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How postfeminism plays out for women elite leaders

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ABSTRACT. In this chapter we explore experiences of women elite leaders through a postfeminist lens. Through a re-reading of three of our recent empirical studies we illustrate postfeminism as a discourse that surfaces issues of surveillance, makeover, transformation and choice. Specifically, our re-reading focuses upon the themes double entanglement, choice and body-care. In our attempts to offer a contribution to postfeminist analysis, we toy with our own struggles with the features and assumptions of postfeminism, alongside our sense of responsibility to stay ‘true’ to the women elite leaders’ experiences. In this pursuit we experience felt tensions whereby we know we risk privileging certain voices, those of women elites and middle class women, while potentially rendering others voiceless.

INTRODUCTION

In the following chapter for *Postfeminism and Organization* we explore the experiences of women elite leaders through a postfeminist lens by revisiting our recent empirical studies. We illustrate postfeminism as a ‘property’ that surfaces issues of surveillance, makeover, transformation and choice. In our work we view postfeminism as a key feature of the feminist lexicon, one which reflects the dominance of choice and agency, “an emphasis on individualism, the retreat from structural accounts of inequality and the repudiation of sexism and feminism” (Gill et al., 2017: 227). Postfeminism is now under debate in gender and organisation studies (see Gill et al., 2017; Lewis, 2014; Lewis and Simpson, 2016) and our aim here is to draw upon a postfeminist lens to explore our recent theorising of women elite leaders’ experiences. We do not identify as postfeminist researchers, rather we follow Gill et al. (2017) and engage with postfeminism as a “gender regime” or “sensibility” (Gill, et al., 2016: 226) in order to critically revisit our recent studies and extend understandings of women elite leaders’ gender relations. Specifically we explore the question, how does postfeminism play out for women at the top of UK organisational hierarchies?

We are aware of how our work on women elite leaders may appear awkwardly situated as critiques of postfeminism can view women elite leaders as part of the postfeminist problem. As such we tread carefully. However our key assumption is that to include postfeminism into understandings of work and organisation there is immense value in understanding the experiences of women elite leaders and in recognising that not all women elite leaders share the same experiences. The persistent rarity of women who hold such senior positions in organisations illustrates why the experiences of women elites are imperative in feminist futures.

We first provide an overview of postfeminism to ground our postfeminist reading. We then introduce women elite leaders who can be perceived as postfeminists who (directly and indirectly) undermine ‘true’ feminist theory and practice. With this critique as a backdrop we provide an overview of the empirical research that informs our published studies and progress to critically re-read the work through a postfeminist analysis. We focus upon three themes informed by existing postfeminism theory namely: double entanglements; choice; and, body-care. We discuss our contribution and offer insights into the possibilities for feminist research that provides space to hear and learn from women elite leaders.

POSTFEMINISM

Seen by many as an active process through which feminist gains of the past are undermined, postfeminism can reflect “an array of machinations, elements of contemporary culture which are effective in an undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Postfeminism can be viewed as taking feminism into account while “installing a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (McRobbie, 2004: 255). It refers to discourses that constitute part of a backlash against feminist achievements or aims; “the ‘post’ signalling a reaction against feminism (Faludi, 1991)” (Gill et al., 2017: 229). Postfeminism is also conceptualised as a ‘girly’, ‘sexy’ brand of feminism (Lewis, 2014) which has a “generational ethos” (Gill et al., 2017: 228), used synonymously with third wave feminism or as a new kind of feminism for a new context of debate (Hollows, 2000). Critical work connects postfeminism with neoliberalism (Adamson, 2017; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2008) so that it is “safe and unchallenging for corporate culture” (Gill et al., 2017: 226). This changing face of femininity is reflected through a newly empowered subject that holds postfeminist agency and is distanced from outmoded notions of female disadvantage; “a discourse of a highly individuated new femininity which leaves little room to raise questions of gender inequality or to articulate the experience of difficulty and disadvantage” (Baker, 2010: 186).

Rottenberg’s (2014) thesis of postfeminism highlights how women’s liberation is now framed in extremely individualistic terms in a way which erases issues of social and collective justice and incorporates neoliberal governmentality. This feminism does not systematically critique male dominance in business and is individuated in the extreme, where “the subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women... she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality...” and “accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Rottenberg, 2014: 420). In this way, the postfeminist subject converts “continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair” (Rottenberg, 2014: 420). As a feminist entrepreneurial subject she directs her efforts and resources towards intense calculation and personal initiative (Rottenberg, 2014).

Our aim here is to re-examine our studies of women elite leaders’ experiences from a “common sense of postfeminism” (Gill et al., 2017: 8). We follow Lewis (2014) and Dean (2010) and understand postfeminism as a critical concept “best understood in terms of ‘an ambivalent set of hegemonic discourses around gender, feminism and femininity (Dean, 2010a, p.19), which shape manifestations of contemporary femininity” (Lewis, 2014: 1846). Gill et al. (2017) suggests that postfeminism can be understood as discursive moves serving as a sensibility or gender regime (Acker, 2006). This ‘sensibility’ simultaneously recognises that gender and inequalities matter and dismisses sexism and feminism as ‘yesterday’s’ concern, no longer relevant. From this perspective, “inequalities are presented as ‘just how it is’, in ways that do not require social transformation” (Gill et al., 2017: 226), and success is the result of harder work and entrepreneurialism from individual women. The work of McRobbie (2004) also helps to frame our re-reading of the experiences of women elite leaders. McRobbie (2004) offers a series of possible conceptual frames that reflect postfeminism. First, she talks about *double entanglement* (p.255), as the co-existence of feminism alongside renouncing feminism. Double entanglement involves feminism dismantling itself, where feminism is taken into account but also distanced. Feminism changes focus “from challenging centralised blocks of power to dispersed sites e.g. talk, discourse and the concept of subjectivity” (McRobbie, 2004: 256). McRobbie (2004) also highlights the notion of *female success* where “ideal subjects are subjects of excellence” (p.257) attached to privilege and there is a displacement of feminism as a political movement. Third, postfeminism is manifested through the premise *unpopular feminism*, where feminism is routinely disparaged by media while communicating female individualism and success; an undoing of feminism (McRobbie, 2004: 258). Finally, *choice* as part of individualisation is at the heart of this postfeminism, where “women’s freedom and choice airbrush out inequities that still mark relations between men and women” (McRobbie, 2004: 260). Postfeminism demarcates between those who succeed through this

personal responsibility and those who fail and there is a lack of consideration of the structures in which this personal responsibility is enacted (McRobbie, 2004). It is against this background of postfeminism that we introduce women elite leaders in organisations.

POSTFEMINISM AND WOMEN ELITE LEADERS

In an effort to incorporate postfeminism and neoliberal analysis into gender and organisation studies, Adamson (2017) analysed the biographies of four celebrity women CEOs. She suggests “the CEO autobiography genre may be contributing to the emerging ‘balanced femininity’ discourse” (p.325) and that more research is needed in this area. Women on boards and women who have reached the top of organisational hierarchies are a risky site to offer a postfeminist analysis. Rottenberg (2014) notes a trend of high powered women in the U.S. publicly espousing feminism, however this feminism “is predicated on the erasure of issues that concern the overwhelming majority of women in the USA and across the globe” (p.419). Women such as Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter are those perceived by postfeminist scholars to have “delivered self-declared feminist manifestos” which are “symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon” of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014: 419). Gill et al. (2017) see the highly publicised topic, ‘Women on Boards’, as over emphasised while other feminist issues are ignored. Sandberg’s *Lean In* is critiqued as not confronting or challenging structural, political, economic and social inequalities but focussing on what women can change themselves – the individualised project – which “require constant self-monitoring” (Rottenberg, 2014: 424). This is seen to fail feminism, “rendering it hollow” (Rottenberg, 2014: 424). The feminist subject is decoupled from social inequalities and the “structures of male dominance, power or privilege” (Rottenberg, 2014: 425) remain intact and unchallenged. In Rottenberg’s (2014) critique Sandberg’s ‘true equality’ is grounded in an agenda where individuals progress “*one woman at a time*” (p.426, emphasis in original). This creates an isolated feminist consciousness which internalises the revolution. In other words, the revolution has already taken place and radicalism is rejected, all women need to do is “rouse themselves by absorbing and acting on this reality” (Rottenberg, 2014: 426). This is positioned as an inward turn to produce an individuated feminist agent, who alone is accountable for her own revolutionary energy. This individualised, entrepreneurial and highly privileged subject is directed away from solidarity and common goals, towards her personal initiative in order to improve her career prospects in the corporate world.

Reflecting on scholars’ approaches to postfeminism and having embedded ourselves in accounts of experiences from 80+ women elite leaders, we feel torn. We recognise the privileging of certain voices, that is, women elites and middle class women (women scholars - of course fall under this ‘label’), may render others’ voiceless. Yet, we want to unearth a more nuanced postfeminist analysis, one that recognises our felt discomfort with postfeminism, while providing space for our feminist aim of reflecting the women leaders’ voices. Is there more to learn from women elite leaders beyond Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter if we bring a postfeminist lens to our theorisations of women elite leaders’ accounts?

STUDIES OF WOMEN ELITE LEADERS

Our Empirical Context

In order to re-examine our previous theorisations of women elite leaders’ experiences from a postfeminist perspective we introduce the research participants whose voices we analysed. The accounts from women leaders re-read through a postfeminism sensibility for this chapter are based on research with 81 women from UK-based organisations, interviewed in a wider study: 36 Executive Directors/Non-Executive Directors in FTSE 100/250 companies and 45 elite leaders identified in an annual regional newspaper supplement of the top 250/500 influential leaders. The women were aged between 33 and 67 years: 73 self-declared as white British/Irish/Other white backgrounds, two black/mixed backgrounds, with six non-declared; 62 women worked full time; 14 part time with five

non-declared. Thirty-five women had at least one other Non-Executive Director/Chair of Board role and eight had at least one other Governor/Trustee role in education, charities or legal organisations. These women leaders are primarily white and have significant power and status at the top of organisational hierarchies, holding substantial economic and social power.

As outlined in Mavin et al. (2014: 6), the women engaged in a research project exploring women leaders' social relations with other women at work. Constructionism grounded our original work whereby we were interested in how meanings were re-constructed over time as these women came to understand their (and others) experiences and identities in particular contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Fletcher, 2006). Following Grandy (forthcoming[GG1]) we viewed ourselves as co-constructors of the 'realities' discussed and we engaged with the retrospective accounts through lenses interwoven with our own lived experiences (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Dick and Cassell, 2004; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Semi-structured interviews lasting on average 90 minutes were undertaken by three research assistants utilising an interview guide and were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and coded. Within a context of women's intra-gender relations, the questions focused on women's progress to elite leader positions, ambition, friendship, cooperation, competition and key issues for other women.

Our Original Theorisation

For this chapter, we re-read our theorisation and empirical data through a postfeminism sensibility from three published studies which analyse the women elite leaders' accounts: *Experiences of Women Elite Leaders Doing Gender: Intra-gender Micro-Violence between Women* published in *British Journal of Management* (Mavin et al., 2014); *Women Elite Leaders Doing Respectable Business Femininity: how privilege is conferred, Contested and defended through the body*, published in *Gender, Work & Organization* (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b), and *A theory of Abject Appearance: women elite leaders' intra-gender 'management' of bodies and appearance*, published in *Human Relations* (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a). Our re-reading here offers insights into how postfeminism plays out for women elite leaders.

In Mavin et al. (2014) we theorised 'intra-gender micro-violence' to illustrate how a masculine symbolic order shapes and constrains women elite leaders' social relations with other women. We fused the literatures on gendered contexts, doing gender well and differently (Mavin & Grandy, 2012, 2013), intra-gender competition, and female misogyny. We interpreted three themes (disassociating, suppression of opportunity, abject appearance) from the empirical accounts which illustrated the complexities which underpin and explain negative intra-gender social relations of women.

In Mavin and Grandy (2016a) we developed a theory of abject appearance to explain women elite leaders' embodied identity work as a possible material effect or consequence of women's abjection in organisations. Building on the work of Kristeva (1982), Hopfl (2004), Rizq (2013), Fotaki (2013), Gatrell (2014) and Jones (2007), we suggest that women's maternal bodies (and just the threat of pregnancy), render women abject in organisation; a site of both intrigue and disgust. As such, despite achieving 'success' in organisations and afforded privilege through formal authority, women elite leaders are both *One and the Other*, always at the margins in organisations. We describe abject appearance in this way:

Abject Appearance explains the dynamic ways in which women elite leaders can be reminded of their abjection through their feminine bodies. The process is dialectical in that it reflects tensions. It explains women elite leaders' active efforts to navigate a *fascination* (simultaneous *attraction* and *repulsion*) with their *own* and *other* women's bodies and appearance and the relational efforts to monitor boundaries and risks through embodied identity work... As power envelopes women's co-constructions within a paradox of One and the Other, Abject Appearance

explains how women elite leaders as embodied speaking subjects can engage in agentic praxis (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006: 75) (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a: 1101).

In this published work we presented three analytical themes to illustrate abject appearance as interpreted through the women leaders' accounts, namely: *Fascination with Appearance*; *Refocusing from the Body and Appearance*, and, *Achieving a Professional Balance*. In Mavin and Grandy (2016b) we developed a theory of Respectable Business Femininity to explain the contested nature of women elite leaders' privilege as manifested through a disciplining of the body and appearance in the elite leader role (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b). To do this we built upon research on privilege as unstable (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014), women's body work (Gatrell, 2013; Gimlin, 2007; Sinclair, 2005; Wolkowitz, 2011) and their "troubling bodies" (Brunner and Dever, 2014: 463) (but not men's), and respectable femininity (Fernando and Cohen, 2014; Fischer, 2014; Radhakrishnana, 2009). We theorise how historical notions of respectable femininity, where particular forms of femininity are constructed and constrained within class-based and heterosexual structures (Krane et al., 2004), persist in organisations and play out in contemporary (Western) organisations for women elite leaders. Historically, respectable femininity is marked by rules of 'appropriate' body and appearance (e.g., dress neatly and modestly, well-mannered, self-restrained), a form of social control and identity policing, through which women can achieve respect, dignity, self-worth and value. We advanced historical notions to theorise *Respectable Business Femininity* as a discursive and relational process to explain the tensions and contradictions that women elite leaders experience (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b), as "sometimes privileged" (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). Privilege is conferred, contested and / or defended through the body and appearance. These struggles, we theorised, involve acceptance and / or rejection of practices of self-care and self-monitoring in performing the elite leader role.

On revisiting the work through a postfeminist lens we suggest that the study and our theorising surfaces how postfeminism is reflected through women's bodies and appearance. In what follows we explore this further.

The Complexity of Double Entanglements in Women Elite Leaders' Accounts

As a 'property' of postfeminist discourses, double entanglements (McRobbie, 2004) refer to the recognition of a need for a feminist agenda while simultaneously distancing from such an agenda. In this way, there is a "selective take-up of feminist principles" (Lewis et al., 2017: 215) alongside a rejection of such principles. We suggest that through a postfeminist sensibility re-reading of the women elite leaders' accounts this complexity is vividly apparent in discussions of board appointments. Specifically, there is a call to action for increasing women's representation on boards but this political movement is almost muted by a cautionary 'tread carefully' undertone. Through our re-reading we interpret that it is espoused as a feminist cause worthy of pursuit for the 'right' women but not for all women. In effect, it implies that equality must be reserved for special women and thus equality is attached to privilege (McRobbie, 2004). We offer two accounts from our re-readings to illuminate these double engagements. Specifically, on revisiting the women leaders' accounts included in our published article on intra-gender micro-violence we can see a postfeminist discourse of recognising inequality while simultaneously reflecting a backlash against feminist achievements or goals (Gill et al., 2016). For example, when talking about the drive to increase numbers of women on company boards, Wendy says:

A lot of this comes out of all this gender diversity on boards women need to think really, really hard, just as men do, when they take on a senior position. They are difficult jobs with lots of responsibility and hard work. I really worry in terms of the discussions around [name of senior role] diversity that it all, it all seems to be conversations about the appointment. We need to

appoint more women to the boards. There's little acknowledgement of what a serious job that is and what it entails. I do slightly worry that some of the consequences of what we're seeing at the moment is women - at its best women will be encouraged to, to progress through those sorts of things. At the worst, women will feel entitled to get some of those positions... we shouldn't have a sense of entitlement any more than anybody else [man]. These are big jobs. (Wendy in Mavin et al., 2014: 446)

Wendy acknowledges the need for more women on company boards but we interpret that she sustains inequality by arguing that women should not feel entitled to a board position. Her talk indicates that these are 'serious jobs' appropriate for hard working individuals (read men). We might even go as far to suggest that her account implies that men take these jobs more seriously (than women) and that only special women are fit for such privilege. Similarly, Martha acknowledges the 'appoint more women to boards cause' but expresses concern that such appointments should be reserved for *certain* women (not younger women). She somewhat mutes what might be interpreted as disdain for women 'who are not exactly up for the job' by couching her discussion under a solidarity umbrella intended to protect such women from being in a position where they will 'end up being unhappy'.

...Especially now where there is a real desire socially and in society to appoint women, the real risk is that women are appointed who are not exactly up to the job and then to confirm implicit feelings that women can't really do it or can't be as good as men which is not the case, it's only a case of having chosen the wrong woman but because these younger women are not corrected anymore and perhaps the pressures are a little bit less there's more positive discrimination. The real risk is that they actually end up being quite unhappy in a position where they shouldn't have been in the first place and that's a real problem... (Martha in Mavin et al 2014: 449).

Our intent here is not to 'judge' the women elite leaders, rather we wish to illuminate the complexities faced by women elite leaders' as they navigate through a web of power dynamics. A postfeminist sensibility re-reading offers an opportunity to surface and discuss such complexities. For example, in the discussion section of Mavin et al. (2014) we recognise that "women can only be liberated from patriarchy through a struggle to change the system as system (Cockburn, 1991, p. 8[GG2]). Yet it is impossible to confront a common condition before we have recognised it; we cannot begin to find our own power until we consciously recognise our non-power (Rowbothan, 1973)" (p. 14). We argue in the article that in 'naming' intra-gender micro-violence and raising consciousness to destructive relational processes between women that take place in gendered contexts and constrain solidarity behaviours this is our attempt at recognising a common condition and disrupting the system. Therefore, while some of the women's accounts reflect neoliberal postfeminist discourses, others do not and our own voices are again a combination of challenge to patriarchal systems and hierarchies of masculinities and empowering women at the individual and the collective, as we again struggle for an alternative path to postfeminist discourses.

A Governance or Illusion of Choice?

In our re-readings we also were intrigued by the explicit and subtle references to choice, which has been argued elsewhere to serve to sustain inequalities and pervasive systems of power that continue to advantage men and some privileged women. Lewis et al. (2017) suggest that postfeminism discourses are often marked by a "shift from objectification to 'voluntary' subjectification" (p. 214). Choice is entangled "alongside the re-articulation of traditional expectations and traditional gender stereotypes around motherhood, beauty and female sexuality" (Lewis et al., 2017: 214). The neoliberal subject (Gill et al., 2017) has choice; this subjectification neither recognises nor challenges the patriarchal

systems that constitute and sustain what many feminists would view as a dangerous illusion of choice. Ruth and Clare's accounts offer illustrative examples of governmentality and the seductive nature of the entrepreneurial individual subject who is free to choose her own path to success.

I will have conversations with women who are in their early to mid-thirties who've had one child, possibly going to have the second one, want to work part time yet equally are sort of saying to me 'but this may jeopardise my career opportunities and positions. I don't want to lose pace.' And I have to say I think that's the shadow (issue) the interesting test, because I sit here with very mixed emotions. Clearly as a supporter of these women I don't want to see them lose pace, but equally one has to be pragmatic and you make choices and if you've got three four five years out the workplace and you're part time, it is tough to say, unless you're a particular specialist functions, you're going to keep track with other colleagues and other peers. (Ruth, from Mavin et al. 2014: 446).

I feel very strongly that women should not put themselves into a position where they reject leadership... There may be career choices which actually mean that you have to make that sacrifice. You can't expect the framework of the career will entirely bend... because of what you demand... Some of the areas where I have worked have been about the absolute pinnacle of quality of something and that doesn't fit with taking half your time off or going home when you need to look after the children (Clare, from Mavin et al., 2014: 447).

Ruth's talk about women's caring responsibilities, working part time and the effects on career, highlights the discourse of an individuated subject at the heart of postfeminism. It illustrates her struggle between supporting other women yet realising they will "lose pace" with men (and other women without caring responsibilities) by working part time to care for children. At the same time, she does not fully acknowledge or challenge the inequalities at play which facilitate these struggles, rather she sees choice, as Rottenberg (2014) points out, within a discourse of neoliberal postfeminism, as within an individual woman's control. Similarly, Clare expresses a rejection of a feminist political agenda and the need to challenge and change the systems and structures, rather women have choices within that system and "can't expect the framework of the career will entirely bend". It implies an acceptance that it is their "responsibility for their own well-being and self-care" based on "crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus" (p.420). Here, again we see inequalities as 'just how it is' without critical challenge (Gill et al., 2016).

Both Ruth and Clare's accounts reflect a discourse which Rottenberg (2014) critiques in Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, where women are so individuated they are unable to see social inequalities and do not consider or challenge male dominance, power or privilege (Rottenberg, 2014). The postfeminist issue of choice is surfaced in the accounts in relation to the women's choice to take on board roles; to work part time or not; and other women elite leaders' judgement of these choices. What might be seen as Ruth's judgement of women with children can be interpreted as ambivalence: supportive, in that she wants women to succeed but also as reflecting neoliberalist feminism, reinforcing the ideal worker as masculine and adapting her preferences to an unequal and discriminatory context (e.g., Hirshmann, 2010). Rottenberg's (2014: 432) suggests the impact is dangerous; "as more and more white middle-class women enter and remain in the public sphere, even after they have children – by choice and by necessity" – neoliberal postfeminism "helps to neutralize the potential critique from other strands of feminism". Rottenberg (2014) goes as far as to comment that "no longer concerned with issues such as gendered wage gap, sexual harassment, rape or domestic violence, ambitious individual *middle class women* (emphasis in original) themselves become both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age" (p.432). Lewis et al. (2017) propose what we feel is a more constructive way forward to unpack the complexities of said women's experiences: "instead of presenting 'choice' as the answer

as to why there is still a minority of women in senior management positions... we can approach the notion of 'choice' as a question, such as what are women seeking to achieve when they cite 'choice' as the reason" (Lewis et al., 2017: 216) to opt-out of (or into) motherhood or leadership.

Postfeminism as a Bodily Property: Body-Care

"The enactment of femininity within the world of business must be 'measured' and not perceived as disruptive...women must be 'properly' feminine...but not engage in unnecessary or unwarranted feminine displays (Lewis, 2012)" (Lewis, 2014: 1858). Some of these women elite leaders come to view the enactment of their femininity as crucial to the entrepreneurial subject; the leveraging of their feminine body and appearance is "a form of governance of everyday life in which individuals practice their freedom" (Lewis et al., 2017: 215). Their entrepreneurial spirit and commitment (Gill et al., 2017) manifests through their body-care. In the accounts of Alice and Amanda we interpret that there is an acceptance that body-care and leveraging the right kind of femininity is simply part of "playing the game" (Anita, from Mavin and Grandy, 2016b), without much questioning of the pervasive power dynamics at play.

I would say I've also noticed that being a woman that I often have the ability to - I can get the attention of men more easily than other men might be able to because, I don't know if it's because of my accent or because I wear dresses not suits, I find that I can get meetings perhaps a little bit more easily or get time in if I need it or get the attention of people if I'm speaking. Yeah I think it's because there aren't very many women often in the meetings I'm in that I do feel that I command respect and attention when I'm saying something (Alice, from Mavin et al., 2014: 446).

Sometimes they've [women] known how to play men very cleverly. You do have to learn how to do that. This whole argument about how you use your looks or your sexuality at work which would have to me been completely anathema as a concept. More and more I recognize we are all sexual beings and I've seen women who are very attractive do very well. I don't mean that they slept around or that they've been nasty to other women but they use their inherent female attractiveness and obviously you also need the power of intellect (Amanda; from Mavin et al., 2014: 446).

Reflecting on these accounts through a postfeminism sensibility we suggest that the postfeminist subject is feminine. But it is expressed as an individual calculated femininity, one which serves to obscure the self-monitoring and surveillance which constitutes it. Postfeminism plays out through the body and demands choice, empowerments, and surveillance for success. So those who succeed take responsibility for their own success, "*one woman at a time*" (Rottenberg, 2014: 426) and *choose* to engage and play the game. Those who succeed experience "feelings of autonomy and dignity ... [and] privilege is stabilized" (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b: 385), reflecting postfeminism as a bodily property.

This isn't to say that the accounts above reflect the experiences of all women elite leaders with whom we engaged. Many did challenge the patriarchal systems in which they were placed and that which restrained them and other women. For example, many talked about how they refused to concede to the pressures to display oneself as the measured professional, while others challenged the systems within which they were celebrated (e.g., refusing to permit – and in some cases calling them out - the media to write about their body and appearance and their status as mother, etc.). Nevertheless, they were very aware of the body-care expectations under which success typically was fostered in this context.

HOW POST-FEMINISM PLAYS OUT FOR WOMEN ELITE LEADERS

In the discussion that follows we do not personally subscribe to an individuation discourse of postfeminism which ignores the challenge of women's oppression within patriarchal systems and masculine hierarchies. Yet, we are also adamant that women elite leaders' voices do count in organisational theorisations and in conversations about feminism.

Returning to our research question of how postfeminism plays out for women at the top of UK organisational hierarchies, our re-examination of our published studies of women elite leaders' accounts could be seen to have highlighted postfeminism at work: the individualised, entrepreneurial and highly privileged subject who is focussed on her own "personal initiative in order to improve her career prospects, particularly in the corporate world" (Rottenberg 2014: 432). Significantly our studies illustrate how postfeminism is surfaced where women engage in choice and struggle around their understandings of disadvantage and privilege, surveillance, makeover, self-reinvention and transformation in order to perform as credible successful elite leaders. The women are not victims; they are confident and powerful, distanced from outmoded notions of female disadvantage and draw upon femininity and feminism while deflecting any alienation from men leaders. Change for the women elite leaders comes through an entrepreneurial spirit and commitment (Gill et al., 2017). Indeed, it could be argued from a critical postfeminism reading that in assuming individual responsibility for successful navigation within the system, these elite woman leaders neglect the complexity of the structures and systems that sustain a gendered order and which persist to disadvantage women.

For us, the double entanglements and expressions of choice mark out the felt complexity and ambivalence that women elite leaders face. We suggest it is not that they don't care about a feminist agenda, but that the governmentality in which the entrepreneurial subject is constituted is sometimes so pervasive that it becomes impossible to recognise its power effects. While sustaining such enactments of postfeminism without any challenge threatens a feminist agenda, we propose that attacking and harshly criticising women elite leaders' enactment of postfeminism creates a boundary around feminism which keeps women leaders out. These women challenge the gendered status quo simply by holding their organisational positions. Yet in this system they remain One and the Other, struggling to defend and/or protect their credibility (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a). As feminist scholars who also hold positions of privilege we identify with their struggles. While we do challenge patriarchy and a gendered order in our own work (and in the three published studies), as women leaders we too struggle to find paths through which we can 'get ahead' in our careers by enacting choice, empowerment and body-care. We return to the question posed by Lewis et al. (2017), what do women seek to achieve when they cite choice as a rationale for the decisions they make and impose upon other women? Because as we didn't explore this specifically with the women leaders, we can only speculate here. As we reflect on our experience, we are left wondering if sometimes this is simply a function of trying to make a difference in the only space we feel we can – ourselves. We suggest future research starts to more fully unpack how and why choice frames and guides the experiences of women elite leaders. We propose, perhaps naively, that through a postfeminism sensibility we might create space to engage in constructive debates, spark curiosity, and trigger an unsettling of the neoliberal subject (for ourselves and others).

In addition, in all three studies the women's accounts reflect postfeminism with the following features: body care as a means of stabilising their privilege and enabling their empowerment, as well as distancing from critiques of gendered inequalities and alienating men; how they look and present themselves is their own individual responsibility; their success as an elite leader in this regard is dependent on their personal initiative and entrepreneurialism; the need for individual self-care and self-monitoring, as well as the surveillance of other women through their bodies and appearance; demonstration of choice, pleasure and success; and, a coming together of women leaders with opportunities for challenge. Within this space "women draw on discourses of individualism, choice,

merit as much as their male colleagues, having an impact on masculine power” (Lewis and Simpson, 2016: 6).

As such this postfeminism outlines a discursive space where “feminism is boldly affirmed at the same time that a distance from radicalism is secured” – as such a “more moderate [acceptable], less excessive feminism” located in the present (Dean, 2010: 395/393). This feminism is marked by care provided by individual women to their own bodies and appearance, ‘by you-for you.’ Women identify their own body work needs and take steps to meet them; they take time to prioritise their body and appearance and to know where they ‘stand’ on their own body and appearance as elite leaders, as well as towards other women’s body and appearance. This postfeminism illustrates a way of encouraging “assimilation into the corporate mainstream” which does not reject feminism but yet is less radical than “a complete deconstruction (or at least re-thinking) of the system as a whole” (Cooley, 2016 accessed 3/01/17).

Reflecting on our work here we are cognisant of a feminist backlash towards women elite leaders, who are sometimes viewed as distasteful for perpetuating postfeminism; perceived to restrict other feminisms and constrain collective action against oppression. Women who have reached the top of organisational hierarchies and engaged in postfeminism are criticised for ignoring gender inequalities, discrimination and male dominance in corporate cultures. Such women leaders can be viewed as the senith and conduit of postfeminisms in that they can be seen to dilute feminism. However within our studies there remains substantial evidence from the women’s accounts and our theorisations, of external challenge to women’s oppression and patriarchal contexts and opportunities for solidarity and common goals. In this way, we suggest that women elite leaders’ experiences become a site for both postfeminist discourse and a feminist agenda for recognising and challenging embedded gender orders[WU3].

Conclusion

In this chapter we have re-examined our studies of women elite leaders through a postfeminist lens and reflected on our understandings of experiences of work-based gender relations. We hope we have provoked critical thinking about postfeminism in organisations by revisiting women elite leaders’ accounts and exploring how postfeminism plays out in our studies. As we end the chapter we are focussed on Hirshmann’s (2010) point, that a critical challenge for feminism is the “right to choose” (p.271) and respecting that the choices made will not always be the ones we want. For some feminists the choices some women elite leaders have made and continue to make will not be the ones hoped for. For us, as we reflect on our research approaches we have become conscious that we are frustrated by a lack of collective action (see also Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013). We have studied why this collective action is constrained but have not yet found a way to overcome the processes of fragmentation between women elite leaders. It is this frustration and our struggle for alternative paths that will shape our future studies. [GG4]

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