'Female Heroes': Celebrity Executives as Postfeminist Role Models

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This article explores the significance of contemporary celebrity businesswomen as role models for women aspiring to leadership in business. We explore the kind of gendered ideals they model and promote to women through their autobiographical narratives, and analyze how these ideals map against contemporary postfeminist sensibility to further understand the potential of these role models to redress the under-representation of women in management and leadership . Our findings show that celebrity businesswomen present a role model that we call the 'female hero', a figure characterized by 3Cs: confidence to jump over gendered barriers, control in managing these barriers, and courage to push through them. We argue that the 'female hero' role model is deeply embedded in the contemporary postfeminist sensibility; it offers exclusively individualized solutions by calling on women to change themselves to succeed, and therefore has limited capacity to challenge the current gendered status quo in management and leadership. The article contributes to current literature on role models by generating a more differentiated and socially-situated understanding of distant female role models in business and extending our understanding of their potential to generate sustainable and long-term change in advancing gendered change in management and leadership.

Keywords: Role models, celebrity executives, postfeminism, gendered ideals, leadership

Introduction

Despite substantial advances in gender equality in the workplace, research continues to highlight women's under-representation in management and leadership as an issue of both social and economic concern (Bendl, 2008; Eagly and Carli, 2007). For some time now, the popular press and business outlets have been rehearsing the argument that one of the causes for such under-representation is the lack of female role models in business (Catalyst, 2003; Frazer, 2014; Pereira, 2012). Academic research also highlights particular importance of *female* role models for women's success (e.g. Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Latu *et al*., 2013; Lockwood, 2006; Sealy and Singh, 2009; Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). Interestingly, a number of businesswomen who have made it to the top, for instance, executives like Sheryl Sandberg or Karren Brady, have recently gained a celebrity-like status and widely share their experiences

and advice on how women can become successful (Kapasi, Sang and Sitlo, 2016; Metz and Kumra, 2018). However, to date little is known about the significance of such business celebrity role models and their potential to redress the under-representation of women in management and leadership. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the gendered ideals modelled and promoted by contemporary celebrity businesswomen. By 'ideals' here we mean the behaviours, characteristics and values that are constructed as culturally and socially desirable for a particular (work) role and become norms against which to assess performance (Acker, 1990; 1992; Schein *et al.*, 1996).

The focus on 'distant' female role models (Gibson, 2003), i.e. those in the public domain, is important as research indicates that women look up to public figures for inspiration (Sealy and Singh, 2010). Moreover, female celebrity executives promote not only business ideas, but also particular ideals of *the kind of woman* one needs to be to achieve success (Adamson, 2017). They disseminate these views through media appearance and, increasingly, through publishing their autobiographical accounts. Selling millions of copies, these books are presented in the business press as 'must reads' for aspiring businesswomen (Revesencio, 2017) and provide a rich canvas against which female readers may shape their behaviour and identities (Metz and Kumra, 2018). This article analyses this increasingly popular outlet to understand the gendered ideals modelled by these celebrity executives.

To date research on role models has mainly focused on exploring *individual women's* performance and self-perceptions when exposed to distant female role models (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Hoyt and Simon, 2011; Latu *et al.*, 2013; Taylor *et al.*, 2011). The analysis of distant role models themselves particularly the gendered ideals they model, has receive little attention. Given that not all distant female role models have a positive impact on women or the gendered *status quo* in organizations (Faniko et al, 2017; Hoyt and Simon, 2011; Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014; Taylor *et al.*, 2011), such scrutiny is crucial to provide a better

understanding of the characteristics that mediate female role models' effect. Furthermore, because women admire *female* role models *both* for their work skills and the kind of gendered behaviour they exhibit (Kelan and Mah, 2014; Singh and Sealy, 2006), exploring the gendered ideals promoted by distant female role models in business is important to further theorize their potential to impact on the under-representation of women in management and leadership.

This inquiry is particularly timely given the growing popular sentiment in developed Westerns societies that gender equality has been achieved; this contemporary gender regime has been termed a 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007; 2016; Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017; McRobbie, 2009). One of its elements include the emphasis on individualized solutions for gender advancement such as constant self-improvement and business celebrity autobiographies may be seen as a source of various tips and advice that women may use to modify themselves to be successful. Hence, understanding whether or how the gendered ideals constructed by these powerful women map against this postfeminist cultural landscape is vital to further understand their impact and emancipatory potential. It must be noted that we do not use postfeminist as an identification; following Gill (2007; 2016) we view postfeminism as dominant set of cultural discourses around gender.

This article contributes to the literature on role models by analyzing that celebrity businesswomen as distant role models and the gendered ideals they promote. Drawing on the analysis of their autobiographies, we argue that they (re)present a specific gendered role model, which we call 'female hero', characterized by *3Cs: confidence* to jump over gendered barriers, *control* in managing these barriers, and *courage* to push through them. Understanding these gendered ideals in the context of a postfeminist sensibility lead us to question the extent to which celebrity business role models we analyzed may inspire sustainable change in the gendered *status quo* in management and leadership. Through offering a socially and culturally situated analysis, this paper contributes to a more sociological conceptualization of distant

female role models in business, complementing existing literature grounded in psychological theories that tends to focus on individual identity dynamics and interactions. In theorizing the emancipatory potential of distant female role models in business, this article also contributes to debates in this journal on understanding the under-representation of women in leadership (e.g. Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011; Main and Gregory-Smith, 2017; Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014; Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014), and answers a recent call for management studies to take account of broader questions of politics, economy and society (Wood and Budhwar, 2014).

The article proceeds with the review of the current research on gender and role models, explaining existing gaps and how our analysis may further existing theorization. We then outline the methodology and present our results. The conclusion highlights how the analysis of distant role models against the backdrop of postfeminist sensibility extends the current research on female role models in management and leadership.

Women, role models and postfeminism

Exploring how female role models may help foster women's advancement in management and leadership careers is crucial. Following Acker's (1990; 1992) theorizing of the 'ideal worker', research shows that historically leadership roles are gendered, meaning that, the implicit 'ideal' of a manager and leader is not neutral but privileges masculine traits and behaviours, leading to women being seen as less 'suitable' for such roles (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Schein *et al.*, 1996; Mavin and Grandy, 2013, 2016). Organizations are also gendered, as workplace structures are set up to favour the stereotypical life course of male workers, which continues to create barriers to women's advancement (Bendl, 2008; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014). Although management 'ideals' are changing (Lewis, 2014), the continuous under-representation of women in leadership positions signals that masculine ideals persist. Having more senior female role models in business is often cited as a potential way to

change this *status quo* (Frazer, 2014; Pereira, 2012), but in light of the above, understanding the kind of gendered ideals they construct is crucial to understand the extent to which this change may be possible.

The impact of female role models and the mechanisms of their influence on women have been extensively debated. Studies suggest that 'women are more inspired by outstanding female than male role models' (Lockwood, 2006, p. 36). Women use role models for motivation, self-definition and learning (Murrell and Zagenczyk, 2006). Exposure to successful senior female role models may help counter gender occupational stereotypes and enhance women's performance and career aspirations by illustrating possibilities for success and providing guides to behaviour that one can emulate (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Cheryan *et al.*, 2011; Latu *et al.*, 2013; Sealy and Singh, 2010; Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2013). In this respect, exploring distant role models (Gibson, 2003) in business is particularly important as women often *prefer* to learn from them given the lack of close senior role models in their own organizations (Sealy and Singh, 2010).

In experiments, exposure to distant role models, such as famous politicians or executives, often impacts positively on individual women's self-perceptions and performance of certain tasks (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Hoyt and Simon, 2010; Latu *et al.*, 2013; Taylor *et al.*, 2011). However, closer scrutiny of the characteristics of distant role models is required to fully understand their impact. For instance, research on distant female role models in politics demonstrates that a rise in the number of top female politicians does not result in a rise in women's aspirations to run for office, and has only a temporary inspirational effect on their behaviour (Broockman, 2014; Mariani *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, research in management and organization studies also shows that simply having more women in top executive positions does not automatically result in challenging the gendered *status quo* in organizations (Cross,

Linehan and Murphy, 2017; Derks *et al*., 2011; Faniko *et al*., 2017; Mavin, 2008; Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014).

Various characteristics of distant female role models may mediate their positive impact. Lockwood and Kunda (1997) argue that perceived similarity in features and circumstances matters for inspiration, for instance in relation to the model's domain of excellence or level of success. If female 'superstar' models are seen as too dissimilar their success may be perceived as unachievable which lowers women's self-evaluations and leads to role model's rejection (Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Hoyt and Simon, 2011). Similarly, role models lack an inspirational effect if women do not perceive them as having deserved their success (Taylor *et al*., 2011). Interestingly, *female* role models in particular are emulated and admired not only for their work skills, but also for the *gendered* behaviours they exhibit. For instance, female role models in science who embody the discipline's gender stereotypes are unlikely to influence women's beliefs about success (Cheryan *et al.* 2011). Women evaluate female role models against a whole set of criteria spanning their careers in organizations *and* their private lives, whereas male role models are evaluated against narrower criteria pertaining only to the workplace (Kelan and Mah, 2014). For instance, women may reject childless female role models, as these are seen to exemplify a 'masculine' career pattern (Singh, Vinnicombe and James 2006). Hence, understanding the gendered characteristics of female role models is crucial for theorization of their role and impact on women.

The majority of recent studies of role models are grounded in psychological theories of identification and learning, hence their main focus is on understanding how *individual women's* behaviour, aspirations and self-perceptions are shaped by exposure to distant female role models, and how gender shapes women's identification and learning process. Yet, there is a lack of a more socially-situated analysis of distant role models themselves, and what they model. Such exploration is vital because women create mental constructs based on a variety of

available role models (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008; Ibarra, 1999) and the latter is directly shaped by the social context (Fisher, 1988). Exploring the gendered ideals would allow us to unpack how wider cultural and social ideals become manifest in the contemporary distant role models available to women. Höpfl (2010, p.404) argues that many contemporary social role models present women with an image of femininity that is stereotypically docile and models self-interest. If similar is true for business role models, it has important implications for the kinds of impact they may have: research on mentoring indicates that initiatives which teach women to question and challenge gendered assumptions and practices are more successful in generating long-term positive impacts on gender in the workplace than simply teaching women to change their behaviour (de Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006). Hence, to further theorize the potential of distant female role models to aid women's advancement in management and leadership, we need a socially-situated analysis of the patterns of gendered ideals that they model and promote.

This article seeks to make such a contribution by exploring a distinct group of 'superstar' role models – celebrity female executives. Researchers agree that celebrity executives are highly influential in promoting certain managerial trends and/or leadership styles (Guthey, Clark and Jackson, 2009; Halsall, 2016; Huczynski, 2007). Similarly, as discussed previously, female celebrity executives promote certain desirable gendered behaviours and attitudes associated with achieving success (Adamson, 2017; Kapasi, Sang and Sitko, 2016). As role models are not chosen and cannot be seen in isolation from the social context (Fisher, 1988), we theorize female celebrity role models in business against the backdrop of a 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007; 2016; Gill et al, 2017) to see how and whether the ideals they construct map against these dominant cultural discourses about gender. We argue that such a sociological analysis allows us to foreground ways in which female business role models are embedded in the contemporary socio-cultural context, which is important and complementary to current

research that largely draws on psychological theorization of individuals' immediate interactions with close role models.

The concept of postfeminism initially developed in cultural studies (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; 2009), has only recently begun to find its way into management and organization studies (Lewis, 2014; Lewis, Benschop and Simpson, 2017; Kelan, 2009b, 2014). The term itself is contested (see Lewis, 2014), but one of the most productive ways for critical analysis is to understand it as a set of cultural discourses or a sensibility (Gill, 2007; 2016). Elements of postfeminist sensibility include 'a focus upon empowerment, choice and individualism', an emphasis on self-transformation and self-discipline as a path to achievement, and acknowledgement of certain gender issues such as sexism, but also a sense of 'fatigue' from gender issues and a resurgence of essentialist ideas of sexual difference (Gill *et al*., 2017, p.230). The postfeminist sensibility is distinctive, in that it represents an *entanglement* of feminist and anti-feminist ideas (McRobbie, 2004). For instance, it positions women as active and empowered agents, but at the same time, as McRobbie (2009, p.19) explains, supplants the feminist idea of collective struggle with a 'regime of personal responsibility', placing accountability for success or failure on the individual and dismissing structural concerns.

Postfeminist discourses appear progressive, but research demonstrates that they bring about new forms of sexism and contribute to the maintenance of gender inequalities. Kelan (2014) uses a postfeminist analysis to understand why young female professionals draw on the language of individual agency rather than structural gender inequalities, leading to their denial of the existence of gender discrimination at work. Similarly, Ronen (2018) shows how postfeminist rhetoric valorizes gender essentialism in design work, which obfuscates gender inequality. Lewis (2014) draws on postfeminist sensibility to highlight how only particular ways of enacting feminine identities are deemed valuable in organizations, while Adamson (2017) illustrates how work–life balance underpinned by postfeminist discourses entrenches

individual responsibility for achieving balance, while ignoring organizational obligations and structural constraints. We therefore suggest that understanding gendered ideals modelled by celebrity businesswomen against the backdrop of postfeminist sensibility may provide us with a deeper understanding of their potential to challenge gendered leadership ideals.

In summary, the literature on role models has not explored the broader patterns of gendered ideals promoted by contemporary distant female role models in business. Our analysis of celebrity businesswomen against the backdrop of postfeminism therefore seeks to move the theorization of role models and their impact beyond the current focus on individual interactions to a more sociological and socially-situated conceptualization.

Methodology

In order to unpack the gendered ideals modelled by contemporary business role models, we analyze their autobiographies. Exploration of autobiographies and other cultural genres is still unusual in management and organization studies, but such analysis is growing (Halsall, 2016; Kapasi, Sang and Sitko, 2016; Phillips and Rippin, 2010; Sims, 1993; Watson, 2009; Willhoit, 2014) and has the potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of the socio-cultural basis of gender workplace inequality (Adamson, 2017; Dempsey and Sanders, 2010). Our approach the autobiographical genre emerged from a social constructivist perspective, meaning that we see these texts as social constructions, rather than as a source of factual biographical information (Gilmore, 1994). From this perspective it is not important whether these texts present truthful facts about these celebrities' lives: in fact, the books may even be written by ghost writers and shaped by editorial decisions to communicate desired identities and messages. What *is* important is that these texts contribute to the creation of influential cultural 'ideals' – for instance those of a successful businesswoman by creating and normalizing certain representations, meanings and ideas about women and gender, and in doing so contribute to (re)productions of certain gender ideologies (Adamson, 2017).

Extant studies analyze between one and five autobiographies (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010; Phillips and Rippin, 2010; Sims, 1993; Watson, 2009; Willhohit, 2014) and there is no set template for selecting such texts. Given our focus, we made an exhaustive search of *all books* authored by female business celebrities that were published when we started the project in 2016 and our selection criteria and justification are explained in detail in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Book selection criteria and reading boundaries

Step by step selection criteria	Justification	Books excluded based on this criteria
1. Books authored by *celebrity women*, but only those who achieved their fame through *business activity*, i.e. executives, business owners etc.	Our focus on *distant female role models* was due to a theoretical rationale: Lockwood (2006) suggests women are more inspired by female role models than male. Moreover, studies in management and leadership have been critiqued for being dominated by men's accounts while women's voices are typically side-lined (Calás and Smircich, 1999; Stead and Elliott, 2009). Although 'the autobiographical 'I' is acknowledged to be a textual construction' rather than in any way real historical representation, focusing on female written texts is still seen as important as they complement '*his*tory' with '*her* story' (Joannou, 1995, p.32). Our focus on *business* celebrities was determined by research suggestions that similarity is important for identification with role models (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997), hence, business celebrities were deemed more likely to be seen as credible role models by women aspiring for careers in business.	After an exhaustive search, 21 books written by female business celebrities were identified. Books written by female celebrity actors, musicians, politicians and so on were not considered.
2.The book had to be *an autobiography* or draw consistently on autobiographical events	We were not interested in the neutral business advice *per se* (i.e. how to do business), but, as we explain in the literature review, our core interest was in the *gendered ideals* that female role models construct (i.e. how to succeed in business *as a woman*), because	Ten books were excluded based on this criteria, because they were a *different genre:* a) pure *business advice* with no or very little mention of any

	research links the way in which these ideals are articulated to the possibility of gendered change (Hopfl, 2010; de Vries et al, 2006). Therefore, only autobiographical narratives with rich personal details and focus on explaining the gendered nature of these women's success journey provided data that enabled us to explore this.	autobiographical detail (6 books), focus was on: a) *company's history* (3 books) c) *personal memoirs* with brief vignettes containing no discussion of career or business journey (1 book).
3.Books that featured women's accounts of *motherhood and work-family balance*	As we were interested in the *gendered* ideals, the experience of negotiating work and family boundaries continue to be a big part of such constructions for women, and, as research suggests, work-family balance remains one of the main barriers for women in management (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009). Exploring accounts that contained these discussions helped us explore this.	Only two books were excluded based on this criterion.
4. Popularity. The books we selected had to feature on 'best-seller' lists or show other signs of popularity e.g. abundant reader reviews (we checked Business Insider, Forbes, Amazon, Goodreads etc.).	The popularity of these books matter, as more popular ones reach broader audience and therefore are more influential.	Only one book was discarded based on this criteria as it only featured 11 reviews respectively on Amazon, and 7 and reviews on Goodreads (while all other books had at least over 100), indicating lack of popularity.
5. Date of publication	As new books are constantly being published we had to draw a line for our data collection somewhere, so we included all autobiographies that fit the criteria outlined above that were published before November 2016 (when we started coding).	Two other books that were published after our data collection cut-off date (2017 and 2018 respectively) were not included in the analysis. However, a brief read suggests they feature very similar themes.

As explained in Table 1, the main attrition was due to genre so ten pure business self-help

books with no autobiographical details were excluded; two books were excluded as they did

not feature any work-family balance accounts, and one was due to lack of popularity. This left us with eight autobiographies (see Table 2) comprising over 2000 pages of text, which is a significant corpus for such an analysis.

Table 2. List of autobiographies

Name	Position	Country	Title of Book	Year
Nicola Horlick	Former managing director at Morgan Grenfell, investment fund manager	UK	Can you really have it all?	1997
Mary Ash Kay	Founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics	US	Miracles Happen: The Life and Timeless Principles of the Founder of Mary Kay Inc.	2003
Ariana Huffington	Entrepreneur and co-founder of The Huffington	US	On Becoming Fearless...in love, work, and life	2006
Deborah Meaden	Entrepreneur and investor, a star of Dragon's Den	UK	Common Sense Rules: What you really need to know about business	2009
Karren Brady, CBE	Former vice chairman of West Ham football club and a star of the Apprentice	UK	Strong Woman: Ambition, grit and a great pair of heels.	2012
Hilary Devey, CBE	Founder and CEO of Pall-Ex logistics and a star of Dragon's Den	UK	Bold as Brass: My Story	2012
Sheryl Sandberg	COO of Facebook	US	Lean In: Women, work, and the will to lead.	2013
Michele Mone, OBE	Founder of Ultimo, entrepreneur and designer	UK	My Fight to the Top	2015

As we do not intend to generalize our findings across the whole scope of distant role models, we determined that this sample was sufficient to gain a good sense of the general patterns of gendered ideals demonstrated by female business role models. Furthermore, with each book

we analyzed, fewer new points emerged, suggesting that we had covered the main sense-making processes.

We used Potter and Wetherell's (1987) version of discourse analysis, which views discourse as a social practice that constructs and is constructed by the social world (Kelan, 2009). In this sense, business celebrity autobiographies are a form of discourse. Discourse has several characteristics: it is functional, meaning that it aims to achieve certain effects, it is tailor-made to a specific context, and it is rhetorically organized to convince the audience (Kelan, 2009b). A key tool for this version of discourse analysis is the interpretative repertoire, a unit of sense making similar to a register, which is mobilized to make a point in a specific format or style (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Interpretative repertoires are routine arguments that often contain familiar clichés and tropes (Edley, 2001), and these may overlap or be contradictory. As Wetherell and Potter (1992) suggest, repertoires are available choreographies that may share specific dance moves but are nevertheless observable as a recognizable pattern in their unique formation. This version of discourse analysis is typically used to show how common-sense ideas are constructed as non-questionable, and is therefore is well-suited to our analysis the gendered ideals constructed by celebrity role models.

We began by conducting a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013), which is commonly used as a starting point prior to discourse analysis. As autobiographical texts contain information about various aspects of celebrity life, on our first reading, we looked for passages that discussed what it was like and what is required to achieve career success as a woman as this was our focus. Both authors then re-read and coded these excerpts separately. Various code themes emerged, such as family influence, organization of private life, perceptions of equality, making choices, self-management, work attitudes, etc. Next, we embarked on discourse analysis and, as Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest, the key here is to ensure intimate familiarity with the data, achieved through (re)reading and looking for noticeable discursive

patterns that emerge from an array of identified codes. The process is not always linear or a matter of 'following a recipe' (Wetherell and Potter, 1988, p. 177), and it is necessarily interpretative. Focusing on function, i.e. how accounts are constructed and what they are seeking to achieve, is central to this process. Hence, we sought to understand how the broader patterns of making sense of what it means to be a successful woman in business was constructed. Our analysis indicated that this sense-making was characterized by three dominant interpretative repertoires that were consistently and repeatedly used to explain ways of dealing with gendered barriers: developing the *confidence* to overcome gendered career barriers, the *control* to manage barriers that cannot be overcome, and the *courage* and perseverance to push through barriers where necessary. While there was some (expected) overlap in codes (e.g. the self-management code was part of both the confidence and control repertoires), the repertoires were recognizable and distinct in explaining different aspects of the gendered ideal being presented. Wetherell and Potter (1988, p.174) suggest that significant variation in people's accounts is a natural feature of language use, but that dominant repertoires need to be selected that are present in *most* accounts. The three repertoires we discuss occurred regularly in *all* the books and, in combination, captured the typical sense-making process determining what it takes to be successful as a woman.

The final reflexive note here is on our positionality which is that of involved researchers 'who are passionately and caringly engaged in transformative struggles' (Pio and Essers, 2014, p.253) of women in organizations. As we did not conduct fieldwork *per se*, our intellectual positionality as feminist researchers is what primarily shapes our study and analysis. Seeking to add to feminist analysis in organization studies (see Calás and Smircich, 1999; Ashcraft, 2009), determines our focus is on women's issues and voices with the view to highlight and challenge institutionalized social and intellectual gendered practices and structures. We followed discourse analytic requirement to keep an open mind and read against the grain

(Wetherell and Potter, 1988) and a rigorous analytical procedure outlined in this section. However, reading and analysis is a socially constructed process in itself which means, inevitably, that different researchers might read material differently.

The 3Cs of success: Analyzing the female hero

Our analysis suggests that the autobiographical texts of celebrity businesswomen present their female readers with a specific role model, which we call the 'female hero'. This gendered ideal of a 'female hero' demonstrates to the reader the behaviours, values and attitudes that are allegedly necessary for women to achieve success in today's business environment. This metaphorical discursive image, a figure of a female hero, is produced by three main interpretative repertoires: *confidence*, *control* and *courage*. In calling this role model a female 'hero' rather than 'heroine', we seek to highlight the gendered nature of this ideal. While heroes are traditionally male, women now adopt agency albeit with a feminine undertone to perform this 'heroism' which does not challenge traditional conceptions of leadership as we show below. In modelling this ideal underpinned by the *3Cs*, celebrity executives appear to perform the individualism and self-responsibilization characteristic of postfeminism, and reframe structural issues as personal barriers, as something that women may simply learn to overcome if they make the right choices.

Confidence

Confidence stood out as a very consistent repertoire relayed in all the books, suggesting that it is absolutely necessary for women in order to succeed in business:

> Women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves
> back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our
> hands (Sandberg, p. 8).

> I've never been the one to pass up an opportunity. It is a 'Yes, you can!'
> philosophy … Women […] have so much potential they never tap. Why? Because
> they lack self-confidence (Kay, p. 9).

> I might have been shy around my friends but when it came to work, I had this
> armour of confidence that I would throw on… I could sell anything. (Mone, p. 18)

These quotations illustrate the constructed necessity for confidence, rhetoric that echoes the typical image of the 'can-do' girl in postfeminist discourse who exemplifies a shift from women being objects to becoming active and doing subjects (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Celebrity executives do acknowledge that some gender barriers exist. However, being confident is presented as a way to overcome and leap these barriers:

> When you come to a road block, take a detour. Go in another direction. Don't let
> a stumbling block stop you. Go over, under, around… but don't give up. Have
> confidence in yourself, and you'll find another route (Kay, p. 99).

> This is what I had: passion, determination and a 'can-do' attitude. If you've got
> those ingredients, nothing will stop you (Mone, p.16).

Gill and Orgad (2016) in their exploration of the 'confidence culture' note that despite the seeming difficulty of arguing with the idea of the importance of confidence, it is important to critically scrutinize the drawbacks of the contemporary 'confidence cult'. Building on their critique, we suggest that the confident ideal modelled by celebrity female executives is problematic, because it is ridden with contradictions and seems to imply that structural gender inequalities at work may be easily surmounted by changing personal attitudes. Firstly, confidence and self-esteem are positioned in most books as attributes that one is born with or develops in early age:

> I am known to be forceful in my views […] I had been brought up in an environment where my father regarded my mother as his equal and where I had been given all the same opportunities as my brother. It was a shock to realize that other women were not as lucky (Horlick, p. 47).

> I was confident I could take care of myself. My mother used to say, 'you're absolutely fearless' […] even as a child I wanted to … do my own thing (Brady, pp. 25–26).

Such matter-of-fact discussions seem to suggest that confidence is something that is already there. Apart from the fact that you simply need to think yourself confident, or 'be lucky' with your upbringing, there are limited suggestions on how it may be developed. Meaden (p. 16) suggests that sometimes 'confidence comes from feeling in control', but continues to affirm that 'if you are naturally confident it can be easier to make things happen'. Furthermore, confidence for women must be carefully balanced in 'the right way':

> The twin-sister of confidence is self-esteem. But never confuse self-esteem with being cocky, though. A know-all is worse than a know-nothing (Brady, pp. 46–47).

> I would not suggest that anyone move beyond feeling confident into arrogance or boastfulness. No one likes that (Sandberg, p. 34).

These suggestions echo the double bind often discussed in relation to women in leadership – a narrow path of acceptable behaviour that women must navigate to avoid violating gender and leadership norms (Kelan, 2009a; Mavin and Grandy, 2013, 2016; Schein *et al*., 1996). The female hero must be forthcoming and confident, an attribute often expected of men; but to 'compensate for her transgression into male territory and avert a feared reprisal' (Schubart, 2007, p. 18), she must show confidence in a balanced way, indicating that women's inclusion

17

in the male world of leadership remains conditional. Figuring out the fine line of doing confidence 'correctly' remains up to the reader. Confidence is thus a typical pattern of explanation of how to overcome gender-based barriers – a sentiment underpinned by postfeminist ideas of extreme agency, constant self-improvement and individualized solutions to structural issues (Gill, 2007; Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017).

Control

Another repertoire that emerges as a pattern of explanation for the success of the 'female hero' is being in control, which is necessary to help her to *manage* the gendered barriers that may hinder her career. The female hero is expected to be in control of all aspects of her life: private life, kids, work, partner, and herself. All the texts acknowledge that combining family and work remains a barrier to women:

> I didn't want anyone to think I was slacking… Getting up at 6am I continued to do fifteen-hour days… However bad the night had been, I still got up the next morning and, like any working mother, prised my eyelids open with matchsticks to start the day... It's hard when you're a mother who works – and particularly so if you're a single working mother. As a single parent, there was never any lenience shown towards me… child or no child. I accepted it – that was my job (Devey, pp. 175; 179–182).

Despite the difficulties, the accounts assert that the female hero never stops aspiring for both work and family and that it is possible to combine the two, as long as she exercises a tight grip of control over both domains. The books present a variety of strategies for managing the typical barriers associated with being a working mother, such as giving up their social lives, making quick decisions, planning ahead, and delegating duties to housekeepers and nannies, and running family with business efficiently:

Some mothers worry if they leave their child with a nanny or childminder. This did not concern me… I could only do my job properly if I had a good, experienced nanny… I also wanted someone who was going to keep the house tidy and look after the baby clothes properly (Horlick, pp. 125–136).

My children had household duties … I [developed] a standardized performance-appraisal system… I didn't know at the time that I was using a standard employee-management technique … nevertheless it worked (Kay, pp. 93–94).

With two teenage children we have worked out how to run our lives in the smoothest way possible. My PA sends [my husband] a copy of my schedule every week and he compares it with what he has to do (Brady, p. 125).

Celerity businesswomen construct themselves as 'just working mothers' which makes them relatable as role models for other working women. The tactics they outline seem to have the potential to free up time and allow women to manage high-intensity top jobs and families. However, these are presented as simple personal choices that anyone can make and the privilege of having financial resources needed to be able to exercise this control, for instance, to hire a nanny which may be a pricey option not possible for many professional women, are rarely acknowledged. This rhetoric also renders gendered and classed labour chains (McDowell, 2008) invisible and unproblematic: the housekeepers, nannies and cleaners who make it possible for these executive women to stay in control themselves are unlikely to have access to similar life 'choices'. This reflects postfeminist rhetoric which, as Gill and Scharff (2011) and McRobbie (2009) argue, is a white, middle-class project that gives little consideration to any kinds of social challenges that may be involved in accessing these strategies.

In addition to controlling work–life balance, the female hero is also in control of her partner. For instance choosing the right partner to support her goals:

> I was as ambitions in love as in my work. It would have been very easy for me to end up with [a typical local] guy … that's what life was like - you got pregnant, you got a house … and you never got out…[but] I had ambition… I was getting lots of attention form guys but I hadn't yet met anyone who shared the same goals as me. (Mone, 23-25)

In addition to being careful in partner 'choices', most autobiographies emphasize that men typically do not do enough household and childcare work, which creates a barrier for women, but suggest it is possible to manage this barrier by 'making your partner a real partner':

> A mother has great power to encourage or impede the father's involvement … the single most important career decision that a woman makes is whether she will have a life partner and how that partner is… no one comes fully formed … even after finding the right guy… use the beginning of a relationship to establish the division of labour (Sandberg, pp. 109–116).

The strategy of taking responsibility for teaching or persuading partners to be involved is, of course, highly gendered, since there is no equivalent advice for men to ensure they choose the right woman or teach her to do childcare adequately. While sounding sensible, this rhetoric seems to relieve men of responsibility for their actions and place it on women instead to identify and educate men, exemplifying how the postfeminist regime (McRobbie, 2009) encourages women to interpret their success *and failure* in the language of personal choice and responsibility. In other words, if the right choices are made, success is possible; if not, it is your own fault.

Similar tropes of control are found in discussions of women's working environment, where women are encouraged to make active choices around their work demands:

> Giving 100 per cent is simply not realistic all of the time … working smart, keeping yourself business fit, bringing yourself to peak condition when it is needed and slowing down for rest […] is far more effective (Meaden, p. 19).

> Insecurity creates … workaholism. […] when we feel we have to prove ourselves, we give priority to our jobs over everything and everyone else (Huffington, p. 98).

> [Work] would never stop making demands on our time, so it was up to us to decide what we were willing to do. It was our responsibility to draw the line … if later on the job did not work out, we would know that we had tried on our own terms (Sandberg, p. 127).

The rhetoric of hyper-agentic choice surfaces again in managing work demands, implying that if one's 'own terms' are not working, then responsibility lies with employees' rather than organizations' unreasonable demands. Although comforting and sensible, this rhetoric works to remove from the picture the organizational responsibility and the pressure of an ever-growing production demand that shape the workplace, and to rearticulate these structural issues in the language of personal choice and responsibility.

Finally, in addition to home, work and partner, the female hero must be in control of her own self to achieve business success. Interestingly, a big part of this is controlling her feminine characteristics, for instance her emotional state or appearance:

> I don't get emotional – if something is wrong I try to solve the problem … I take all emotion out of it [work] and find I work well… it doesn't mean you have to be cold or unfeeling… It's about being clear, precise and operationally succinct… it's not about being a bully (Brady, pp. 29, 49).

I definitely believe that women should pursue any career they wish, but I don't think they should totally abandon looking and acting feminine. There is no reason for a successful woman to behave like a man (Kay, p. 108).

Most books suggest that retaining femininity is paramount to success, a call that echoes the postfeminist return to gender essentialism (Gill, 2007). Brady's quotation above suggests that it is necessary to retain self-control over one's emotions, implying that excessive emotionality is a typical 'female' issue, but also points to the intricacy of balancing traits considered as 'feminine' – being not too emotional but not too cold either. As with confidence, this echoes the difficulty for women of finding the 'right' way of doing gender (Mavin and Grandy, 2013), and indicates how these suggestions are underpinned by a postfeminist sensibility that encourages women to take on some agentic 'masculine' traits while embracing and maintaining femininity (Gill, 2007). Thus, the control repertoire explains how the female hero can achieve success by managing gendered barriers. In indicating that getting to the top is do-able by using the suggested practical tactics, the texts imply that choosing to be in control is a woman's responsibility if she wants to succeed.

Courage

Finally, while some barriers can be jumped over or managed, others must be pushed through, and celebrity executives certainly model the courage and perseverance required to do so.

[Our female] fears of sticking our necks out because of how we'll be perceived often causes us to sabotage our careers… if you want to succeed big, there is no substitute for simply sticking your neck out (Huffington, pp. 93, 105).

Achieving business success is portrayed as hard work, and being a female manager, in particular, is presented as a constant struggle. Therefore, she needs determination, grit and fortitude to stop complaining, push through the barriers and just 'get on with it':

> Career is built on sheer hard work – endurance and tolerance, relentless energy, the constant battle between kids and work. You can't stop when you are tired; you have to push on (Brady, p. 100).

> I never give up. No matter what challenges life throws at me, I'll still pull myself out of ben the next morning and get on with it. That's what I had to do when I was growing up and that's what I do to this day (Mone, p2).

Much of the discussion around pushing through the barriers centres around the vocabulary of endurance, perseverance, gritting one's teeth but still having optimism rather than fear or 'rather than spending hours comparing experiences and swapping tales of doom (Meaden, p.19). Accounts of how women have pushed through gendered barriers are described in a very heroic, emotional tone. Interestingly, heroism is necessary to push through these barriers in the interest of personal success, but there is little suggestion of dismantling these barriers or questioning how and why they are there in the first place, which also means they are implicitly constructed as inevitable, and often unmalleable. Schubart's (2007, p. 23) exploration of female hero portrayals in cinema shows that 'most of the acts female heroes perform are about proving they are as good as men, better than men … [but they do not] enter society and absorb social unrest'. Our female hero's fight is also mainly with her (feminine) self, her personal obstacles and realities, rather than with the system that creates them, which echoes the exaggerated agency and individualism ingrained in the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007).

So what about the happy ever after? Typically, after a (male) hero defeats dragons and beasts, a reward awaits him – a princess, a castle, a crown. So what is the female hero's prize? Some of the books do discuss rewards:

I do have my indulgencies… like Chanel. But other luxuries, I'm not bothered about. I don't mind a massage but I'm usually too busy to enjoy it (Brady, pp. 98–99).

I never liked those things other people seemed to enjoy for relaxation. I never had time to learn how to play games like tennis, and I absolutely hated cocktail parties (Kay, p. xi).

As the quotations suggest, after surpassing the barriers and achieving resounding success, there is little time left to enjoy the things that money can buy. This impasse is presented in the spirit of personal choice: both Brady and Kay imply that they do not want these 'rewards' anyway. So compared with men, who may indulge in an overabundance of posh cars, gambling and parties, the female hero is constructed as more sensible, modest and frugal, resonating with a rather gendered post-crisis argument that women have different ethical duties and moral capacity superior to men (Prügl, 2012). Furthermore, despite encouraging women to strive for success, concerns creep in about whether wealth will bring her true happiness - love. Mone (p.40) writes that 'The more successful I became [at work] the more arguments we had at home', and Devey (p.232) remarks: 'I don't think there are many men who can cope with a woman like me – someone so decisive and, let's face it, financially successful.'

So in the end, it seems that women's reward for courage and hard work is, in fact, more work:

When I read articles about the lives of successful women which make them seem like one long shopping trip to Bond Street … I just laugh. The truth is that the more successful you become, the harder you work (Brady, p. 93).

Yes, it will be tough, but it will be fun too. It is the sheer nature of entrepreneurs that they will enjoy the gruelling times (Meaden, p. 27).

The story therefore has a rather anti-climactic finale: 'and she worked happily ever after' echoing postfeminist expectation of a 'working girl' being dedicated to her career (McRobbie, 2009). While some celebrity writers mention that 'we should transform the meaning of work' (Huffington, p. 112), the female hero role model that emerges from the texts continues to exemplify mainly how to 'forge a path through obstacles' (Sandberg, p. 172), rather than to take them down.

Discussion

As with any other cultural representations, the female hero role model that we have described is not a fixed and actual person to be emulated, but a cultural 'ideal', a set of social and cultural expectations that seem to dominate these accounts. Endowed with authority of celebrities who construct them, this gendered ideal may become powerful in defining what counts as culturally valuable and desirable. By unpacking the 'female hero' ideal promoted by female celebrity executives, we have contributed insights into the current understanding and theorization of distant female role models in the following ways.

We have argued that unveiling hitherto under-researched patterns of the gendered ideals that contemporary celebrity executives model and understanding whether and how they are underpinned by postfeminist discourse helps us offer such culturally and socially embedded analysis of distant role models in business. In exploring distant role models in business against the backdrop of postfeminist sensibility, we move the current theorization of role models, grounded mainly in psychological theories and focuses on individual women's identification with models, towards a more sociological understanding. Looking beyond individual interactions allows us to show how distant role models and the gendered ideals they present, are a site where gendered social norms become manifest and are negotiated, enabling further understanding of the emancipatory potential of such role models.

Our analysis complements and extends current theorizations of the capacity for distant role models to aid women's advancement in management and leadership (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Hoyt and Simon, 2010; Latu *et al.*, 2013; Taylor *et al.*, 2011) by highlighting how the kind of behaviours and values they model may mediate their impact. We have argued that, despite a certain 'spirit' of agency and achievement, the extent to which the gendered ideal modelled by business celebrities may have a sustainable impact on women's advancement in the workplace may be rather limited. As our findings indicate, the female hero role model is underpinned by three discursive repertoires: *confidence, control* and *courage*. The books suggest that, if women emulate this *3Cs* ideal, it is entirely possible to jump over, manage or push through gender workplace barriers. This ideal promotes the possibility of achieving success solely through exercising (hyper)agency, making the right personal choices, working hard on self-discipline and taking full responsibility for succeeding or failing. This suggestion that women can simply 'choose' to overcome gender barriers echoes postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017) and is problematic because it dismisses any need to question the deeper structural and organizational obstacles that sustain the gendered *status quo*. Current research (Cheryan *et al.*, 2011; De Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006; Sealy and Singh, 2010; Mariani *et al.*, 2015) indicates that long-lasting sustainable change in generating women's advancement happens when women are encouraged to recognize and challenge gender barriers, rather than focus on changing their individual behaviour. However, the female hero role model that we have analyzed seeks only to teach women how, through individual change, they may be able to adjust to and navigate gendered barriers. It exemplifies how to 'fit into' the gendered capitalist work arrangement, not how to begin to disrupt it.

Hence, the article contributes further evidence to the literature that questions whether merely increasing the number of senior female women will necessarily aid women's emancipation (Cross*,* Linehan and Murphy, 2017; Derks *et al.*, 2011; Faniko *et al.*, 2017;

Mavin, 2008; Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014) by showing how celebrity role models may perpetuate the *status quo*. Höpfl (2010, p. 404) argues that the 'truly heroic dares to contradict', yet, the ideal modelled by business celebrities offers almost no vocabulary for questioning the gendered nature of leadership, nor does it encourage any fundamental challenge to the system of work. The 'female hero' ideal constructed by female business celebrities is largely shaped by and perpetuates the contemporary postfeminist sensibility, where political and economic issues are reframed as personal barriers and individual responsibility (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In promoting these ideals, these distant role models contribute to the very individualistic 'one-woman-at-a-time' logic which perpetuates gendered barriers within organizational environments through making them appear less significant.

The fact that these role models offer only individualized and often inaccessible solutions to structural problems may explain why studies show that 'superwomen' role models do not always inspire women, and may reduce their self-esteem (Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Hoyt and Simon, 2011). However, this is where the postfeminist sensibility starts to unfold its power: while these ideals are indeed unachievable for most ordinary women, these texts speak to genuine issues that women experience in the workplace and offer simple strategies to overcome or manage gendered barriers, backed by personal examples. This reframing of structural barriers in the language of individual effort and choice puts success within anyone's reach. If some women fail, it is because they do not try hard enough. Coupled with a pro-active and optimistic postfeminist spirit, this ideal becomes very seductive and relatable, and potentially more damaging for individual women. The implications of the dominance of the 'female hero ideal' for gender issues in organizational environment are also significant. An exclusive focus on the individual's capabilities to overcome barriers diverts our attention from questioning how and why these barriers appear in the first place and how to challenge them. In its emphasis on self-responsibility, the female hero ideal also perpetuates the focus on 'fixing

the women' and moves the onus away from organizational responsibilities to structurally address inequalities.

Conclusion

In analyzing contemporary distant female role models in the context of postfeminism, we have argued that celebrity role models in business have limited potential to make a long-term impact on redressing the gendered *status quo* in leadership.

Our analysis points to a number of avenues for further research. First, it would be useful to explore and compare the interpretative repertoires drawn on by celebrity male executives with those we have explored as there is good reason to suspect that male autobiographies would emphasize different aspects of leadership ideals. Second, we need to explore whether similar work ideals are presented to female and male readerships, and how these are perceived, because current research indicates that, even if the same behaviours are encouraged in both men and women aspiring to leadership, their experiences of performing them may differ (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Further analysis is also needed to explore how race and ethnicity are currently written into or out of the autobiographies. This might extend the research focus to exploring how issues of intersectionality are relevant to role model identification. Finally, our analysis focuses on role models in the developed Western contexts of the UK and the US. Although, due to globalization processes, these may be considered to be international role models (Dosekun, 2015), further exploration is necessary of how the postfeminist ideals they export are viewed differently and/or challenged in non-Western contexts, particularly those with collective rather than individualist values, or where women still experience significant discrimination.

This article has shown how celebrity role models are embedded in and reproduce a postfeminist sensibility which perpetuates hyper-individualistic effort as the main way to achieve equality. While important, this emphasis alone cannot lead to sustainable change,

otherwise the number of women CEOs would not be decreasing (Miller, 2018). Hence, it is necessary to imagine different ideals and discourses that, perhaps, would emphasize the systemic nature of barriers encountered by women, encourage mutual support and alliances to collectively challenge existing structures, and urge those at the top of organizations to work to remove the gendered barriers. Exposing the implications and limitations of the current individualistic nature of role model discourses, as this article has done, may also be another step toward generating greater awareness and creating a platform for change.

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