Postfeminism, men, masculinities and work: a research agenda for gender and organization studies scholars

Abstract

Mobilizing the concept of postfeminism as a sensibility, this article invites organization and gender scholars to examine how postfeminist masculinities are discursively constituted and performed by men within contemporary work contexts. Acknowledging that women are interpellated within postfeminist discourses as empowered and autonomous subjects whose lives are shaped by individual choice, this article explores the implications for men, in particular how men variously perform postfeminist masculinities and the implications for addressing gendered inequalities within the workplace. Developing a research agenda, this article outlines three research trajectories: 1) problematizing a gender binary in which women are depicted as empowered at work and men in a state of crisis; 2) interrogating signs of 'new' postfeminist masculinities coded as inclusive in the workplace and; 3) examining how different types of men perform postfeminist masculinities at work. This article concludes by providing examples of research questions to generate future organizational scholarship in these areas.

Keywords: Postfeminism, men, postfeminist masculinities, work, gender.

Introduction

This article draws on Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminism as a sensibility in order to examine and advance research on contemporary men and masculinities in the context of work. Specifically, it invites organization and gender scholars to explore how postfeminist masculinities are discursively constituted, both within postfeminist media culture and within the contemporary world of work. Postfeminist men and masculinities might be said to be distinct and historically specific from those that existed during second wave feminism. As Nettleton (2016: 124) points out, in modern postfeminist culture, men must negotiate the demands made upon them by feminism: treating women as equals; sharing childrearing and domestic responsibilities and; caring for their female partners who may be more empowered, autonomous and successful in and outside work. As such, discursive constructions of postfeminist masculinities are of particular interest because they appear to have taken feminism into account. Yet the discursive assembly of postfeminist masculinities is, as this article demonstrates, replete with contradictions because performances of postfeminist masculinities may also reinforce traditional, patriarchal discourses of masculinity (Clark, 2014).

Mindful of this, it is unwise to predict both the content and effects of postfeminist masculinities in and outside work. For one thing, research shows that postfeminist masculinity ought not to be reduced to a specific mode or particular type of man (Brabon,

2007; Kolehmainen, 2012; Gann, 2016). As such, the primary aim of this article is to encourage more engaged research in the complicated ways in which discourses of postfeminist masculinities are historically patterned and intermingle with cultural and economic discourses. Specifically, organization and gender scholars are called upon to examine the conditions of emergence for discourses of postfeminist masculinities in the workplace and the potential effects the performance of these discourse have on men and women. As such, this article proposes three research trajectories that, in the context of work organizations, focus on: 1) problematizing how postfeminist media culture reproduces a binary between empowered women and vulnerable men in crisis; 2) interrogating signs of 'new' postfeminist masculinities coded as caring and inclusive and; 3) examining how different types of men perform postfeminist masculinities at work.

A research agenda on postfeminism, masculinities, men and work is apposite for a number of reasons. First, with some notable exceptions (Harlow, 2004; Kelan, 2008, 2009, 2010; Lewis, 2014; Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015), organization and gender scholars have yet to engage fully with the concept of 'postfeminism' as a set of cultural discourses that has influenced the complex reconfiguration of femininity in and outside work. Emergent research in this area has responded to a call for more sophisticated analyses of femininity in the workplace that shifts attention, away from an 'exclusive focus on masculinity and the male norm in organizational research', toward more nuanced ways of understanding women's experiences at work (Lewis, 2014). Specifically, part of this endeavor has focused on how femininities have been reshaped and how women may be *included* as well as excluded within the contemporary workplace. While this research is making great strides in that respect, organization and gender scholars have yet to examine how organizational masculinities might have also been reconfigured against a postfeminist cultural and economic landscape. For example, the postfeminist media construction of the empowered woman who has achieved success in the workplace and at home is reliant on the care and support provided by 'postfeminist husbands', typically 'depicted as truly supportive of their wives and the feminist project' (Dow, 2006: 121). Thus, examining organizational masculinities and men's practices against a postfeminist cultural backdrop is pertinent because it steers attention to the ways in which men are responding to the on-going project of feminism.

Second, organization and gender scholars have only just begun to draw insight from feminist research on postfeminist representational culture, located largely within cultural, film and television studies (Genz, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007). This represents a promising opportunity for organization and gender scholars to

engage in interdisciplinary research, adding and developing an organizational dimension to feminist media culture scholarship that seeks to interrogate the contemporary nexus between women, femininity and feminism in the West. For Gill (2007), the study of media culture reveals the presence and influence of postfeminism as a multi-themed sensibility, circulated within cultural discourses in which women are interpellated into choosing to be empowered and autonomous subjects through consumption and body management. But it is not just women who are incited to forge meaningful lives through narratives of individual choice. As Kolehmainen (2012) asserts, the construction of postfeminist masculinities is not independent from the construction of postfeminist femininities, although the discursive processes for constituting each may differ. For example, there has already been a lot of research on masculinity and tensions between discourses of crisis and men's privilege, in relation to postfeminism and TV, cinema and popular literature (Brabon, 2007, 2013; Clark, 2014; Dow, 2006; Edwards, 2014, 2006; Gill, 2014a; Hammad, 2014; Horrocks, 1995). Some research explores the portrayal of, and audience responses to, the depiction of postfeminist masculinities in fictitious workplaces in TV shows like *Mad Men* (Agirre, 2012, 2014) and *Frasier* (Gann, 2016), in which some men are incited to become self-reflexive subjects and perform more inclusive forms of masculinity. Yet there is further scope to build on this research in order to interrogate how a postfeminist sensibility renders inequality increasingly difficult to speak about in and outside the workplace (Gill, 2014b).

In light of the above, this article contributes to extant research twofold. First, it enriches current empirical organizational research on gender and work by outlining how scholars can investigate the complexity of postfeminist masculinities, in the apparent freedoms accorded to some men to perform more inclusive forms of masculinity at work, and in the simultaneous reinforcement of traditional values of masculinity that perpetuate persistent gender inequalities. In so doing, this article demonstrates the utility of mobilizing insights and drawing inspiration from a feminist literature on postfeminist media culture to this end. Second, this article contributes to a postfeminist media culture literature on men and masculinities by showing how organization and gender scholars can enrich the study of postfeminist men and masculinities within fictitious workplaces. Potentially, organization and gender scholars can play an important role in exploring how cultural discourses of postfeminist masculinities intersect with economic discourses on work and employment.

This article is structured as follows. It begins by showing how the term postfeminism has been variously understood, before outlining the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility, which forms the theoretical backdrop to the research agenda. In the following section, the

notion of postfeminist masculinity is theorized, drawing on the emergent literature on postfeminist masculinities in postfeminist media culture. Next, the article outlines three research trajectories, mentioned above, before concluding by providing examples of research questions that might further research along these lines.

On postfeminism

Although saturated with divergent and sometimes contradictory meanings, to the extent that Genz asserts there is 'no original or authentic postfeminism that holds the key to its definition' (2009: 20), Gill and Scharff (2013) argue that postfeminism tends to be deployed in three broad ways. First, to signal an 'epistemological break within feminism' (2013: 3), whereby feminism is said to intersect with other theoretical movements concerned with difference such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, queer theory and postcolonialism. In this sense, postfeminism is understood as an 'analytical perspective' that indicates a transformation within feminism (2013: 3), one that challenges the hegemonic conceptions of womanhood and femininity promulgated in white, Anglo-America feminist theory. As such, postfeminism is seen to confront the challenge of theorizing difference by abandoning the binary thinking of second-wave feminist theory and focusing on plurality, fluidity and hybridism. Ann Brooks, a proponent of this view of postfeminism, articulates it thus: 'Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks' (Brooks, 1997: 4).

Second, postfeminism is mobilized as a term to mark an historical shift in feminism. Understood in this way, Gill and Scharff (2013) reason that postfeminism may be articulated as a set of assumptions about the 'pastness' of feminism which, according to Negra and Tasker (2007: 1), can be 'noted, mourned or celebrated'. For example, Negra's (2009) analysis of postfeminist media culture reveals how cultural discourses celebrate the passing of feminism, illustrated by instances of typically heterosexual, white, middle-class female achievement in male dominated workplaces, women's ability to treat men as sexual objects and the seemingly unfettered freedoms women enjoy in respect to career choice, parenting and domesticity.

Third, some scholars have drawn on postfeminism to indicate a backlash against feminism. In this frame, postfeminist media culture has played an influential role in claiming that feminism is moribund, irrelevant and inapplicable to the contemporary lives of women

(Faludi, 1991). Various permutations of backlash discourse include that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer required, as well as positioning feminism as a source of unhappiness in women's lives. As Negra (2009) contends, in postfeminist media culture, feminism is almost forgotten or, when it is visible, it is represented as a threat to the family and a modern woman's capacity to choose and sustain an expressive lifestyle.

For Gill and Scharff (2013), the use of postfeminism in these broad, sometimes opposing and overlapping ways is helpful for highlighting the fluidity and open texture of postfeminist discourses. However, they are also critical about how these approaches to postfeminism 'do not tell the whole story' (2013: 3). They suggest that postfeminism can be read in another way, one to which this article subscribes and comports with organizational scholars who have engaged with postfeminism (Lewis, 2014), as a cultural discourse that responds to feminism. Seen in this way, postfeminism is not essentialized as a specific set of beliefs, ideas or theories that stabilize its meaning. Rather, when postfeminism is read as a set of discursive assemblages, it allows a variety of permutations and readings to co-exist, even if they do not do so harmoniously (Projansky, 2001; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). McRobbie (2009) refers to discursive processes of disarticulation that acknowledge feminism but suggest there is no longer any need for feminist politics within women's lives, which severs feminism from its political and philosophical roots, thereby working to erode and 'undo' the cultural purchase of feminism within the contemporary lives of women. In this sense, postfeminism can be understood in terms of competing, overlapping and sometimes contradictory discourses that, as Lewis (2014: 1850) puts it, 'shapes our thinking, attitudes and behaviour towards feminism and women's changing position in contemporary society, not entirely linked to an "actual" historical event or moment'. Similarly, Gill and Scharff (2013) aver that it is the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas within postfeminist culture that allows an elaboration of postfeminism as a sensibility

Postfeminism as a sensibility

A 'postfeminist sensibility' then, as Gill (2007: 147) articulates, comprises a number of interrelated themes: the 'notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference'. In this conception, which accords with a view of postfeminism as a set of cultural discourses, elements of a

postfeminist sensibility are treated as objects of critical analysis, thereby countering the tendency to reduce postfeminism to a distinct theoretical orientation, historical shift in feminism or a one dimensional form of feminist backlash. At the same time, Gill (2007) maintains that postfeminism is intimately bound up with and situated within wider neoliberal discourses because both emphasize individualism over the social and political, both promote a notion of the individual as self-inventing, entrepreneurial and autonomous, and it is women, more so than men, who must self-manage and discipline the self. A postfeminism sensibility then is partly constituted through discourses of neoliberalism that establish an individualistic form of governance that characterizes significant parts of contemporary Western culture.

For the purposes of this article, one aspect of Gill's (2007) postfeminist sensibility is emphasized: individualism, choice and empowerment. In this element, Gill argues that 'notions of choice, of "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself" are central to a postfeminist sensibility that suffuses contemporary Western media culture' (2007: 153). One incarnation of the postfeminist discourse on female empowerment, individualism and choice concerns its associations with an agentic female sexuality. Gill (2008) notes a shift in the advertising industry's construction of women, from representations of women as passive objects of sexual desire for men, to portrayals of women as powerful, independent and sexually agentic. Positioned as such, while achieving heterosexual desirability is still considered important for women (e.g. exemplified by female protagonists in Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the US television series *Sex in the City*) it is re-framed as a case of women pleasing themselves, not men. However, whether such postfeminist depictions of empowered women do any serious harm to a normative gender order is doubtful (Negra, 2009). Postfeminist discourses on female sexuality contain contradictory elements. As Harvey and Gill (2013: 64) maintain, a postfeminist 'desiring, knowing female sexuality…must be at once "up for it" yet sensitive to male needs and fears, and "spiced up" but maintaining the boundaries of heterosexual monogamy'. The discursive emphasis on female empowerment, autonomy and choice within postfeminist culture is relevant to how organization scholars might investigate the dynamics between postfeminism, men, masculinities and work.

Elaborating this salience, it is important to underline Gill's (2007, 2008) argument that postfeminist discourses of female empowerment, individualism and choice must be understood as a technology of power. Drawing on poststructuralist feminist theories, indebted to the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault, Gill (2008) argues that the formation of the self in postfeminist media culture is an exercise in gendered power relations. Thus the attention to discursive processes of subjectification, a Foucauldian term used to describe the construction

of the individual subject, underscores how power is both creative, in how the self is formed, and repressive in how the formation of the self is also constrained. Yet, in postfeminist media culture, the idea that women's practices are freely chosen is at the heart of postfeminist discourses which position women as autonomous, no longer constrained by gendered inequalities of the 'past' (Gill, 2007). For this reason, Whelehan (2010: 156) deplores how the world of work is generally portrayed within postfeminist media culture, as 'allowing female success, but there are glimpses of sexism which present enough problems that women have to solve for themselves or in consultation with their close girlfriends'. Negra (2009) and Gill (2002, 2014b) agree also, with Gill (2014b) noting how work settings within the cultural and creative industries are shaped by a dominant postfeminist sensibility that suggests 'all the equality battles have been won', rendering inequality increasingly difficult for women to voice or speak about. This is very problematic, as Lewis (2014: 14) avers, because women can be blamed for their own exclusion within the workplace, 'with little attention directed at the structural and cultural constraints which act on them'. The discursive approach adopted by Lewis (2014) and others (Negra, 2009; Gill, 2014b) is key in problematizing a postfeminist sensibility that promulgates a notion of the self as unconstrained by social and political structures. Indeed, this article engages with Gill's (2007) poststructuralist frame to theorize masculinity as a set of discursive assemblages that are enmeshed within gendered relations of power that, in turn, are circulated within cultural discourses that contest and sustain a postfeminist sensibility (Dow, 2006).

Theorizing postfeminist masculinities

Conditioned by contemporary postfeminist culture (Nettleton, 2016), 'postfeminist man' is often constructed as a 'chameleon figure still negotiating the ongoing impact of feminism on his identity' (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 143). Discursive formations of postfeminist men embody a 'melting pot of masculinities, blending a variety of subject positions' such as the 'new man', the 'metrosexual', the 'new father' and the 'new lad' (2009: 143). Rather than indexing these discursive figurations, as though one type of postfeminist male subject position has been supplanted by another, it is important to acknowledge that these discursive configurations of men and their associated masculinities can exist simultaneously. Conceptually, this provides an anti-essentialist approach for theorizing postfeminist men and masculinities, one that rejects the idea that types of postfeminist masculinities are fixed and inhere naturally within the bodies of men. Rather, postfeminist masculinities are necessarily

understood as sets of discursive performances that may be enacted by men (and women) and will vary across time and context.

Accordingly, Gill (2009: 8) postulates that it is possible to think of postfeminist masculinities such as 'new laddism as a sensibility', whereby different formations of masculinity can be reworked, recycled and used strategically to provoke each other. For example, the emergence of the 'new lad' can be read as a cultural reaction against the soft masculine character of the 'new man'. Discourses of new laddism have chided the figure of the 'new man' as too sensitive, fashion conscious and a hollowed out media construction of masculinity that is said to be 'inauthentic', in contrast to the supposed honesty of the way in which the 'new lad' does masculinity unapologetically (Gill, 2003). Consequently, Whelehan (2000: 5) reads new laddism as a 'nostalgic revival of old patriarchy' in how it emphasizes the virtues of excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, defensiveness about fashion and ambivalence towards women.

Examining the postfeminist 'melting pot' of masculinities, some feminist scholars have turned to literary genres such as 'lad' or 'guy lit'. Gill's (2014a) analysis of novels that exemplify these genres uncovers an 'unheroic masculinity', in which men are discursively presented as troubled and bumbling losers who are looking for love, in counterpoint to women's (apparently effortless) success and accomplishments. Yet constructions of unheroic postfeminist men are not mere reflections of an affable and self-deprecating mode of masculinity, but are constitutive in how they work to shape and support a postfeminist sensibility in which men's power is problematically repudiated, while feminism is humorously 'sent up'. For Gill (2014a), discursive constructions of men and masculinities as self-deprecating and unheroic in postfeminist literary culture struggle to subvert traditional gender relations because they buttress a distorted view that men, rather than women, are the disadvantaged losers in the 'new' postfeminist gender order. Indeed, compared to postfeminist manifestations of women as empowered and successful at both home and in the workplace, Negra (2009) argues that media representations of men in advertising, 'chick lit' and female-centred films and primetime TV dramas often portray them as inept, falling behind women, unable to adapt. However, postfeminist masculinities are not singular in the form they take and the meanings that converge on them. For example, Hamad (2014) argues that paternalism has been reworked within Hollywood cinema so that it aligns with a paternal form of postfeminist masculinity, providing even the most inept and idle men with an opportunity to recover a masculine sense of self through parenthood.

From another perspective, with the cacophony of postfeminist masculinities seemingly available to men comes a sense of bewilderment about what it means to a man within postfeminist culture. One reading of this confusion is that men and masculinities are entrapped in a state of crisis. Historically, masculinity has been variously subject to claims of crisis (Beynon, 2002; Edwards, 2006), but one intonation of this discourse of crisis within postfeminist culture is articulated along the lines that feminist politics has contributed to an undermining of patriarchy to the extent that men have been left in an existential crisis of self. As Faludi (1999) notes, many men are unable to achieve ontological security by recourse to traditional values associated with an idealized type of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. Put simply, this form of crisis discourse suggests that men do not know how to be men. Debates about the crisis of masculinity persist right up to the present day (Roberts, 2014), giving rise to grave questions about how men's power is simultaneously being dislodged, reconfigured and fortified, through constructions of men and masculinities within a postfeminist culture (Dow, 2006; Edwards, 2014). As such, the examination of conflicted, crisis-inflected postfeminist masculinities promises to reveal much about how men's power is re-negotiated rather than relinquished.

Given the contributions imparted by feminist media studies so far to the study of postfeminism, men and masculinities, the next three sections of this article outline potential research trajectories for gender and organization scholars. Specifically, each research trajectory identifies an area for study that has not yet been sufficiently investigated by organization and gender scholars in the field, but harbours potential for advancing debates about the influence of postfeminism on organizational men and masculinities. Overall, this article develops a research agenda that does not aim to present 'truths' about specific types of postfeminist masculinities within work contexts. Rather, with Gill's (2007) notion of a postfeminist sensibility in mind, it broadly articulates the salience of investigating competing discursive constructions of postfeminist masculinities at work, within postfeminist media culture, and, within the everyday work lives of men.

Empowered women, vulnerable men in crisis?

This section of the article advocates organizational research that problematizes how a postfeminist sensibility (re)articulates the idea of men and masculinities as vulnerable and in crisis. The relevance of this avenue of research is demonstrated in how aspects of postfeminist media culture repeatedly construct men as in crisis, in contrast to women who

are empowered and successful (Negra, 2009). While this postfeminist sensibility places emphasis on female empowerment and individual choice (Gill, 2007), it also throws into sharp relief how the gains of feminism are constituted as being firmly established within postfeminist culture, seemingly putting men at a disadvantage in the workplace (Tasker and Negra, 2007; Negra, 2009). In this binary formulation, men are positioned as having been gravely wounded by feminism, raising concerns about the future role of men in work and society (Faludi, 1999). Exposing and problematizing this binary is of paramount importance for organization and gender scholars who seek to understand how discourses of postfeminist masculinities implicate men in both challenging and revitalizing traditional, patriarchal discourses of masculinity.

One avenue for future research concerns examining how, within postfeminist media culture, men and masculinities are variously constructed as being in crisis and what this means for both men and women (Hearn, 1999). Here organization and gender scholars can develop analyses of postfeminist media culture in which postfeminist masculinities are depicted in fictitious workplaces (Agirre, 2012, 2014; Gann, 2016). This represents an opportunity for organization researchers to engage in concerted efforts to analyze the problematic deployments of a postfeminist sensibility within discursive constructions of work and organizational settings in TV, cinema and popular literature. There are good reasons as to why organization and gender scholars might wish to focus on film and television, since these cultural artefacts shape the 'social imagination, extending invitations to "new" performances of subjectivity in everyday life' (Ashcraft and Flores, 2003: 2). Put differently, film and television can articulate gendered possibilities for social actors.

As an illustrative example, Ashcraft and Flores (2003) consider what is at stake for white-collar, professional men in Hollywood films such as *Fight Club* and *In the Company of Men*. In the case of the latter, the film opens with the two male protagonists linking work and women together as the cause of the impending downfall facing white-collar professional men. For Ashcraft and Flores (2003), this sense of crisis is set up by a narrative that positions men struggling to meet the demands made by women who 'expect men's sensitivity in romantic and work relationships, as well as their financial support' (2003: 9). *In the Company of Men*, women are portrayed as controlling men, offering 'nothing but ingratitude and abuse in return', while the workplace is constituted as a 'sterilized den of thieves, thanks in part to women's invasion and a merciless corporate elite' (2003: 9). Prophesizing that the 'common businessman will soon be extinct' galvanizes the male characters to use the workplace as a crucible in which 'real masculinity' can be re-forged through, among other things, acts of

male violence and sexism. Although Ashcraft and Flores (2003) do not locate *In the Company of Men* within postfeminist media culture, their analysis allows for a reading of how this film contributes to a postfeminist sensibility that reproduces complex and contradictory meanings about men's relationship with feminism and the meanings attached to postfeminist masculinities. Crucially, rather than see the crisis in white-collar masculinity as an opening to develop more socially inclusive relations, the male protagonists in these films read it as an 'injustice'. Ashcraft and Flores (2003) contend that women are discursively constructed as the culprits for feminizing and thus disabling men 'with conflicting demands for emotional, financial, and political support and sensitive, over-civilized behavior' (2003: 10). Revitalizing the worn-down masculine businessman is sought through the revivification of a 'civilized/primitive masculinity', embodied by the 'hardened white man who finds healing in wounds' (2003: 1). Potentially problematic then is how re-articulations of men and masculinity in crisis can be used to justify rolling back gender equality for women in the workplace, re-fueling anti-feminist discourses of backlash (cf. Leonard, 2014).

Besides film, other cultural phenomena can be analyzed by organizational scholars interested in exploring how postfeminist discourses of masculinity and men in crisis intersect with political and economic discourses. For example, political discourses have circulated concerns about how men struggle to respond to women's autonomy in and outside work. In May 2013, Diane Abbott, then Labour shadow public health minister, delivered a lecture titled 'Britain's crisis of masculinity'. Abbott's speech, which attracted wide media and print coverage at the time was centred on a number of disturbing observations about British culture and society: 1) fewer men are able to connect the realities of their lives with the archetypes of traditional masculinity; 2) a lack of respect among men for women's autonomy; 3) the pervasive normalization of homophobia; 4) a decline in heavy industry and manufacturing has meant more men feel uncomfortable about employment opportunities in the service sector where large number of people are employed. Abbot's vocalization of a crisis in masculinity has been challenged for its contradictions and inconsistencies which are beyond the scope of this article (see Roberts, 2014). More pertinent here is that political discourses of masculinity in crisis disseminate cultural tropes of male injury, loss and underachievement without acknowledging the hegemony of men's practices in the reproduction of gendered inequalities within many contemporary organizational settings (Hearn, 2015).

Another reading of the discourse Abbot draws upon concerns how it functions to reproduce a gender binary that casts men as losers and women as winners. This binary thinking is unhelpful because it flattens out the complexities in how different types of men

and women might understand and respond to the crisis of masculinity discourse. Indeed, as discussed later, political discourses of masculinity in crisis might not fit detailed empirical studies of the material effects of postfeminist discourses of men and masculinities in and outside the workplace. Related to this, another angle from which to consider how discourses of postfeminist masculinities intersect with cultural and economic discourses, concerns the conditions of emergence for discourses of postfeminist masculinities within the context of the financial crisis that has unfurled across the globe within recent years.

Embracing the financial crisis as an important topic of study, Negra and Tasker (2014) point out that discursive constructions of men and masculinities in US recession popular culture routinely depict them as being inflexible, left out or left behind women. Images in advertising, film and TV appear to mournfully suggest that men have been hit the hardest by the economic recession, facing joblessness, and an uncertain future as traditional enclaves of male employment such as construction and the automobile industries collapse. In recession culture, male subjectivities are placed under pressure to reconfigure so men can adapt to sectors of employment where employment opportunities exist such as in the service sector. This has given rise to anxieties in the US and in the UK about men's adaptability in that respect (Roberts, 2014), especially as some postfeminist masculinities are routinely depicted within media culture as inflexible, unable to adjust within feminized sectors of employment where work opportunities are available.

Negra (2009) extends this point, demonstrating how women are constructed as empowered, adaptive and in economic ascendancy, contributing to a postfeminist sensibility that further sustains a false dichotomy of women's gains being intrinsically linked to men's losses (Gill, 2007). Again this binary logic is problematic, not least for women, since postfeminist media culture (e.g. chick lit, advertising and female centred primetime television) glazes over the empirical and persistent exclusion of women from top positions within key political, executive and economic realms of employment. Negra and Tasker (2014) note also that women in recession culture generally have more tenuous and contingent financial arrangements than men, more dependent obligations and have been disproportionately affected by cuts to welfare benefits, economic incentives and initiatives. Leonard (2014) also berates how a postfeminist media culture has emphasized the capacity of women as consumers who are more capable than men of helping us to spend our way out of recession. However, it would be wrong to assume that postfeminist media culture mirrors the everyday lives of women and men. Empirical realities of postfeminist men and masculinities in work contexts contoured by the economic recession may well reveal some men to be more

amenable to re-moulding masculinities through new forms of work than postfeminist popular culture discourse suggests.

'New' postfeminist masculinities at work?

This section of the article supports future organizational research that examines how discourses of postfeminist men and masculinities may be drawn upon by men to constitute responses to a postfeminist sensibility of female empowerment and autonomy. Acknowledging this is to recognize how men and masculinities might be understood in 'new' ways that are more in synch with feminist critiques of men and masculinities (Hearn, 2015). Put differently, the study of postfeminist masculinities and men allows organization and gender scholars to critically consider how men and masculinities in the workplace might be (re)coded as caring and inclusive, especially in the light of recent developments in theorizing masculinities as inclusive (Anderson, 2009). Changes in patterns of employment might serve as the conditions of emergence for such masculinities.

For example, Harlow (2004) claims that the crisis in recruiting social workers in London is due, in part, to a postfeminist cultural context that emphasizes choice in women's work careers. Harlow (2004) contends that women are seeking alternative careers that are no longer connected to occupations and types of work associated with femininity, such as social work. Recruitment shortages within professions dominated by women may well provide opportunities for more men to move into areas of employment where the expression of more inclusive masculinities is welcome and rewarded, in ways that women's performances of caring and inclusive femininities are not. The salience of this research trajectory is supported by postfeminist media culture research that has attributed caring and inclusive qualities to men; for example, the men who are the partners or husbands of successful career women who still retain a footing within the domestic sphere (Dow, 2006; Hamad, 2014).

One line of research then might examine the tensions that arise when men view women at one and the same time as autonomous and empowered at and outside work, and, in more traditional roles, as wives and mothers. To illustrate, it is useful to refer to Gann's (2016) research on the popular US television series *Frasier* (1993-2004). Using the character of Frasier Crane as a main focal point of analysis, Gann (2016) explores how fictional postfeminist men respond to empowered and autonomous women at work, focusing on how these tensions are manifest in the work and home life of the show's male protagonist Frasier Crane, a well-educated, white, middle-class psychiatrist who hosts a radio call-in show.

Based on analysis of episodes drawn from the eleven series of *Frasier*, Gann (2016) demonstrates how Frasier Crane embodies aspects of postfeminist masculinities, in particular Frasier's negotiation of his relationship with the women in his life who are presented as autonomous and empowered. For example, in one episode, noting Roz's (Frasier's female radio show producer) despair with her career and home life, Frasier commends Roz for her career success but then suggests she wants 'too much from her job', and should focus more on fulfilment in her personal life, perhaps through dating and a 'serious relationship' (2016: 106). Here Frasier confers responsibility onto Roz for engineering her own fulfilment, which negates any consideration of how structural gender inequalities might impinge on Roz's life, and locates her potential happiness within stereotypical female-centred activities such as home making and dating. Yet when Roz becomes a single mother in another episode, Frasier is supportive and does not stigmatize her as a single parent.

Considering these contradictions, Gann (2016) argues that Frasier distances himself from traditional male stereotypes, evident also in his commitment to finding a lasting relationship and emotionally embracing fatherhood. Through examples of this kind, Gann (2016) shows that while postfeminist masculinities allow characters like Frasier a 'wider range of acceptable behaviours' as an American man working within a postfeminist workplace, 'this variation exacerbates competition and leads to insecurity as men judge themselves alongside other men and prior notions of idealized manhood' (2016: 114). Some episodes serve as vehicles for Frasier to explore his own postfeminist masculinity, in particular how it falls short meeting the archetypal ideal of American masculinity embodied by other characters in the show. Organization and gender scholars can build on analyses of postfeminist media culture by problematizing fictitious representations of the postfeminist workplace as a level playing field for the organization of gender power relations between men and women.

The sense in which postfeminist masculinities might be understood in terms of contradiction and ambivalence is also apparent in how they are variously interpreted in everyday life. One illustration of this concerns the media accounts of former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's male partner, Tim Mathieson. Donaghue (2015) analyses how journalistic discourses have constructed Mathieson as the 'First bloke', a man who is happy to cook and care for his wife while still performing practices of traditional masculinity that make him a 'man's man'. For Donaghue (2015), even the journalistic accounts of Mathieson that try to bust gender stereotypes of Australian masculinity by promoting Mathieson as a man who embodies a postfeminist masculinity, reproduce a gender binary by repeatedly

positioning him as a 'former hairdresser', understood within journalistic discourse as an atypical occupation for a heterosexual man, and gendering activities such as cooking and caring as unconventional male pursuits. Organization and gender scholars might follow the type of research trajectory marked out by Donaghue (2015), analyzing how postfeminist media discourse constructs the male partners and husbands of powerful women, noting the tensions and contradictions in how these men are portrayed and understood as inclusive and caring while not sacrificing characteristics associated with traditional forms of masculinity. Alternatively, organization and gender scholars might turn their attention to investigating the conditions of possibility for inclusive postfeminist masculinities within specific economic and work contexts. For example, important research is yet to be undertaken on how inclusive postfeminist masculinities might flourish and/or revert to traditional patterns of doing masculinity under specific economic conditions of employment.

To illustrate, Knights and Tullberg (2012) investigate the link between managing masculinity and mismanaging the corporation which resulted in the financial crisis and government bailouts for the banks and a near collapse of Western economies. Knights and Tullberg explore how self-interest, often represented as an influencing factor in the mismanagement of corporations, is not just a reflection of the neo-liberal economic consensus, but also of masculine discourses within the business class elite that make the pursuit of ever spiraling remuneration almost obligatory. As such, hypercompetitive masculinity within this sector of employment has been subject to scorching criticism, with social discourses circulating views that such masculine work practices will no longer be welcome in post-recession economies (Knights and Tullberg, 2012). Although a welcome proposition, the possibilities for this outcome require empirical investigation, not least because the crisis in professional white-collar masculinity within some sectors of work might facilitate the revivification of a nostalgic, hard-boiled mode of doing masculinity (Ashcraft and Flores, 2003).

Illustrating this, Banet-Weiser's (2014) analysis of Levi's 'Go Forth' 2010-11 US advertising campaign reveals how a blue-collar masculinity is discursively constructed as a solution to the economic crisis. In a series of adverts and videos featuring the inhabitants of a steel mill town in Pennsylvania ravaged by the economic recession, Levi's set out to tell 'stories of the new American worker' who wants to make real change in the face of economic crisis. Banet-Weiser's analysis exposes how the advertising campaign promulgates a message that 'rebuilding the nation after economic crisis is a man's job' in which masculine work activities are organized around a 'hegemonic set of normative values, such as

competitiveness, adventurousness, stoicism, willpower, independence, honor, authenticity, and persistence' (2014: 91). In this instance, the male blue-collar worker, rather than the empowered and autonomous woman constructed within a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; Negra, 2009), is positioned as a recuperative hero through a nostalgic re-invocation of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. However, postfeminist masculinities are not reducible to a specific mode or set of performances, so it is unwise for organization and gender scholars to rule out completely the possibility that postfeminist masculinities understood and experienced as inclusive might emerge in some post-recession work contexts. This demands closer attention to the types of men that perform postfeminist masculinities.

Which men, which masculinities?

This section outlines a research trajectory structured around several key questions: which types of men are performing postfeminist masculinities and how formations of difference shape a postfeminist sensibility? These questions are inspired by the observations of Gill (2007) and Projansky (2001), both of whom point out that the category of woman who is typically constructed as empowered, autonomous and whose life is driven by choice is young, white, heterosexual and middle-class. Such female subjects and the types of postfeminist femininities they perform are likely to be problematized by women who are located within different subject positions marked by, for example, sexuality, class, age, race and ethnicity. Extending this line of questioning to men and masculinities, it is vital to substantively discern how postfeminist men and masculinities are understood and performed by different types of men. Two illustrative examples are provided.

The first concerns how discourses of class intermingle with discourses on postfeminist masculinities and work. For example, drawing on qualitative interviews with 24 young men employed in the UK retail sector, Roberts (2013) found that, contrary to much prior research on masculinities, young working-class men are able to resist dominant and hegemonic cultural ideals about how young, working-class men perform masculinity that emphasizes sexism, brute strength and aggression. Roberts's (2013) working-class men were employed in the service sector, a sphere of employment dominated by women and often seen to be incongruous with traditional notions of working class masculinity (Nixon, 2009). Yet the young men in Roberts's (2013) study appeared to accentuate the pleasures of performing shop-floor customer interaction. Extended and personalized shop floor interactions with customers were favoured over short and instrumental transactions based at the til/check out,

as they could demonstrate their skills as effective communicators and relationship builders. Striking then is that in a postfeminist workplace where men are entering into feminized sectors of employment, front-line service sector jobs may provide occasions for young working class men to do softer forms of working class masculinity. It is of particular relevance to this article that the working class men in Roberts's study did not feel that their retail sector based performances of working class masculinity were inferior to traditional notions of embodied working class masculinity associated with manual labour. Furthermore, acknowledging progressive shifts toward gender equality in a wider cultural landscape, many of the men Roberts interviewed were scornful of sexist attitudes toward women and excessive alcohol consumption, deriding them as flawed strategies for crafting working class masculinities in and outside work.

Notably, Roberts's (2013) study problematizes a discourse of masculinity in crisis mobilized by political figures such as Diane Abbott, discussed earlier, to sound a pessimistic warning about the employment futures of young men within a postfeminist culture. It also complicates representations of men within postfeminist media culture who are seen to be outpaced by women in a postfeminist workplace (Negra, 2009), by suggesting that men may also experience a sense of empowerment through engaging with discourses of postfeminist masculinities. However, it would be rash to simply accept that instances of more inclusive working class masculinities are singularly indicative of progressive shifts in gender politics, as men have long adopted strategies to ensure their masculinity is not compromised in feminized work contexts, with the effect of sustaining harmful gender binaries (Simpson, 2004; Lupton, 2006). As such, performances of postfeminist masculinities in the workplace may renegotiate rather than relinquish men's power. Organization and gender scholars might consider how working class men are rewarded for performing unconventional softer versions of masculinity within the service sector, in contrast to those women whose performances of femininities within the service sector are often unacknowledged and unrewarded (Lupton, 2006).

The second example concerns sexuality. Discourses of postfeminist masculinities may provide opportunities for men to engage in more self-expressive, self-reflexive ways of performing masculinity at work, influenced, in part, by openness, at in the least West, toward non-heterosexual sexualities (Weeks, 2007). Organization and gender scholars might examine how discourses of postfeminist masculinities can empower some men to explore sexuality in ways previously considered taboo. For example, UK research on workplace friendships between gay and heterosexual men reveals the possibilities for more inclusive

masculinities to emerge (Rumens, 2010, 2011). For instance, heterosexual men were said to enjoy opportunities provided by gay men to be emotionally open and engage with discourses of masculinity based on consumption by taking pleasure in exchanging fashion tips, discussing cosmetics and shopping together. Some of these friendships served as relational contexts for generating postfeminist masculinities that allowed heterosexual and gay men to develop unconventional forms of intimacy in the workplace, such as same-sex kissing and touching, considered by the men to undermine heterosexual male norms around which some work cultures and relations were organized.

However, some of the gay men interviewed by Rumens (2010, 2011) complained how their heterosexual male work friends positioned them as knowing 'experts' on fashion and shopping; subject positions that essentialize gay masculinity and reinforce gay male stereotypes within a postfeminist culture that celebrates the role of gay men in rehabilitating heterosexual masculinity, exemplified in television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Gill, 2007; Negra, 2009; Kolehmainen, 2012). Here, then, workplace friendships might reproduce a postfeminist sensibility that acknowledges a wider cultural tolerance and openness towards male homosexuality, but through recognizing the work of gay men as 'experts' in personal grooming and styling, alongside or perhaps above the work they perform as occupants of jobs. This example invites organization and gender scholars to draw parallels between gay and heterosexual male postfeminist masculinities in the workplace and the media construction of these masculinities. In doing so, attention is trained toward how gay men might be deployed by heterosexual men as agents in transforming heterosexual masculinities into more socially and organizationally desirable forms. As Rumens's (2010, 2011) research suggests, in friendship, gay men are linked to heterosexual men's gains in terms of performing more acceptable modes of masculinity that, quite plausibly, may enable them to achieve more powerful positions at work, without rupturing the gender binary or improving the inclusion and advancement of gay men in the workplace.

Conclusion

This article has sought to encourage organization and gender scholars to undertake research that focuses on the multiple, conflicted and sometimes contradictory meanings organized and circulated within discourses of postfeminist masculinities, both within the workplace and postfeminist media culture. Part of this endeavor involves paying attention to the conditions of emergence for discourses of postfeminist masculinities in the workplace and within media

constructions of the postfeminist workplace. It also entails examining how different men mobilize discourses of postfeminist masculinities and the potential effects of those discourses on men and women. Supporting this project, this article has proposed three research trajectories which, crucially, should not be read as a list that exhausts all possibilities for scholarship in this area. Strengthening the potential of these research strands to inspire future research, specific questions may be raised in regard to each trajectory.

When concerned with problematizing how postfeminist media culture reproduces a binary between empowered women and vulnerable men in crisis, organization and gender scholars might consider these questions: How do postfeminist films, literary genres and TV shows discursively constitute the dynamics between men, masculinity and work? How men are discursively positioned in terms of crisis within the world of work is another pertinent line of inquiry, as is how the discursive construction of postfeminist femininities based on empowerment and choice is contingent on the construction of particular types of postfeminist masculinities performed by men. Research that interrogates signs of 'new' postfeminist masculinities coded as caring and inclusive might be guided by these questions: How are postfeminist masculinities understood and experienced as inclusive by men within their everyday work lives? How do postfeminist discourses open and foreclose various subject positions (e.g. 'new lad', 'new father') for men in the workplace, and what are the consequences of these for men and women? How do inclusive postfeminist masculinities renegotiate men's power in the workplace, perpetuating gender inequalities? Lastly, when considering how different types of men perform postfeminist masculinities at work, organization and gender scholars might carry out research that asks: what roles do particular men play in contesting and reproducing the normative elements of postfeminist masculinities at work? What opportunities do specific work contexts afford different men to perform postfeminist masculinities that are organizationally desirable? How does sexuality and class influence the lived experience of performing postfeminist masculinities at work, and what parallels can be drawn with the media representations of these masculinities within postfeminist culture more widely?

In conclusion, by outlining the research trajectories above with illustrative examples and research questions, this articles hopes to contribute to existing research in two principal ways. The first relates to the potential for enriching organizational research that has started to engaged with the concept of postfeminism (Harlow, 2004; Kelan, 2008, 2009, 2010; Lewis, 2014), by demonstrating how postfeminism, when understood as a set of cultural discourses (Gill, 2007), can open up discussion on how the construction of postfeminist femininities is

linked to the construction of postfeminist masculinities (Clark, 2014; Dow, 2006; Kolehmainen, 2012). Specifically, this article advocates theorizing discourses of postfeminist masculinities as contextually contingent, fluid and polysemic; notably, in how they can incite men to perform more self-reflexive and inclusive forms of masculinity at work, but through a process of renegotiation of men's power that can reinforce traditional values of masculinity. Exploring these discursive dynamics can permit organization and gender scholars to gain insights into how postfeminist masculinities are conflicted and perpetuate persistent gender inequalities in the workplace.

The second contribution concerns the benefit for organization and gender scholarship if researchers draw inspiration from a feminist literature on postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007; 2008, 2014a; Negra, 2009; Negra and Tasker, 2007). This article calls on organization and gender scholars to play an important role in exploring how cultural discourses of postfeminist masculinities intermingle with economic discourses on work and employment that variously reproduce a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007). Moving into academic territory more familiar to cultural and media studies scholars, organization and gender researchers can help to interrogate how the 'postfeminist workplace' is discursively constituted as a site for doing 'new' forms of gender. Taken together, both contributions treat postfeminism as a set of cultural discourses that require scrutiny (Gill, 2007) and adopt a critical stance toward understanding how postfeminist masculinities are discursively constituted in everyday life.

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