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Placing Postfeminism and Affect: Exploring the Affective Constitution of Postfeminist Subjectivities by Leaders in the City of London

Patricia Lewis

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This chapter brings together notions of affect and postfeminism to explore the affective positivity and affective dissonance connected to the identity work (Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019) of leaders working in the place of the insurance market in the City of London. While leadership as an activity has conventionally been characterised as a realm saturated by masculine norms, a social transformation in our understanding of the 'good' leader means that culturally feminine relational behaviours are increasingly expected alongside masculine-marked practices. (Eagly et al, 2014; Ford, 2006). Consequently, a 'gender-balance' of masculine and feminine behaviours is seen as necessary for effective leadership (Gartzia & van Engen, 2012; Powell et al, 2021; Khan et al, 2022).

Postfeminism has produced the cultural conditions which facilitate the reframing of leadership as contradictorily gendered and the reconfiguration of subjectivities characterised by the simultaneous uptake of masculine and feminine norms is fundamental to this discursive formation (Gill, 2007; Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019; Lewis, 2014, 2018). Interpellating individuals to engage in the constant mobilisation of opposite gender norms, postfeminism calls for permanent movement '...back and forth between a grammar of hardness and a grammar of care...' with the calibration between the two poles left up to an individual's '...own tactical calculations of intuition' (Brockling, 2005: 22). Significant research attention has been directed at the way postfeminism interpellates women in organizational contexts to connect with masculine norms through the enactment of empowered,

entrepreneurial, agentic behaviours while simultaneously engaging in feminine displays of care, empathy and the nurture of others. In contrast, men's engagement with this discursive formation in terms of the calibration of masculine and feminine norms in the constitution of their subjectivities has had less research attention directed its way, despite recognition of an interdependence between the formation and shaping of postfeminist masculinities and femininities (Rumens, 2017).

However, shaping oneself in postfeminist terms – whether man or woman - is not only achieved through a disciplined response to discourses but is also influenced by affective attachments. As an affective phenomenon, postfeminism can be used as an analytic device, to make visible the emotions of leaders when engaged in the calibration of masculine and feminine norms. It can draw out how issues of leadership are navigated, and how leaders affectively respond to pressures generated by the continuous calibration of gendered discourses and norms. In doing this a consideration of context is also important and I draw on the notion of place to highlight how the social and cultural are geographically constituted (Simpson et al, 2021). In presenting this analysis, the chapter explores how men as leaders manage the calibration of masculine and feminine norms and behaviours, highlighting the combination of affective dissonance and affective positivity which surrounds their gendered response to this calibration when engaging in leadership activities. In doing this it reveals how gender is a felt force when moving between masculine and feminine norms within the place of the insurance market in the City of London. The chapter is organized as follows: first, the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism and how it is used as an analytic framework is outlined. I then present the methodology adopted for the study. This is followed by presentation of the empirical data and interpretation of the findings. Finally, the chapter finishes with a conclusion to the study.

Postfeminism and Place

As both an object of analysis in and of itself and a critical concept drawn on to interpret contemporary gender relations, postfeminism has been intensively scrutinised with much disagreement over how it should be interpreted and its value as a theoretical concept (Gill, 2007, 2016; Gill et al, 2017; Lewis, 2014, 2018). Within the gender and organization studies field, the prevailing understanding of postfeminism is one which treats it as a discursive formation connected to a complex set of discourses around gender, feminism, and femininity where equality is treated as part of our contemporary common sense and the ending of gender discrimination is emphasized (Lewis, 2014). Within this context, both men and women are called away from traditional gender norms towards a reconfigured subjecthood but this does not mean the obliteration of conventional masculine and feminine principles. Instead, what emerges is a co-existence of gender equality norms and conventional gender norms discernible in reshaped modes of masculinity and femininity (Lewis & Benschop, 2023). This configuration shows as the combination of masculine and feminine behaviours such that together they form the central core of postfeminist subjectivities associated with discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment; self-optimisation and constant transformation; 'natural' sexual difference; femininity as a bodily and psychological property; and active engagement with the care of children as a positive choice (Gill, 2007; Negra, 2009).

The interpellation to invest in a postfeminist subjectivity is conventionally understood in terms of an array of techniques which call individuals to constitute a (leadership) identity characterised by empowerment, choice, and a hyper-engagement with the needs of others (Negra, 2009). These techniques do not emerge from a centrally located source but from the

actions and influence of a range of semi-autonomous institutions, organization and agents who deliver a similar message across public discourse usually without organized co-operation (Riley et al, 2019). Given this, as both object and concept, postfeminism is constantly evolving and consequently increasing consideration is given to the shifts *within* postfeminism and the sense that something has altered (Dejmanee, 2016). For example, postfeminism is now understood to have moved from a repudiation of feminism to the rehabilitation of a moderate feminism (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020; Lewis et al, 2019). As part of the examination of the malleability and tenacity of postfeminism, it is also now recognised as an affective and psychic phenomenon which tries to shape what women and men think and feel and how their emotional states are displayed (Gill, 2017). Accordingly, shaping oneself in postfeminist terms is not achieved solely through the disciplined take-up and performance of a set of life regulations. It is also dependent on affective attachments connected to a collection of 'feeling rules' which shape the way individuals articulate and manage the demands and contradictions of a (leadership) identity (Dobson & Kanai, 2019). In considering feeling in relation to the postfeminist constitution of leadership, I explore affect and discourse together. Here, I differ from the dominant approach that has turned away from discourse and meaning-making and suggests that there is division between thinking and feeling (Calder-Dawe & Martinussen, 2022). As such, the approach taken follows Wetherell's (2012) stance that affect and discourse cannot be separated and that emotional struggles take the form of affective discursive practices which are patterned within the everyday activities of place and social life.

In exploring the postfeminist calibration of masculine and feminine norms when constituting a leadership identity within the insurance market of the City of London, the latter, as said earlier, is more than just a background setting to the action of leading.

Understanding the insurance market of the City of London in terms of 'place', means we can approach it not only as a location in the world but as a way of knowing that world (Cresswell, 2015). As one women leader in the wider study said about the insurance market: '...it's a very, very unique market, there has been a huge amount of jumping companies and that's how people build their network...it's easy to jump, nobody has to change their commute...so it's easy to jump ship around here and that lends itself to the village atmosphere, everybody knows each other because they've crossed paths somewhere along the line'. Thus, the insurance market is an expression of a specific combination of geographical and social relations that includes the embodied relationship individuals' have with the world (Simpson et al, 2021). A central social relationship within the place of the insurance market is that of gender which has acted as a key reference point for how to 'do business'. In this regard, McDowell's (1997) study is seminal as she drew out the entrenched masculinities that emanated from every aperture of the City of London, manifesting in the way business, trading, work and personal relationships were conducted. Nash (2018: 605) in a more recent study sought to investigate how gender is 'currently situated in the City' in light of the entrance of women into leadership positions in growing numbers, focusing on 'what is experienced as in place and out of place'. Similarly, this chapter brings the concepts of postfeminism, affect and place together to explore how the changing relationship between masculinity and femininity in relation to leadership is 'felt' in place, and how the particularities of that situation are central to understanding how men calibrate masculine and feminine gender norms in the constitution of their leadership identity.

Methodology

This chapter stems from a project which sought to investigate how men and women leaders discursively constitute a leadership identity within the economic context of the City of London and the cultural location of postfeminism. A key aim of the study was to make visible the way in which postfeminist gender norms informed men's and women's leadership and the constitution of their leadership identities. With this purpose in mind, interviews were conducted with mid to senior leaders working in the insurance market within the City of London. A snowball sample was constructed from a mixture of personal and professional contacts and yielded 48 interviews. In this chapter the focus is on the 22 men who were interviewed as part of the study. Topics discussed during the interviews included the path to leadership, their motivation to lead, the work they did on themselves as they moved into leadership positions, their own account of how they lead and how this has changed over time, their views on what counts as 'good' and 'bad' leadership, and the range of challenges they have faced over the course of their leadership career. The questions asked related to leadership experiences in general and were not specifically related to gender. This was to provide as open a space as possible for individuals to speak about leadership. However, the respondents were aware that men and women leaders were being interviewed and it was not unusual for the conversation to refer to gender in relation to leadership.

As the object of study was the postfeminist shaping of leadership identities within the insurance market of the City of London, a Foucauldian discursive methodology was adopted for analysis of the data. Discourse analysis techniques were used to investigate the way in which leadership identities were discursively constituted by respondents within postfeminist discourses, problematising the common-sense association of men leaders with

masculine behaviours and women leaders with feminised ways of leading (Lewis & Benschop, 2023). In taking this analytic approach, discourse is understood in Weedon's (1987: 12) terms as systems of text, concepts, beliefs, and signs that exist in written and oral form and in the social practices of everyday life. Subject positions are offered by discourses and their take-up by individuals is a discursive practice, activated by individual agency but people are 'subjected to the power and regulation of discourse' (Weedon, 1987: 119). Three stages of analysis were undertaken: first, the focus was on the 'things said' by respondents in relation to their leadership activity as they invoked certain norms and subject positions '...establishing ways for people to be...' (Bacchi and Bonham, 2016: 115). Second, the words and phrases articulated by interviewees were traced to postfeminist discourses as the utterances of the interviewees were located in and made sayable by them (Tassabehji et al, 2021). In other words, the 'things said' were read through the analytical lens of postfeminism and located within postfeminist constitutive discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment, make-over and self-transformation, care and relatability for those you lead and choosing active care for children and home. Discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment and make-over and self-transformation are understood to be connected to masculine attainment in work, while discourses of care and relatability for those you lead and active care for children and home are associated with feminised relational behaviour of building connection, focusing on the needs of others, and providing support (Lewis, 2014; Lewis & Benschop, 2023).

One notable aspect of the interviews identified during data analysis was the emotional tenor of the discussion and the way positive and negative affect was generated in the interviewees as they sought to discursively constitute their leadership identity. As the strength of feeling articulated by the respondents was striking, this became a central focus

of the analysis. Accordingly, focusing on the affect generated in the interviews and following Wetherell's (2015) argument that discursive practices are entangled with affect, the third stage of the data analysis concentrated on identifying the affective discursive practices that draw out how discourses are practiced, circulated, and felt within a culture. While there is often minimal description of emotion episodes within interviews, what is said is unquestionably 'felt'. Accordingly, paying attention to affective discursive practices '...dares discursively minded identity researchers to broaden their understanding of what counts as data and what matters for identity work' (Calder-Dawe & Martinussen, 2022: 129).

Affective discursive practices 'carve deep ruts in the bodies, brains, minds, and subjectivities of individuals'. Such grooves are a manifestation of the entanglement of the personal and social as these undulations simultaneously impact on 'the social and cultural resources patterning and justifying social action' that is taken up and made personal by individuals as their own (Wetherell, 2015: 88). Affective discursive practices can reproduce accepted social norms or have a transformative potential as subject formation opens up opportunities for change in a subject position such as 'leader' (Lewis & Benschop, 2023). Adopting a focus on affect through the delineation of affective discursive practices aligns with the 'psy' shift in postfeminism which as said earlier, is now recognised as an affective and psychic phenomenon. Additionally, affective discursive practices locate the material world such as places, within the horizon of identity research and wider social formations (Calder-Dawe & Martinussen, 2022). Within the analysis, consideration of the struggles and successes respondents expressed when calibrating masculine and feminine norms are presented as a set of affectively laden dilemmas. The next section is organized around the identified affective discursive practices and associated dilemmas connected to the issue of who to be as a leader and include disavowal of excessive individualism, valorisation of the

masculine, seeking and caring for aspiration, and acceptance and regret around family.

Excerpts from individual interviews which are illustrative of the identified affective discursive practices and resonate across the wider data set are included in the findings.

Findings

Disavowal of Excessive Individualism

Should care for others but caring too much.

Postfeminism is strongly associated with individualism and the self-reliant individual who seeks internal, 'psy solutions' to challenges, pressures and barriers that emanate from outside themselves. There is a postfeminist cultural imperative to express and build an individualised potential by developing knowledge of an individual's interiority to support the call for constant work on the self. However, the discursive status of individuality and self-transformation is masculine as it has always been open to men but only recently to women as they could not always access the terms of individuality (Cronin, 2000). However, the shifting terrain of individuality in terms of who can or cannot 'be an individual' has, within work contexts such as the insurance market, contributed to questions over levels of individuality. In narrating their leadership experiences, interviewees identified careerist, self-focused individuals as poor leaders whose behaviour has the potential to be detrimental to the business. Too strong a focus on a masculinised individualism without calibration with more feminised care for both business and people was seen by all respondents as poor leadership. An affective dissonance – feelings of being used, not being cared for, a sense of unpleasantness – was experienced by those subjected to the self-focused, individualistic leader who was rejected as an example of poor leadership by respondents as follows:

Here we had it (poor leadership) for a while, that was around self-interest when you know the reason they want to lead is because they want the profile and it is a stepping-stone to the next place, not about the current. And I've seen that a couple of times and it's very visible and it's just an unpleasant environment to work in when you know you're just being used and you know you've got someone who doesn't care, is making decisions around a perceived career progression rather than a real care for the business and the people. (Interview No. 3)

Nevertheless, while emphasizing the importance of care, collaboration and nurture in contrast to the strongly individualistic leader who is forging forward towards the future he can see, an affective dilemma around how much leaders should care emerges as follows:

'...my wife says "(name), why do you care about it (the organization) so much?" and I said, "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, this is an innate, you know, it's a building with a load of people in it and here I am, you know, worrying about the future of all these people and their families. So, so we want people that's what we're looking for is people who really care about it...and the organization is the people really, so I care a lot about the people. (Interview No. 20)

In expressing this view, this leader articulates his concern for the organization he leads through a postfeminist calibration of masculine and feminine norms within the place of the insurance market. Drawing on masculinised notions of duty, mission and obligation alongside a feminised sense of care for people and their families, an affective angst and feelings of some torment emerge from his narrative – he cares but does he care too much? The worry expressed around care can be interpreted as emanating from the place of the

insurance market which ‘...comprises a collection of resources and conditions of engagement with the world’ (Simpson et al, 2021: 8). This place is a gendered masculine space which impacts on the emotional responses articulated around the calibration of masculine and feminine norms when constituting leadership identity. Masculinity is embedded in the material elements of the insurance market, with men’s bodies being highly visible in this place which is constituted around the strong masculine symbolic imagery of its phallic buildings (Nash, 2018). I suggest that the strength and feeling of masculinity that the insurance market projects, acts to create a feeling of anguish in relation to how this can be calibrated with what is perceived to be the soft **feminist** skill of care. Men within the place of the market are captured and constrained in terms of what they can say and do about their leadership, a constraint which is present throughout the data.

Valorisation of the Masculine

The importance of the feminine but the necessity of the masculine.

The role of place in creating and maintaining the dominance of masculinity also emerges through the next affective discursive practice of the valorisation of the masculine. The circulation of postfeminist discourses around the place of the insurance market has contributed to a growing value being attached to feminine leadership practices such as care and nurture of those you lead, but this has not usurped the value attached to masculine ways of leading as the following illustrates:

I think I’m extremely accessible that people can just walk in and just talk to me or talk to me while I’m walking around...So at the very top, my style wouldn’t work at the very top, absolutely, we’d have anarchy and I don’t think you can have that. So, I think you do need a degree of somebody who will force their will on to...shape the

organization and somebody in the organization needs to do that and I think those people who can do it, they're hugely impressive individuals... (Name)...is a hugely impressive individual, enormous achievements, his sheer force of will and character gets things done. He can be a nasty, unpleasant individual, really unforgiving and demanding...without those traits you can't have that leadership style that he's got.

(Interview No. 17)

Drawing on discourses of relatability and care and placing an emphasis on the importance of soft skills such as openness and a willingness to listen, this leader describes his identity as a leader in terms of a feminised collaborative leadership style. This is emblematic of the importance attached to soft skills by all respondents citing the need to 'bring out the best in people' within their organizations. However, he strongly criticises his own leadership by stating that if this was dominant at the top of the organization there would be 'anarchy', a term which communicates intense conflicted feelings about his way of leading. His affective orientation to his own feminised leadership practices means that he constitutes himself as 'outsider', separating himself from the top tiers of leadership. This leads to the affective dilemma of the importance of the feminine but the necessity of the masculine. From his perspective, organizations within the place of the insurance market cannot survive and thrive without the masculine leader 'who will force their will on to...the shape of the organization'. Feelings of admiration for the power and strength of the conventional, heroic, masculine leader emanate strongly from this text. So what, if the masculine leader is 'nasty' and 'unforgiving', they can 'get things done', and without them success will be elusive. In his depiction of this masculine leader, this interviewee highlights the centrality of this masculinity to the place of the market – everyone knows these characters and their

‘enormous achievements’, many have experienced their unpleasantness but it is these masculine leaders who constitute the insurance market and have made it what it is – without them there would be chaos.

Seeking Aspiration

Repudiating human fragility, embracing human potential

The masculine materiality of the place of the insurance market – the visible dominance of men, masculinity, and phallic buildings – influences the type of care which leaders are able and willing to give to those they lead. Care is not just one thing and there is a clear differentiation made between care of fragility and care of potential as the following fragments from one respondent demonstrate:

I mean I think a lot of people want to manage people for some reason and I never understand it. I never understand why people, because managing and leading as you know are somewhat different. Managing’s a pain in the backside generally, isn’t it? It’s dealing with problems and nitty-gritty, at times, I’d love to have no people, the managing of things, you know, I come in on whenever, Tuesday, someone, first thing that happens is someone bursts into tears on me, in effect saying this group of people is not working well enough and I’ve got, ah, that’s the last thing I really want, can’t I continue leading, leading the organization to new...so I think there’s a difference isn’t there between that? (Interview No. 5)

In this respondent’s text, care for people (and their problems) is narrated with significant affective dissonance. The individual who ‘bursts into tears’ is presented as contravening the positive and confident affective displays associated with successful working within a

postfeminist era (Orgad & Gill, 2022). The affective discord he feels in this situation emerges strongly in his plea 'can't I continue leading the organization' to new horizons? Why do I have to deal with this excruciating, annoying, uncomfortable situation summed up in the phrase 'pain in the backside'? There is a disavowal of care for people which requires having to deal with negative emotions as opposed to confident, positive accounts of how a problematic work situation can be addressed. The affective dilemma here relates to the type of care as a leader this interviewee is willing to provide, as he constitutes his leadership identity around the dialectic co-existence of masculine and feminine norms. Indeed, supporting people through their 'problems' is consigned to 'management' and is constituted as not leadership at all.

However, from the same interviewee, we see a shift from affective dissonance to affective positivity when it comes to the issue of nurturing capability as the following illustrates:

So, I'm a great fan of trying to meet people's aspirations. Yeah, also hit their full potential. Most people do not work to their full potential and it's really disappointing to me that that happens. Some people don't appreciate what their full potential is and you're trying to bring that out of them because the company will do better, and the individuals will be happier if we can get people really contributing and working to their full potential within the organization. So, I really like that bit, so the people side to me is the most exciting bit and then seeing people develop. (Interview No. 5)

Here, we see a completely different affective orientation to a people situation which is focused on supporting individuals to achieve their full potential. Embedded in this account of nurturing and caring for the individuals he leads, are a set of feeling rules characteristic of

postfeminism. These include an emphasis on positivity, being upbeat and working on confidence to support reaching an individual's goals. For this leader, care is (re)produced within the interdependent postfeminist discourses of individualism, self-transformation, care and relatability. We can see the affective positivity which infuses this care when he says he is a 'fan' of 'meeting aspirations' and that the 'people side' and 'seeing people develop' is 'exciting'. This is in marked contrast to the angst articulated in addressing people's problems in the earlier fragment. In calibrating masculine and feminine norms when leading, this leader seeks to draw together his strongly felt desire to lead into the future with a form of care which is not overly feminised through its focus on people's problem but adjusts to align with the masculine place of the insurance market through its focus on potential.

Family – Acceptance and Regret

I choose work but I missed out on children.

The final affective discursive practice relates to the issue of the relationship between work and family. There was an awareness among all respondents of how long working hours had a negative impact on family life but reflection on this was viewed through the lens of choice. In placing an emphasis on choice, the interviewees took up the discursive stance of the choosing individual subject who freely engaged in long working hours (Lewis, forthcoming) as the following illustrates:

But you know it's been tough...so you're doing a lot of travel, you know, I was probably as CEO of this business having client dinners three times a week so you know, you were only home at best at weekends and a lot of weekends you're sort of travelling...I'm earning more money than I ever thought I'd earn in my life...I made

that decision and I'm happy with it. But it has been, you know, you're got to be

conscious it is tough on the family.

(Interview No. 3)

In taking this discursive stance, this interviewee communicates a strong masculinised attachment to work characteristic of the insurance market. Work comes first before family and is just what you do if you hold a senior leadership position. Within the place of the insurance market, regular entertainment of clients is an expected and normalised business practice, as is constant travel. The impact of this is strongly felt, first in terms of the pleasure expressed around the money he earns which reinforces a sense that he made the right decision and he is 'happy with it'. Nevertheless, there is also a feeling of concern about the impact this has had on his wife and children. Moving from affective positivity to affective dissonance, a sense of regret was communicated across the interviews with some respondents wishing they could have done things differently as the following demonstrates:

I mean I've had a fantastic career, you know, I've been, I've travelled the world, made great friends, you know, done loads of exciting things and I don't know, I mean I, you know if somebody said to me I'd do it all over again so I'd just spend more time at home that's all so...I so I think, I think I would say that you've got, I would, I would want to do, I would want to do not the work bit but the home bit differently.

(Interview No. 20)

Here, the affective dilemma associated with putting work first and missing out seeing your children grow is expressed by this respondent through a reflection on how his work has impacted on family. We can see clearly the affective positivity embedded in his discursive stance expressed through reference to the excitement, fun and thrills that have characterised his career. Yet, affective dissonance is present in his statement that if he could

‘do it all over again’ he wouldn’t change his work experiences but would do the ‘home bit differently’. Drawing on the combination of discourses of individualism and choosing to be involved in active childcare, these respondents express a strong affective attachment to work but are also interpellated in their reflections by the postfeminist call to be a productive and reproductive citizen.

Conclusion

Placing postfeminism within the insurance market of the city of London, this chapter has sought to make visible the affectivity positivity and affective dissonance which emerges as male leaders engage in the calibration of masculine and feminine norms and behaviour to constitute a leadership identity. Previous research has highlighted a reluctance to engage with feminine norms and behaviours by male leaders or if taken up there is a disinclination to name them in gendered terms (Fondas, 1997). This failure to name is located within the hierarchical masculine/feminine binary, where the feminine is still degraded as ‘lesser’ and non-mainstream. Indeed, Stemple et al (2015) assert that men enacting masculine behaviours are still seen as more legitimate in the leader role. Nevertheless, the contemporary postfeminist valorisation of the feminised practices of care, nurture, and empathy in relation to leadership means that characteristics identified with these gender norms cannot continue to be ignored. Instead, a modified adoption of behaviours such as the nurturing of others, conventionally identified as feminine, occurs with followers who are fun, positive and upbeat such that their potential can be nurtured for the benefit of their careers and the organization, are more valued than those who are negative, fragile and pessimistic. Identifying the affective discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012) that are present in the place of the insurance market of the City of London, the chapter highlights the

combination of affective dissonance and affective positivity which surround male leaders' gendered response to the calibration of masculine and feminine norms when engaging in leadership activities. In adopting this approach, I have made visible the way in which feminine gendered norms while central to contemporary leadership are modified by male leaders, influenced by the prevailing masculinity of the place of the insurance market. Affective dilemmas around care and variations in affective orientation towards different modes of nurture are implicated in the reproduction and reinforcement of the masculinity that has long been characteristic of the insurance market in London. While circulating postfeminist discourses have opened up economic arenas like the City of London to women, the masculinity which infuses this place is reinforced through the postfeminist calibration of masculine and feminine gender norms and is deeply felt by those who are subject to it.

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