

CAN SISTERS DO IT FOR THEMSELVES? CRITIQUING THE POSSIBILITIES OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP THROUGH A POSTFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

HELENE AHL

School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University,
551 11 Jönköping, Sweden

SUSAN MARLOW

Haydn Green Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Nottingham, UK.

INTRODUCTION

A critical component of the contemporary neo-liberal turn has been the rise of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviours (Mole and Ram, 2012). Neo-liberalism offers a philosophical and economic foundation for entrepreneurship given the shared focus upon the individual actor, unfettered by regulation able to exploit the self for personal reward (Swail et al., 2013). This discourse chimes with the analytical foundations of postfeminism which, despite various and contested iterations (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), suggests that social and employment liberalization in a context of decreasing sexism and greater equalities have generated a meritocratic society and so, rendered feminist subordination critiques redundant. Thus, entrepreneurial activity – centred upon the agentic exploitation of the self – accords with the sentiments underpinning postfeminist arguments where the individual can use agency and ability to fulfil potential. The ideological intertwining of these two discourses should, theoretically, enable empowered women to engage with entrepreneurship in the same fashion as their male peers such that they reap similar individual benefits. Yet, this promise has yet to emerge given that upon a global basis, with few exceptions, women remain a minority of the self employed per se, are less likely to own high performing entrepreneurial ventures and deemed to be risk averse and lack entrepreneurial competencies (McAdam, 2012; Kelly, et al., 2015). This generates analytical tension between the possibilities suggested by each theoretical exposition and a persistent evidential mismatch.

Such tension demands explanation; this has been articulated by problematising women who are failing to exploit the opportunities offered by postfeminism and entrepreneurship. Thus, the underpinning policy and research debate focuses upon the need to encourage women to pursue readily available entrepreneurial opportunities as a form of self-actualization whilst at the same time, contributing to the socio-economic productivity of advanced economies (Carter and Shaw, 2006; Marlow and McAdam, 2013). In this paper, we critically explore the alleged complementarities of these debates. We suggest that rather than revealing new opportunities, the alleged postfeminist woman business owner, by virtue of gendered ascriptions and constraints, will find her entrepreneurial activities subject to contextualized discriminatory assumptions, biases and challenges. As such, we argue that melding entrepreneurship and postfeminism generates a fictive gender neutral space where women are positioned as free agents able to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential. Evidence suggests this space is fundamentally gendered (Henry, et al., 2016) and so, compromised by the intrusion of discriminatory discourses. This generates a paradox; expectations of achievement are based upon notions of a postfeminist meritocracy whereas experiential outcomes are subject to gendered constraints. Thus, any

differences between men and women regarding entrepreneurial propensity and firm performance are ascribed to a blame discourse attributed to feminine lack and deficit (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). The false promise of entrepreneurship in the alleged postfeminist era not only deceives but then generates a blame narrative to disguise this deception. To elaborate upon these arguments, we focus specifically upon governmental policy initiatives focused upon encouraging and supporting women's business ownership. In addition, we acknowledge the importance of context in shaping theory and practice (Zahra et al., 2014). To that end, we draw upon two differing contexts to explore the nuanced influence of gendered ascriptions upon entrepreneurial activity – those of the UK and Sweden. In the former, as a representative of the Anglo-Saxon free economy model, similar to the US, there is a regulatory framework of equality which, it is assumed, offers meritocratic opportunity for women to pursue entrepreneurial activity. In Sweden however, there is a focus upon the value attributed to specific womanly merits and opportunities which can be used as a resource for entrepreneurial activity.

DIMENSIONS OF POSTFEMINISM

Postfeminism is an elusive label, it is difficult to delineate; as such, to avoid misunderstanding, we commence somewhat contrarily by arguing what it is not. So, it is not post-structuralist feminist theory, which is a distinct epistemological perspective that sees gender as socially constructed as opposed to biologically given, and which interrogates how gender is done, or performed. (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Neither is it intersectional theory which extends the interrogation of gender constructions to intersecting constructions of race, ethnicity, class and other social categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Nor is it third-wave feminism, which Butler (2013) defines as a quasi-political movement that emerged as a response to the perceived limitations of second-wave feminism. Third wave feminism is still feminism, though, in the sense that it seeks to improve women's situation, but, argues Butler (2013), it provides women with a fundamentally neo-liberal space – inclusive, welcoming, and without the negative connotations of old-school, political feminism. Postfeminism thus, is *not* feminism, but a response to feminism. This response has been articulated in three ways according to Butler (2013). First, the popular interpretation that it is the end of feminism, i.e. women's liberation has been achieved so feminism is no longer necessary. Second, a critical interpretation, most clearly voiced by Faludi (2009) is that it is a backlash against feminism. The third version is postfeminism as an up-to-date, sex-positive version of feminism. But it is more complicated than this, argues McRobbie (2004). Postfeminism does not negate feminism, it rather co-opts it. Even if one can easily demonstrate that feminism has not yet done its job quite yet, victories have been made; postfeminism does account for, even builds on this; and postfeminist cultural expressions are pervasive, so one cannot just write it off from feminist discussions. Postfeminism is paradoxical in that it holds feminist as well as anti-feminist discourses. Gill (2007:163) writes that postfeminism holds a patterned nature of contradictions in which “notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of these who make the ‘wrong’ choices”.

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

characteristics: first, implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus, no longer necessary; second, marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification; third, encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline, and a makeover paradigm; fourth, emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary route to women's independence and freedom; and finally, promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference.

Critical evaluations of the efficacy of postfeminist claims for female emancipation have been a phenomenon of academic inquiry primarily in cultural and media studies (McRobbie, 2009). Research has analyzed the representation of women in popular films, novels, television and other media and particularly, how those women deemed 'celebrities', acting as contemporary role models, enact gender (McRobbie, 2011). Successful, sexually liberated and independent working women are portrayed in contemporary media as those who have effectively used their agency and initiative to negotiate the complexities of modern society free from sex and gender bias (McRobbie 2004, 2009). Deconstructing this portrayal however, reveals a dominant imagery of youthful, heterosexual, conventionally attractive, white educated women. Maintaining this status requires a constant critical gaze on the self to ensure the subjective being reaches normative recognisable standards as a successful postfeminist woman. The paradox here being that the postfeminist concept promises emancipation for all women yet, is only applicable within advanced economies with alleged equality agendas, and even in such contexts, bias is endemic through the production and reproduction of an idealised feminine avatar of the desirable, independent heterosexual woman. So, whilst postfeminism celebrates women's achievements in former male arenas, it also reinforces a traditional reproduction of femininity – but with a twist; women are portrayed as having choice but are freely, willingly and proudly *choosing* to enact traditional femininity. McRobbie (2004) describes it as a double entanglement – neo-conservative gender, sexuality and family values coexist with processes of liberalization regarding choice of the same.

It has been noted that postfeminism chimes with a neoliberal ideology, which privileges the market before the state, and which is characterized by deregulation, privatization and state withdrawal from many areas of social welfare (Perren and Dannreuther, 2012). Privatization is often argued in terms of providing citizens with a choice of provider for a variety of services previously managed by the state. The language of choice is central to the neo-liberal ideology; it constructs a new, agentic citizen, assumed to be – and assumed to want to be – self-governing and self-regulating and keeping the state at a distance (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001). As Rose (1993) points out, this is a new form of governmentality, in which the citizen internalizes government and governs by making the right choices in the market. The paradox being of course, that the discourse of choice within a consumer society is a chimera; to fully exploit available options requires appropriate resources, only when in possession of such, can choice be exercised. In the absence of resources, consumer choice is a fiction. Postfeminism has emerged as a contemporary gender ideology reflecting the ethos of neo-liberalism stressing personal agency, responsibility and freedom of choice (Chen, 2013). Yet, the debate is muddled for as we have noted, choice is constrained by resources whilst embedded hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race and class are persistent and constraining features of contemporary society (Butler, 2013). Thus, postfeminism offers a conceptual promise of emancipation based upon choice; however, the paradox arises as the narrow idealised image of the postfeminist woman, presented as an aspirational subject, denies choice to either value diversity or challenge orthodoxy. Indeed, people govern themselves in such a way that old hierarchies are reproduced. The step from neo-liberalism to entrepreneurship, or entrepreneurialism, (du Gay, 2004) is a short one. The new,

self-regulating citizen is also the new, entrepreneurial citizen. The rhetoric of neo-liberalism positions the entrepreneur as the epitome of the autonomous enterprising self, achieving personal independence.

POSTFEMINISM AS A LENS FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP RESEARCH

As a specific strand of research activity, analyses of the influence of gender upon women's entrepreneurial activity have progressed through several iterations. Over time, the focus has shifted from relatively blunt positivist, objectivist analyses using founder sex as a variable through which a male norm was utilised as a comparator for women's entrepreneurial activities (Carter and Cannon, 1992; Mukhtar, 2007) to contemporary feminist critiques (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Henry et al., 2016). The former stance invariably found women wanting in terms of entrepreneurial competencies and achievements *even* though when analysed as populations, there are few performance differences between male and female led firms (Robb and Watson, 2012). Feminist poststructuralist scholarship however, has demonstrated that the construction of the woman entrepreneur as secondary is the result of a number of unquestioned assumptions prevalent in main-stream entrepreneurship research, namely the assumptions that the primary purpose of entrepreneurship is profit, on the business level, and economic growth, on the societal level, that entrepreneurship is something male, that it is an individual undertaking, that men and women are different, and that work and family are separate spheres where women prioritize, or ought to prioritize, family (Ahl, 2004, 2006).

In terms of utilising Butler's (2013) list and comparing it to the assumptions in published mainstream research on women's entrepreneurship (McAdam, 2012), one might conclude that this body of research is in itself a postfeminist expression – most of the points may be identified. But postfeminism would here be framed as a characterization or a result, not as an analytical tool. Lewis (2014) adopts a doing-gender approach as an analytical strategy, but looks explicitly for postfeminist elements in the resulting constructions finding four different entrepreneurial femininities: first: The "entrepreneur" who is supposedly gender neutral, meritocratic and have an equal chance of success if they commit energy and enthusiasm. Postfeminist elements stress individual choice and the lack of gender specific barriers. Second, the "mumpreneur", who has a home-based business offering products or services associated with motherhood. Postfeminist elements would be individualization (actually running a business), the retreat to the home, and the commercial valuing of traditional femininity. Third: the "female entrepreneur" who performs traditional, relational femininity – family and home are valued. Postfeminist elements are the stress on essential sex difference, and the valuing of the feminine in a professional or commercial context as complementary to masculine values. Fourth: "Nonpreneur" a person who performs "excessive" femininity – vulnerability, dependence etc., without compensating this with contemporary, postfeminist assertiveness, confidence and self-determination. From the texts reviewed here, we conclude that using a postfeminist lens implies looking for postfeminist elements in whatever the research object is, rather than using postfeminism as an analytical strategy or analytical tool. We now turn to such an analysis upon Sweden and the UK.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Swedish Initiatives

Sweden, like most western European states, went through a period of neo-liberal changes after the financial crisis in the early 1990s reducing the size of the public sector and privatization of former publicly owned operations (Ahl, Berglund, Pettersson, and Tillmar, 2016). Parallel to these shifts is the rise of the entrepreneurship discourse. It is private entrepreneurship which steps in where the State steps out. The Swedish government has had policies to support women's business ownership since the early 1990s (see Ahl and Nelson, 2015). Such policies provided training and advisory services for women, a number of development projects, organized activities for prospective female entrepreneurs at colleges and universities, mapped existing networks for women, and trained support staff in gender awareness. This discourse could easily be characterized as postfeminist. There are few mentions of feminist activism. Women are assumed to be different from men; they possess unique womanly skills that can be drawn upon for commercial success. Women need to use the available business support and start their own firms, as well as inspire other to do the same. Postfeminist elements of individualism, choice and empowerment are clearly present; references to changing discriminatory structures are absent. Regarding the outcomes of such programmes, it emerges that women's self-employment did indeed increase, from a historic figure of around 25-30%, to 36% in 2012 (Statistics Sweden, 2014). But almost all of the increase in the formerly publicly owned sectors was in child care, a feminine gendered business with very low earnings and profit potential (Sköld and Tillmar, 2015). The other formerly publicly owned sectors such as health care used outsourcing procedures that favoured male-owned, large oligopolies (Sköld, 2015; Sundin and Tillmar, 2010). There is little evidence that the postfeminist discourse of women's entrepreneurship in Sweden is matched with corresponding results, i.e., gender equality is not achieved – existing gender hierarchies are recreated. But there *is* evidence, we claim, that the postfeminist discourse tends to conceal this fact.

UK Initiatives

Reflecting the Swedish context, postfeminist critiques of government policy to support women's entrepreneurial activity do not feature within this debate. However, unlike Sweden, affiliation to feminist principles within UK policy initiatives is not evident (Fawcett Society, 2015). The focus has been more upon an individual 'enabling' approach which reflects the UK's engagement with the neo-liberal agenda dating back to the close relationship between Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s (King and Wood, 1999). As such, it was not deemed to be the role of the state to promote or protect specific disadvantaged populations. Rather, the emphasis was upon creating an environment where market forces enabled the most talented individuals to employ their agency to achieve on the basis that markets do not recognise sex, colour, class et cetera. The absurdity of such arguments has since emerged. Free market liberalism as a pathway to greater equality has not been effective; rather inequality has become more entrenched particularly since the recession in 2008 and related policies of austerity (Tyler, 2013). Yet, successive governments of differing persuasions have maintained allegiance to the neo-liberal project; this has been evident in terms of the continued privatisation of services and in recent years, a significantly reduced public sector (McKay et al. 2013). A cornerstone of such political

dialogue has been enthusiastic support for entrepreneurship (Dannreuther and Perren, 2012) as a desirable representation of the self-sufficient individual. Thus, adopting a postfeminist analysis, the assumption informing successive government policy initiatives is of the individual woman as the unit of analysis – it is she who must change and adapt in order to realise her entrepreneurial potential and in so doing, engage in self-development and contribute to the wealth of the nation. As such, it is women who require dedicated support to develop entrepreneurial attitudes and competencies to overcome feminised deficits and so, enjoy the promise of entrepreneurship. There are no feminist reflections regarding the impact of persistent discrimination, the continuing disparity in terms of domestic/economic labour divisions and generic structural challenges women experience as a category and how this may impact upon their entrepreneurial activity. In addition, there is certainly no reflection that given such socio-economic constraints, entrepreneurship is a poor choice for many women as they are very unlikely to be able to utilise agency to overcome such barriers. In fact, secure public sector employment is a much better option for most women; however, this is contradictory to the current fetishal reverence afforded to entrepreneurship as open and meritocratic reaping benefits for the individual and society.

CONCLUSIONS

We draw three main conclusions from this analysis: First, this might be the time for postfeminist discourse, but these are not postfeminist times. Rather, women's subordination appears to be recreated, and not only that, the postfeminist discourse renders feminist (collective) action - which could potentially change this state of affairs – obsolete. Second, postfeminism cannot be used as an analytical tool in organizational or entrepreneurship analysis – it is far too imprecise. Third, to count as a feminist analysis, the analysis cannot stop at the description of any discourse as postfeminist. It must be accompanied by old-fashioned analysis of the gender order, which in organization studies is best and most persuasively undertaken by reviewing the evidence. The current focus upon entrepreneurship is an exemplary case in point; the postfeminist context suggests it presents new opportunities to recognise and celebrate individual achievements without ever acknowledging the persistence of gendered barriers which obstruct progress. Nor does it question or challenge the desirability of entrepreneurship as a 'good choice' for women in terms of their health, welfare or wealth. Finally, any postfeminist analysis must be combined with a feminist analysis; the gender/power implications of the postfeminist condition must be recognised.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS