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Postfeminism as a critical tool for gender and language (study)

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Abstract:

This article introduces the concept of postfeminism and highlights its value for research in language and gender studies. After discussing theoretical, historical and backlash perspectives, we advance an understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility – a patterned-yet-contradictory phenomenon intimately connected to neoliberalism. We consider elements widely theorised as constituting the postfeminist sensibility, alongside concerns shared by those who take postfeminism as their object of critical inquiry, in addition to an analytic category for cultural critique. The article then illustrates how the postfeminist sensibility may operate empirically, in the context of the doing and undoing of gender equality policies in workplaces. The article responds to calls for the field of language and gender to reinvigorate its political impetus, and to engage with feminist scholarship on postfeminism, particularly as recently developed in media and cultural studies.

Key words: Postfeminism; gender and language studies; feminist cultural studies; popular feminism; gender equality

1 Introduction

Since its inception in the 1970s, the field of language and gender – now also sexuality – has been consistently evolving in response to developments within feminism and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, as well as to the broader socio-political landscape (Holmes and Marra 2010). Notwithstanding some descriptive gender and language work not necessarily animated by feminism, the field has demonstrated in general an explicit or implicit commitment to gender equality. Gender and language scholars have sought to identify, demystify and challenge the ways in which language can be used to construct gender divisions and inequalities, as well as to develop epistemological approaches from a feminist perspective, such as feminist conversation analysis (Kitzinger, 2000), feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (Baxter, 2003) and feminist pragmatics (Christie, 2000). In some cases a deliberate effort to unite scholarship with political struggle against systemic oppression and discrimination has also been made, as in feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar 2005, 2007).

However, for some years now a number of scholars have argued that language and gender research is in danger of losing sight of its political or ‘analytical activism’ (Lazar 2007) orientation (Mills and Mullany 2011; Philips 2003; Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003; Cameron 2006, 2009; Litosseliti 2006a). For example, Deborah Cameron (2006, 2009) has observed a decreased preoccupation with political collective action, which she has associated with the field’s current interest in local linguistic practice, and with the wider increased emphasis upon questions of identity – the shift or ‘identity turn’ away from ‘what can be done’ to ‘who I am’ – also echoed in Michelle Lazar’s (2009) discussion of the shift from ‘we-feminism’ to ‘I-feminism’. In addition, there have been calls for new forms of feminist linguistic analysis in a postfeminist era (Mills 2012), to allow us to explore shifting postfeminist representations of feminism and femininity (Lazar 2014) and ‘the global neo-liberal discourse of postfeminism’

(Lazar 2007: 154). Yet postfeminism remains an under-explored concept in the field of language and gender studies. This is in contrast with cultural, media and gender studies, where the concept has become central to the vocabulary of feminist scholars.

In response to calls for the field to revitalise its political voice and motivation, and to engage with contemporary gender politics debates generally (Cameron 2006; Lazar 2005, 2014; Litosseliti 2006b; McElhinny and Mills 2007) and feminist scholarship on postfeminism in particular (Mills and Mullany 2011), this paper aims to elaborate a critical approach to the concept of postfeminism and to highlight its analytic value for language and gender studies. The paper is divided into three parts. In section 2, we introduce the main four different ways in which the term has been used, contrasting theoretical, historical and backlash perspectives, before setting out the idea of postfeminism as a sensibility, which is the perspective that has influenced most recent research and will form the focus of the remainder of the paper. Section 3 introduces some of the empirical regularities, features or patterns in contemporary cultural life that have been widely theorised as constitutive of a postfeminist sensibility. By way of advancing a critical approach, we also consider a set of concerns shared by those who take postfeminism as their object of critical inquiry, as well as an analytic category for cultural critique. Finally, section 4 illustrates how postfeminist themes or tropes can play out in contemporary workplace policies. Fine-grained analyses of language have much to offer other fields such as cultural studies so as to better disentangle the role of linguistic and discursive practices in the (re)production of socio-cultural phenomena (de Gregorio-Godeo 2008). In the same way, we argue, there is also both a need and an opportunity for language and gender scholars to engage with the interdisciplinary work on postfeminism as a cultural sensibility.

2 Postfeminism: Four perspectives

In the last few decades postfeminism has become a key term in the lexicon of feminist scholars working in areas including Gender and Women Studies, Media and Cultural Studies, Literature, Film Studies and Sociology. Like most key concepts, the term is contested and has provoked animated debate and discussion. Moreover, it is used by writers in multiple, even opposing ways; and many more speak of ‘postfeminism’ or ‘postfeminist’ without making any attempt to offer definitions. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify four main broad ways in which the notion of postfeminism is used – even if this is sometimes implicit rather than explicit: a) to mark out an epistemological break or shift within feminist thought in light of engagements with ‘difference’ and other ‘post’ movements; b) to posit a historical shift and a generational ‘moving on’ within feminism from the perspectives and forms of political activism associated with the second wave – sometimes allied to the third or even fourth wave of the feminist movement; c) to signify a regressive backlash against feminism; or d) to capture a distinctive cultural sensibility related to both feminism and neoliberalism.

In some early writing – predominantly from the early to mid-1990s – postfeminism is understood as a new theoretical turn in feminism: an epistemological break stemming from ‘the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism’ (Brooks 1997: 1). ‘Post’, in this sense, signals transformation and change, and a critical engagement with earlier or other forms of feminism. Most notably, it represents a challenge to the ‘dominant and colonizing voice’ of ‘hegemonic’ Anglo-American feminism (Alice 1995: 11), and is understood to have arisen partly as a result of critiques from black and Third World feminists, who interrogated the right of white Western/Northern women to speak on behalf of all other women (Mohanty, 1988; Hooks, 1984). Alongside this challenge – and resonating with it – were the critiques mounted by post-modernism and poststructuralism, calling into question the ways in which feminist theory relied upon metanarratives and totalising concepts (such as ‘patriarchy’) (Fraser and

Nicholson, 1988). According to Anna Yeatman (1994), when used in this sense postfeminism represents feminism's 'coming of age'; being able to tolerate difference and to reflect upon its location in relation to other intellectual and political movements. This would seem to suggest that it is a theoretical orientation or perspective. Yet in practice it is hard to find work that actually operationalizes the term in this way: few scholars *identify* as postfeminist in the way that they might identify as a postcolonial or poststructuralist scholar.

A contrasting perspective regards postfeminism as an historical shift within feminism, or as part of its on-going transformation (Robinson 2005). Such a perspective relies on attempts to periodise feminism – usually by decades or waves – and regards postfeminism as a period after the height of second wave feminism. In this sense postfeminism has a strong generational focus, 'kicking off' against an 'older' feminism, and offering itself as a more 'girly', 'sexy' and certainly 'updated' brand of feminism (Lewis 2014). It interrogates the idea that the only 'true' feminism is that of the second wave (Hollows 2000), and instead sees feminism as dynamic and in a process of permanent transformation, fuelled by new ideas and new generations of feminists – postfeminism is simply the latest version. As argued elsewhere (Gill, 2007), whilst this embrace of change and the openness to new feminist ideas is valuable, the difficulty comes in specifying what, if anything, might constitute the core *content* of postfeminism, and thus in addressing how it is to be distinguished analytically and politically. Are all feminist engagements and ideas that postdate the second wave – namely everything from the mid-1980s onwards – to be treated automatically as necessarily postfeminist? If so, what does the term add to our understanding, particularly with regard to the – sometimes radically – different ideas and aims that can circulate at any one time? Moreover, as with the epistemological/theoretical take on postfeminism, the absence of attempts to claim a postfeminist identity is striking – particularly in contrast to the vocal embrace of third or fourth wave feminist positions (Gillis et al, 2007; Cochrane, 2013; Rivers, 2017).

A third way in which postfeminism is used is to refer to discourses that constitute part of an anti-feminist backlash. Susan Faludi's (1991) book popularised the notion and has been germinal in formulating ideas about reactions against feminism. The backlash critique gained significant impetus in attempts at making sense of a media-supported political counterassault on the goals and achievements of the Women's Movement during the Thatcher-Reagan era of the UK and US. As Faludi (1991) documented, feminism was blamed for the personal, social and economic problems experienced by contemporary women through a range of mythical afflictions such as the 'man shortage' or 'infertility epidemic', as well as feminine figures, including the 'unhappy spinster' and the 'anxiety-ridden-careerist'. Contemporary examples might include the many cases of hate speech, abuse and trolling of women who 'speak out' in support of feminist ideas or policies, including celebrities such as Emma Watson and Jennifer Lawrence and journalists such as Caroline Criado-Perez, who argued in favour of having a female figure on a British banknote and was subjected to intense abuse online in response to her mild-mannered campaign. In the US, Gamergate and The Fappening are the names given to notorious instances of this systematic gender trolling, which is often also racist, classist and homophobic (Vickerey and Everbach, 2017; see also Banet-Weiser, 2018). But the notion of backlash does not exhaust the meanings of postfeminism, which has a far wider significance. Moreover, whilst the backlash analysis is useful for highlighting particular political projects and the reactive – as well as reactionary – nature of many contemporary representations and discourses, the elision of postfeminism with anti-feminism misses a most crucial and prevalent aspect: the ways in which feminist and anti-feminist ideas are *entangled* (McRobbie 2009). It is precisely this entanglement that endows the contemporary gender regime with its cultural force, as well as a powerful shield against critique, and which is at the centre of theorisations of a postfeminist sensibility.

Perhaps more prominent in recent writing, and certainly, in our view, more useful than epistemological, historical and backlash formulations, then, is the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility (Gill 2007). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007: 1) argue that postfeminism has to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, ‘whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated’. By contrast, Angela McRobbie’s (2009) influential theorisation stresses its ‘undoing’, whereby feminism is ‘taken into account’ and asserted as common sense yet simultaneously feared and repudiated. In the postfeminist gender regime, McRobbie (2009) argues, (especially young) women are allowed greater access to certain freedoms (e.g. sexual) and opportunities (e.g. at the workplace) on condition that they disavow feminism as a collective political movement for radical social change. This points to the profoundly complicated nature of the relationship between feminism and postfeminism – generally not one that is reducible to a simple backlash. Also highlighted in this body of work are resonances with neoliberalism, not least for the way in which the ideal neoliberal subject – autonomous, freely choosing, entrepreneurial – bears a striking resemblance to postfeminist femininities (Gill and Scharff 2011). Indeed, it has been suggested that postfeminism may be – quite simply – gendered neoliberalism (Gill 2017). Overall, for many feminist scholars the notion of postfeminism as a cultural sensibility has become a means for thinking about the way that feminism is intertwined with neoliberalism (Rottenberg, 2014). In media and cultural studies, it has generated a wealth of empirical research and critical reflections on the ideas and discourses that characterize the dominant landscape of gender in contemporary culture. Some central broadly agreed upon features of the postfeminist sensibility, together with key intellectual and political concerns of this growing area of feminist scholarship, are outlined in the section that follows.

3 A critical approach: Key elements and concerns

The approach to postfeminism as a sensibility highlights the patterned nature of social life, and the necessity of capturing the empirical regularities in contemporary discourses and representations of gender. Scholars working with the notion apprehend postfeminism as a patterned – yet contradictory – phenomenon in need of critique. From this perspective, then, postfeminism is *the object of study* rather than a perspective or stance. Thus, rather than *being postfeminists*, we regard ourselves as *analysts of postfeminist culture* – interested in critically unpacking the current ‘common sense’ about gender, alongside its intersections with other socio-political systems of differentiation and domination.

A number of relatively stable features of this sensibility have been identified recurrently across studies and contexts. First, there is the pre-eminent emphasis upon *the body* as both the locus of womanhood and the key site of women’s value (Winch 2015). This contrasts with earlier constructions of femininity in western culture, where other features were highlighted – though often also problematically, e.g. women’s role as mothers or as intrinsic bearers of certain psychological characteristics such as compassion. Whilst the body has been said to represent a ‘project’ for everyone in late modernity (Featherstone 1990), the requirement for women to work on and perfect their bodies has reached such an intensity that it has been suggested that patriarchy has ‘reterritorialised’ in the fashion and beauty complex (McRobbie 2009). A key aspect of this is the implication that such ‘aesthetic labour’ (Elias et al. 2017) must be regarded as freely chosen rather than culturally demanded: women are simply ‘pleasing themselves’ rather than acting according to fierce external pressures. This is in turn part of a wider thoroughgoing commitment to ideas of self-transformation, constituting a profoundly gendered – as well as racialised and classed – ‘makeover paradigm’ that increasingly extends beyond the body to require the remodelling of *the psyche* (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). Wrapped in discourses about self-determination, taking control and empowerment, the

postfeminist subject is called upon to self-monitor, discipline and transform in a manner that is ever more intensive, extensive and psychologised (Gill, 2017).

Indeed, the intensified *surveillance* of women is another much discussed feature of postfeminist media culture. It can be seen in multiple sites: in the unprecedented level of scrutiny – and (hostile) judgment – accorded to celebrity bodies across the media; in the striking commercial colonization of women's bodies, which includes ever more forensic examinations (viz the number of adverts that feature tape measures, magnifying glasses, microscopes); and, more recently, in the extraordinary multiplication of apps designed to record, monitor and evaluate whole areas of women's experience: there are now apps for pregnancy, dieting, sex, beauty, and more (Lupton 2014; Rettberg 2014; Elias and Gill 2017). Also notable is the proliferation of practices of peer surveillance, for example on social network sites such as Facebook or Instagram. Examining contemporary practices of women's looking, Alison Winch (2013) has highlighted the prevalence of a 'girlfriend gaze', which she argues is characteristic of 'postfeminist sisterhood'. Building on this argument, Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (2014) suggest that there may now be a specifically postfeminist politics of looking implicated in homosocial forms of control, as seen for example in the policing of weight, 'slut-shaming', etc.

More broadly, postfeminism is implicated in the emergence of a set of distinctive '*new femininities*' (Gill and Scharff 2011), as constructions of gender subjectivities and relations undergo a shift. One example is the change in the way that women's sexuality is represented. As media scholars have noted, representations from the 1970s and early 1980s largely centred on depicting women as weak, preoccupied with a narrow range of gender-stereotyped interests, and as passive sexual objects of a male gaze. In the sphere of intimacy, there was a strong focus upon female insecurity, lack of knowledge and the desire to be liked/loved. In postfeminist media culture we find a striking shift: such 'traditional' forms of objectification are substituted by the construction of women as active, confident, desiring sexual subjects. It may be that this is simply objectification in a new form (Gill 2003), but nevertheless the shift is a significant one. In turn, the idea that women's value in the heterosexual marketplace (and beyond) resides in their innocence and virginal qualities has been replaced with an emphasis upon sexual knowingness, experience and expertise as they are enjoined to operationalize 'technologies of sexiness' (Radner 1993; Gill 2009; Evans and Riley 2014). Most notably, pornographic and other sex industry aesthetics and practices are advanced as models for the constitution of a contradictory postfeminist feminine subject: the 'sexual entrepreneur' (Harvey and Gill 2011). Here sexual agency is compulsorily demanded of women (Burkett and Hamilton 2012), but within narrowly defined and masculinist parameters that are stringently policed; women must be 'sexy' without being 'slutty' or appearing 'too knowledgeable' or 'practiced' in order to not 'put off' or threaten men (Favaro 2017a).

The 'entrepreneurialism' demanded is not limited to 'sexiness', or to work to add value to or capitalise the body. In fact these examples are instances of a much wider trend towards *entrepreneurial self-hood* that is intimately related to neoliberalism. This trend is marked by injunctions to work on, discipline, improve and optimize the self. Women are accordingly hailed as active, bold, confident subjects who are empowered to write the stories of their own lives, who are, to put in another way, architects of their own destinies. In cultures marked by a postfeminist sensibility, notions of individual choice and agency are prominent and invoked repeatedly. One of the most profound consequences of this is the implication that women are no longer constrained by any social inequalities or power relations that might hold them back: their lives, it is suggested, are only and simply the outcome of their own choices. In both the postfeminist sensibility and in cultures marked by neoliberalism more generally, languages for talking about structures and culture have been eviscerated. Any remaining power differences between women and men are understood as the outcome of individual choices, not of cultural

forces or unfair socio-political systems. Inequalities have become increasingly ‘unspeakable’ (Gill 2014), both because they challenge the neoliberal hegemony, and because of a widespread ‘gender fatigue’ (Kelan 2009), or ‘overing’ (Ahmed 2012), part of a broader ‘culture of post-critique’ (Lazar 2009) fostered by postfeminism. A return to gender essentialism also animates the cultural sphere with regressive sexual difference discourses advanced as pleasurable, erotic, and even empowering for the constitution of the self. This is underscored by a ‘postfeminist biologism’ (Favaro 2015), influenced by the resurgence of Evolutionary Psychology.

Finally, it is clear that postfeminism has a *psychic life*, and also a distinctive *affective life*, similar to that of neoliberalism (Scharff 2015). This draws our attention to the fact that above and beyond its presence across cultural products the sensibility acts to shape subjectivities. Writing in 2009, McRobbie discussed what she saw as a postfeminist ‘melancholia’ in contemporary culture. Gender distress in the form of eating disorders, self-harm and certain forms of addiction, McRobbie (2009: 112) noted, ‘came to be established as predictable, treatable, things to be managed medically rather than subjected to sustained social scrutiny’. For McRobbie (2009) a range of ‘postfeminist disorders’ became vehicles for expressing young women’s ‘illegible rage’, effectively materialising agony that was ‘unspeakable’ in political terms, as structurally produced. Importantly, this work highlights the *normalization* of female distress against the backdrop of repeated injunctions to girls and women to recognise themselves as powerful, successful, as winners in the new gender order. However, alongside the outward expression of pain and distress as individual pathologies, postfeminism is marked by other affects. Notable among these are ‘hollow defiance’ (Gill and Kanai, 2018), ‘performative shamelessness’ (Dobson, 2015), ‘warmly-couched hostility’ (Elias and Gill 2017) and languages of self-actualization and inspiration (Gill and Orgad 2017; Henderson and Taylor in press) – seen in everything from self-help to greetings cards that instruct to ‘live, love, laugh’ or ‘dance like nobody is watching’. The ‘feeling rules’ of postfeminism call forth a subject who is fun, positive and relentlessly upbeat – such that particular affective states and ways of being are to be disavowed and repudiated, especially a sense of victimhood (see Favaro and Gill 2016 for its gendered dynamics), resentment and anger, which has become associated with the ‘feminist killjoy’ (Ahmed 2010). Against this, ‘resilience’, ‘happiness’, ‘grit’ and ‘confidence’ are amongst the characteristics increasingly celebrated in postfeminist culture. This new significance accorded to notions of character and attitude (Allen and Bull 2016) matches perfectly with neoliberal capitalism’s emphasis upon individualism and the need for subjects who embrace risk, take responsibility for themselves, and have the all-important quality of ‘bouncebackability’ for when things go badly (Forkert 2016, Neocleous 2013). Research on contemporary imperatives to confidence (Banet-Weiser 2015; Favaro 2017a, Gill and Orgad 2015) has highlighted the peculiarly gendered aspects of this, as female ‘low self-esteem’ becomes invoked as the cause of girls’ and women’s problems as diverse as an unsatisfying sex life, poor body image or the gender pay or status gap, and individual programmes and strategies to develop confidence are heralded as the solution, neatly sidestepping the role structural inequality or a sexist culture may play in their genesis.

Many accounts of postfeminism stress that its emblematic subject is a white, western, middle class, heterosexual and youthful woman. However, recent research has called such assumptions into question (Butler, 2013; see also Gill 2017), including the necessary westernness of the sensibility (Lazar 2006, 2009; Dosekun, 2015), particularly in an age of transnational media, technology and fashion (see also Favaro 2017b) – contributing to a growing picture of the extensiveness of postfeminism as a sensibility, its spreading out across cultures and its address to widening constituencies. Furthermore, whilst the recent resurgence of interest in feminism might have been expected to throw doubt upon the continued relevance of postfeminism as an analytic term, in fact its tenacity has been noted (Fuller and Driscoll 2016; Henderson and Taylor in press), and indeed the ability of postfeminism to mutate and

adapt, for example by appropriating other elements, has received considerable discussion (Dejmanee 2016; Gill 2016; Favaro and Gill 2018). In fact, the term ‘sensibility’ was selected over other alternative lexical possibilities such as cultural dispositif or regime, or ideological or discursive formation so as to more readily capture this fluidity and flexibility, as well as a sense of postfeminism as a cultural and political but also an affective and psychological phenomenon (Gill 2017). It manifests in culture but also in public moods, atmospheres and structures of feeling. Using postfeminism as an analytic concept or category for the critical study of culture, then, involves being attentive to both continuity and change, as well as interrogating the assumption that new ideas simply displace existing ones (Gill 2016). This combination of dynamism and stability together with the co-existence of multiple and contradictory ideas can be observed in the data discussed next.

4 Analysing the postfeminist sensibility

This section seeks to illustrate how the notion of postfeminism – in its critical iteration as a sensibility – can contribute an additional and valuable analytical lens for language and gender scholars. Building on some of our previous research on gendered discourses in the talk of professionals within sex-segregated workplaces (Litosseliti and Leadbeater 2013; McEntee-Atalianis and Litosseliti 2017), we draw on our current work in progress on the discursive resources through which gender equality, diversity and inclusion policies are enacted within workplaces. In particular, we examine some of the discursive resources through which gender equality workplace policy is framed and reconfigured in line with postfeminist and post-critique sensibilities.

There is a proliferation of gender equality, diversity and inclusion policies and initiatives in organisations: employee networks specifically for women and/or families; Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) diversity initiatives; family leave and shared parental leave policies; family-friendly and flexible working policies; ‘return to work’ programmes; programmes for collaboration with external partners such as the UK’s *Working Families* organisation or *Business in the Community* and their *Opportunity Now* gender diversity campaign; and numerous Women in Leadership programmes typically with an emphasis on female role models, mentoring and ‘confidence’ training. In the UK (as well as elsewhere) there is the added element of governments setting targets, for instance for increasing representation of *Women on Boards* and for requiring companies to make their pay data transparent. In this climate large companies especially have appreciated the importance of embracing and/or being seen to embrace the idea of promoting gender diversity; which has been predominantly framed as the ‘business case for gender diversity’: diversity makes business sense and diverse teams are the most profitable.

One example of a specific policy increasingly adopted is that of ‘agile working’. Different from ‘flexible working’, which usually involves working at a specific location at predetermined times, agile working allows employees to work at a place and time that best suit them, as long as they meet their work targets and objectives. A discourse of ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’ to engage in such work is typically instantiated in these policies through a celebration of the availability of information technologies such as file sharing on-the-go and video conferencing that allow employees to work from anywhere – and crucially to be reached at any time. It is an especially resilient discourse, often employed as part of gender diversity efforts that claim to benefit *both* women and companies – as illustrated in the data excerpts below from an article posted on *Women in Business*, an online community which has been active in the past decade and self-describes as ‘an award-winning online destination for the news and information women need to be successful in the business world’.

(1)

Agile Working – Benefits for Women and Industry

(online article published in *Women in Business*, 3 March 2017)

The Wider Impact of Women Leaving the Workforce

The loss of women from the workforce or the under-utilization of their skills has a significant impact on countries' economies. For example, in 2015, a roundtable event held by Policy Network identified that the loss of women from the workforce could be costing the British economy up to £10billion per annum. In Finland [...] just a 50% reduction in the gender gap in the workforce could increase the country's GDP by six percent by 2030. [...] There is, however, a solution that tackles these problems and benefits women, employers, and industry alike. That solution is agile working.

The Benefits to Women

Agile working allows women to remain economically active and maintain some financial independence while managing their caregiver commitments, which is an important factor for many women. Career-wise, it enables women to maintain their skills and continue to prove their expertise in their field for if and when they choose to change employers or return to an office environment. The very nature of agile working also opens up global opportunities that they may not otherwise have been able to access. This can provide greater leverage when negotiating their employment terms and conditions.

The Benefits to Companies

[...] Companies invest both time and money in training their employees. Allowing women to work on an agile basis means that this investment is not lost, and they retain valuable employees. While employers may fear that unsupervised staff will abuse the system, research has shown that agile working actually leads to greater productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness. In addition, employees express greater job satisfaction, so they are less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Client satisfaction also increases when staff are able to work at times that suit them. Many people who work agilely spend at least some time working outside of normal office hours. This means that they are able to be responsive to client requests and queries, which directly contributes to client retention.

In some cases, companies may choose to employ agile workers on an 'as required' basis, more akin to freelancing. This allows them to respond to peaks and troughs in their workloads. This can be beneficial to employees who want more flexibility and the option of choosing which assignments they want to take on. This can be particularly advantageous to employees with children of school age who need to plan around school holidays.

Conclusion

The loss of women from the workforce is detrimental to women, individual companies, industry, and the economy. When women do return, it is often on a part time basis in roles that are below their qualification and skill level. Even if they do return to a full time role equivalent to their pre-children position, their earning power is dramatically reduced due to a number of factors, but mainly due to employers' perceptions of reliability and retained skill level. Agile working allows women to remain within the workforce on a basis that suits both them and employers. [...]

Our interest here is not the intended or actual use of the article, but the gendered sensibility that underpins the constitution of 'solutions' to workplace diversity 'problems', in particular the loss of female employees. Agile working is framed as an unequivocally 'good thing' for women: it 'opens up global opportunities' and provides 'flexibility', the 'option to choose' assignments and 'to remain within the workforce'. This emphasis on personal choice and self-determination is distinctive of both postfeminism and neoliberalism, and has been critiqued as 'a limited form of individuated self-care' (Rottenberg 2014: 433) which masks or de-problematizes structural inequalities and removes responsibility for change. Furthermore, the text makes a number of assumptions which appear to require no explanation or questioning, as they constitute common-held beliefs – gendered discourses circulating in and shaping workplaces: female employees will, it is assumed, leave the workforce at some point to have a family; it is doubtful whether they will return ('when women do return'; 'even if they do return') 'to their pre-children position', and when/if they do, it will not be on a full time basis; women do have 'caregiver commitments' which they have to 'manage'; on their return to work,

women will need ‘leverage’ to negotiate their employment terms and conditions and their earning power will be ‘dramatically reduced [...] mainly due to employers’ perceptions of reliability and retained skill level’. Analyses of such linguistic choices (both lexical and discursive) by discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts, feminist critical discourse analysts, conversational analysts, corpus linguists and so on have been and continue to be key in making these kinds of assumptions visible as well as in scrutinizing them; but the notion of postfeminism is *additionally* and *especially* helpful for situating these choices – what is foregrounded/ backgrounded, what is present/ absent – in the broader social context, thus extending and enhancing our analysis. For example, attention would need to be paid to the ways in which juggling family and work responsibilities is framed as an individual/exclusively women’s issue (rather than a social or institutional challenge), or to how the causes of these challenges as well as issues of under-representation and double standards are placed firmly outside the organization and must be anticipated and managed by the female employees themselves (Gill 2014; Beddoes and Pawley 2014). That is, the idea of challenging discriminatory workplace assumptions, norms and structures is not even entertained as part of a toolkit of possible ‘solutions’. This absence is especially potent given the significant consequences for *some* workers: ‘staff’ or ‘employees’ in general are not expected to deal with a dramatic reduction of their earning power or with their employers’ perceptions of reliability, but many female workers/ returners are (and some of them will likely be *Women in Business* readers). A postfeminist/neoliberal sensibility centers on survival strategies for individuals rather than structural transformation for all. Also, the systemic and structural inequalities that make only *shades* of choice and freedom possible, and only in a contained way within the corporation, are left unchallenged. For example, the text bypasses any constraints and pressures on agile workers to spend time ‘working outside of normal office hours’, to ‘be responsive to client requests and queries’ and to accept precarious employment ‘on an ‘as required’ basis, more akin to freelancing’. Ultimately, neither gender diversity nor social justice are in themselves high priorities in the neoliberal workplace, unless they are proven to be good for ‘the bottom line’ and linked to higher productivity, efficiency and profits (Elomäki 2015). Similarly, employee satisfaction matters because staff retention means that companies’ time and money investment in their employees ‘is not lost’. All in all, gender equality is co-opted as a resource in a neoliberal age – it is ‘smart economics’, as the World Bank slogan puts it (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Prügl 2014; Newman 2013; Adamson 2017).

While the article has an explicit focus on *women*, it also exemplifies the seemingly ‘neutral’ and generalising language of workplace policies, where a given action is framed to be for the benefit of the workforce in general – ‘employees’, ‘staff’, ‘agile workers’ and ‘employees with children of school age’. Far from random lexical choice, talk about ‘people’ or ‘employees’ when in fact women specifically are concerned or addressed, reflects and contributes to the increasing de-gendering of language in policies and initiatives where gender is fundamentally central. It is a clear example of how language reflects and reinforces the depoliticizing orientation of the postfeminist sensibility. Woodward and Woodward (2015) provide examples of this in policies framed for ‘parents’ and ‘parental leave’ but without acknowledging the specificities of maternity, and references to ‘teenagers’ or ‘children’ in the context of eating disorders without accounting for the gender dimensions of a problem that in fact is not a ‘teenage’ problem in general but affects girls in particular. Such discursive formations are important because the way in which inequality is framed, explained or interpreted can both affect whether action is taken and shape the solutions pursued (Cech and Blair-Loy 2010; Beddoes and Pawley 2014; Lombardo et al. 2012).

A related issue concerns the fragmentation and dilution of gender equality policies as a result of a gradual (discursive) shift of emphasis from *equality* to *diversity* and, in recent years,

to gender *mainstreaming*¹. As analysts of these linguistic/ discursive shifts, we can benefit greatly from incorporating an understanding of a postfeminist sensibility into our toolkit for exploring these new developments, such as the ‘tension between “mainstreaming” and the suggestion that battles have been won in relation to gender equality’ (Woodward and Woodward, 2015: 3). As other scholars have argued, the focus on gender *diversity* can threaten gender equality ‘by losing sex and gender in the diversity bundle, by privileging other dimensions of inequality over sex and gender; by diminishing the importance of group inequalities that is essential to understanding systemic gender inequalities; and by linking diversity strongly to human resource management and business priorities, which risks passing over the crucial relationship between paid and unpaid work that underpins much gender inequality’ (Ben-Galim et al. 2007: 17). Similarly, despite offering a series of strategies on gender equality and having some success in the areas of employment and promotion (Walby 2005), there is an ongoing debate about whether gender mainstreaming risks becoming an alibi for neutralising positive action, and making gender policy a handmaiden to economic policy making (Rolandsen Agustin 2013, Stratigaki 2005), as well as whether it requires/leads to a sacrifice of feminist goals, a depoliticisation of gender (and) equality, or a pushing of systemic inequalities and profound social transformation to the sidelines (Woodward 2003; Verloo 2005, McRobie 2012)².

5 Conclusion

Postfeminism has proved an enduring and productive term for feminist scholars in media and cultural studies, among other disciplines, helping to furnish analytic tools and critical insights for the interrogation of gender in neoliberal societies. The notion of a postfeminist sensibility in particular has come to prominence because of its ability to speak to the distinctive, yet contradictory features of the current moment – a moment in which the struggle for gender equality is partial and unfinished, and faced by a multiplicity of processes that may include those of simple or straightforward backlash but also often others such as commodification and adaptation, for example through the re-articulation of different – even originally opposing – elements or ideas. As we have argued here and elsewhere (Gill 2016), we are – unfortunately – far from being post-postfeminism.

In this paper we have started to think about how the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility could become a valuable tool for language and gender scholars. We have exemplified an approach to scrutinising how ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘mainstreaming’ policies operate, by focusing on the discursive resources that structure how gender is made sense of, what versions of femininity/ masculinity/ gender diversity are put forward and valued as well as omitted, and what inequalities are created therein. We have also drawn on work on postfeminism, to explore how such policies emphasise ‘choice’ and celebrate ‘diversity’ while co-opting these ideas for profit purposes, as well as erasing any notions of collective struggle for gender equality. Feminist linguistic scholarship is marked by its sustained attention to language and its sophisticated fine-grained analyses, which allied to critical work on postfeminism could help to map connections with current broader cultural patterns, and

¹ Gender mainstreaming is a policy adopted by the EU in the second half of the 1990s and established in over 100 countries, aiming to integrate the gender perspective into every stage of policy process – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Mainstreaming is different from diversity approaches in that it is less tied to the level of individual experience; it has the potential to address disadvantage and transform policy, especially as it is applicable to all institutions.

² For an insightful discussion of the difficulties in bridging the divide (both cultural and linguistic) between feminism and mainstreaming theory and action, see Carney (2003).

ultimately better understand complex phenomena such as how the mainstreaming of workplace policies on gender diversity can, in a seemingly paradoxical way, have depoliticizing effects. Moreover, by expanding our theoretical and analytical toolkit we will be better equipped to show how current policy agendas can create new hierarchies and inequalities in the current moment.

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