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Hakim Revisited: Preference, Choice and the Postfeminist Gender Regime

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Abstract

We revisit Hakim's influential preference theory to demonstrate how it is both reflective of postfeminism and generative of its values and practices. We differentiate between two interpretations of postfeminism – first a surface level “successful but obsolete” version articulated by Hakim and a second, multi-layered account of postfeminism as a discursive formation connected to a set of discourses around gender, feminism and femininity. Drawing on this latter version we make visible the embeddedness of postfeminism in preference theory highlighting its connection to the creation of a new postfeminist subjectivity based on an agentic and ‘choosing’ femininity. We show how a consideration of preference theory in terms of the emergence and constitution of “*the female chooser*”, opens up aspects of Hakim's thesis which to date have been overlooked. In addition, our postfeminist reading of preference theory draws out aspects of Hakim's account which she herself understated. Specifically, within a contemporary context where equivalent priority is afforded to wage-work and care work, it is Hakim's ‘adaptive’ woman who exemplifies the new postfeminist subject required to perform well simultaneously in both the work and domestic domains.

Keywords: postfeminism, preference theory, choice, new choosing femininity.

Introduction

In this paper we revisit Hakim's preference theory (1998; 2000; 2002; 2006) to argue that the theory is both reflective of postfeminism and generative of its values and practices. Specifically, we suggest that preference theory, in seeking to explain and predict women's choices regarding investment in productive and/or reproductive work, constitutes the ‘conditions of possibility’ for female employment through the creation of a new postfeminist subjectivity based on an agentic and ‘choosing’ femininity. We demonstrate the strong links

that exist between preference theory and postfeminism and explore the implications this has for understandings of women's often problematic labour market positioning. We therefore show how a consideration of preference theory in terms of the emergence and constitution of "*the female chooser*", one of the central subjectivities of the contemporary era (Ball, 2008), opens up aspects of Hakim's analysis which to date have been overlooked by the substantial body of work that has commented on her argument.

With preference theory (a controversial yet highly influential account of women's life style choices), Hakim (2000) asserts that in contemporary, affluent (Western) societies there is a new material reality for women. This new material reality derives from five social and labour market changes which include contraception, acceptance of the principle of equality, white-collar jobs, non-standard work, an emphasis on personal preference and choice, which together undermine the need for the social engineering of labour market outcomes. Two 'revolutions' in particular, namely contraception giving women control over their fertility and the implementation of equal opportunities policies, 'ensured that for the first time in history women had equal access to all positions, occupations and careers in the labour market' (Hakim, 2000: 7). Arguing that women have 'never had it so good', Hakim (2000: 14) places an emphasis on a newly empowered, assertive, femininity emphasising how traditional constraints have been removed creating a situation where women have '*...genuine choice...and female heterogeneity is revealed to its full extent*'. Indeed, for Hakim, not only can (all) women now act on their individual preferences, they are *forced* to take decisions which will impact on the form their life will take as there are no longer any universal certainties or collectively agreed courses of action.

Hakim (2000) maintains that the most significant decision a woman can make is between a life centred on private, family work (*'home centred'* woman), one centred on

market work or other activities in the public sphere (*'work centred'* woman) and one which combines the two (*'adaptive'* woman) – the latter grouping seen by Hakim as being the most populous. Agency, from this perspective, has greater impact than social structure in determining individual behaviour to the extent that inequalities in labour market outcomes can be positioned as a result of choices made. Within the academy, this core argument of preference theory has generated extensive and often 'acrimonious' debates. While some support has been found for the significance of individual preferences in labour market outcomes most research in the area places emphasis on structural constraints. In terms of the former, Collins and Wickham (2004) found some substantiation for Hakim's prioritisation of life-style preferences, highlighting the significance of individual aspirations in women's employment decisions. Kangas and Rostgaard (2007) and Gash (2008) found a clear association between attitudinal level and current labour market status – leading Gash (2008) to conclude that preferences 'do matter' in terms of predicting labour market participation. All three studies, however, also point to the significance of structural constraints with Gash (2008) suggesting higher predictive values afforded to institutional factors such as affordable childcare. Similarly, in a cross national study, Yerkes (2013) found that participation is influenced by a combination of factors that include but go beyond individual preferences to encompass institutional arrangements such as flexibility in terms of working hours. The greater responsiveness of working hours to individual preferences in the Netherlands was accordingly linked to the ease with which employees can, following legislation, flexibly adjust their working week.

Other authors (e.g. Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Lane, 2004; James, 2008; McRae, 2003; Walters, 2005) have argued more unequivocally that it is (often discriminatory) institutional and societal processes that determine female labour force participation rather than 'unfettered choice'. Lane (2004) for example shows that part time workers do not, as

Hakim suggests, have less commitment to the labour market but the low status of such work is a product of how such workers are construed and located within organizational career structures. James (2008) points to important class based differences in attitudes and preferences while McRae (2003), in a longitudinal study of work histories in the UK, found that women with similar preferences will have different labour market experiences because of varying capacities to overcome constraints – capacities that were partly linked to income levels with women in the highest income brackets being able to live “*as if* they faced no constraints” (McRae, 2003:329 italics in original) while others had choices curtailed.

As well as generating substantial academic debate, Hakim’s work on life-style preferences, is regularly referenced in the media, and has had a significant impact on how women’s labour market positioning is popularly understood with implications for policy more widely. A search on “Catherine Hakim” in all English language newspapers over the past 20 years indicates 868 references to her work ⁽¹⁾ (Nexis accessed August 2015) with many suggesting that equality initiatives are ineffectual in reducing gender based disadvantage. Thus, a recent article in *The Times*, a prominent British newspaper, made explicit reference to Hakim alongside an assertion that the persistent gender pay gap is not driven by discrimination or unjust treatment, as the Prime Minister David Cameron had claimed, but is largely connected to women’s own empowered choices around work (Phillips, 2015). A similar argument was recently reported in Ireland which, drawing on Hakim and on Eurostat data, concluded that the gender pay gap ‘has little to do with the....success of....equality agendas’ (White, 2015) in that countries with stronger equality measures (e.g. Sweden, Norway) have been found to have larger gender based disparities in pay (16% and 17% respectively compared with 14% in Ireland). As other media reports have sought to highlight (e.g. Campanella, 2015), it is women’s personal choices (such as to have children; to work part-time) that determine labour market participation rather than equal opportunity

measures. The profound influence of this view was evidenced in the determination of the former Australian Prime Minister John Howard – ‘who declared himself “very impressed” by her “realistic and compelling” theories - to make Hakim’s work central to major family policy initiatives (Arndt, 2003). In Australia she was widely identified, from national media coverage, as ‘the woman destined to shape the Howard Government’s policies on women, childcare and work’ (Mann, 2002) – initiatives that have a continued legacy in Australian labour market policy today.

The intensity of the debates surrounding Preference Theory lies largely in the (often conflicting) nature of evidence that can lend itself to the theory’s refutation or support. By contrast, our interest in re-reading Hakim derives from a desire to consider how her work contributes to the production of women as choosers. Hakim (2007: 123) presents herself as a social scientist and describes preference theory ‘... as an evidence based theory, developed over a decade from extensive reviews of research results on women’s choices and lifestyle preferences in modern society’. She therefore locates preference theory firmly within the ambit of the academy. However, given the extensive media attention she has received, we approach Hakim’s work in general and in particular her book *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, as a crossover text, i.e. a text which transports (academic) ideas, often unpredictably, across the porous boundaries between academia and popular discourse (Dean, 2012, Gill & Donaghue, 2013). In doing so, we argue that Hakim’s articulation of preference theory (despite its academic origins) helps to establish a common sense understanding of women now being autonomous subjects with choices. We therefore avoid a focus on realist questions such as whether (all) women actually have choice and agency around employment or theoretical questions relating to the extent to which women can demonstrate agency through individualized, autonomous, choosing behaviour in the labour market (Braun, 2009). Instead, we approach choice as a social practice,

conceptualizing the agency and empowerment that Hakim emphasizes, as an ongoing activity or “doing” within everyday life which is context specific and historically, culturally and discursively present for individuals to draw on and activate when required (Kelan, 2010; Martin, 2006; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). As such our review of Hakim’s preference theory is underpinned by poststructuralist theoretical principles with agency understood ‘...not as sovereign or masterful self-authoring but as a constituted effect’ (Dosekun, 2015: 442).

From this starting point we re-read preference theory through critical use of the concept of postfeminism, as central to this cultural phenomenon is the emphasis placed on choice, agency and empowerment which are cited as fundamental to contemporary feminine experience (Gill & Donaghue, 2013; Lewis, 2014a). In completing this reading, our focus is on the postfeminist elements of individualism, “natural” sexual difference and choosing to retreat to the private sphere of home as these dimensions are central to preference theory and the claims it makes. Through this reading we focus on how preference theory – depicting contemporary women as knowingly and deliberately making choices around work and motherhood - is part of postfeminism and has contributed to a reconfiguration of contemporary femininity impacting on the way women are incorporated into the contemporary workplace. In outlining three preference groupings, we suggest that Hakim presents a set of (postfeminist) cultural representations of women and their orientations to work which ‘accords significantly greater autonomy and agency to subjects’ (Gill, 2008a: 435), moving our understanding of women from the traditional passive subject position of ‘helper of men’ to the subject position of ‘agentic woman’. We therefore contribute to the literature that has critically evaluated her work by focussing, uniquely, on the role preference theory plays in promoting a postfeminist gender regime understood as the patterning of gender processes connected to the reformed relationship between feminism and femininity in Western contexts, from the end of the 20th century into the 21st century (Acker, 1994;

McRobbie, 2004). This postfeminist gender regime has changed contemporary conceptions regarding what constitutes women. In disseminating the thinking associated with this regime through preference theory, we argue that Hakim contributes to the generation of an agentic ‘choosing’ femininity, reshaping expectations of women’s participation in the world of work.

This reading largely draws on the text *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory* while also referring to her *British Journal of Sociology* (2007) response to some of the criticisms made. To illustrate our reading of Hakim’s text we draw on ‘fragments’ of her discussion (Pullen & Simpson, 2009) which are evocative in their content and contribute to our aim of exposing the concealed postfeminist elements of her account. As well as these ‘fragments’ being illustrative of the postfeminist dimensions of individualism, “natural” sexual difference and retreatism, they also relate to the aspects of her work which have been subject to criticism. In other words they are significant in terms of the existing critique of Hakim’s work as outlined above, while also drawing out the postfeminist elements embedded in the text.

The paper proceeds with a delineation of the notion of postfeminism, highlighting the specific modalities of this cultural phenomenon. In so doing we identify two interpretations of postfeminism, the first of which is based on an understanding of the success and redundancy of feminism, explicit in Hakim’s account, and a second version which outlines the co-optation and ‘moderation’ of feminism (through postfeminist features of individualism, ‘natural’ sexual difference and retreatism) which we suggest can also be surfaced, at a more fundamental level, from her text. Drawing on this latter interpretation that sees postfeminism as a discursive entity, with its associated discourses having a socially constructed influence that critically shapes feminine identity, we read preference theory’s three-fold classification of women’s work-life preferences in the twenty-first century (home-centred, work-centred and adaptive). In completing this reading we highlight inherent

tensions and contradictions within and between the three preferences and propose the crucial role of the ‘adaptive’ category in creating a new postfeminist subject. Finally, in demonstrating the continued influence of preference theory, we argue that it contributes to the contemporary postfeminist discursive formation by reshaping configurations and representations of femininity around home and work,

Postfeminism and preference theory

According to Tasker & Negra (2007: 19) ‘definitive conceptualizations of postfeminism are...elusive...’ connected to the original generation of the term outside the academy. In exploring preference theory through the lens of postfeminism, two interpretations of this cultural phenomenon are of particular importance. The first interpretation - dominant in the media and drawn on explicitly by Hakim – is one which emphasises the ‘success’ of feminism in achieving gender ‘equality’ and providing unprecedented opportunities for girls and women. Hakim draws on ‘...feminism’s historical usefulness for women...’ (Projansky, 2001: 72), identifying its pursuit of equality as one of the five historical changes occurring in western societies in the twentieth century which prepared the ground for preference theory. Here, the focus is individual rights and the establishment of an equivalency between the either/or ‘choice’ of working in the private world of home *or* working in the public world of work. While the existence of women who ‘choose’ to do both is acknowledged - as ‘drifters/unplanned careers’ (Hakim, 1991: 112) in her earlier work and ‘adaptive women’ in preference theory - the focus of her argument around choice tends to be on the two ‘qualitatively different groups’ (1991: 113) of women who are work centred in a similar way to men and women who are home centred in a (new) traditional way. The reference to ‘new’ tradition here, refers to those women who willingly

take-up the roles of wife and mother, retreating to home as a matter of choice not obligation. In ‘celebrating’ the achievements of feminism for providing women with ‘choice’, Hakim draws on a version of postfeminism which suggests that as long as women who choose to can succeed in typically male arenas, ‘...feminism has worked, feminists are happy and thus there is no longer a need for feminist activism...’ (Projansky, 2001: 75).

However, though this ‘successful but obsolete feminism’ version of postfeminism is explicitly drawn on by Hakim, it only touches on the surface of preference theory. To expose the deeply embedded postfeminist nature of preference theory and how it rearticulates women to a new choosing subjectivity, we need to draw on a second more complex interpretation of postfeminism which has emerged in recent years out of the significant academic attention that has been directed at this cultural phenomenon. Traversing a number of areas including sociology, cultural studies, media studies, film studies and organization studies, a detailed, academic and scholarly investigation and specification of the notion of postfeminism can be located in the foundational work of writers such as Gill (2007a), McRobbie (2009), Negra (2009) and Tasker and Negra (2007). This influential body of work conceives of postfeminism as a discursive entity, made up of interrelated themes connected to a complex set of discourses around gender, feminism and femininity, which, as we will show, are also embedded in preference theory and which contribute to the surfacing of an agentic ‘self-making’ femininity.

From this perspective, postfeminism is understood as a discursive formation which moulds our thinking, attitudes and behaviour towards feminism and women’s changing position in contemporary society and as such is not entirely connected to an ‘actual’ historical event or moment (Dean, 2010; Projansky, 2001). Approached in this way, postfeminism can be interpreted as a cultural response to feminism (or an abduction of feminism) and the transformation it has brought about elaborated by Tasker & Negra (2007: 2) as follows:

‘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. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. Assuming full economic freedom for women, postfeminist culture also (even insistently) enacts the possibility that women might *choose* (emphasis in original) to retreat from the public world of work’

Gill (2007a, 2007b) and McRobbie (2009), through the notions of a postfeminist sensibility and postfeminist gender regime respectively, advance the most systematic exposition of this understanding of postfeminism as something which is discursively produced, framing our understanding of normality and our sense of self. Both authors expose how feminist values (e.g. equality of opportunity in education and the workplace) have been incorporated into everyday (western) life such that feminism now has a taken-for-granted status with the expectation of equality in all aspects of life being unremarkable. However, it is important to note that in conjunction with this feminist egalitarianism there remains a strong current of traditional familialism manifest in the camouflaged re-articulation of traditional gender stereotypes (Thornham and McFarland, 2011). In addition, McRobbie (2009) suggests that this reassertion of traditional gender relations alongside equality is accompanied by a repudiation of feminist action because ‘...feminism has to be understood as having passed away for it to be taken into account’ (Scharff, 2012: 9).

Despite emphasis on the disavowal of feminism in some explorations of postfeminism, as articulated above, the claim that feminism has been completely renounced as irrelevant and unnecessary (as in interpretation one) has been challenged. Writers such as Dean (2010: 393) contend that within a postfeminist cultural milieu, the forswearing of

feminism does not mean complete rejection of feminist thinking which ‘...can and does exist in mainstream public discourse in a manner that is substantial rather than merely spectral’. However, what is rejected is an *excessive* feminism associated with the 1970s, identifiable by a critical, collectivist ethos with a focus on shared rights for women as the sine qua non of feminist activity. In contrast what is affirmed according to Dean (2010) is a *moderate* feminism (2) characterised by an emphasis on the empowerment of individual women such that individual female subjects are identified as the source of change so that ‘social critique is increasingly replaced by self-critique’ (Salecl, 2011: 31). In addition, there is a desire not to alienate men, a firm refutation of the notion that women are victims and an implicit or explicit distancing from a broader critique of gendered inequalities. Indeed, McRobbie (2015: 12) also now recognises the emergence of this conservative form of feminism stating that the new popular feminism favours individualistic striving translated ‘...into an inner drive, a determination to meet self-directed goals’.

One notable feature of this moderate feminism, characteristic of a postfeminist gender regime, is a rapprochement between feminism and femininity. These two strands do not exist independently of each other with women ‘choosing’ to be successful in the world of work as an enactment of feminist behaviour *or* successful in the home sphere as an enactment of femininity, rather work and home have a symbiotic co-existence with women expected to excel in both arenas. This interdependence is typified by the integration of feminine and masculine aspirations so that contemporary femininity necessarily engages norms as well as social realms marked by masculinity (Carlson, 2011: 79-80). Gill (2007a; 2011) identifies the modalities of this co-existence as the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance; femininity as a bodily property; the prominence given to individualism, choice and empowerment; the ascendancy of a make-over paradigm, the revival and reappearance of “natural” sexual difference; the resexualization of women’s

bodies and finally the retreat to home as a matter of choice not obligation (Negra, 2009). As the manifestation of a postfeminist gender regime, these dimensions can be understood as a set of ‘...loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions & meanings...’ that result in and maintain continuing gender inequalities (Acker, 2006; 443). Within a postfeminist gender regime, women draw on discourses of individualism, choice, merit, as much as their male colleagues thereby having an impact on masculine power. However, as McRobbie (2009) argues, this impact is diminished by the alignment of economic freedom with the promotion and expectation of feminine practices around motherhood, beauty, fitness and body culture.

For the purposes of reading preference theory through the lens of postfeminism, three of these modalities are central – individualism, choice and empowerment, notions of ‘natural’ sexual difference and retreatism. These three elements, to which we now turn, capture the coexistence and tension between feminism (interpreted here in terms of achievement in the public, masculine world of work) and femininity (understood as feminized behaviour and domestic responsibilities in the home). This reconciliation between feminism and femininity, which is at the heart of preference theory, forms the basis for a new feminine subject with profound implications for women’s often contradictory experiences and positioning within the world of work (Kelan, 2008a, 2008b, 2014; Lewis, 2014a). In particular, reading preference theory through our second interpretation of postfeminism namely, as a discursive formation, signals the need to revisit Hakim’s life style preferences - home-centred, work-centred and adaptive. The aim here is to assess what this cultural context (summarised in Table One below) means for the way wage-work and home-work are combined given the considerable social and economic changes, not least the further up take and promulgation of neoliberalist ideas and practices, that have occurred since the early 2000s when preference theory was first proposed.

Insert Table One about here

Preference theory – individualism, choice and empowerment

Central to preference theory is the notion of individualization. Preference theory argues that research attention should be directed away from structural factors towards the values and preferences that are ‘...increasingly important determinants of lifestyle choices and behaviours in prosperous modern societies’ (Hakim, 2000: 278). The individualization embedded in this statement, a feature of postfeminism, can be summed up in Giddens (1991: 75) oft-quoted phrase ‘we are not what we are but what we make of ourselves’ and Beck’s (1997: 95) assertion that ‘individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves’. Here, who an individual ‘is’ has changed from a ‘given’ to a ‘task’, for which individuals must take responsibility (Dawson, 2012). What this signals is that the individual is privileged as the unit of social reproduction with outcomes being understood as internally referential as opposed to externally structured for the first time in history (Baker, 2010). Individuals, as the masters of their own lives are now ‘endowed with choice’ (Baker, 2010: 187) which ranges from minor everyday decisions about how to take their coffee to life-changing choices about who they should marry or what career they should build. Thus, subject formation is believed to emerge from de-socialized self-determination where successes and failures are interpreted as being caused by ‘good choices’ and ‘poor choices’, concealing or ignoring the impact of structural and relational factors. Here, a pervasive belief exists, particularly among young women, that while inequalities may persist they do not impact on them. Further, if social constraints connected to gender, class, race etc. do arise they believe that their individual energy, personal effort and determination are enough to surmount them (Scharff, 2012).

However, the individualization which is embedded in preference theory derives from discourses of Enlightenment rationality which discount and ignore women. The notion of being ‘self-made’ has historically been associated with men but women’s entrance into the

labour force means that they are no longer only seen as helpers of men involved in the competitive world of work rather ‘...the ideology of self-making (has) expanded to both genders (and) the logic of self-making (has taken) another form’ (Salecl, 2009: 160). No longer is there simply an upward, steady career path to follow. Instead, individuals take on the role of ‘chooser’, expected to make never-ending choices regarding the direction of their career and life in general. What Salecl (2009) signals here along with Cronin (2000) and Changfoot (2009: 18) is the often unacknowledged masculine subjectivity which women must adopt if they are to succeed ‘in carving out (a) definitive path towards freedom’ through processes of individualization. Hakim does appear to recognise this when she states that women ‘can adopt a male work-centred lifestyle if they wish and socially their gender becomes male rather than female’ (Hakim, 2000: 278). Nevertheless, her emphasis on the postfeminist supposition – central to the first interpretation of postfeminism outlined above – that equality for women has been achieved, that women are no longer constrained by inequalities or power imbalances allowing them to ‘have it all’, that traditional feminist struggles are no longer needed, means she does not recognise the potential difficulties women experience in trying to break away from the traditional space of the home to create an autonomous life.

In exploring how processes of individualism are experienced by women, McRobbie (2009) coined the phrase ‘female individualization’ to highlight that it is a gendered concept and while women are now required to ‘write’ their own biographies, they must do so while still ‘tied’ to the domestic sphere. Further examination of the individualization argument has been undertaken by writers such as Lash (1994) and Adkins (1999) who question the assertion that the life story of women has been brought closer to that of men through processes of detraditionalization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Both Lash & Adkins interrogate the claim that the conditions of social change encapsulated in the concept of

individualization lead to the demise and eradication of tradition such that women (and men) are liberated from conventional gender outcomes. Instead, they suggest that individualization can produce more rather than less tradition. While Lash proposes that the tradition that accompanies individualization has the potential to be progressive, Adkins argues that tradition in the context of individualization manifests ‘...in the undesirable form of reconstituted relations of family appropriation that lead to the reaffirmation of conventional gender fates’ (Banks & Milestone, 2011: 80). Hakim’s reliance on the postfeminist claim of ‘women’s success’ means she underestimates the ongoing impact of tradition and how its contemporary construction ‘...may involve the resuscitation of some less than desirable traditional work relations’ (Banks & Milestone, 2011:86). Thus Hakim overlooks how tradition, in its new postfeminist forms, impacts on her preference groupings and the tensions and struggles involved in making ‘choices’, relying instead on essentialist claims about women’s choices, to which we now turn.

Preference theory and ‘natural’ sexual difference

As noted earlier, the postfeminist sensibility is partly rooted in notions of ‘natural’ sexual difference as evidenced in the emphasis on traditional familialism and the rearticulation of traditional gender norms. While understandings of difference have been subject to wide debates within feminist theories, the assertion of variation between men and women is now widely accepted, with a key area of disagreement centring on the origins of identified differences. Some theorists (e.g. radical and poststructuralist feminists) view women’s ongoing subordination in terms of their difference from the masculine norm and the privileging of masculinity over femininity, while gender essentialists assert that differences

between men and women are ‘natural’ connected to physical, physiological and/or spiritual divergences, contributing to ongoing social and material disparities between the sexes.

The arguments of gender essentialists are usually treated with considerable caution (or scorn) by feminist commentators as ongoing patterns of inequalities connected to ‘natural’ male and female difference are rendered legitimate with little justification for change. While Hakim (2000: 258-259) rejects ‘...that there are fundamental, large and important differences between men and women that are biological in origin, immutable and universal’, she does consider ‘small and enduring differences’ such as levels of aggression which manifest in the workplace as ‘...persistence, ruthlessness, energetic activity, drive and determination...’. Though she constantly qualifies her emphasis on ‘natural’ sexual difference with reference to firstly, variation among men, secondly, the problem with averages and thirdly, the reduction in sex differences between men and women, she stresses the persistence of variation between men and women. She links this disparity between male and female to differences in ‘fundamental’ values (e.g. men as more competitive and materialistic and women as more caring and compassionate) – leading to different experiences in the workplace:

‘The most recent meta-analysis underlines that most sex differences are very small with moderate or large differences only on motor ability, aggression and sexuality... Aggression is of particular importance because it is linked to drive and determination, motivation to succeed, risk-taking and ambition as well as verbal and physical aggression, and the sex differences are largest in real-world settings’ (Hakim, 2007: 129)

In her response to Crompton & Lyonette (2005) who categorise preference theory as gender essentialist, Hakim (2007: 124) explicitly states that preference theory ‘is not gender essentialist...(it) is an explicitly unisex theory which shows that in modern societies sex and

gender are now redundant concepts...’. At the same time, she points to a traditional gender divide, arguing that women are happier in marriages characterised by traditional domestic relationships – a claim that is disputed by Crompton & Lyonette (2005) given that it is based on research that has been widely challenged. Hakim also makes largely unsupported assertions such as:

‘most women prefer economic dependence on men, if it is on offer, and increasing educational attainment among women has had remarkably little effect on women’s preference for marrying ‘up’ if they can, to a better-educated and higher-earning spouse’ (Hakim, 2007: 130).

Her claim that women opt for tradition on the basis of personal choice, along with her citing of difference in levels of aggression between men and women, indicate that despite her denials, she does rely on notions of ‘natural’ sexual difference, also embedded within postfeminism, to explain variations in women’s preferences when compared to those of their male colleagues.

Preference theory and retreatism

The under-representation of women in certain professions, sectors or leadership positions is often explained with reference to the choices women make in relation to family and domestic responsibilities. Women, it is suggested, choose to opt-out by retreating to the home as a matter of choice not obligation summed up in the following quote: ‘I don’t want to conquer the world. I don’t want that kind of life...a baby provides a graceful exit’ (*New York Times*, cited in Ryan, 2014). Hakim presents women’s relocation back within the home in

terms of traditional gender hierarchies as a choice that women themselves want to make as opposed to it being forced on them. As she argues:

‘...women today have a choice between using the marriage market or the labour market to achieve social status, self-expression and material well-being. The two options are not open to men because...women and men rarely accept the idea of role reversal in the family. The marriage career option remains permanently open to women, even in the new scenario’ (Hakim, 2000: 161)

A key feature of Hakim’s position, from the earliest renditions of her thesis to formal presentation of preference theory, is the notion that *to work is not a better choice than to stay at home*. For Hakim (1991: 114) those ‘...who choose domesticity, the marriage career and hence a large degree of economic dependence are self-made women just as much as those who choose, and stick with, an ongoing employment career and all that entails’. Thus, she asserts that staying home is no longer about self-sacrifice where women ‘...surrender their self-interest so that their husbands and children can attain their autonomous subjectivity...’ (Hakim, 1991: 114), rather marriage and caring work in the home can, like formal employment, act as an arena within which women can be ‘...egotistical subjects of interest’ (Oksala, 2013: 42).

In presenting a marriage career and work career as equivalent choices of identical value she distances preference theory from the polemically and historically formative opposition between work and home that is at the centre of liberal feminism. Second wave feminist perspectives such as liberal feminism did not promote choice between home and work. Rather, it fought for women’s right to *leave* home behind in favour of work, as opting for independence through labour market activity was perceived as the means to secure a life of one’s own (Lewis, 2014b). Iconic feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer,

Ann Oakley and Betty Friedan all placed an emphasis on the need to leave behind the domestic sphere and the role of the housewife, if individualised autonomy and self-interest were to be secured and public success achieved (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004; Oksala, 2013). Though the pursuit of equal access to the labour market by feminists is one of the five historical changes which Hakim identifies as facilitating the emergence of preference theory, her equal positioning of home and work in preference theory is emblematic of postfeminism and the ‘choiceoisie’ (Probyn, 1990) which characterises this cultural formation. Unlike liberal feminism which prioritizes labour market work over the domestic sphere, the cultural expectation surrounding work in a postfeminist gender regime is that women not only have the choice of home *or* work (*‘either/or’*) but *should* choose home *and* work (*‘both/and’*).

As we will see below, this is a set of choices which are encapsulated in the three work-life preferences (home-centred, work-centred, adaptive) and as the latter is the largest group numerically, it is important to point out that this category represents the blending of labour market activity with the care responsibilities of home. This is significant because this blending of care-work and labour market work does not simply mean being a ‘working mother’ who tries to ‘balance’ home and work but rather requires that contemporary women are ‘good’ employees and ‘good’ mothers. Thus as Zoe Williams (2011) asserts it is no longer thought sophisticated to be the type of woman who does an important job well and does motherhood less well – in a postfeminist gender regime both must be embraced and performed in an exemplary manner. Here, the co-existence between feminism and femininity has significant implications for patterns of female labour force participation and gender equality, an issue which we turn to below through examination of Hakim’s three-fold classification of women’s work-life preferences.

Hakim's preference groupings

Academic debate surrounding preference theory has largely focused on competing descriptions and interpretations of empirical data, relating to the degree of agency and choice present in women's work-lifestyle decisions, encapsulated in the three preference groupings outlined above and discussed further below. Our approach differs in that we aim to show how the postfeminist themes of individualism, 'natural' sexual difference and retreatism, permeate the three groupings giving rise to the reality of a choosing femininity. We are suggesting therefore, that preference theory engenders a novel representation of women as active choosers, engaged in the dynamic ongoing construction of their own biographies. As we seek to demonstrate below, it is the adaptive category that occupies a critical position and which forms the basis of a contemporary postfeminist subjectivity.

The work-centred woman

Identified as making up 20% (varies 10% to 30%) of the female population of working age, the work centred woman is the beneficiary of a progressive transformation of the labour market connected to the five historical adjustments to society identified by preference theory. These changes enable those women who want to, to enter into the masculine realm of the workplace and to replicate the stereotypical male career and work history. According to Hakim, childless women are concentrated in this group and those work-centred women who do have children do so in the same way as men '...as an expression of normality and as a weekend hobby' (Hakim, 2000: 164)

The postfeminist subtext – the set of concealed power-based processes (re)producing gender distinction in social practices (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998) - entrenched in this work-life preference is that women are no longer blocked from the workplace or held-back in terms of their career aspirations. They are active, dynamic, choosing individuals who make

their own decisions regarding the path their careers will take overcoming any impediments they may encounter as they progress through an organizational hierarchy or move around a labour market. Their commitment to a life based around work (of whatever kind) and their single-minded pursuit of career goals, presents a rational, unified and deliberate image of the women who ‘choose’ this path. For those work-centred women who do have children, a strict separation is established between home and work with childcare according to Hakim (2000: 164) ‘...mostly delegated to others, either purchased privately or left to public sector day care nurseries and schools’. Hakim’s work-centred woman is an example of the universal breadwinner model of work-care relations where both men and women can participate fully in the workplace while care-work is largely marketised (Boyer, 2014).

In considering why only a minority of women enact a work-centred preference, Hakim states:

‘The vast majority of women who claim to be career-oriented discover that their priorities change after they have children. The minority of work-centred women effectively adopt the male role and gender, even if their presentational style remains resolutely feminine’ (Hakim, 2000: 164)

In accounting for the small minority of women who articulate and enact a work-centred preference within a context where individualization and freedom are emphasized, Hakim implicitly draws on the notion of ‘natural’ sexual difference between men and women and retreatism. The latter manifests in her assertion that a woman’s ‘natural’ instinct for nurturing children ‘kicks-in’ once she becomes a mother so she will likely opt-out of an intensive career retreating to the home to raise her children, while the former emerges in Hakim’s claim that if a woman maintains a ‘masculine’ career she will (have to) remain ‘resolutely feminine’. Indeed, the importance of asserting and displaying femininity within the context of

a masculine career was illustrated all too clearly by the recent removal of Harriet Green from the CEO position of Thomas Cook, Britain's oldest travel company. Despite her success in saving the travel company from bankruptcy and a tenfold increase in its share price during her tenure, it was her masculine behaviour in the role of CEO, recounted during a magazine interview, which was her undoing. According to a report in *The Sunday Times* (Mills & Rayment, 2014):

‘The interview that hastened Green’s departure was a glorious, liberated self-portrait by a woman uninterested in conforming to an old-fashioned idea of what a woman should be....She was the leader that gave investors the confidence to put the money in....she saw no need to be perceived as nurturing (saying) “I don’t deal particularly well with needy people....Of course, that can be adapted if someone is sick....I can fake it a little bit on the sympathy stuff”’

Thus, it would appear that in a contemporary postfeminist regime, to successfully enact a work-centred preference, women who take-up this choice must actively embody a combination of feminine characteristics and behaviours in combination with masculine displays, if they are to be fully accepted into the corporate sphere (Lewis, 2014a). What this signals is that women who are work-centred and who enact the choice of maintaining a career can avail of this ‘...liberated social status as long as it is not at the ‘expense’ of their femininity’ (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012: 200). Thus, while women can now ‘do’ masculinity in the world of work and secure senior positions as Hakim suggests, she appears to ‘downplay’ the impact of the postfeminist expectation that women must do so in conjunction with displays of femininity. As the example of Harriet Green illustrates, women can be ‘punished’ for being too masculine and so the ‘choice’ of a work-centred life can be fraught with difficulty and is clearly not as straight-forward as Hakim presents.

The home-centred woman

Home-centred women make up another 20% (varies 10% to 30%) of the female population of working-age according to Hakim and are distinguished by their acceptance of the traditional sexual division of labour in the home and their preference not to work. When discussing this category - imbued with the postfeminist modality of retreatism - Hakim uses the term 'homemaker' instead of 'housewife' to avoid the pejorative association with drudgery that attaches to the latter. Unlike the housewife, the homemaker is not just concerned with 'keeping house', she also performs status maintaining family work such as cultivating the educational and social development of children, supporting the development of a husband's career through entertaining his work colleagues and clients or simply '...maintaining good social relations in public social gatherings or other social events at which status and wealth are displayed' (Hakim, 2000: 162). Home-centred women may secure qualifications and work before marriage to enhance their marital prospects but upon marriage only return to work in extreme circumstances. Hakim argues that the marriage career which attaches to the home-centred preference is as valuable to a woman as working because '...women can do as well from marriage careers as do men from employment careers' (Hakim, 2000: 161). Here, Hakim is emphasising care-giver parity, where providing care in the context of the home while differentiated from wage-labour, is as highly valued (Boyer, 2014).

The postfeminist element of 'natural' sexual difference is also clearly embedded in this preference. In stating that the marriage career is not open to men in the way it is to women as '...women and men rarely accept the idea of role reversal in the context of family...' (Hakim, 2000: 161), she tacitly draws on the notion of sexual difference between men and women when considering work-life choices. Further, in arguing that the marriage career option is always open to women, the postfeminist dimensions of individualization and

retreatism are both subliminally emphasised with the suggestion that women who are working in an interesting career, can at any time alter their biography by opting for marriage and children if the right opportunity presents itself. The retreatism that suffuses the home-centred work-life preference is further developed by Hakim through the notion of the ‘two-person career’ whereby:

‘Upwardly mobile men in professional and managerial careers find it advantageous to have the full support services and status-production work of a wife who has no competing career or job’ (Hakim, 2000: 161).

As Hakim seeks to present the employment career and marriage career as being of identical value, the notion of the two-person career where the female spouse occupies a junior partner support role, constructs the family as a team made-up of equal collaborators, even if this does translate into a ‘stay-at-home mum’ and a full-time working father. This emphasis on equal collaboration reinforces the sense that staying-at-home is a positive choice not a negative chore. According to McRobbie (2013: 130), this ‘...validates at least a retreat from the idea of combining full-time successful careers with motherhood and it gives new more professional status to full-time mothers...The professionalization of domestic life forcefully reverses the older feminist denunciation of housework as drudgery and childcare as monotonous and never-ending by elevating domestic skills and the bringing up of children as worthwhile and enjoyable. The well-run ‘corporate family’ (counters) any presumed loss of status on the part of the stay-at-home mother who now directs her professional skills (at) her children’

Nevertheless, despite the ‘equal billing’ which Hakim gives to the home-centred and work-centred preferences, presenting them as equivalent career choices, contemporary economic and social trends put pressure on these ‘choices’ being treated as comparable

counterparts which are separately enacted. As McRobbie (2013: 121) states ‘...female labour power is far too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be an advocate of long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers’. The pursuit of equality from the mid-1970s onwards also means that while women may be willing to take ‘time-out’ to have children, they have a strong desire to (re)enter the labour market once their children start school. In addition, the championing by government of women who work is a contributing trend as women with careers are less likely to draw on state welfare. Therefore, what emerges within a postfeminist context and takes on increasing importance is the adaptive woman, discussed below.

The adaptive woman

The adaptive category is the largest and most diverse of the three preference groupings, comprising 60% (varies 40% to 80%) of the female population of working age. As we suggest, it is this crucial category which forms the basis of a contemporary ‘choosing’ postfeminist subject based on the co-existence between feminism and femininity. This grouping contains women who seek some combination of paid work alongside an active mothering role in the home and is thereby ‘saturated’ with the three postfeminist modalities of individualization, ‘natural’ sexual difference and retreatism. Hakim’s equal valuing of home-centred and work-centred women has some impact on how she approaches the adaptive women i.e. she understands these women in terms of their ability and willingness to fit into the home-centred and work-centred categories. Thus, women in the adaptive group are interpreted in terms of a dominant orientation to either home or work with the capacity to act on that orientation being impacted by their social and economic circumstances and whether and who they marry. They can be women who planned a home-centred career but ended up working for reasons of necessity sometimes but not always connected to divorce. Alternatively, they may be work-centred women whose priorities change upon having

children leading them to realise that they are not solely committed to work careers but wish to combine employment with active motherhood.

Two types of the adaptive life-style preference are identified by Hakim and both variants of the adaptive ‘choice’ give expression to the postfeminist co-existence of egalitarianism and familialism. According to Hakim some:

‘...adaptive women give a slight priority to motherhood over employment’, taking up part-time, intermittent or less demanding jobs in the vicinity of home, a choice which means lesser achievements in one or both spheres, compared to women and men who decide on one main priority’ (Hakim, 2000: 167-169)

Thus this type of adaptive woman is an expression of the ‘mommy-track’ model of wage-work and care-work relations (Boyer, 2014) and female individualization (McRobbie, 2009: 81) where women are both ‘...willing subjects of economic capacity while also undertaking to retain their traditionally marked out roles in the household’. Compromise is the dominant orientation of this type of adaptive woman and limits are set on configurations of labour force participation and gender equality to enable women to fulfil domestic and childcare responsibilities. Thus, the ‘choice’ made is home *and* work as opposed to home *or* work and is characterised by *adjusted ambition* whereby the adaptive woman does not seek to imitate the orthodox male career but to work towards an accommodation with the work patterns that attach to it. While this ‘choice’ facilitates women’s participation in the public world of work, this is not about ‘having it all’ but ‘having just enough’.

The second type of adaptive woman seeks to combine full-time work in professional or managerial occupations - which are not normally available in a part-time mode – with motherhood. This goes against the assumption that having children means adjusted ambition and the abandonment of career aspirations, rather the emphasis here is on *nurturing ambition*.

It is possible to identify an overlap between this type of adaptive woman and the work-centred woman - though Hakim does not comment extensively on this – but the priority which the adaptive category in general gives to motherhood means that a strict separation between home and work is not always sought. Indeed, the existence of this type of adaptive woman signals that as a postfeminist subject the choice is not an either/or one of success at work or home. Instead, women can seek to excel (in contrast to a mode of accommodation) in both realms – demonstrating economic capacity within the context of a normative male career while also enacting a traditionally female caring role. This connects to what Boyer (2014) refers to as the more extractive ‘*wage-earner plus*’ mode of work-care relations, characterised by the *enfolding of care-work within the time and space of the workday* as the following example illustrates:

‘Eileen Burbidge starts tweeting as early as 5am, two hours before her children wake up. She does the school run before reaching Passion Capital’s offices in east London at about 10am. Her day is spent meeting entrepreneurs who are looking for investment and finalising deals. Burbidge likes to be home by 6.30pm for dinner with her sons and daughter and limits herself to two events after work each week. “Once the kids are asleep I’m back online, sending emails and making calls. On a good night I’m in bed by midnight”’ (Loizou, 2015)

The immediate consequence of this mode of postfeminist self is ‘...the addition of care-work on top of the activities of a full-time working day...significantly intensifying the experience of wage-labour for working mothers’ (Boyer, 2014: 280). The success of this way of working is associated with the postfeminist emphasis on self-responsibility which holds individual women accountable for their own destiny connected to the choices they make such as marrying the type of man who will willingly share home responsibilities (McRobbie, 2013; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). The high degree of integration between work and care activities

experienced by this type of adaptive women is not discussed in depth by Hakim but is reflective of the postfeminist cultural roots of preference theory. Despite its numerical dominance, the adaptive category is clearly not the most important for Hakim as she accounts for women's presence in this group from a perspective of being more 'home-oriented' or more 'work-oriented'. Nevertheless, as the postfeminist gender regime has intensified the 'adaptives' have become a key postfeminist subject, personifying the co-existence between feminism and femininity, manifest in a rigorous mode of workforce participation while also being present for and fully responsive to the needs of their children.

In summary, we have seen how preference theory can be re-read through the critical lens of postfeminism understood here as a discursive entity centred on the intersection of a complex set of discourses around gender, feminism and femininity. This reading makes visible the deeply embedded postfeminist nature of preference theory and the way in which Hakim draws on various modalities of postfeminism though she herself does not acknowledge this. Further, this approach highlights how postfeminism is integral to preference theory not in terms of a rejection of an obsolete feminism as Hakim claims but rather through the contribution it makes to '...the remoulding of feminine subjectivity to fit the current postfeminist, neoliberal moment' (Gill, 2008b: 36).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has revisited Hakim's preference theory to explore how it has contributed to the emergence of a contemporary 'choosing' subjectivity (Gill, 2008). Drawing on postfeminism as a critical concept, we have presented a reading of preference theory which makes visible its cultural and historical specificity and its generation of a 'newly constructed' female subject who consistently mobilizes and enacts narratives of choice and autonomy to

account for the “twists and turns” of her life story, particularly in relation to work. As preference theory has strongly propagated the notion of choice, revisiting it allows us to interrogate how as a theory it enabled ‘choosing’ as a particular account of women’s work-life experience to gain legitimacy, drawing attention away from whether preference theory is ‘true’ towards a focus on what it “does”. As Runte & Mills (2006: 696) have stated: ‘theories...provide the stories by which we come to understand the world and our place within it’. Therefore a consideration of preference theory in terms of what it “does” opens up aspects of her work which to date have been left untouched.

Through this endeavour, our article makes the following contributions. *Firstly*, as an initial step in demonstrating the impact of Hakim’s work, we have shown how preference theory is reflective of the postfeminist gender regime within which it is located and how postfeminism forms the basis of its cultural roots. This can be seen at an immediate, surface level in Hakim’s postfeminist emphasis on the ‘success’ of equal opportunities, the weight she puts on the belief that gender disadvantage is a thing of the past and the prominence she gives to the notion that feminism is now redundant – captured in the first interpretation of postfeminism. However, by providing a reading of preference theory from a deeper, more careful and critical position informed by a second multi-layered interpretation of postfeminism as a cultural discursive formation (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009), we have uncovered more profound parallels that indicate the strength, penetration and embeddedness of postfeminism in preference theory. Thus, we have demonstrated how the postfeminist modalities of individualism, choice and empowerment, ‘natural’ sexual difference and retreatism are entrenched within the theory, underpinning the ways in which the three core preference groups are constituted. The significance of this alignment has been overlooked by many critics of her work who focus on the extent to which her analysis can be seen as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ through the perceived failure of preference theory to take structural conditions

into account (e.g. James, 2008; Walters, 2005); the suggestion that it is based on gender essentialist suppositions (e.g. Crompton & Lyonette, 2005) or through claims that the three preference groups fail to capture the complexity of women's lives (e.g. Kumra, 2011). As such, this article represents a first attempt to locate preference theory within its particular *cultural* domain – a location which can help explain its ongoing influence despite the extensive criticism it has received.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, we show how preference theory is not just reflective of the specific cultural and historical circumstances of postfeminism but is *generative* of its outcomes and values, contributing to a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007a). Preference theory we suggest, constructs a particular reality through the creation and sustaining of a new choosing agentic feminine subject, who knowingly and deliberately makes choices around work, home and motherhood in a context of assumed equality of opportunity and the equivalence of choices. As such, preference theory has strongly propagated the notion of choice and enabled 'choosing', as a particular account of women's work-life experience to gain legitimacy, foreclosing other explanations. The sense of personal empowerment, engendered within Preference Theory, is based on notions of self-belief that encourage perceptions of endless potential - helping to frame how women are included in the world of work (no longer passive "helpers of men" but active "self-made women"). Discourses of choice contained within the theory suggest material circumstances can be rearranged, constructing positions for women that appear accessible, masking the often unrealizable nature of options perceived. Narratives of self-empowerment through personal effort and choice, alongside a belief in the success of equal opportunities, conceal a labour market that has been largely undisturbed in terms of the distribution of gendered power – where continuing female disadvantage can be 'explained' through the choices women make (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Simpson et al, 2010). We can therefore see how the new 'choosing'

feminine subjectivity, derived from postfeminism and articulated through Preference Theory, has influenced the way women are incorporated into organizations today and how they and others explain that inclusion through notions of choice, autonomy and personal responsibility.

Thirdly, reading preference theory through the lens of a multifaceted interpretation of postfeminism draws out aspects of the analysis which Hakim herself understated. Developed during the 1990s and early 2000s, a socio-economic context when (some) women *could* make choices such as home *or* work, preference theory is still influential today when it is now *expected/demanded* of (all) women that they be fully, self-actualised, choosing subjects, involved in both work *and* home. While considerations of the relationship between work and home for women have often highlighted the limitations imposed on earnings and career opportunities due to the former being ‘adjusted’ for the latter, increasingly the need to adjudicate between career and care-work is made in a context where equivalent social, political and economic priority is afforded to wage-work *and* domestic/care-work. Within this context, women are being ‘encouraged’ to continue to cultivate their professional ambitions while having children and a satisfying family life and thus it is Hakim’s ‘adaptive’ woman – the largest though least revered category in her account – who is likely to increasingly occupy a critical position in work-life debates, providing a subjectivity based on equal weight being given to work and home. Thus, we argue that Hakim’s adaptive category exemplifies the new postfeminist subject, required to perform well simultaneously in both the work and domestic domains. However, a cautious note needs to be sounded as the discursive environment which derives from the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism is generative of a subjectivity which impels women to combine a career and care for family in a manner which is highly extractive of their physical and emotional labour. ‘Leaning-in’, in this way means that care-work is enfolded into the time and space of the workday contributing to longer working hours and a high degree of integration between work and non-work activities (Boyer, 2014). Future work

on Hakim's preference theory should therefore focus on the adaptive category and the increasing emphasis placed on integrating career-work and care-work and the requirement to do both excellently. In this regard, attention might be directed at who has access to the subjectivity of the "excelling adaptive woman" as the ability to "do" career work and care work extremely well is likely to be influenced by the structural position of individual women in terms of class, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality and other forms of social difference (Lewis, 2014a).

Other paths of research include the following: first, further investigation of the work a theory like preference theory "does". We have sought to show what preference theory "does" by exposing how this theory (disseminated widely in the academy, within policy arenas and through the media, becoming the common sense which informs everyday understanding of our social reality) intersects with, circulates and takes hold within a specific postfeminist cultural formation. However, in doing this it is important to recognise that what a theory "does" as a form of action is not "finished", since what a theory achieves depends on how it is "taken up" i.e. how its ideas circulate and how strongly it 'takes hold'. 'To track what (a theory does), we need to follow (it) around. If (theories) circulate as documents or objects within public culture, then our task is to follow them, to see how they move as well as how they get stuck' (Ahmed, 2006: 105). This is not about looking harder or more closely at something like preference theory but rather of 'seeing what frames our seeing' (Dosekun, 2015:437). Second, future research may seek to problematize the social practice of choosing - that Hakim celebrates and presents as uncomplicated - not in terms of who has choice but rather in terms of the anxiety, struggle, vulnerability and ambivalence that can accompany a "choosing" subjectivity. In other words, research can focus on some of the affective dimensions involved as women struggle to meet this normative ideal.

We have argued in this article that Hakim's highly influential Preference Theory is not only reflective of postfeminism but, more importantly, is generative of its values and practices – a positioning that has been largely ignored by critical commentaries of her text. As we demonstrate, the theory and its implications can only be fully understood as part of a postfeminist gender regime, contributing to a reconfiguration of contemporary femininity and impacting on the way women are incorporated into the workplace. Recognition of what preference theory “does” allows us to ask a different question namely, not whether Hakim was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ but how and in what ways the theory, with its three lifestyle choices promotes a postfeminist gender regime; how it sustains and justifies ongoing relations of gender domination while at the same time celebrating feminist gains; as well as how adaptive women, as an emerging postfeminist subject position, experience the world of work and are incorporated into organizations today. It is these questions, rather than a critique of Hakim's work in an empirical sense that can be fruitfully addressed in future research.

Notes

- (1) This figure of 868 citations of Hakim's research refers to other elements of her work such as the notion of erotic capital as well as references to preference theory, indicating the easy transfer of her ideas from the academic realm to the broader socio-cultural realm. However, Hakim has stated that the response to issues such as erotic capital has been low-key compared to her work on modern women's careers which experienced a world-wide media reaction. In addition, at the invitation from the former Australian Prime Minister John Howard she undertook a month long lecture tour in Australia giving presentations to politicians, officials and academics on preference theory (Parker, 2012).

(2) A number of commentators have suggested that new forms of feminism, connected to the take-up and instrumentalisation of feminist principles (e.g. equality) by the mainstream in the context of a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural milieu, have emerged. These include choice feminism (Kirkpatrick, 2010), neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014) and popular feminism (McRobbie, 2015). These new forms of feminism are characterised by their conservatism, manifest in the emphasis placed on individual action and choice, and the belief that ‘...so long as a woman’s actions or circumstances are considered a result of her own choices, no further analysis or problematization of them is welcome or warranted’ (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 99).

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