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Developmental Paper

**The Reconfiguration of Femininity:
Comparing Neoliberalism, Postfeminism and Neoliberal Feminism**

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Introduction

This is a conceptual paper which compares neoliberalism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism as three key concepts which are drawn on to interrogate the reconfiguration of contemporary femininity. There is a tendency within current organizational writing to treat the overlaps between these three concepts as “a given”, as opposed to subjecting these intersections to critical scrutiny. This is particularly the case in relation to neoliberalism and postfeminism where the latter is regularly referred to as “gendered neoliberalism” (Gill & Scharff, 2011) without providing full explanation of what this exactly means. Three different dimensions to the interconnections between neoliberalism and postfeminism can be identified: first, their relationship to feminism and the cultural prominence both give to feminist principles of choice and empowerment. Second, the emphasis both place on the entrepreneurial individual who is governed by market logic and continuously invests in physical and mental capabilities to facilitate the accumulation of human capital. Third, the importance attached to reproductive as well as productive skills -the consequence of which is the “holding” of women within the realm of traditional femininity (Gill et al, 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014; Lewis & Simpson, 2017; Repo, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018). Taking these three dimensions into account, and to facilitate identification of the overlaps and divergences between neoliberalism and postfeminism exploration of neoliberalism and postfeminism is separated from consideration of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism.

Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

As a concept neoliberalism has been interrogated across a wide variety of disciplines with two key dimensions which have impacted on work and organizations highlighted (Birch, 2015). These relate to what Peck & Tickell (2002) label as the ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ of the state. ‘Roll-back’ of the state refers to the range of structural and policy changes which promote the view that markets and entrepreneurship are indispensable for the realization of a better world. ‘Roll-out’ refers to the promotion of a neoliberal ethic which disciplines individuals to be “free” such that they adopt a manner of living which is competitive, self-interested, market-focused and entrepreneurial alongside an acceptance that people’s well-being is the responsibility of the individual.

The experience of living a neoliberal life through the development of an entrepreneurial, market-focused subjectivity is increasingly of interest to organizational researchers. Focusing on what is referred to as the psychic life of neoliberalism as a means to make visible how individuals are constituted as neoliberal subjects at work, Scharff (2016) delineates the various dimensions of this subjectivity such as treating the self as a business, being constantly active, accepting risk and disavowing inequality. She shows how injury – both physical and psychological – caused by this subject position is hidden and constructed as personal weakness as opposed to a consequence of difficult working conditions. Similarly, Baker & Kelan (2018) investigate the psychic life of executive women under neoliberalism through a psychosocial lens, demonstrating how these women dismiss the idea of gender inequality and place an emphasis on individual agency and responsibility. They argue that despite experiencing the injuries of unfair treatment, women in senior positions manage corporate wounds through unconscious psychological processes of splitting and blaming such that they ‘...remain emotionally invested in upholding the neoliberal ideal that if one works hard, one shall be successful, regardless of gender (p. 22).

The stance taken by Baker and Kelan’s corporate women is ‘supported’ by the take-up of (liberal) feminist principles by many contemporary organizations, an acceptance which has formed the basis of critical assessments of neoliberalism. Central to such critiques is an influential narrative which argues that feminism has unintentionally legitimised corporate

capitalism (Eisenstein, 2009) and has been complicit in capitalist processes (Fraser, 2013). Neoliberalism is perceived to reduce the meaning of feminism to its most widely recognised form, namely, enabling women to enter the labour force and for a small number to secure access to power (Eisenstein, 2009, Fraser, 2013). As Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis (2017) argue, women are perceived to be crucial actors in the restructured neoliberal economy in contrast to their traditional treatment as a disposable, ‘reserve army of labour’.

This neoliberal reshaping of feminism establishes a connection with postfeminism as the ethic of neoliberalism which acts on individuals aligns with the subject constitution demands of postfeminism. Postfeminism is a malleable concept for which there are a range of interpretations. Within organizational work, postfeminism is treated as a discursive formation which governs everyday life, fashioning our views and actions towards feminism and women’s changing position in society. Both neoliberalism and postfeminism place a heavy emphasis on individualism and disavow the impact of structure on individual experience and behaviour. There is also a strong resemblance between the independent, agentic, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism and the freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism (Gill & Scharff, 2011: 7). As Gill (2008: 443) argues the current ‘...neoliberal postfeminist moment is importantly – perhaps pre-eminently – one in which power operates psychologically by governing the soul (such) that notions of choice, agency and autonomy have become central to that regulatory power’. Neoliberal’s co-optation of liberal feminism therefore gives life to the self-reinventing, economically independent woman around which postfeminist logics revolve, operating through a celebration of (liberal) feminist principles as opposed to a disavowal of feminism in general. However, the dynamics of the interdependent relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism are not just one-way. As the economically independent woman has the potential to ‘upend traditional gender hierarchies especially as women’s place in the workforce becomes a common-sense part of culture’, the postfeminist subject provides ‘at least one essential pivot point for neoliberalism by restabilising the increasingly unstable gender hierarchies’ (Dubriwny, 2013: 24-25). This steadying of gender hierarchies is achieved through the resignification of traditional femininity. Suffice to say here that establishing the connections between postfeminism and neoliberalism draws out the gendered dynamics of the latter with ‘...the embodied dimensions of neoliberalism finding gendered expression through postfeminism’ (Cairns & Johnston, 2015: 153). These overlaps mean that it is now commonplace to suggest that postfeminism *is part* of neoliberalism and not a separate phenomenon (Gill & Scharff, 2011, Scharff, 2016).

Postfeminism and Neoliberal Feminism

In mapping out elements of the postfeminist sensibility she identified, Gill (2017: 611) has always highlighted the degree of fit between the postfeminist subject and the neoliberal subject arguing that ‘postfeminism is as much a neoliberal sensibility as one defined by its relationship to feminism. It may be best thought of as a distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism’. Use of postfeminism as a critical concept by organizational researchers has entailed some differences to Gill’s original interpretation, in relation to feminism and femininity. First, Lewis (2014) in arguing for more extensive use of the concept of postfeminism in feminist analyses of organizations, questions the emphasis placed on the disavowal of feminism, maintaining instead that the postfeminist rejection of feminism refers to repudiation of an “excessive” feminism while promoting “moderate” feminism. The latter focuses on transformation of the individual woman as opposed to the structural revolution associated with the “excesses” of the former. This postfeminist domestication of feminism creates the conditions for a rapprochement with femininity, with the coupling of feminism and femininity manifesting in various features of postfeminism. However, in

mapping out the dimensions of the postfeminist sensibility and connecting this to the gendered dynamics of neoliberalism, Gill does not include motherhood as an aspect of female subjectivity which is subject to postfeminist demands, bringing us to the second difference in the way postfeminism is adopted. Lewis (2014) incorporates a maternal element into Gill's (2007) account of postfeminism by adding the feature of 'retreat to home as a matter of choice not obligation' derived from Negra (2009). Focusing on this choice to 'return home' along with the postfeminist dimensions of individualism, choice and empowerment and 'natural' sexual difference, Lewis (2014) argues that together these three features capture the dialectic tension between feminism (achievement in the public, masculine world of work) and femininity (feminized behaviour and maternal responsibilities in the private, feminine world of home). Out of the range of postfeminist femininities – individualized, maternal, relational, excessive - identified by Lewis (2014), variations of maternal femininity have received further research attention. For example, Sullivan and Delaney (2017) consider how neoliberalism and postfeminism shape the tension between feminism and femininity giving rise to an evangelical entrepreneurial femininity, Adamson (2017) and Rottenberg (2018) identify 'balanced femininity' and Lewis & Simpson (2017) consider the contemporary privileging of a feminine subject who simultaneously succeeds in the home and work domains where equal value is attached to activity in both realms. Later work (Turner and Simpson, 2018), demonstrates how this postfeminist maternal femininity translates in non-Western contexts through a study of Nigerian female doctors' experience of managing work and home. What all of these investigations of contemporary femininities draw out is the way feminist gains are celebrated while relations of gender domination are maintained through tradition in the form of motherhood.

Within a similar timeframe as these discussions of postfeminism and postfeminist femininities emerged in organizational research, Rottenberg (2014a, 2014b) identified the appearance of a new variant of feminism which she calls neoliberal feminism because it aligns seamlessly with neoliberal capitalism. Prompted by the emergence of 'feminist manifestos' written by corporate women (e.g. Anne-Marie Slaughter and Sheryl Sandberg) who in the past would have avoided any association with feminism, Rottenberg views neoliberal feminism as a form of governance which seeks to manage (at a distance) the mindset and behaviours of women so that they align with the requirements of a market economy. She argues that this new form of feminism produces a specific kind of *feminist* subject who is on the one hand agentic, self-reliant, individualised and entrepreneurial and on the other an active mother who builds a successful career while carefully *balancing* this with a fulfilling family life. Thus, the notion of 'balance' becomes a new feminist ideal replacing the traditional feminist goals of justice and emancipation such that transformation of social-economic and cultural structures is disavowed. External barriers to equality are reconceptualised as internal obstacles which individual women can address through cultivation of the right mindset, thereby 'defanging' feminism as an oppositional force (Rottenberg, 2014b).

Neoliberal feminism does two things according to Rottenberg: first, the call to women to be both productive and reproductive subjects through constituting an appropriate balance between work and family life enables the reproduction and maintenance of human capital which is necessary for neoliberalism. However, the neoliberal feminist requirement that women construct and maintain a 'happy' balance between work and family prevents them from securing the rewards and power that come with success on the labour market on the same terms as their male colleagues. Nevertheless, despite this tension and the 'defanging' of 'disruptive' feminism, Rottenberg (2018) argues that the second (unintended) consequence of the emergence of neoliberal feminism is the pervasive luminosity it awards feminism in general thereby creating a space for a more militant form of feminist movement to emerge.

In other words, despite attempts to moderate feminism, the popularity and desirability of this form of feminism, opens up a space for the development of more progressive feminist agendas such that ‘...the wholesale defeat of feminist agendas should not be a foregone conclusion’ (Prugl, 2017: 48).

Conclusion

In this paper, the overlaps and divergences between neoliberalism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism have been explored. I have highlighted how the connection between neoliberalism and postfeminism is strongly based on self-management and transformation such that women are perceived as the ideal subjects of neoliberalism, called to this position via the co-optation of the (liberal) feminist principles of agency and empowerment. On the other hand, the connection between neoliberal feminism and postfeminism makes visible the dialectic tension between feminist agency and feminine care manifest in the demand that individuals are both productive and reproductive subjects. Developing the paper will focus on the need to not only consider their commonalities but also to understand them as separate formations which impact on the reconfiguration of femininity in specific ways with consequences for organizations and those who work within them.

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