Gendered Encounters in a Postfeminist Context: Researcher Identity Work in Interviews with Men and Women Leaders in the City of London

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Abstract

Studies of interviewing highlight asymmetrical power relationships between interviewer and interviewee in elite, cross-gender interviews. Such interviews are said to have distinctive power dynamics which position the interviewee as the dominant party. Drawing on the notion of postfeminist encounter, I argue that the research hierarchy in interviews is not static and that the power dynamics are better understood as fluid with control constantly moving between interviewer and interviewee. Concentrating on researcher subjectivity, I investigate my identity work in interviews with men and women leaders in the City of London drawing out the variability in my subject position. I depict the subjectivities of academic, wife and therapist which I was called into during interviews. Through this set of subjectivities which emerged via the calibration of the masculine enactment of academic expertise and the feminine performance of listening and empathising, I make visible the changing power dynamics which characterised these elite interviews.

Keywords: Elite Interviews, Leaders, Postfeminism, Postfeminist Encounters

INTRODUCTION

Mobilising the notion of postfeminist encounter, I explore researcher identity work as one aspect of the research relationship when interviewing men and women elite respondents. Scholarly considerations of relationships in interviews tend to emphasise the vulnerability of interview subjects, arguing that irrespective of research topic or interviewees, the power dynamic always acts in favour of the researcher as s/he controls the interview (Stanley & Wise, 1993). In contrast, elite interviewing is said to have a distinctive power dynamic with the interviewer occupying a weaker position and the interviewee being the dominant party (Boucher, 2017; Empson, 2018; Mason-Bish, 2019). However, elite status is not the only characteristic that is perceived to reverse the claimed conventional power dynamics of the interview. Cross-gender interviewing where women interview men has also been documented as a research context steeped in power struggles with the gender of the researcher influencing how informants respond in the interview. Discourses of masculinity are said to bestow greater authority on men as respondents allowing them to gain the upper hand during the interview interaction (Pini, 2005; Vahasantanen & Saarinen, 2013). Accounts of women researchers' experience of interviewing men highlight how men respondents can respond negatively to a women researcher's subjectivity, particularly where the research takes places in a masculine environment. This manifests not only in a man respondent adopting an authoritative position in relation to knowledge about the research topic but may also materialise in attempts to control the conversation through interruptions, directing criticism at the questions asked, belittling the research topic or sexualizing the woman researcher (Chiswell & Wheeler, 2016; Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005).

Co-existing with the critique above, other considerations of cross-gender interviewing emphasise the positive effects of the femininity of a woman researcher in research interactions. When women interview men, it is argued that men respondents may be more likely to perceive the interview as a shared collaborative event (Gatrell, 2006). As such, men respondents can act to downplay controlling behaviours associated with masculinity. They may not be inclined to engage in traditional masculine behaviours and may prefer to speak to a woman as opposed to a man interviewer, particularly in relation to personal matters (Arendell, 1997; Gatrell, 2006; Padfield & Procter, 1996; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Thus, being a woman and doing femininity can mean that men respondents treat a woman researcher as non-threatening, a good listener, and a facilitator of their narratives (Pini, 2005). Power dynamics associated with femininity have also been considered in relation to same-

gender interviewing. According to Oakley (1981, 1998) a non-hierarchical interview is more likely between a woman interviewer and woman interviewee. Additionally, she argues that data collected in this more 'equal' interview situation is likely to be innately more valid.

What is clear from many accounts of elite and (some) cross-gender interviewing is that there is a tendency to view power relations within the interview context as a zero-sum game - if one party has the power they exercise it at the expense of the other. However, increasingly understanding interviewers and interviewees in these terms is seen as short sighted, as neither party is likely to be all-powerful or always vulnerable. Consequently, recognition that interview situations are not characterised by static power lines is growing (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). Likewise, there is a questioning of assertions that same-gender interviewing is always characterised by a 'level playing field' between interviewer and interviewee. The impact of social similarity between interviewer and interviewee is said to go beyond gender to include other aspects of difference further complicating relationships within interviews (Tang, 2002). From this perspective, the impact of femininity in same-gender interview interactions can also be shaped by its intersection with other forms of difference such as class, race, and age (McDowell, 1998). Accordingly, assumptions regarding the equal status of interviewer and interviewee in same-gender interviews are open to question.

Taking these challenges into account, I ague that it is more fruitful to interpret the power embedded in interview interactions as fluid, dynamic, dispersed and contested with the research hierarchy always in process, moving between the researcher and the respondent (Tang, 2002). Starting from a position of understanding interviews as fluid encounters (MacDonald, 2020), I explore my identity work as the interviewer as one aspect of the research relationship in elite cross-gender and same-gender interviews. I begin by providing some background to the interviews that are drawn on in this chapter. Drawing on the concepts of encounter and postfeminism, I next reveal the importance of approaching elite interviews as a theoretical and not solely a practical task. I suggest that theorising my identity work as a gender and management researcher makes visible the subtleties of interview encounters, alerting me to the shifting power dynamics of the interaction which would otherwise remain opaque. I conclude with a consideration of the issues raised.

POSTFEMINISM IN THE CITY

This chapter derives from a project that explores the experience of leadership in context where the latter is understood as the economic setting of the City of London and the cultural location of a postfeminist gender regime. Working out of a postfeminist frame, the research conceptualised leadership as a negotiation between masculine and feminine norms with both men and women doing masculinity and femininity when leading. Accordingly, adopting a focus on the insurance market centred around the 333-year-old institution of Lloyd's of London, 22 men and 26 women mid to senior leaders from underwriters, brokers, insurance sector bodies, Lloyds, a law firm and technology company (two respondents) both of which work with the insurance market, were interviewed. Of the sample of 48 interviewees, 26 of the respondents were in senior leadership positions which included one recently retired individual. Twenty two respondents were in mid-leadership positions meaning they had high status function and/or section responsibility with some having significant industry experience and often long tenure in the insurance market (Welch et al, 2002). The respondents occupied various leadership roles such as being CEO of an organization or holding responsibility for areas such as Finance or Operations at board level. Mid-leadership roles included leading a particular business area within the insurance field which required high levels of expertise and which often included responsibility for a team of people. Interviewees were sourced through a mixture of personal and professional contacts which supported the construction of a snowball sample which yielded 47 out of the set of 48 cases with only one person responding to a cold call email (Small, 2009).

Following this snowball procedure, the interviews began in March 2019 and continued throughout the year into early 2020. The interviews took place in a range of locations with thirty five respondents inviting me to meet in their buildings – either in their personal office (4), a meeting room (26) or a coffee area (5) – which facilitated viewing and observation of corporate spaces which are normally secure and not open to the public. The remaining 13 interviews took place in coffee shops (7), members' clubs (2), restaurants (2), my university office as one (retired) respondent offered to meet there and one in the home of a respondent as this was their only availability. With the exception of one meeting, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with extensive notes of the non-recorded interview written up directly after the interview interaction. Following each interview, a summary note was written up capturing reflections on the interaction. These varied in length with some notes being longer than others.

As the interviews progressed, consideration of interviewer and respondent interaction drew on the experience of McDowell (1998) in her study of workplace culture in banks in the City of London. In interviews with bankers, McDowell (1998: 2138) details how she varied her personal presentation to her interviewees based '…on a quick initial assessment of a range of visual and verbal clues and an establishment of a relationship as we progressed through the interview…'. Consequently, in some interviews she took up a conventional woman role to complement the traditional masculinity of her respondents; in others she enacted an efficient woman persona to facilitate interaction with senior 'fierce' women; with women similar to herself she was more 'sisterly'; and finally with younger men she presented herself as a 'super-fast' and 'super-informed' woman researcher (p. 2138). In approaching interviews in this way McDowell's enactment of different woman positions was a response to the practical interview situation she faced. In considering variations in my enactment of femininity within the interviews, my account differs from McDowell in two ways. First, I approach my 'doing' of various femininities when in the field as researcher identity work and as such is more than a practical response to the interview situation. Here, emphasis is placed on the contradictions surrounding the constitution of an appropriate interviewer identity within the context of elite interviews. As such my interviewer identity was not simply chosen by me (as McDowell suggests) or allocated by powerful respondents (as conventional elite interview literature claims) but rather is the outcome of processes of acceptance, adjustment and distancing emerging out of my identity work within interview encounters (Brown, 2017). Second, consideration of my identity work in the interviews is, as said above, viewed through the conceptual lens of postfeminism understood as a cultural phenomenon which has reconfigured contemporary femininity. Women are now interpellated by discourses of masculinity and femininity and engage in ongoing, careful movement between masculine and feminine behaviours when 'doing' gender. In exploring the identities and relationships I was called into when interviewing men and women leaders in the City of London, I highlight how I was interpellated by postfeminist discourses and constituted in particular ways which varied across the interviews. In doing this my aim is to provoke reflection on the complexities of the research relationship with elite respondents in both cross-gender and same-gender interview encounters and to highlight the importance of thinking theoretically and not just practically about conducting elite interviews.

INTERVIEW ENCOUNTERS OF THE POSTFEMINIST KIND

In considering the issue of researcher-respondent relationships, it is argued that it is important to understand that the processes of gaining access, engaging with respondents, and exiting interactions with them is primarily a relational endeavour (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). When conducting interviews I did not approach the issue of research relationships, particularly within the context of elite interviews, as essentially a series of tactics for gaining investigative advantage. Rather I viewed the research relationship as an issue of researcher & respondent identity that is multifaceted and intricately interwoven. To understand the multi-layered aspects of this relationship, postfeminism as an analytical concept is drawn on to frame the identity work I engaged in during the interviews. While there has been much debate and contestation of the interpretations attached to the notion of postfeminism, the most drawn upon elucidation is one which views it as a mode of governance which has given rise to the reconfiguration of the feminine subject (Gill et al, 2017; Lewis, 2014, McRobbie, 2009). Understood as a discursive formation, the emergence of postfeminism is attributed to the actions and influence of '…a range of semi-autonomous institutions, bodies of knowledge, disciplines, organizations and agents who may deliver the same message across public discourse without necessarily organised co-operation' (Riley et al, 2019: 7)

When drawing on postfeminism as a theoretical resource, a central question posed regarding its use is whether or not it should be treated as a theoretical perspective. Scholars who draw on postfeminism as an analytical device are adamant that it should not be treated as a feminist perspective in and of itself but also highlight that as a critical concept it is informed by and operationalised via the principles of poststructuralist feminism (Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al, 2017). Consequently, consideration of my identity work as interviewer is also informed by poststructuralist principles, an approach which had a threefold impact on the research. First, I conceptualised the interviews as encounters as opposed to formal hierarchical meetings. Following MacDonald (2020), I adopted the notion of encounter to move away from the conventional understanding of elite interviews as static meetings controlled by all-powerful influential respondents. Treating interviews as encounters means moving '…beyond notions of division or asymmetry to focus on attachments, affective relations and narratives of being alongside…' (Wilson, 2017: 454). Accordingly, the interview is understood as an arena within which interviewer and interviewee as subjects encounter one another in multiple and fragmented ways. Within the encounter, they are called into relationship with history, culture, and particular socio-economic and political contexts as

well as with each other so while power dynamics persist, the shape of encounters cannot be predicted in advance (MacDonald, 2020). Second, in emphasising the fluidity of the interview relations, the dynamics of power are understood to be less fixed and more volatile, moving between the interviewee and interviewer as opposed to statically remaining with the elite respondent throughout the course of the interview. Here, positionality and status are approached as porous and dynamic and the elite respondent is not treated as an object from which the researcher excavates knowledge but as a subject of the research underlining the multiplicity, fragmentation, relationality and subject-making that characterised the interviews (Mason-Bish, 2019). As well as depicting the leadership experiences of my respondents, I also approached the interviews as sites for my own biographical work particularly as one of my key personal contacts who facilitated connection with respondents was my husband (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Mason-Bish, 2019). Accordingly - and from the point of view of the respondents - I was connected to the insurance world and involved in the mediation of meanings between them as interviewees and academic conventions (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013: 369). Third, in approaching the interviews as encounters '…inflected with history between differently positioned subjects' (MacDonald, 2020: 5), I treat gender as a performance which is culturally and historically situated within (postfeminist) discourses but not wholly determined by them (Hekman, 2014). Treating the interviews as postfeminist encounters, I place an emphasis on what Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013: 365) refer to as the spaces of possibility between researchers and respondents and the way in which '…researcher-respondent relationships are often emergent, multiple and agentic in the sense that researchers and respondents shape each other's identities and actions'.

In taking this approach to researcher identity work when conducting interviews two particular concerns must be considered. First, are there any additional ethical issues that emerge when doing identity work in the interview and second, how can this identity work be captured? Ethically, the issue that is potentially pertinent here is whether this approach to the research relationship should be discussed with the interviewees either prior to or as part of the interview? This question relates to how much of the approach taken to the interviews should be disclosed to respondents. While a summary of the research should always be provided to participants, even with the most comprehensive synopsis, a gap in understanding on the part of interviewees is always possible connected to their lack of knowledge of the academic literature on something like research relationships. Arguably, such a gap is not outside the expectations of respondents who would not presume to have the same experience of research

interviews as the researcher. While they can reasonably anticipate that a researcher will engage with them in a professional and serious manner, there is also likely to be understanding that a researcher may have a different interpretation of the interaction in the interview as it will be viewed as part of a series of conversations and not just a single discussion (Taylor & Smith, 2014). In relation to the capture of the identity work of the researcher, I would suggest engagement in two key research practices when completing the interviews. First, data collection via interviews should be firmly located within the theorisation of the research. This means ensuring that prior to the interviews consideration is given to ontological, epistemological, and theoretical aspects of the research and that these feed into the preparations for data collection. Second, directly following each interview and using an A5 notebook, the researcher should write up impressions of the interviews in practical terms – where the interview took place, how long it lasted, the engagement of the interviewee, how the questions worked. Following these 'technical' reflections, the researcher should then turn an 'academic eye' to the interview experience, viewing it through the theoretical framework of the research and pondering the ontological and epistemological elements of the interaction. From these two before-and-after research practices, the researcher can surface the identity work they engaged in during the course of the interviews and drawing on these practices, it is this aspect of my own research that I now address.

Postfeminist Research Femininities

Emblematic of the discursive formation of postfeminism is its reconfiguration of femininity such that the constitution of postfeminist femininities is exemplified by the intertwining of feminine ideals with masculine marked practices (Carlson, 2011; Lewis, 2014, 2018). This postfeminist co-existence of the discursive dimensions of masculinity and femininity is revealed in a collection of stable features, empirical regularities and material affects which according to Gill (2007, 2016) connect to each other in a patterned way. These include individualism, choice, empowerment, 'natural' sexual difference, self-surveillance, and valorisation of home and family. Interpellated by postfeminism, I drew on discursive resources associated with discourses of masculinity (e.g. individualism, agency, control) and femininity (e.g. care, interdependence, nurture, empathy) which constituted (but did not entirely regulate) my interview subjectivity. While other commentators in the gender and organization studies field (e.g. Byrne et al, 2019; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006) have argued

that men and women have access to femininities and masculinities when doing gender, viewed through the prism of postfeminism, it is important to note that while women are interpellated to constitute their subjectivity through discourses of masculinity this *must* be done interdependently with femininity (Carlson, 2011; Lewis, 2014, 2018).

The compulsory intertwining of masculine and feminine behaviours means that they do not just occur concurrently and should not be understood as a type of androgyny based on complementary performances of agentic and communal behaviours. For this reason, combining the different discursive dimensions of masculinity and femininity when constituting the postfeminist subject requires vigilance and suitable modification of self-regulatory behaviours on an ongoing basis. Assessing my interview experience, the masculine identity of academic researcher was enacted alongside the feminine identities of wife and therapist giving rise to separate but overlapping research identities – researcher as wife and academic and researcher as academic and therapist – which I moved into and out of both within and across the interviews. These identities were enacted through a calibration of the masculine enactment of academic expertise and the feminine performance of listening and empathising during interviews. In understanding the constitution of these postfeminist research femininities they are not presented as 'types' which are clearly bounded from each other. Rather, there is a blurring of the boundaries and they are better understood as available bodily and relational performances which I entered into by drawing on postfeminist discursive resources or was moved into by respondents during the interviews.

Researcher as Wife & Academic

In setting up the interviews initial contact with potential respondents was made through my husband who works in the insurance market. I emailed these contacts, using my husband as the means to gain access thereby constituting myself as 'wife'. At the same time, I outlined the purpose of my research, inviting them to participate in a one hour interview and provided a summary description of the project and through this constituted myself as 'academic', calibrating feminine and masculine behaviours as the following email illustrates:

Email Example One

Hello _____, Please allow me to introduce myself to you. You work with my husband _____ in _____ and he suggested that I contact you

about research that I am currently completing. I work in the Kent Business School at the University of Kent in Canterbury and I have recently been awarded research funding to complete research on leadership within the City of London which provides support for data collection. I am interested in looking at the experience of leadership for men and women working in the insurance market and your leadership experiences in insurance make you an ideal and valuable respondent….

The vast majority of the individuals emailed in this way agreed to the request for an interview, an agreement which was largely based on their acquaintance with my husband and without which I would not have secured a high response rate. Indeed, I was told by some of the respondents that the reason they agreed to the interview is because I was 'one of them' through my husband and that they normally delete the type of email request I sent. However, while I was constituted by them and by myself as 'wife', there were also questions about what the research was about and what I was seeking to achieve along with questions about where I worked. Therefore prior to meeting respondents and during the interview my researcher identity was a calibration of 'wife/academic' where I enacted both feminine (connection, relationality, family) and masculine (agency, knowledge, expertise) behaviours to secure access and to manage the interview. Yet, despite the importance of my own personal connection to respondents through my husband, this is not the only reason why the identity of 'researcher as wife' was key to gaining access as there is also a significant contextual reason. The London insurance market is the only face-to-face market in the world with business normally enacted daily through person-to-person meetings within the Lloyds building and surrounding area. Respondents constantly referred to the market in terms of 'a family', 'a village', 'human connection' with one women senior leader from a broker stating:

'…it's all about the humans. You know there's nothing else to say, it would be great to go sit in a closet and you know move assets around but unfortunately, it's all about the humans'

The building of human connection through regular interaction and activities such as travel, drinking, golf, shooting expeditions, charity dinners and other philanthropic activities was cited as key to success within a sector where business is literally done socially in a relational way on a daily basis.

As time went on, I established contact with respondents not directly through my husband but from the respondents I interviewed – see email example two below – who also

drew on my marital relationship to introduce me. However, in constituting me as 'wife' we can also see in this email the high level of sociality which circulates throughout the insurance market and works to support business activity. It is this sociality which underpinned the 'snowballing' of respondents:

Email Example Two (email sent on my behalf by one of my interviewees)

Good morning all, Some of you will know _____ of _____, his wife Patricia is at the University of Kent in Canterbury and is doing an academic project on *leadership in the financial services sector in the City of London with a particular focus on the insurance market.* She is particularly keen to talk to successful women in the sector as well as chaps; she did interview me for this (for some reason). She asks if I might put her in touch with some market leaders and hence this email. Would it be possible for her to contact you with a view to her interviewing you for this project? FYI, she comes to London or wherever it mutually suits and she and I did it over a (very pleasant) lunch. Would be grateful if you could let me know if it is OK for her to get in touch with you – a summary of the project is below. Best regards & thanks

From this email and also from the illustrative quote from an underwriter CEO respondent below, we can see the importance of relationships in the insurance market. Within this context, 'wife' is a particular subjectivity which is understood as part of the maintenance and development of social relationships and this underpinned people's willingness to speak with me.

One of the things (wife's name) found I think since I joined the insurance company Patricia is that people are just so much nicer than in banking and it's a very charitable industry, so she goes to many more dinners and events within insurance than we ever did in banking and she really enjoys spending time with the brokers and other carriers and so on. So she knows, I know most of my competitor CEOs and she knows most of them as well plus spouses and she knows lots of brokers plus spouses….'

Additionally, within the interviews when discussing issues connected to work-life balance, men respondents often referred to an 'understanding wife' who facilitated the long hours work culture of the insurance market as the following comments from two men CEOs illustrate

But so she understands the business so she's sort of been out of it for a long time but she, her father was an insurance broker as well so she understands sort of the demands that the business has in terms of travel and client entertainment and all this sort of stuff so she's very tolerant…

(Wife's name) leads the family. Perhaps, that's one of the things about it being, it can become a bit tiring, when I go home at the weekend I don't want to make any decisions, I don't want to (laughs), I'm decisioned out…I think it seems to work

Thus, within the insurance market the presence of the subjectivity of 'wife' is quite strong and I was interpellated to take up this position as a means to secure access and to engage with respondents. In doing this I located myself between the relational, marital figure of 'wife' and the masculinised agentic, individualised figure of the 'academic researcher' constituting a postfeminist research feminine subjectivity which required movement from the realm of femininity into the arena of masculinity. While I sought to calibrate the juxtaposition of the masculinised academic researcher and the feminised wife, in the interviews arranged via my husband I was often positioned by respondents in the traditional realm of family with a strong emphasis on the doing of femininity as a 'wife'. Respondents were extremely polite and supportive and frequently asked if their responses were helpful. For them, the aim was clearly to help me as much as possible – support I appreciated – while I sought to ensure that I was addressing the needs of the project. Thus, for many of the interviews I moved between the subject positions of wife and academic, calibrating my feminine and masculine behaviours to ensure that I fulfilled the requirements of the research.

What of the power relationships between me as interviewer and elite interview respondents? While clearly it could be argued that being located in the realm of femininity as 'wife' placed me in a less powerful position than my respondents, it also meant that the interviewees were extremely open in their responses. For example, in one interview with a mid-level leader in a brokers, a young man who was on an internship was also present. At one point in the interview the intern reached over to turn the recorder off as the interviewee recounted private details of how he lost a previous job as follows:

Respondent: Well I was fired actually

Interviewer: Am I allowed to ask what happened there?

Respondent: Well yeah, I shagged my boss' mistress

Interviewer: Oh goodness

Respondent: And she obviously wasn't very impressed because she told him

Interviewer: Oh goodness!

Intern: This is off the record

Respondent: No, it's on the record, no, I woke up one morning and this woman said "do you know a bloke called _____" and I said "Oh _____, he's a colleague, he's my boss actually" and she said "Oh dear" and the next thing I knew he had shipped me off to the States for six months and then when I came back he said "you're off" (all laugh)

In this exchange, there is clearly no attempt made to sanitise the account or conceal the reason why this respondent lost his job, despite having the opportunity to avoid providing a detailed response. It could be argued that this type of openness indicates a lack of hierarchy in the interview, an equality which may be connected to my identity as 'wife' and thus being seen as non-threatening or simply him feeling comfortable enough to be open. It also aligns with previous research on cross-gender interviewing which emphasises how the doing of femininity in terms of a willingness to listen and sympathise can facilitate data collection.

Researcher as Academic and Therapist

As the data collection moved on, I became less reliant on my husband for sourcing respondents. I had one professional contact who I met through a women's business network in Kent and as a senior figure in the insurance market she agreed to be interviewed while also providing me with two further contacts. Another contact initially secured via my husband was also involved in looking at issues of leadership within the insurance market and she acted as a connection point to 12 senior leaders. Through this source, I was also invited to participate in a focus group on diversity and leadership in the insurance market and connected with three other senior leaders at this meeting. While these respondents were aware that my husband worked in the insurance market, this was more of a background identity and central to my engagement with them was the subjectivity of academic. Here, demonstration of an agentic, knowledgeable persona was essential. For some of the senior leaders, both men and women,

there was an openness to considering the gender issues circulating around the market with concern expressed about the homogeneity of leadership as follows:

> On my board there's me and one other women and I have three Matthews and three Andrews and two Davids - that's lonely. Especially when the Bloomberg thing, the Bloomberg article recently came out, the sexism in the market, and you know, one tries to subtly say, yes, this is real and you need to acknowledge it, when you're overwhelmed and being beaten around the head with – and it was a badly-written article - 'that doesn't happen anymore, that's rubbish' Yes it does, I've seen it. So it's a challenge from that perspective too, the loneliness and the, the women aspect' (Women CEO)

> '…you listen to other CEOs around the table, they're all talking in similar ways and they talk inclusiveness…I think that when we've had issues of diversity, gender equality, I've almost never heard them discussed at senior levels until the last five years or so and now they're just front and centre and there's been some good initiatives….we want to be the last generation of old white men, we think we must be more diverse going forwards but it's easier to say much harder to do' (Men MD)

Within this context, the research relationship within the interview was characterised by a sense of professionalism. Discussion centred on an exchange of views about the nature of leadership in the insurance market and the current attempts being made to open up senior positions to non-traditional individuals. In this sense I was firmly engaged in doing masculinity through the enactment of academic researcher as the difficulties involved in changing the status quo were considered. On occasion I was also 'brought back' from the doing of masculinity as academic researcher to the feminine subject of wife and mother as a means of turning a question I asked back to me. For example, in relation to the consideration of what it takes to be a successful leader, one man CEO positioned me as 'mother' and argued against a conventional 'motherly' view of wanting your children 'to be happy' as follows:

Respondent: Do you have children?

Interviewer: Yes I have a son

Respondent: OK your goal is to make them a balanced individual with a good balance and a good temper and a…you know work hard-play hard and not be obsessed about everything.

Interviewer: Yes to be happy

Respondent: People like that achieve nothing in life. They are very happy people but in terms of driving and building, everyone, the most successful people I've come across have got some chip (on their shoulder) which has driven them

In arguing that children reared to be 'happy' could not be successful because they are not driven, this respondent is asserting a hierarchy in the interview in two ways: first my approach to motherhood is deemed problematic (despite being the norm i.e. most mothers want their children to be happy) if I want my son to be successful in the future. Second, the view expressed is contrary to contemporary academic arguments about running successful organizations where an emphasis is placed on 'harmony', 'balance' and valuing the 'whole' person. From the perspective expressed here recognising and developing 'driven' individuals with something to prove is perceived as the key to successful leadership.

All of the respondents in this study were involved in the leadership of multi-million/multi-billion pound businesses with significant numbers of employees and full awareness of this responsibility. Given this, in constituting my identity in the interview as academic researcher, I was also called into the feminine position of therapist as I listened to respondent's reflections on their leadership experiences. This required an ability to attend to the interviewee's account of leadership and to remain quiet while also responding sensitively as they reflected on some of the challenges they faced. This included personal issues such as divorce connected to the long hours work culture, managing the daily challenges of family life and responding to the numerous challenges which businesses in the insurance market are currently facing. As one men CEO commented:

'…I want people who are passionate about this organization, you know, I go, my wife says "_____ why do you care about it so much?" and I say "do you know what I don't know". I feel a sense of obligation and duty and a sense that, you know, it's like a mission and I think this is ridiculous….

The deep level of commitment to the business and the recurrent expression of a desire to leave the organization in good shape for their successor along with a distaste for careerist leaders who are mainly concerned with themselves, contributed to a high level of self-reflection in the interviews. The emotion expressed by a large number of respondents during their accounts of their leadership experiences interpellated me to take up the subject position of therapist which I calibrated alongside academic researcher. While there is certainly overlap between the subjectivities of 'wife' and 'therapist', when I took up the subjectivity of the former it was mainly in relation to my own husband. In contrast, the identity of 'therapist' relates to responding to the emotions and thoughtfulness which many respondents expressed when considering the leadership challenges they face.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the concepts of encounter and postfeminism, this chapter explores research relationships in elite interviews with men and women leaders in the insurance market of the City of London. Focusing on the subjectivity of the researcher, it draws out the variability in my positionality, outlining the different subject positions I was called into during the course of the interviews. In doing this the chapter contributes to understanding of the 'doing' of gender research in two specific ways. First, the chapter adds to the growing body of work (e.g. Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; MacDonald, 2020) which highlights the fluidity and agentic nature of researcher-respondent relationships. By treating the interview as an encounter (MacDonald, 2020) as opposed to a formal meeting, the varying degrees of power and influence that I experienced in relationship with my respondents were made visible. In contrast to conventional considerations of elite interviews which assume that the power in the interview interaction is static largely lying with the elite (usually) masculine respondent, the account of my interview experiences demonstrates the fluid nature of the power dynamics of the interviews both within and between them. It also emphasises the variety of ways in which researchers position themselves and are positioned by respondents making visible the need to consider the impact of this on the research study itself. For example, the construction of the sample for this study relied heavily on personal connections both my own and those of the respondents who recommended other potential interviewees. While this means that respondents in the study are highly likely to know each other and to form a type of social network, in the context of this study this can be justified as it is

reflective of the nature of the insurance market in London. Nevertheless, while acknowledging this, it is as Small (2009) argues important to seek to understand, develop and incorporate this aspect of the research design into my understanding of the research context and not to try to 'control away' or ignore its impact.

The second contribution of this chapter is to demonstrate the benefits of theorising an interviewer's role when interviewing – here the combination of encounter and postfeminism – instead of approaching it only in terms of a practical response to an interview situation. Much of the literature on elite interviewing takes the form of 'methodological advice' to secure investigative advantage but such an approach has the potential to misrepresent the reality of the elite interview with a potentially negative impact on the research. By reading my researcher identity through the lens of a postfeminist encounter I am not only able to draw out how I engaged with respondents, I am also able to demonstrate the centrality of external subjectivities such as 'wife' to the doing of gender within this particular business context. As an analytical concept, postfeminist encounter acts as a means to highlight the way in which my researcher subjectivity took shape in the interview encounter through an active calibration of masculine and feminine behaviours. Together the notions of encounter and postfeminism enabled me to see how I am in relation with the leaders I interviewed and the context of the insurance market. Accordingly, as gender and management researchers, we should be aware of the importance of approaching research interviews theoretically as well as practically so as to sensitize ourselves to the intricacies of the interactions that take place when interviewing.

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