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"To thine own self be true"

Being authentic is increasingly considered a valuable and sought-after characteristic. Considering how and why we construct compartments for different aspects of our lives can be a powerful way to deepen our personal understanding of ourselves and foster authenticity. Set in a regional Australian community at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, this paper shares the author's personal journey to better understand her own constructs of self and provides reflections on her experience of challenging the status quo. In doing so, she challenges the reader to reflect on themselves and how they might use this thinking to enhance their practice.

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To thine own self be true

Reflections on compartmentalisation and integration from a partnership broker in a regional community during COVID-19.

Introduction

> _'This above all: to thine own self be true,_
> _And it must follow, as the night the day,_
> _Thou canst not then be false to any man.'_
> Act 1, Scene 3, The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark, William Shakespeare (Mowat, B. ed.1996)

This quote was written for me in my autograph book by my grade three teacher. At age nine I had no idea what the quote meant. In my teens I discovered it was a quote by Shakespeare. At various stages in my life I have returned to it, peeling off deeper layers of meaning each time. Today I find myself returning to this quote once again.

This paper considers how and why we construct compartments for different aspects of our lives, the extent of integration amongst these compartments and what I found when I chose to change this. Through sharing personal reflections on some possible drivers for my own compartmentalisation and integration, and providing examples of my recent experiences in defying this status quo; I challenge the reader to reflect upon their own constructs of 'self'.

Defining compartmentalisation and an integrated self

Many psychological theorists argue that the concept of 'self' is multidimensional. The idea is that each of us possess multiple 'selves' (Tarlow Friedman and Haaga 2007) with each 'self' being associated with particular meanings and experiences (Ebrahimi, Kouchaki and Patrick 2019).

To illustrate this, let's consider two of my 'selves' – as a partnership broker, and as a mother. When I am in a partnership broker role – for example, when I am running a

partnering workshop - I put on my metaphorical partnership broker 'hat' and take on the expected characteristics that come with such a responsibility. I draw out quieter participants, carefully design activities and craft questions to elicit equity and diversity. I check for permissions and focus on keeping to the agreed scope of work to support the group to move forward. As this 'self' I am very conscious of what I am doing. I juggle the contradictions between supporting and directing, but remain very conscious of how and when I do this. I am generally following a 'rough plan' at a minimum, and I am highly proactive.

As a mother I also follow a 'plan' but this plan could otherwise be described as my values set. As a mother, I am mostly organic in my approach. Particularly when I am tired it's not unusual for me to 'bark' orders at my children, regardless of their choice in the matter. I juggle contradictions between supporting and directing easily; unconsciously and seamlessly switching from demanding that a room be cleaned immediately - to a big hug and a chat if it's clear there's something wrong and they just need a bit of support.

An individual with very little overlap across their various 'selves' can be said to have a high level of 'compartmentalisation'. Conversely, those with high levels of overlap of their various 'selves' have high levels of 'integration'. Highly integrated individuals "*experience a self-view that shifts across situations, for instance, at work and home domains, versus wearing 'one hat' at home and a 'different hat' at work*" (Ebrahimi, Kouchaki and Patrick 2019 p102).

Importantly "*an individual's self-structure can be described on a continuum ranging from evaluative compartmentalization to evaluative integration*" (Showers and Zeigler-Hill 2007 p1183). Like any spectrum, few individuals could be considered fully integrated or fully compartmentalised, with most of us falling somewhere in between.

Returning to the two selves in my example, whilst some compartmentalisation is evident, at the same time there is also some integration. The care for individual wellbeing that is highly prescient in my mother 'self' is also evident in my work as my partnership broker 'self' - though certainly to a lesser extent. Conversely whilst I

often seek to draw out the deeper perspectives and opinions of my children, it is sadly perhaps not as much as I would with my 'broker' hat on (something for me to work on!).

Advantages and disadvantages of compartmentalisation and integration

There are pros and cons to both compartmentalisation and integration.

Our contemporary world places much importance on being 'authentic'. The state of authenticity has been defined as '*the sense of feeling that one is currently in alignment with one's true or genuine self, that is being his or her real self*' (Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton and Thomaes 2017 p521). Here we see a strong relationship between an integrated self and the notion of authenticity, whereby a pursuit of an integrated self could also be considered as the pursuit of being truly authentic.

Authenticity has been associated with positivity, greater self-esteem, reduced self-consciousness, a greater likelihood to fulfil psychological needs (Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton and Thomaes 2017), higher quality relationships and improved hope for the future (Ebrahimi, Kouchaki and Patrick 2019). People have a personal belief that their authentic self is fundamentally or morally good (Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton and Thomaes 2017) and it has been suggested that "*wholeness and integrity of self are better warrant of sound ethical behaviour than compartmentalization*" (Rozuel 2011 p686)[1].

Compartmentalisation is a form of dissociation (Brown 2006) and it can have an important role in self-preservation. For example, compartmentalisation allows individuals to behave and appear highly functional in some of their selves, whilst in another of their 'selves' they may be completely dysfunctional due to traumatic circumstances. Extreme compartmentalisation has been seen in those with transient

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[1] Whilst outside the scope of this particular paper, due to the additional relationship between authenticity and perceived trust, the pursuit of authenticity and integration may warrant further exploration in the context of the partnering principle of 'openness leading to trust'.

amnesia (Brown 2006), alcohol addiction (Gregory-Smith and Manika 2017) and survivors of sexual abuse (Clifford, Hitchcock and Dalgleish 2019). Arguably, it is only through breaking down the compartmentalisation brought about in these examples that individuals have the opportunity to address and heal the issues that are driving their compartmentalisation in the first place.

However maintaining, or even creating, a sense of compartmentalisation is purported to be critically important in managing stress. For example, Maria Baratta (2013), a psychotherapist specialising in supporting senior executives, strongly recommends 'switching off' their 'work selves' at home in order to adequately recharge. In this sense we see that achieving 'full' integration also has its drawbacks.

Drivers of my compartmentalisation and integration

It has been proposed that it is individuals themselves that "*define their own multiple contexts for their identities"* (Showers and Zeigler-Hill 2007 p1182). To illustrate how I may have developed the some of the constructions of my 'self' and the extent of the compartmentalisation and integration amongst them, I offer examples of two possible drivers for me - my gender and where I live.

Impact of where I live

I grew up in Warrnambool, a scenic coastal city in regional Victoria situated south-west of Melbourne. Whilst I moved away for a decade or so in my youth, I returned here to raise my family.

I recall being desperate to leave my hometown to go to university in Melbourne. I craved the anonymity of the city and what I now understand to be, the ability to move amongst the various 'selves' I was constructing, without the perception of constant observation. I was tired of everyone around me knowing who I was, who I was connected to, and what my various roles were in the community.

However towards the end of my time living in Melbourne, I was conscious that my life was highly compartmentalised. At work and in the suburbs in which I lived, I

interacted mostly with highly educated professional adults. At work I was building a career and conformed to the structures of the public service in which I was working. At home I mingled with the young adults in my social group, making much of what a city has to offer for the young and financially independent. I grew ever conscious of the homogeneity of my life – where were the children, the elderly, the vulnerable, those in financial hardship? Seeing the diversity in the community loomed importantly large for me as a way to stay true to my keenly held value of social justice. Having grown up in a community of 30,000 people, I knew I would see all of this if I moved home. I now see this decision to leave Melbourne as my first conscious commitment to attempting to collapse the compartments I had created for myself.

As I have come to realise over the years since I moved home, smaller communities still have the need of the many roles that exist in larger ones, but there are fewer people available to perform those roles. The natural consequence is people in small communities invariably have different formal 'hats'. This is illustrated in a running joke I've heard about a tiny remote local government, cheekily suggesting that the CEO also must be the parking inspector given the very few people that live and work there.

The connections are also closer. If across the world there are six degrees of separation amongst us (Exploring Your Mind 2019), in communities like mine, the most distance I usually experience is one, perhaps two at a stretch. Some of the people I work with professionally in my partnership broker role include personal friends, people for whom we share mutual friends, former colleagues of my parents, parents of my children's friends, siblings of my colleagues and so on and so on.

This makes my partnership broker 'self' necessarily integrated with my personal non-work 'self' and vice versa. There is strength in this. There is strength in the relationships and relatedness we hold with one another as a community and in the necessity of high levels of mutual respect to successfully deliver outcomes together.

Someone once shared their insight with me that regional communities are not necessarily more conservative, they are just slower to change. The reason for this is

that the fast and blunt instruments of change can invariably damage relationships irrevocably. This is not to say they cannot be used, just that they are likely to be used less often in regional communities. For example, imagine making large numbers of people redundant, all of whom you are forever more likely to bump into at the supermarket or at your local restaurant.

For me, the move home to my regional community had the consequence of collapsing my compartments and becoming a more integrated and 'authentic' person. Whilst at times, I do still crave that anonymity, ultimately I think this has made me a better partnership broker and a better person. However, like most journeys of self-improvement, it appears that my quest for improved integration is not yet complete.

Impact of my gender

Gender roles have long been embedded in cultures across the world. The unyielding image of a woman 'barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen' does much to describe the patriarchal view of a woman's role in society as a child-bearer and carer of the family and the home.

Gender equity is not yet achieved here in Australia. In February 2020, less than a third of all directors on Australian boards were female and more than one third of boards have no female directors at all (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2019c). Similarly, around a third of elected representatives in the Australian Federal Parliament are women (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019). Women comprise just 17.1% of CEOs and 31.5% of key management personnel in Australia (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2019c). Just 37.7% of full time workers, yet 68.2% of part time workers are women (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2019c).

Growing up in the 1970s and 80s, I was incredibly fortunate to have been raised by parents that did not ascribe to traditional gender roles. Consequently, I thought that I could do and be anything I wanted. As much as they could, they created an environment that supported me to pursue this. However, I also grew up in a society that was firmly in the grip of patriarchal systems and structures. Like now, but to a

greater extent, leaders and full time paid workers were predominantly male, not female. Women were routinely objectified, dominated and demeaned.

Whilst Australia has come some way forward since the seventies and eighties, many of these issues still remain (Workplace Gender Equality Agency. 2019b). The experience of our first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard is a prime example. Our former Prime Minister's famous misogynist speech to the Australian parliament in 2012 (The Sydney Morning Herald 2012) is a brilliant expression of her frustrations with this environment.

I am the first and only female General Manager in an organisation which has a 7:3 ratio of male to female employees. Whilst these gender ratios have not yet reached our aspirations, our organisation has been used as an example of one that is leading the way in its positive cultural approach to pursue gender equity. I am proud to be a part of that and have colleagues that treat me as nothing but their equal.

A few years ago, I received some feedback through a 360-degree process that there was a very subtle difference in the way in which my Executive peers viewed me as compared to my direct reports. It appeared that whilst my peers valued and respected me, my direct reports appeared to do more strongly. What is it about how I was being different with my peers as compared to those that reported to me?

Through reflecting on the possible drivers of compartmentalisation in my life I have arrived at a possible answer to this question. Sadly and reluctantly, I admit that despite the best efforts of my parents and the respect I have from my colleagues, the 'self' I have constructed relating to my gender may have been affected by the wider society in which I live.

I have perhaps sub-consciously allowed traditional 'female' characteristics (such as those of a carer, coach, and mentor) to have appeared more easily and strongly in roles that overtly called for them, such as when I am being 'line manager' and a 'partnership broker'. Yet perhaps I have had difficulty seamlessly integrating these 'female' characteristics into environments that can call for more traditionally 'male' characteristics (e.g., direct, assertive, decisive), such as at the Executive table.

Whilst this explanation is not necessarily right nor wrong, it is an interesting reflection on my self-constructed compartmentalisation that may support my further development as not just a partnership broker, but as a leader.

Is it possible to change our level of compartmentalisation and integration?

Given the proposition that there is a spectrum of compartmentalisation to integration of our various selves, can we change our position on that spectrum? There is evidence to suggest that we can. Showers and Ziegler-Hill (2007) propose that when an individual's goal or motive changes, so too can their structures of self can be altered.

For example, you can choose to make a more conscious effort to 'leave the stress of the office at the office' (increasing compartmentalisation) or to 'treat our colleagues more like we'd treat our friends' (increasing integration).

I have recently experimented with two different approaches to shifts along this spectrum - one by choice, and one by circumstance. Whilst both examples were shifts toward greater integration, the reader may also consider if there is benefit to be derived from enacting a shift toward more compartmentalisation depending upon their own personal situation.

Becoming more integrated by choice

During accreditation I was reflecting on a piece of work I had undertaken in which I was clearly in the role of a partnership broker. In that role I had felt confident in my abilities to 'lead from behind' through asking questions in such a way that prompted the thinking of those I was working with. Yet, when I was in the 'role' of being a participant in a meeting in other environments, I found it more challenging to draw upon those skills that I seemingly used with confidence as my other 'selves' - such as being a partnership broker, a line manager or a mentor.

Perhaps compartmentalising my skills as a partnership broker to environments where I formally held that role was holding me back? It was this realisation that led

me to becoming more aware of the 'compartment' in which I was currently defining myself, and furthermore, to experiment with drawing skills across these various 'selves' (or compartments).

Whilst this was challenging (and still is), when I was successful in doing so, I observed it led to new opportunities and new value. In several instances, this approach resulted in enrolling unexpected new partners in the partnerships I was working on. It also led me to confidently holding the space for a partnership through a time of crisis, rather than taking actions that were not yet warranted or having it dissolve. Finally, it supported my thinking about the actions by some members of a partnership. In doing so, I was able to establish a process for the wider group to table and explore any concerns that, unchecked, could have had the potential to be damaging to the partnership.

Whilst I did not notice any negative implications from me practicing this approach, it is possible that these exist, and I have not yet stumbled upon them.

Becoming more integrated by circumstance

My Partnership Brokers Association accreditation was undertaken in the first half of 2020 as the whole world was undergoing the upheaval brought about by coronavirus. The work from home revolution heralded by this pandemic was spawning widespread changes to the work and home 'compartments' that many of us construct.

For many of us, our work selves were now on video conference, streaming live and direct from our homes. Suddenly we learned more about our long-time colleagues, and even our new and once-off contacts, than we ever had before. We were literally seeing into their homes and their lives. We got a feel for the size and nature of their home working environment, including their taste in art and home decor. We became aware if they live by themselves, with a partner, parents, children and/or pets. We heard their doorbells ring as their plumber arrives to fix their broken toilet or as a package from the latest round of online shopping arrived by courier. Our compartments between work and home largely collapsed, or at the very least, became much more closely integrated.

This breaking apart of the work and home compartments can be very challenging. It can be seen as an imposition on privacy. There is also the inability for people to delineate between time to be 'on' for work (just one more email, the computer is just sitting on the kitchen bench after all) and the very important time needed to relax and recharge.

However, I observed this 'forced' integration between the professional and the private 'self' also had its benefits – including the strengthening of relationships through greater understanding of each other's challenges and differences. At a time where there was minimal opportunity for our personal connections outside our own households, we created new spaces for similar connections on our work screens to explore and support each other throughout the unifying experiences of a pandemic world. It was not unusual for new or distant colleagues to delve deeper and more personally in their conversations than would ever have been expected in our pre-coronavirus world.

As the world grapples with the move from pandemic to endemic, there is opportunity for partnership brokers to learn from this experience and reflect on how we might harness this new possibility for deeper 'relatedness' moving forward.

Conclusion

Partnership brokers have many roles, including the need for gaining trust and illustrating the relationships amongst many perspectives and positions. Whilst the pursuit of an integrated self is one that would appear to be a useful goal for partnership broker, there can be drawbacks to being fully integrated, or more integrated, when this is not a deliberate choice. Given this, partnership brokers should very carefully consider whether, or the extent to which, they might wish to change their current level of integration amongst their various selves.

In conclusion, it is not that we should be aiming to achieve a 'fully integrated self', but rather it is helpful for us to remain aware of "*our natural tendency to fragment and to compartmentalize our personality*" (Rozuel 2011 p686) in order to realise our

potential. It is here that the practice of reflection is once again reinforced as an essential tool for a partnership broker. There is much to be gained from reflecting on where we are on this compartmentalisation and integration spectrum, what the drivers may have been for us to be in that position, and if we can see value in choosing to move along that spectrum in one direction or another. Or, another way of putting it, *to thine own self be true*.

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