 1948). My research has been undertaken within the professional context affected by the rise of digital coaching platform providers. With the recent arrival of coaching platforms, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) presents a further complex question on how gender is represented. Is the data being used already biased against women (Criado-Perez, 2020)? If so, what are the implications for the women who are framed as the subject of women-in-leadership development programmes assigned a coach? My thesis covers how a push towards digitisation from organisational clients is making it increasingly difficult to address such ethical challenges, especially when the accreditation bodies are largely silent on such dilemmas. Having introduced my professional context, I will now briefly introduce the research approach and my research question before outlining how the remainder of the thesis is presented.

Research approach

The DMan is as a professional doctorate, equivalent to a PhD, which offers a view of organisations as complex, dynamic sites of social interaction (Stacey, 2010). The programme challenges conventional management thinking by emphasising unpredictability and emergence in everyday activities. The researchers on the programme, who are working practitioners, use a critical management approach aimed at developing a better understanding of experience as part of the patterns of organisational life. The background to this research approach, which was developed at the University of Hertfordshire by Ralph Stacey and his colleagues (Stacey et al., 2000), is a 'group-based pedagogy with an interdisciplinary research perspective combining natural and social sciences' (Mowles, 2024a,

p. xiv). I will explore the full method in Chapter 3; for the purpose of this introduction, I will provide an orientation that is helpful for understanding the projects in the next chapter (Chapter 2).

Chapter 2 presents four interlinked exploratory projects which form my inquiry. Unlike the structure of most doctorates, the four projects are written during the duration of the programme, and a synopsis articulates my contribution to theory and practice. This is not as a comprehensive analysis and assessment of everything to do with gender and coaching but as a practice-based inquiry into aspects of group coaching for women that allow me to contribute to theory and practice. In each project I highlight how I have had to improvise and negotiate in moments of uncertainty, and how I have come to interpret recurring habits and patterns in conflictual relations with others through looking at the cultural and situation context. Complex responsive processes of relating, on which this thesis heavily relies, has at its heart the very human richness of human experience in relation to practice problems. As a foundational way of thinking complex responsive processes of relating (developed by Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw at part of the research approach) is an attempt to describe the paradigm of thinking, researching and acting which 'privileges relationships, process and collaborating, uniting the knower and the known in paradoxical tension' (Mowles, 2024a, p. xv). By this, how things unfold in everyday activities and how meaning is made through doing, means movements in theorising and movements in practice evolve in unpredictable and uncertain ways (Chauhan and Mowles, 2024). Therefore, I am not making any claims of truth but aim to offer a contribution to research by inquiring into the ongoing debate on coaching practice, specifically power relations in group coaching for women, based on first person narrative accounts.

The first project is written as an 'intellectual autobiography' (Chauhan and Mowles, 2024, p. 9) in which I explore how my positionality and habits have become patterns through my own socialisation process. In writing my first project, I started to identify and problematise habits such as self-silencing and moments of cynicism that I had been relying on in my thirty-plus years of organisational life. Thematic questions arose within my everyday work, specifically around the meaning and representation of gender, which I went on to explore in increasing depth during the second, third and fourth projects. Projects Two to Four are perspectives on paying attention to my own experiences in relation to others; my positionality, language, embodied emotions and the ways I have come to act in moments of uncertainty. Each of these projects begins with a different narrative account of events in my professional life. In each, I start to pay attention to my experiences during group coaching as part of women-in-leadership development programmes, especially those that announce quotas for women as part of gender diversity initiatives. Noticing why (and how) I have been relying on certain habits within my practice as a group coach suggests that this happens more often when confusion and power struggles arise over who is agreeing to coach whom. As a result, I often find myself negotiating between many people, often with conflicting interests and values. During these moments, a turn to the code of ethics of my profession has not helped - either the topic is not mentioned, or contradictory ideas are offered. Exploring possible interpretations of the narrative events in my projects, I have been drawing on more critical literature and engaging with the wider research community to try to find possible alternative theories. The four projects combine to form the 'data' of my research inquiry over three years.

The methodological approach of the programme is to notice the complex dynamics of organisational life by inquiring into what is happening in the everyday experience in the practice of the researcher:

One can only really understand an organization from within the local interaction in which global tendencies to act are taken up. This means that the insights/findings of the research must arise in the researcher's reflection on the microdetail of his or her own experience of interaction with others (Mowles, 2022, p. 226).

To avoid this research being no more than an inquiry into my own personal experience as a group coach and researcher manager, my interpretations have been challenged through my participation in the DMan programme's research community. Four times a year over three years, the research community meets for a four-day residential. In between residential sessions, smaller learning sets of four researchers and a main supervisor meet to read and comment on each other's work. I have benefited from other members of the research community critiquing my interpretation of my narratives, as I have critiqued theirs. Being questioned by others, and questioning them in return, arguably allows researchers to take a more detached approach in what social theorist Norbert Elias calls the paradox of involvement and detachment (1987). It was through being questioned on my research as part of the community that I have been able to develop more reflexive thinking. Critical reflexivity as a form of thinking about one's own thinking, has led me to observe when strong emotions arise. By looking at what might be shaping those feelings I have been able to view alternative ways in which broader social and organisational power dynamics operate beyond my own interpretation. Arguably the whole research method is a way to understand the creation of knowledge as a social process, in a challenge to realism. By interrogating and reflecting back on the interpretations of the experience described in each narrative I have been able to position central research themes and thereby articulate my research question as:

How do group coaches navigate ethical challenges arising from simplified ways of thinking about gender, power and ethics in coaching practice?

In Chapter 3 I will explore some of the key ideas from complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey et al., 2000; Stacey and Mowles, 2016), which are central to my research and understanding how knowledge emerges between and within group dynamics. I will also discuss some of the ethical considerations I faced within this process. The next chapter contains my four interlinked projects, which are set against the professional context I described earlier in this introduction. I wrote these projects as I progressed through my inquiry and began to explore and get to grips with the ideas within complex responsive processes of relating. In line with my ethics committee submission, all names, identities, locations and companies have been anonymised, so they do not identify specific people or events. The rest of this thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2: Four interlinked projects
Chapter 3: Research method
Chapter 4: Synopsis
Chapter 5: Contribution to knowledge and practice
References.

2. Four interlinked projects

This chapter comprises four projects. The first project is an account of my preconceptions and ways of thinking. The remaining sequential projects each start with a narrative account of a work situation which I found troubling. These accounts have been reflected upon and iterated on at least four times using ideas from critical feminism, pragmatist philosophy, complex responsive processes of relating, social theory and group analysis. Each project reflects how I have become increasingly able to detach from my involvement in the experience. I start with outlining my resistance to even discussing the theme of women-in-leadership in Project One; through to noticing moments when ethical dilemmas appear in relation to group coaching in programmes aimed at women-in-leadership. The focus is on everyday moments of doubt and uncertainty within my professional context, as the centre of my inquiry. As I progressed over time with writing the projects, I started to engage with what might be alternative interpretations of my own repeating patterns, based on taken for granted assumptions of meaning that arise in conflicting moments between and with coaching groups. I have presented the projects as they were written. In my synopsis, Chapter 4, I will reflect and look at the movement of my own thinking as part of a developing ability to adopt a more critical and reflexive approach.

Project One: A lapsed feminist's first critical reading on resistance

Introduction

'I do not want to write about women in organisations. I have been having this conversation for 30 years and really, I have nothing more to say.'

My self-talk is racing through my head at the first meeting of my learning set for a doctorate, where draft projects are reviewed by other students and by my supervisor. I am being asked why I am resistant to writing about the issues facing women in organisations. The way I think is highly influenced by how I understand gender as constructed. I resist the notion of being labelled a 'female' manager and over the years I have conditioned myself to tone down my feminist-inspired identity. In some ways, I am feeling my resistance as being self-defeating through my acts of masking my femaleness and 'going into camouflage' (Sinclair, 2000b; 2019).

The year is 2022 – three years since the beginning of a global pandemic that highlighted just how unequal global social groupings are. I am some way into a freelance career in executive coaching, facilitation, and writing management development programmes for business schools and private organisational clients. The disruption to my established routines and the personal isolation caused by the pandemic leads me to think deeply about aspects of the coaching conversations I am having. Clients often mention themes of feeling powerless and uncertain. I am curious. What is going on?

By April, travel restrictions due to the global pandemic across Europe loosened. I joined the first residential weekend for the DMan programme at the University of Hertfordshire in England, which offers global practising managers, consultants and coaches the opportunity to work on research as a narrative inquiry that describes what is going on in their area of work. In an emerging approach to research, students use theories from complexity sciences taken

from (among others) sociology, philosophy, anthropology, group analytic theory and social psychology. One of the main theoretical backdrops referred to during the programme is complex responsive processes of relating, 'a paradox of immersing in and abstracting from experience' (Stacey, 2010, p. 226). I am feeling unsettled about starting to write about how I have, for decades, taken for granted the everyday thinking of the dominant narrative of leadership and management in my work.

To explore what I mean when I say, 'taken for granted,' I start to recount why I might experience this dominant narrative of management as hostile and to acknowledge how uneasy I feel when facilitating conversations about women in my work. The notion that changing the conversation in organisations will alter the way we think, and act (Shaw, 2002) makes me curious about how I position what I do. Reconstructing my experiences in resisting the notion of gender identity in the world in which I have been socialised reflects some of my own nomadic thinking and, critically, how I act in everyday interactions. The conclusion at the end of this project summarises the possible research questions on gender identity, power, and resistance, on which I would like to focus.

Being a girl in the top 5%

As a young girl I loved to identify with the fictional character Jo March from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1880). Jo was easily the least feminine character in the book, an imagined figure who loved reading and shunned the traditions meant for women of the day. It was reading Alcott's first novel that made me realise how historically women made do with the best of their incredibly limited options, which was indeed my own mother's experience.

I was born into a family of girls, me being the middle daughter. My father was an urban economist from the UK, my mother a secretary from the US. They met and married in Africa where my older sister was born. We travelled throughout Africa before moving on to Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, and the UK. During my childhood I was often in the care of nannies and domestic female staff, who gave up looking after their own families to care for mine. Many of these women never had the opportunity to learn to read or write, which often excluded them from the local financial system. I was to experience some of that exclusion with my own mother, who tried to leave the marriage but could not open a bank account on her own without my father's signature.

At the time my family arrived in Hong Kong, I was turning 12. My mother had had no other option but to stay with my father, as she had failed to gain access to finances. He had taken a teaching post at the local university in Hong Kong and was preoccupied with the idea that education was the single most important legacy he should leave, which he had inherited from his father, a school principal. He was often quoted as saying, 'be in the top 5% of the world; only 5% go to university, be among them.' My sisters and I studied hard, my friendship circles were with other children who were also keen to study, and our apartment was often filled with the sound of debates among university students.

I was introduced to *Little Women* at school. Island School in Hong Kong referred to itself as 'No Ordinary School' and had been set up as a vocational school in the English language (Forse, 2007). We were a mixed group of students with transient, nomadic lives; we knew that most of us, if not all, would leave the island for higher education or work, as China resumed

ownership. School life gave me the opportunity to act, debate and read poetry in open sessions to train my voice to be strong, which I used in public speaking and recitals. A special figure who influenced my thinking on the wisdom of a lifetime with books was the principal, 'Jonty', C: J Driver, who had spent time as a prisoner of conscience under the South African apartheid system. In his autobiography (Driver, 2016), he wrote about his experiences of standing against apartheid, where he recounted ending up in the UK after ninety days of solitary confinement in South Africa, stateless and exiled. As I recall, reading these accounts, I took the concept of resistance to be not only difficult but also punishable.

Working hard to be independent: why not me?

When I turned seventeen and had finished my A-levels, my mother emigrated with us to Britain to get us into what were then free university places. My parents divorced the following year, when my mother was fifty; my father remained in Hong Kong, where he died shortly before my twenty-fourth birthday. His death added to the financial strain experienced by my mother, as she had no access to his pension. Even today, when I have easy access to economic systems, financial independence drives much of my thinking and action.

I studied management sciences at Warwick University, which espoused a traditional way of thinking of an organisation as a 'whole system,' which can be modelled mathematically, controlled by an autonomous rational group of senior managers known as 'leaders,' and influenced by the goal of maximising financial return (Stacey, 2010, p. 50). The discipline represented the origins of work on circular causality and quantitative mathematical modelling of cybernetic systems (Beer, 1959). It also further reinforced my thinking from A-level economics and maths that free markets are made up of the collective actions of rational, educated individuals who are acting under free choice to produce optimal outcomes (Smith, 1776).

The pedagogical approach at university was that of the conventional professor presenting his book and works for a semester, with an examination at the end. There was little or no interaction between the students and the teaching staff. I was only one of five women on the degree course, which alone was surprising given that Germaine Greer had been a lecturer at Warwick and published her famous book *The Female Eunuch* during her tenure (Greer, 1970). My belonging to the top 5% as a woman made my mother immensely proud of having overcome her own economic struggle, but it also set up a sense of responsibility in me to make the most of this opportunity. My mother had been left unable to rent a property or get a mortgage without my father's name when we arrived in England and had to plead to the bank manager to 'believe in her'. I remember feeling indignant on her behalf for being forced into what I saw as an act of female subservience.

Living in a shared house with other young women, I often had conversations that turned to our experiences of university life. Many of us were female student minorities in our subjects. One flatmate was the sole woman on her engineering programme. As I became aware of my own sexuality, I joined the university feminist movement, which set out to deny the social rules that were grounded on our bodies. A great deal of the feminist literature of the time focused on the repression of women based on our physical form and my opposition was towards the imagined powerful group of elite men who made choices on our behalf based on

our biology – the so-called Patriarchy. I re-read the iconic works of Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote:

Now, woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage (De Beauvoir 1949, p. 29).

I identified my cause as one fighting against the economic exclusion of women from the financial system when a woman stays at home, as my mother had fallen foul of.

The choice of my career in finance on leaving university was informed by my belief that I could achieve my own free choice towards economic inclusion. The bank I joined offered to sponsor an MBA in Capital Markets, which made it an attractive option. Professional management education was prized by aspiring managers during the late 1980s – partly for status reasons and partly to increase personal salary offers. Capital Asset Pricing Models, the basis of the study offered by City University Business School (CUBS), is a mathematical model for pricing financial assets based on their risk and financial return. The rise of investment capitalism had had a profound effect on the way CUBS prepared students by teaching rational economic thinking and advocating for the role of managers as financial agents responsible for maximising shareholder returns (Stacey, 2010, p. 43). I went to hear a female lecturer, Leah Hertz, speak at CUBS on how women should contribute more to business, and I was inspired by her rally cry of 'Why not you?' In her later book *The Business Amazons* she wrote:

The key to every success story: ambition. The urgent desire to do better. Frustration which is common among women, dissatisfaction with their status and opportunities, could be ambition's greatest spur. (...) The other extras that can help you turn a dream into reality are hard work and tenacity (Hertz, 1986, p. 258).

I recognised in her work the fantasy I already believed: that all success took was hard work and self-reliance. As one of a 'top' group of educated women, my focus was on getting down to the task of simply being more tenacious and working even harder.

The act of being female – did I misread my possibilities?

At age twenty-three, I worked as part of a group of trainees who were learning how to be financial pricing researchers for the investment trading desk. London was aspiring to become the financial epicentre of Europe, as deregulation of financial products and the sale of British state-owned enterprises formed a large part of the political re-election manifesto. The bank had a growing product portfolio and I was involved in the mathematical modelling for pricing widely differing financial products.

I accepted the taken-for-granted dominant discourse on power and those who had it:

The view which tends to prevail in the dominant discourse on organizations and their management in which power is thought to be possessed by

someone who can use 'it' to get others, sometimes force others, to do what they would not otherwise have done (Stacey, 2010, p. 180).

Taken this way, to me the senior male traders were all-powerful. They would issue more pricing instructions extremely late into the mathematical modelling, which would negate the equations. We trainees re-worked the models, usually in teams of four and often late into the night, to cope with these changes. I was most often teamed up with the only other female trainee, an extremely smart mathematician who left the bank before the year was up for a job with a much higher salary. I learned to cope with, or at least not take personally, the stereotypically aggressive masculine language that was used on the trading floor. It was a high-pressure place to work, with huge individual financial rewards or losses. I took toxic language to be part of the 'act' that the all-male group of traders put on to give the impression that maximising shareholders' (and their own) returns was down to individual effort. I was not earning fees for the bank; therefore, my role was viewed as less powerful by the traders, and I needed to work harder and be more tenacious to earn my place.

The ideas that I grew up with – little women get excluded from economic opportunity, resistance is punishable, and free markets produce optimal results – gave rise to me experiencing the bank as very hostile. In one instance, one of my fellow trainees approached me during a routine fire practice and told me the department had a bet on who could give me the best sexual experience of my life, as proxy for *which one of them was a real man?* I remember feeling embarrassed for my colleagues and especially for my boss, who gave me a metaphorical thumbs up sign as I must have looked at him during this exchange. My response was to internalise the questions on my place in this grouping: what is a real woman, if there is a real man? Who gets to decide? Is it safe to even be here?

As I reflect on this experience, I can identify more with what might really have been going on. Viewing power as less about who can force others in an organisation to do something and more about the establishment of legitimacy, men acting together in this way in public could be regarded as resisting the legitimacy of women in banking. Banking was, and remains, a traditional, masculine industry where the white and male 'elite' dominate. It might also be regarded as men acting as they would like to see themselves, to be accepted as part of an in-group (Scott, 1990).

In *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, Scott (1990, p. 79) points to the pattern of misreading the possibilities emancipation can give women, and I would relate this perspective to my imagined proposition that we would have little distinction between us as trainees. Accepting aggressive behaviour to earn one's place as a trainee, in a hostile environment, links to why I was misreading my own possibilities and not thinking about the wider problematic experience of regular acts of workplace sexism. I resigned from the bank after my MBA, exhausted by what felt like my own failure to act - far removed from my ideological notion of inclusive meritocracy. Looking for options to support self-reliance and financial independence, I moved to a new career in sales.

What games am I part of when I adopt my explicit feminist stance?

At age twenty-five, I took on my first managerial job in a global sales role for a family-owned manufacturing company. My work incorporated mathematically forecasting the sales

potential for a given region, assigning client relationships roles to my team and aligning call frequency with production demand forecasts. My boss, Lim, was chair of the British/Hong Kong Management Association and had written several academic works on marketing and sales. We had a lot in common from our shared Asian experiences and I viewed him as a good teacher and mentor. The other women in the company were on the shop floor operating light electronic machines or in the administration office, an experience of sex-segregated role bias that I was to commonly experience in later life.

I was proud when I was promoted and became the first woman on the senior management team; after all, I had by now demonstrated my ambition, tenacity, and hard work. My role was to increase global sales and I used a popular approach to motivation that focuses on matching individual choice and capability to the achievement of goals. Maslow's (1943) motivation model proposes five hierarchical 'needs' of individuals arranged in an ascending pyramid. I used what I saw as my skill in rational thinking to set targets and agree commission structures; each member of my team presenting their own motivation and views on what they wanted. When we finally agreed by collective discussion on the final structures, my thinking was starting to move away from strict rational choice to a more pragmatic view of what I was experiencing in everyday life. Often, our meetings emerged as chaotic, held in response to production shift changes or raw material delays, rather than the disciplined agendas I tried (and mostly failed) to impose. At this stage, I was still largely thinking of who had power along hierarchical lines of the dominant discourse:

Understood in this way, the use of power is judged to be unethical, especially as it is often equated with manipulation. This view leads to a call for the empowering of the many by the few (meaning that the few should give some of their power to the many), and even those who do not share the view that power is unethical at least argue that empowerment is a form of motivation that improves performance and so is desirable in a rational kind of way (Stacey, 2010, p. 180).

While Lim and I had always been in a friendly dialogue on empowerment over the years, the founder and owner of the business Richard and I often disagreed. I had from the beginning of my employment found myself uneasy around him, experiencing his acts of temper – throwing things, and shouting during meetings – as personally frightening. After the experience at the bank, I felt a sense of responsibility to call out what I experienced as his patriarchal behaviour, even though my male colleagues did not seem openly concerned by it. I identified with strong feelings of indignation about being somehow forced into a subservient relationship with him, in a replay of my own family dynamics.

Taking further Scott's reading of power – 'that relations of power are at the same time relations of resistance' (Scott, 1990, p. 45) – my challenge to Richard's ideas and language could have been seen by him as challenging his position and even highlighting my lack of subversiveness. At one of my last management meetings, he referred to me as 'that woman in sales' and said I had used my feminist dogma once too often when openly speaking out against his refusal to allow part-time working, which mostly affected the female staff. When I was told I was being made redundant in the sixth month of my pregnancy, I felt I was being personally punished for acts of resistance and stripped of part of my working identity.

Stacey goes further in his analysis of Scott's theory of power and resistance by drawing on work from sociologists Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. People do not do anything, Stacey (2010) concludes, but act based on interests in everyday ordinary relational interactions. Quoting Bourdieu he relates 'playing the game' in accordance with the way one perceives the social world – the *habitus*:

However, we also have the capacity to become aware of our preoccupation with the game, to reflect upon our practical action, which expresses the *habitus* in which we live, in order to make conscious sense of what we are doing (Stacey, 2010, p. 108).

In opening my account of experience and an emerging pattern of living through acts of sexism and sex discrimination, the complex dynamic relations of the many concepts within my own feminist inspired agenda imply that I often play in more than one game. I can only be critical of the decision to exclude me from the business while I was pregnant due to there being a law prohibiting such actions against women in western society. I went forward with a claim for unfair dismissal just before my son was born. For six months I was involved with lawyers in a depressingly slow process where I was cited as being a 'difficult, aggressive woman,' eventually winning a substantial unfair dismissal claim. Resistance in 'playing the game' in line with the traditional narrative of who held power led me to the very worst of my fears - economic exclusion, punishment and a feeling of hopelessness.

If I am so rational in my thinking, what am I resisting now?

After the birth of my second son, I struggled with the notion of being a non-working mother, finding it lonely and misaligned with how I had imagined myself. Not having paid work also meant that, at the time, it was not possible to maintain pension payments and ensure my own future financial security. I felt so miserable and defeated at not being economically self-reliant that after a few years at home, I started freelancing as a sales trainer, developing a portfolio of sales management accreditations. My feelings of boredom and isolation when attending social groupings, such as toddler groups or pre-school events (which I viewed as in some way 'invisible' work in society) caused me to deeply question the playing field as a feminist, where daily life was riddled with tiresome gender stereotypical struggles. If looking after children was keeping women in a state of permanent financial inequality, resistance against the accepted patriarchal systems felt at times like an unbearable personal struggle.

Shortly before my fortieth birthday, we moved with the children to South Africa. At home in Cape Town, ten years after the fall of apartheid, I found my energy return through being able to join in with different diverse conversations about power, resistance, economic participation, race and sex. A new government policy had been introduced with a specific focus on women: black economic empowerment (BEE) aimed to ensure that previously disadvantaged individuals (PDI) under apartheid were awarded opportunities. I met inspirational women at conferences and in discussion groups on PDI, women who had endured systematic exclusion for generations, and their stories of subversive resistance made my own conflicts seem somehow a bit less individualised failure and more generalised.

At one conference I met Ona, a young aspiring black woman, who had just left her job at a major consultancy firm. She offered me a role as change manager in her new team to develop and launch a change programme affecting thirty thousand employees using stratified systems theory (Jacques, 1989). The programme was managed by our executive committee sponsor, Albert, who explained that our aim was to work towards the goals of offering more opportunities for aspiring black managers while at the same time providing an open platform for senior white managers to exit the business. Albert had experienced most of his career under apartheid and had great hopes for BEE. As a team we were excited by the new opportunities our project would bring. Ona and I developed ideas for how to restructure the organisation based on what Jacques (1989, pp. 33–42) refers to as the managerial accountability hierarchy. In these ideas hierarchy is understood to be using empowerment as a form of motivation.

Stratified systems theory takes two perspectives of hierarchy: time (tasks individuals undertake in organisations, divided semi-naturally into seven distinct time spans); and cognitive ability (the mental capacity required to manage these time spans, which comes from maturing skills and experience). In reflecting on how I approached my role, two important critical limitations were omitted in my own thinking, which seem more obvious from an alternative perspective of the complexity sciences. The first: by setting one of the criteria as maturing skills and experience, we privileged the very few PDI candidates who had access to university education. Lack of qualifications in South Africa, especially for women, was more of a barrier to economic equality than all the other social issues at play. I was effectively building back 'elite' status quo groupings into the model. The second: looking at only the rational notion of predictable change management, I did not pay attention to the wider social changes happening outside the organisation.

Management is a discipline predicated on the idea that managers decide, are in control and can change things at will: they have a variety of tools and techniques to turn the organisation from one state to another and to plan, predict and keep things running smoothly. The alternative perspective, suggests Mowles (2022) is 'extrapolating from the (complex adaptive systems) model, is that the organization arises because of everyone's activities, which, because it brings about a colliding of intention and understanding, is both predictable and unpredictable of outcome' (Mowles, 2022, p. 22).

Having been given the mandate by Albert to use a specific change approach taken from Lewin (1949) called Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze, my focus was on what tools would sustain aspects of new 'desired' behaviour in managers. The duality of Lewin's concept was based on the notion of autonomous individuals observing the organisation as a complete system, which is still part of orthodox management thinking today (Griffin, 2002). I was to take note of the current behavioural patterns of individual managers and, using group environments, iterate new change outcomes by changing social groupings. My task was to select and train two hundred and fifty 'change leaders' – a term that refers to a subset of the general management team who play an active part in the new social groupings (Kanter, 1984). Using a series of 'town hall'-style large group conferences, we designed agendas to take what were known as 'pulse checks' to measure feelings and emotions among managers. I found myself using a great deal of the experience and training I had gained in selling, especially how to read a group and how to respond to open questions.

Seeing power as a function of social relations, as the sociologists contend, the proposed changes to groupings during the change approach required mainly white, male managers to give up hierarchical power to PDI candidates, including and up to the executive committee and the board. In my experience, members of traditional elite groupings never enthusiastically back any move which questions their legitimacy or changes their social status. However, the trade unions did support our mandate and gave me the formal approval to move ahead.

By the time our team was ready to run the town halls, an independent consultancy led by Peire, a seasoned South African academic, was appointed by the CEO. He had a different approach and did not want to use Lewin's notion of autonomous individuals, instead proposing to encourage local managers to act in a way that would maintain social disequilibrium as the driver for change – or 'sitting in the fire,' as he referred to it. Perhaps he could observe the inexperience we had as a team, but in my thinking, I judged him to be yet another white, elite overpowering male who did not want to have his legitimacy questioned. He took to checking in on me, requesting re-writes of documents I was working on, adding his own material into the presentations, and tuning up at town halls without being invited. I responded by resisting his requests, adding his material into the appendixes of management meeting notes, and using my strong voice at town halls in a preoccupation with the familial, stereotypical game of power play. Paying attention to the messy reality of what goes on in the internal dynamics of power and discourse which the philosopher Michel Foucault refers to as 'the way in which certain actions modify others' (Foucault, 1982, p. 788), I reflect now that Peire and I were both working from the same rational thinking about organisations as whole systems and the predicated idea that change could be designed from a central position. We represented and tried to modify each other's ideas as somehow better or more approved than the others, as if we could 'choose events, designs and outcomes solely from a centralised position' (Mowles, 2022, p. 106).

News of our messy social relations reached the board; Ona and I were called to present our programme status at a meeting in the autumn and to give an account of ourselves. It became noticeably clear during a heated exchange that the board did not intend to give up any power, precisely because they all belonged to the traditional grouping of the 'elite'. I was told to place greater emphasis on the programme being conducted in a 'more orderly' way. I understood that I was being told to behave by giving the board more of a sense of security, rather than talk about what was happening. It was no surprise that our programme was closed by the board before the year ended. What does resonate with me was the observation that my continued pattern of silent resistance overlooked the reality of my own complex, dynamic social relations for which is my understanding of gender was always present. From my early reading of de Beauvoir (1949), gender is considered to many readers to be constructed. Social construct theorists refer to this as

One core idea of early gender theorists was that biological differences between the sexes do not determine gender, gender attributes, or gender relations. Before feminists began their work this was far from obvious. Gender was, in the first analyses, thought of as an add-on to physiology, the contingent of the social world. Gender is this conception, is a "constitutive social construction (Hacking, 1999, p 8).

Yet if gender is a social construction, its effects are felt as real in everyday interaction, shaping the experience of inequality and power. This started to feel like an act of subordination.

Going into camouflage – is this my subversive performance?

At the start of 2007, I was offered an opportunity to move to Australia to join a global insurance company, a role offered by Amanda in her position as director of human resources. We had worked together in South Africa, experienced the limitations to thinking about organisations as whole systems, and wanted to try novel approaches using emergent conversation. I had come across the concept of working with everyday emergent conversations in organisations while working with Chris Rodgers (Rodgers, 2006).

Moving to Australia, and meeting new groups of women, reinforced my interest in female groupings as I heard about their experiences of exclusion. My interest was also sparked by reading about the history of local struggles for women in Australia. When I arrived, the country was engrossed in a political discussion on sexist behaviour in government, and I was warned to expect racism and sexism in the Australian workplace (The experiences of sexism against the then Premier Minister, Julia Gillard are recounted in Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala, 2020).

The week before I started, I had a reunion lunch with Amanda, where she warned me to expect what she called ‘non-friendly tones’ from the external consultants working with the board on the cost-reductionist business case. On my first day, I saw one of the consultants underneath my desk on the telephone. I asked her what was happening and she looked embarrassed as she explained that she was calling the nanny to check on the children but that as an external consultant, she was not allowed to make personal calls during billable working client hours. It was the only time I saw her, as she was reassigned to another project. I wondered, based on my own self-perception, if she had been punished for speaking out to me.

The next day, Brian was introduced to me as the external lead consultant, and Max as the external principal, both of whom reported to the CEO. This struck me as a complex arrangement for who held which responsibilities. Brian told me after my on-boarding phase that he was looking for ‘one throat to choke’ as an aggressive joke about holding one person accountable for the change implementation. Both Brian and Max started work at 10.30 am and worked late into the evening but it was difficult for me to catch up with emails after picking my children up from school at 4.30 pm. Amanda and I discussed how difficult it was to work under these conditions, as she also had a young family.

Max was very experienced at board-level groupings. He was in constant communication with the CEO and started to assume more of the lead, which meant that Amanda was losing her voice on the project. Over the months, I felt a keen sense that I was being told to ‘perform’ the tasks Max distributed, especially after Amanda decided she had been constrained enough and resigned. The idea of emergent conversation was de-scoped from the official project plan and I was instructed to ‘perform’ a very classic approach from John Kotter (1996) prescribed by Max. The model is another rational notion of predictable change management, based on the organisation as a ‘whole system’ with an autonomous individual leader steering change through eight top-down steps. The resulting approach based on penguin fable: telling

‘inspirational’ stories to influence behaviour and defuse ‘negative’ emotions experienced during change (Kotter, 1996) is to my view, infantile.

Rather than seeing our ideological struggles as a natural outcome of the different approaches to change, or the possibility of negotiating power relations with Max, I saw any attempt to resist his instructions as a danger to continuing to work on the project. He claimed the ‘big opportunity’ from Kotter (2001) as his own constant phrase. On one occasion, he called me over to talk about my work and his vision for me in the ‘big opportunity’. Giving me unsolicited feedback on what he saw as my over-friendly relationship with the ‘girls from change,’ as he called the trainers, he told me that if I was to be taken seriously, I should not be around them. I simply stopped speaking up in meetings or bothering to offer a different view. In neither openly lobbying for Amanda nor standing up for the change team, I started to think less of myself as a feminist and more of a woman hiding in plain sight to survive. Amanda Sinclair (2005; 2011; 2019) argues that we have come to expect our leaders to be a certain type of person – most often a tough, heterosexual male without the constraints of family:

Indeed, being ‘seen’ as a woman diminishes one's leadership. Behaviours which draw attention to sex – such as displays of ever femininity, being pregnant, referencing family, wearing colourful or expressive clothes – typically diminish a woman's leadership potential in the eyes of the observer.... This explains why women consciously unconsciously, have used all sorts of strategies to conceal gender and sexuality, to camouflage, to blend in rather than stand out. By dressing in particular ways, by playing along with the jokes, by not supporting other women, by not allowing oneself to be associated with ‘women's issues’ or by seeking to minimise one's absence from the workplace for maternal or family reasons, women have sought to reduce the visibility and the impact of their gender and sexuality (Sinclair, 2005, p. 178).

The board took on the very practical implementation plan from Max and I reflect on how positively managers relate to the openly public narratives of certainty. Understanding resistance through what Scott refers to as the ‘hidden transcripts’ of communication from subordinated groups and the wider social evolution of jokes (Scott, 1990), together with Fine's view of relinquishing power to subversive performances (Fine, 2010), the ‘girls from change’ took to grumbling repeatedly together about Max and Brian. We even developed a cynical in-group joke taken from a Disney cartoon, where the penguins watch a ship sail towards an iceberg: ‘Shall we tell them there is an iceberg there? No, girlies from change, smile and wave, smile and wave and look pretty now’.

Becoming cynical – is this power or resistance?

In 2010, as the project in Australia ended, I was offered a German based change management role working back with my former South African colleagues. I had developed my thinking to be sufficiently critical of planned change approaches and to pay attention to what was happening to relationships between people in the local functions and countries. The experiences of working with traditional external consultants led me to also be aware of the strong relational role that they play in power constellations. The consulting partner in the new

project called himself a thought leader and spoke about leveraging all information up to the board as his repeating strategy. His team of consultants were very strategic in finding opportunities to communicate their actions upwards, often using heavily antagonistic language (such as 'war rooms,' 'up or out,' 'low hanging fruit,' 'war on talent,').

I wanted to try to explore other approaches for building relationships within groups less reliant on the spoken language, not least because I was very often the only native English speaker. The concept I used, 'clean space,' is from the work of David Grove's clean language – a form of non-verbal communication. The groups I facilitated might draw, act, dance, improvise or, if they want, produce no actions at all. As we use what emerges, working together with the local change teams is a continuous iterative process:

Clean Space is a developmental model that complex-adaptive systems (people) learn through embodied activity, feedback, and iteration (Tompkins and Lawley, 2003, p. 5).

The more I worked with concepts away from the traditional view of managers as autonomous individuals, the more I bumped up against the fixed, complete system thinking that dominates the consulting world.

I have become aware in writing this project of how I act when feeling powerless by disengaging, feeling angry and responding with cynicism. Gossiping and cynicism feel like what Scott calls a 'safe critique of power':

How we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct (Scott, 1990, p. xiii).

In reflecting here on the inquiry into my twelve-year career in change management, a conscious theme emerges. Working in change means going against the orthodox view of certainty. This leaves me dis-identifying myself with my role as a change practitioner, while still somehow acting daily in it to avoid conflict and feelings of powerlessness (Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Coming out of hiding: but what shall we do about the women?

By 2015, I was eager to get out of change management. My appointment to the position as programme director in executive education included being 'female' with international change practitioner experience. I understood the feeling of double-bind from the initial offer – yet again a representative female – but because I had already established a good working relationship with the dean, I felt we could work well together.

The privatisation of executive education, especially one based in Europe, where education is essentially free, presents many societal and ethical questions, identified by the dilemma of teaching a generalised concept of 'leadership' while at the same time acting as consultants to the same organisations (Khurana, 2007). I had found a way to reduce the pressure from the masculine environment, perhaps by not noticing it, in what Bourdieu (1990) refers to as a fish

in water. He suggests norms and social practice become invisible in the same way fish no longer feel the weight of the water they swim in.

When my colleagues asked me to launch a women-in-leadership programme, I first said no, as my other female colleague had done. A new programme was to be sponsored by the 30% Club, a global group which aims to boost female representation at board and CEO level. I had been part of such organisations since the age of twenty-three and I supposed that this sort of movement had made so little real progress that the concept of, yet another women-in-leadership programme seemed depressing; the pursuit of some utopian imagined feminist future while still labelling women leaders as 'niche'. Taking this cynical perspective, I wondered what I was being asked to prepare women for? Most of the existing programmes I researched taught women how to gain more self-esteem, how to act and speak up – and, in effect, how to show generalised masculine traits. There did not seem to be anything novel to challenge the stereotype of masculine by default leadership thinking most probably because:

The patriarchal politics of academia mean ideas of feminism have been positioned as a form of activism rather than a source of legitimate knowledge (Bell et al., 2019, p. 10).

When I moved to become a freelance executive coach and trained with the ICF, I started to reflect on the strength of my resistance to any form of conversation about diversity and women, especially my feeling that it is too difficult to change the conversation in organisations. My mixed and complex relationship with feminism meant I had adopted a more individualistic and somewhat binary view on what I thought was progressing in terms of women's rights. The paradox is that my actions are perhaps in themselves assuming gender is fixed and binary, perhaps even contradictory to knowledge creation. In not talking about what is going on in terms of inequality across a plurality of views, am I maintaining the very power relations I claim to critique?

What happens when I start to pay attention to complex responsive processes of relating?

After becoming an independent executive coach, I did get asked to work in women-in-leadership programmes, using a specific approach of group coaching. Group coaching in executive education is an experiential approach that draws upon several concepts associated with group analytics and didactic coaching. My experience of group coaching practice, defined as reflective coaching for senior managers who manage large complex teams (Kets de Vries, 2014), starts to reframe the notion of thought itself in groups and reframes how we pay attention to the language used in organisations (my own included) to become aware of taken-for-granted thinking.

During one programme I coached, a virtual programme during the global pandemic, the theme of diversity came up. I framed the theme as representing support for the organisation's value of belonging, which was the main topic being discussed. The conversation went horribly wrong. I found myself trotting out words like 'leading diversity' and 'managing inclusion'. These terms even now feel very messy and ambiguous. There are so many differences in dimensions of gender and diversity that intersect with each other that talking generally about gender diversity seemed to be unhelpful and vague. Perhaps being in an environment where women-in-leadership is so salient triggers an unintentional need in me to manage my own

anxiety. I started to present a rational business case as to why women are being presented to represent diversity and felt I was in danger of reducing inclusion to a predictable change management tool (Fine, 2010). I have reflected many times on this experience over the past few months. How is the detached, disembodied way I coach in such a contested field leading to my own feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness? How is the way I am thinking about the social context of inequality, gender diversity as a ubiquitous categorisation of women and the complex gendered response of relating, evoking in me a question on the ethics of what I do?

Conclusion

Two questions arise as I pay attention to a narrative inquiry on my own working life: why is the generalised thinking of traditional social groupings in organisations continuing; and in what way does resisting the strong narrative of leadership as masculine by default require an alternative way of thinking? The legacy from my family was the prize of education as *the goal*, because of being female. Being privileged by the complex legacy of an education as a westerner in colonial countries, it fell to me and my sisters to study hard and not to take for granted the opportunity we had been given. I translated this into the lifetime act of gaining economic opportunity through further education, influenced by my mother's experience of financial exclusion. Through my university studies, I was influenced by a 'whole systems' way of thinking about organisations, stereotypically presented by a male professor using a traditional pedagogical approach. Pushing against the traditional barriers for women in business, and keen on acquiring more credentials to gain access to the financial system, I joined the banking industry. Even today, finance is one of the most masculine, sex-segregated industries. Accepting the dominant discourse of power as held over others (Stacey, 2010), investment traders set the tone for toxic language, which I accepted *because* I had earned a right to be there. Experiencing sexism and sex discrimination in my early working career, being excluded from the work force during motherhood, and getting into power struggles, I questioned my early feminist thinking. I understand that my experience of being excluded from certain groupings has rarely ever been a single issue of 'men versus women' or a linear movement over time, but a complex response to the nomadic way in which I think and relate to others. When I moved continents to the global South, where the colonial legacy of inequality shapes all aspects of daily life, my thinking shifted away from feminism as a political activity representing the rights of all women towards the way in which power relations enable certain actions to modify other reactions (Foucault, 1982). I have narrated my position during destabilising change programmes and my acts of camouflage, where distancing, cynicism, and self-silencing against the dominant language of certainty have felt like some form of protection against the masculine metaphors of war being used in change management.

Taking the critical thinking idea of power as something that is exercised during complex responsive processes of relating rather than something that is possessed by individuals in the hierarchy, I am challenged to examine why I remain silent when my identity is put under pressure and why I tend to respond with acts of self-silencing and cynicism. As part of joining the DMan programme, I was *certain* that I did not want to talk about women in organisations. By taking my own experiences seriously, I would now like to progress to an exploration into how women resist being subordinated in organisations – both by looking at my own resistance and those with whom I interact – as constraining and enabling the changing conversation on power in organisations.

Project Two: Understanding resistance as a dynamic social process

Introduction

In Project Two I start to notice what happens to my practice when I think differently about the work that I do as a coach with groups in leadership development programmes. Here, I describe, in a narrative, my experience as a group coach with a coaching group as part of a well-established leadership development programme. Through exploring what happens in the conversations within groups, I start to shift my ideas towards the notion of self; not as a fixed concept, as I am describing to the group, but as something that is both developing and being constantly developed during the relationships between and within groups.

The idea that complex social processes influence our view of ourselves in our relation and interactions with others is taken from my developing research as a student on the DMan programme at University of Hertfordshire. I review my training and practice as a coach against some of the thinking from the programme – including pragmatist literature, social theory and complexity – to explore how leadership emerges in groups, rather than (as assumed) being held by an individual in a hierarchical position. Throughout this writing, I point to how emergent thinking is challenging my orthodox training, especially when my view of self is challenged, and I feel uncertain and vulnerable. Later in the project I explore the way I am thinking, by considering the wider social context of social inequality, which evokes questions on the ethics of my coaching practice.

Paying attention to my own ideas on resistance, I turn away from the orthodox view of resistance as an oppositional act of refusing to accept or comply with organisational control mechanisms (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), and towards contrasting theories on resistance as a complex responsive act that might act as a catalyst for change. I am trying to understand the struggles and contradictions that arise in groups when leadership development programmes call out specific identities as ‘niche,’ often based on differences along race or sex divisions, who need to be ‘managed’ to be included (Puwar, 2004). At the same time, these programmes claim to be inclusive, which can call out the inequalities in leadership positions by treating certain identities as outside the ‘norm’. There is a hidden assumption of what already exists as established. Resistance has been, in my experience, presented in organisational literature as a duality where workers refuse to obey managerial control. In my reading of feminist theory, resistance can be understood as activism against the so-called patriarchy, which historically controlled the rights of women through controlling rights to their own bodies (Scott, 2020). I would like to look at resistance from a plurality of perspectives to continue my research into how small acts of resistance against conforming to the status quo might contribute to more spaces being available for women in organisations. Understanding what part resistance might play in thinking differently about the discourse in leadership development programmes helps deepen my inquiry into the constraining and enabling conversations on group coaching practice.

Narrative

Five participants arrived at the coaching room, for what I had planned as a standard group coaching session. I smiled my welcome and indicated our seating arrangements in the

carefully prepared circle of chairs. I had moved the tables to the sides of the room so we would not have physical barriers between us and already pinned the large sheets of drawing paper to the wall. One person did not return a smile. She stated that she was leaving at 3 pm and then took her seat. Given that the experience is offered as an opportunity for collective learning as part of a leadership development programme and I had not even started to introduce the process, I felt a flash of irritation. I decided in that split second not to push further; I acknowledged her request and said I would try to accommodate it for this one occasion. The others took their seats quietly as I smiled again and began to outline the flow of the day, telling them what coaching involved and that it was taken from the work of John Whitmore (2009). I explained the ideas around what coaches call contracting – how we run the day together and the “rules”. I was aware that the same person, Franzke, was now looking at her phone. Was I not opening the session well? I thought. Did I miss a step connecting to her? One of the requests I usually make during the opening process is that phones and laptops are not used during the group sessions. I noticed another person, Carey, also got out her phone and then looked at me and immediately decided to turn it off and put it away. I knew from having read her profile that Carey had the most experience in the group and was likely to have a stronger influence on the way the dynamic of the group developed. I thus spoke directly to Franzke and Carey and made a joke about not wanting to be a phone patrol officer. No one laughed and I felt the tension inside myself rise.

I had been looking forward to working with these five participants, who were to be my coachees, in a small coaching group as part of the programme for executive leaders. I have liked working on the programme since it first started ten years ago. It runs regularly and I have been a resident executive coach for the past eight years. Thirty participants are supported by six executive coaches over three days; we observe the participants as they attend the taught sessions on leadership and debrief their experiences in a group coaching session called ‘having meaningful conversations’. These conversations are defined as reflective sessions for senior managers of large complex teams (Kets de Vries, 2014). The desired outcome is described as to be able to maximise impact for their organisations. As executive coaches we are positioned to act as self-reflection guiding partners to our coaching group in supporting their discussions on business challenges and options. I have usually experienced a great deal of energy in the room for these sessions, and often coachees are deeply moved by the open conversations we share.

The tasks involved facilitating a discussion on individual 360-degree feedback reports. This is a process where a business leader evaluates themselves against a set of standardised business characteristics using a questionnaire. Questionnaires focusing on the same characteristics are also used by other respondents, such as the coachee’s peers, direct manager, or team. I focused on the primary leadership traits that we would use in the session, taken from an assessment developed at a business school. My role was to work with my coachees in a peer coaching format, adapted from a model of the ‘didactic triangle’ (Arnold and Pätzold, 2007), where I am involved in a discussion on each person’s strengths and development areas and their knowns and unknowns. The framework for this group coaching was that an individual presented a business challenge, and we adopted one of three roles: coach, coachee or observer. I only took the role of coach and observer in these sessions, using part of my training which prescribed a conscious attempt on behalf of the coach to be mentally present as an

observer, and to rephrase the participants' own language so as not to add individual bias to the challenge (Korotov, 2008).

The group was made up of participants from Germany, Great Britain, Poland, and Spain. Carey, from Great Britain, had the longest work experience in the group and had written on her initial introduction profile that she wondered what the experience of a group coaching process would be like in practice. I had noted to myself to address her request and opened my welcome by explaining the experience, the origins of the coaching process and what was likely to be the expected outcome of an action plan at the end of the sessions. The German participants, Kiel and Siv, had recently taken on more senior roles in two different consultancies; both much younger in their experience of managing teams, they had mentioned struggling with the balance of workload as their themes. The Spanish participant, Cel, called himself someone with a serious disposition and had been nominated to the programme as a 'star performer' by his manager at a large engineering firm. He also reflected in his introduction that he was looking forward to sharing experiences of working across cultures, as he had just completed two overseas assignments. It was my early leaving coachee, Franzke, whom I was by now a little more curious about. She listed her achievements as having 'two beautiful children' but had not completed her initial introduction form. In her 360-degree report the feedback mentioned needing to work on time management and stress. She had the largest difference in her 360-degree feedback report between her own evaluation of her performance (high) and that of her colleagues in her company (who rated her lower). In preparing for the programme, I had attended the briefing sessions with my fellow coaches, and we had looked at the reports together to search for patterns or themes in them. There was nothing I noted before the session that might have prepared me for the first coaching session, or indeed my reaction to the experience.

I explained the model for running group coaching sessions on the programme as a developmental approach where we create an 'identity laboratory' (Kets de Vries et al., 2007). The term *identity laboratory* was developed to describe the concept of a transitory phase for business leaders where they start to experiment with new roles and behaviours. The session opened with a question about what the coachees wanted to focus on in their daily leadership challenges. I explained that they would create a leadership brand using art and storytelling, which would reflect how they want to be seen by others. I also explained that as their coach, I would not talk about my own situation and would position myself as neutral, in what Korotov (2008) calls 'acting as a guiding figure'. As a result of my professional training, I had thought of myself in these sessions as a person guiding the conversation, skilled at listening and asking questions and not involved in the case. By this, I mean that I think of myself as neither getting attached to nor judging the cases.

I noticed that my voice had gone a bit flat as I explained the first exercise: to draw. Usually, I am quite animated at this early point in the agenda, as the participants often make jokes about not being able to draw. I wondered what effect Franzke's early announcements would have on the group dynamics. The coachees started to move around the room and draw on the large blank paper frames. Franzke was amazingly fast in completing her portrait, using only one colour, and sat back down before the allocated time and looked at her phone. I wondered where the challenge from her was coming from. How would I be able to establish a bond of trust between us if every request I made was rejected? I asked her directly to please put her

phone away. She raised her eyebrows at me and put it face down on the floor in front of her, maintaining her gaze on me. I felt unease in my chest. As the rest of the group started to finish and sit down, there was an almost awkward embarrassed silence. No one spoke. Franzke broke the silence and looked at the group, her eyes going from face to face. She wanted to start first, she said, as she had a time limit. Still, no one spoke, and I agreed, aware that this was not a great start to the session. As she began to explain her drawing, I could see her body tense and noticed that she did not stand up to show her art, which most participants do. She had drawn a triangle with her parenting role at the top, acting as a carer to her parents and her partner's parents in the left-hand corner, and a full-time career on the right. There were no other details and the only colour she had used was black. She spoke with a sharp, flat tone of voice, without much enthusiasm. It was only a few more years before she had time to think, as she cared for both sets of parents and had small children. She would like support not to fall apart for the next few years.

"What does not falling apart mean to you, Franzke?" I asked to introduce a metaphor, which is what I often do as a coach. Her quick answer came back: she refused to leave her children with some stranger, and her partner had the same career aspirations so she could not ask him to do more. Her parents had previously supported her career choices, and now it was her time to support them. I looked at the other participants and asked what reflections or experiences they had in relation to the metaphor of not falling apart. Carey spoke first, sharing her experience of being a working mother, and suggested planning and developing strategies to manage time. She had, she said, gone on to job-share when her children were small and found the stress of not being good enough at all these roles difficult to manage. Franzke said that of course she had considered other options, but nothing could be done. I was alert to thinking very carefully about using my words next, not wanting to make this a problem with women in the workplace, which had been my own experience. I noted there was a pattern developing of the women speaking with each other in this opening conversation. I really wanted to ask her why her partner's career was worth more than hers but felt this was my putting my own view into the middle of the coaching session and might make the men feel attacked. Instead, I invited the other participants to share their views on how the case could be approached. Cel started to speak of his own experiences of being raised by an au pair and on his overseas assignments, having spent many evenings with families who had additional support at home. He asked whether Franzke would like to imagine what he called 'outsourcing' more roles, such as hiring someone else to pick up the children from school or sharing the roles with other parents so she could alternate longer days at work. I looked over at Franzke, who shook her head slowly from side to side and looked increasingly disinterested, her face showed little emotion. She sighed audibly and I wondered what she was thinking. Kiel said he had every sympathy for the position Franzke was describing and shared a variety of time management ideas one after the other. Siv concluded that he did not have much more to offer than the group had already suggested. As the group finished sharing their views, I asked Franzke where she was in the conversation with her question to the group now. She started to seem agitated and said that she thought we meant well but her choices were non-negotiable.

At this point, I started to feel stuck with the coaching session and uncertain about where to take the session. I thought it might have been helpful to the group to introduce the model of the roles we play as either victim, rescuer, or persecutor from Karpman's (2014) 'drama

triangle,' which comes from the field of transactional analysis. This approach stresses that each person is accountable for their capacity to make choices and how they can become trapped in a victim mentality where they feel they cannot change their circumstances. I said to the group that I thought Franzke's view was remarkably interesting and that sometimes when people are 'stuck' in a setting, they believe that their situation cannot change until an external force changes and can tend to act in one of these drama positions. I asked Franzke if she felt she was in a victim role. She shrugged again. I waited for her to reply. She said nothing. I turned back to the group to ask if we as a group might also be holding one or more of these positions or even be acting out other roles in the room. Cel spoke into the group and reflected that his suggestion that Franzke could ask someone else to pick up the children might indeed have been perceived as implying she was the victim of an 'unfeeling' organisation as the persecutor. I asked Franzke whether she might have felt judged by Cel's comments, and she repeated in her unwavering tone that none of her choices were negotiable, so she did not care who judged her. I wondered if she really did not care.

As I summarised to the group what I had heard from Franzke on her experiences as a working parent trying to manage an impossible schedule, I felt tired and despondent about what she could do. I quickly caught myself projecting my own view of parenting onto her role, putting me in danger of creating my own drama triangle by trying to rescue her. In my body, I felt a strong resistance to the whole group coaching process, reacting to what I had experienced myself as a working mother. What was I doing here? I regained myself, breathing deeply, and reflected that it was not my role to be giving solutions. I decided to move on to the 360-feedback survey debrief. I spoke of the language of self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-analysis, and handed out an action plan as we neared the end of the session that asked how the coachees could increase their self-perception and reduce their resistance to feedback towards the proposed leadership traits. With a few minutes to go before the end of the session, Franzke was far from finding the 'tipping point for change' that the programme methodology advertised. I was starting to worry about how to even end the session when Kiel stepped in and joked about the notion of unhelpful labels of superwomen in business. I felt his gesture was an attempt to support the group to move forwards. Carey nodded vigorously and said she found the language of an authentic leader in the taught section of the leadership development programme from the day before also unhelpful to her personally. I suggested that we stop now, as Franzke had already started to pack away her reports, no doubt relieved that she could end the session without filling in an action plan. I suggested we take a break.

As I re-read Franzke's 360-degree feedback after the session, I noted that she had been advised by her boss 'not to be too ambitious'. I reflect now on her resistance to the whole coaching process and the work I do as a group coach. Do such leadership programmes support or constrain the conversations and experiences for women working in organisations? How do participants really feel about having their 'identity' presented in such a way?

Reflections on self

Self as individual

I consider myself experienced in the process of group coaching using the process proposed by Kets de Vries et al. (2007), having run group coaching sessions for over 500 hours. The approach

I most often adopt arises from the humanist perspective, which gained support in the 1950s. Quite often the route I take uses some of the work of Maslow (1943). The main premise in Maslow's theory is that people are inherently 'whole,' and that there are five sets of basic goals which we as humans are perpetually wanting to achieve. These basic goals are neither necessarily conscious nor unconscious and centres all motivation theory (Maslow, 1943, p. 395). Primarily, the methods I use have been developed to encourage self-awareness and thought-provoking action, with the notion of freedom for an individual to choose consciously what actions to take. The ideas I have been taught as part of my professional training emphasise the unique qualities of the individual in being able to change certain choices and actions, which are guided by setting goals to 'maximise their potential' (ICF, 2024). I have used several frames and professional experiences from my past coach training so that, over the years, I have felt able to manage most coaching situations, whether in groups or as individual sessions. By this, I mean I am confident of my ability to lead the group relationships in a way that identifies my guiding role and the voluntary nature of coaching. The coach is expected to acknowledge that the coachee always retains the choice in their own actions.

The notion that individuals have self-will, make rational choices and seek to attain their highest potential has influenced my work as a coach in group settings. I started the coaching session with the view that individuals want to improve their working lives through goal setting. The process I used to open the coaching session began by clarifying the tasks and parameters that form my idea of the relationship boundary between the coach and the coachees. I consider myself the facilitator of the coaching process. Getting to an action plan is part of the outcome-oriented language I use when opening a coaching session. In fact, I am asked by the organisations running these leadership development programmes (my client) to ensure that my coachees complete an action plan and upload it to a digital platform. This is to ensure the coachees' commitment to building on their strengths and focusing on how to manage (or change) their identified development areas. In this session, I talked of repeating patterns of self that, under certain conditions and with reflection, can be changed. I also referred to the 'safe space' of coaching, by which I meant that coachees should feel they could talk freely about their working environment without fear of judgement. As the coachees tell stories and recount their concept of themselves in a narrative, they position themselves temporarily within each story, with the coach trained to stay outside the story, observing patterns and looking for metaphors. Upon reflection now, I often find implying individuals can change themselves by changing their story creates a dilemma in terms of what goes on in people's lives that cannot so easily be put into such a conventional way of thinking. As I reflect on what was going on in the group coaching session, I notice the impact of my own client's influence on my actions. I reflect that I put pressure on the group to get to a 'successful' coaching outcome and complete an action plan. The coaching strategies I followed in the session focused on the notion of coachees' free choices, while ironically my own choice was limited by the contract with my client, on how to carry out the coaching process (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018).

Although I was trained to be effective at staying outside the conversation, I observe from my narrative that this is not possible. In referring to the assumption of coaching as a 'safe space' and the 'frames' I used in sessions, one such frame is transactional analysis, developed by Eric Berne (1964). This humanistic theory is related to how individuals interact with each other,

talk together about events, reflect on current interactions with colleagues and form future commitments as a framework that can be shared with coaching clients to understand their motivation, interactions, and coaching goals (Cox et al., 2018, p. xii). Talking about self in a narrative story is understood, by coaches, to lead to a positive sense of who their coachees are as leaders and what they want to change in their story, away from being judged by colleagues and peers in the workplace. Transactional analysis (Karpman, 2014) clearly states that an individual is responsible for their own choices and telling life stories forms the most valuable part of the coaching conversations in looking at where repeating patterns of drama occur.

The need to manage a heavy workload, stress and time is a common topic brought by coachees into coaching conversations. I observed that it had been a constant theme throughout most of the coaching session. What struck me as I reflect on the narrative was how individuals can resist being coached, even while they are in theory free to leave. Difficulties emerged in the group, we resisted talking about them, and we did not deal with them in way I felt supported the coachee.

The concept of self as a brand to be used in story telling made me curious about what I and the others in the group thought we meant by self. When I think of self, my view is of something inside me that looks at me as a reflective object. I imagine this to be like the poem I was taught as a young member of the Brownie Girl Guides, which we were asked to speak aloud when we joined:

Twist me, turn me, and show me the elf, I looked in water and there stood myself (<https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/information-for-volunteers/programme-and-activities/the-brownie-story>, 2025).

The inference was that by turning around I would become the magical little brownie creature that had changed my identity, which conjured up ideals of a mystical, magical self. To act and become a Girl Guide, I had to change from the me that was judged by the Brownie group as something less worthy into a helpful little creature who did good turns. The concept of judging resonates with me in my reflection. How I think of my own repeating patterns on what I asked of the coaching group was that they should change, despite the claims that the process of coaching does not judge.

Theorising on a self

I wrote that my voice had gone flatter than usual and that I had felt irritated by Franzke's behaviour at the start of the coaching session, and I reflected that I saw her attempt to establish her presence in the room early. I inwardly criticised myself for not having opened the coaching session well and considered whether I had missed a step in the process. I was not sure why I judged myself so early, as I have a great deal of experience in these sessions. The difficulties I faced in understanding the concept of self and what was going on in the coaching session led me to research some of the earliest concepts on self in pragmatist philosophy. In *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead (1934) argues that self is not the precondition of what we imagine but is the outcome of social interaction. The self, according to his work, is a reflective process – 'I' reflect on 'me,' who arises from the 'self' in response to taking the gestures and responses of others:

The beginning of a response becomes the stimulus to the first form to change his attitude, to adopt a different act. The term 'gesture' may be identified with these beginnings of social acts which are the stimulus for the response of other forms (Mead, 1934, p. 43).

I understand Mead is saying that we cannot assume (as my coaching approach had done) that there is already an 'I' responding to 'me'. Instead, gestures are the beginning of the social act as a specific stimulus that calls out a social response in others. Gestures and responses become the process of social interaction in how we respond to each other's actions and learn to adapt our behaviour. When I look through this pragmatist lens, smiling was my first gesture, so that I would be seen as non-threatening and friendly. I was taught that it is important for a coach to gesture to the coachees that the group is a safe, welcoming space to be in, and I anticipated a response in a smile in return for mine.

A central theory put forward by Mead (1934) is that of 'significant symbols,' in which a gesture, like a word or action gets a reaction from another person. This reaction also affects the person who made the first action:

Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same response which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals to whom they are addressed: in all conversations of gestures within the social process whether external (between different individuals) or internal (between the individual and himself), the individual's consciousness of the content and flow of meaning involved depends on his thus taking the attitude of the other towards his own gestures (Mead, 1934, p. 47).

From this I understand that my gesture of a smile was in anticipation of an image of myself as engaging the group in a shared understanding of what to expect in coaching. What these ideas are pointing to is the paradoxical nature of gestures and responses that change in response to each other. Taking such ideas further offer a radically different view of self than the one I have been trained for. Mead (1934) suggests a view of self is created through taking up the gestures and responses of others, and that self and identity are not fixed but constantly evolving in social interactions. This is an interesting set of ideas which resonates with me, as my failure to get the reaction I expected from one coachee, points to why I might have experienced the social act as conflicted. I felt in conflict with the response and thus with how I had anticipated our social interaction. During my internalisation of the experience of smiling and anticipating the responses of others, I noted that I questioned my view of self as the one who has the authority in the relationship, while at the same time granting authority to Franzke by allowing her to leave early. I changed my response by moving swiftly on to trying to establish formal rules, as Franzke's response to me was significant in that it called out in me an element of underlying competition between us and saw us come into conflict.

There is no meaning independent of the social act of communication, writes Mead (1934, p. 174): 'I' react to self through taking up the attitudes of other. I reflect how I had taken up the attitudes of the other towards self when I started to readjust my responses. There was another early act of communication in the group where we could be seen to react to each other's attitudes. Franzke's act of not putting away her mobile phone started a response where Carey

looked as if she might react by also getting her phone out. I observed that she did not progress the act further and, I felt, granted me the role of coach, the experience of which was still being questioned by Franzke.

The coaching process intends to ask the coachees to reflect on the image they have of themselves by creating a piece of art and a leadership story. Reflecting on their experience of leadership might be a question of asking them to think of a different interpretation and perhaps create another version of the story, to change their working identity (Ibarra, 2003). The process steps I used referred to feedback as the tool for creating such a new working identity. At the same time, I implied that I was not changing – which Mead's theory would critique as implausible. This, he suggests, is because 'I' and 'me' can exist only in dynamic relations to each other through the significant symbols. It is in referring to significant symbols (Mead, 1934, p. 268), the foundation of Mead's work, where he sets out how thinking is a form of participation in the social process of taking the generalised attitude of others. I would conclude, using this theory, that I cannot be outside the conversation (as I had stated to my coaches) given that I am also always involved in social relations. Mead (1934, p. 155) terms the 'generalised other' as relating to self's own assumptions of the actions and attitude towards others, which turns upon self to create a sense of our own identity. This is one explanation of how I might have found myself anticipating others' gestures and regulating my own behaviour by silencing myself as the interactions unfolded. I experienced holding back my voice when Franzke talked of her division of work within her family during our interactions. However, Mead's theory of self with a view that identity is a social construct is a quite different concept from my coaching approach. I focused almost entirely on a view of an agentic unique I-identity as innate in the coachee.

Social roles, according to Mead (1934, p. 256), are sets of social responses and gestures which we find ourselves taking up in our social environment based on our histories, of which we have different senses of awareness. I understand how my view of self was constantly being negotiated within our encounters in the group, in which I realised I was thinking I was not doing a good enough job of leading the session and responded by trying to affirm my role. I imagine in the first encounters, Franzke might have wanted to have her roles recognised too, as she was constantly asking for recognition within her own organisation and community. She stated this aloud later in our session when she said that she did not want to negotiate herself with me or the other coachees. Her gesture of not returning my smile, which signalled that she did not intend to participate in the social process of coaching, saw me turn to humour and a veiled threat of being the phone patrol police. I felt that the coachees were also observing what was required with respect to each other and that hence I needed to emphasise the 'no phones' rule to establish that I was still the one guiding the session and our conversations. In coaching training, we talk of roles very differently as a descriptor of something we inhabit, with the notion of living a role from the 'inside out'. This means I talked about a consistent way of behaving that my coachee might want to adopt when 'inhabiting' the leadership role they had assumed when they took their place in the organisational hierarchy. I clearly outlined an assumption that professional roles are separated from private life, and that the coachee can attribute the correct balance of time to each, according to what they as individuals want to achieve.

Reflecting on my experience now, I assumed that my role as the coach was to run the process and that the group would agree to be participants in the process. I can see that it could not have been possible to anticipate in advance how the individuals and the group would react together, even if I considered myself experienced. The way in which coaching presents itself as a profession, with the group coach leading the process, separates the coach from the group, as if they are roles already granted and not constantly being negotiated; this concept is quite different from the one proposed by Mead. His theory of social conflict suggests that conflict arises when individuals in groups fail to reach agreement on the process of achieving the goal of the social act, the plan of action or both, they also have various levels of awareness of the process (Mead, 1934, p. 304). This might point to why some in the group might have granted me the authority to be their coach, while others appeared not to and led me to feel uncertain.

As I reflect on Mead's (1934) theory of self, I can agree that self is not something that an individual possesses but rather is constructed during social interactions. As I contrast this idea with the humanistic view of self that I had been using I see quite different assumptions embedded in ways of thinking about self. The humanistic school of thought emphasises the importance of individual agency and self-determination in shaping identity. The tensions between the notion of what might be going on in the collective group versus the orthodox notion of an individual setting goals and writing an action plan leads me to inquire further into the concept of group coaching, which presents self as already existing and stable – a thing that can be almost designed and altered at will. At this point in my reflection, I conclude that using pragmatist theory, it is possible neither for a coach to be outside the group conversation nor to predict how the group will react. The failure to reach an agreement on the process and goals of the social act we were engaged in led to conflict. As I develop my thinking on how self is being constantly negotiated, I am curious about how our differences in what we thought we were doing were being negotiated within the group.

Leading a gendered self

If I am not outside the group as the coach, and my understanding of self as socially formed during processes of interaction, I am interested in what was being negotiated in the discussion on how Franzke could manage her case. Mead (1934, p. 172) concludes that the self has no past but emerges from a historical perspective in which people act in the present based on their reinterpretation of the past and an expectation towards the future. I understand this to mean that from the moment we are born, a view of self arises out of multiple, complex intergenerational relationships and social experiences, so that our identity is constantly shifting and evolving in how we narrate ourselves from the perspective of multiple other pasts in the present moment. We cannot, of course, remember our birth and so we narrate ourselves through shared symbols, stories and artefacts that are constructed through the social process (Anderson, 1983). Both pragmatism and humanistic theories recognise the importance of social context and the historical cultural factors that impact individuals.

I am interested in what might have existed in the intergenerational memory and cultural norms of the group that might have seen us representing a historical view of the division of labour that so often assigns the work of care and parenting to women (Fraser, 2013). As a theme in the group, we referred to a generalised view of working mothers. The assumption was these people formed a homogenous group, against a backdrop of what might be seen as

a taken-for-granted, historically masculine view of what working life and leadership are thought to represent. This led us to talk of the duality of separating home and work life, as I emphasised the division of private and public roles in our conversation. My gesture could be seen as reinforcing the complex social factors involved when discussing such traditional views of roles as if separated by an assumed gender (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). As we struggled to agree on joint actions for the coaching case, Cel took a very detached view in suggesting how other people, specifically calling out female carers, could fulfil the parenting role, while Carey suggested going part time. Both suggestions were strongly rejected, especially given the strength of Franzke's rejection to the idea of getting to an individual action plan or discussing other options.

Fine, a well-known theorist on gender, writes in 'Delusions of Gender' (Fine, 2010) that we cannot understand gender differences without understanding the social context in which the term gender is used. This builds on some of the earlier work of Oakley (1972) that gender is malleable and shaped by society, not biology. Haslanger (2010) contrasts constitutive social construction with what is being reproduced by suggesting we consider what work naming gender as a social category is supposed to do. Naming individuals as 'working mothers' (which could also imply that mothers who stay at home do not work) using this implies an expectation of how certain roles are considered normative and should be performed. From Haslanger's view

What is of concern, to put it simply, is that societies, on the whole, privilege individuals with male bodies. Although the particular forms and mechanisms of oppression vary from culture to culture societies have found many ways—some ingenious, some crude—to control and exploit the sexual and reproductive capacities of females (Haslanger, 2010, p.38).

In the context of my research, I am interested in the different views on what we thought gender represented within my coaching groups. Oakley (1972) distinguishes sex-based biological differences from gender, which she suggests as culturally constructed and maintained. The binary split between sex-based differences and gender is often taken for granted in organisational thinking which West and Zimmerman (1987) suggests arising from action as some sort of gender display. I will go on to explore these ideas within the thesis.

In the historical context of leadership, the idea of leadership assumed as masculine could be seen as part of what Anderson (1983) refers to as the cultural artefacts that shape us. I take this to mean that the idealisation of what represent masculine and feminine roles and other cultural artefacts of western leadership, have their basis in long linguistic histories. To understand the cultural artefacts properly we would need to understand how they have come into historical being and how the meaning has changed over time. Given that I asked the coachees to account for their narrative against a fixed assessment, I set the expectation of how a leader should behave. The coaches would have each been negotiating their identity against their own historical narrative, even if it is in fact also changing over time.

Thinking about what gender is assumed to represent in my practice, my attempts to tell my coachees to present themselves as unique individual leaders in a leadership story would always be constricted by a presupposed fixed view of a gendered other. Gender is not then

something that ‘simply happens in the nooks and crannies of interactions’ but embedded in the acts of everyday life (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 130). This resonates with me in the sense that telling Franzke who she should be and how she could act (by outsourcing her responsibilities to other carers and planning her time away from the family) could be seen as a form of asymmetrical division of labour, which she neither recognised nor subscribed to and which caused a conflictual social act. Franzke’s responses challenged the shared understanding of the process of getting to an action plan for the organisation during the coaching session.

Haslanger (2010) questions if

Typically, the act of classifying someone as a member of a social group invokes a set of “appropriate” ~contextually specific norms and expectations. It positions her in a social framework and makes available certain kinds of evaluation; in short, it carries prescriptive force. Accepting or identifying with the classification typically involves an endorsement of some norms and expectations ... Although “identifying” someone as a member of a social group invokes a set of “appropriate” norms, what these norms are is not fixed. (Haslanger, 2010, p. 47)

This resonates with the importance of Anderson’s (1983) theory which posits the fact that cultural artefacts can and do change over time. In my narrative, leadership development programmes call out a presupposed specific social category of a woman leader, and programmes are run specifically for them; indeed, I have attended such programmes as a participant, yet the category itself could be seen as imagined, fluid and historically mutable.

I would now add to my developing arguments that if coaching is taken up as a social object, which Mead (1934) describes as a generalised tendency of individuals to act in similar ways, my work as a coach cannot be separated from the incongruent claims that organisational leaders make when allocating goals to leadership development programmes to include a specific category called women leaders. This treats women as somehow a ‘separate’ social category that requires special attention (Alvesson and Billing, 2009), which suggests that coaching in leadership development may even reinforce the cultural narratives and expectations about what is understood as gender, with which the participants of such programmes implicitly or explicitly agree. If gender is constrained by the meaning assigned to it, in what way does group coaching create incongruence or challenge the view of how we constitute self?

Self as constructed identity work

In my reflection so far, I have concluded that it is not possible for a coach to be outside the social process and know in advance how coachees would behave, using the emergent pragmatist theory described by Mead. I have also started to think about the work of gender as a social constructionist (Oakley 1972; Oakley 1998) in developing ideas from social theories. My work as a coach cannot be separated from the claims made by leadership programmes that women leaders are somehow a ‘separate’ social category, requiring special attention. From my formal coaching training, identity is presented as something fixed that has already been formed, but which can be changed using a process of iterative feedback by working with

a coach (Dutton et al., 2010). Reflecting on the struggles we were having in the group, which are often reflected in feminist literature on women's experiences in organisations, I now explore how traditional social attitudes and assumptions about our roles in society were being taken up in the group.

The early feminist writers I grew up reading in my student years, whom I referred to in Project One, sought to assert the rights of women to participate fully in economic society (for which Simone de Beauvoir [1949] was for me a central figure). I have noted that the work I do as a coach can be seen against the historically formed idealised historical construct of leadership. Patterns over history have more often assigned women the taken-for-granted role of primary caregiver for the family and men the role of the primary wage earner. Sex based division of labour has been reproduced into many of the assumptions of what gender represents that is taken up in organisational research. Evidence-based research often claims that women are inherently more nurturing whereas men are more assertive which can easily reinforce social expectations as to how women are required to behave (Guillén et al., 2018).

The way we aligned as a group around how to manage the family could be seen from a historically situated social order in many societies, which assigns roles in a duality of male and female expectations (Bourdieu, 2001). Carey spoke of her experience of being a working mother and suggested planning and developing strategies to manage part-time work. We suggested several ways that Franzke could reduce her parenting responsibilities to give more time to the organisation, as it was pointed out that no leader could be allowed to work part time in Franzke's organisation. My current reading of critical management writers notes that the idealisation of leadership as masculine by default makes it difficult for women to participate fully while also not breaking performativity expectations of how they should behave, for which they are often disadvantaged (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Fine, 2010; Fraser, 2013; Haslanger, 2010; Puwar, 2004; Scott, 2020).

The complexity of my interactions within the coaching group asked individuals to think of self as changing towards a set of idealised leadership traits to become a *better leader*, described in leadership development programmes as identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Identity work in coaching within leadership development often refers to using a set of assessment methods and techniques that describe specific leadership dimensions, which, when reached, claim to increase the degree of realisation of an individual's productivity and achievement of their highest potential (Kets de Vries, 2006). Expecting self to be modified by becoming a better leader, to align to a set of taken-for-granted idealised dimensions, speaks to me of the way in which individual patterns of conflict emerged in the group when trying to use the assessments as a truth regime.

It is worth noting that I made the request to the group to individually engage with forming a story of themselves as a leadership brand based on their assessments. A leadership brand is described by several business approaches as a visual representation of an individual leader in the minds of others, created from the promises they make to deliver and how they go about achieving results. This is described in the coaching process as 'the social process of leadership creates a leadership brand that others will remember and talk about' (Horth et al., 2016, p. 4). I reflect now that even as I asked the coachees to form a leadership brand, most academic studies have failed to agree on a definition for the term leader. A leadership brand can be seen

as a way of thinking of leadership as reified and idealised, and commodified in the sense that a brand makes money. Asking autonomous individuals to create a specific narrative of themselves to present to others can be seen as putting them in competition with each other as leaders. Encouraging them to work on a leadership brand implies that an individual can create a vision of who they want to be, while constraining them to what the organisation expects by using an idealised set of assessments (Dutton et al., 2010; Sinclair, 2011).

Central to the thinking of leadership as a brand in the group was the strong narrative of being a 'star performer,' as Cel was called, with the expectation of conforming to such collective idealisations to aspire to an even better brand. This added to the expected outcome of leadership development as being able to ensure individuals work to maximise impact for their organisation. Thinking about how creating a leadership brand might have been seen as an attempt to regulate the emergence of self, using the instrument of assessments and feedback could also be seen as assuming that all leaders should act according to the traits as a given set of universal norms. Mead (1934) emphasises the importance of social interactions in the development of self and that individuals understand each other through their interactions. In the context of leadership assessments, if leadership gets taken up in organisations as a social object, with the idea that we hold a universal view of how we act together as leaders toward shared values and beliefs while not being certain of what we are really meaning, I might start to think radically differently about the struggle and conflict in the group.

I deliberated on how research has often found that feedback assessments judge women more harshly than they judge men when it comes to their leadership behaviour. Pro-social traits (such as being caring, being warm and helping others) are assigned in feedback more often for women, while the assessments prescribe agentic traits (such as risk-taking, influencing skills and resilience) as those that leaders should act on (Karelaia and Guillén, 2011). This can lead to 'othering' – calling out specific identities as niche and not part of the existing group. In my own experience, I have been told on leadership development programmes to be more assertive, use my network more, take bolder decisions, appear friendly, and not to allow my voice to go up at the end of my sentences (which I was told shows insecurity as a woman manager). While men and women leaders can be seen to behave and perform similarly in organisations, women face a competence/likeability trade-off (Karelaia and Guillén, 2011, p. 4). One explanation could be the way in which the social object of leadership has taken up in leadership development through the idealisation of assessments. Perceiving women less favourably has been argued:

This is because leadership is often conceptualized as a stereotypically 'masculine' endeavour requiring agentic qualities, bodies, and behavior. Women who conform to the behavioral requirements of the role can be seen to be violating the communal 'warm and kind' female social role expectations (Meister et al., 2017, p. 672).

By considering Meister et al. (2017) ideas, in the context of my narrative, I note how our interactions were being formed and taken up in relation to the idealisation of leadership traits. This suggests that leadership assessments are not a simple matter of giving individual feedback but also act as leadership artefacts that can reinforce the meaning taken up in collective social and cultural norms. Group coaching could create incongruence in individuals' self-perception

if their view of self if conflicted by how an idealised leader is expected to act - as conforming to gendered expectations.

Cel had been nominated to the programme as a 'star performer' and stated in his introduction that he was interested in sharing his experiences (of being a star achiever, as rated by the assessments) with the group. On the other hand, Franzke had been advised not to be too ambitious in her supervisor's report, and she shared that she did not identify with her feedback and did not want to be coached. This points to how differently feedback was experienced. How assessments are taken up in organisations can create challenges for how individuals get recognised in these assessments; it might also give rise to androcentrism as a repeated pattern in society of privileging traits associated with masculinity while devaluing behaviours labelled as 'feminine' (Fraser, 2013, p. 221). I observe that the assessments lowered the status of some coachees in the social act, while raising the status of others in how individuals saw themselves against how the meaning of leadership was being judged, such that what makes an effective leader can be seen as a highly gendered concept.

According to Mead (1934, p. 303), assuming the allocation of roles based on the perceived ability to perform then creates functional superiority, which can lead the social act into conflict. The very notion of presenting an 'identity lab' might also have constrained the emergence of our social roles due to the orthodox view that constructing the self as an idealised individual was possible through 'identity work'. Humanistic theory according to the founders (Rogers, 1961) emphasises the importance of self-growth, which group coaching takes up as a specific way of thinking on the self as already individually constructed and the existence of an inner 'ideal' self. The whole coaching process could be seen as reinforcing a form of management thinking, which is so often taught in business schools, on the increased market value commanded by individuals when they develop leadership skills and a brand. Individuals are seen as free to serve stakeholders as entrepreneurs of their own careers, with the assumption that improving individual motivation and earning more money are the main aims (Mowles, 2022). From within the coaching group and through my actions when we tried to step in and offer support for the coaching dilemma of 'not falling apart', I gained a sense that we were implying that the demands of the organisation had more legitimacy than the demands of family, as a so-called freedom of action. In my reflections now, I am curious about what the group was collectively doing in accepting that the identity of a mother had less importance than the identity of a leader. Franzke's strong rebuttal that she did not want a stranger to look after her children, and Cel's notion that she could outsource her private and family activities, reflect how the group created a reality of the traditional social order of mother and father roles in organisational life (Goldin, 2021). Given that the group suggested ways to 'reduce' Franzke's activities as a mother and fit more activities around her organisation, the actions of the group could be seen as reinforcing the coaching concept of creating the maximum impact for the organisation.

Mead's arguments would lead to the conclusion that the concept of a 'safe space' – the space we describe in coaching as a non-judgemental open place to talk – is improbable, because social interaction inherently involves negotiation and social conflict (Mead, 1934, p. 215). Here I reflect that the very choices Franzke wanted to make were not recognised in the prescribed assessments, as the outcome of the assessment can be seen to pit social responsibility against the concept of organisational work. The act of answering for self was at

the same time constrained and enabled by the idealisation of what it meant to be a 'leader' within the group.

Self as part of complex social groups

In thinking of the habitual ways in which the group took up the assumption of rules, expectations and the idealisation of leadership, I considered the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1977, p. 82) draws on Mead, among other theorists, and develops a concept of *habitus* – that is, social and cultural practices and ways of being that become systems of disposition. These patterns are influenced by and continue to influence both our history of the social world in which we inhabit and the future; including the prevailing group social structures, values, and beliefs in which we are a part:

It is just as true and just as untrue to say that collective actions produce the events or that that they are its product. The conjuncture capable of transforming practices objectively co-ordinated because subordinated to partially or wholly identical objective necessities, into collective action (e.g. revolutionary action) is constituted in the dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, a habitus, understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, function at every moment as a perception, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasksand of the other hand, an objective event (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82).

To me this means events do not simply arise because of collective action but nor do collective actions arise because of events. They influence each other. The habitus shapes the ways in which individuals think, act, and interact with each other, which are key in reproducing social themes. In this case, as a coaching group we reproduced the theme of social inequality. Taking up Bourdieu's perspective would suggest that our ways of thinking became internalised in how we respond to external condition that are repeated in our actions over time.

In the context of women, I would take this to mean that the patterns that have privileged a dualistic view of masculinity as representing leadership over femininity as caring are deeply ingrained in our society at large. The idea that a social world has already preceded me, and that I am influenced by others in terms of how their historical social worlds have been formed, takes my inquiry into my own strong internalised patterning of resistance to being called out as a woman leader. Bourdieu's (1977, p. 164) argument is the maintenance and reproduction of historical social practices become so established over time, that unspoken unquestioned assumptions are often taken for granted in society. In relation to women, he suggests ingrained beliefs define a woman's role and place in society which become internalised to align them to social norms and roles.

When the coaching group talked about leadership, we defined and reinforced in our language an implied notion of idealisation without questioning why we did that. During our conversation, Franzke stayed quiet, maybe because she was used to being constrained in her work and home environment by the roles ascribed to her and by her view of herself. She commented that working part time was not possible in her organisation, which was constraining her own choices. Our conversation reinforced the idea that leaders can choose

to create their vision of self into the future. However, this way of thinking ignored the conflicts that existed in our social activities, such as the tension between paid-for and unpaid care work, and the separation of private and public life, which continues even today to reinforce unequal social structures.

Bourdieu (1977) emphasises the importance of power in shaping social relations, which he considers to be embedded in social structures and cultural practices. Those who possess the knowledge, skills and cultural practices can shape social norms, and hence they have more power over these social acts, which can often reproduce social inequality. However, he also recognises that habitus is not fixed and hence the role of resistance as a form of social action that can challenge and transform the dominant structures, which he argues the ability to challenge one's habitus is made possible through greater critical awareness. It was through the resistance to the coaching process that *a priori* leadership identities and stereotypical gender-specific patterns of status subordination was made more visible to me and were opened to be questioned. I would also imagine that these conflicts arose from our not thinking critically together about what we were doing when we were involved in our conversation and unconsciously internalising norms in unquestioned beliefs of what are assigned as gender-based roles.

Resistance to identity work

Paying attention to everyday micro-moments of interaction with others in this project, my emergent thoughts, and observations of my own repeating patterns of conflict regarding being a woman in business has led me to form new perceptions about what I thought was going on in the group coaching conversations. Research on resistance has often assumed individuals organise themselves against the dominance of power (Scott, 1990). This, I find, tends to reinforce a dualistic notion of resistance to power as if power is assumed the accepted form of domination, where individuals struggle to establish and maintain legitimacy. The early 1960s and 70s feminist writers I read in my student years certainly regarded the power struggle for emancipation against the domination of androcentrism as a dualistic struggle. When I consider my early most feminist influences, I certainly assumed social justice was a 'male against female' struggle. Yet being limited in my own ability to participate in organisational life as a full adult (Fraser, 2013) when I was pregnant and when I fought against what I considered to be a sexist system, led me to hide my activist work. Perhaps it was my own experience that I projected on to Franzke as if she too had no choices.

Group coaching and the use of identity work, presented in an identity lab, creates the idea that individuals should have an ideal 'right' identity for their organisation. In the case narrated, thinking about how resistance was evoked when a view of self was threatened and perhaps the coachee felt she was being forced to act more 'ideal'. The sense of incongruence between self and societal norms and expectations became visible in the discussion on the assessments as an artefact of an ideal leader. I argued in Project One that organisations have come to use difference as a tool to be managed, which leads to workshops on diversity, equity and inclusion aimed at smoothing over that difference (Griffin, 2002, p. 202). Critical feminist Nancy Fraser (2013) has been inspirational in my reading on power inequality and the rise of individualism and capitalism. Fraser (2013) is more critical of Mead's theories, arguing that they do not fully account for the ways in which values, norms and beliefs are taken up in

society and how power relations work differently to shape the identity of women's work, which is considered 'niche'. She argues:

To be misrecognized, in my view, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others' conscious attitudes or mental beliefs. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interactions and prevented from participating as a peer in social life – not as a consequence of a distributed inequity (such as failing to receive one's fair share of resources or 'primary goods') but rather as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem (Fraser, 2013, p. 239).

I am thinking about how the group did not discuss the social inequality that is historically linked to power and privilege of certain groups. My understanding is that Fraser means inequality for women is not just a matter of social construction and identity recognition but rather a structural problem that comes from not recognising care work which leads to social and economic injustice. Fraser would argue that we need to call out the significant social norms, beliefs and values that are capable of challenging inequality as a collective group, rather than implying individual women can fix the system.

I am curious about the complex social processes that emerge between gender, resistance, and identity work in the work I do. In 'Teaching managers about masculinity', Sinclair (2000a) points to the multiplicities of masculine differences in organisations, some privileged and some stigmatised, which remain under-researched and invisible. It is this invisible categorisation, she proposes, that becomes manifest in all forms of organisational resistance to the construct of identity work and social inequality (Sinclair, 2000b). Here I note that I stopped even raising the subject of difference, remaining silent on whether Franzke's partner should play a more equal role, and Kiel deflected from the topic altogether with a joke about Superwoman. One reason for the struggle and my own worry to even be talking about difference might well have been why we called out Franzke's actions as being outside the expectations of organisational ideals, and I even referred to her as a 'victim'. I also wonder if she felt that her identity was being reduced to a 'niche' within her own organisation, as I felt that she resented being on the programme at all, even though in theory she was free to leave.

The leadership development programme was run over three days and was based on traditional models of leadership that prioritise individual achievement, goal setting and action plans. These models are often rooted in masculine norms, and the assessment singled out 'niche' behaviours that do not fit the norm. Reflecting on this, I could have invited into the discussion the notion of what we mean by 'managing our time,' what an inclusive approach would have looked like, and why we considered that the duality between private life and organisational life is one to which we should adhere. Instead, I turned the question back to ask why an individual was 'stuck' in their thinking and how we as a coaching group could somehow unstuck thoughts. It might be that I took up myself an idealisation of leadership, without any reflection on what happens in the lives of individuals, by calling out those who fail to comply a 'victim'. I now reflect on what often happens in daily organisational life, where taken-for-granted assumptions that are inherent in orthodox language about how we should

act; and how we often turn away from conflict as if it is inherently dreadful thing to have happen.

One pattern I notice now was more covert form of resistance, where the coachees pushed against being asked to draw an imagined identity and create a leadership brand. Resistance, in terms of what Mumby (2005) refers to as less of a binary action against control and more interdependent actions within relationships, saw objects (such as mobile phones) play a hidden role, without being identified as acting as resistors. Looking at phones, putting them out on display and putting them away again, formed part of the narrative on who got to gesture their authority without it being openly talked about. Repetition of these acts was taken up by others to form a chain of what I understood as a disruptive form of covert resistance. This could mean that using phones constituted a familiar act that countered the anxiety provoked by having one's identity challenged. It could also have been performative, a gesture to signify that one's importance and status is being brought to the attention of others or simply prioritising other actions as more important. In addition, when I felt uncertainty, I found myself sticking closely to forms of knowledge that established me as having the authority. I got stuck and turned to using the instruments of 360-feedback to position myself back into the group. Here was an instrument that identified me as the group coach – which assumed I was granted the authority to give feedback to others. I notice the complicated role that the assessments played in my own self-identity and started to feel tired by and despondent about the whole group coaching process that I embodied, re-creating my own internalised disruption to what I thought I was not doing properly as a coach.

As a working parent, my claim to be recognised as having the legitimate right to occupy organisational spaces has seen me often resort to what Sinclair (2000b; 2019) calls 'camouflage' – acts of adapting to the masculinisation of language through self-silencing, taking on other workloads, cynicism, cynical jokes, and minimising sex differences in organisational life. This is what Franzke was refusing to do. She was resisting the dogma implied in the way I took up the coaching approach and trying to assert her own view of what was important to her. In making visible her refusal to conform to the coaching process and its idealisation of leadership as a social object, the role of coach comes into social conflict within the group.

Dalal (1998), in *Taking the Group Seriously*, emphasises the importance of relationality in self and resistance, in which he argues that identity is abstract shaped by social dynamics, individual agency, cultural context and power relations. He argues that resistance is necessary in the ongoing process of how notions of identity are formed, because as a process resistance allows individuals to challenge the power structures and social relations that shape their lives. He suggests that resisting dominant discourses on identity categories, which agrees with Oakley's (1972) view on gender as socially constructed, can illuminate power relations (Dalal, 1998, p. 190). Here I see resistance not as a dualistic response to power domination but as a creative way of generating more possibilities for what is being presented by categories of differences within social relations. Taking my reading on resistance further, from a plurality of perspectives, as being part of the social relations through which self-arises, I would like to progress my research in Project Three to deepen my inquiry on resistance as a complex social process of relating to how a group coach can navigate some of the ethical dilemmas presented in this project. To establish more ideas about what happens in group coaching when I think

differently, I would like to inquire into the broader concepts of conflict, resistance and rebellion in leadership development groups as offering the possibility of enabling and constraining the space for difference.

Conclusion

To take a social view of self and identity, as social theorists suggest, is to notice the ‘paradox of thoroughly social individuals, who are shaped by the society into which they are born and whose individuality is created by the groups they are part of’ (Mowles, 2022, p. 9). As I summarise my reflections on the narrative of coaching a group as part of a leadership development programme, I notice how strong the focus on individual achievement and attaining of goals has become in key management practices, without reference to the historical patterns that shape us. My group coaching process focused on how individuals should strive to achieve productivity for their organisations by maximising their personal impact, while ignoring what constrains or enables individuals to act. In group coaching, the coach is contracted by client organisations to assist the coachee to articulate their desired goals, which is said to lead to a desired action plan for change. This conventional view, taken from the humanistic school of thought, implies that individuals can overcome historically unequal forces through self-will and a better understanding of self, which can be obtained through assessments and feedback.

Coaches are expected to acknowledge that the coachee always retains choice about their own actions and that the coach is outside the conversation. My aim in this project was to pay attention to the concept of self as fixed and identity as capable of being managed, which has influenced my work as a coach in groups. Taking up Mead’s concept of significant symbols in the form of gesture and response (Mead, 1934, p. 71), has led me to argue that the coach’s role is only relevant during the coaching session, in the social context where self is formed in relation to others in the group. In Mead’s view, self and identity are not fixed or predetermined but are constantly being formed and forming during social interactions, to which I have concluded that the coach cannot be outside. Neither can the coach know how the group will react during these social interactions. The group coaching session was based on traditional models of leadership, which prioritise individual achievement and are often rooted in assessments that adopt idealised notions of leadership norms. Haslanger’s (2010) argument that gender is taken up as a set of institutional expectations to which individuals feel they need to conform became a dominant theme in the coaching group. Expectations of how women and men are constituted as they take up roles saw power and resistance being negotiated in what the group assumed to be the outcome from the coaching session. As I have reflected above on the power relations between us, I now think that the social conflict within the group might have arisen as we took up an idealised view of leadership and what that means in terms of changing social relations.

Paying attention to the functional superiority assumed in the role of a group coach, some members of the group gave authority to assuming a generalised view of leadership, which got taken up as the dominant view of how a leader should act, even without being clear about what we were really talking. This suggests that coaching in leadership development may even reinforce cultural relations of power, reinforcing the expected outcome of creating the maximum impact for the organisation. It was through the resistance to the coaching process

that *a priori* leadership identities and stereotypical patterns of status subordination was made visible and opened to questioning. This leads me to a deeper reflection on the requirement to think more critically about how group coaching gets practiced and the language we use in talking about leadership. For example, how I was thinking about my own internal conflict and language implied that organisational paid work was more valuable than non-paid care. In Project Three, I explore how resistance challenges and enables certain power dynamics by creating alternative meaning and patterns in my daily practice. From the view of complex responsive processes of relating, I am specifically interested in how being more aware of the potentially constraining processes I get caught up in when power relations are disguised and often not called out during my practice.

Project Three: Relating embodied resistance to gender diversity

Introduction

Over the past ten years of my career, there have been many shifts in thinking and attempts to define coaching as separate from psychology and therapy. Current definitions of coaching vary so much that it is even difficult to define what is one's own 'practice' (Cavicchia and Gilbert, 2019). Thinking differently about what is going on in the way I take up my role in group coaching I am using my developing ideas taken from the perspective of complex response processes of relating. I look more closely at the relational interactions between my client(s) and the power relations within groups in my work, to which resistance is also always present.

At the conclusion of Project Two, I narrated an interaction where I, as a group coach, got caught up in struggles related to established power dynamics. The ideology of leadership and what a group coach 'ought' to be doing was questioned when one of my coachees refused to be coached. A core idea in my developing research is to take my own experience in my daily practice seriously and reflect on continuous patterns where I experience myself in patterns of conflict within power struggles. This often happens when I reflect on what values and norms, I think I am being judged against. Using Mead's (1934) pragmatist thinking, as well as that of others, I concluded at the end of Project Two that my assertion that I, as the group coach, was able to direct the group to reach a specific goal was indeed problematic. This way of thinking implies that I am somehow outside the group and has the potential to narrow perspectives on complex issues.

Moving into Project Three, this project focuses on a time when I was contracted to provide group coaching for a leadership programme in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for a global multinational energy company. It was assumed that I would make use of the clients established group coaching frameworks and methods, such as 360-degree feedback assessments and group projects, to achieve the programme outcomes. My coaching group did not want to adhere to the project, and in acting as their 'messenger' to the client I found myself in an emotionally conflicted situation. Based on the traditional notion of setting goals and developing action plans, my coaching group was expected to achieve the desired change in the organisation by delivering a change project. This was exactly what they were refusing to do. Taking up the work on complexity and organisations from Stacey et al. (2000), I reflect on how group coaches often view power, resistance, and control as if individuals exercise these. Such a view has led to privileging the rational mind, often as if the mind is split from the body.

As I start to pay attention to what we think we mean by change and the patterns that emerge in my daily working life, I highlight how the group coach can risk being taken up as an instrument of control directed towards ensuring the sameness of fit to the established idealisation of leadership (Stacey, 2010). In the context of resistance, thinking of power and resistance as co-forming in relation to each other, I am thinking through a more critical lens on what was not being spoken about or remained hidden.

Narrative

The crease between Cora's eyebrows became a deep frown as she stared at me and asked me what I expected her to do: was I suggesting we do not promote women or only have projects for native English speakers? She was angry with me for raising the issue of my coaching group, who did not want to submit their project. Nula was sitting to the left of me at our corporate-looking dark wooden table, her hands resting neatly on it.

I had asked for the meeting with Cora (the client) and Nula (my business partner in this programme) shortly after my third coaching group session on a global leadership development programme to explain why my coaching group did not want to submit their change project. Cora is the learning and development director of a large industrial engineering company, which I will call Disklen. She had been asked to put together a team of group coaches to support a leadership programme for the four hundred and fifty senior managers. The purpose of the programme, launched in January 2023, was to support the introduction of a new performance management process, due to launch at the end of the year. Alongside the new process, Disklen's board of directors had looked to improve the number of women at leadership level. This was because of the EU legislation that was due to be enforced (Directive EU 2022/2381).

The programme had been written up in a business case to drive behavioural change and embed a new diversity framework which had been approved by the board. The logo for the programme was designed as *the power of diversity to connect minds*. McKinsey, the global management consultants, had issued an article in 2014 followed by a series of research papers highlighting that companies in the top-quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians; and companies in the top quartile for gender diversity, were 15% more likely to have higher returns (Hunt et al., 2015). Disklen had used McKinsey reports as the basis for their diversity agenda.

Nula and I had gone back to working together after the pandemic. Because Nula was classified as part of a minority ethnic group, this had made her small company eligible to tender for the contract under Disklen's procurement policy, which awarded contracts to previously disadvantaged groups. Nula and I were both aware that she had qualified for the Disklen procurement process due to being categorised as belonging to an underrepresented group. We had worked on both female empowerment and diversity projects together before in this constellation. I also knew that this was a big revenue-generating programme for her and that she was pleased to have been awarded the tender. Given our shared history, these facts gave me the feeling that I had a certain responsibility to support her to achieve a good outcome for the client. I started to feel that this sense of responsibility was creating its own tension between us.

The group that I was coaching had been assembled according to the diversity criteria assigned by Disklen, which included specific requirements for a mix of age, race, and gender among the participants. The organisation defined diversity as - people from diverse backgrounds, to boost performance - which I took to mean different from the many white male leaders at Disklen. Cora had told me at the kick-off that there were not enough female leaders to have an equal number of men and women in each group, and said she was sorry about that. I felt that at the

time, she expressed no sincere sympathy in her words; her eyes did not soften but seemed to express irony. Why exactly was she apologising to me?

My coaching group will not comply

The programme was designed in line with a framework for promoting diversity in the selection and development of leaders at Disklen, which Cora had worked on with her HR colleagues and which had agreed by the board.

The programme was a 13-month journey that aimed to:

- provide opportunities for individuals to grow
- use project-based learning on significant business challenges
- solve concrete business issues
- use multicultural teams
- develop an agile mindset
- provide for networking across sites
- overcome silo thinking and create synergies for managing change.

The foundation of the programme's objectives was drawn from the key domains outlined in the McKinsey reports (Hunt et al., 2015; 2018; 2020). Change project work themes were given from the board of directors as those deemed important to the diversity initiative, and each member of the board acted as a sponsor. The desired outcome was a final presentation that would be something of a 'winner takes all' competition between the groups, and the emphasis was that the board would allocate resources to build on the initial ideas presented by the groups, if board members felt that the ideas were promising enough. At the time of the programme, the board consisted solely of white European men who had a lengthy career history at Disklen. The first woman was appointed to the board during the programme. I did feel that Cora had been limited by in her scope by what she felt the board would commit to and so I judged she felt pressurised to propose a rather traditional programme design.

At our first online kick-off, my coaching group had shared their 360-degree assessment with each other, created a learning action plan as a group and produced individual action plans. As a follow-up, the group had started an online discussion forum where they shared observations and questions with each other. One participant raised that he had heard from previous cohorts that the project work was overwhelming. Two weeks went by before another participant responded with a 'sad face' emoji. After that, the online group went quiet until the second group coaching session. After the second coaching session, the group again started to post comments to each other about the project. It transpired the sponsor had not turned up to their booked meeting even though there had been a lot of work involved in the preparation. The most outspoken comment came next was from a coachee based in Dubai who focused on all the negative possible reasons the sponsor had failed to turn up to a project meeting. The project that had been assigned to my group was to create innovative ideas, as a team, for the company-wide performance management models being launched, and their presentation was due in a month. They told me by email that they had decided not to go on with the project. Just before the final group coaching session, I reached out to Nula by email for guidance. She replied a few days later. She was sure I was doing my best but that we could not force the participants to do anything.

At the final online group coaching session, I asked the group what it might mean for them all if they did not submit their project: were they all in agreement, and if not, what might some of the arguments be? I decided to try a process that I had experienced in a large group setting as part of my own doctoral programme, and let the group sit with the silence, as the resistance might have been manifesting at this point. The silence was a bit unnerving for me (and for the group), and it seemed to go on for a long time, although it was not more than a few minutes. I offered to the group to talk informally to Cora. I wanted to help them move forwards by checking what might be behind their disagreement on submitting the project, acknowledging which words were not being spoken, and mediating to release the anxiety – mostly my own. I noted the discussions and comments the group were having in my notebook and asked them if this was a fair representation of what they wanted me to confirm with Cora. They all agreed, no doubt glad that the discussion had ended, and they could get back to their daily lives.

Cora, Nula, and I in conflict

When I reported back to Cora and Nula a few days later, I tried to explain what I had experienced within my coaching group. I sensed frustration with the points I was raising from their two frowning faces. I highlighted the struggles the group was having in writing the project, suggested they did not agree with the diversity aims and said that I was keen to explore how we might work with the group further. I observed that Cora did not look happy with my proposal; her hand started clicking the pen she was holding. She explained that the programme clearly supported the company's 50% target to create a more diverse leadership. As I tried to explain that I imagined putting together people based on visible signs of race and sex might feel a bit odd, Cora raised her voice to defend the use of quotas and targets to select participants.

Since there were only two managing directors in each country, Cora explained, the quota of 50% women could not easily be reached. The existing managing directors would have to be dismissed prematurely, and assuming that a woman successor could be found, this would make her increasingly subject to massive speculation that a woman was only appointed because of a target. Therefore, race had been added as a variable for selecting participants. I was by now irritated by what I felt was 'corporate speak' and noticed heat rising in my face. I heard my breathing quicken as I commented that this did not make much logical sense, since the established managing directors already had the advantage. Nula's eyes shot a look upwards, and she did a slight shake of her head. She quickly changed the subject back to my group's non-compliance with the project. I took this to be a signal from her to stop talking.

I observed that, as Cora and I struggled to discuss the points from my group which I had written in my notebook, Nula had cut over the simmering disagreement to move the conversation on to focus on a 'safe' solution for what to do about a non-compliant group. I was not so surprised that Nula took this action, given that we had worked together previously. My thoughts were swirling around. Was I being stopped from talking so that Nula could protect her own position, with her nervous laugh signalling that I should not take our conversation any further? Or was this an effort to protect her power status in our relationship. Either way I sensed Nula's action as a strong signal not to try to work with my group's feedback to discuss what might be an organisational dilemma reflected by the group.

I was feeling uncertain and concerned that I was at risk of being disloyal to Nula and causing her discomfort too. Why was everyone so uncomfortable in the room? Cora stated that she found my conversation unsupportive of her and the objectives of the programme, and her pen jabbed at the table. At this point in our conversation, I had the intense sense that Cora's and Nula's own needs were being played out into our conversation, and I was going to be punished for not complying with their expectations by insisting my group complete their assignment. Nula hastily started to propose solutions for my group. We would arrange a meeting with the sponsor and seek his guidance, which Cora said was an elegant solution. We abruptly finished the meeting, with my own fake half smile and the obligatory farewell handshake rounding things off. As Nula and I left the building together, her neat heels clacking against the tiled floor, I remained quiet; I was thinking about whether I would really invest time and effort in these diversity programmes in the future. I felt very irritated, even angry, with myself for finding myself back into the same conflicts.

Reflections on what we think we mean by the business case

During 2014, McKinsey launched a series of research reports on women in the workplace, conducted in partnership with LeanIn.Org (the organisation founded by Sheryl Sandberg, the then COO of Facebook, as a result of her book [Sandberg, 2013]). The reports spawned a host of diversity initiatives aimed at improving hiring and learning and development practices to deliberately included more women.

By 2022, the EU had ruled towards greater equality between men and women by introducing quotas to set a share of 40% of the underrepresented sex among non-executive directors and 33% among all EU directors, for companies listed on the stock exchange (Directive EU 2022/2381). A year later, the United Nations (UN Women, 2023) concluded that despite all the training efforts and legislation, globally women held just 28.2 per cent of management positions in the workforce. The percentage of women had declined steadily towards the top hierarchical positions and became even more alarming when looking at other inter-sectional data, such as ethnicity and disability.

When the EU legal framework was introduced in 2022, it assigned targets for gender balance to be achieved by 2026 in both the private and the public sector:

Progress in improving female representation on corporate boards and in business leadership positions remains slow and uneven across the EU. This cannot be explained by a lack of availability of skilled women with the ambition to lead. Long-standing and systemic entry barriers into corporate boards and leadership positions, known as the 'glass ceiling,' persist and will not disappear without additional action (...) The new directive sets targets for large, listed companies in the EU to accelerate progress towards gender balance in their boards. The aim is for the under-represented sex to make up at least 40% among non-executive board members or 33% of all directors by 30 June 2026 (Directive EU 2022/238).

As the skill and ambition of women was not being questioned, the Directive pointed to the historical sex-based barriers that could be overcome with quotas. However, the questions on what we even mean by gender, what is supposed to be causing the 'glass ceiling' (Hede, 1994)

and why gender diversity is taken as the under-represented female sex, are neither simple nor straightforward.

Much of Disklen's learning and development agenda had quoted the Hunt et al. (2020) report, which claimed:

The business case is stronger than ever. For diverse companies, the likelihood of outperforming industry peers on profitability has increased over time, while the penalties are getting steeper for those lacking diversity (Hunt et al., 2020, p. 3).

The report quoted statistics of what they called 'diversity leaders' where they suggested 5% of firms had taken concrete steps to balance the ratio of men and women in senior roles. 'Laggards,' on the other hand, were firms without diversity and were more likely to underperform their national industry median profitability, at 40 percent (Hunt et al., 2020, p. 5). The report continued to expand on the basis for its claim that the leadership group driving company strategy and organisational transformation showed better earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) when the board was diverse. However, the report did not mention why better profits might be the case. Indeed, the report went on to say:

The interplay between diverse boards, executive teams and company profitability is not well understood. Could these more diverse boards be operating differently? Or could a visible commitment to board diversity be signalling a company's openness towards increasingly diverse customers, employees, businesses, and communities, which in turn is positively influencing financial performance? Board diversity could symbolize a company's commitment to equality, innovation, and inclusive growth. Certainly, these questions warrant further research. (Hunt et al., 2020, p. 13).

Claims that greater diversity leads to higher profits has seen a sudden rise in training programmes. Yet the business case argument has been far from clear why adding women makes a difference. Implied in this thinking is a way of talking about leaders who can decide how an organisation can change from one state to another. What is not clear is how this happens when more women are 'added'. How does this lack of clarity about what we are talking about affect the design and implementation of diversity programmes? I would like to address this question by examining what might have been behind the thinking on the case for change at Disklen.

What are diversity programmes supposed to do differently?

The requirement of the leadership programme to include 'diverse' individuals at Disklen created a complex picture of an established way of thinking about leadership as if there was somehow already an established group, which was implied to be western and masculine by default. It was frequent practice for Disklen to set target numbers for female and non-western candidates in its recruitment processes. Specifically, this meant that female candidates were invited for group coaching after they were recruited. Cora talked about the company's 50% diversity targets as a valuable way of getting women into senior roles. To me, it implied that

there was something that a homogenous category of women was supposed to do to achieve profit objectives. How this was to happen was not, however, articulated anywhere.

In my reading of Oakley's (1972; 2005) ideas, gender is socially constructed and yet the definition of what and how is being constructed is much contested. The argument that women have been hindered by being assigned a gender that is a lower social status, means organisational roles pattern into expectations based on sex-based divisions of labour (Acker, 1990; Haslanger, 2000; Scott, 2020). The fact that women have been assigned lower status roles due to sex-based divisions is an argument taken up by many critical, gender and feminist theorists. Benhabib (1992) theorises on why women have been, and still are, situated less favourably than men in society by highlighting that almost every society has been, and largely remains dominated by masculinised bodies, thinking and values. While this project does not intent to provide a cohesive analysis of the different theorising between sex-based differences and gender, I am highlighting how historical power relations patterns continue to be reinforced in the everyday experience of my practice.

According to the United Nations (UN Women, 2023), while much progress has been made, much remains to be done due to the fact that women continue to earn less than men and be assigned many lower and often unpaid caring roles (Goldin, 2021; Scott, 2020). Thus, it would be fair to agree with the argument for increasing the representation of women in higher-status roles to accelerate social change and do away with unequal rates of pay, if this changed the opportunities for women in general. However, in examining the business case from Disklen, there is a risk of turning the fairness argument into a rational justification that what is for 'good' for business, as assumed to also be 'good' for women. The business case could be critiqued for underplaying the role of power and privilege in the persistence of ongoing unequal social outcomes. Such a critique makes me question what we thought we were doing within our roles on the diversity programme at Disklen.

What might be behind the business case?

As a group coach, I have been involved in and influenced by the work of Kets de Vries, who has written extensively about the tendency in organisations for individuals to adopt rational thinking dominant ideas on agentic, logical, individual risk takers as part of leadership development programmes (Korotov et al., 2012). Group coaching, a common intervention on these programmes, has grown at a substantial rate over the past twenty years, and is said to be conceived of as support for personal leadership journeys to bring about organisational change (Brown and Grant, 2010). Organisations like Disklen are naturally expecting coaching and group coaches to produce results, as they invest heavily in these programmes.

In recent years, assuming gender diversity means 'adding more women into management' has resulted in such training efforts as the one I was involved in. Training efforts in diversity have also attracted criticism, and there has been recent debate about why they have had a negligible impact on female representation overall (Schoen and Rost, 2021). The criticism has been that these programmes are instrumental only in finding ways to increase the number of few women in senior roles, while many discriminatory processes and policies that hinder women taking better paid or more fulfilling roles remain in place, especially given that most women still take on the bulk of childcare in the home (Goldin, 2021).

When I reflect on the way we talked about diversity at Disklen, it was abstract. We assumed that there might already be an established 'ideal leader' to which new groups might be added. Taken for granted was the idea that diversity was a 'thing' that needed to be managed through a learning and development agenda and measured to produce positive, profitable outcomes for the organisation. The tendency to assume an ideal leader continues to privilege rationality, as if 'I' can 'think' myself into being. It is a line of thinking that has its roots in Descartes' philosophy (Griffin, 2002, p. 165). The implication that the mind exists in a person as somehow separate from the body was explicitly stated in the Disklen business case and in the marketing slogan used for promoting the programme: *the power of diversity to connect minds*.

The split in thinking about the metaphorical organisational mind (thinking) and body (doing) as somehow separate from each other is apparent in the early scientific management theories of Frederik Taylor (1911). I was trained to think of management as a science from the origins of Taylorism. His early work assigns the moral authority and power of thinking to managers' minds and the doing of tasks to the (unthinking) bodies of workers:

It is only through enforced standardization of methods, enforced adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and enforced cooperation that this faster work can be assured. And the duty of enforcing the adoption of standards and enforcing this cooperation rests with the management alone (Taylor, 1911, p. 83).

When I reflect on my training and the view that management alone should enforce efficiency standards, I can identify two taken-for-granted ways of thinking that influenced the business case at Disklen. The first is the notion that the leader is a rational, autonomous individual thinker who controls organisational change. The second is the notion that the mind is split from the body and individuals are split from each other. For many years, researchers have been calling out that such thinking has been part the politics of who gets to assign what jobs, fundamental to the way difference is called out in service of how capitalist societies work (Mumby, 2011).

One argument for 'adding' women might be that bringing in more female representation could break behavioural stereotypes and change the historical narrative of leaders as male, agentic, goal-oriented risk takers. Yet when I looked at the senior leadership at Disklen, there seemed little evidence to suggest that the diversity programme had changed the rational, goal-oriented 'winner takes all' business case and design. Another argument could be that adding women and members of non-western cultures could add a new way of thinking and knowledge creation to orthodox theories of management – although how such an approach is supposed to come about and offer more knowledge is not clear. My inquiry into the business case has presented several new angles for my research. Privileging rationality points to the risk of the programme I was involved in acting as a mere 'visible' tick-box exercise that would allow the board to 'signal' equality and fairness in their annual report to shareholders, while maintaining the status quo. However, I am left with a question if was there actually was an expectation from the board that the programme was going to create change? If so, how was that supposed to come about? I will explore these questions by taking up alternative ideas from complex responsive processes of relating.

What might be an alternative way of thinking?

In my view, there was something very problematic about the whole diversity discourse at Disklen; which result in a localised conflict between Cora, Nula, and me - a discourse that is often reflected in wider society. One might conclude that if diverse boards and management teams are indeed supposed to operate differently from boards and teams that are not diverse, it should be possible to clearly explain what is supposed to be different. Reinforcing how inconclusive the case for diversity training programmes is, a Harvard Business Review report in 2020 (Ely and Thomas, 2020) stated that diversity initiatives have had a negligible impact. I understand this to mean that we still do not know what diversity training programmes are supposed to do.

Stacey (2000) highlights that learning agendas come from an orthodox form of thinking that suggests powerful individual ideal leaders can act on the organisation to achieve their objective. New knowledge in orthodox learning and development agendas is said to be 'located in individual heads' (Stacey, 2001a, p. 14). Which, as he points out, does not really explain how such knowledge has arisen nor how individuals would share their knowledge. I have reflected on the stated aim of the leadership programme at Disklen, which was to drive behavioural change and embed the new diversity framework that *has the power to connect minds*. This indeed could be considered as somewhat magical thinking, as if managers are able to connect their minds together in some abstract, disembodied way.

The first volume of *Complexity and Management* (Stacey et al., 2000) gives a very thorough account of why we cannot be considered as individuals split off from each other. The ideas in this book developed from, among others, social theorists Elias and Bourdieu. Elias and Bourdieu differ in their approaches, but they agree in their respective theories that individuals can be understood only in the context of their relations with others in society:

The function of the pronoun 'I' in human communication can only be understood in the context of all the other positions to which the other terms in the series refer. The six others are absolutely inseparable, for one cannot imagine an 'I,' without a 'he,' or a 'she,' a 'we,' 'you' (singular and plural) or 'they' (Elias, 1978, p. 123).

What I understand Elias to be saying is that there can be no 'I' without 'you' or 'we'. It follows that to construct a 'we' implies a 'they'. Such a challenge to thinking of the individual free will as split off from society would mean that we are inseparable from each other within social groups. Elias (1978, p. 128) maintains that the social self is intertwined with the relations between individuals and within and between groups. If I take up what I understand Elias is pointing to, one way of looking at group coaching is to consider coaching as a social process. Coaching itself, from which group coaching has developed, has most of its origins in a humanistic approach, placing precisely the opposite emphasis on appreciating people's individual subjective experiences from within their own frame of reference; in other words, from their own subjective point of view, as if 'I' reside somewhere inside a self and 'I' have the free will to reach individual goals (Lee-Clarke, 2003). This moves my thinking to thinking of an organisation not as an entity but as a dynamic pattern of social relationships is to understand complex patterns of relationships (Stacey, 2003). Given that we all come with different

historical backgrounds and experiences, groups relating to each other could be supportive of thinking about diversity differently, as embodied conversations of difference. This would challenge the idea that diversity is a 'thing' to be managed within a business case. Indeed, such an idea was, I think, what my coaching group was inadvertently pointing out.

Stacey (2001a; 2001b; 2003; 2010) develops a line of argument in his work on the dynamics of groups as organisational patterns. If there is no split between the individual and the group or between the organisation and society, knowledge creation can be understood as an active part of relational process of social interactions:

Relating between diverse people in their local situations is understood as the process in which knowledge is perpetually reproduced and potentially transformed at the same time. This relating is understood as communicative interaction in which power relations emerge (Stacey, 2001b, p. 4).

What I understand his view to be is that diversity is what happens when people get together and interact to make sense with one another based on their histories and where novelty and continuity arises in social interaction. In other words, themes and meaning arise as we go on together, which are – paradoxically – predictable and unpredictable at the same time. This is a radical challenge to the idea that diverse knowledge is only in the minds of some individual niche leaders.

Building on the thinking from *Complexity and Management* (Stacey et al., 2000), how I take up my role as a group coach would represent a radically different view from thinking of a self-regulating individual leader who can change their organisation by acting on the goal of connecting 'diverse' minds. I might start to pay attention to the complex, evolving relational processes of people interacting and making sense with one another where repeating patterns arise. Paying attention to my developing ideas, I agree with the ideas from Stacey that knowledge cannot be considered as only existing in the 'minds' of some leaders and that diversity cannot be considered as a thing to be managed. Thinking further along these lines of argument would involve inquiring what, in the events narrated, might we have meant by the power of connecting minds and why 'adding' women as part of a quota system was supposed to increase this power and produce better results.

What was 'adding' women supposed to do, and why did it not work?

Leadership development programmes promise profound change results for organisations in a fast-growing industry. Leadership development is prone to such wild claims partly due to the mystical narrative around what leadership is. I covered much of this thinking in my interpretation of Project Two. Development programmes walk a fine line between supporting a shared view of learning and aiming to demonstrate their espoused contribution to individual goal setting for career success (Sinclair, 2011). Claims of achieving change outcomes at a very individual level stem from the modernist thinking that profit, control, and efficiency are the main goals of coaching (Cavicchia and Gilbert, 2019). For women, when success does not manifest itself in individual career advancement, 'fixing' is often offered in the form of skills improvement through training, coaching and leadership development. These interventions can be seen as an attempt to ensure that employees adhere to the organisational view of what is considered the 'ideal worker' (Gray et al., 2019).

At Disklen, I felt that Cora wanted to show that she was fully supporting the senior leadership business case and the implied fairness of the diversity message, which she proudly wore as a message on her shirt. Nevertheless, we had all started to realise the programme was not achieving the promised results. I started to question why our efforts clung to vague measures and promises of the outcomes of revenue growth in the business case, when so often these efforts fail. The business case justification for running diversity programmes does, however, point to why group coaching has been taken up as an instrument in traditional thinking, focused on profit maximisation. Perhaps the unintended or emergent position of diversity programmes is precisely to illuminate contradictory experiences in order that we can inquire deeper into what is really going on when we refer to leaders as powerful individuals are able to choose the future state of the organisation to maximise gains.

To take up the perspective from complex responsive processes of relating on the Disklen programme, would be to argue that goals and outcomes are predictably unpredictable. Therefore, how value might be created is affected by the reality that change can happen at many social levels and is not under the control of only some minds. Such a view would certainly deflate the narrative of leadership development programmes. Shaw (2002) suggests an alternative approach to make sense of the contradiction inherent in leadership development efforts:

This means inquiring into the ongoing local situated communicative activity between experiencing bodies that gives rise to intentions, decisions, and actions, toolmaking, and tool-using. Such an approach attempts to explore the paradox that our interaction, no matter how considered or passionate, is always evolving in ways that we cannot control or predict in the longer term, no matter how sophisticated our planning tools (Shaw, 2002, p. 172).

As I understand it, part of Shaw's critique of orthodox thinking is that we cannot know in advance what potentially will be transformed when we bring together individuals with divergent backgrounds and histories. Or she means at least that our ideas about what is changing are conflated due to the emergence of complex interactions. In the context of my narrative, the lack of shared understanding about what we were all doing, our emotional reactions, my challenges to Cora and her responses could all be understood as part of complex relational processes. During our interactions, knowledge was being reproduced and potentially transformed as part of the discourse.

In conclusion thus far, arguing from a complexity perspective would have a direct impact on the notion of my role in diversity programmes. Diversity could be thought of not as a framework of power 'in the minds' of leaders to drive behavioural change, but as part of the dynamics of what goes on in our changing relations in conversations. Such a way of thinking about what Cora, Nula and I were involved with invites me to inquire more critically into the discourse of what was not being openly spoken about or what was hidden by the orthodox assumptions of the business case.

What happens when I pay attention differently?

Inquiring more critically invites me to try to see what might have been going on and to reflect on the micro-details of my experiences that might have been surfacing between us. Taking up

ideas from complex responsive processes of relating as identified by Stacey et al. (2000), patterns in communicative approaches to how change emerges can be identified by paying attention to our relationships:

Complex responsive processes of relating are temporal processes of interaction between human bodies in the medium of symbols patterning themselves as themes in communicative action. These themes are continuously reproducing and potentially transforming themselves in the process of bodily interaction itself. The themes of communicative interaction are also understood as the emergent constraints (power and leadership) within which individual and collective identity and difference is perpetually constructed as continuity and potential transformation. It is interacting persons who form and are formed by them (Griffin, 2002, p. 169).

This points to how our view of self is constantly forming and being formed in everyday ordinary conversations, which become patterned. It is these patterns that constrain and maintain relations between us. In reading Griffin (2002), I become more aware of how historical patterns are reproduced when we do not pay attention to them and when we take them for granted. I understand this is similar in meaning to when Bourdieu (1977) refers to habitus as the embodied sense of how to act, which is reproduced in our social structures (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). How I think and act reproduces, and is produced by, relations of individual and collective practices over history. Elias uses the term habitus in a comparable way when he refers to the rules and norms that shape the 'we' patterns in groups (Elias, 2001, p. 204). Patterns form when we refer to ourselves as part of 'we' in social groups. If 'we' is the established group of leaders, to which 'they' the diverse group is added, a form of binary thinking is implied. The established group of leaders at Disklen had been, until very recently, western men. In a challenge to Cora, I spoke of the established leaders as 'they,' perhaps implying the pattern of my own binary thinking of male and female leaders as separate. I had already positioned myself as being part of the outsider group. The challenges within my coaching group in relation to the project and the language I used could be seen to reflect how I have taken my own thinking for granted. I challenged Cora by saying that male leaders at Disklen already had the historical advantage of being considered 'ideal'. At the same time, many women have successfully secured senior roles at Disklen, so there have been changes to the balance of power; this challenges my own unreflective way of thinking and acting.

Reacting to organisational rules, when looked at from complex responsive processes of relating point of view, is to consider not only an automated response but also what arises in the changing balances of 'rules' over time. Bourdieu gives a detailed account of how the structures of the historically characterised habitus reproduce themselves through learning processes to pattern sex-based divisions of labour and norms (Bourdieu, 2001). I will not go into his extensive work here, but I will reflect on his assertion about the continued strength of the masculine order:

The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has

no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 9).

I take this to express the notion that I, and those around me in my relationships, have assumed 'masculine' in our thinking about leaders and therefore do not discuss it. As Cora and I struggled to find agreement on the points raised by my coaching group, I noted that accusations and counteraccusations about not supporting women found their way into our conversation. This is not surprising when viewing the historical context of leadership as I described in Project Two. Bourdieu (2001) explores relations as deeply embedded within masculine cultural and social structures as seeming natural in conversation. As Shaw (2002) points out, no matter what we plan for, change will always happen in patterned ways unless we start to talk differently about meaning. As historians have repeatedly asserted, sex-based divisions in roles have existed since the origins of humankind, often in service of efficiency (O'Connor, 2019). Our understanding of how we perform our roles has much to do with how women is defined which accords with historical power relations and the way thinking about gendered norms have arisen (Haslanger, 2010). This leads me to consider that we have taken for granted through the concept of women-in-leadership, as if there is a homogenous female group waiting to be invited to join an already established masculine one.

Returning to my original questions, how am I inquiring into the institutional patterns that privilege masculine, western thinking as the established group? I start to reconsider what I think is even meant by 'gender'. Having read some ideas from social constructionism (Hacking, 1999) more deeply, I agree that patterns arise when individuals are assigned to a binary view of sex-based category. However, from my reading of complexity, the argument that constraints are perpetually being reinforced when gender is seen as only an add-on to sexual identity, privileges some certain women whilst ignoring other social categories such as class and race (Haslanger 2010, p. 37 quoting [Butler 1990 Chapter 1]). I am left still with no plausible alternative ideas to Cora's challenge of what else can be done.

As I reflect on my narrative up to this point, I find myself in a critical position. How organisations discuss 'adding women' to senior roles as good for business is promoted from a capitalist view of profit maximisation. I have been reflecting on the need to pay attention to how I am acting into conflicting situations when the business case argument is used to promote women. Perhaps my actions and those of Cora and Nula are because, as Bourdieu points out, 'habitus is an endless capacity to engender products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). I have noted that I tried to limit my show of emotion and indeed that I experienced tension in feeling controlled by Nula. Reflecting on this, I realise that I was embarrassed about not being able to answer Cora's question as to what alternatives to diversity programmes there are. In addition, I had not been able to get my group to deliver their project. Not being able to get my group to deliver their project points to a contradiction with my view of self as the group coach. I am supposed to deliver and, to view emotions as neat packages that can be managed, by following a series of coaching steps. Indeed, I was criticising the programme without having an alternative to propose, and I was probably not alone in feeling vulnerable. My coaching group, Cora and Nula also had a lot at stake to ensure the programme was a success. Viewing coaching as a mode of control, rather than seeing it as

a social process, might have stopped us from making sense of what we were doing? How might I have acted and spoken into the situation differently, as Shaw (2002) suggests?

How could I have acted into the situation?

Burkitt (2014) enquires into a view of how feelings and emotions arise in patterns of power relationships. He emphasises a view beyond dichotomous or dualistic visions of society and individuals by suggesting we pay attention to how emotions are created within patterns of power relations. In *Emotions and Social Relations* (Burkitt, 2014) he concludes that all emotions relate to some type of feeling but that not all feelings are emotions. I understand that he is pointing to emotions as being formed relationally in the social context in which they arise and the meaning we make of them. Referring to Elias's (2001) thinking in terms of a society of individuals, Burkitt (2014) highlights how we are multiple selves in relation how our emotional relations arise. He concludes that our habitus and embodied disposition get taken up as an ongoing sense of self where power relations are maintained through how well emotions are controlled:

The implication is that emotion is always interwoven in power relations, both shaping and being shaped by them. Emotions are shaped by power relations because governments and other actors and agencies try to use emotions to direct the field of social action, controlling and manipulating people. However, these attempts often fail because emotion itself shapes power relations, as people do not always respond in ways that those who attempted to govern conduct intend, or in ways that can be predicted in advance (Burkitt, 2014, p. 150).

For me, thinking how emotions become regulated as a social norm is a novel way for me to examine power relations and how doing gender is reinforced. How a group coach might seek to control her own emotions might reproduce the existing expectations of her gender, especially in such a contested field as diversity training.

Thinking more about power relations as being shaped by, and within, dynamic and evolving emotions takes my inquiry in a new direction. In the situation narrated, unintended consequences were at the centre of my anxiety, and I felt tense about my conflicted loyalties. It was naturally very anxiety-provoking to be in opposition to Cora: the formal power figure, who I hence saw as having a higher status, and was the client in this programme. Nula was my direct client, but also a lifetime friend. It felt natural to self-silence, as an unconscious default response that I have patterned. My response was to get out of the conversation as quickly as possible rather than cause further upset to my colleagues. Emotional responses can be considered as being a vital part of how we make sense of, and respond to, complex struggles within relationships. This is what I think Burkitt (2014) means by emotions as being created and shaped by patterns of power relationships.

It is clear Elias (1978) sees power as denoting a social relationship:

One might say that someone 'has' power and leave it at that, although such usage, which implies that power is a thing, leads down a blind alley. A more adequate solution to problems of power depends on power being

understood unequivocally as a structural characteristic of a relationship, all-pervading and, as a structural characteristic, neither good nor bad. It may be both. We depend on others; others depend on us. In so far as we are more dependent on others than they are on us, more directed by others than they are by us, they have power over us, whether we have become dependent on them by their use of naked force, or by our need to be loved, our need for money, healing, status, a career or simply excitement (Elias, 1978, p. 93).

Taking up this notion of power relations as socially formed, shaped by and within emotions, changes my reflections on what we were doing together. My constraining Cora from acting in line with what she might see as a legitimate corporate expectation of my role put our relationship at risk of further conflict. This reflection develops my thinking that calling out women as a classification that represents gender diversity inevitably contributes towards the patterning view of how we feel about ourselves. My coaching group were perhaps angry at being isolated and sent on training programmes, especially as being considered as niche. Our perceptions of ourselves will always be informed by how others make us feel and how we feel about others.

Bourdieu (2001) differentiates between symbolic and material relations of power to take this point further. To him, material power is foremost economic, while symbolic power is the form that is taken up through social order and categories. He also points to the idea that we are all bound to each other in our interdependence through power:

Symbolic power cannot be exercised without the contribution of those who undergo it and who only undergo it because they construct it as such (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 40).

His ideas suggest how complex power relations become when they pattern in our habitus. The ideas of habitus from both Bourdieu and Elias remove any notion that powerful individuals can control power; rather, how our relations in society give rise to normative patterns that control and enable how we feel about ourselves.

At this point I am also conflicted, given that emotions, feelings, and affect are themselves difficult concepts to define. Burkitt (2014, p. 14) does not differentiate between affect and emotions, as he concludes that it is impossible to separate the terms. However, my reading is that embodied emotional states and registering of events in minds and bodies are flowing, dynamic and contextual for women in a way that critical feminists claim is central to the inequality debate (Ahmed, 2004). For this project, it is perhaps enough to acknowledge that it is crucial to pay attention to emotions when referring to critical social research for women. Historically and culturally normed to women, and stereotyped as such, emotions are then continuously bound up in power relations and social inequality.

Being categorised as outside the established group of leaders and exotically labelled as 'diverse' affects how we feel we are being constrained when we act together. My coaching group made this visible when they engaged with the roles they had been assigned, despite refusing to hand in their project. Despite this tension of being grouped into outsider categories, they remained within the programme but did not speak aloud about their feelings.

Instead, I volunteered to talk their message to Cora. I wonder if in doing so I took away some of the agency that had to represent themselves. In contrast, I might be seen to have responded rigidly to Cora, and she to me, while not making space to generate new meaning and (in this context) to have missed the opportunity to make sense of what we were doing. The curious thing was the orthodox binary structure of my own language in my conversation with Cora when I questioned the advantage men already have in their historical positions. In doing so I called out my own pattern of thinking, which also led to our power struggles. In addition, I did not explore the potential for change in my own response.

When I reflect on the gestures and responses in our power struggles, I note that Cora, Nula, and I all tried to withhold something from each other in our relations. Nula's eagerness to move the conversation on to a very narrow focus and close the discussion could be seen as a power gesture, given that the business relationship was first established between her and Cora and that she was heavily reliant on the contract. It could also be seen as a gesture that reflected her anxiety about maintaining her status and hence being able to win more business. I could be seen to have challenged potential expectations of how I should behave as a group coach to support the organisational aims of the project, thus preventing Cora from being able to declare the programme a success by delivering an obedient project task. Cora could also be seen to have withheld my ability to support my group by refusing to acknowledge the feedback and open the discourse on what we thought we were doing. Likewise, the expectations of collaboration were influenced by monetary transactions between Cora and Nula. Cora had awarded Nula the contract based on the diversity criteria set by Disklen, and she was reliant on the work for her income (as indeed I was). This was a key point, as power existed in every aspect of our relationship. Money tends to strongly illuminate power relations and thus when money is involved, notions of fairness can often fade quite quickly.

Reflecting on how money might have influenced our feelings towards each other and reading the comments of my learning set after I handed in the first draft of this project, I was questioned as to whether Cora, Nula and I were trying to demonstrate to each other that we were 'caring'. Was this a habitual embodied female response to each other not to be seen as selfish or money grabbing? Or was it also that the strong narrative of rationality in why we were promoting women which created contradictory feelings of wanting to believe we were doing 'good'. Why did I feel I needed to remain pleasant and mild-mannered? Either way, I would conclude that my behaviour was fearful and a reflection of my feelings about the situation.

The ideas from complex responsive processes of relating invite me to pay attention differently in group coaching sessions to my own patterns of responses that arise when I feel challenged and do not stay in the conversation:

It is a way of thinking that invites us to stay in the movement of communicating, learning, and organizing, to think from within our living participation in the evolution of forms of identity. Our blindness to the way we participate in fabricating the conversational realities of organizing is compounded by the difficulty we have in thinking from within, in thinking as participants, in thinking in process terms, above all, in thinking paradoxically (Shaw, 2002, p. 20).

What this means to me is that it is important to think more deeply about patterns of my own assumptions on one's own evaluation of gender. My own thinking, language, and patterned behaviour, and the conflicting emotions arising from the experience of working with DEI may have to do with feeling tied to my own identity. From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, we cannot just do what we want in relation to each other; rather, we have to be accountable to each other for what we do (Stacey, 2001b, p. 114). The constraints of patterning who gets to speak and who does not (and whose voices are heard and whose are not) establishes which people are 'in' and who is 'out'. Feelings became embodied in Cora's eyes and face in ways I had not predicted, and this placed me with a feeling that I did not belong in this constellation. I was perhaps fearful of turning against myself and my early feminist beliefs.

Paying attention to how emotions and power relations interact, might allow a deeper understanding of how groups pattern historical practices. Stacey (2010) suggests diversity is a requirement for novelty to arise in the emergence of new meaning. This he says is because we all have different habitus. If diversity supplies novelty, difference and tension will always give rise to misunderstanding. Coaches, coachees and clients will all hold different perspectives, and it is in paying attention to these differences that we can stimulate new conversations and the possibility of change. In contrast, it is through closing the conversations down that we unreflectively close the possibility of novelty.

Engaging with patterns of emotional and power relations in difference

In *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias and Scotson (1994) studied how two groups, with no recognisable socio-economic differences between them, formed a power figuration based on those who thought of themselves as being part of the established 'we' group. The authors conclude that naming 'difference' between groups is used to sustain power for the established group. These named differences are used to preserve power relations by forming a cohesive identity (or indeed by not recognising the 'out' group and therefore resisting giving them a voice). Over time, power differences become patterned such that the 'out' group come to act as if they are constrained by power, especially when strong emotions of shame and embarrassment arise:

As the study of Winston Parva indicates, an established group tends to attribute to its outside group, as a whole the "bad" characteristics of that group's "worst" section – of its anomic minority. In contrast, the self-image of the established group tends to be modelled on its exemplary, most "nomic" or norm setting section, on the minority of its "best" members. This pars pro toto distortion in opposite directions enables an established group to prove their point to themselves as well as to others: there is always some evidence to show that one's group is "good," and the other is "bad" (Elias and Scotson, 1994 p. xix).

It is interesting for me to reflect here that the established group of leaders at Disklen had developed the diversity slogan and were vocally sponsoring the training. To me, this means that the sponsors already considered themselves as the established leadership 'we' group. At the same time, the sponsor who was part of the we group, failed to turn up to the project

meeting, resisting giving a voice to the newcomers. In such a case, apparent displays of power meant the newcomers would probably have felt excluded from the very training that was promoting inclusion.

Through my growing awareness of and reflection on relational patterns, I noticed that Cora could indeed have been concerned that my strong critique against using the arbitrary criteria 'woman leader' and 'difference' went against her strongly held ideology that the training was gender-neutral and supported the development of women. She resorted to sarcasm to imply that I had not properly thought about an alternative idea, as if my professional status as an expert coach was being questioned. After all, Disklen had a strong and established leadership base, and it was investing a great deal in training. There was clearly a lot at stake for Cora and her team. I reflect now that when I started the discussion on how little was being achieved for women, this could also have been seen as an aggressive gesture. Conversational processes can indeed be understood as both transformative and (potentially) destructive through the possible loss of identity (Stacey, 2003, p. 326). Was I about to be excluded, which I felt as panic and became angry? Our conflict might also be seen as arising from internalising anger in still not feeling part of the established 'we' group and therefore feeling defensive, perhaps coming from the urban myth that women should always help other women.

Furthermore, as a contractor I was the 'outsider' at Disklen and therefore my status is different from, and lower than, Cora's. This led to the conversation being abruptly stopped by Nula when she felt the rising tensions and gestured a constraint. I noticed a feeling of rising anger as a bodily sensation, and our exchange speaks to me of how hard it is to discuss themes of power relations openly when not paying attention to strong emotions. This observation might be accepting that the limits imposed by the status quo often take the form of 'bodily emotions – shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 38). Perhaps my ability to look openly at the everyday dynamics within and between groups was being hindered by how I felt I should be feeling both as a coach and as a woman, unreflectively closing the possibility of novelty.

Who is already considered part of the established group in an organisation, and how the division of resources is allocated to exclude others, patterns in such a way that causes us to feel that we cannot openly discuss what is going on. Silence is also a way that established groups continue to operate. As Elias concludes:

It is equally possible for groups of people consciously oriented towards change just to strengthen the tendency of their figuration to remain as it is (Elias, 1978, p. 147).

This leads me to think that my practice as a group coach could naturally be seen as a mechanism for controlling sameness, under conditions of rational thinking. This would lead to emotions being regulated, as certain topics are deemed unspeakable or indeed not being seen as necessary to speak about.

Burkitt (2014) takes up his reading of Elias further to suggest that internalised aggression is most often expressed as a gesture of anger when we feel we cannot make meaning of our interactions. I felt this when Cora explained that putting more women on to the local management boards would have to involve dismissing men prematurely and that assuming a

woman as successor would make the female candidate the subject of massive and increasing speculation that she had only been appointed to meet a target. I called this out as not applying to the 'established' group, which often occurs in organisations, and felt myself disciplined into silence. My own experience also speaks to me of the history and actual structure of power relations that circulates so often for women. It is so difficult for women to be talk about quotas and senior positions without being accused of being mere placeholders and without always being moved (and stigmatised by shame) back to a lower status and to the position of an outsider.

Burkitt (1997) explains how emotional control is tied to established power structures:

The whole notion of activity and passivity pervaded the relations between self and others, as well as the relation of a person to their own self and was reflected in the modes of domination and subordination in social relations of power. Here, the masculine was prioritised and given superior status over those traits which were seen as feminine, and the man who displayed these traits in the most clear and unambiguous way proved himself worthy of mastery over women and slaves. In this way, emotions and their controls are tied to the power structures of a society, between classes, races, and genders (Burkitt, 1997, p. 51).

This implies that my view of self is inseparable from the way in which others respond to me. Because of this, in the situation narrated I felt guilt and anger. A form of self-silencing arose in that I felt that I was expected not to continue the conversation, and I questioned my own competence as a group coach. As Stacey (2003, p. 327) points out, 'transformation is possible, then, only when interactions are characterised by difference.' Fundamentally, he is referring to a paradoxical way of thinking about the creative and destructive patterns of social interaction that emerge at the same time. This makes me think about how my coaching groups failure to hand in their project also highlighted resistance to the board's attempts to manage difference, whilst the sponsor not turning up also maintained the dominant position. Given that I have argued for thinking differently about my practice as creating the possibility for new meaning to arise during relational discourse, I wonder how I might be able to reflect on Cora's question about alternatives to promoting women into leadership development programmes?

How to respond to ethical question?

Cora gestured her frustration with my challenge to the programme in a way that made me feel uneasy. I identified a crease set between her eyes as an expression of irritation with me, which she spoke aloud. I noticed how angry I felt in response to how Cora spoke to me and to our interaction felt conflictual. Similar to the concept of power figurations proposed by Elias (1978); Burkitt (1999) highlights how emotional figurations occur in our relational settings and how they become embedded in the process of social acts. He suggests:

Relations of conflict may stir in people feelings of aggressiveness towards certain others with whom they are interdependent: those who may not have fulfilled their responsibilities in the relationship, who may have betrayed or undermined it; or those seen as outsiders or a threat on the basis of national, ethnic or racial prejudice (Burkitt, 1999, p. 104).

What Burkitt is saying resonates with my feeling that I was somehow not behaving in the way I was expected to behave as a group coach but also as a woman. When I reflect again on our conflict, I understand that the quota system and our conversation both imply that there is an existing order in place – one that denotes an established spaces for existing leaders and ‘includes’ a new space for others (Puwar, 2004). Somehow, adding too many more women as leaders might intrude on established spaces (‘by getting male managing directors to be dismissed prematurely’). This could be difficult if women were called out for not staying in their own designated space (‘she will be subject to massive speculation that she had only been appointed based on the quota’). Disklen had set a clear quota of promoting female leadership to 30% by 2030. Cora even felt the need to apologise to me at the start of the project because my group of six contained only two women, even though this matched the quota set by the organisation. Feelings of discomfort and embarrassment arose between us, in that we started to realise the training was something of a tick-box exercise. Constructing a quota for women leaders is seen as inherently ‘good’ politically but is often controversial, given that women-in-leadership itself is hotly contested and cannot be understood in isolation from other multiple other categorisations of exclusion.

Quotas are described as if they treat all women as an abstracted, homogenous group, for which coaching is prescribed as a popular intervention to ensure a fit to the idealisation of a senior leader. So perhaps Cora’s question is unanswerable. I have been arguing that paying attention to the way diversity programmes can reproduce established power relations, means leadership development programmes aimed at women might be working to maintain the status quo. To think differently about Cora’s question is not to reduce the debate to solution-finding but to consider the ethical dilemma that arise when relying on the business case argument. I have already argued against unreflexively promoting women-in-leadership programmes in Project Two. I would add to my arguments that because we all come from diverse backgrounds, paying attention to the role of strong emotions within power relations, we might reach a different understanding of how social change is possible. While I naturally agree with the ideals behind attempts to redress inequity and an unequal distribution of resources, I disagree with the way in which the diversity classifications get taken up in coaching as rational instruments, perhaps even manipulative ones, to promote the narrative of an ideal leader. This does not mean that I would no longer take part in these programmes; however, I would think differently about how I contract with organisations, the consequences, and the emergent unexpected outcomes of power relations and how emotions become embroiled in power relations.

Conclusion

The idea that ‘adding women’ to senior roles in organisations is good for business has often been promoted by the capitalist view of profit maximisation. Yet, the research on why adding women might create more profit is inconclusive. On the one hand, one argument for adding more women is that bringing in more female representation could break behavioural stereotypes and change the historical narrative of leaders as being male, agentic, goal-oriented risk takers. However, how this would add to profit is still very much in question. On the other hand, another argument could be that adding more women could lead to new ways of thinking and knowledge creation emerging between managers. This would have some merit

if it were clear what was expected come about from such new thoughts. Nevertheless, both these lines of argument point to an orthodox way of looking at woman-in- leadership as 'things' that can be added to an organisation in a planned way.

Women-in-leadership development programmes have also attracted some debate and criticism, including the argument that diversity training has had only a minor impact on female representation in management, or has even made matters worse. Taking alternative ideas from complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey et al., 2000), I argue that we cannot know in advance what will potentially be transformed when we bring together individuals with diverse backgrounds and histories into such programmes. Thus, as a group coach I need to pay attention to local patterns of resistance that can point to global patterns of disruption on existing relations of power. My practice as a group coach has most of its origins in evolutionary psychology and humanistic approaches, which place emphasis on appreciating people's individual experiences from within their own 'frame of reference;' that is, from their own subjective point of view (Lee-Clarke, 2003). I have reflected on my scientific management training in this project, which has influenced the established way in which I think and feel negatively about power relations and view conflict as something 'bad'.

In critiquing established management theory and the demands made of coaches to get to a certain outcome, I highlight how power relations are always involved, and uncomfortable emotions are constrained when speaking out against the expectation of outcomes. I have argued that relations of power are always at the heart of the group coaching process and, extending Bourdieu's (1977) thinking on habitus, attempts to control emotions can limit the opportunity for novelty to arise. I would argue that rather than forcing people from diverse backgrounds and groups together, developing a shared understanding of power relations and our emotional responses offers better possibilities for change. However, at the end of Project Three I am still without a fully formed argument as to what alternatives there are to women-in-leadership development efforts and quotas. In Project Four, I would therefore like to go on to explore the conflicting tensions that emerge from the rising marketisation of coaching practice and the ethical dilemmas I face in trying to find alternative answers with my clients. Looking at such tensions themselves, and the complexities of emotional responses, may inspire new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in my practice.

Project Four: Rising ethical dilemmas in the marketisation of coaching practice

Introduction

Individual success, personal goal setting, and the idea that everyone should be able to compete for roles on an equal basis are expected outcomes that have been commonly accepted within my practice as an executive group coach in diversity programmes. While there has been some recent criticism of the dominant theory and practice assumed coaching in women-in-leadership programmes (Bierema et al., 2023), much less has been said about the role of the coach in these programmes, especially when the chosen coach is also a woman. Little has been researched about group coaching (Seiler, 2024) especially for women.

Over the past three years, my research has inquired into resisting the internalised stereotypes and social expectations that come from thinking of ourselves in terms of our assumed and assigned gender. During the progress of my inquiry, my thinking has become intertwined with how I have been socialised as a woman, within my group coaching practice as part of women-in-leadership programmes. I have been following the developing, and often contradictory, arguments from organisational, critical management, and feminist theorists on why these programmes are not necessarily helping to solve the problem of organisational inequality. My research to date has explored how we have come to rely on a dominance of performative evidence-based theories within group coaching practice, which results in a focus on profit maximisation, often driven by a business case approach to women's development. The assumption behind the business case approach concludes that 'including' women is good for business, which I explored in Project Three. However, drawing on Stacey's (2001a; 2001b; 2003; 2010) work on complexity, I concluded at the end of the project that focusing outcomes on economic gain or idealised notions of fairness is reductive, because it ignores the complex, relational and emergent aspects of the lived experiences for women in everyday organisational life.

Project Four contains a narrative about a critical incident where I found myself in conflict with the expectations about my role as a group coach, invited to work in a women-in-leadership programme, the need to earn money and the 'rules' assigned to the growing professionalisation on my profession. Setting up the terms and scope of a coaching contract is usually a central first stage of any coaching assignment. Ideally, this is done as a discussion between the coach, the coachees and the organisations working together. A recent and significant development since 2015 has been the arrival of digital coaching platform providers, who now sell large-volume coaching programmes direct to organisational clients. In this new constellation, the coach no longer plays a role in the negotiation. A problem arises in the potential mismatch between the complex relational nature of coaching, who is agreeing to be coached and the commodified, standardised approach of the platform business model, especially when this approach is used to sell women-in-leadership programmes.

As I reflect on my final project, I use three frames of inquiry to contribute a new perspective to definitions of ethical practice within the coaching profession. As the first theoretical frame, I explore my narrative against the seminal work of Arlie Hochschild (1983), considering coaching as a form of 'emotional labour' in which emotions are managed according to the 'feeling rules' of a professional code of ethics. Within the second frame, I highlight coaching

as a social process where silencing a coach who does not conform to the appropriate 'feeling rules' might be seen as a way of maintaining forms of economic and cultural capital for those who hold the balance of power (Bourdieu, 1990). Finally, I take the ideas of the early pragmatist Jane Addams (1902) to build my arguments on ethical dilemmas and why coaches, coachees, organisational actors and digital platform actors might need to think differently about claims of neutrality to avoid endlessly returning to the same point in discussions about inequality.

Narrative

Working from the home office

On a very wet and windy day in December 2023, I was sitting in my home office considering my financial future within my coaching practice. It had been hard to continue working as a freelance executive coach during a market recession. Fewer clients were turning to coaching, and their organisations were offering much-reduced rates. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there seemed to have been a reluctance to return to face-to-face coaching, and I was sensing the danger of losing the freelance status I had relished.

In contrast, the emerging online coaching platform industry was growing fast. Perhaps because working from home was now a real alternative for many people. In the period 2019 - 2022, the number of coaches globally had doubled 109,200 according to the ICF (ICF, 2023). The shift from small-scale practices, like mine, to large-scale digitally enabled offerings was evident in this growth of the platform providers (Passmore and Woodward, 2023). The digital coaching platforms were offering considerably lower rates for assignments, claiming to make it easier for coaches to find work, and offering lower fees for clients. This fit with the classic argument of the digital age that it is possible to offer more for less.

My dwindling bank balance made me think back to a lunch I had had in 2020 with the founders of one of these platforms. CoachB was started by three men who had worked together at a global management consultancy. At the time of our lunch, they had just been approached by a venture capitalist to support their online business idea. The venture capitalists had become excited by the idea that leadership coaching was a worthwhile practice that could be offered on a large digital scale. Given that they were billionaires, it was hard to argue that the venture capitalists did not know a 'good' (i.e., profitable) business idea when they saw one. CoachB was to be launched as an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled technology platform where AI 'matched' coachees to a leadership coach. The one requirement for coaches was that they should possess industry-approved credentials, to enable the platform sales teams to be able to convince hiring HR managers. Data and analytics would help coachees and their managers track their improvements and achievements through the CoachB app. The platform's algorithms could then recommend learning material to the coachees for them to read and videos to watch. It was marketed as being able to unlock employee potential at scale, sold as a total package to the hiring HR manager. The business sales pitch was ease of use for hiring HR managers and less work managing coaching relationship with individual coaches.

At the time of our lunch, I was amazed that these three men were going to start a leadership coaching platform without a shared understanding of what they meant by 'coaching'. They appeared quite jovial and made jokes about the fact that between them they had no

experience of the industry. In a sense, I was being a bit hasty in my judgement of their conversation, as I did not know much about data-surveillance business models or raising finance for platform businesses. Over lunch they had asked me to provide some support with content for the first coaching modules. I think I might have smiled wryly at this request, as the idea seemed abstract and even a little absurd. At the time, I was part of university-based, academic coaching programmes, and believed in the focus on evidence-based research and so was closed off to such a radical new idea.

Nevertheless, the founders expressed confidence that they had spotted a gap in the market to offer more coaching to companies direct through the 'ease' of matching coachees to coaches via digital channels. I politely declined their offer to join them, my smile fixing into a solid grimace. I had spent enough time on what I then felt would reduce coaching to nothing more than a digital video with AI-generated content. On reflection, I was probably also quite angry about the prospect of commodifying my beloved coaching practice. After all, I had spent considerable time and resources on creating a practice I loved and felt I was good at.

'Don't you want to be among the lucky few...?'

By the start of January, there had been a continued increase in coaches qualifying with the coaching accreditation bodies. At the same time, many large European companies were struggling in the face of rising energy prices and wage inflation, cutting learning and development budgets. The organisations that seemed to be benefiting were the digital platform providers, as investors were looking for quicker returns and continuing to finance the expanding number of technology-driven companies.

The invitation from CoachB popped up in my email inbox somewhat unexpectedly. I had been 'selected' from my profile on the website LinkedIn and was being invited to coach on a women-in-leadership programme, which was to be called *Coaching through the Gendered Lens*. The email was signed by someone called Yarin. She wrote that CoachB was looking for executive group coaches just like me and mentioned that the rationale for this programme was based on the evidence-based research by Hunt et al. (2015; 2018; 2020). I did not think there was any irony in the fact that CoachB were quoting management consulting research, given that the founders had all worked there. Was I now less cynical about the prospect of being commodified only because I needed to find work, or was I also concerned about being left out of the exploding digital movement? I considered my response. Perhaps my role as a researcher would be of interest to them, given my critique of the McKinsey studies? By this time, I had been undertaking a more critical inquiry into women-only programmes as part of my doctoral research; I felt strongly that I might have something to say that could change the way in which the programme was being presented.

A week later I received a second warm message from Yarin at CoachB. I felt conflicted about the need to earn money, my awareness of the potential downsides of women-only programmes, and the thought of being replaced by an AI chatbot. I read the programme design, which was attached to the message. The programme brochure presented information on how to coach women to be more confident, how to ensure that women got heard, and how to support women to overcome imposter syndrome. In my reply, I asked Yarin in my reply for a one-to-one call. She replied that she would be delighted to 'jump on' a call and sent me

a link to a meeting on the platform's video-conferencing software at 10:05 am on the following Monday.

Jumping on a call with Yarin

I had been lost in my thoughts on the Monday before I looked up and noticed the invitation flashing on my screen. I was already 5 minutes late for the call when I logged on. Yarin was there, smiling broadly into the camera, with her video screen background loudly proclaiming *CoachB – Transforming the World of Coaching*. I apologised for being late and felt embarrassed for not checking the time properly. I hoped that Yarin did not think I did this sort of thing within my coaching practice. It was a theme in my coach training to always appear professional, and now I was not. She asked me what I wanted to discuss, and I started to explain where my doctoral research was heading and suggested that perhaps some women might have an issue with the programme. I tried to explain the many other perspectives such as complexity, feminist politics, gender, and critical management studies that I had been researching and how contested some of the themes in the business case approach are seen. Might there be a way we could approach the programme differently, perhaps without resorting to universal generalisations about women? Would CoachB be open to such an approach?

Yarin's broad smile dropped just a little. Or was that my imagination? She started to share a PowerPoint presentation on her screen and showed me the learning journey slides. Suddenly my internet connection stopped working and I was no longer on the call. My computer crashed and restarted, and I had to reconnect. By now I was afraid that I looked not only unprofessional but technically incompetent. My complete system decided at precisely that moment to reset. It took several minutes to get reconnected. I noticed that Yarin was no longer smiling when my picture reappeared on the screen. She clarified what she had heard me say in what I thought was a very professional summary and pointed out that it was a question of budget. Olaf, the lead designer, already had a *jour fixe* standard meeting with the Learning and Development and HR managers who had bought this programme, and he had spent a lot of time ensuring that their needs were met. What she thought I was looking for was ways to form more of a coaching community to raise such 'interesting' research conversations. Yes, she said, it was a great idea, but really who was going to pay for this, or was I suggesting that group coaches would be willing to do this for free? She repeated that she had full support from Olaf and that in her view group coaches were not really needed during this design phase. She would ask Olaf to ensure that all the women who were proposed as coaches for this programme could meet to talk about the expected outcomes. My mind was racing. I started to feel that Yarin did not welcome my intervention and that perhaps I was being criticised for not playing into my coach role properly. I could hear my heart beating loudly. She reiterated the 'generous' offer that Coach B offered to lucky coaches like me, where we could 'fill' our extra hours without having to make any business development effort. She said that Olaf would be in touch about the 'next steps' and then abruptly left the call before I managed to speak again.

Next steps with the other 'lucky' coaches

The email invitation was headed *Drop In to discuss 'Coaching through the Gendered Lens'*. Olaf was inviting all the proposed women group coaches to discuss the aims and ideals of the

programme. I debated with myself about what to say openly. Should I still try to introduce my research themes? Did I think there would be space to discuss alternative ways of changing the programme, given that CoachB made no secret of their profit motives? As I approached the video call, I was feeling apprehensive. I knew quite a few of the other coaches on the email invitation, and I knew how reliant they too would be on the revenue they might get from CoachB. Many had already chosen to accept various other lowly paid offers from coaching platforms because of fewer opportunities.

Olaf opened the call with a wide smile and a great deal of what I thought looked like ‘scene-setting’. He began with a recap of how well CoachB were doing, their latest funding rounds, and their expansion aims. I felt he was clearly in his role of representing the sales and revenue value of platforms. He introduced the programme as part of their flagship offer to give all women the chance to be coached, regardless of their geographical location or their hierarchical position in their company. There were eight other coaches on the call, as well as Olaf and Yarin. I wondered if all the coaches had been chosen solely from LinkedIn. Olaf invited us to introduce ourselves to each other. As I wanted to find a way to introduce my research into the topic of women-in-leadership, I mentioned that I was also a doctoral researcher and had given a few talks that often resonated with people about why we have come to single out women as needing special leadership development. A few heads nodded. I felt more encouraged.

One of the coaches, Ranit, started to talk about how wonderful the experience of being offered the chance to be coached could be for women. She thanked Olaf for his kindness in considering her and inviting her to be on his team. Another coach also added her sense of deep gratitude for being asked and to CoachB for providing this space where we could get to know each other. She said that she found the platform technology very inspiring and that she resonated with the aim of helping women become the best version of themselves. I started to feel uneasy about the way the conversation was going. It sounded so insincere and sycophantic even. My stomach was getting tighter, and I felt I was in danger of not paying attention to what was being said, but perhaps I was already aware of shifting power relations. What space was there to discuss alternative ideas with other coaches who were already acting into the expected role?

I tried to slow down my speech and breathe slowly as I described where some of my research might suggest an alternative way of looking at what women might be feeling and experiencing when they are being coached. I said that I was not sure that the ‘business case’ argument reflected all the multiple impacting categories of difference that affect leadership, given that the term women-in-leadership is already contested. Might we also find space to look at the argument against suggesting that women, as a homogeneous category, were not leaning into their careers? Yarin unmuted her microphone and asked what I thought we were working towards. Her face looked grim to me. I paused for a moment. Should I answer or reflect the question back? I felt the unease rise to my chest, and my breathing got quicker. I deflected to the other coaches and invited their comments in. This gave me time to control my rising anger. Ranit suggested that we were there to help women overcome imposter syndrome. Another coach said we would build networks of women and support their career development in a safe space. Yarin fixed her gaze, staring straight into the camera, and asked me by name what I thought we were working for. Her challenge was direct. I said I was feeling uneasy that we

might risk suggesting that individual women were responsible for their own lack of career opportunities and that they were responsible for fixing it. I asked if we might be patterning existing stereotypes, given we were an all women coaching group? Was there space for us to have a wider conversation? I took a deep breath, knowing that Yarin might well become more irritated I had not stayed in my role. This was a terrible conversation, I thought.

The mood of the conversation changed. Olaf stopped smiling and replied that CoachB needed to centre all their programmes around their core values. This meant being clear that they were representing the diversity of all people and not embarking on some individual radical feminist activism journey, which he implied was beyond the responsibilities of CoachB business. There was an awkward silence. Olaf said he was not sure I was really committed to the aims of the programme. We sat in silence. I felt a rising well of anger in my stomach. I started to panic and wanted to get out of the call as I felt my face flush with heat and forced a fixed smile onto my face. Ranit came to rescue with a way out of the silence. I had known her for years and knew that she often played the role of smoothing over conflict. She said that she was pleased we were forming such a powerful group; she loved this programme and fully believed in its value for all women, however they defined themselves. Many heads on the screen were nodding, and a general agreement was expressed in mumbled voices. Olaf resumed smiling, though I felt it was slightly more forced, as he moved on to explain our role as group coaches, the metrics that CoachB was hoping to collect and the feedback scores that we should achieve to be considered successful. I only heard part of the presentation, as I was trying to work out how I would cover the potential loss of income when I pulled out of the programme. Would I risk leaving the platform business entirely? The meeting closed. I was almost shaking from the anger I felt. As I tried to make sense of the meeting and the conversation, I wondered if my anger had come from being silenced, from feeling totally disconnected from the group of coaches, or from the potential loss of my cherished profession. Perhaps all three. I wrote a follow up message to thank Yarin and Olaf for inviting me but that I was not sure the programme was for me and so I would not continue with the assignment. They agreed, no doubt thankful I was out of their way.

Reflections

Many coaches fear that the rise of digital coaching platforms will replace the human coach altogether (Passmore and Woodward, 2023). Up to the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, I had felt I contributed to my profession by providing physical spaces for leaders where they could openly talk in groups about what was going on in their organisations. Most of my work was contracted via private executive leadership programmes and business schools, and this offered me something of an elite coach status. Perhaps my own fear of being replaced has brought to the surface the challenges of losing a profession I have enjoyed being part of. It may well also affect how I perceive myself, losing my economic independence and questioning how I can fulfil my ethical duties when working with digital platforms.

Researchers have pointed out that the push for standardisation within organisations has also given rise to coaching approaches most usually referred to as ‘best practice’ (Clutterbuck and David, 2013). The emphasis on evidence-based research often prioritises measurable outcomes, such as goal attainment, which gives rise to seemingly rigid ‘rules’ that coaches have to keep delivering on these goals (Hurlow, 2022). The result has been a rise in private

professional coaching bodies that are marketing accreditation to coaches, from a pick-and-mix of theories, practices, and ideas. Clutterbuck and David (2013) point out that coaching has in itself become a product to be sold rather than seen as part of a relational process. Where marketisation becomes problematic is when considering how the coach deals with the dilemmas of finding a balance between individual self-interest in her own role, the interests of the coachee, the organisational interests within the coaching experience, and the 'rules' set by the professional bodies such as the ICF. Questions arise about who, or indeed what, is being contracted to be coached:

It isn't always clear whether the client is the person being coached or someone else in the organization—perhaps someone higher up the management ladder or someone in the human resources department (Kets de Vries, 2005, p. 74).

Further ambiguity arises about who the client is due to the new demands of platform providers, who effectively contract and pay the coach, and therefore become increasingly able to set new rules.

Making coaching more accessible and inclusive by delivering it through a platform might, as a result, be making it economically worse for coaches. Given that 72% of certified coaches are also women (ICF, 2023) the rise of the platform business model might also be specifically affecting women badly. In Project Three, I argued against the business case approach to including women-in-leadership development programmes, which often treats inclusion as a means to an end and hence adds to the move towards commodification.

The debate on what constitutes gender has gone through many conflicting arguments. This inquiry is not intended to be a review of these arguments but to focus on how coaches and coachees understand the nature of ethical dilemmas they find themselves in when working in conflicting views of what constitutes and perpetuates someone's gender. In general management literature, it is argued that feminism ultimately critiques power and structures of domination that discriminate against or repress women. It has however, been pointed out that feminist theorizing has struggled to move away from how gender is understood and be heard within management and organisation theory (Fotaki and Harding, 2018, p. ix). As I reflect on my narrative, during the conference call, what might have been at stake for me was a loss of professional and financial status and my identity, due in part to 'the complexity in taking conflicting conceptions of good into account' (Mowles, 2022, p. 144). The conflict between Olaf and Yarin representing the platform, my strict adherence to the ICF Code of Ethics (ICF, 2021), my attachment to my own elite status, and my beliefs about social equality gave rise to my strong emotions. Being asked to be highly compliant felt incongruent while standing up for what I believed in was risky.

My inquiry into Project Four is: how can we respond ethically as women, and maybe even influence highly performative situations, to have options to act, despite experiencing feelings of alienation and anger?

Coaching as a form of emotional labour

At the start of being invited to coach with the CoachB team, I found myself compelled to share my research on the problems of focusing on homogenising women for profit and ask whether what we were doing was helpful. Why was that? When I again tried to engage in a discussion about alternative ideas within the group, I found myself isolated. Conflicting and contradictory emotions plunged me into conflict with my view of my professional self, alienated me from the group, and resulted in feelings of anger. My first reflection explores my experience via theories on emotional management. Why might the coach feel she does not have the right to defend her view?

Great coaches, according to the many humanistic theories taken up in coaching literature, are supposed to remain neutral about all situations to help clients find their 'true' purpose. I have written an extensive critique of this view in Project Two. An alternative perspective, taken from current critical management research, is the idea of coaching as a social process that is affected by historical, political, and cultural shifts over time (Shoukry and Fatien-Diochon, 2024). Following this alternative way of thinking, my research inquiry aims to create new knowledge, which is in itself an inherently political process (Stacey, 2001a). Announcing my role as a researcher in the call is then a political act. As my fear of losing professional status was arising, I could have been trying to shape the dynamics and interactions, and even the distribution of power, within the group by bringing in different themes.

Thinking of group coaching as a social process raises questions about how current structures of power in organisations affect inequalities for women, especially when women are categorised as niche, requiring a specific leadership development programme. In the context of established social patterns, when the coach is assumed to be value-free and neutral in the role coaching women, power relations are covered over (Shoukry and Cox, 2018). Neutrality can be seen as taken for granted by professional coaching accreditation bodies such as the ICF, which uses words like 'should' and 'must'. Such deterministic language may subtly restrict the coach's opportunity and capacity to respond and act in the moment. To explore my inquiry further, I will start by reflecting on my emotional responses, and those of others, to the expectations around the neutral coach who is guided to act by a prescriptive professional code of ethics.

During the meeting between the other group coaches and the team from CoachB, I noticed how the business case for running women-only programmes took centre stage during our discussion. I heard from my fellow group coaches that women 'should' be offered professional support to advance their careers, as if this assumed that career advancement was a good thing. Career advancement as a goal for the group sessions would reflect broader social values rooted in orthodox organisational thinking. Such a strong emphasis on career advancement can be counterproductive for women because it reinforces traditional social norms that do not take account of the historically assigned 'good' care roles, such as domestic caregiving, which have largely been considered private affairs and are often unpaid (Fraser, 2013; Goldin, 2021). When group coaching assumes career advancement as the universal positive goal, the assumption might be that what is good for the organisation is also good for the progress for women. In Project Two and Project Three, I highlighted occasions when this assumed way of

thinking can perpetuate the idea that women are responsible for their own success and might also continue to feel pressured to conform to the notion of an 'ideal worker' (Gray et al., 2019).

In announcing myself as a researcher, I tried to influence the design of the programme to make it less homogenising of women. However, such an intervention was not supported by my colleagues. I had not been invited to present this theme, and I felt incredibly angry and uncertain about how to act. Perhaps it would have been less risky to conform and simply join my fellow group coaches, who spoke of their joy in being asked to coach on the programme. To have managed my emotions better might have been economically prudent and in line with the expectations of my role, and yet I felt very strongly about the potential for harm that we might create. Perhaps my thinking that managing my feelings would have been a good thing comes from the idea that a coach should be exceptionally pro-social (Greyson et al., 2023) and well-mannered.

Observing professions where being expected to 'stay in role' was explicit, Hochschild's (1983) study *The Managed Heart* followed the training of Delta Airline stewardesses in the 1980s. Professional roles in which individuals are trained to manage their emotions and suppress feelings become what she calls 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983, pp. 137-161). Hochschild differentiates 'surface acting,' which she states we are all capable of doing, from 'deep acting,' where pretending to feel deeply is required as part of a role and could alter a person's sense of self (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33). Hochschild's ideas, rooted in a dramaturgical approach to work, were influenced by her reading of Goffman's (1959) concept of selves as social actors who are deeply engaged in managing the impressions they make on others.

When Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith (2015) examined how coaches become entangled in impression management, they found that the approach taken by most professional coaching bodies is to insist coaches use unsubstantiated competency frameworks. In a comparable way to the service workers whom Hochschild studied, coaches present a professional image by controlling their emotions and behaviours in line with both the client's expectations and the rules laid out by the professional bodies. Most coaches, conclude Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith (2015), do not critically reflect on how they act, but rely on managing their adherence to the standard competency frameworks from accreditation bodies. For me and my fellow coaches, adherence to the ICF core competences (ICF, 2021) is reinforced by a set of frequent examinations to maintain our membership status. I would reflect that, prior to my research projects, I too had never critically reflected on how I act in my role or whether I am managing impressions.

One view could be that my fellow coaches have developed a strong feel for the coach role through the training regime we go through. My experience of working with Ranit has been that she is remarkably consistent in maintaining a professional coach 'face'. I have never experienced her getting into conflict during the contracting phase of the coaching process nor being disagreeable. Emotional labour, according to Hochschild, focuses on how 'feeling rules' are maintained in a professional setting according to specific sets of expectations. These expectations are often unspoken, yet they are crucial for maintaining one's professional reputation (Hochschild, 1983, p. 118) In the light of Hochschild's work, not being disagreeable, judgemental, or acting against the requirements of the client and the professional bodies can be seen as setting expectations for how a coach should behave. Here, Hochschild suggests

that the cost of doing emotional work risks alienating the worker from herself, effectively commercialising feelings for profit:

Only when our feeling does not fit the situation, and when we sense this as a problem, do we turn our attention to the inward, imagined mirror, and ask whether we are or should be acting (Hochschild, 1983, p. 43).

To me, this speaks of how unsure I felt about raising my research inquiry. Should I have stayed in the professional coach role? The ethical standards of behaviour that are expected of a professional coach around managing her emotions could be seen as setting the stage for being expected to slavishly follow feeling rules.

If displaying the 'right' emotions is required for me to maintain my role as a group coach, even during the contracting phases, surface acting might mean that I should appear calm and align with the client's expectations to appear competent. Probably, introducing my research theories did not align with how Yarin and Olaf saw me in my role. Yarin called me lucky to have been chosen to represent CoachB, yet I did not feel lucky at all. I recognise that challenging the design of the programme was not expected in my role, and Olaf, Yarin, and Ranit, all reminded me of this. The welcoming smiles from the group vanished when I raised the research issue of alternative ideas for women-in-leadership programmes. In response, I felt the need to suppress my rising anger, unsure of how to act into a situation that was becoming increasingly narrow to speak into. When Yarin asked me what I thought we were working for, I was, in many ways, being reminded of the feeling rules related to supporting CoachB as a value-free coach. Olaf bluntly told me we were clearly not there to discuss feminism, closing the door on what that would mean to us.

The extent to which emotional management works in coaching to control the coach might be visible in Hochschild's concept of the 'transmutation of an emotional system' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 19). Here she describes the process through which emotional labour alters an individual's private feelings and their outward expression, often in response to expectations of professional norms:

First, emotional work is no longer a private act but a public act, bought on the one hand and sold on the other. Those who direct emotion work are no longer the individuals themselves but are instead paid stage managers who select, train, and supervise others. Second, feeling rules are no longer a matter of personal discretion, negotiated with another person in private but are spelled out publicly [...]. Third, social exchange is forced into narrow channels; there may be hiding places along the shore but there is much less room for individual navigation of the emotional waters (Hochschild, 1983, p. 119).

What this means to me in the context of my narrative is that the arrival of the digital platforms has introduced a new dimension to the concept of emotional management and the possibility of transmutation. My interaction with CoachB was mediated by algorithms and thereby reduced human interaction. Communication started in written emails, using standardised forms of text, where the tone was set for what was expected. This was further reinforced by the rule that I should 'adhere to the ICF Code of Ethics in all my interactions' (ICF, 2021, Section

II, point 14). As I drafted my response emails to Yarin, I was conscious of the need to be seen as polite and positive – suggesting surface acting – and of preserving my professional coach status within the group, despite feeling dissatisfied with the programme design and the proposed coaching fee.

CoachB specifically stated that only ICF or similar coaches would be considered. This would accord with Hochschild's second element of feeling rules that are spelled out publicly. The ICF (as do the other major professional coaching accreditation bodies) in its Core Competencies requires the coach to be examined every three years by highly trained supervisors. To continue to hold the ICF badge of professional status, I am 'committing to honesty, courage, consistency of action, ethical practice, and the highest standards for ICF and the coaching profession' (ICF, 2021). CoachB places the coach in a structured, less personalised setting, and it makes the process of managing emotions even more complex and demanding by further insisting on adherence to ICF standards.

In summary, taking up the role of executive group coach can be seen as a form of emotional labour, which is capable of being transmuted, according to the elements described by Hochschild:

When this emotional system is thrust into a commercial setting, it is transmuted. A profit motive is slipped in under the acts of emotional management (Hochschild, 1983, p. 119).

The further commodification of the coach, through digital platforms, may accentuate the performative qualities of coaching by reinforcing existing feeling rules and normalising specific expectations. This, I argue, is problematic when the group coach feels forced to fit into a spelled-out structured expectation of rules and internalises emotions, privileging profit outcomes, specifically in an environment that feels impersonal and limiting. In my narrative, tensions arose during the contracting phase of the group coaching process when trying to challenge what we thought we were doing together versus what we were working for. It became apparent that profit maximisation and return on investment was the aim.

Arguing that affectual performance is part of the assumed professional practice of an accredited coach would suggest that it could be helpful to examine how such emotional labour is enacted. In the next section, I will examine how a coach might experience transmutation and struggle to recognise the emotional labour required when carrying out the role.

Losing the capacity to act due to a loss of status

When I try to make sense of why I decided to act into the group, I can see how involved I was in thinking that it was important to get my research ideas across. My identity has been, and continues to be, formed by my own narrative of the exclusion of women across my own familial generations of women (Project One, the act of being female). This positions the complexity of critical feminist theories on inclusion and exclusion in organisational life at the core of how I see myself. Yarin and Olaf refuting that we were talking about feminism immediately felt like a personal attack on me (Ahmed, 2017). I felt out of place – isolated, even – as the only woman not publicly claiming to be grateful for being invited to coach other women.

Executive coaching has an interesting relational aspect for women. Claiming neutrality while exacting elevated levels of emotional management might even make it possible for highly masculinised power and status structures to be maintained. A high degree of trust and intimacy is potentially extracted from the coach, through the constraints of the emotional feeling rules, where the interests of the coachee are said to take centre stage. At the same time, the coach is financially dependent on another party, who has a personal stake in the outcome and management of the coaching relationship (Fatien-Diochon et al., 2022). The ICF claims to be the 'gold standard' of the coaching industry (ICF, 2024), meaning that there is a lot at stake if one goes against the expectations of what is a 'good' professional coach – not least, the power of the ICF itself to influence the outcome. Such claims of a gold standard may imply that being a better feeling actor, being better at emotional management, and staying within the prescribed ethical codes, are crucial for getting more work as part of the coaching community.

To follow the line of argument that emotional feeling rules that are required by the digital platforms complexifies the extent to which emotional management works. To illustrate this point I will focus on the different stances that the other coaches seemed to adopt by examining what these stances risk or enable. Hochschild (1983) has classified reactions to the demand to act into a role. However, as she points out, emotional labour is present in all roles and has an enabling as well as a constraining effect within our social relations. What Hochschild (1983, p. 119) sees as being problematic is 'when this emotional system is thrust into a commercial setting'. She does not seem to suggest that individuals are without agency in how they responded, but she concludes that the capacity to respond is limited, as I go on to explore.

Hochschild (1983, p. 187) notes three stances from which workers under transmutation seem to respond. In the first, she notes that workers identify with the job wholeheartedly to the extent that they risk not being able to differentiate themselves from the job and 'does not see her job as one of acting.' This may fit my experience of Ranit's responses. When I spoke to her after the meeting about how she had experienced our different opinions, her response was to appear unconcerned. She was used to being used as a data source by other platforms, and she said that she did not see this as an issue. More important to her was a feeling of pride in becoming more valuable, having reached a rating of 4.9/5 points in her coaching assignments. Such a display of emotional management might even be considered a hallmark example of a gold standard professional coach, even if this means selling self as unit of data and becoming more remote from self. The second stance is when a worker is clearly able to distinguish herself from the job but tend to blame herself for making the very distinction and denigrate herself (Hochschild, 1983, p. 187). I might recognise this response in some of my colleagues and even in my own actions. My encounter with CoachB made me question my attachment to the ICF and to coaching. I felt that I should continue acting, but my attachment to what I valued as a researcher and a feminist became a stronger feeling. My concern might have been who got to judge what we talked about; clearly, those paying for the coach felt that they were entitled to set the agenda. The third stance noted by Hochschild (1983, p. 187) is when workers do not blame themselves and are able to distinguish the act from self, which carried the risk of estrangement from acting altogether and some cynicism about it. My habitual way of responding has often been to 'go into camouflage' (Sinclair, 2000b; 2019) in organisational

life when it has simply felt too difficult to continue to argue against the dominant masculine language. More recently, I have pretended not to be part of what is going on. This potentially causes me to be seen as doing the job poorly, which can risk isolation when it comes to being able to challenge norms. The prospects of feeling either like a troublemaker or like a person who just gives in are both problematic and difficult to handle, given that it is clear how a group coach is supposed to act. Thinking about my own habitual way of responding leads me to question why habits are so difficult to change.

In all three stances, the problem inherent in the stance, is workers' lack of control over their conditions of work: in effect, a reduction in the right and capacity to act due to the conditions of Goffman's 'stage' (1959). The experience of having little or no choice could then be a strong source of resistance, where preserving one's view of self becomes a fight for status and respect (Alvesson and Szklarek, 2021). It also presents the opportunity to think in a more detached way about resistance and how we make ethical choices when faced with rules on regulating strong emotions becoming a way of silencing others. Hochschild points to useful ways of thinking about how the role of the group coach involves emotional labour, subject to emerging new rules of digital commodification. In my understanding, she is taking a social theory view on emotions, drawing from Dewey (1895) and Goffman (1959), among others, where emotions are seen as a socially circulating system of meaning. However, her explanation of an 'inner true self' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 196) differs from Goffman's work as far as he concludes that all our performances are real and does not, to my mind, write about reflexive, false or agentic selves. If we understand selves as social, Hochschild's way of describing self equates the public sphere to the social act, confining the inner self to the realms of private feelings. In *The Society of Individuals*, Elias (2001) makes the point that in insinuating that there is an inner world, we have come to perceive the mind as residing inside a person, different from the body. He refutes this as follows:

One can locate the brain inside the cranium and certain brain functions in the brain itself. But it makes no proper sense to say something takes place inside these functions, inside consciousness or thought. One cannot really say that something takes place inside speaking or outside walking (Elias, 2001, p. 114).

Despite relying on Dewey and Goffman, Hochschild's approach appears to contradict the idea of selves being socially formed and separates emotions into a private and public world. Burkitt (2014) goes on to provide one feasible alternative with his theory on emotions. In his view, emotions do not arise out of nowhere, often do not conform to the feeling rules put forward by Hochschild (1983) and are often not managed. In this regard, he states that emotions:

.....have to do with our habitual, embodied responses to others and to certain situations which are tied to our relational past and the practices we engage in with others (Burkitt, 2014, p. 156).

This is more congruent with my reading of Dewey (1895), who believes that emotions can be understood as relational phenomena, based on modes of behaviour. I agree with Burkitt that it is not perhaps helpful to separate feelings as if there is a private and public self and others, because we cannot predict in advance how people will respond, given our own connecting histories. Faced with the complexity of social selves, Burkitt (2014) points to how our

biographical trajectories and habitual ways of acting become core to self, which can come into competition in our relations with each other. Hence, he concludes that emotions are almost always about relations of power. I noticed how angry I felt during my interactions. Anger by itself, however, did not tell me anything about what was at stake within our connecting historical relations of power. I reflect that my anger could be seen as being linked to not only a loss of status from within the group, but also a loss of power (relative to the others) to influence the situation.

In summary, Hochschild's (1983) notion of the three possible stances of full acceptance, partial compliance and resistance to emotional labour can be understood more coherently alongside Burkitt's (2014) formulation of emotions as socially formed and tied to relations of power. This brings me to my first argument: if emotions are shaped by and challenge the new social norms being imposed by the platforms, the coach's capacity to exercise judgement is reduced by complex, often conflicting, emotional costs. In emphasising how anger is experienced by social context within power relations, especially as a woman, I will go on to reflect on possible ways to act within these new digital coaching environments. To explore alternative views on how my anger might have become habitual, I take up Bourdieu's (1977; 2001) ideas of habitus, which reflects his view on self having an embodied history.

What are possible ways of belonging and participating?

My feelings of anger might have stemmed from feelings related to a loss of status, shifting identity and the transmutation of feelings required to stay in a coaching role. What has still not been explained is why the other coaches did not share my reaction. After all, what did they think we were working for? Were we simply selves for hire? Did that not concern us all as women? While philosophy based on early-Christianity based philosophy almost always suggests that anger is bad, more recent radical feminist critiques treat anger more as a positive political force for change (Ahmed, 2004). As I develop a relational understanding of emotions as shaped by social patterns, I want to go on to explore Bourdieu's (1977) ideas of self having an embodied history. I find this a useful frame to look at how we get to be heard and participate in political decisions as women. In doing so, I consider the specific context of patriarchal societies where leadership roles are typically defined by traits associated with masculinity – something that is often taken for granted.

Bourdieu (1977) describes habitus as everyday habits, skills and dispositions which get taken up in a bodily response, such that we often do not challenge or critically reflect on what we think we are doing. Habitus, he suggests, is ingrained in how we act and in how we acquire capital, which enables or constrains our entry into social games. For Bourdieu accumulation of various forms of capital shape, define and affect our social position. In the context of emotional labour, the way the group coaches managed their emotions could be understood as a form of disciplining each other into a new habitus to improve our position. In Bourdieu's view, the practice of fitting in and being able to influence power relations is partly a result of how well groups conform:

The mechanisms responsible for reproducing the appropriate habitus are here an integral part of an apparatus of production which could not function without them. Agents lastingly bind each other, not only as parents and

children, but also as creditor and debtor, master and khammes, only through the disposition through which the group inculcates in them and continuously reinforces, and which render unthinkable practices which would appear as legitimate and even be taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 196).

The habitual patterns within sex-based groups, which are taken for granted, make me think again about managing the right emotions – especially as a woman – and about the rationale for assuming homogeneity in women-in-leadership. Bourdieu (1977, p. 11) uses the analogy of ‘the game’ to describe social acts and how we get caught up with competing rules. Conforming to social order, he points out, relies on rigorous submission to the collective rhythms of the group. Thus, he concludes (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164), that every established order relies on the reproduce of power relations through naturalising the arbitrariness of the mechanisms that allow groups to hold power.

Taking the relational view of power as negotiated among groups, Bourdieu (1977, p. 183) describes how people become invested in, and taken in by, the game. The game is not static, he claims, but depends on agents' relative capital position and their propensity and capacity to play the game. He also identifies the real function of classification systems and the reason a groups representation on the world might be so rigorously adhered to (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 163). The *doxa* correlates to the form of recognition of legitimacy of a group which relies upon, which he suggests brings several sources of capital that allow individuals to improve their position in different areas of social life, which he calls ‘fields’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 163-171). These sources of capital become embodied forms of multiple habitus, such as femininity, masculinity, manners or style (which indicates social class), or the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and cultural practices that are constantly negotiated and valued over time in society. In this way, Bourdieu’s (1977; 1984; 2001) ideas can be used to theorise how we might have arrived at the assumption that women group coaches are somehow best for coaching women leaders. Women start with less social capital due to the sex-based divisions of labour, which, using Bourdieu’s (2001, p. 78) arguments, leave women often economically dependent on men. In this case, assuming women need coaching by other women is perhaps to give the appearance of a changing field, whilst disciplining women on how to behave.

Reflecting on my own narrative leads me to conclude that outward displays of women supporting women might cover up the assumed taken-for-granted masculine order, as an attempt to maintain the status quo. If offering more coaching for women in groups is a good thing, to be seen as fair and inclusive could well be a strategy of those who historically already hold more capital not to change the game. My own pattern of trying to suppress angry feelings often arises from a mix of factors, including the pressure to play stereotypical female roles in organisations. The anger and embarrassment I felt as a young girl after seeing my mother plead with the bank manager for money seemed to be about who got to decide on resources: in effect, who controlled the share of economic capital. The anxiety I felt about being excluded again in my first few years of working was a result of becoming a mother myself in that, while pregnant, I was asked to leave a role I enjoyed. I have experienced repeated instances of sexism and sex-based discrimination, doubtless as generations of women before me have done in continued patterns of masculine privilege, in organisations. My anger and frustration have given way to a degree of cynicism more recently upon my realising how long and complex

the journey of negotiating power relations has been from the point when I entered the workforce. My emotions have often not been well managed during these experiences, and this has often seen me excluded from roles and groups, often due to responding to others with a muted, cynical, angry point of view.

Excluding myself from the group of coaches by raising what I saw as the problem with homogenising women might have been about avoiding a conversation with myself about the anxiety I felt. Was I yet again losing my status and having to confront power negotiations that challenged my beliefs and my sense of self. In other words, I might have been avoiding a conversation with myself in the same way that Olaf and Yarin, and the other coaches, were avoiding a conversation with me. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) propose that differences and distinctions between power relations are based on not just access to money as material capital but also the possession of symbolic power – access to cultural, social and symbolic capital. Cultural capital is made up of non-financial assets (education, knowledge, skills, and language) that set up divisions in social mobility. Social capital refers to networks (group memberships and connections) that provide access to resources. Symbolic capital is produced by the perception of legitimacy by being recognised as being in authority (prestige, titles, and honour). Symbolic capital is derived from cultural, social, and economic capital and results in what becomes valued in society (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 183-184).

Bourdieu (2001, p. 1) suggests that the established order of masculine domination is a gentle form of violence, ‘imperceptible and invisible’ which he suggests explains the asymmetry between the sexes:

...the sense of the game that is acquired through prolonged submission to the regularities and rules of the economy of symbolic goods, is the principle of the system of reproduction strategies through which men, the holders of the instruments of production and reproduction of symbolic capital, aim to secure the conservation or expansion of this capital (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 48).

Thinking about this differently, as the dynamics of the situation unfolded, I might have felt trapped, with no straightforward way to participate due to my reduced sources of capital and mentioned my research as a way of growing that capital.

It would make sense that in the history of oppression from within patriarchal societies, traits that are considered ‘feminine’ are often marginalised. The feeling rules that are taken for granted in the profession of coaching, and the drive for outcomes and results, would have made it hard for the theme of feminism to even be heard as part of the game (Ahmed, 2017). If women-in-leadership programmes reconstitute privilege by reducing the capacity for critical voices to speak, who is really being served by the current narrative of these programmes? During the conference call, I might have found it more difficult to understand what was going on because I was not sure what I was angry about. Trying to mask my rising anger, might have been as I imagined myself in the gaze of the others as radical ‘to be a feminist can feel like being in a different world even when you are seated at the same table’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 40).

In many social contexts, feminists are regarded as disruptive or difficult because of their desire to challenge the status quo. Ahmed calls this ‘willfulness’: a way of addressing whose subjectivity becomes a problem’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 66). In Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, the field is

characterised by unequal distributions of capital. My ability to gain social capital by raising an emancipatory view would be restricted by a field aligned not with equality but rather with profit maximisation through efficiency. Indeed, Olaf openly said that we were not talking about feminism which, in Ahmed's (2004; 2017) terms, would mean that I was not only challenging the rules of the game but also disrupting the very structure of the social field and power relations. Accepting the terms of the digital platform meant going against what I felt was justified. Therefore, my anger might also be seen as a genuine precondition for me to recognise the social and political issues facing me in trying to act into the role of group coach on a digital platform.

Recognising that social and political issues affect how we feel, anger is potentially not only about power relations but also about how I feel when modern capitalism works in subverting certain social categories, often into low-paid or unpaid work (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2023). In part, categorisation itself could be seen as a mechanism that enables and constrains the capacity of individuals and groups to respond. In Bourdieu's view (2001), men have historically been able to conserve and hold on to capital by making significant decisions about who is to be included, and for what purpose, within the establishment of social norms. This is done, he suggests, by those with the most power maintaining and restricting access to capital, often shifting the rules of the game and hence restricting the access of others. Therefore, although anger could be seen as an attempt to challenge the status quo of power relations, I would reflect that without sufficient relational capital my ability to act politically was likely to be constrained.

Considering Bourdieu's (2001) notions of masculine domination, it is not surprising that CoachB was started by three men. Coaches are likely to have to rely on these platforms increasingly in the future, which probably explains why my colleagues avoided associating with my research. In their eyes, doing so could limit their ability to gain more capital, and they might have recognised that associating with critical research was not the game being played. The belief that running a leadership programme as part of achieving fairness and equality for women could (in Bourdieusian terms) be seen as the 'illusio' of the game: the belief in the value and seriousness of the stakes in the field. To break accepted rules was perhaps to put other coaches at risk of losing their chance to gain social capital. In not supporting me in my suggested theme, the other coaches openly showed that they were willing to cooperate with Olaf and Yarin's agenda, which I was not. As a female group coach, contracting with a digital platform provider for a women-in-leadership programme could even be seen as being part of a process that, despite the rhetoric to the contrary on diversity, reinforces deep-seated inequality. Social categorisation can restrict who gets to speak and act. Those with power, suggests Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 2001), benefit from investment in social games (illusio) and others' acceptance of the rules, which appear as natural and go unquestioned. Thus, marginalisation is a way of protecting the field and the critique of power.

On entering the first call, all the coaches would probably have been striving to acquire symbolic and cultural capital to be guaranteed higher status, can power and thus more work. Olaf and Yarin would have known they had control over the rates of compensation and the contract terms; hence, they had the economic power to limit the coaches' financial autonomy. Ahmed's (2004) work highlights the emotional and social costs of rejecting the illusio of the field. Feeling isolated and being dismissed for not having a relevant contribution to make to

the programme would have reinforced my status as an outsider. This can be seen in the light of Bourdieu's (1977; 2001) notion of symbolic violence, where social norms are imposed at the expense of others to maintain the status quo, hidden in power differentials between groups.

In summary, as group coaches, our credentials enabled us to leverage higher cultural capital. After all, we were chosen because we had credentials that would enhance the status of CoachB. Taking up the diversity narrative to promote women could be seen as a conceivable way of increasing the cultural capital of CoachB and of Olaf (as the designer of such a programme). At the same time, standardising the offer and limiting the room for a coach to operate might have reduced the capital that a coach had available to negotiate with. My showing up on the call as a researcher in complex social process and identity could also be seen as being my own attempt to increase my cultural capital and hence acquire symbolic capital through my own personal accomplishments. I could perhaps have gained more capital if my fellow coaches had agreed that feminist political critiques were what we were talking about. As it turned out, even gender diversity was not the main game being played; it was all about how to maximise money through digital growth. If the game was not about women's equality but about money and technology, it is not too difficult to imagine a potential new source of capital arising. The more able one is to engage, score higher data points and have access to digital technology, the more authorised one becomes because of the technology. What this highlight to me is the embarrassment I felt about being seen as technologically incompetent because I did not use my technology properly. Technology and especially AI might attain even more symbolic capital and value for the future. Indeed, my practice is bombarded by 'thought leadership' pieces that encourage coaches to embrace the new digital system, become technically competent and be part of the 'gig economy' (Hullinger, 2023).

The prestige of being invited to coach in this programme was presented as an economic advantage for all women and for female group coaches specifically. Given that the symbolic order of the dominant masculine/feminine narrative in orthodox leadership (discussed in Project Two and Three) is reflected in society at large, drawing on Bourdieu's (1997) ideas on power, my fellow group coaches might have felt that they wanted to fit in with the demands of a new field. For Bourdieu (1984), such a field would denote new arenas of production, where the competitive positions held by actors in the game enable them to accumulate, exchange, restrain and maintain diverse kinds of capital and thus form strong relations of power. In my second argument, my key claim is that the structure of the field of digital coaching, coupled with the selection of those with the right credentials, can be a contributing factor to maintaining and reproducing existing power relations. Accreditation is both enabling and constraining coaches to act, although accreditation enables forms of capital to arise, conforming to the 'ethical standards' of accreditation limits a coach's ability to affect change in a new field of capital that might be developing. By privileging certain forms of capital – such as knowledge, emotional control, and orthodox ways of thinking – coaches themselves reinforce and conform to an orthodox practice, which can be restrictive and may even reduce the ability to play the game. Those who appear not to conform or who are 'angry' are likely to be marginalised because they refuse to play by the established rules, and their presence may disrupt the illusio.

I will now go on to explore what is possible when making choices, even in situations where gender conformity is expected, by highlighting the pragmatist notion of intersecting theory and ethical practice as a frame for social change. In this final frame of pragmatist philosophy, I will focus on the work of Jane Addams (1902; 1910; 1916) and her practical view of everyday experience.

What is possible when engaging multiple views of competing goods?

To think more about Bourdieu's (1984) theories on who gets to speak, who is cut short and what is spoken about would mean to pay more attention to judgement and choice in power relations as part of my everyday practice. Trying to examine and inquire into my narrative has made me question how I could adopt a more reflexive approach, detach from my own voice as the subject of this inquiry, and observe my own habitual patterns. By this, I mean the process of observing, observing and questioning what we are doing (Hibbert et al., 2010).

One alternative way forward, suggested by Bourdieu (2001), would be to include reflexive analysis within the women's movement 'so as not to let itself be confined within forms of struggle that are conventionally labelled feminist, such as the demand for parity between men and women within political organisations' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 116). In a comparable way, Hochschild (1983) suggests that greater reflexivity is a way to gain more control within the constraints we face. Questioning the movement of my own assumptions and internalised norms in my practice would mean that my aim of working towards political acts of emancipation for women would be likely to require a high level of involvement and detachment (Elias, 1987). At the same time, I still question my experience of existing power dynamics which makes me feel as though I am obliged to sacrifice one good for another.

In the light of my arguments and questions, the very concept of women coaching women leaders can be seen to have become a preoccupation for me. In Bourdieu's terms, (2001) women's political and practical experiences always become moral questions, because they are part of everyday acts of symbolic violence: a form of subtle, often invisible, domination that legitimises power relations and inequalities. Social expectations often define roles for women as taken for granted, and challenging such expectations is seen as a violation of the natural social order. As much as any other profession, coaching operates within a political arena, despite the professional bodies claiming otherwise. In this sense, social practice, relations of power, and ethical choices are firmly situated within group coaching as a social process – and, hence, within an individual's habitual ways of being. It is plausible that conflicts themselves depend on our emotional habitus as socially conditioned responses. In my case, anger seems to have become a habitual, unreflexive habit in response to subordination.

Borrowing from Fraser's (2013) theory of participatory parity, ethical questions might relate to being able to recognise the damage that is inflicted when women are systematically homogenised by the status order of the field into leadership development programme called gender diversity. In my context, I might recognise how ethical and practical conflicts arise from my feelings on generalising about women-in-leadership programmes as if they are part of an emancipatory agenda, while I am covering over capital subordination. I have developed my practice question to ask not only how we can respond ethically but also how we can be more

critical and more aware of how to act in political spaces under conditions of the diminution of access to symbolic capital.

I have already argued against thinking about group coaching as a practice of guiding autonomous individuals, who are acting, often unthinkingly, in accordance with assumed neutral ethical guidelines and rules (Western, 2012). I have highlighted how the unequal access to capital may explain the limited spaces in which to act in conversations on gender diversity. This has important implications for the future of digital platform coaching providers. Codifying formulaic forms of coaching practice 'rules' against the directive business case language of what a coach ought to do and should be doing can be seen as essentially a power grab for creating solid new rules of the game and shrinking opportunities to influence other emancipatory positions. Given that organisations are integral to the way society works, coaching women-in-leadership positions means that the coach is a political actor; yet paradoxically the platform providers potentially limit the coach's ability to address political issues.

Trying to open spaces in which to act may well require reframing my practice by taking up the invitation from Mowles to use pragmatist philosophy to 'value ways of knowing which shed light on practical difficulties when we get stuck in organizations' (Mowles, 2022, p. 172). Acting into the political space may need coaches to group together and talk openly about the social structures and cultural norms that affect their differences in practice. Part of my seemingly isolated anger arose from the tension between a somewhat reductionist approach to coach credentialling and my own lack of critical awareness of the complexity of the ethical issues I was facing. Political anger could be seen as being a legitimate response to my practice question about how we can avoid the normalisation and homogenisation of women in leadership development by becoming more reflexive and acknowledging how group coaches get to speak and in whose voice. However, I realise that this cannot be achieved with a single lone angry voice.

Haddock Seigfried (1996) argues that pragmatism, because of its focus on the emancipatory potential of everyday experiences, offers women a powerful way forward which frees them from the confines of the conventional struggles of not being heard. In taking up the voices of female students of Dewey's work, Haddock Seigfried begins a historical recovery of pragmatist women's voices and presents a way of thinking differently about social justice. In concluding how pragmatist philosophy might be useful in supporting emancipatory politics, she suggests that difference does not need to be eradicated to achieve an understanding of inequality. She defines pragmatism as a philosophy that stresses:

the relation of theory to praxis, which takes the community of experience and nature as revealed through the outcome of direct action as the starting point of reflection (Haddock Seigfried, 1996, p. 6).

One of the explicit links that Haddock Siegfried makes between pragmatism and feminist theorising is taking a pluralistic approach that looks differently at the complexity of ethical choices. In my understanding, her work highlights that we could even drop the idea of ever resolving gender-based conflicts. Bourdieu (1977, p. 167) would probably agree, given that he suggests themes that go undiscussed and taken for granted is often an attempt to maintain power. For my practice, it would mean working towards creating spaces where coaches,

especially those working with women-in-leadership groups, can speak freely without maintaining that women need separate spaces to be included.

In drawing on generations of women pragmatists, Haddock Seigfried (1996, p. 57) points to how experience and knowledge are not simply uncritically reproduced but are interrogated as to their value for a richer, fuller life. Much of Haddock Seigfried's work relates to her reading of Addams, one of the early female pragmatist founders. Addams (1902) suggests that ethical choices can be considered only by practising them daily in relation with others:

For our daily experience, we have discovered that we cannot mechanically hold up a moral standard, then jump on it in rare moments of exhilaration when we have the strength for it, but that even as the ideal itself must be a rational development of life, so the strength to attain it must be secured from life itself (Addams, 1902, p. 5).

Here, I would view the coaching code of ethics and the insistence on accreditation by digital platform providers as a form of what Addams (1902, p. 111) calls 'belated ethics' – rules or norms that continue to remain as a standard for only certain interest groups, which result in implying that there is only one best way to act. I think she means that responding to hidden and invisible power relations could be supported by breaking down the barriers between social groups. In many ways, this is a similar view to the one Bourdieu (1977; 2001) later took on symbolic violence.

At the start of my early research proposal two and half years ago, I asked if women-in-leadership programmes are really an effective way to redress persistent organisational inequalities. I have moved my thinking to pay attention to the role of emotions in bringing about change. Addams (1902) saw society as a set of relational sites, with people moving between sites of community (for example, places of work, social gatherings, political groups, and family structures) in recurring patterns of action, framed by the pursuit of community shared interests. She seems to be suggesting is that we can think of ethics as arising from how interactions occur in the form of outcomes that groups decide on, rather than from the pursuit of individual aims (Addams, 1902, p. 15).

By taking up Addams' (1902) work within my reflections, I add to the themes I have been highlighting that result from the official ideology around leadership and gender diversity in relation to how we think we make ethical decisions. I note that the publicly proclaimed value of coaching women, which is based on normalised gender assumptions about what is good for women, ignores the conditions under which emotions are managed, the differences between individual histories, and whose interest in acquiring capital to maintain power relations with each other are being privileged. As suggested by Addams (1902, p. 6), 'We are learning that a standard of social ethics is not attained by travelling a sequestered way, but by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for another and at least see the size of one another's burden.'

As my final argument, I conclude that paying attention to how we can stay in relations with each other, even in unequal, emotionally conflictual situations, can be an opportunity to think differently and change habits:

Our conceptions of morality, as all our other ideas, pass through a course of development; the difficulty comes in adjusting our conduct, which has become hardened into customs and habits, to these changing moral conceptions. When this adjustment is not made, we suffer from the strain and indecision of believing one hypothesis and acting upon another (Addams, 1902, p. 13).

This would imply that from the outset of the contracting conversation narrated in this project, the reduction of ethical questions to individual choices about what to challenge and whether groups should or should not follow rules, limited my own scope to engage in the field. Therefore, two final questions remain open to me: are we always obligated to sacrifice one good for another in questions of competing goods? How do we continue to be aware of and responsible for a world in which the things we value are disregarded, when we feel powerless and excluded? I have become more aware that active political engagement is an essential part of the way in which, as coaches, our shared reality might be seen as complementary and not competing.

Moving forwards in my practice

Drawing on the works of Addams during her time at Hull House (1910), creating a more plural view of social ethics requires a willingness to work collectively. Group coaches, and leadership coaches in general, cannot rely on fixed codes of ethics and models alone to decide on competing goods, because this has the potential to limit voices. Addams (1910) gives an example of how open spaces can be maintained in the form of her response to levels of poverty in Chicago. She established Hull House, a social settlement that she claims was as important to community problem-solving as an academic institution or a governmental body. From Addams' (1902) perspective, industry constitutes organised claims from owners of businesses to take effort and output from people. This, she claims, is only possible because it renders certain groups incapable of responding together by leaving them helpless to ignore the demand of earning a living. This is an interesting parallel with my observations on my practice and our behaviour as coaches. Addams (1902/2018, p. 194) argues that social ethics arise out of an emotional response 'as a clutching of the heart'. I think she means finding a heartfelt connection with each other to agree on ethical choices, which have the potential to promote social justice. The skill that is most essential in making such choices, she suggests, is the realisation of the limits to our claims of good when we limit the spaces of others.

If thinking and acting with others opens a space for change and action, I may need to distance myself from a fixed view of the status of an elite group coaching profession and engage in sharing more critical perspectives. I now consider that anger, in fact, could signal a breakthrough for my practice to highlight the excessive demands of assumed neutrality and pro-sociability. Anger as a form of affective dissonance, means paying attention to strong emotions also means being aware of not limiting the views of others, by making claims on good, within such a dialogue. As the coaching industry moves further towards digital models of delivery, the space for a coach to act may be limited by reductionist approaches to coach certification and by the business case view of diversity. I support the perspective that coaching should instead be viewed as a social process. This would encourage open acknowledgement of the nature of changing power dynamics within the practice and the acknowledgement of

the spaces for action (Shoukry and Fatien-Diochon, 2024). Changing the frames through which coaching and the group coach are viewed could enable us to think differently about how we might respond ethically, potentially opening the field to more pluralistic views.

Conclusion

In this project, I have demonstrated the pressure on a group coach to increasingly react to the demands of professionalisation and digitalisation within the industry. My practice-related question focused on whether group coaches can respond to ethical dilemmas, especially in highly gender conform situations, given that the space in which they can act has become more restricted. To answer my question, I raised the following three arguments.

My first argument is that coaching is a form of emotional labour (according to the definitions from Hochschild (1983) in which the coach's feelings are capable of being instrumentalised for commercial gain. The arrival of digital platforms in professional coaching practice has imposed new challenges on the group coach's ability to act – by reducing the space to speak up, and by making it complex and often emotionally costly to do so. Emotional labour can be seen as a mechanism through which Bourdieu's (1990; 2001) concept of *illusio* is maintained.

In my second argument, I conclude that digital platforms can be seen to represent a specific field, with new rules, norms and power dynamics that are concentrated in the hands of the platform owners and the administrators. By effectively adhering to the fixed rules of conduct in acquiring accreditation, group coaches themselves are reinforcing and conforming to an orthodox way of practising, which can be restrictive and may even further constrain the ability to act and speak up. Hochschild's (1983) work highlights the emotional cost of conforming, while Bourdieu's work (1977; 1990; 2001) shows how difficult *not* conforming is. Existing social structures and norms often perpetuate masculinised patterns, which makes it harder to be heard without gaining sufficient capital. Paradoxically, silencing a group coach may negate any possible renegotiation of the cultural constructs that shape habits and social norms. Such a renegotiation would presumably be needed for bold claims of how coaching in women-in-leadership programmes can change social norms. Understanding moments of anger led me to think about my repeating pattern of fixed attachment to neo-liberal notions of feminism as an ideology. I have reflected that my attempts to get my identity as a researcher seen and heard went against the ethical rule that a group coach provides objective, value-free support as an expert third party who avoids biases, personal interest, or involvement (Fatien-Diochon et al., 2022). I have also reflected that complex social decisions cannot be resolved if those with access to more capital try to silence those who make the situation uncomfortable. Trying to speak into a space without having sufficient capital is risky and can threaten existing power relations as well as being a threat to one's own identity.

My final argument is that paying attention to how we can stay in relations with each other, even in unequal and emotionally conflictual situations, can be an opportunity to think differently and change habits. Going forwards, bringing together players from coaching platforms, coaching bodies, academics, coaches and coachees could help my practice to reassess the assumptions about group coaching for women as part of wider leadership development programmes. I am reminded that ethical choices can only really be made by critically reflecting on what is at stake for everyone involved.

3. Research method

Introduction

The research method that I have followed throughout this thesis emerged from colleagues working together at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) from an interdisciplinary perspective combining complexity and social sciences (Mowles, 2017). Researchers on the DMan programme take up four principal traditions of thought that inform complex responsive processes of relating: pragmatic philosophy, process sociology, group analytical thinking, and complexity sciences. Combining these four disciplines emphasises the creation of knowledge by and within a community, which has developed over the years with a great emphasis on power and ethics. All four traditions of thought take emergence, relationality and novelty as their focus, rejecting rigid determinism. This is the view that students on the DMan take up when they use narrative accounts and interpretation to research every day organisational life. The focus on everyday interactions that arise in the individual researcher's practice is at the centre of the inquiry. As researchers, we focus on how we co-construct and make sense of the world together as we make ethical choices (Chauhan and Mowles, 2024, p. 6).

By working with this research method and drawing on work from other researchers, research communities, practitioners and literature, I aim to complexify my thinking about everyday experiences in organisations in response to orthodox management theories and dominant patterns of simplification (Solsø, 2024, p. 121). Many orthodox theories of management contain central assumptions drawn from systems theory. Indeed, these ideas are taken as central to the work of a group coach, and I have explored them throughout Projects' One and Two. In thinking of organisations as entities that operate at different levels, such thinking implies that the manager is outside the organisation. In the same way, as a group coach I am often referred to as outside the group by my clients and asked to work with different coaching tools (such as 360-degree assessments) at distinct levels of the organisational hierarchy. As an alternative way of thinking, the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating assumes that there are 'temporary processes of interaction between human bodies in the medium of symbols patterning themselves as themes in communicative action' (Griffin, 2002, p. 168). This perspective is the basis for thinking about the temporal paradox of experience - the apparent contradiction that we, as researchers, assume that whatever happens in organisations arises as a result of what people are doing together. The paradoxical movement of local interaction between people creates global patterns, while at the same time, global patterns shape local activity (Mowles, 2024a, p. xvii).

I am highlighting my understanding of the position of experience as primary in the words of (Chauhan and Mowles, 2024, p. 10):

- starting with a breakdown in practice
- narrating that event and identifying a practice question that feels compelling to inquire into
- exploring the interpretation of events through iterative cycles of critical and reflexive analysis, in a community of inquiry and drawing on relevant literature

- offering insights that have been helpful for the researchers own practice, resonate with other members of the researcher's professional community and offers a new way of thinking about the original question.

My research is concerned with acknowledging that group coaches cannot be 'outside' the group but are deeply embedded in, and shaped by, social patterns that emerge in our relations with each other. I write about mind, self, action, communication, power, ethics, stability and change, informed by perspectives contained in the theories of complex responsive processes of relating. The process of inquiring into my own experiences uses Dewey's (1922) notion of habits, from pragmatist philosophy, as recognisable patterns of responses that are socially produced. Adopting this process of inquiry shifts the focus away from the individual and towards considering actions as socially embedded patterns of acting. This means inquiry is the activity that holds the potential of transforming the situation because it is impossible to detach the subject from temporal and social relations (Solsø, 2024, p. 126). As an example, I recounted in my first project how strongly my young self felt about the moral injustice of seeing my mother excluded from the financial system. I became aware of how I developed a hyper-sense of trying to avoid being called out as a woman in the workplace in case I was cast out, favouring hard work and credentials as ways to earn the right to be included within a structure denied to my mother. Connecting my past experiences with a growing understanding of change as a social process has helped me to think about how patterns form and continue to show up in organisational contexts. My growing understanding influenced the development of my thinking and enabled me to adopt a more detached position in my writing in Projects Two to Four.

Projects Two, Three and Four are specific, practice-based inquiries that reflect a new and growing awareness of patterns in my work. At the time of writing, I was grappling with how events described might represent wider social patterns, especially the rise of the digital platforms. I will now describe the use of narrative accounts by drawing on ideas from three principal pragmatist thinkers – Mead (1934), Dewey (1910) and Addams (1910) – to highlight the importance of social selves and everyday experience. Then I will expand on ideas from social theorists – including Elias (1978; 1982; 2001), Bourdieu (1977; 1990; 2001) and others – as I continue to outline my interpretation as part of the research method. Finally, I will highlight the ethical considerations related to this type of research and the contributions it makes, concluding with the possible limitations.

Narrative accounts

As a form of qualitative research, narrative inquiry has the potential to illuminate social life by contextualising experience in terms of cultural history. In accordance with the ideas described above, the very act of inquiring into how individual and society form and being formed by each other, makes my experiences as a researcher already general (Chauhan, 2024, p. 36) and at the same time unique. My individual experiences are never just my own; they are shaped by my own historical culture and society, just as society is shaped by individual interactions. My method starts with Dewey's (1922) theory of experience, exploring the breakdown of habits that takes place as I engage with my work. The method shares similarities with a range of other qualitative methods, such as autoethnography and action research, that treat experience as a source of inquiry (see Chauhan and Mowles, 2024, pp. 10-17 for some

observations about similarities and differences). Where this thesis's method differs is in the use of narrative accounts that bring power to the fore of everyday interactions. Writing a narrative account of my experience represents the raw 'data' for my inquiry. This is to present narratives not as scientific data but as an experience that I have found puzzling and interesting in my work. In Dewey's (1910; 1922) terms, the account of an experience is the meaning we make of socially produced habits of thought, feelings and ways of interacting. Interruptions to habitual ways of acting can serve as moments of doubt when we might not understand how to respond. Moments of doubt can be interesting to inquire into and can lead to new ways of theorising if we are open 'to subjective and intersubjective ontologies' (Cunliffe, 2022, p. 13).

Exploring patterns of feelings, relating, acting and thinking is a fundamental part of the research method. In my view, adopting such a method is consistent with writing differently as a woman, which Braidotti (1993) observes is writing from an already embodied, sexually differentiated position. Cunliffe (2022, p. 1) argues that theorising about work in organisation and management studies is an inherently masculinised form of research, which limits pluralism and more human ways of theorising. I started to ask what human ways of theorising might be by drawing attention to moments when I felt strong emotions and moments of doubt about my usual way of seeing the world. Cunliffe's view is also consistent with the suggestion made by other critical feminist researchers that we cannot write from nowhere but must write into an assumed gender subtext of masculine language (Ahmed, 2017; Benhabib, 1992; Braidotti, 1993; Fotaki and Harding, 2018; Puwar, 2004).

I started to inquire into my own and others' embeddedness in the world, how this affected my interpretation of the experience and how 'to potentially change things from within the experience' (Cunliffe, 2022, p. 18). Such a perspective acknowledges that uncertainty, doubt and contradiction are all natural ways in which we experience the world. Instead of seeking fixed truth, the researcher can explore interpretations of experiences as they relate to the researcher and others. Narratives, as part of my research method, are accounts that describe what happens in society, organisations or groups to illuminate wider phenomena that may be of interest to other researchers and practitioners. Calling into question once-taken-for-granted assumptions as an understanding of breakdown of habits (Solsø, 2024, p. 128) strikes me as a helpful way to consider how subjectivity and gender become embodied patterns of thinking and acting. Starting with moments of doubt and exploring alternative meanings offers us ways of 'becoming more attuned and responsive to what is happening in the moment' (Cunliffe, 2022, p. 13). Breakdown can be understood as an obstruction to understanding, which the researcher perceives as doubt. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011, p. 92) point to this doubt as having the potential to become 'mystery' when it is not easily understood in the literature alone and needs details on the context. 'Mystery as method', they interpret, focuses on how the researcher manager and the respondents react to the breakdown and how they make sense and meaning of what is happening in the moment. Chauhan and Mowles (2024, p. 6) posit that interpretations of the narrative can lead to a way of 'directing the research towards illuminating a concrete example of a general dilemma where the steps participants take to go on together are a matter for interest.'

If a narrative account is the starting point, Brinkmann (2012) proposes that interpreting these accounts requires an understanding of how stories are influenced by history, culture, and social and personal contexts. Starting by researching a breakdown in my understanding of

moments within the group seemed to be appropriate, given the different and often contradictory understandings of gender, where a generalised understanding of gender itself cannot be separated from the situation of the individual in the categories of race, class or sexual identity that determine our view of self (Lennon and Alsop, 2020). Brinkmann (2012, p. 22) suggests three ways to analyse the narrative: phenomenologically (making the obvious obvious); critically (making the hidden obvious); and deconstructively (making the obvious dubious). I have tended to take a critical stance and make the hidden obvious in my analysis, given the influence of science-based evidence that is taken up in organisational writing. Ambiguous power relations in the context of assumed neutrality of the coach is one of a hidden assumption within my narratives, as is the masculinisation of leadership. Evidence in organisational research is also not neutral as it is often shaped by the narrative of what leadership should look like. This becomes tangled up in the assumption of leadership roles in relation to masculinity and the business case arguments claiming adding women to leadership produces a positive outcome (Hunt et al., 2015). I agree with Fotaki and Harding's (2018, p. 172) argument that we can 'change the world little by little through everyday practices of embodied writing'.

Speaking differently about organisational life is to take a more critical stance on whose voices are not heard or are only heard through the citations of orthodox organisational theory (Ahmed, 2017). I have not gone as far as the proposition from Ahmed to quote women only, but I have made every effort to balance the number of citations and hear from feminist writers who are more critical of heavily masculine sources of citations. Having described the process of narrating about breakdown, I will now explore how researchers set about exploring the interpretation of events.

Interpretation of events

One of the most important aspects of taking a critical stance is to be able to step back from the events being narrated and the breakdown. As first-person narratives can be criticised as being somewhat unreliable due to the entanglement of the interests of the researcher (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009), part of the research method is to open up narratives to the scrutiny of the learning sets. Therefore, the ability to step back from how we are thinking and potentially strip away conventional ways of understanding becomes useful when being questioned as to whether the researcher is detached enough. Drawing on ideas further from pragmatist philosophy, an experience is probed into with other researchers through 'our everyday practical entanglement with it, with each other and with our ourselves' (Mowles, 2024b, p. 96). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the DMan is run as a group activity, even though the final thesis is the work of single author students. Alongside attending the residential weekends and community meetings, working in learning sets in between residentials is required.

Working in a learning set means working with a primary supervisor and four researchers who comment on each other's work during the weekend and four other times each year. The aim is to develop the reflexive ability of questioning the 'researcher's own positionality, patterns, and assumptions in how one is responding and thinking' (Cunliffe, 2022, p. 20). It can also be helpful for illuminating aspects of organisational life where the researcher feels stuck in

repeating habits. Therefore, one way of developing critical reflexivity is through a better understanding of group analytical theory (Dalal, 1998).

Foulkes (1948) is attributed to founding the group analytic tradition on the idea that the best place to understand self in is social settings such as the group. Foulkes uses the term community to describe social groupings which implies a biological basis for groups (Dalal, 1998, p. 58) – implying that belonging to certain groups is innate. Elias (1978) answers the missing power dynamic within group/individual dichotomies by bringing in the way historical patterns of interdependencies between individuals move and change. He suggests that novelty can only arise within the social context because of the meaning we make in what we are doing together (Elias, 1978, p. 94). Being encouraged to pay attention to one's own historically and socially produced patterns within the dynamics of the group is made possible within the DMan community by being able to notice habitual ways of acting as they are pointed out by other researchers. 'This is a method of encouraging individual reflexivity by amplifying group-mindedness' (Mowles, 2024b, p. 103).

The ability to examine the relationship between the broader social patterns of relating – or 'field', to use Bourdieu's (1977; 1984; 1993) term – and how knowledge, practices and norms create social dispositions is an inquiry into the ways that patterns in power relations within and between groups continue. For example, ways in which established groups defend their right to leadership roles first arose in Project One and became clear as I tried to make sense of the literature on group coaching. The 'field' of coaching is in constant negotiation with organisational clients, digital platform providers, accreditation companies and even coaches themselves about the 'rules of the game'. In writing my interpretation of breakdowns, I was challenged by the learning set in each project. Each version was contested and challenged by students and supervisors to ensure my writing became coherent with the research themes that led to the research question.

Reviews of interpretations may include 'offering different interpretations of what they understand to be happening in the narrative material being presented or drawing attention to the author's interpretive or responsive patterns' (Solsø, 2024, p. 134). Importantly, only when the group judges the work to be good enough can a researcher move on to the next phase of their work. For example, when iterating my final project within the learning set, I felt challenged in my belief that categorisations of identity are wrong. A colleague described me as being dogmatic. Feelings of anger arose towards members of my learning set and in my writing of my project. Taking a reflexive turn enabled me to detach from the ideology of being the professional coach who felt she was simply helping other women. It was in detaching from my writing that I felt able to view dogma as a plausible explanation of my practice, and why being obedient to 'feeling rules' is required to be seen as a professional coach. I was then able to theorise about the emotional labour expended in coaching.

Elias (1987) provides ideas about how reflexivity develops from being able to find a way of looking at situations with involvement and detachment. Both involvement and detachment, he suggests, are in a 'condition of flux' (Elias, 1987, p. xxx). To unlearn our ways of thinking, by a greater level of reflexivity potentially changes our view of the experience and our awareness of the different ways in which we regulate our feelings, thoughts and actions. The process of paying attention, turning away and turning the experience back on to the

researcher enables a better understanding of the concepts of involvement and detachment which can lead to a shift in their interpretation and understanding. Having reviewed the complexities of involvement and detachment and how researchers start to develop the ability to adopt more critical and reflexive thinking, I will now elaborate on the value of groups and communities further in my research.

Communities of inquiry

The purpose of the kind of collaborative community-based research method I am describing is to develop reflexivity in the researcher, as well as to test for generalisability. As researchers who are aiming to contribute to knowledge and practice, rather than to match our experience to our own ideologies, we must be able to recognise and step back from our own habits and social patterns (Mowles, 2017). In other words, we must be able to turn back on the experience, to engage with a plurality of other views, and to engage with themes that are likely to elicit conflicting responses from others, as a community of inquiring researchers. Alongside learning sets, the community meeting is probably the best example of a community of inquirers. Meeting three times over a weekend for 90 minutes as a complete group, there is no agenda other than to explore what is happening in each other's research. Faculty members working on the programme take part in the community meetings as members of the group. The openness in these meetings to being questioned by others, and questioning them in return, arguably allows us as researchers to take a more critical approach to what Elias refers to as the paradox of involvement and detachment (1987). In considering how the researcher chooses one interpretation or theoretical lens over another, we accept that we can never be fully objective but that we can be aware of how generalised patterns continue to show up.

The topics that emerge at the community meetings tend to reflect themes that the researcher is exploring. For example, the theme of sexism came up in my penultimate residential weekend when a female student mentioned that she had heard misogynistic jokes being told at the bar. I had not been in earshot of the jokes, so I found myself not saying much. A few students then asked if a pattern was developing where the community had now unconsciously accepted misogynistic jokes being told. I reflected that in my own experience, jokes at the expense of women are often part of organisational life, and I was curious about why I had paid so little attention to the theme. There was a lively debate (which continued into subsequent community meetings) about everyday micro acts of sexism, which go unnoticed or unremarked upon. As a result of the community meeting, I wrote about the ethical dilemmas of speaking up on sexism and how patterns of self-silencing develop such that I do not notice them in others. Thus, the community meeting is an invitation to detach from daily life and understand how we recreate our own realities through our own patterns. Arguably, the whole research method is based on critical reflexivity and experiential methods of inquiry, where we are asked 'to become more aware of our unconscious and how it affects our behaviour in groups' (Mowles, 2022, p. 110). The DMan community has certainly been central to my view on writing ethically. I turn to this now, before concluding this section with some thoughts on the contributions and limitations that this type of research method offers.

Ethical considerations

Researchers who practise critical research and writing reflexively agree that the researcher needs to appear within their research interpretations (Kara, 2018). This means that when trying to write ethically, we will always face choices and judgements about what relational others to include and what events to exclude. Professional, social and institutional attributes and rules can combine in ways that make such ethical choices more complex. For example, I found it more difficult ethically to write about individual coachees within a coaching relationship than to write about contracting partners and formal arrangements. This was partly due to conflicting ethical rules and formal procedures, but it was also because of my keen sense of protecting ongoing individual relations. While I could make every effort to minimise any potential harmful impacts on others, there were events that I did not feel able to write about without compromising an ethical code. I have left these out of my narratives after having discussions with those involved and with my learning set.

The narratives I have written relate to everyday experiences with relational others. This brings into question the theme of confidentiality and consent from those who have been included in the narratives. Although people I have been working with are included, I have changed their names and locations, and I have anonymised all organisations. All relational others have been informed that I am a researcher and in some cases the narratives have been shared. This was not necessarily with a view to changing the narrative, but in recognition of my sense of moral responsibility to others. One way I started considering deeper ethical questions in the narratives was when applying for the formal process for ethical clearance at the University. The process is based on formal procedures and policies for obtaining informed consent, avoiding harm and maintaining confidentiality (Alvesson and Stephens, 2024). However, I had to make competing choices when writing about which coachees I could involve in my narratives, where I am additionally bound by the confidentiality code of ethics of my profession. When considering moments of practice breakdown where multiple people were involved in negotiating coaching contracts, it was indeed often not clear who needed to give consent on what for me to be able to write about the experience at all.

Within my thesis, I have argued for a relook at coaching as socially situated. I take up a qualitative methodological approach, which means that I, as the researcher, am involved and co-constructed as part of the inquiry. Clearly, considerations of ethical care extend to ensuing that I, as the researcher, avoid what Cunliffe (2003) warns can become an endless pathological spiral of doubt where everything being researched is called into question. Ethical considerations were discussed within my community of inquirers and specifically within my learning set. Addams (1902) presents ethics as two equal forces: first, ethics interacting with and shaping social life within a sense of personal moral responsibility; and second, ethics within social interactions themselves which is the ongoing negotiations of the meaning. She suggests that these are best handled, not as economic determinism, but as a framework of needs representing a larger community (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2014, p. 103). With this approach, the rules of the universities and coaching federations are not in themselves sufficient for what constitutes doing no harm to others in society. As described above, making judgement calls in my thesis required 'ethical choices about co-creating knowledge that is socially useful' (Kara, 2018 [quoting Ball and Janyst, 2008], p. 172). I believe that I have acted in the best feasible way to remain compliant with the ethical approval granted in 2022 while

also being human, maintaining my professionalism, committing to bonds of confidentiality, and being able to continue to interact within my everyday social relations.

I will now move on to the final sections in this chapter, which outline the contributions this type of research can make to organisational research as well as its limitations.

Contributions to organisational research from this research method

This kind of research lends itself to different kinds of contributions than those found in the natural sciences, or indeed more orthodox management research. The concepts of induction and deduction, which are based on rationalising conclusions from observations, are often used to anchor orthodox theories and justify their use, and those theories then get taken up as generalised evidence. Stacey (2010) defines evidence-based management as a set of generalised principles derived from research into management practices. Evidence, he outlines, is defined as ‘generalizable knowledge about cause-effect relationships derived from controlled testing and observation in linking, measuring and analyzing of the causal variables’ (Stacey, 2010, p. 15).

In returning to Cunliffe, she argues that:

despite intentions and efforts to broaden theorizing in organization and management studies (OMS), particular definitions of ‘good’ theory and ways of theorizing continue to be privileged and to perpetuate the silencing of alternative and more diverse voices (Cunliffe, 2022, p. 2).

Cunliffe (2022) presents how rationality is privileged – by abstraction, proceduralising and disciplining – as an imperative for being published in management journals and hence is recognised as good theory. From this perspective, contributing to knowledge means abstracting from reality. In other words, it means assuming that the organisation is a system, as if it were a whole, and assuming that the researcher is objective and outside the system observing it (Stacey, 2010; Stacey and Mowles, 2016).

Cunliffe (2022, p. 21) suggests there are alternative ways of theorising that recognise the researcher’s embeddedness and questions why one form of knowledge is privileged and why. She proposes research methods where no orientation is privileged. Solsø (2024) agrees and commends a different kind of engagement with the world by adopting Dewey’s suggestion for ‘inquiry with a scientific attitude’ (Solsø, 2024 [quoting Dewey, 1922] p. 123). The notion that we can inquire with a scientific mind at all, Solsø proposes, requires a form of abductive reasoning as a central principle. Abductive reasoning is a pragmatist form of reasoning that forms a plausible set of explanations for an observation (Solsø, 2024, p. 124). I have taken up abductive reasoning to use theories as a lens, through which possible explanations can be viewed.

Theorising in a human way, as I have been proposing throughout my work, means judging the research by how it leads the researcher and others to a deeper level of understanding of the problem (Brinkmann, 2012). Fotaki and Harding (2018, p. 190) suggest that new ways of writing, debating and thinking about work and organisations create new possibilities for thinking, feeling and writing differently about life, enabling all people to flourish. I have explored the concepts which inform the DMan research community and method with these

ends in view. This has involved taking up key insights from how reflexive analysis and abduction into every day, ordinary experience that may help organisational researchers gain new insights and connections to existing theories.

The opportunity to think about how new knowledge is produced has seen me draw upon pragmatist philosophy, critical feminism, social theories, group analytics and complex responsive processes of relating. The aim is to take seriously the idea that organisations are sites of complex activities that are not linear. I am concerned with bringing ethical consideration into less abstract and remote ideas from the point of view of group coaches. The process of paying attention to the themes I am exploring in my research has given rise to what it means for group coaches when faced with ethical dilemmas. I have written about how coaches can feel silenced in their everyday working environments and how they might consider going about making sense of confusing and often contradictory dilemmas. This leads to being able to seriously question the assumptions of rational, generalised evidence that is presented in organisational research.

In conclusion, this type of research method aims to present experience in a human form. It intends to provide knowledge that is both useful and relevant in order to broaden the debate on gender in organisational life. Naturally, there are limits to these claims of contribution, which I will now highlight.

Limitations

In this final section before my synopsis, I set out some limitations to the method I have used, specifically as it relates to an inquiry into group coaching for women. As I have mentioned, such a form of inquiry can contribute to thinking differently about what counts as knowledge, which raises ethical considerations. Ethical dilemmas can also provoke a form of judgement from the self and others, especially about which experiences are documented. Cunliffe (2003) suggests that researchers need to be aware of the limitations of reflexivity, which are that it can be destabilising and leave the researcher questioning all theories. This started to become part of my experience of writing, when I began to question even the reality of women's accounts of being coached, including my own. Fotaki and Harding (2018) suggest that much academic writing does the very same thing by silencing women, who have no language in which to write (due to masculine theorising) and can be at risk of even forgetting the self. In Benhabib's (1992) contrasting view, reclaiming the female self in writing is part of the agency and selfhood required for change. I understand that Barad (2007) critiques reflexivity by suggesting that there can be no independent realities, such that the boundaries of objects or subjects should not be presumed to represent anything other than the researcher's lived reality. Thus, the degree to which reflexive inquiry can have emancipatory potential is contested.

If we assume that historical divisions of labour produce systematically differentiated and differentiating habitus, to use the argument made by Bourdieu (2001, p. 55), masculine domination is produced and reproduced in the domain of symbolic goods (for example, writing, publishing, journalism, academic conferences and media). The potential for reflexivity is thus limited by the very way of thinking that enables patterns of domination to continue. It is through repeating historical patterns and training of the body which leads to people being

inclined and able to enter into different fields. In acknowledging this limitation, I am not suggesting that alternative ways of writing and researching are impossible. However, I am recognising how entangled writing from the position of a woman can be as a researcher.

Illouz (2012) suggests increased individualisation is also a barrier to developing reflexivity. I have written extensively as a critique on these ideas in Project Four, where highly restricted forms of emotional control are taken up in thinking of our own self-interest and limited our ability to experience each other. Cunliffe (2022) outlines further in terms of the current domination of self-interest and the demand for views of good theorising, which she suggests tending to suppress our ability to experience views other than our own. Thus, there are limitations to the extent to which I can make claims to represent women beyond the experiences narrated in these four projects. I am not making claims about what represents gender in my practice, but rather I encourage a different way of noticing what is going on in the promotion of group coaching for women-in-leadership. I think the importance of clearly documenting my research method, including my assumptions, bias and challenges, as I have tried to do here, goes some way to accepting that all research inquiries are fallible. Equally, as Addams (1916) draws attention to, researchers do recognise that we all have differing views on ethics, on knowledge, and on what (or rather, who) is being privileged in the creation of knowledge. She suggests a serious engagement from the researcher with their subjects of research from the perspective of what she called emotional sociology. I have tried to respond to the limitations by hearing from a plurality of views and staying with trying to complexify my thinking rather than simplifying. Having given a clear account of my research method, I will now start to pull together the red thread from the main themes that emerged in this thesis as I set about answering my research question.

4. Synopsis

A reflexive review of four projects

In this chapter, I pull together a discussion of the main themes that have emerged in my research and the three arguments they inform. In Chapter 2, I presented the four projects as I had first written them; what follows here is not simply a summary of my work, but a synoptic, critical review of that work. This includes further ethical considerations, and a final reflexive turn that describes the movement of my thinking since I interpreted the narratives.

Project One: A lapsed feminist's first critical reading on resistance

In Project One, I wrote about my experiences of being excluded from promotional opportunities and even the workplace itself, and I explored how this related to sex-based divisions of labour and motherhood. I had been trained to think of organisations as systems (Beer, 1959), which meant understanding organisational roles, behaviours and individuals as parts of a larger, mechanistic whole. My initial research framed women's economic and social exclusion within these systems, beginning with my experience of witnessing my mother not being allowed to open a bank account in her own name. The personal and social contexts that shaped me, viewed women's financial exclusion as being the result of the historical exclusion of their sex. I assumed this to be based on repeating patriarchal patterns in society, that of largely assigning child-rearing roles to women, which denied them a place in public society (De Beauvoir, 1949). At an earlier stage in my career, I believed that if I worked harder and gained more credentials, I could break through some of the organisational barriers faced by women and become equal to the current holders of top jobs, mostly western men.

As my career progressed and I rose to my much-coveted hierarchical positions, I accepted traditional linear thinking and an individualistic view of self-empowerment, which would mean by working hard I could rise in the career ladder. At the time of making my career choices, I sought to lean into my own career (Sandberg, 2013), subscribing to the belief that by being more assertive, prioritising work and projecting confidence I would be able to rise to senior leadership roles. By my mid-thirties, I thought that openly sharing what I was doing would encourage other women to focus on their careers too, rather than leave the workforce to care for their families. However, when I was excluded myself during motherhood, I adopted a hyper-intense ability to suppress my anger, and self-silence. I went onto study further to gain more credentials so that I could resume my career, and I even considered my time of exclusion from the workforce as a personal failure. I went on to train in how to teach on leadership programmes, often aimed at women. Later, I started executive coaching, as part of my developing portfolio of skills. While I trained to become an accredited executive leadership coach, I became a freelancer – another opportunity to sell my skills. The models that I trained under are widely used in executive coaching; they include the GROW model (Whitmore, 2009) and feedforward (Goldsmith and Mark, 2011), both of which take the view that individuals can plan to change from their own current position to a new one through their own actions.

What changed for me after writing Project One was that I realised I had trained as a group coach taking up concepts that are often still used without clear definitions or purposes (Bachkirova, 2024; Seiler, 2024). By the end of Project One, I was disillusioned with being asked

to coach groups within diversity programmes, specifically those aimed at women and with a narrative around 'leading diversity' and 'managing inclusion'. I found myself in conflict with the leadership development programme participants themselves, who took strong views against the reason they were told they were there. I was perplexed: why were we continuing to run these programmes if oppositional voices were being ignored? I started to question why I had so strongly patterned self-silencing and tended towards acts of cynicism when I felt angry and uncertain. An inquiry into my strong resistance to accept the established view of what we were doing in women-in-leadership development programmes led me to pragmatist philosophy, starting with Jane Addams (1902) and George Herbert Mead (1934).

Theme One: Organisations can be considered as complex patterns of social processes which challenges how we think of gender

My systematic way of thinking about organisations that I outlined in Project One has been primarily based on my academic training in systems theory. All the tools I use in coaching, and in the experiences, as I have described, advocate that individuals can plan to change from their current position to a new one, by following coaching processes and using feedback. Taking alternative ideas from Mead (1934), individual experience is paradoxically social at the same time as we respond to an imagined and evolving sense of self, within relations with others. Mead provides a formulation of individuals and society as connect – we learn who we are through seeing ourselves through the eyes of others.

Mead's theory of individuals and society has been taken up in the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Griffin 2002; Stacey et al., 2000; Stacey and Mowles, 2016). This perspective is suggesting that although individuals and groups interact with each other in their local situations according to a certain type of order, the global consequences cannot be planned by any of them. For Mead (1934), we experience ourselves based upon our histories, where the patterning of our responses is embedded in and constrained by temporal and social relations (Chauhan, 2024, p. 42). I see how my early life has been influenced by thinking that gender assumes a certain type of sexualised fixed order. Being aware of how aspects of dualistic thinking have become patterned into my own way of thinking and acting, I now see how assumptions of working hard to achieve individual career success became embodied in what I noticed and paid attention to in others.

I now take the view that organisations are not simple systems but complex social patterns which emerge from processes of communicative interacting and power relating between us. I agree that 'individual minds form and are formed as paradoxical processes of continuity and potential transformation at the same time' (Stacey, 2003, p. 17). I relate the meaning of what Stacey says to how I experienced myself, and how I narrated my experience as constrained by social norms and habits. I had not noticed the potential process of transformation that emerged in the experience and tended to fix on power as being held by dominant individuals. Reflecting on this now, I see gender not as something fixed or separate from complex social interaction but as being negotiated from within the groups we find ourselves responding to within shifting power relations. We cannot reduce the language we use to describe gender diversity to assuming fixed categories of groups which I assumed was universally understood by others in my initial reflections on Project One.

The habit of suppressing feelings of anger, self-silencing and resorting to cynicism, which I described in Project One, meant I continued to act in my role as a group coach by reducing my involvement in the conflict. It is perhaps less helpful to try to avoid conflict, considering that my role is aimed at transforming the status quo. Stacey (2001a; 2001b; 2003; 2010) argues that individuals are always in relations with each other in power relations, to which conflict arises. What he is suggesting leads me to reflect that I missed understanding gender as being socially constructed through social interactions and the contested nature of meaning itself (Haslanger, 2010). In doing so, I missed the transformation potential by constraining myself and others from exploring new ideas for what gender diversity could imply. Since writing Project One, my thinking has shifted to align more with the work of gender theorist Joan Acker (1990), which claims that organisations are not rational, objective systems but rather sites where intersections of race, class and gender inequalities have the potential to be created and reinforced in everyday processes. What this points to is a way of thinking of gender inequality as not inherent or planned but arising from certain patterns of established order that get repeated in everyday construction of social identities, unless we are able to change the conversations.

Theme Two: Localised patterns of resistance are part of wider resistance to established social norms

When I was interpreting why I had been excluded during motherhood and had adopted patterns and habits of self-silencing, as well as joining in with cynical gossip, I was still thinking of individuals within groups as striving for career recognition. I found myself muddled in thinking of the term 'gender', 'feminism', 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. At the time of writing the first project, I became embarrassed about not having a clear idea of what I was writing about. Having worked in very male-dominated industries, such as finance and engineering, I largely accepted certain ways of behaving to be accepted and part of the in-group. I thought I was resisting staying within the narrow confines of the few roles assigned to women in organisations by leaning into my career and becoming an investment banker. As there were very few of us women around on the trading floor, I simply found ways to cope with the very stereotypical male language and sexist jokes.

Within the groups I now belong to and in my role now as a group coach, I still resist stereotypical role expectations, yet very often I find myself on my own. My thinking now represents a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of understanding gender as something that emerges from, and is constituted during, communicative interacting and moments of power relating. At the time of writing my narrative, I did not consider how my own localised acts of resistance and those of the people I coach, could be seen as part of wider social patterns. Looking back at Project One, a much more complex picture emerges of the links between power, resistance, gender, groups and ethical dilemmas in coaching than I had been aware of when writing my first project.

To understand others and self in the context of coaching groups, rather than seeing my experiences (and those of the women around me), as personal individual struggles against being expected to carry out the care giving roles and offered limited career opportunities as a result (Goldin, 2021), I think it is helpful to view resistance as part of ever-shifting social relations. I have come to see how my desire to be economically independent led me devaluing

(unpaid) caregiving. I reflect that this has become embodied in how I respond and notice patterns in others, especially during micro-moments of resistance (Harding et al., 2017). For example, in trying to defend the diversity programmes I am arguing against those who do not agree they should be run at all, I suppress a rising feeling of anger and may miss noticing the same habits in others. Paying attention to these localised patterns of resistance, reflected in the coaching groups which I belong to, has become a valuable resource to examine how power relations get negotiated.

Summary of my movement in thinking

Reflecting on my thinking around my original research question (on whether women-in leadership programmes are helpful or unhelpful for women), I now consider that my inquiry was limited by thinking of society as having fixed orders and about whether categories of entire groups define gender as a good or bad thing. What interests me in this movement of thought is how the promise of economic enhancement and personal career improvement formed the basis of accepting the dominant binary discourse to simply work harder, become credentialed and accept the notion that order in society is fixed. This extended to my role as a group coach. I thought I was a skilled professional coach and did not evaluate ways in which I was less open to noticing how my actions might have restricted others.

Reflecting on the two main themes outlined above, in the context of Mead's (1934, p. 172) suggestion that the self has no past but emerges from a historical perspective in which people act in the present based on their reinterpretation of the past and an expectation towards the future, I understand this to mean our view of self is constantly shifting and evolving in how we narrate ourselves from the perspective of multiple other pasts in the present moment. Such a reflection leads me to think about the shifting discourse of gender fairness in organisations, and I have moved towards complex ways of thinking about organisations as complex social processes, in which our understanding of gender and localised patterns of power and resistance within group coaching are being negotiated as part of wider social patterns of change.

Project Two: Understanding resistance as a dynamic social process

At the start of my second project, I coached a group as part of a leadership development programme at a business school and delved further into pragmatist philosophy to explore notions of social selves through the work of Mead (1934). Pragmatist philosophy contrasts with the individualism of coaching models taken from psychodynamics and psychological principles. Beginning by viewing myself as a professionally trained group coach, largely influenced by the work of Kets de Vries (2005; 2006; 2014) from INSEAD Business School and his colleagues (Kets de Vries et al., 2007), it appeared that the coachee at the centre of my narrative resisted all attempts to follow my guidance and would not follow the coaching processes. She would not put away her mobile phone, she told the group she was leaving early, and she refused to be drawn into a group discussion on her 360-degree feedback report. At the time, I reflected on the fact that even though she was free to leave the session and I was free to ask her to leave, we continued not to openly acknowledge the struggle that was going on. I felt I had followed the coaching process well by contracting with the group and talking about outcomes and goals. Yet, my coachee still resisted all attempts to get her to

interact with the group. Instead, she continued to focus on her phone and stayed within her own narrative - that her family commitments carried far more weight than her organisational ones, and she did not want to discuss the topic further.

As the coachee resisted being part of the process, the group tried to take over and manage the process for her. One other coachee suggested ways she might reduce the influence her role as a mother had on her organisational role by 'outsourcing' her family commitments or by asking her partner to do more. In reading Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), I was struck by the view of self, which according to his work, is both shaped by and shaping our interaction with others (Project Two, reflections on self, p. 31). This happens through how we respond to and reflect the actions of others, which is formed by the attitudes, expectations and norms of society. His theory of social conflict suggests that conflict arises when the goal of the social act is contested, or the plan of action or goals are not agreed upon. He also acknowledges that there also will be various levels of awareness of the process within the group (Mead, 1934, p. 304). This might point to why some in the group granted me the authority to be their coach, while others appeared not to and led me to feel uncertainty as to what I was doing. The challenge to my position altered my view of what I assumed we had agreed on. At the start of the narrative, I had assumed that the outcome was largely predictable and that I was the neutral coach outside the group, supporting the promotion of women in organisations. In my analysis, I wrote about how the remaining participants formed a 'we' group and reinforced the idea that the influence of family life ought to be reduced to be committed to the organisation (Cheryan and Markus, 2020; Gray et al., 2019).

Kets de Vries (2014) himself has long been a strong advocate for looking at group coaching through the lens of complex adaptive processes, using clinical paradigms to reflect on the unconscious dynamics that influence the individual within the group. In Project Two, at the time of writing the narrative, I looked at how gendered patterns of expectations arose in the group. The assumption had been that the organisational demands and the role of leadership took preference, which the coachee challenged. The group then took up an idealised view of leadership, which Sinclair (2005) proposes privileges very few identities. In this case, the conflict between us highlighted that power, resistance and struggle are everyday realities in group coaching, leading to strong feelings of anxiety and the expectation of conformity to social norms.

Theme Three: Group coaching reflects complex social patterns of inclusion and exclusion in organisations, where established groups are privileged

By the end of Project Two, it was becoming clear that I doubted I could remain a neutral observer of the dynamics within a group and offer simplified tools and processes to get the group to the outcome requested by the contracting manager. I observed that this gave rise to feelings of uncertainty. Mead suggests uncertainty informs how we experience moments of social conflict. When I started coaching the group, I was aware that the assessment tools and coaching methods would reduce my uncertainty and establish me as overseeing the group. However, I had not considered the implications of historical social patterns for relations or how leadership development programmes assume a somewhat idealistic view of coaching. During my reading of Khurana's (2007) account of the marketing of business schools, I

reflected on the rise of executive coaching and how my own inflated view of what I thought of as a 'good leader' influenced my aim of being seen as a 'good coach'.

In my view now, the group was trying to correct the coachee towards becoming more of a good leader by privileging the organisation's demands on being available to work. Groups depend perhaps on expected modes of responding to each other as a defence against anxiety. Alternative views on what gender might represent points me to the fact that I was asking the coachees to account for themselves against an ideological view of leadership, as what West and Zimmerman (1987) call doing gender. In other words, while I sought to reduce my own anxiety by using coaching tools, I was raising the coachees by asking them to account for their own choices without reflecting on systemic inequalities. At the time of writing and interpreting Project Two, I was concerned with why, when I had been attempting to follow the coaching process, which is what I had been contracted to do, I felt conflicted in my role. In considering group coaching as part of the complex patterns of gender recognition, power and resistance that reflect wider themes in society, I did not consider the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in as much depth at the time.

In *The Established and the Outsiders* study, Elias and Scotson (1994) highlight how groups start to think of themselves as being part of the established 'we' group. The mechanism used to reinforce the identity of the group include stigmatism through gossip and jokes (Elias and Scotson, 1994, p. xxiv). I am struck now by how the group might have moved the coachee to the role of the outsider by making jokes about superwomen. The suggestion was that adherence to the organisational goals were the most important. The coachee had also declared her own sense of being outside the group by refusing to be drawn into any further dialogue on what she considered important. What I take from this additional reflection now, is the deeply problematic nature of group coaching in sustaining ideologies through the social dynamics of established and outsider. I became preoccupied with being seen as a 'good coach' and the group was trying to discipline the coachee towards a view of 'ideal worker' (Gray et al., 2019), perhaps as I have suggested using Elias and Scotson's ideas, by devaluing behaviours not aligned to the ideology of leadership held by the group.

Theme Four: Resistance to group coaching illuminates how groups sustain conformity to established norms

I felt at the time of writing Project Two, that the coachee's resistance to adhere to the coaching process could be seen as an act of refusing to collude with me as a representative of the organisational demand to be more efficient. Looking back now over Project Two, I observe a deeper ethical dilemma between the coachee's desire to be seen as making her own agentic choices and the social tendency for people to assume caregiving is of less value (at least financially). I wonder if my desire not to call out or make visible the importance of her choice was not granting her the individual agency she asked for, or if I was avoiding having a conversation with myself about whether her resistance challenged my own self-interests. After all, I have already highlighted in the analysis of my first project that I was heavily influenced by the belief that individual women can succeed if they work hard. Was I judging myself as having failed to persuade my coachee to participate in my own view of what is possible for women in my story?

Mead (1934, p. 387) points to how groups negotiate evaluative expectations and judgements. By this, he is proposing that we should look at the social situation rather than our own self-interest. It is a view that Addams (1902) had also suggested. She maintains that all ethical dilemmas arise from social interactions and taking the view of all those involved can be a way to challenge norms. As I look back at my decision to no longer coach in women-in-leadership programmes, following the completion of Project Two, I wonder whether my discomfort is due to a subjective, self-interested belief that I am no longer able to affect change in these programmes, or whether I avoid my embarrassment in asking deeper questions about how entrenched norms continue to go undiscussed. As my own patterns have been towards self-silencing, I am more aware how I am also silencing others who do not conform.

Taking up Foucault's (1982) claims that where there are relations of power there will always be relations of resistance, I notice how the rest of the group stepped in to act, as an attempt to create the appearance of 'we' group cohesion. I would reflect now that by acting to try to create group cohesion, group coaches can reinforce the legitimacy of established power dynamics. I acted in my own self-interest by negating the wishes of the coachee to act outside of the coaching agreement and thereby confirmed her in the role of outsider. What this highlight to me, when re-reading Project Two, is why the coach might want to be able to maintain stability within the group. In a sense, such patterns reflect a view of the individual and the group as somewhat separate, the coach is outside the group and that change can be planned. Such a shift in established ways of thinking can be disruptive and uncomfortable. Pondering the question of how power imbalances in social relations are negotiated within groups, I reflect now on how this also relates to micro moments of resistance in leadership group coaching as an attempt not to follow the dominant narrative of strong leadership who can transform followers (Reams, 2020). I was perhaps mirroring the narrative of strong leadership by wanting to be seen as a strong coach who could support the coachee to change their own current position to a new one through their own actions.

Summary of my movement in thinking

In Project Two, I was reflecting on the patterns in society that devalue care work as a social norm and how the dynamics of the group responded in our interactions with each other when presented with the theme. Where I have shifted my thinking is to consider that coaching groups are not simply individuals acting in unison by following a coaching process but form a 'we' group identity that is linked to existing norms and social order. Elias (1978) suggests the 'we' group often hides customs, beliefs and habits that sustain patterns of power. I am more aware of the ways in which group coaching shores up existing power relations that suggest some traits and actions are more desirable than others, despite claims to the contrary.

I have moved my thinking away from simply narrating my role as a facilitator of a group coaching process where I manage group cohesion, towards seeing resistance as the struggle to transform established patterns of power. To view resistance during leadership development processes as emerging and being created from established patterns of power differences (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017) represents a move in my thinking about what remains undiscussed and hidden. As I have described above, rather than viewing resistance as something to manage, which is often the case in coaching studies (Seiler, 2024), I have shifted

my thinking towards how resistance can illuminate the group's self-interests and give rise to patterns of exclusion.

Project Three: Relating embodied resistance to gender diversity

In my third project, I reflected on the experience of working on a global leadership diversity programme, as a subcontractor to a larger coaching organisation. The organisational HR client had specifically set a quota for the number for women to be included in the training programmes, in line with compliance procedures to the relevant EU Directive (Directive EU 2022/2381). My coaching group, which was made up specifically of women and under-represented races (as defined by the HR client), did not complete their expected assigned project as part of the programme and came into conflict with the stated programme outcomes. At this point, I offered to speak with my contracting clients. Naturally, my HR client did not openly welcome my intervention and, in my role as a sub-contracted freelance coach, I was disciplined into silence by my direct client.

Project Three looked through a new lens at the narrative that 'adding women' to senior roles in organisations is 'good for business', which has often gone unquestioned. The narrative had been promoted by, among others, management consultants McKinsey (Hunt et al., 2015; 2018; 2020). Yet, the research on why adding women might create more profit had been very inconclusive (Edmans, 2024). On the one hand, one argument for adding more women could be that bringing in more female representation would break behavioural stereotypes and change the repeating patterns of historical social norms. However, how this would add to profit is still very much in question. On the other hand, another argument proposes that adding more women leads to new ways of thinking and knowledge creation, which emerges between managers. This would have some merit if it were clear what was expected to come about from such new thoughts. Nevertheless, both these lines of argument, I reflected at the time of writing my narrative, point to an orthodox way of looking at woman-in-leadership as 'things' that can be added to an organisation in a planned way.

The evidence used to back claims that diversity increases business profits has been frequently researched (see Yang and Konrad, 2025 for a full list of studies). However, even now, I often find myself in conflict with these arguments and tend to align with colleagues who feel repetitions of these studies are not helpful. Critiquing the business case approach for gender diversity (as proposed by Hunt et al., 2015), I have reflected on the suggested basis of these assumptions taken from the idea that management is a science, and on the notion that the mind is split from the body (Project Three, what might be behind the business case, p. 51). The rational business case 'winner takes all approach' I had suggested can mask and hide patterns of power. Taking up the ideas from *Complexity and Management* (Stacey et al., 2000), I have suggested looking at an alternative view than thinking of a self-regulating individual leader who can change their organisation by acting on the goal of connecting 'diverse' minds. By taking up such an alternative view, I started to pay attention to the complex and evolving relational processes of people interacting and sense-making with one another. What this means to me is I must pay attention to my own patterns of acting and how I suppress strong feelings and emotions in the structures and relations of power that privilege rational, evidence-based thinking. As I reflected on Project Three at the time, I had become more aware of how repeating patterns of self-silencing and suppressed anger made it difficult to detach

from the experience. Delving into Bourdieu's work on how power and social positions are maintained, I looked at how my own repeating struggles could be understood within the dominance of masculine ideals in society (Bourdieu, 2001).

Theme Five: The role of the group coach can reinforce conformity to established rules

Reflecting again now and turning my reflections back on myself, the more powerful 'we' group in Project Three was that of my contracting client. Raising my concerns over the structure of the leadership development programme was not part of the established rules for a coach. Elias (1978) uses the notion of a game as an analogy. He raises the point that in the social processes we find ourselves part of established views that dominate the discussion on what ought to be done as part of the rules of the game. His ideas suggest to me that the established group are often better able to influence the outcome of the game by trying to maintain the status of the existing norms and rules. Elias posits that we cannot know in advance the outcomes of the many games we are involved in, because they depend on shifting power figurations. Taking this into account, it would have been more in my own interests to align myself with my HR colleagues and the established rules. As I re-read Project Three now, I am interested in why I decided to bring the coaching group's feedback back to my clients. I could have just agreed with my clients, who appeared to control the resources, and hence, were in a stronger position. Upon reflection, what was being asked of me was to not disturb the existing relations of power, justified by a strong business case. In other words, I needed to comply with the established rules to continue in my role. I am interested in why a challenge to the business case felt risky and I suspect this is the perspective of rationality that Cunliffe (2022) says is so often presented as being the truth.

Thinking of the rules of the game, Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus explains the tendency for patterns to be repeated. From my current perspective now, I think of established patterns where coaches often adapt to the dominant thinking and do not question the theories behind them. Bourdieu (2001) calls habitus patterns that tend to be repeated over time and become embodied in certain dispositions such that we do not question them. Group coaches, like me, are trained to maintain a professional distance and adhere to standard rules and associated codes of individualised ethics, which can simply ignore or over-simplify the ethical dilemmas that arise in real-world situations. I am trained to comply with rules and find it difficult to respond when challenged. In this project, the expectation to conform was partly about reinforcing gendered norms because women-in-leadership programmes are seen as fair. Who can argue against claims of diversity as being fair:

Resistance to equity-oriented intervention programs becomes challenging because any object of resistance disappears into a cloud of fair policies – how can one resist something that is considered fair for everyone?
(McClellan et al., 2011, p. 212)

Since writing Project Three, I have become more critical of the dominant framing of organisational evidence-based research that suggests women have a specific 'lens' of habits - or prosocial traits - that makes them a benefit to companies (Diekmann and Eagly, 2000; Helgesen and Goldsmith 2018; Ibarra et al., 2011). As such, I agree with Liu (2020, p. 42) that the idealisation of leadership itself continues to promote the view that individual women can

singlehandedly transform into valuable commodities to be sold as 'leaders' - or in my practice, sold as 'the coach'. This positions my role as the one that is expected to reinforce the established rules, which implies that it is possible to change individuals in a planned and organised way to be more valuable to the organisation. I face choices between continuing to work within the accepted parameters for a group coach or acting differently and losing substantial income. I am not advocating for inaction or acts of strict conformity, but I am much more aware of how difficult it can be to make moral judgements without appearing to be disruptive and oppositional to certain established ways of working and thinking.

Theme Six: There are opportunities to reform rules that gives rise to ethical dilemmas

Acker (1990) argues that workplaces are not gender neutral but are structured in such a way as to reinforce gendered norms which like Oakley (1972, 1998) sees gender as problematic social constructs. My HR client wanted to be able to report her programme as effective, rather than considering that we might well be perpetuating orthodox gendered stereotypes. Here, I think again in terms of Mead's (1934) ideas on moral judgement and Addams (1902) view that all ethical choices are social and what are considered expectations for men and women. The client was expecting a result from a diversity programmes, yet the coaching group had an alternative view of what the result should be. As a group coach, I have to balance whose interests I represent, as I am expected to contribute to what is often taken for granted as the successful outcome of a programme yet also expected to help the individuals achieve what they want.

Reflecting on this now, I see that I could have tried to re-negotiate the conditions of my contract at the start of the assignment, or even during it, to allow for more emergent outcomes, but I was happy to have the work, so I said nothing. I acknowledge that re-negotiating contracts to allow for emergent themes is difficult within the current procedural processes of coming to an agreement on coaching contracts. Finding freelance work can be difficult without feeling like conformity is expected. In addition, difficulties in negotiating are relevant when openly discussing what established relations of power are being sustained in group coaching interventions. This raises questions about how ethical dilemmas are solved. Heitz and Leach (2022) claim that little is known about the ethical dilemmas experienced by coaches (and coachees) and how coaches approach moral judgement. Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith (2015) argue that this is due to the taken-for-granted assumption of neutrality from the coach, where the coach positions themselves as external to the experience, and perhaps ignores (or does not pay attention to) that they are at risk being used as an instrumental part of orthodox management discourse.

Taking a further reflexive turn, my increasing unease with the way in which gender diversity programmes are encapsulated within a business case is connected to being my growing awareness that group coaching should not be about trying to impose fixed outcomes. Hurlow (2022) proposes reframing coaching within organisational learning as a social process, which is largely how I am now thinking of coaching practice. She contends that traditional coaching models can emphasise individual agency or imply that groups are simply individuals acting together, without paying attention to historical patterns of social, racial and cultural context. I reflect again how constrained I feel in my ability to act when I am faced with complex and often competing ethical demands. I have observed that coaches often reach for tools and

simplified ways of thinking to combat anxiety and feelings of unease on competing ideals of what is considered good. Staying with my inquiry into how difficult it is to challenge strong beliefs and orthodox ways of thinking; I am now aware it is not possible to do this alone. Pondering how to move beyond prioritising individualistic approaches in such situations, I can see the contradictions that arise in trying to balance the ideals of a professional neutral coach who is contracted to achieve specific outcomes with ethical choices. Such challenges come from trying to increase the already small number of women to higher senior roles in the simplified belief that this is sufficient for organisations to achieve equality (Alvesson and Billing, 2009). My clients and I failed to negotiate a way of accommodating our differing understandings and ways of looking at the world. Our failure to stay in relation prevented us from creating new meaning or sense in what we were doing, which points to the need to pay attention to power and resistance in those moments of strong emotion. I see how other communities become important to be able to challenge such simplified ways of thinking.

Summary of my movement in thinking

I now think more about the hidden, unspoken aspects of group dynamics, which are crucial to develop an understanding of what is being privileged and what is being marginalised (Griffin, 2002). When I find myself caught up in social interaction, there are often many competing and contradictory views about who is the client and what is fairness and what is good judgement. I recognise that I get caught up in ethical dilemmas when competing goods and notions of 'truth' are presented. I am interested in re-examining Project Four having undergone a shift of thinking, because in that project more players now have an interest in the outcome of the coaching group: as well as the fee-paying client, the other coaches, the accreditation bodies and my own self-interests - digital platform owners now have an interest.

I now have a better sense of how conflict and tensions arise in coaching negotiations between the needs of different and multiple interests when working with clients who hold dominant ideologies (and now legally enforceable requirements) about the benefits of increasing the number of senior women in organisations. From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, contradictions and paradox are seen as part of everyday experience, such that tensions are unlikely to be resolved. I can now be more open to the idea of continual negotiation of what gender means and bringing hidden assumptions to the surface, to inform how I can continue to influence my clients. Paying attention to ethical dilemmas, powerplays, dominant views of good leadership, potential conflict and acts of micro resistance add to a new understanding of what is at stake when negotiating between multiple stakeholders as part of my work. In the past few years, the arrival of coaching platforms has further complicated the ways in which coaching groups continue to maintain patterns of exclusion and inclusion, despite shifting relations of power and changing views of what we think we mean by gender. There is a new group on the block that potentially stands to gain the most from reinforcing the game of an ideal leader and recreating an ideal coach. This is the focus of Project Four.

Project Four: Rising ethical dilemmas in the marketisation of coaching practice

My final narrative recounted my experience of being invited to join a digital coaching platform as part of a group of women coaches, who had been selected by a digital algorithm to work

on a women-in-leadership programme. The proposal for the programme was that I would join a group of female coaches to guide separate groups of high potential women through a nine-month leadership journey. The coaching groups would be sent material in advance on themes such as gender bias, organisational politics, how to increase their confidence and how to negotiate promotional offers. The programme was to be conducted online, as part of a self-paced learning offer, with fixed dates for when coaching groups would have virtual meetings with me. When the invitation to join the platform arrived, I was considering who to talk to about my research. Up until now, offering more critical views has not been very warmly welcomed by any of the organisations I work with. At the same time, I find myself bound by the code of ethics (ICF, 2021) of the professional coaching bodies, which means that a coach is regularly examined regarding their knowledge of the code, which reinforces conformity to the status of neutral and value free.

I wrote about the ethical dilemmas I face when presented with claims of fairness that do not often get covered in the code of ethics in Project Three. This is how I found myself turning to literature that is more critical of coaching for inspiration on how to act in the digital environment. On receiving the invitation, I asked the team that was organising the programme if we could discuss my emerging research against the aims and ideals of the programme. They did not disagree; but on reflection, they also did not offer an open invitation either. During the online “kick-off” call with the whole team it became clear that neither the organising team nor my fellow coaches wanted to discuss my research on alternative ideas. This contributed to me feeling alienated from the group and even from my profession. At this point on the call, I was accused of being a radical feminist activist. I reflect that even though the group was centred around women, feminism was not considered to be a legitimate part of the discussion. During my conversation with the group, the way we talked about women became highly contradictory. On the one hand, we were using highly agentic language to talk about individual women who could rise to the top of the organisation; on the other hand, we were also implying that a homogenous group called ‘women’ needed training to be ‘good’ for business. I felt that we were reducing identity and organisational complexity into oversimplified categories. In trying to raise concerns, I was not only excluded from the call but also from the programme.

Interpreting my narrative when writing Project Four, I referred to coaching as a form of emotional labour using the term suggested in Hochschild’s (1983) study, *The Managed Heart*. The increasing professionalisation of coaching sets expectations for how a coach should act. Naturally, not acting in accordance with the expectations of coach-neutrality, despite being financially dependent on a third-party contract, leads me to think about my own habitual way of responding to what I understand as gendered themes. Recognising my patterns of attempts at ‘going into camouflage’ (Sinclair, 2000b; 2019) and self-silencing I began to see how emotional regulation has become embedded in my experience of the work I do. A strong internalised feeling of anger, which I have recognised I consistently try to suppress, arose while I was writing Project Four. I found myself angry at the promise of group coaching to bring about a more equitable world. At the same time coaching can be seen as simply taking up the pretensions of equality while reinforcing established patterns of power relations. In announcing myself as a researcher, I was going against expectations of professional conformity and was removed from the invitation. At the end of writing the final project I was left with

further questions about what it is possible for a group coach to inquire into. In the context of an industry moving rapidly towards commodification and a reliance on orthodox views about evidence-based research, critical inquiry feels highly restricted.

Theme Seven: Resisting recreating established patterns as a group coach requires reforming the game and conforming to the game at the same time

From my current perspective, I think of established patterns or habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) where coaches often adopt to the dominant thinking without questioning the theories behind them. I already mentioned that group coaches are trained to maintain a professional distance and I have become aware of how difficult it is to respond to ethical dilemmas when challenged by clients. Questioning the response of the group within a practice that trains coaches to adhere to social norms, standards and rules puts the coach at risk of losing her voice by not playing by the right rules. Bourdieu's (1977: 2001) theory of capital and the field has been useful for examining the rules of interaction as ongoing. According to Bourdieu (1977; 1993), capital can be understood as resources that can be exchanged. He viewed these as not only economic but also social, cultural and symbolic. Power relations determine who has access to and can gain sources of capital, hence having a better ability to play the game. The field is the sphere in which capital is used, it is structured by the distribution of capital and the force of the rules (Rasmussen, 2024, pp. 198-199).

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *illusio* – where the stakes and rewards display our predisposition to invest in maintaining power dynamics – show just how difficult resisting new ways of thinking and acting can be. In trying to understand the field of group coaching in women-in-leadership programmes I thought my research would be welcomed in any debate on what organisational practices constitute subjects as masculine or feminine (Fotaki and Harding, 2018, p. 14) and I was thrown off-balance when I was silenced. In other words, I had not gained enough capital to be able to speak about this topic, and I was excluded. My exclusion from openly discussing a more complex agenda implies not only a personal affront to me but also a generalised pattern of how groups resist reforming and end up conforming, despite claiming not to do so. Losing the ability to speak, pose Fotaki and Harding (2018, p. 30), also happens when the only language to speak in is the language of domination, 'resulting in a grief that emerges from the accounts of how we become defeated.' In taking a final reflexive turn on my analysis of Project Four, perhaps I was not thinking critically enough about how power dynamics are maintained within coaching practice as local patterns emerge and how this can constitute the coach as somehow mute.

It can feel difficult and risky to voice alternative critical themes, when gender-biased stereotypes give rise to the assumption that leadership is best suited to a certain public ideal (Cheryan and Markus, 2020; Ernst, 2003; Sinclair, 2000a) and care is left to the private domain of the home. The risk of exclusion can shape how groups of women leaders and female group coaches internalise gendered social norms, which shape how we engage with the particularities of the field. By this, I mean that the space to challenge everyday concepts assumed as natural in conversations on women-in-leadership becomes even more restricted. Group coaches might need to engage with the very structures they seek to disrupt if they want to make the hidden power relations within groups more visible. In other words, staying in the game while challenging the rules at the same time requires access to capital to be able to

understand how ethical dilemmas can be approached within the paradox of stability and change.

In my thinking now, using Illouz's (2012) term 'emotional dominance' to describe groups that have a greater capacity to control the emotional interactions of others, I think about the emotional toll that expectations around value free and neutrality place on group coaches. Set into a current changing marketplace, these expectations are heightened in the virtual digital platform environment, where the group coach can lose ways of speaking up by being excluded. Hurlow (2022) asserts that membership of professional accreditation bodies (as a way to gain capital) can limit the space for a coach to act by implying there is one best way. Clutterbuck and David (2013) have found that coaching is more recently being sold as a product rather than as any part of a relational process, which also resonates with me. Trying not to resort to self-silencing, I persevered with my endeavour to raise my research topics.

The ability to negotiate and at least to have some influence on the rise of new digital platforms requires access to and accumulation of various new forms of capital. The question is how do we go forward to engage with conflicts and find spaces to create new dialogues within digital fields? My practice is heavily reliant on the new digital field, which weakens the power of the coach, and hence moves the distribution of capital away from the coach. Arriving at the end of my reflexive turn, I am looking to engage in ways I might continue to resist demands of conformity and instrumentalisation in order to change the dynamics within coaching groups. I will go onto reflect on some of the current critical issues facing the future of my profession, which will form part of my contribution to knowledge and practice after my final summary and presentation of three arguments.

Summary of my movement in thinking

My research thus far has highlighted how the new forms of digital technology can isolate and exclude even small ways of being able to challenge norms. Where I have shifted my thinking is to understand how difficult this is to do alone, and I have connected with other coaches, researchers and practitioners who share an interest in exploring ideas on power and politics. I have moved from not really understanding why I internalise such strong feelings of anger, to understanding the importance of strong emotions in highlighting complex historical patterns that are being repeated within emergent networks of social relations and power. I have also moved to being more aware of the responses of others around me to social norms, inherent in micro moments of noticing.

Considering group coaching within broader relational social dynamics, by remaining curious about how power and ethical dilemmas show up, I have become more aware of how social patterns are so often reinforced in groups. If the ability to form new meaning and widen the debate within coaching practice is affected by how we feel able to act, then feeling that that I as a group coach need to control my emotions to fit with rules can restrict the emergence of change. Stepping back from experiences to notice patterns of when I feel the need to control my emotions and self-silence in order to fulfil my role helps me to reflect on the assumptions and implicit norms that often remain well hidden within coaching practice. I am shifting my thinking, so it is less about how to resolve ethical dilemmas and more about how to stay in the conversation. I am more often critically exploring what is going on and inviting others to do so too.

Synthesis of my key arguments

Looking back over my four projects, I notice how the themes of power, ethics, and exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics within groups were already strong themes in Project One. At the end of my second and third projects, the dynamics of how my coaching practice reinforces these themes became the focus of my inquiry. I did not think that relations of gender, power, resistance and emotional regulation would be so intricately connected with habitual responses to ethical dilemmas within group coaching.

The main themes that have developed movements in my thinking are:

1. organisations can be considered as complex patterns of social processes which challenges how we think of gender
2. localised patterns of resistance are part of wider resistance to established social norms
3. group coaching reflects complex social patterns of inclusion and exclusion in organisations where established groups are privileged
4. resistance to group coaching illuminates how groups sustain conformity to established norms
5. the role of the group coach can reinforce conformity to established rules
6. there are opportunities to reform rules that gives rise to ethical dilemmas
7. resisting recreating established patterns as a group coach requires reforming the game and conforming to the game at the same time.

I will now go on to synthesise my main arguments to answer the research question I have been working on:

How do group coaches navigate ethical challenges arising from simplified ways of thinking about gender, power and ethics in coaching practice?

Argument One: The process of group coaching involves navigating complex inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics

My research has led me to understand the importance of paying attention to the complexities inherent in group coaching. This involves recognising and examining the ways in which group coaching reflects localised patterns of inclusion and exclusion in organisations, which are reflected in generalised patterns in society. When I think of gender as socially constructed, I am not referring to gender as sex-based differences but as the ways in which societal norms, expectations and bias influence who is included and excluded within organisational life, based on the essentialising of men and women. The theme of gender as representing sex-based differences in organisations is not new but has become a wider area of debate within critical management (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Fotaki and Harding, 2018; Mumby, 2011). From an anti-essentialist perspective on gender (Fotaki and Harding, 2018; Ford et al., 2021), I understand gendering as a disposition arising within complex social processes. By that I mean the situation where relations of power and resistance inform embodied ways of thinking and acting, that arise within the living present.

Organisations across Europe are under increased social and political pressure to balance the female-to-male ratio of leaders (Directive EU 2022/2381). As a result, they have adopted

various interventions to promote women. One of these is a leadership development intervention, where group coaching is offered with the emphasis on personal development, peer learning and offers of reaching one's full potential (Athanasopoulou and Dobson, 2018; Thornton, 2010). Understanding group coaching as a facilitated process led by a skilled professional coach (Kets de Vries, 2014; Seiler, 2024; Thornton, 2010), a common debate in organisational research is how coaching works to add value to the development and promotion prospects of women (Bonneywell and Gannon, 2022; Filleti and Jones, 2025; Vitzthum, 2023). In the context of women-in-leadership development programmes, coaching is promoted under the banner of positive support for women's personal choices and the benefit to their careers in creating a professional identity (Iberra et al., 2011; Skinner, 2014).

In contrast to many hegemonic discourses, I argue that the experience of group coaching reflects patterns of organisational life. My argument starts with the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey et al., 2000), which assumes that whatever happens in organisations does so as a result of what people are doing together based upon their cultural histories. Local interactions create global patterns because of what we are doing together in a paradoxical movement where global patterns shape local activity (Mowles, 2024a, xvii). These patterns are part of organisational social processes, of which gendered thinking is always a part (Acker, 1990). I emphasise that the group coach cannot be considered a neutral skilled professional outside the group but part of the relational social process of group dynamics, where power relations constrain and enable how groups interact and make sense of what they are doing. This assumes thinking of leadership along masculine stereotypes and that the ideal leaders are typically viewed through a masculine lens (Ford et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2019; Sinclair, 2011). Such thinking is often reproduced in the dynamics of group coaching.

Throughout my thesis I have drawn on the work of Elias (1978) and Elias and Scotson (1994) to illustrate the dynamic social processes that constrain and enable individuals within inclusionary and exclusionary group practices. Elias and Scotson (1994) point to difference as the very dynamic that preserves power differentials between and within groups. I suggest that to create women-in-leadership as a distinct group that needs to be included to the established leadership space entails taking a view of group coaching as a practice that often requires the group to conform to ideal worker norms. Such a requirement is neither explicitly recognised nor discussed, resulting in what Bourdieu (2001) claims is part of the masculine ideology:

The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification, the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in the discourses aimed at legitimating it (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 9).

I suggest that a dominant masculine ideology has been naturalised within group coaching as part of simplified ways of thinking about women-in-leadership development programmes. Moments of micro resistance to ideal worker norms within the coaching group can be seen as patterns of a wider resistance to established masculine social norms. An inability to conform to established norms as a woman is well documented (Fraser, 2013; Goldin, 2021; O'Connor, 2019). What is less well documented is the ideological work being carried out within and between coaching groups, which can sustain conformity to established norms. If coaching

sustains established norms, women resisting the process are seen as having failed to reach their full potential as a result (Fatien-Diochon et al., 2023).

Elias (1978) links the individual and society to figurations of power relations, as a structural characteristic central to all human relations. The mechanisms by which groups maintain the balance of power are through the behaviours of members of certain groups using inclusionary and exclusionary processes, such as gossip, internalised shame and embarrassment. These are outlined in Elias and Scotson's (1994) account of highly effective policing strategies. I have demonstrated how such strategies bolster conformity to unspoken and sometimes hidden rules within the coaching group. I now conclude that the very act of differentiating who is included and who is excluded from leadership spaces in organisations is based on established norms, expectations and gendered bias. The established power differentials between and within women-in-leadership programmes can influence how groups feel compelled to conform to or are able to resist the established norms. Who feels they belong to which groups can be described in terms of interdependencies, or what Elias calls changing patterns of interdependence (Elias, 1978, p. 130). In Project Two, even when confident in my training and competence as a skilled, professional coach, I found myself being constrained in ways than I had not anticipated. I felt embarrassed that I could not facilitate the group to get to an outcome and was facing resistance from a coachee. The group itself started to police non-conformity by suggesting ways in which the coachee could obtain career success by becoming more ideal in the eyes of the organisation. Jokes were made about 'superwomen' as one policing strategy implying that non-conformity was weak and group cohesion should be maintained. Dalal (1998) highlights this as a way in which groups navigate towards those who are perceived to have a better feel for the game and hence hold more power.

Taking up Elias's (1978) ideas on figurations further, I argue that the outcome of group coaching is not a dimension of the behaviour of many discrete individuals but the outcome of patterns of changing tensions, including gendered power figurations. Studies of power figurations are useful for explaining the under-representation of women at the top hierarchical levels, which typically places them as *outsiders* (Ernst, 2003, p. 279). It is not possible to conceive of coaching groups of women within figurations without considering the impact of power relations on gender expectations. As illustrated in Project Three, group coaches find themselves navigating the deeply entrenched views that supporting individual women to build their skills and getting more women into senior positions is fair and a good thing to do. The ability to negotiate between and within groups, requires not only self-reflection but also an awareness of how self-reproducing power figurations constrain and enable our ability to act.

Based on my research, I argue that it is perfectly possible for the group coaches, through their own actions, to become entangled in habitual ways of thinking, acting and speaking within organisational groupings that privilege a masculine and idealised view of leadership. In this sense, the group coach is part of how the group is formed within the present view, based on patterns of the past, in anticipation of the future. I conclude that the process of group coaching involves navigating inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics which have become patterned around hidden (and often undiscussed) assumptions of what is taken for granted as gendered social norms, implicated in promises of career success.

Argument Two: Simplified ways of thinking about the dynamics of group coaching narrow questions about ethics and established power

The first argument situates group coaching as a dynamic process that arises from what everyone in the group is doing (or not doing) together within existing power figurations in organisations. My second argument is formulated on Bourdieu's ideas of habitus, capital and field, which I have drawn on throughout my thesis and which I will explain again briefly below. Assumptions that the habitus of relations of power in coaching groups of women-in-leadership is determined by both the structure of capital and the field, means power is at the centre of group coaching dynamics. This brings into question the way coaching is presented as culturally value free and gender neutral (Roche and Passmore, 2021), whilst working within simplified ways of thinking as if all actions are possible through individual agency.

One of the most recognised simplified figurations over the centuries has been the split between men and women in the gendered division of labour (O'Connor, 2019). However, this simplified view has not remained constant, which, as Elias (1982) suggests, reflects a broader cultural structural shift of figurations as western societies changed. Divisions between and within groups are dynamic processes that can and do change, yet a dominant simplified understanding of gender as sex-based differences in these processes persists (Lennon and Alsop, 2020). Bourdieu (1977; 2001) presents elaborate theories of how, despite changing figurations, power asymmetries have continued to privilege the habitus of masculine dominance. He suggests that privilege is reinforced through how groups obtain and maintain symbolic capital, which he posits is how social categories are viewed. Power is contested and negotiated through how groups obtain capital by what Bourdieu calls habitus – 'patterns which get constructed and naturalised through the training of the body' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 55). The tendency to repeat historical patterns is understood to be part of how individuals embody social situations to acquire symbolic capital through experience, emotional control and language:

The sexual division is inscribed on the one hand, in the division of productive activities with which we associate the idea of work, and more generally in the division of labour of maintaining social capital and symbolic capital which gives men the monopoly of all official public activities, of representation, and in particular of all exchanges of honour (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 47).

Coaching women leaders within groups can be seen to operate in contested spaces (which Bourdieu [Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993] calls the field), where coaches negotiate with multiple others on how to work within changing power relations, 'through the experience of a "sexually" ordered social order' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 95). Conformity can be seen as a mechanism through which the ability to acquire symbolic capital (e.g. through qualifications, writing, journals and academic works) grants a certain order to speak into a masculine-dominated field; while habitus can be seen as something that keeps the dominating language sounding natural. Therefore, as I have demonstrated in my projects, relations of power and resistance are always present in group coaching assignments in leadership development.

One of the ways of acquiring symbolic capital in the field of group coaching is to pose questions and express alternative possibilities of meaning, supported by evidence. The demand from accreditation bodied for adherence to standard rules and associated codes of individualised ethics is seen as part of the rise of a largely western view of professionalism, and hence the ability to acquire capital. At the same time, the ability to express alternative possibilities is restricted by simplified models and by demands to use certain tools. Accreditation enables group coaches to obtain symbolic capital and simultaneously restricts their ability to speak against established norms, especially when trying to contract with multiple stakeholders.

An understanding of habitus is helpful for suggesting why group coaching programmes might persist in framing individual women through a specific 'lens' of prosocial traits (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Helgesen and Goldsmith 2018; Ibarra et al., 2011; Karelaia and Guillén, 2011), that assumes special universal feminine qualities. In asking women to adhere to the space allowed for them within the existing narrative of orthodox views of leadership, qualities such as empathy and care are assumed to be required to ensure career success. This argument is consistent with that of Puwar (2004), who says that only a few (mainly white, educated) women are selected for leadership roles because of the limited space assigned to them. Special traits also become attributed to the group coach, especially if the coach lacks the symbolic capital to challenge established ways of working. Without this capital, the coach's expression of an alternative perspective is dismissed as disruptive or is stigmatised as the coach not being able to control their emotions within the narrow space made available for them to speak. Shoukry and Fatien-Diochon (2024, p. 20) suggest that claims of neutrality and professional codes of ethics are part of established power relations that privilege the coaches who promote idealised leadership norms. However, coaches who do not resist the established rules in the field are at risk of enabling 'neoliberalism's potential to reduce the human to nothing but cogs in organizational machines.' (Harding et al., 2017, p. 1226).

The rise of digital coaching platforms, which is the central theme of Project Four, is further restricting the space for the group coach to act. It is doing so by emphasising the taken-for-granted figurations of individualism, leadership, authority and gendered assumptions of special traits for women. My fellow female coaches appeared not to be interested in questioning what we were doing together at all, possibly because this would have made it harder for them to create their own capital in the new digital space. In the context of today's changing marketplace across Europe, the expectation to conform with highly simplified ways of thinking is heightened within the virtual digital platform environment. The group coach can quickly lose ways of maintaining and gaining further capital, to become treated as a product (Clutterbuck and David, 2013; Louis and Fatien-Diochon, 2018) and be commodified in service of profit.

My second argument takes up Bourdieu's (2001) claim that only action that takes account of all the structures that require conformity will be able to reform the various effects of historical patterns masculine domination. The opportunities to reform the field are enabled and constrained at the same time by the ability to acquire social capital. Women's political and practical experiences always become moral questions, because they are part of everyday acts of symbolic violence. Bourdieu (2001, p. 1) describes this as a form of subtle, often invisible, domination that legitimises certain power relations and inequalities, which often go

unnoticed. I conclude that accepting established norms when acting as a group coach, without challenging them, perpetuates the existing social order, but that gaining the capital to be able to challenge is not easy. Group coaches can only challenge these norms if they work together to gain enough capital within the existing structures to be able to strengthen their collective voices and influence the deeper relational aspects of the role, rather than profit maximisation to resist becoming commodified. Paradoxically, this requires reforming the game and conforming to the existing order through a more reflexive, complex understanding of human relations. A prerequisite for this is to be able to stay in the game and engage within the existing political process to navigate the field.

Argument Three: Noticing small acts of resistance could be a means by which coaches can navigate ethical dilemmas.

So far, I have argued that the practice of group coaching in women-in-leadership is woven into the historical patterning of power relations and the perspective in which the meaning of gender is assumed within organisations. Patterns of inclusion and exclusion are both constantly influencing and being influenced by how individuals and society makes new meaning of what is being negotiated. I have argued that this is neither a neutral nor linear process of change but rather a complex, contested space where conflicting interests and contradictions arise. The meaning of gender, and leadership, can be viewed from differing perspectives depending on what is being contested.

Power, I have suggested, operates from a historical perspective as well as from within the current moment of who gets to obtain enough symbolic capital to speak and whose voice is privileged within the field. Consequently, group coaching within women-in-leadership programmes can be seen to operate within dynamic sites of negotiation, where power and resistance take up entrenched, embodied socially constructed structures that are both reformed and maintained. If it is not clear who has agreed to be coached, and the group coach is fully dependent on another party with vested interests to be able to work at all (Bachkirova, 2024; Shoukry and Cox, 2018; Vitzthum, 2023), negotiations concerning the purpose of coaching women-in-leadership quickly become an ethical issue. Despite the claims for good, fairness, neutrality and progress (ICF, 2024), my research has added to the body of knowledge which offers a more critical stance that challenges presumptions of conformity to simplified ways of thinking. Such a view suggests power figurations can become embodied in the group, and the group coach reduced to being used as an instrument of control (Shoukry and Fatien-Diochon, 2024). Attempts to react to irreconcilable demands for change and unpalatable career choices within competing interest can be supported through more reflexive thought.

In Project Four, I used Hochschild's (1983) study to suggest that coaching can be seen as a form of emotional labour, where the group might operate within restrictive spaces, as members try to obtain enough symbolic capital to challenge existing systems. With insufficient capital, the role of the group coach can reinforce established organisational patterns that privilege views of individual agency and devalue the ethics of care (Fraser, 2013; Gilligan, 2023). I argued at the end of Project Four that a simplified view of ethical considerations is especially acute within the dynamics of digital coaching and coaching platform models.

In taking up Addams' (1902) theories and ideas of ethical claims for good, I illustrated that her suggestion to pay attention to ethics that originate in feelings of strong emotions (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2014, p. 105) can be useful for all coaches. I have considered how ethical considerations arise out of our potential for emotional responses, which Burkitt (2014) suggests are not predictable and can surprise us. The sense of needing to control emotions in group coaching can be heightened by the desire to end feelings of uncertainty to be able to gain more capital. Adhering to professional accreditation bodies, as well as trying to gain enough capital to stay in the game, requires the ability to adopt a sense of involvement and detachment (Elias, 1987). Vague and often unrealistic expectations of how to behave are put on the coach by ethical codes of conduct (Bachkirova, 2024; Heitz and Leach 2022). My second argument concluded that conforming with demands of professionalisation can also be seen as a form of emotional dominance. In Project Three and Four, I have presented examples of how coaches are disciplining each other to stay in the right form of emotion and accept the terms of the requirements so they continue to be awarded contracts. However, if one thinks of organisations in terms of complex responsive processes then the role of the group coach is not to seek definite solutions to the ethical dilemmas as they arise, but to pay attention to what assumptions on gender might be hidden within those dilemmas.

My final argument is that one way to be in position to question assumptions and reform historical patterns for group coaches is to pay attention to the experience of unpredictable emotions. Scott (1990) calls such actions small but significant shifts in the way we engage with power relations. Group coaches and those involved in the process of coaching could pay attention to small acts of resistance that indicate shifts in power relations. I have suggested that this can be done by noticing micro-moments of strong emotions as resistance to established power relations (Harding et al., 2017). As Chauhan and Mowles (2024, p. 9) argue, a reflexive way of understanding what is being resisted and negotiated is to recognise the messy, emergent nature of practice 'that involve the entanglement of motives, interests and power struggles.' Rather than positioning group coaching as a method for overcoming structural and systemic bias, I agree with Harding et al. (2017) that paying attention to small acts of resistance might be seen as a space for challenging organisational expectations in moment-by-moment co-constitutive moves. I therefore suggest that one way in which group coaches can navigate conflicting ethical dilemmas is by paying attention to how we can stay in relation with each other, even in emotionally conflictual situations. As an alternative to slavishly following demands to conform to methodological tools, rules, contracts and processual step models, group coaches can think and act more reflexively to change the emphasis on conformity. I suggest this can be done by paying attention to embodied emotional responses as co-constituted with moments of resistance.

Opening spaces in which to act may well require reframing the purpose of group coaching to make ethical dilemmas transparent. Mowles recommends we can use pragmatist philosophy to 'value ways of knowing which shed light on practical difficulties when we get stuck in organisations' (Mowles, 2022, p. 172). I agree with Addams (1902) that we might be best served staying open to strong emotions and not knowing the outcome, rather than by fixing on ethical codes, outcomes and goals. I am reminded that ethical choices can only really be made by critically reflecting on what is at stake for everyone involved. To view all ethical choices as social (Addams, 1902), I conclude that we can become more aware of what might

be at stake for each other and make hidden dynamics visible. Rather than relying on rules and codes of ethics, we can become less individualised in marketing ourselves as professional, well-trained group coaches and we can become more aware of competing goods in the variety of perspectives and differences we face.

The ongoing commodification of my coaching practice and the productisation of women-in-leadership programmes may reduce the ability of coaches to engage in ongoing, reflexive acts, open conversations, and thinking differently; however, group coaches can benefit by paying attention to how resistance is being co-created and how it co-emerges. For example, resistance may arise within the group as a refusal to enact the coaching process by refusing to be asked to be ideal. It may come when the group will not submit to demands to perform in line with the expectations of their assigned gender and will not present themselves as 'diverse'. It can co-emerge in the group coach's refusal to take up an assumed position of neutrality. By acknowledging small acts that constitute the group's refusal to conform with overdemanding requirements for what is perceived as fair and good, other interests can also be made visible and open to questioning.

In summary, group coaches can pay attention to the ambiguous, inherently complex and unpredictable relations of power and ethics within the practice of coaching women-in-leadership by not simplifying emotional responses through the lens of rational, objective modes of thought. I have presented three arguments to support my assertion. The first argument is that groups can reflect on how to navigate the inclusionary and exclusionary gender-based dynamics that arise within the group coaching process. The second is that to resist simplified ways of thinking, group coaches can pay attention to how micro-level resistance co-emerges against the simplified ways in which gender is assigned, and career success is presented and negotiated. Finally, my third argument offers a way of thinking about and paying attention to what is at stake for all involved, which is the process of noticing strong emotions and making visible the assumptions behind who, or rather what, is being assumed as ideal. The tensions that arise in how historical power relations emerge, specifically around gender, and how they are maintained, are unlikely to be resolved but can be continually negotiated and navigated by adopting a more reflexive group coaching practice.

Having presented my three arguments, I will now explain ways in which my thesis offers a contribution to knowledge and practice.

5. Contribution to knowledge and practice

Based on the synoptic review and further analysis of my projects, I now offer my unique contributions to theory and practice. My research demonstrates the importance of taking a more critical look at ethical dilemmas in the field of group coaching in women-in-leadership programmes, especially those which arise, in part, from simplified thinking. Such thinking comes from attempting to reduce complex organisational dynamics into simplified models. One of the most obvious oversimplifications related to my thesis is that of gender. The way in which gender is treated in organisations often overlooks the nuanced and evolving nature of what is understood as gender by homogenising groups based on socially constructed norms and idealising what might work to address problems of inequality. My research adds a deeper level of understanding of the ethical challenges that arise from such simplified ways of thinking about group coaching beyond linear ‘fixes’ to getting more women to fit into the existing organisational structures (Gray et al., 2019). Many coaching models are based on individualistic theories of identity and self, based on a strong tradition in organisational studies that focus on an idealised view of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Khurana, 2007; Sinclair, 2011). Group coaching is often taken up from a mix of dyadic models and group psychodynamics (Kets de Vries, 2005; 2014; Seiler, 2024) that can be critiqued as treating complex dynamic social group processes as if they are fixed, object-like entities. My contribution is to continually challenge theories that are reductive and essentialist, i.e. ignoring complexity and reducing phenomena in coaching groups to one of its aspects.

Contribution to knowledge

My research supplements existing research by building on Cunliffe (2022) and Fotaki and Harding (2018) who critique organisational research and management theories as being inherently masculinised and often ignoring reflexivity and a more human way of theorising. Theorising in a more human way recognises the researcher’s own embeddedness in the world and rethinking the issue of social inequality. Drawing on Addams’ concept of the travesty of reducing ethics to mechanisms of a formal system or to a disembodied monologue (Haddock Seigfried, 1996), I argue that simplified ways of thinking about group coaching for women-in-leadership programmes narrows questions of ethics to *belated ethics* – that is a simplified belief that getting more women into senior roles will address social inequality. Using the lens of pragmatist philosophy helps to avoid oversimplified and outdated approaches, instead focusing on more complex, human-centred and responsive understandings of ethical challenges. Such an oversimplified view, I have argued does not account for the positionality of what is meant and governed by norms assigned to women embedded in established masculine norms of career success, leadership and professionalism which marginalise those who do not (or cannot) conform. This adds to the argument that organisations can be seen to constitute subjects as masculine and feminine.

As a critique of reductionist concepts of what is meant by ethics draws attention to ethical dilemmas as constituted from and within power dynamics. By this I am highlighting how hidden binary organisational structures are made visible through dialogues that challenge the dominant, often hidden politicised coaching accreditation frameworks that are presented as representing the work of a coach. I am joining in with other critical researchers studying

coaching who have also pointed to a more dynamic understanding of power relations (Bachkirova, 2024; Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith, 2015; De Haan and Nieß, 2015; Fatien-Diochon and Nizet, 2019a; Fatien-Diochon et al., 2022; Hurlow, 2022; Louis and Fatien-Diochon, 2018; Shoukry and Cox, 2018; Shoukry and Fatien, 2024). I add a cross-disciplinary perspective, taken from critical feminism, social theory and pragmatist philosophy to the theme of ethical dilemmas, which is relatively under explored in coaching research.

Strengthening the argument that coaching is itself a political act (Shoukry and Fatien-Diochon, 2024), I contest that writing and researching about group coaching is also a political and ethical act, particularly when it is done by women writing on issues that affect women. This challenges the boundaries between knowledge creation and activism (Bell et al., 2019) and contributes to the methodological debates about positionality in research (Ahmed, 2017; Cunliffe, 2022; Fotaki and Harding, 2018; Gilligan, 2023). Heitz and Leach (2022) claim there is little understanding of coaches' ethical knowledge, the means used to resolve dilemmas and how these dilemmas align with other professions. Sieler (2024) posits even less is known about the ethical challenges of group coaches. My research offers the novel perspective that coaching's problematic alignment with corporate agendas can reinforce privilege from historical patterns of masculinised norms, even in spaces meant to empower women. The ethical dilemmas faced by group coaches within women-in-leadership programmes are hence tied to deeper structural inequalities rooted in the idealisation of leadership and what is understood by male and female. I am disagreeing with a body of knowledge that suggests women can overcome career challenges by being supported by a coach towards creating a new professional leadership identity. This means I challenge claims that 'cultivating courage' or supporting women to 'lean in' can be viewed as the work of coaches in 'supporting women to overcome systemic barriers to career progression' (Filleti and Jones, 2025, p. 247) that do not pay attention to power relations.

Since starting as a researcher, I have adopted a more critical view of accreditation and encouraged colleagues to explore ethical dilemmas through alternative lenses than the code of ethics. Challenging the assumption that ethics can be universal and codified I also oppose an understanding that frameworks and codes of ethics are in any way sufficient to address ethical dilemmas that arise from dominant claims of good. Implying that ethical considerations are a matter of compliance to follow a list of rules to follow overlooks the power laden situational context of the ethical dilemma. Calling for ethics to be considered as politically situated connects to the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Mowles, 2022). I do not support the proposal that group coaching should develop its own separate code of ethics (Seiler, 2024; Thornton, 2010) due to the simplified assumption that codes can be universal. Instead of treating ethical dilemmas as personal challenges to be solved by codes of ethics, which should be followed by emotionally detached group coaches, I conclude that coaches have an obligation to engage with ongoing complex and ambiguous, emotional relations of everyday processes of inclusion and exclusion. This is to bring management theorising closer to a human experience and undoubtedly group coaches into speaking with a more human voice.

Contribution to practice

In this thesis I have taken a phenomenological approach, influenced by understanding deeper interpersonal dynamics and specific situations. Yet I have never lost sight of the importance of everyday realities of navigating ethical dilemmas within and between multiple stakeholders. Within my arguments I offer group coaches, coachees and hiring managers a way to consider alternative perspective in coaching constellations. I have argued that the process of group coaching is embedded in, and reproduces, gender-based norms that are often hidden in the exclusionary dynamics that focus on outcomes. Coaching frameworks presented as neutral and universal can obscure the rational, individualistic masculinised ideals of achievement that can constitute women as a problem needing to be fixed. The vast majority of ethical dilemmas become so embedded in what a coach ought to do and should do that it is easy not to think about the problem of gender entanglement. Group coaches can come to be silenced, even to themselves and those they coach, especially when experiencing conflict and tension in trying to manage the right sort of emotional detachment. I have argued that rather than trying to control feelings and emotions, group coaches can become more reflexive. Over the three years of writing this thesis and being part of the DMan, I have considered how I have changed my practice, as well as changed myself, by becoming more reflexive. Cunliffe (2003) shifts reflexivity from just a technical act of checking for bias to a deeper ontological practice of being in relation. To me researching my practice as a group coach whilst being both part of, and reflecting on, narrative accounts has moved my thinking on slavish adherence to codes of ethics to wider considerations of what it means to act ethically in practice. This has led me to pay attention to the micro moments of strong emotions and its often-unspoken role within power relations.

A key contribution to my practice lies in bringing to the fore the emotional experience of the coach within the context of the everyday experience of group coaching, a perspective that remain unresearched in the literature (Fatien-Diochon and Nizet, 2019b; Vitzthum, 2023). Building on Mowles (2024b), I argue that becoming more reflexive is made harder by the pressures of professionalisation, the privileging of evidence-based paradigms, and an often-uncritical acceleration of digitisation. In response to the complexity rendered by these three dynamics, I position emotional responsiveness as a constitutive element of ethical practice. Drawing on early pragmatism (Addams, 1902; Dewey 1895), I view emotions as both a mental and physical sensation – or a ‘clutching at the heart’ (Addams, 1902, p. 8). Beyond the gendered concepts of mind and body assumed in group coaching, I have become less silent about the disruptive possibilities of strong emotions that are ‘part of and never independent of these relational dynamics’ (Burkitt, 2014, p. 171). The question is therefore how do coaches become more reflexive? To help other coaching practitioners become aware that further inquiry might be needed, I am suggesting that other coaches can reflect more on what is being asked, as I have done. Going forward, as I suggested in Project Four, there should be more critical debates and forums where all players come together (such as coaching platforms, coaching bodies, academics, coaches and coachees), which could help to make visible the limitations of linear ways that thinking of leadership development programmes that simplifies the complexity of human relations. Finally, during negotiations with clients, I am suggesting that whose interests are being served might be made visible by more openly discussing alternative ways to understand progress – such as using narrative accounts and viewing

reflexive inquiry not just as a process of research but as part of the way we respond to ethical dilemmas as emphasising that transformation in coaching is often made more visible by viewing all interactions as complex responsive processes of relating (Chauhan & Mowles, 2024).

As I engage with the community of critical scholars and feminist researchers, I have presented my ideas at the 22nd International Studying Leadership Conference at the University of Birmingham and have applied to present my work at the Coaching Ethics Forum 2025. I am in the initial phase of preparing a submission to more critical leadership journals to be able to present my ideas more widely. As I have started to present my ideas to other coaching colleagues, at seminars and at professional events to highlight the importance strong emotions in noticing and engaging with conflicting understandings of ethical dilemmas, I have met a mixed reaction. I recognise that being willing to engage with conflict and explore opportunities for reform requires a form of courage to speak up but also the ability to (re) learn how to participate in the larger game on politics that arises from power asymmetries. This has further supported my ability to understand that my own reactions are not wholly my own individualised acts but a reflection of my participation in ongoing organisational life.

Conclusion and further research

My research has led me to new ways of thinking about my practice and about the role of group coaching in women-in-leadership development programmes. The findings expand our knowledge of how the group coaching process in women-in-leadership programmes can be instrumentalised in service of profit maximisation, specifically arising from simplified ways of thinking about gender, power and ethics within organisations. During this study, I have written about complex social processes as they have arisen in my everyday practice in Europe. My findings are therefore not a comprehensive analysis of how other forms of exclusion arise from the intersection of race and class, especially from within other cultural and legal settings.

My synopsis suggests that noticing small acts of resistance within the group coaching context, highlight the hidden, undiscussed gendered figurations where ethical dilemmas arise. Power asymmetry is arguably inherent in all coaching practice due to the structural positioning of the coach as facilitator and the coachee as learner or subject of transformation (Stacey & Mowles, 2016). This power asymmetry is made more complex by the triangular relationship with the organisational stakeholder (Cavicchia and Gilber, 2019). However, the asymmetry is not fixed and changes in the relational dynamics and the practice of reflexivity of the players. What often goes unnoticed is the shaping of the power dynamics in micro-moments of resistance. Resistance may take the form of refusing to accept the notion of an ideal leader, and in refusing to take up the narrow tools and methods as instruments of control towards an idealisation of leadership. I have primarily referred to ethics as socially constituted, where emotional awareness and reflexivity allow novelty and change to emerge and be negotiated. I closed my arguments by suggesting that group coaching is not inevitably a control process but also can support change when we are more open to noticing new ways of knowing. I have suggested this can be done by paying attention to how emotional reactions highlight how we are moved to confirm or reform to the existing rules of coaching practice. At the same time group coaches need to maintain enough social and symbolic capital to be able to influence

the scope of possible new meaning, which is to notice how resistance challenges patterned assumptions within the leadership ideology and the business of leadership development.

Whilst my thesis has been primarily concerned with group coaching, many of the findings may well also apply to individual coaching and facilitation within leadership development aimed at women. In terms of areas for further research, given the current wide-ranging debate on diversity, some areas that open up to being further examined because of these findings might include intersectional views of how group coaching in women-in-leadership works in organisations and executive education outside the European cultural context. Additional research on the impact of AI and coaching platforms seems important to the debate on gender, given the current geo-political climate. My findings warrant additional critical investigations into the how ethical dilemmas arise for clients, stakeholders and those involved in coaching platforms as they become more influenced by digital products using universal claims of the 'good' benefits of democratising coaching.

Postscript

As the thesis was nearing completion, I was invited to think about examiners. After these were agreed, my thesis submitted and a date set, I spent a nerve wracking three months waiting for the viva. I had two main sources of doubt: one to do with whether my understanding of gender was in opposition to the examiner; the second was my competence as a researcher. I had studied and tried to prepare for the day, including attending a mock viva offered by DMan faculty.

In the event, the viva became an embodied enactment of the very themes I had explored: it was not a neutral test, but a live, co-constructed inquiry into what counts as knowledge under conditions of complexity. In line with Stacey's (2010) complex responsive processes of relating and Mowles' (2022) emphasis on local interaction as the site of meaning-making, the viva itself became a dialogical site of knowledge creation which was neither pre-determined nor abstract, but emergent in the moment. Drawing on Martela's (2015) fallible enquiry with ethical ends-in-view the viva illustrates how knowledge is co-created in real time through such interactions.

I was challenged on my framing of gender in relation to post-feminism and post-structuralism. While these perspectives overlap in their critique of essentialist categories, they diverge in their reading of power, resistance, and progress. Post-feminist positions, often associated with empowerment through individual agency, choice, and entrepreneurial femininity, can be seen in the light of neoliberalist attempts to depoliticise structural inequalities. As an alternative position, post-structural and critical feminist theories interrogate these discourses, foregrounding how women's identities are continuously negotiated through power-laden discursive practices (Fotaki and Harding, 2018, p. 5). My intention in the thesis and during the viva was to resist collapsing differences in theorising to right or wrong and instead engage with them as part of an ongoing, fallible, and situated inquiry into the gendered nature of everyday life.

As the conversation continued, I found myself thinking of how submitting to one discipline over another requires ethical choices. The literature I engaged with has been wide ranging and has been drawn into the inquiry as it becomes relevant, which I feel allows a more embodied, situated, and ethically accountable form of knowledge-making. While this may differ from conventional doctoral practice, I am inspired by scholars who are taking up researching differently and critical feminist latest ideas. By this I am referring to scholars who refuse the binary between 'rigour' and 'reflexivity' and advocate instead for embodied, affective and relational modes of inquiry (Ahmed, 2017; Barad, 2007; Bell et al., 2018; Cunliffe, 2022). These approaches do not treat knowledge as something 'out there' to be captured, but as emergent from participation. I have reflected more on the value of researching differently for my coaching practice. Nothing in this thesis is intended to simplify our understanding of complex responsive processes of relating both to sex and gender in organisational life that get taken up at a local level. Given where women find themselves in the global world at the current time, I offer an ongoing fallible and dialogical inquiry into the ongoing sense making of complex human relating.

In reflecting further for the future, I do not conceive of reality as fixed or external but as emergent from the ongoing, responsive relating between people (Stacey, 2001a). Knowledge, from this perspective, is not universal or cumulative, but relational, situated, and always under revision and ethically implicated. As both examiners pointed out, my research and thinking cannot be seen as ending here. By this I think about the way younger generations of women can be supported in my work as a coach not by giving them the idea that they can reach the top of hierarchies but by feeling able to question the very pressure they feel by being told they 'should'. In the context of AI and the emotional labour involved in coaching there is an even stronger call for compassionate coaching and for ongoing reflexivity to resist broad brush generalisations of who is the coach, and, in whose language, she speaks. As I continue to observe the drive to use AI in coaching, women are once again being positioned at the margins which means they have been excluded from design logics, risk being devalued as replaced by digital labour, and required to perform emotional labour in dehumanised online spaces. I am curious about how our bodies will continue to respond to these exclusions and what my contribution to critical feminist theories of embodiment might offer as research going forward.

The process of becoming a researcher has moved me from self-silencing to reflexive engagement with the ethical and emotional dilemmas of my coaching work. This is not just a personal shift but a political one, in which coaching becomes a site of contested meaning. Drawing on Cunliffe's (2003) relational reflexivity, as I look ahead, I see my role not only as a coach, but as a co-inquirer with other women navigating pressures to become marketable gendered products in an increasingly online world. This aligns with Harding et al's (2017) view of a neoliberal self where identity becomes a product to be bought and sold. Throughout my progress in drafting the thesis and beyond I engage with critical feminist perspectives that challenge normative constructions of gender and work. Ahmed's (2017) work on compliance and institutional resistance, and Fraser's (2013) critique of the co-option of feminist language into neoliberal discourse, have helped me examine how coaching women can mediate power in new ways through online technologies. An online self becomes another site of surveillance, control and gender control.

Fotaki and Harding (2018) suggest we now have the language to rethink gender. By challenging the dominant simplified ways of thinking that lead women to blame themselves we can change how we think about organisations. We can suggest that self is not only created in the moment-by-moment interactions but also defended. Such a challenge requires methodological innovation, such as I have used in this research, to capture the complexities of identity construction.

Moving forward, I aim to continue to engage with the literature to reflect on how current less orthodox ideas can challenge categorisation or support a different way of sense-making in practice. I continue to engage with ethical and political aspects of coaching with other peers and researchers as described by Hurlow (2022) and Fatien-Diochon et al. (2019b). Continuing to write and research the themes highlighted in my thesis calls for more compassionate, critically engaged, and feminist-informed approaches to coaching practice. Writing is itself an act of resistance. I am hopeful that further research will continue to listen carefully to silence, honours resistance as insight, and remain ethically accountable to the women whose stories I have and remain privileged to witness and support.

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