

Postfeminist times: New opportunities or business as usual?

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Abstract

Within this paper, we critically analyse the intertwined discourses of neo-liberalism, entrepreneurship and postfeminism. Given its foundations upon autonomy, individualism and self-responsibility, entrepreneurship has been positioned as central to the contemporary neo-liberal turn with its focus upon developing an enterprising self in a context of choice and possibility. This echoes the postfeminist agenda where women, emancipated through access to education, employment and positive cultural representations of liberated, economically independent actors, are being encouraged to create new ventures as independent business women. We critique the notion that entrepreneurship is a natural conduit for the postfeminist women to exploit the opportunities offered by encroaching neo-liberalism. Using policy discourses from two contrasting advanced economies, Sweden and the UK, aimed at encouraging women into enterprise, we illustrate how the poststructuralist message is articulated through an aspirational rhetoric of opportunity whilst reproducing gender inequalities.

Introduction

A critical component of the contemporary neo-liberal turn has been the rise of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviours (Campbell and Pedersen, 2002; Mole and Ram, 2012). In developed nations, this era has been exemplified by a marked increase in entrepreneurship and new venture creation; entrepreneurial activity has also been integrated into the corporate environment encouraging individualised employee agency to generate innovative problem

solving (Ogbor, 2000; Dannreuther and Perren, 2012) At a micro-level, we have seen the emergence of the 'enterprising self' where the onus for welfare, employment and well being has transferred from the state to the individual (du Gay, 1994; Down and Warren, 2008; Ahl and Nelson, 2015). Such far-reaching and seismic changes were made possible by an ideological shift from the post-war collective social democrat contract towards right of centre political movements in the late 1970s/early 1980s (Howard and King, 2008). These were notable within the USA and the UK, signified by the election of Reagan and Thatcher respectively. Populist support for the emerging neo-liberal agenda enabled far reaching changes in institutional norms permitting extensive de-regulation, privatisation and liberalized markets (Perren and Dannreuther, 2012). Such changes generated a philosophical and economic platform for entrepreneurship to emerge as socio-economically desirable given the focus upon the individual actor, unfettered by regulation able to exploit the self for personal reward (Swail et al., 2013).

This discourse chimes with the analytical foundations of postfeminism which, despite various and contested iterations (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), suggests that social and employment liberalization in a context of decreasing sexism and greater equalities have generated a meritocratic society and so, rendered feminist subordination critiques redundant. As Gill (2007: 147) notes, meritocratic achievement is available to the postfeminist woman through, 'self-surveillance, monitoring, self-discipline, a focus on individualization, choice and empowerment'. Thus, entrepreneurial activity – centred upon the agentic exploitation of the self – accords with the sentiments underpinning postfeminist arguments where the individual can use agency and ability to fulfil potential. The ideological intertwining of these two discourses should, theoretically, enable empowered women to engage with entrepreneurship in the same fashion as their male peers such that they reap similar individual benefits whilst contributing to so the socio-economic wealth of contemporary society. Yet, this promise and potential has yet to emerge given that upon a global basis, with few exceptions, women remain a minority of the self employed per se, are less likely to own high performing entrepreneurial ventures and deemed to be stubbornly risk averse and lack entrepreneurial competencies (McAdam, 2012; Kelly, et al., 2015). This generates analytical tension between the possibilities suggested by each theoretical exposition and a persistent evidential mismatch.

Such tension demands explanation; this has been articulated by problematising women who are failing to exploit the opportunities offered by postfeminism and entrepreneurship. Thus,

the underpinning policy and research debate focuses upon the need to encourage women to pursue readily available entrepreneurial opportunities as a form of self-actualization whilst at the same time, contributing to the socio-economic productivity of advanced economies (Carter and Shaw, 2006; Marlow and McAdam, 2013). In this paper, we critically explore the alleged complementarities of these debates. We suggest that rather than revealing new opportunities, the alleged postfeminist woman business owner, by virtue of gendered ascriptions and constraints, will find her entrepreneurial activities subject to contextualized discriminatory assumptions, biases and challenges. As such, we argue that melding entrepreneurship and postfeminism generates a fictive gender neutral space where women are positioned as free agents able to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential. Evidence suggests this space is fundamentally gendered (Henry, et al., 2016) and so, compromised by the intrusion of discriminatory discourses. This generates a paradox; expectations of achievement are based upon notions of a postfeminist meritocracy whereas experiential outcomes are subject to gendered constraints. Thus, any differences between men and women regarding entrepreneurial propensity and firm performance are ascribed to a blame discourse attributed to feminine lack and deficit (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). The false promise of entrepreneurship in the alleged postfeminist era not only deceives but then generates a blame narrative to disguise this deception.

To elaborate upon these arguments, we focus specifically upon governmental policy initiatives focused upon encouraging and supporting women's business ownership. In addition, we acknowledge the importance of context in shaping theory and practice (Zahra et al., 2014). To that end, we draw upon two differing contexts to explore the nuanced influence of gendered ascriptions upon entrepreneurial activity – those of the UK and Sweden. In the former, as a representative of the Anglo-Saxon free economy model, similar to the US, there is a regulatory framework of equality which, it is assumed, offers meritocratic opportunity for women to pursue entrepreneurial activity. In Sweden however, there is a focus upon the value attributed to specific womanly merits and opportunities which can be used as a resource for entrepreneurial activity. To critically evaluate these arguments, this paper is structured as follows; we introduce our analytical framing by outlining dimensions of postfeminism; this is followed by an exploration of the Swedish and UK context. We then consider the implications of these arguments and finally, we conclude by questioning the capacity of entrepreneurship to fuel a postfeminist future whereby women can claim new pathways to personal emancipation.

Dimensions of postfeminism

Feminist postfeminism?

Postfeminism is an elusive label, it is difficult to delineate; as such, to avoid misunderstanding, we commence somewhat contrarily by arguing what it is not. So, it is not post-structuralist feminist theory, which is a distinct epistemological perspective that sees gender as socially constructed as opposed to biologically given, and which interrogates how gender is done, or performed, paying particular attention to resulting gender hierarchies (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Butler, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Moreover, it is not intersectional theory either, which extends the interrogation of gender constructions to intersecting constructions of race, ethnicity, class and other social categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Neither is it third-wave feminism, which Butler (2013) defines as a quasi-political movement which emerged as a response to perceived limitations of second-wave feminism. Third wave feminism created a space for feminist action for women of colour, for young women, and for wider expressions of gender identities including “girlie” feminism which is a “can-do, sex-positive, all-access pass that allows women to be independent, strong, smart and sexy all at once”, and which favours consumer-based “cultural” activism before overt political activism (Butler, 2013:42). Third wave feminism is still feminism, though, in the sense that it wants to improve women’s situations, but, argues Butler (2013), it provides women with a fundamentally neo-liberal space – inclusive, welcoming, and without the negative connotations of old-school, political feminism.

Postfeminism thus, is *not* feminism, but a response to feminism. This response has been articulated in three ways according to Butler (2013). The popular interpretation is that it is the end of feminism, i.e. women’s liberation has been achieved so feminism is no longer necessary. The critical interpretation, most clearly voiced by Faludi (2009) is that it is a backlash against feminism. The third version is postfeminism as an up-to-date, sex-positive version of feminism. But it is more complicated than this, argues McRobbie (2004). Postfeminism does not negate feminism, it rather co-opts it. According to Tasker and Negra (2007:2) “postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer”.

The perceived victories of past feminist action are thus, part of the postfeminist story, but incorporated and taken for granted and seldom mentioned explicitly. Because of this, it also renders “old-fashioned” first and second wave feminism (in the sense of taking political, collective action for women’s rights) dated and irrelevant. Even if one can easily demonstrate that feminism has not yet done its job quite yet, victories have been made; postfeminism does account for, even builds on this; and postfeminist cultural expressions are pervasive, so one cannot just write it off from feminist discussions. Scott (2006) makes a persuasive case for the benefits to women of commodified female beauty; her empirical analysis of the development of the beauty and fashion industry in the US, which is an achievement by women, as workers, sales people, editors or business owners suggests it has indeed provided women opportunities for financial and personal freedom and independence. Being against commodification of female beauty is not a feminist position argues Scott (2006); rather, it is a prudish position. Postfeminism is paradoxical in that it holds feminist as well as anti-feminist discourses. Gill (2007:163) writes that postfeminism holds a patterned nature of contradictions in which “notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of these who make the ‘wrong’ choices”.

Pinning down postfeminism

The academic literature on postfeminism seems in agreement that a clear definition of postfeminism is beyond reach. Gill (2007) proposes that postfeminism is best regarded as a distinct “sensibility”, made up of eight distinct interrelated themes. Butler (2013) however, favours the term “discursive formation”. Using the themes suggested by Gill, Butler (2013:44) identifies a text or a narrative as postfeminist if it incorporates one, or more, of the following characteristics:

1. implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus, no longer necessary;
2. defined femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference;
3. marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification;
4. encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline, and a makeover paradigm;
5. emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women’s independence and freedom; and
6. promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference.

Another point may fruitfully be added to the list, namely the retreat to home as a matter of choice, not obligation (Lewis, 2014).

Cultural postfeminism

Theoretical postfeminism suggests, in its most basic interpretation, that women are now finally emancipated such that they have equivalence with men in all facets of life and therefore, feminism is a redundant project which has achieved its key objectives (Coppock et al., 2014). Critical evaluations of the efficacy of postfeminist claims for female emancipation have been a phenomenon of academic inquiry primarily in cultural and media studies (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; McRobbie, 2009). Research has analyzed the representation of women in popular films, novels, television and other media and particularly, how those women deemed ‘celebrities’, acting as contemporary role models, enact gender (McRobbie, 2011). Successful, sexually liberated and independent working women are portrayed in contemporary media as those who have effectively used their agency and initiative to negotiate the complexities of modern society free from sex and gender bias (Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie 2004, 2009). Deconstructing this portrayal however, reveals a dominant imagery of youthful, heterosexual, conventionally attractive, white educated women. Maintaining this status requires a constant critical gaze on the self to ensure the subjective being reaches normative recognisable standards as a successful postfeminist woman. The paradox here being that the postfeminist concept promises emancipation for all women yet, is only applicable within advanced economies with alleged equality agendas, and even in such contexts, bias is endemic through the production and reproduction of an idealised feminine avatar of the desirable, independent heterosexual woman. So for example, even in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a popular US television show in which five gay men undertake a complete makeover of a heterosexual man, they do so in order for him to become attractive to a female partner. As Cohan (2007:177), dryly notes that “some formulations of postfeminism have so readily absorbed the impact of queer theory but left out the queerness”.

So, whilst postfeminism celebrates women’s achievements in former male arenas, it also reinforces a traditional reproduction of femininity – but with a twist; women are portrayed as having choice but are freely, willingly and proudly *choosing* to enact traditional femininity. McRobbie (2004) describes it as a double entanglement – neo-conservative gender, sexuality and family values coexist with processes of liberalization regarding choice of the same. Lazar (2006:510) notes a similar paradox: beauty advertisements speak to women’s agency and power (“you make it happen”, “shape your destiny” “It’s my body. I’ll call the shots”), but the focus of agency is confined to one’s own physical appearance and sex appeal and the means

for this agency is consumption. The postfeminist role model presents an ideal to aspire for, attainable through material means and through consumption.

Working class women, older women or women of colour are the invisible others. On the topic of representation of black women in US media, Springer (2007:251) asserts that “postfeminism seeks to erase any progress toward racial inclusion that feminism has made since the 1980s. It does so by making racial difference, like feminism itself, merely another commodity for consumption.” But postfeminism is a phenomenon with global circulation. Dosekun (2015) notes that it produces class differences all over the world, irrespective of skin colour, between women who find themselves “already empowered” in terms of material standards, level of consumption and self-determination, and those who do not.

Neo-liberal and entrepreneurial postfeminism

It has been noted that postfeminism chimes with a neoliberal ideology, which privileges the market before the state, and which is characterized by deregulation, privatization and state withdrawal from many areas of social welfare (Harvey, 2005; Perren and Dannreuther, 2012). Privatization is often argued in terms of providing citizens with a choice of provider for a variety of services previously managed by the state. The language of choice is central to the neo-liberal ideology; it constructs a new, agentic citizen, assumed to be – and assumed to want to be – self-governing and self-regulating and keeping the state at a distance (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001). As Rose (1993) points out, this is a new form of governmentality, in which the citizen internalizes government and governs by making the right choices in the market. The paradox being of course, that the discourse of choice within a consumer society is a chimera; to fully exploit available options requires appropriate resources, only when in possession of such, can choice be exercised. In the absence of resources, consumer choice is a fiction.

Postfeminism has emerged as a contemporary gender ideology reflecting the ethos of neo-liberalism stressing personal agency, responsibility and freedom of choice (Chen, 2013). Yet, the debate is muddled for as we have noted, choice is constrained by resources whilst embedded hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race and class are persistent and constraining features of contemporary society (Butler, 2013). Thus, postfeminism offers a conceptual promise of emancipation based upon choice; however, the paradox arises as the narrow idealised image of the postfeminist woman, presented as an aspirational subject, denies choice to value diversity or challenge orthodoxy. As Gill (2008:443) argues: “It seems to me that this neoliberal

postfeminist moment is importantly – perhaps pre-eminently – one in which power operates psychologically, by “governing the soul” ... Indeed, it is not simply that subjects are governed, disciplined or regulated in ever more intimate ways, but even more fundamentally that notions of choice, agency and autonomy have become central to that regulatory power.” And somehow people govern themselves in such a way that old hierarchies are reproduced.

The step from neo-liberalism to entrepreneurship, or entrepreneurialism, (du Gay, 2004) is a short one. The new, self-regulating citizen is also the new, entrepreneurial citizen. The enterprising self extends to all spheres of life, not least work, where the new employee is morally obliged to maximize their own human capital, be flexible, and align personal fulfilment with the interest of the employer (Kauppinen, 2013), which in less upbeat words could be described as having to live with job insecurity and no boundary between work and leisure (Noon and Blyton, 2007). Whilst employees are expected to be more enterprising, the rhetoric of neo-liberalism positions the entrepreneur as the epitome of the autonomous enterprising self, achieving personal independence but also, undertaking a social welfare function by generating new jobs and creating economic wealth.

Postfeminism as a lens in entrepreneurship research

Since the 1980s, entrepreneurship research has matured into an established field with a number of well-respected specialty journals. As a specific strand of research activity, analyses of the influence of gender upon women’s entrepreneurial activity has emerged somewhat more slowly and has progressed through several iterations. Over time, this debate has demonstrated progressive development and increasing coherence (McAdam, 2012) whereby the focus has shifted from relatively blunt positivist, objectivist analyses using founder sex as a variable through which a male norm was utilised as a comparator for women’s entrepreneurial activities (Carter and Cannon, 1992; Mukhtar, 2007) to contemporary feminist critiques (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Henry et al., 2016). The former stance invariably found women wanting in terms of entrepreneurial competencies and achievements *even* though when analysed as populations, there are few performance differences between male and female led firms (Ahl, 2006; Robb and Watson, 2012). Feminist post-structuralist scholarship however, has demonstrated that the construction of the woman entrepreneur as secondary is the result of a number of unquestioned assumptions prevalent in main-stream entrepreneurship research, namely the assumptions that the primary purpose of entrepreneurship is profit, on the business

level, and economic growth, on the societal level, that entrepreneurship is something male, that it is an individual undertaking, that men and women are different, and that work and family are separate spheres where women prioritize, or ought to prioritize, family (Ahl, 2004, 2006). Other scholars have also fruitfully employed a post-structuralist perspective in order to reveal the gendering of entrepreneurship in different contexts (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2004; Calás, et al., 2007), but explicit feminist perspectives are nevertheless, still rare in entrepreneurship research (Jennings and Brush, 2013) and a postfeminist perspective is most definitely a novelty.

In terms of utilising Butler's (2013) list (above) and comparing it to the assumptions in published mainstream research on women's entrepreneurship (see Ahl, 2006; McAdam, 2012), one might actually conclude that this body of research is in itself a postfeminist expression – most of the points may be identified. But postfeminism would here be framed as a characterization or a result, not as an analytical tool. Lewis (2014:1845) argues, however, that postfeminism may be used to critique how “women and a reconfigured femininity are now being *included* in the contemporary workplace” and proceeds to analyse how feminine subjectivities, or “entrepreneurial femininities”, are constructed in the gender and entrepreneurship literature. Lewis (2014) adopts a doing-gender approach as an analytical strategy, but looks explicitly for postfeminist elements in the resulting constructions finding four different entrepreneurial femininities: first: The “entrepreneur” who is supposedly gender neutral, meritocratic and where individual men and women have an equal chance of success if they commit energy and enthusiasm. Postfeminist elements stress individual choice and the lack of gender specific barriers. Perhaps not so postfeminist is that this entrepreneur distances herself from traditional femininity and from the private sphere. Second, the “mumpreneur”, who has a home-based business offering products or services associated with motherhood. Postfeminist elements would be individualization (actually running a business), the retreat to the home, and the commercial valuing of traditional femininity. Third: the “female entrepreneur” who performs traditional, relational femininity – she is a transformative leader, shares power, promotes trust and pursues collective goals. Family and home are valued, since this is the place where such skills were developed in the first place. Postfeminist elements are the stress on essential sex difference, and the valuing of the feminine in a professional or commercial context as complementary to masculine values. Fourth: “Nonpreneur” is a person who performs “excessive” femininity – vulnerability, dependence etc., without compensating this with contemporary, postfeminist assertiveness, confidence and self-determination.

From the texts reviewed here, we conclude that using a postfeminist lens implies looking for postfeminist elements in whatever the research object is, rather than using postfeminism as an analytical strategy or analytical tool. The analytical strategy is best understood as a post-structuralist/constructionist approach, searching for how gender is constructed. The result may then be interpreted or described with the help of postfeminist concepts. We now turn to such an analysis using material that we are familiar with from our own countries, Sweden and the UK.

Government support for women's entrepreneurship in Sweden

The term postfeminism does not have a wide circulation in Sweden. A Google search on Swedish language pages reveals that before 2010 it could be counted in two-digit numbers and since that time, has mostly been found in academic student papers utilising the theme of cultural postfeminism. This rather more limited engagement with the notion of postfeminism may reflect the notion that old-fashioned feminism is alive and well in Sweden. Sweden has, in 2016, a purportedly feminist government, a feminist foreign policy, even a feminist party trying to make inroads into parliament, as well as a uniquely “women friendly” welfare system and family policies (Hernes, 1987; Sainsbury, 1999).

This does not mean that the phenomenon of postfeminism is absent. Sweden, like most western European states, went through a period of neo-liberal changes after the financial crisis in the early 1990s reducing the size of the public sector and privatization of former publicly owned operations in education, care, health care, transportation and infrastructure that continue to the present (Ahl, Berglund, Pettersson, and Tillmar, 2016). Parallel to these shifts is the rise of the entrepreneurship discourse. It is private entrepreneurship which is to step in where the State steps out; as the State used to employ many women, there is a special call for women to fill this void. The Swedish government has had policies and programmes to support women's business ownership since the early 1990s (see Ahl and Nelson, 2015, for a full description). In this section we look for postfeminist elements in the arguments for such programmes, paying particular attention to changes over time. The quotes below are from Swedish government publications such as decisions, investigations, transcribed parliament debates, or program evaluations. The first programme in 1994, Resource Centres for Women, was argued as follows:

The goal could be to promote women's independence so that women, irrespective of where in the country they reside, can live a dignified life measured by women's standards. This means equal conditions for women and men regarding education, income and influence in society. It means that society's resources – ownership, right of disposition – are equally divided between the sexes. It means freedom from patronizing, abuse and other violations from men (Friberg, 1993).

This quote is firmly anchored in old-school feminist thought, both liberal (stress on equal chances) and socialist (stress on equal outcome). The propositions and motions that follow, though, stress that men and women are indeed different and need different measures. The second quote below contains a postfeminist, upbeat version of women's difference – they are the ones that will secure long-term financial stability:

Problem descriptions and analyses must take into account that women and men have different needs and conditions and measures must be designed so that they further both women and men. Special measures for women are also needed (Proposition, 1993/94:140).

There is reason to believe that female entrepreneurship is an industry of the future...studies have shown that women's businesses are more long-lived, stable and grow less dramatically. The effect is that women have been able to expand in a business cycle when men are forced to lay off people (Motion 1993/94:A460, 1994).

The new, broader programme from 2007-2014 focused on women as an under-utilized resource for economic growth. The gender equality argument is gone.

....More women business owners would mean that more business ideas are taken advantage of and that Sweden's opportunities for increased employment and economic growth is strengthened...The program shall contribute to more new women owned businesses and that more businesses owned by women grow. The program shall thus make more women consider starting a business, chose to run a business full time and choose to employ others (Regeringsbeslut, 2011).

The programme has provided training and advisory services for women, a number of development projects, organized activities for prospective female entrepreneurs at colleges and universities, mapped existing networks for women, and trained support staff in gender awareness. There was an ambassador programme in which 880 female entrepreneurs inspired

school pupils with the female entrepreneurship message, a “Beautiful Business Award” competition (no financial award), and exhibitions of women’s innovations.

This discourse could easily be characterized as postfeminist. Apart from the first quote, there is no mention of feminist activism. Women are assumed to be different from men; they possess unique womanly skills that can be drawn upon for commercial success. Women need to use the available business support and start their own companies, as well as inspire other to do the same. Postfeminist elements of individualism, choice and empowerment are clearly present; references to changing discriminatory structures are absent.

Regarding the outcomes of such programmes, it emerges that women’s self-employment did indeed increase, from a historic figure of around 25-30%, to 36% in 2012 (Statistics Sweden, 2014). But almost all of the increase in the formerly publicly owned sectors was in child care, a feminine gendered business with very low earnings and profit potential (Sköld and Tillmar, 2015). The other formerly publicly owned sectors such as health care used outsourcing procedures that favoured male-owned, large oligopolies (Sköld, 2015; Sundin and Tillmar, 2010). There is little evidence that the postfeminist discourse of women’s entrepreneurship in Sweden is matched with corresponding results, i.e., gender equality is not achieved – existing gender hierarchies are recreated. But there *is* evidence, we claim, that the postfeminist discourse tends to conceal this fact.

UK Government initiatives to promote women’s business ownership.

Reflecting the Swedish context, postfeminist critiques of government policy to support women’s entrepreneurial activity do not feature within this debate. However, unlike Sweden, affiliation to feminist principles within UK policy initiatives is not evident (Fawcett Society, 2015). The focus has been more upon an individual ‘enabling’ approach which reflects the UK’s engagement with the neo-liberal agenda dating back to the close relationship between Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s (King and Wood, 1999). As such, it was not deemed to be the role of the state to promote or protect specific disadvantaged populations. Rather, the emphasis was upon creating an environment where market forces enabled the most talented individuals to employ their agency to achieve on the basis that markets do not recognise sex, colour, class et cetera. The absurdity of such arguments has since emerged. Free market liberalism as a pathway to greater equality has not been effective; rather inequality has become more entrenched particularly since the recession in 2008 and related policies of austerity (Tyler,

2013). Yet, successive governments of differing persuasions have maintained allegiance to the neo-liberal project; this has been evident in terms of the continued privatisation of services and in recent years, a significantly reduced public sector (McKay et al. 2013). A cornerstone of such political dialogue has been a continued and enthusiastic support of entrepreneurship (Dannreuther and Perren, 2012) as a desirable representation of the self-sufficient individual. It is also a useful vehicle to transform unemployment into self-employment in an era of public sector redundancies.

Regarding the emergence of government policy initiatives for women's enterprise since the late 1990s, focus and provision has been volatile and fragmented. Successive Labour governments (1997 – 2010) developed numerous initiatives to encourage and support more women to enter self-employment. So for example, they sponsored umbrella organisations such as Prowess (Promoting Women's Enterprise Success and Support) and produced a number of policy documents outlining a pathway to increase women's entrepreneurial activity (Small Business Service, 20013; 2010) with action embedded in Regional Development Agencies (Huggins and Williams, 2009). Since the election of the Coalition Government in 2010 and Conservation Government in 2015, the discrete focus upon women's entrepreneurial activity has diminished becoming subsumed into a broader stance upon equality and opportunity (Fawcett Society, 2015). In response to such diminishing interest, a Women's Enterprise Policy Group (WEPG) was formed in 2012 who reported that:

From a policy perspective, there has been a very limited focus on women in business from the Coalition government. Though, interestingly, the 'women on boards' agenda, following the publication of the Davies report, has been widely debated and has received many more column inches within the media than women's business ownership. This has served to deflect discussion on, arguably, the more important issue of creating a pipeline of growth-oriented female-led businesses which will provide the FTSE board directors of the future.

<http://www.womensenterprisepolicygroup.com/index.htm>

Thus, focused support for women's enterprise in the UK has had a somewhat chequered history; prior to 1997 there was virtually no discrete policy initiatives, this changed significantly during the early 2000s with a distinct strand of government support invested in

promoting women's enterprise. Since 2010, whilst governments still make reference to the importance of women's enterprise there have been very limited direct policy or funding focused upon this issue (WEPG, 2012).

In terms of the impact of government policy, Carter et al., (2015) note that recent estimates by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicate that women comprise about 29% of the United Kingdom's self-employed population, and 22% of incorporated businesses are women-led (BIS, 2013; Causer and Park, 2009). Women-owned businesses contribute about £75billion to Gross Value Added (GVA) productivity, about 16% of the approximate GVA of all UK SMEs (BIS, 2013). Despite the recent decline in focused support for women's entrepreneurial activity, rates of self-employment and firm ownership have actually notably increased in the last few years (ONS, 2015). This may suggest that a combination of previous policies, the cultural embedding of an entrepreneurial mind-set and higher rates of entrepreneurship education are fuelling an increasing propensity for women to create new ventures. McKay et al. (2013) however, note the impact of recession and austerity policies since 2010 such that the sharp contraction of the public sector has had a devastating impact on women who dominate such employment. This would suggest that much of the increase in self-employment has been fuelled by public sector redundancies; moreover, the ONS suggest that reduced employment opportunities are preventing normal levels of churn such that those women who might normally wish to self-select back into employment given dissatisfaction with self-employment are unable to do so (ONS, 2014). Moreover, as in the case of Sweden, distinct gendered occupational segregation persists within self-employment and small firm ownership (Marlow, 2014) whilst women are still far more likely to start home-based part-time firms in an effort to combine domestic labour and economic participation (Jayawarna et al., 2013).

Regardless however, of which ever government has been in power, their willingness to invest in women's enterprise policy initiatives or the impact of such, there is a consistent underpinning theme to the discourse which informs this debate. The emphasis is upon the responsibility of the individual woman to exploit her entrepreneurial potential with policy initiatives aimed at assisting her to overcome her feminised entrepreneurial deficit. This differs from the Swedish discourse where the distinct value of feminine attributes is more to the fore. Within UK policy documents, there is a sense of longing and regret that women are not more entrepreneurial, this is tinged with a moral judgement upon their failure to make a greater contribution to the wealth of the nation. So unpicking the themes within a comprehensive briefing paper of 2003, 'A

Strategic Framework for Women's Enterprise', a consistent plea is for more women to enter self-employment to reflect levels in the US:

The overall objective is to increase significantly the numbers of women starting and growing businesses in the UK, to proportionately match or exceed the level achieved in the USA. (DTI: SBS, 12)

As Marlow et al. (2008) pointed out, this is a completely specious ambition given the differences in markets, welfare systems and crucially, how business ownership is defined. Thus, the pressure for women in the UK to step up and reflect the contribution of their transatlantic cousins is positioned as a moral responsibility. To achieve this expansion, women are urged to overcome their feminised deficits such as risk aversity, fear of finance, reluctance to develop innovative ideas and make the move from benefits to enterprise. Whilst these are certainly issues which do affect most people considering new venture creation, they have been packaged as peculiarly feminine such that women require special help to overcome such deficits. As Marlow and Swail (2014:80) noted, the generic sentiment being: 'If only women could be more like men'. Bringing this more up to date, the Federation of Small Business (FSB) in their recent report on support for women business owners noted:

Key challenges included balancing work and family life (40%), achieving credibility for the business (37%) and a lack of confidence (22%). All of these are limiting women's ability to start, run and grow their businesses. (Women in Enterprise: Untapped Potential: 2016:4 <http://www.fsb.org.uk/docs/default-source/fsb-org-uk/fsb-women-in-enterprise-the-untapped-potential>)

With the exception of the first issue, the other challenges would appear to be generic to all who seek to create a new venture but are transposed into particular feminised issues when articulated through a gendered lens and applied to women.

Thus, adopting a postfeminist analysis, the assumption informing successive government policy initiatives is of the individual woman as the unit of analysis – it is she who must change and adapt in order to realise her entrepreneurial potential and in so doing, engage in self-development and contribute to the wealth of the nation in so doing. As such, it is women who require dedicated support to develop entrepreneurial attitudes and competencies to overcome

feminised deficits and so, enjoy the promise of entrepreneurship. There are no feminist reflections regarding the impact of persistent discrimination, the continuing disparity in terms of domestic/economic labour divisions and generic structural challenges women experience as a category and how this may impact upon their entrepreneurial activity. In addition, there is certainly no reflection that given such socio-economic constraints, entrepreneurship is a poor choice for many women as they are very unlikely to be able to utilise agency to overcome such barriers. In fact, secure public sector employment is a much better option for most women; however, this is contradictory to the current fetishal reverence afforded to entrepreneurship as open and meritocratic reaping benefits for the individual and society.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the concept of postfeminism as used in academic research, primarily in cultural studies, and applied it to the field of entrepreneurship, using the discourse on women's entrepreneurship in two different countries as illustrative examples. In Sweden we reviewed government policy for women's entrepreneurship comparing it to the approach within the UK. In both instances, we found that the discourse may be characterized as postfeminist. It celebrates individual agency, empowerment and choice. It is built on the notion that a woman can build her own bright future by starting a business. It assumes that all structural barriers have been removed and that women are now free to actualize themselves and to make money through entrepreneurship, while simultaneously contributing to the common good by contributing to economic growth. The discourse has developed alongside neo-liberal economic policy and transformation, and is decidedly part of the neo-liberal discourse. Our critical evaluation of the promise of entrepreneurship in liberal societies suggests this is fragile promise which rests upon aspirational arguments. Entrepreneurship does not challenge existing gender inequalities; it just recreates them in a new form.

We draw three main conclusions from this analysis:

First, this might be the time for postfeminist discourse, but these are not postfeminist times. Rather, women's subordination appears to be recreated, and not only that, *the postfeminist discourse renders feminist (collective) action - which could potentially change this state of affairs - obsolete*. There is reason to speak of postfeminism as an especially insidious governmentality (Dean, 1999) which makes women *conduct themselves* in such a way as to recreate their own subordination.

Second, postfeminism cannot be used as an analytical tool in organizational or entrepreneurship analysis – it is far too imprecise. But postfeminism as described earlier in this paper as a certain discursive formation made up of a number of interrelated themes is very useful as a way to describe, or characterize, the results of an analysis of contemporary discourse around gender and femininity. The analytical tool for such an analysis is better labelled poststructuralist feminist theory.

Third, to count as a feminist analysis, the analysis cannot stop at the description of any discourse as postfeminist. It must be accompanied by old-fashioned analysis of the gender order, which in organization studies is best and most persuasively undertaken by reviewing the evidence. Are there now more women leaders, senior managers or entrepreneurs? Critically, do they make more money and/or have more power and influence? Do organizations or governments have policies in place that make it possible to combine work and family and divide house chores evenly between men and women? Empirical evidence in the form of numbers can have a sobering effect given that whilst there certainly has been change, this has been slow. Moreover, it may be argued that such change has been detrimental to some women as it has not been a case of social change eroding gendered challenges making it easier to be successful leaders, managers and entrepreneurs but rather, greater efforts have been exhorted from individual women to fuel such achievements. The current focus upon entrepreneurship is an exemplary case in point; the postfeminist context suggests it presents new opportunities to recognise and celebrate individual achievements without ever acknowledging the persistence of gendered barriers which obstruct progress. Nor does it question or challenge the desirability of entrepreneurship as a ‘good choice’ for women in terms of their health, welfare or wealth.

Finally, any postfeminist analysis must be combined with a feminist analysis. The gender/power implications of the postfeminist condition must be recognised. Given this, we propose that an analysis of postfeminism or the “postfeminist condition” within the field of organization science is necessary. It offers a conceptual tool that may help us to describe how power is operating in organizations and society.

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