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Women Leaders, Self-Body-Care and Corporate Moderate Feminism: An [im]perfect place for
feminism

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers *Self-body-care* corporate feminism as a theory which explains how postfeminism as a bodily property surfaces through women leaders' body work. This corporate feminism explains how women 'top' leaders' strategize to stabilize their credibility as leaders by identifying their own and other women's body work needs and take steps to meet those needs. *Self-body-care* contributes to understandings of moderate feminism through simultaneous expressions of postfeminism *and* feminism, which deflect and reflect feminism and constrain and empower subjects. As such *Self-body-care* corporate feminism offers an [im]perfect space for disruption and for GOS scholars to pursue the implications and potential of postfeminism. We develop the theory by surfacing complexity in the postfeminist thesis and reflexively re-examining two empirical studies of women 'top' leaders. We extend the research into therapeutic cultures through analysis of women's experiences and illustrate postfeminism as a bodily property within an aesthetic economy.

INTRODUCTION

Limited empirical attention has been directed to moderate feminisms in Gender and Organization Studies (GOS). As types of feminism generally framed as tamed for acceptance as part of postfeminist discourse (e.g., Dean, 2010; Scott, 2006), moderate feminism has been critiqued for undermining the feminist cause (McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014). Corporate feminism, as a type of moderate feminism for example, is perceived to have remoulded feminism and delivered "self-declared

manifestos... symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon” of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014: 419). As such, feminism is seen to be corporately seduced to produce a certain kind of hegemonic feminism embodied in women such as Hilary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice (Eisenstein, 2010). We are acutely aware of how women leaders at the top of organizations are critiqued as part of the postfeminist problem; seen as the zenith and conduit of moderate feminisms, perceived to dilute feminism and criticized for ignoring gender inequalities, discrimination and male dominance in corporate cultures. In this paper, however, we take a provocative and contested position and propose that the persistent rarity of women who hold senior positions in organizations illustrates why their experiences are imperative in feminist futures. We contribute to critiques of postfeminism and Dean (2010) and Scott’s (2006) call to find value and potential in more tempered feminism by exploring expressions of moderate feminism with women ‘top’ leaders. In response to the question posed by this Special Issue of ‘how GOS scholars should respond to the rise of moderate feminisms within contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal contexts’ (Adamson et al., 2016), we are interested in what we can learn in the ambiguous place between feminism and postfeminism and if progressive change can be made in these ‘imperfect’ places. We position ourselves in such a precarious space to stimulate alternative thinking about the potential of moderate feminism. To do this, we explore the question, what can women at the top of UK organizational hierarchies tell us about moderate feminisms?

In exploring this question, we theorise the manifestation of a particular moderate feminism in contemporary organisations. We offer *Self-body-care* corporate feminism as a form of moderate feminism, to theorise how women identify their own and other women’s body work needs and take steps to meet them as a strategy to stabilise their credibility as leaders. *Self-body-care* corporate feminism contributes to discussions of modern day tempered feminism through expressions of elements of postfeminism and feminism, thus offering potential space for disruption and challenge. *Self-body-care* corporate feminism deflects *and* reflects feminism and is constraining *and* empowering.

Following Gill et al. (2016), Lewis and Simpson, (2016) and Lewis (2014), we are not postfeminist researchers - rather we engage with postfeminism as a “gender regime” (Lewis, 2014) or “sensibility” (Gill, et al., 2016: 1), to critically revisit empirical studies, extend understandings of moderate feminism and identify space for alternative feminist affirmation (Dean, 2010). The key assumptions guiding our position are: that feminism is open to all women, not just those of certain class and/or ethnicity (Scott, 2006); little is known about what women leaders at the top of organisational hierarchies can tell us about moderate feminisms and what this might mean for theorising women’s experiences in organisations; and, following Dean (2010), there may be space for more nuanced moderate feminisms, where feminism located in the present can be affirmed.

In doing this, we also extend Swan’s (2017: 2009) concept of therapeutic culture, as a cultural formation that circulates discourses for solving work and life problems through issues of surveillance, makeover, transformation and choice related to women leaders’ bodies and appearance. We develop *Self-body-care* by surfacing complexity in the postfeminist thesis, by critically and reflexively re-examining two empirical studies of women leaders and through analysis we illustrate postfeminism as a bodily property within an aesthetic economy (Böhme, 2003).

We explore the question, what can women at the top of UK organisational hierarchies tell us about moderate feminisms and first provide a brief overview of postfeminism and moderate feminisms to ground the critical analysis that follows. We consider women leaders’ contexts and locations in organisations and in critiques of postfeminism where they can be perceived (directly and indirectly), to undermine ‘true’ feminist theory and practice. We outline an overview of the empirical research underpinning the two published studies and progress to critically re-read the research through a postfeminist analysis. Next we discuss our theoretical contribution of *Self-body-care* corporate feminism. We conclude by indicating the possibilities for feminist research which offers space to hear and learn from women leaders and for GOS to respond to moderate feminisms.

A POSTFEMINIST CONTEXT

Postfeminism can be understood as after, against, within, as well as distinct from, feminism (see Duffy et al., 2017) and has utility as a critical approach and “cultural response to feminism and the changes it has brought, which does not seek to supersede feminism but rather to rework and co-opt it” (Lewis, 2014: 1850). We recognise postfeminism as a discourse and key feature of the feminist lexicon (Dean, 2010). Baker (2010) notes that postfeminism is seen to leave little space “to articulate the experience of difficulty and disadvantage” (p. 186), in that women are aware of, but ignore, inequalities and male dominance in business is left unchallenged (Rottenberg, 2014). Within this context women are constructed as individuated, empowered and entrepreneurial at the expense of collective action and challenging gendered structures. Women’s success is based on personal initiative and they are responsible for their own well-being, self-care and for managing work and family. Postfeminism is also recognised to reflect an obsessive preoccupation with women’s bodies as a source of power, identity and value (Gill, 2007).

There has been much critique of postfeminism for undermining the feminist cause. For example, McRobbie (2009: 85) argues that women, “in displaying sexual and economic agency within the public sphere, must withhold critique of hegemonic masculinity and thus disidentify as feminist;” feminism is now “almost hated” (p. 14) and postfeminism discourses operate as a ‘substitute for feminism,’ ensuring that a new women’s movement “will not re-emerge” (p. 1). Dean (2010: 393) however, argues for “possible emergence of forms of feminist affirmation in postfeminist discourse,” in that feminism can exist as “a discursively defined thorn in the side of postfeminist popular culture but also as a complex and varied social movement” (Projansky 2001: 88). It is such opportunities for possible emergence that we are interested in and we wonder if through such complexity there is space to consider a more nuanced moderate feminism.

MODERATE FEMINISMS

As part of a discursively constructed postfeminist sensibility (Gill et al., 2016), moderate feminism as a more conservative form (McRobbie, 2015) reflects: individualism, entrepreneurialism, choice and merit; a desire not to alienate men; women are no longer victims; feminism and femininity are reattached (Lewis and Simpson, 2016); masculine and feminine aspirations are integrated; and, makeover self-reinvention, embodiment and surveillance are expected (Gill et al., 2016). Forms of moderate feminisms can include: neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014); market feminism (Kantola and Squires, 2012); transnational business feminism (Roberts, 2015) and empowerment feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2015); choice feminism (Budgeon, 2015); “‘glamorous’ feminism (e.g., Naomi Wolf, the Spice Girls)” (Hinds and Stacey, 2001: 153-154); “Dolly Parton Feminism” (e.g. independence and girlie nights out)” (Dean, 2010: 400); and, corporate feminism (Scott, 2006), (e.g. Sheryl Sandberg’s ‘Lean In’). Corporate feminism, or the Sheryl Sandberg brand of feminism, has been critiqued for distracting from the core values of feminism; “controversy-averse, more about feeling good than fixing problems” (Marcotte, 2014), while the overriding inequalities faced by women globally are ignored. In this way corporate feminism encourages “assimilation into the corporate mainstream rather than a complete deconstruction (or at least re-thinking) of the system as a whole” (Cooley, 2016: 1).

There has been vigorous critique of “corporate feminists” (Scott, 2006: 13), who are largely unrecognised for their efforts on behalf of feminism (Scott, 2006). Rather they are criticised for their privilege and not being politically active on behalf of ‘ordinary’ women. Headlines such as “Corporate Feminism: Rich Women Congratulating Each Other for Being So Inspiring” (Marcotte, 2014) pose challenges to feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Tina Brown who opened funding streams so that “what were once grass-roots gatherings have become commercial enterprises: star-studded events with corporate sponsors like Toyota and Walmart,” (Bennett, 2014:1). Corporate feminism is reflected by public policy panels where women talk of women in management and their obstacles e.g. sexual harassment, unequal perks, and critiqued for gender “trumping class” and being “the same kind of

1970s naïve sisterhood that doesn't look at the difference between those women who are acting as managers and working for capital and the women who are subject to capital" (Eisenstein, 2010: 1). Such critique provokes us to question what alternatives are open to women in elite positions and block us from learning about the experiences of women leaders to theorise contemporary feminisms. Criticism of corporate feminists "implies that feminism is not open to all women; only to those of a certain class and place. These distinctions inevitably lead toward selective discussions of who is 'inside' and who is 'outside', a path that should be forbidden to a social movement that hopes to encompass the world" (Scott, 2006: 14).

Women leaders remain framed in a discourse seen in conflict with the masculine leadership norm (Author, forthcoming) and this requires continual challenge. In contrast, the UK high profile, well publicised and celebrated topic of 'Women on Boards' championed by government has been criticised as neoliberal and over emphasised, at the expense of other inequalities which should be priorities for the feminist agenda. For example, Williams (cited in Dean 2010), in a newspaper article critiques feminism which focusses too narrowly on the quantity of women in powerful positions by asserting "the sine qua non of feminism is battling for collective rights, anything else is just capitalism with tits" (2007b)" (Dean, 2010: 399). Rottenberg (2014) argues that Sheryl Sandberg's thesis of 'true equality' in *Lean In* is "predicated upon individuals moving up the professional ladder, *one woman at a time*" (p.426, emphasis in original), so that the individualised, entrepreneurial and highly privileged, mainly white middle class woman is directed away from solidarity and common goals, towards her personal initiative to improve her career prospects in the corporate world (Rottenberg, 2014). 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 "requires constant self-monitoring" (Rottenberg, 2014: 424). This is seen to fail feminism, "rendering it hollow" (Rottenberg, 2014: 424).

In opposition to challenges to corporate feminism, Scott (2006: 16) provocatively outlines how “anti-market feminist literature has generalized on a ‘theoretical level’ until nothing produced by capitalist consumer culture can be considered feminist” and how “rhetorical strategies have also negated the efforts of women in corporations”. She gives examples of feminist authors disparaging women’s appearance, implying that women in corporations are ‘really men’ and “dismissing the power of some women in the private sector - arguing that corporations are still, after all, dominated by men (as if universities were not dominated by men)” (Scott, 2006: 8). In opening up discussion about this dilemma, Scott (2006) argues that feminist activities, publications and related ‘things’ for sale, also take place within the market, with “feminists making money off women - by complaining about other people making money off women. Then they expect us not to notice the paradox” (Scott, 2006: 9). The prejudice against corporate feminism in current feminist discussions does not empower feminists in organisation (Scott, 2006). It poses the question, how is one to act as a feminist as a leader or manager in organisations? And “shuts off an avenue for the advancement of feminism already shown to be broadly effective” (Scott, 2006: 2).

Here we too ponder about possibilities of inherent complexity in the postfeminism thesis that enables us to rethink existing theorising of women’s experiences at work and to consider a more nuanced moderate feminism. Women leaders are a risky site to consider moderate feminism and our focus on women in top leader roles positions us precariously as feminist researchers. However little is known about what these women can tell us about moderate feminisms and we argue for their voices to count in feminist debates in GOS research. Reflecting on critiques of postfeminism from a position of being embedded in empirical accounts of women leaders’ experiences, we feel torn. We recognise the privileging of certain voices, that is, primarily white, middle class, women leaders (women scholars - of course can fall under this ‘label’), may render others’ voiceless. We want to engage in a postfeminist analysis where we acknowledge our own struggles with key features of postfeminism, but stay ‘true’ to our feminist aim of reflecting the women leaders’ voices. We are guided by Dean’s (2010: 393)

argument that it may be possible to affirm a moderate feminism in specific discursive spaces which theorises “an interplay between disidentity and affirmation of feminism” and to highlight how features of postfeminist/moderate feminist discourses, and feminism - can and do exist, and that feminism as a “floating signifier” (p.395) can have a more open meaning.

Following Gill et al. (2016: 8) we re-examine empirical studies of women leaders’ experiences from a “common sense of postfeminism” and draw upon the following key conceptual frames from McRobbie, (2004) and Gill et al., (2016) to inform our analysis. McRobbie (2004) offers *double entanglement* (p.255), as the co-existence of feminism while also fiercely repudiating feminism, where feminism is taken into account but also distanced and the notion of *female success* where “ideal subjects are subjects of excellence” (p.257) attached to privilege where feminism is displaced as a political movement. *Choice* as part of individualisation is at the conceptual heart of postfeminism, where “women’s freedom and choice airbrush out inequities that still mark relations between men and women” (McRobbie, 2004: 260). Gill et al. (2016) propose discursive moves serving as a postfeminist sensibility or gender regime (Acker, 2006). This sensibility both recognises that gender and inequalities matter and denounces sexism and feminism as ‘yesterday’s’ concern, no longer relevant. From this perspective, “c’est la vie accounting” reflects how “inequalities are presented as ‘just how it is’, in ways that do not require social transformation”, rather “success is the result of harder work and entrepreneurialism from individual women” (Gill et al., 2016: 1). In order to re-examine studies of women leaders’ experiences through a postfeminism lens we next introduce the women whose experiences we analysed.

STUDIES OF WOMEN LEADERS

Our research and empirical context

The studies we review 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. The women leaders are primarily white and have significant power and status at the top of organisational hierarchies, holding substantial economic and social power.

The research process explored women leaders' social relations with other women at work and utilised the traditions of qualitative research (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2000). A constructionist approach was adopted to explore how fragments of individuals' retellings – their lives, experiences and emotions - become constructed, negotiated and interwoven into patchworks of meaning over time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Fletcher, 2006). We view ourselves as co-constructors of the retellings, whereby the women leaders' stories are co-constructed and re-presented as partial, retrospective accounts of their experiences, inter-woven 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. The interview questions concerned women leaders' experiences within a context of social relations with other women. Following Gill et al. (2016) who draw upon empirical data from published and unpublished studies to show how postfeminism expresses itself, we now re-examine two previous studies of women leaders' experiences by engaging with a postfeminist perspective to explore what women at the top of UK organisational hierarchies can tell us about moderate feminisms.

Women Leaders: privileged and oppressed

Reflexively re-visiting recent studies of women leaders through a postfeminism lens provoked us to reflexively question our assumptions as researchers and to consider how we positioned ourselves and the women participants. As authors of the studies we identified how, in our writing, we simultaneously reflect and deflect feminism and how our writing is dialectical as we struggle between women leaders as abject and oppressed and as successful and powerful. In our published work we acknowledge the complexities of how women leaders are: only “sometimes privileged” (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014: 433); are distasteful and abject in organisations; and remain an oppressed and constrained minority. Yet they have broken through the glass ceiling of organisational hierarchies, achieving a “masculine strategic situation” (Tyler, 2005: 569) and “a particular parity with the One” (De Beauvoir, 1949). In crafting the studies we highlight how the women have achieved perceived economic ‘equity’ with men, in as much as they can now hold the ‘top’ jobs and earn high salaries. At the same time we view women leaders at the top of organisations as constrained by a gendered double bind, expected to act like a leader (read: masculinity and man), *and* like a woman (read: femininity), yet punished for doing either (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Gherardi, 1994; Maddock and Parkin, 1994; Author, 2016b; Author, 2014). We contemplate whether the women leaders are in limbo; a subject of postfeminism where belief in agency is a power effect of governmentality, or on a path where systems of power can be challenged and changed in organisations. As top leaders and primarily white, middle class, sometimes privileged women, does this mean they should be vilified or rendered invisible and Othered in a postfeminist context? Does this make women leaders, as Rottenberg (2014: 432) argues, “both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age” or is there a space where feminism is possible?

In framing the studies we explicitly outline our understandings of gender, leadership and management as embedded in and restricted by patriarchy, embedded in “a web of non-discursive and discursive power relations (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006)” (Author, 2016b: 3810). We focus on the accounts of individual women, primarily white, at elite leader levels in the marketplace and outline their learning for other women who want to ‘progress’ as leaders in organisations. We also look at

collective action by naming the exclusionary and oppressive discourses which impact on women leaders and use research as a method of consciousness raising to provoke challenge and change. Our belief that the experiences of these women matter and that in studying their experiences we extend GOS, enables us to respond in some way to postfeminist discourse. We therefore argue for an imperfect space between celebrating achievements of postfeminism, in that the women have reached top positions in organisations, while also being on high alert to the contradictions contained in our studies which challenge postfeminism.

Study 1. Women ‘Top’ Leaders Disciplining Bodies

In study one we explain the contested nature of women top leaders’ privilege as manifested through a disciplining of the body and appearance in the leader role. We build upon research exploring 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). For us, “the bodies of women elite leaders are surfaces to reproduce dominant practices of power and social control (Bell and Sinclair, 2014)” (Author, 2016b: 383). 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 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 advance historical notions to theorise a discursive and relational process surfacing the tensions and contradictions that women leaders experience 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 top leader role. In our re-

examination of the study we identified reflections of postfeminism, critique of postfeminism *and* feminism.

In the study we discuss how privilege can be conferred, in relations with others, when women leaders get the body and appearance 'right'. Women leaders accept individual responsibility (and also project responsibility onto other women) for the required body work necessary to be seen as credible and respectable leaders – as such through our re-reading they can be perceived as postfeminist self-directed entrepreneurial subjects empowered by experiencing this beauty premium. Shona gives an example of this:

She's got incredible clothes, a brilliant figure for it and wears really high heels and all that. She really looks the part. I think that's quite helpful sometimes ... because people are impressed by ... so first impressions and physical appearance is part of the picture and some women really are good at that and I quite admire it, almost because I could never do that. Red high heels are not me if I can't walk and she can. She can run downstairs in them. It's amazing (Shona) (Author, 2016b: 386).

We argued in the study that Shona confers privilege onto the other women leader for 'getting it right' but in relation to the other women leader, "Shona's privilege is suspect and fragile ('I could never do that')" (Author, 2016b: 386). Other women leaders reveal a double entanglement; a simultaneous rejection and acknowledgement of feminism (McRobbie, 2004). Anita, as below, expresses that it is different for men and "clever" (individual) women recognise that they are "playing [the] game" of body expectations in order for privilege to be conferred. 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 also experience "feelings of autonomy and dignity ... [and] privilege is stabilized" (Author, 2016b: 385), reflecting postfeminism as a bodily property. At

the same time, we also interpret the women's conscious game playing as a form of resistance and activism which challenges the masculine culture.

There's still more leeway for men to be 'characters' than women [in terms of appearance] and I think there's a certain element that you have to conform but it's knowing that you're conforming and you're playing a game. That's the clever thing. That's what successful women do (Anita) (Author, 2016b: 386).

Some women top leaders more directly call out gender blindness, refusing to brush over structural inequalities that serve to disadvantage women and highlighting struggles over body and appearance in relation to their leader position. Charlotte 'talks' feminism, about how inequalities are in the present and how she has confronted - called out and challenged - the structural inequalities that play out in everyday norms. In doing so we suggest there is recognition of collection action; Charlotte speaks out for herself and other women. Women must be appreciated and celebrated for "their whole self" (e.g., as leaders, mothers, partners, etc.). Charlotte acknowledges that her privilege is contested in that her body "and appearance do not meet ambiguous expectations of embodied femininity" (Author, 2016: 390). Yet she simultaneously defends her privilege by rejecting and taking a stand against "bodies and appearance being a part of their credibility as an elite leader" (Author, 2016b: 390).

...Once in my career some man said to me you should wear less flamboyant clothes and basically my response to that was 'get stuffed, it's got nothing to do with you what I wear and I am who I am', I like dressing how I am and I will take the consequences of how I am and for me that's an important and genuine part of being me and I bring my whole self ... It's really important for women to bring their whole self to work. They don't have to pretend that they don't have a

family life or a social life or children or any of that. I think they try to hide it (Charlotte) (Author, 2016b: 389).

This study illuminates women elite leaders as postfeminist “subjects of excellence” (McRobbie, 2004: 257) yet we propose it also demonstrates how their success, excellence and privilege is fragile, unstable and moderated through their body work. The women leaders elucidate how “women are judged on job performance *and* appearance, while men are judged on their work (Brower, 2013)” (Author, 2016b: 393). In our re-examination we read how postfeminism plays out through the body, demanding surveillance, makeover, re-invention, choice and empowerment for women to succeed. Simultaneously we read how women remain oppressed and discriminated against in organisations.

Throughout our analysis we were reminded of the critiques we experienced (explicit and felt) in presenting this work (to some). On reflection we faced postfeminist challenge for arguing that women elite leaders remain oppressed and discriminated against - audiences denied us this position. When re-examining the study through a postfeminist lens we can see how we worked, as researchers, to balance our desire to acknowledge a gendered order while also opening space for change to reflect the women’s successes, as well as their resistance and challenge. This reflects our own struggles or double entanglement within postfeminist discourse. In the study we identified and named gendered processes to communicate possibilities of “becoming more consciously aware of self-in-relation-to own and other women’s bodies and appearance” (Author, 2016b: 393).

Study 2. Women Leaders and Abjection

In study two we explain women leaders’ embodied identity work as a possible material effect or consequence of women’s abjection in organisations. 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 highlighted how women leaders' bodies remind them of their abjection through dialectical processes; where women express effort to reconcile simultaneous attraction and repulsion of their own and other women's bodies and into social relations to monitor boundaries of their credibility as women leaders through embodied identity work (Author, 2016a: 1101).

On revisiting the work through a postfeminist lens we suggest that this study and our theorising surfaces how postfeminism is reflected through women's bodies and appearance. In what follows we explore this further. We begin by discussing how some of the women leaders' accounts reveal postfeminist double entanglements (McRobbie, 2004), whereby they both acknowledge (often implicitly) feminism, while simultaneously rejecting it. In the two accounts below (Author, 2016a) we see vividly this co-existence of feminism and rejection of feminism.

And other people do it differently and I think that's fine if that's what...other women do, it helps their confidence I think to go for something statement in the way of clothes but for me it never worked for me that idea and I do quite strongly fight the idea that somehow as a woman you have to do statement clothes. I think you can also go down the route of men which is be boring as hell and wear the uniform of dark things that nobody's going to notice much. (Kimberly – Head, Public Administration and Defense) (Author, 2016a: 1104).

Be yourself. Be a girly, don't pretend to be a man, but under no circumstances start thinking that you can use a bit of your femininity to gain some form of advantage... I think if you can just be you... be different, so you're not pretending to be a man... make it perfectly clear that what you actually want to be judged on is your delivery and your approach and your professionalism... Then very quickly, where it matters, your gender will become an irrelevance. Where it matters

is the appraising of your performance and your delivery. (Tina – Manufacturing) (Author, 2016a: 1109).

Through our critical re-reading we interpret how Kimberly enacts feminism or feminist thought in her rejection of women having to do “statement clothes”, yet in her next sentence she rejects feminism by offering a masculine way forward as an alternative; “the route of men... boring as hell... uniform”. Similarly, Tina expresses that women leaders should not conform to the masculine (“don’t pretend to be man”) and that it is OK to “be different” challenging the norm. At the same time, she disregards possible structural considerations that marginalise women and women’s advancement and re-directs attention to competence. In other words, reflecting postfeminist discourse, women can advance if they *choose* to take responsibility for their success. A driven and ambitious successful leader focuses upon improving “delivery” and “professionalism” and then gender will be “irrelevant” (See quote by Tina).

Our emphasis on embodied identity work in the women leaders’ accounts illustrates a postfeminist emphasis on the body and related choice, self-care, and self-discipline (Rottenberg, 2014) where inequalities are acknowledged but in some ways downplayed. Change for the women leaders comes through an entrepreneurial spirit and commitment (Gill et al., 2016). In both Francesca’s and Denise’s comments below self-care and disciplining through body work is again ‘part of the game’. This could be interpreted as resonating with what Gill et al. (2016) refer to as “c’ est la vie accounting” as a feature of postfeminism, where “inequalities are presented as ‘just how it is’” (p.3). Rather than requiring social transformation they demand further individual effort (Gill et al., 2016). The accounts of the women leaders re-told in our studies imply that successful women leaders know (and accept) that ‘being professional’ is required and there is a need to dress for success. It could be argued that in assuming individual responsibility for body work the woman leaders neglect the complexity of the structures and systems that sustain a gendered order and persist to disadvantage women. However, we

interpret that both Francesca and Denise are consciously aware of how their bodies mark them out as different to men. We suggest this demonstrates resistance in their accounts.

Being professional and I think one thing that goes with that is looking professional, i.e. well turned out but not sort of over focused on personal appearance but looking business-like in a suit, don't float into [name of senior role] meeting in a dress that looks as if you last wore it on the beach. I think it is a combination of inner confidence, self-confidence and holding your position in the discussion, not being pushed to the side, not being too quiet and hopefully not being over-strident. (Francesca – Water Supply Activities) (Author, 2016a: 1111).

I am not very tall and if I am going into battle I like to get my stiletto heels on. I like big heels and I like lipstick and I will get my hair done because to me appearance is a part of it. If I want to make an impression... if you are being competitive that is an important situation to be in, so therefore I get glammed up a bit... but sometimes I don't actually believe ... what I am saying (Denise – CEO, Education) (Author, 2016a:1104).

In study two we talk about our own reflexive journey. We detail how we identified with the women leaders and at times felt that their embodied identity work reflected our own struggles with bodies and appearance. Through our re-examination of the study we see more complexity than assuming that the women's experiences reflect a postfeminism regime that denies or suppresses a feminist agenda. The women leaders did acknowledge and challenge directly the pervasive power dynamics embedded in various institutional structures. Patricia, for example, expresses a desire for women leaders to be more aware of the media's power in creating and sustaining gendered inequalities of self-care. She talks about how she tells journalists who ask about her clothes "that's not acceptable ...because if we want to read about 'how do you run the [name of organisation]?', it's irrelevant

whether you are wearing skirts or trousers or how much make-up you put on” (Author, 2016a:1104). Patricia feels it is critical to ‘call out’ gender blindness (Wilson, 1996) to benefit the collective, while simultaneously trying to construct her own path through the web of complexity.

Reflecting on this study we also see double entanglements of postfeminism in our own theorising. We critique the structures and power dynamics at play which continue to marginalise and limit the possibilities for women in organisations, yet we argue that there is space for agency and women can mould and shift “along the lines of the ideal leader, or challenge and change embodied practices of leadership” (Author, 2016a: 1098). In our writing we acknowledge and challenge gendered structural constraints and simultaneously we desire the autonomy associated with *choosing* to succeed. As researchers we see our efforts to recognise the individual entrepreneurial subject while calling for collective challenge to gendered contexts and systems; we are searching for an alternative path to postfeminist discourses. Here, we argue that GOS researchers could respond to postfeminist discourse by *consciously* taking this space in their research and recognising and valuing individual women’s success *and* developing mediums for collective challenge and change to structural inequalities. This may enable researchers to manoeuvre the seduction of postfeminism, fully aware of its consequences and critiques. Could it be that when we are *unaware* of postfeminist discourse we can undo feminism or render it fragile and vulnerable?

SELF-BODY-CARE: A MODERATE CORPORATE FEMINISM

We feel passionately that women leaders are recognised as culturally significant and count in feminist futures. Reflecting on our studies we are cognisant of a feminist backlash towards women top leaders who may be viewed as distasteful for perpetuating moderate corporate feminism; perceived to restrict other feminisms and constrain collective action against oppression. Significantly our re-examination demonstrates how women leaders’ experiences are marked by ambiguity and complexity embedded in structural limitations and inequalities. Their achievements cannot be underestimated; that they have achieved ‘top positions’, wealth and power cannot be underplayed or discarded by feminism. Women

top leaders disrupt gendered systems and provoke discomfort, confusion and change. The women engage with “individualism, choice and merit as much as men leaders and therefore impact upon masculine power” (Lewis and Simpson, 2016: 6). Yet they are only sometimes privileged, both One and the Other and continue to be abjected in organisations. These leaders hold astonishing economic and position power but are also marginalised and discriminated against because they are women.

Returning to our research question of what women at the top of UK organisational hierarchies can tell us about moderate feminisms, our critical re-reading of two studies of women leaders has highlighted space where elements of postfeminism are celebrated and simultaneously there is challenge to gendered systems. In this space the individualised, entrepreneurial and sometimes privileged, sometimes oppressed and marginalised subject (focussed on personal initiative to improve their corporate career prospects) is intertwined with challenge to the masculine norm, inequalities and potential collective action. The women leaders disrupt a gendered order and challenge to structural inequalities by the very fact that they are women in elite positions with ‘equitable’ economic power.

Further our re-examination illustrates how postfeminism as a bodily property surfaces through women leaders’ body work. We see how postfeminism constructs the middle class, white woman “to self-manage, self-discipline, self-regulate... unlike middle class men” (Swan, 2017: 276) and how postfeminist therapeutic culture “promulgates the idea that women’s minds, emotions, careers, lives, and bodies can all do with a make-over” (Swan, 2017:276). There is also complexity in that the women are consciously aware of how their bodies mark them out as different and how related choices and struggles are individual, but at times also collective, impacting upon masculine power. So on the one hand, therapeutic culture offers women the resources to cope with the impossibility of postfeminist demands and the pressure of “performing ‘successful femininity;’ enduring the costs of and injuries of ‘propping up’ postfeminism and undertaking the self-work needed to become the never-ending, self-improving, independent subject (Baker, 2010; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008)” (Swan, 2017: 276). Yet on the other hand, the women leaders engage in choice and struggle around surveillance,

makeover, self-reinvention and transformation of their bodies and appearance in order to perform as credible successful elites. In this postfeminist cultural context we argue that these choices *and* struggles reflect women's bodies as moderators which have power to both appease and disrupt, reflecting a particular manifestation of moderate feminism; *Self-body-care*.

Self-body-care corporate feminism is a theory which "illuminates the landscaping of women's corporate bodies and organizationally compelled ways of performing gender" (Duffy et al., 2017: 261), as well as outlines a discursive space with potential for feminist affirmation. Drawing from Dean (2010), *Self-body-care* corporate feminism is a feminism located in the present. In therapeutic culture, looking after yourself as self-care is important in helping you stay at the top of your 'game': physically, emotionally and mentally, to balance out the impossibility of postfeminist expectations. Self-care is generally understood as activities you do voluntarily which help you feel healthy, relaxed and ready to take on your work and responsibilities. Self-care reflects treating yourself as a worthwhile person and showing that you are valuable, competent and deserving. Normalised in mental health and mindfulness practice, self-care is about identifying your needs and taking steps to meet them and taking proper care of yourself in order to function effectively in daily lives. Extended failure to self-care can result in debilitation or in the women leaders' case, can result in rejection. Here we understand *Self-body-care* corporate feminism as women taking 'proper' care of themselves as valuable, competent and deserving leaders; care provided by women to their own bodies and appearance, 'by you-for you.' *Self-body-care* explains how women identify their own body work needs and take steps to meet them; they take time to prioritise their body and appearance to stay at the top of their 'game' as elite leaders. This is infused with 'power femininity' where women independently and confidently achieve full power and maximal success (Kauppinen, 2013) and at the same time they are aware of, are influenced by, and challenge, inequalities and power balances.

Self-body-care corporate feminism has the following expressions which surfaced from the analysis: body work as a means of stabilising women leaders' privilege and enabling their continued

empowerment, as well as body work as protection against alienation from men *and* other women. How women 'look' and present themselves is their own individual responsibility. There is need for individual self-care and self-monitoring *and* the surveillance of other women through bodies and appearance. Women's success as an elite leader is dependent on personal initiative and entrepreneurialism and demonstration of choice, pleasure and confidence. In counterbalance, there is also awareness of gendered systems, inequalities and masculine norms and a coming together of women leaders offering opportunities for collective challenge. There is evidence from the women's accounts and our theorisations, of challenge to women's oppression and patriarchal contexts and opportunities for solidarity and common goals. In this way women leaders' body work becomes a site for both postfeminist discourse and a moderate feminist agenda for recognising and challenging embedded gender orders.

As a postfeminism phenomenon, empowering women with the confidence and information to look after themselves (bodies and appearance) enables them to have greater individual control of their own health without relying on community and societal systems. *Self-body-care* corporate feminism explains women's experiences as both empowering *and* constraining and reflects feminism *and* deflects feminism. The women are not victims; they are confident and powerful, distanced from outmoded notions of female disadvantage and they draw upon femininity and feminism while ensuring their assimilation. *Self-body-care* corporate feminism reflects how women leaders choose to 'please themselves' in how they look in the face of unrelenting demands of makeover, reinvention and bodily femininity. Women justify and rationalise their choices of how they present their bodies and appearance as they integrate masculine and feminine aspirations. This choice in relation to bodies and appearance takes place within acknowledged gendered masculine cultures. Their bodies become corporate imagery as a cultural resource that encodes their subjectivity as leaders (Duffy et al., 2017). The women leaders know what they are experiencing is gendered and that this continues to "mark

relations between men and women” (McRobbie, 2004: 260); we do see resistance and challenge, and inequalities are not always brushed aside.

Rottenberg’s (2014) argument that Sheryl Sandberg’s thesis of ‘true equality’ is based upon women moving through hierarchies *one woman at a time* and creates an isolated feminist consciousness where no radicalism is necessary. Such a premise is problematized by the dialectical nature of the women leaders’ accounts in our empirical studies. We are not defending Sandberg’s thesis. Further, we recognise that *Self-body-care* as a moderate feminism is primarily an individualised project grounded in choice, where accounts from women leaders reflect how they can feel empowered and confident when they are aware of, and know where they ‘stand,’ on their own body and appearance as leaders, as well as where they stand towards other women’s bodies and appearance. There is an “aesthetic competitiveness between individual women for recognition of their desiring subjectivity and desirable bodies, at the same time as presenting a corporate image of women [leaders] as a collective” (Duffy et al., 2017: 270). There is also space for a coming together of women. The women leaders are mostly white, ambitious and successful privileged women and many *are* concerned about feminist issues of solidarity and challenging gendered organisations and contexts. Some women recognise fiercely that women’s social and economic capital is so fragile within discriminatory and gendered systems that they commit to collectively challenging the system through formal routes e.g., the current Board Apprentice programme to increase overall diversity on company boards. Women top leaders are therefore constructed as individuated, empowered, entrepreneurial and confident career women and simultaneously, as engaging in feminist challenge against structural inequalities - from positions of magnificent organisational and economic power. It is this space where we see potential for moderate feminisms.

Raising consciousness to the importance of women leaders’ bodies and appearance in gendered contexts and providing a language for discussion is also effective in drawing attention to possible collective action to challenge systematic inequalities and structural barriers which constrain women in

organisations. In this way *Self-body-care* corporate feminism encapsulates women's success at corporate elite levels but does not reject feminism outright; it is more temperate than deconstructing the system as a whole (Cooley, 2016) but it is progress. In affirming a moderate feminism in specific discursive spaces (Dean, 2010) *Self-body-care* corporate feminism surfaces a dialectical interplay between distancing and affirmation of feminism (Dean, 2010) and expressions of how postfeminism and feminism can co-exist. This provides an imperfect space to value the potential of corporate feminism beyond "capitalism with tits" (Williams, 2007b in Dean, 2010: 399). GOS scholars could explore this complexity further to advance feminism knowledges, as well as explore where they position themselves as researchers and academics in relation to postfeminism and moderate feminisms when theorising women leaders' experiences in organisations. Challenges to gendered contexts and reflexive approaches to theorising can provide counterbalance to critiques of corporate feminists. Locating women leaders' accounts within ambivalence and complexity serves to further problematise the postfeminist thesis. Taken together this creates space for critique and alternatives, rather than a postfeminist closing down of critique (Rottenberg, 2014).

Self-body-care corporate feminism does not overcome the critique of moderate feminism as that which "transforms feminism based on collective liberation committed to the common good into a limited form of individuated self-care" (Rottenberg, 2014: 433). In fact it reinforces the expression of individual self-care within a therapeutic culture and aesthetic economy. However, we argue that "it is sometimes necessary to act under imperfect conditions. By letting go of the expectation that right action can occur only in the context of total system..." and normalising "activism within the confines of a corporation, then a window could open somewhere for feminism in the workplace"... allowing possibility of feminist progress within corporate contexts (Scott, 2006: 13). This requires acceptance of change that takes place in a "business organisation could not, ipso facto, discredit the activism that led to it" (Scott, 2006: 13). This would better recognise women leaders' potential for feminism and unfetter GOS researchers to write critically and constructively about the challenges that women leaders

are facing and the changes they are making, freeing us from a starting place of defence or apology. An example of this defensive stance comes from study two where we argued;

...we may be challenged for focussing our theory on elite, privileged, primarily white, western women, yet we make no apology. Women leaders in organizations remain as rare as pandas, their experiences are under-researched and their unique achievements offer us much in new avenues for theorizing and stretching ourselves (Author, 2016: 1117).

Unshackled from requirements to defend corporate feminism, GOS could better integrate feminist languages into business and management schools to provoke feminist discussion and “corporate feminists could be recognized for their efforts on behalf of the movement... and having others who recognize and support their efforts ‘on the inside’, as it were, could only produce more positive motivation for women... The cause of activism would be well served” (Scott, 2006: 13). Including these mostly white, middle class, economically and socially powerful women leaders in feminist research would open up opportunities to advance understandings of how inequalities continue to be produced and reproduced in organisations and contribute to feminist futures. *Self-body-care* corporate feminism as a moderate feminism is located in the ambiguous and imperfect place between postfeminism and feminism and offers opportunities for progressive change.

Conclusion

We offer *Self-body-care* corporate feminism as a contribution to feminist discussions to stimulate alternative thinking about the potential of moderate feminisms. *Self-body-care* as a theory of moderate feminism has not completely subsumed and silenced all feminist expression. As we end our paper we focus on Hirshmann’s (2010) point that a critical challenge for feminism is the “right to choose” as a fundamental premise means that “people won’t necessarily make the kinds of choices you want them

to make” (p.271). For feminists the choices some women top leaders have made and continue to make will not be the ones hoped for. For us, we are conscious of becoming more frustrated by the slow pace of collective action at the top of organisational hierarchies and the pervasiveness of postfeminist discourse. However we see potential and possibilities for disruption and change in more nuanced forms of moderate feminism, found in a space of interplay between reflecting and deflecting feminism. Future research into moderate feminism could extend this further.

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