# Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and A 'Successfully' Balanced Femininity in Celebrity CEO Autobiographies

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This article explores the construction of a 'successfully' balanced femininity in the female celebrity chief executive officer (CEO) autobiography genre, and how it is shaped by the postfeminist and neoliberal context. My analysis shows how achieving successful and therefore desirable balance requires one to embrace femininity but in a calculated, market-oriented fashion that benefits business goals, ensuring that one remains a 'good' postfeminist as well as neoliberal subject. I argue that this new femininity poses little challenge to the existing gendered power relations in organizations. The paper adds to the existing debates on doing gender in the workplace by providing an understanding of how and why certain ways of doing femininity in organizations are allowed or disallowed, specifically, how certain organizational femininity comes to be constructed as more successful and valuable in the contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal context. Furthermore, by examining how these ideals of balanced femininity are constructed in celebrity CEO autobiographies, the article highlights the value of exploring these texts as representations of contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal cultural norms.

Keywords: postfeminism, neoliberalism, femininity, celebrity CEO, autobiography

## Introduction

This article explores how a *successfully balanced* organizational femininity is constructed in the female celebrity chief executive officer (CEO) autobiography genre, and how this construction is shaped by the postfeminist and neoliberal context. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the aim of this Special Issue to explore new femininities and the implications of the overlap between postfeminism and neoliberalism for gender in organizations. The notions of (organizational) femininity[1] or feminine (organizational) subjectivity are used interchangeably and refer to a particular sense of feminine self, the kind of balanced subject that, according to these texts, women are called on or expected to become in contemporary organizational settings.[2] The term 'organizational' here simply denotes the focus on femininity in *organizational* as opposed to other social or business contexts, e.g. 'entrepreneurial femininity' (see Lewis, 2010, 2014).

Research in gender and organization studies has long argued that traditional 'ideals' of workers and managers in organizations privilege masculine behaviours and characteristics, thus requiring women to carefully manage their femininity in order to fit in (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977; McDowell, 1997; Wajcman, 1999). Recent studies (e.g. Gherardi and Murgia, 2014; Kelan, 2009; Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013; McDonald, 2013; Muhr, 2013; Powell *et al.*, 2009) suggest that, even though contemporary managerial ideals are changing, doing gender for women in organizations still entails

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*doing a balance* of both femininity and masculinity. Most existing studies theorize this balancing act from the 'doing gender' perspective (see Kelan, 2010) and offer detailed investigations of individual women's experiences of doing this intricate balance. This paper aims to add to this literature by exploring how contemporary cultural ideals of what constitutes a *successfully* balanced organizational femininity are produced, and specifically, how they are shaped by the two dominant discursive formations of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Hence, the focus here is not on individual women's experience of identity work *per se*, but in the power and effect of cultural discourses and how they (re)configure our subjectivities, or one's 'sense of self, emotions and desires' (Foucault, 1982, 1988; Strozier, 2002; Weedon, 2004, p. 18). Such exploration of how the broader political and socio-cultural backdrop shapes the norms and 'ideals' of balanced femininity is important because it is against these cultural expectations and values that individual women negotiate their identities.

This paper's focus is on how the construction of a successful balance of femininity in organizations is shaped by the two contemporary discursive formations — postfeminism and neoliberalism. Postfeminism, defined here as a sensibility characterized by a set of entangled and contradictory discourses about feminism and femininity (Gill, 2007), is a crucial context that impacts significantly on the (re)configuration of contemporary feminine subjectivities (Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009). Neoliberal context, defined here as a mode of governmentality exercised through discourses that extend and disseminate market values to social domains and actions (Brown, 2003; Rose, 1999), is also critical to examine as it works to (re)configure worker subjectivities, i.e. our sense of self as good workers (Brown, 2003; Davies and Petersen, 2005; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). Following Gill (2007), who argues that the postfeminist subject is 'at least partially constituted' through neoliberalism, I suggest that analyzing both contexts is directly relevant to our theorization of how and, importantly, why particular ways of doing femininity in organizational settings come to be seen as more or less desirable in the contemporary historical, cultural and political context of developed western economies.

To investigate the construction of a successfully balanced organizational femininity this paper explores the female celebrity CEO autobiography genre, which I argue represents a fruitful site for such an inquiry. First, analysis of popular cultural genres is known to add considerably to our understanding of how normative meanings of workplace femininity and masculinity are culturally and socially created (Czarniawska, 2006; Phillips and Knowles, 2012; Rhodes and Parker, 2008; Wilhoit, 2014). Female CEO autobiographies, which feature inspirational stories and advice on how to succeed in business as a woman, are growing in popularity, but little is known about their significance for business realities. Female CEO autobiography genre is interesting not only because it offers an insight into hitherto unheard female experiences (Gilmore, 1994), but because, as I explain later, these texts also offer particular models of subjectivity and repertoires of cultural meaning for women to make sense of their selves and their lives. What makes these books particularly intriguing is that many of these celebrity CEOs have declared their affinity with the feminist cause and gender equality; hence, this analysis may shed light on the extent to which these texts have emancipatory potential to disrupt gender norms. Finally, the 'celebrity factor' also makes these texts worthy of investigation. Studies suggest that celebrity CEO and guru voices are extremely powerful in popularizing and/or normalizing particular ideals and styles of management and leadership, *even* if they are ineffective (e.g. Boyle and Kelly, 2012; Guthey *et al.*, 2009; Halsall, 2015; Hoopes, 2003; Huczynski, 2007). Similarly, even though these female executives and their stories may be exceptional rather than representative of the vast majority of their readers, they are heralded by the media as exemplars of female achievement. Hence, their celebrity status imbues their opinions, expressed through these autobiographical texts, with the power to alter and normalize certain gender norms in/of management, such as what counts as culturally possible and acceptable ways of doing femininity and balance.

The article explores the questions of what kind of organizational femininity is constructed as *successfully* balanced in the celebrity CEO autobiography genre; how this construction is shaped by the postfeminist and neoliberal context; and how this analysis advances our understanding of doing gender and balanced femininity in organizations. In doing so, it contributes to the current literature on doing gender in organizations and the nascent postfeminist analysis of feminine subjectivities in organizations in several ways. First, it complements existing explorations of individual women's

experiences of doing gender and balance by mapping how the particular cultural ideal of a *successfully* balanced — and therefore desirable — femininity in organizations is constructed in the celebrity CEO autobiography genre. In doing so, the article highlights the value of exploring these texts as representations of contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal cultural norms. Second, the paper demonstrates how postfeminist *and* neoliberal analysis extends our theorization of doing gender in organization. It helps us to understand how and *why* particular ways of doing gender and balanced femininity come to be allowed or disallowed in the contemporary political, social and historical context of advanced 'western' economies. My findings indicate that celebrity CEO autobiography texts call on women to embrace but carefully balance various aspects of femininity, including behaviour, attitudes and roles, and that a *successful* balance is one done in a calculated, market-oriented and efficient way which, first and foremost, benefits business goals. I argue that this balanced femininity, tamed in the interest of the market, poses little challenge to gendered power relations in contemporary organizations. In fact, through the promise of success and partial inclusion, it curtails the disruptive potential of the feminine and limits the possibility of imagining structural changes to the neoliberal workplace and the gendered power relations imbricated in it.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of existing understandings of doing femininity and balance and how postfeminist and neoliberal discourses are relevant to its theorization. I then discuss my methodology and findings, concluding with a discussion of how this study develops analysis of doing femininity and balance in organizations.

## Feminine organizational subjectivity, postfeminism and neoliberalism

As Kanter (1977, p. 257) writes, 'organizational roles carry characteristic images of the kinds of persona that should occupy them', and organizational research has long argued that masculine ideals of managers and leaders mean that women are constructed as the 'other' and are required to balance their femininity cautiously (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977; McDowell, 1997; Wajcman, 1999). Interestingly, it has been suggested that hegemonic masculinity is no longer the ideal, and that feminine characteristics are becoming an integral part of the managerial role (see Eagly and Carli, 2003; Fondas, 1997). However, studies demonstrate that this shift only means that *doing gender* for women in contemporary organizations increasingly entails *doing balance* of both femininity and masculinity (e.g. Gherardi and Murgia, 2014; Kelan, 2009; Lewis, 2013; Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013; McDonald, 2013; Muhr, 2013; Powell *et al.*, 2009). This may present further difficulties to women in negotiating their workplace identities because, as Mavin and Grandy (2012, p. 227) demonstrate, they are evaluated for 'doing the "right" kind or "wrong" kind of feminine (and masculine)' behaviour. For instance, Muhr (2013) shows how female leaders are forced to perform exaggerated versions of both masculinity and femininity, putting them at a disadvantage. Much of the current research in organization studies offers a detailed account of how individual women do this balancing act and the intricate identity work it involves. It indicates that doing gender is 'socially guided' (Mavin and Grandy, 2013, p. 233), and this paper's aim is to add to the existing analysis through exploring how contemporary political, economic and socio-cultural backdrop, namely, the two dominant contemporary discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism, shape the construction of the social ideals of doing a successfully balanced femininity that guide individual efforts of doing (and undoing) gender.

As studies suggest doing gender is a fluid and interactive process and there may be multiple ways of doing femininity (Linstead and Pullen, 2006; Kelan, 2010). Hence, a crucial question to consider is *how and why* certain ways of doing it come to be seen as more or less socially appropriate and desirable, for example how and why certain kinds of balanced femininity are privileged or devalued, allowed or disallowed in a contemporary organizational context. Such analysis is crucial, since it is against these socio-cultural norms and rules that individual women make sense of themselves. It is also necessary for the generation of a historically and structurally situated understanding of women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion in organizations, as not all women may have the resources or capacity, for example, to do (or undo) gender in a certain socially desired and privileged way. I would argue that bringing postfeminist *and* neoliberal analysis into organization studies constitutes a fruitful

way of generating such understanding of how certain ways of doing gender and doing femininity in organizations come to be deemed valuable and desirable.

To begin with, the postfeminist context is crucial, since cultural studies research has demonstrated that the postfeminist sensibility has significantly re-shaped contemporary feminine subjectivity in a number of ways (Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009). For instance, postfeminist discourses emphasize female empowerment and individualization, and construct women as active subjects who are free to shape their own destiny (Gill, 2007). The figure of an empowered independent 'working girl' comes to be seen as a progressive femininity (McRobbie, 2009). However, despite the promised freedoms, there is an intensified emphasis on the need for women to self-improve and self-discipline (Gill, 2007). This 'regime of personal responsibility' puts all accountability for success or failure on the individual and dismisses structural concerns and any further need for collective action (McRobbie, 2009, p. 19). Furthermore, in contrast to the second-wave feminist agenda that urged women to make non-traditional choices, postfeminism features a resurgence of neo-conservative ideas about natural sex differences and an encouragement to embrace the feminine (Gill, 2007). In other words, the 'working girl' must have progressive career aspirations, but is firmly expected to balance this with maintaining her feminine conduct and desires, for example a stable (heterosexual) relationship (Negra, 2009; Gill and Scharff, 2011).[3] Hence, to become a progressive and valuable feminine subject in a postfeminist context, women are called to engage in balancing a variety of these contradictory expectations.

Lewis (2010, 2012, 2014) has shown how postfeminist analysis in organization studies enables us to explore a variety of femininities at work, as opposed to comparison with a single ideal masculinity. For instance, she outlines how four 'ideal' types of entrepreneurial femininity are constructed depending on how the balance of the feminine and the masculine is done (see also Kauppinen, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014). However, she posits that these femininities are not equally valued, but are hierarchically ordered — for example, exaggerated femininity may be ostracized in organizations (2014, p. 1860). She calls for further analysis of how particular femininities may be devalued while others are privileged in organizations. I suggest that, in order to do this, and to further understand how such hierarchies are formed and why certain ways of doing femininity — and in this case of doing balance — come to be seen as more or less desirable in organizations, it is necessary to situate their construction as embedded not only in the postfeminist but in the broader neoliberal context. This is because the latter shapes ideals of what constitutes a valuable (citizen)-worker, which may help us further understand the constitution of a more or less valuable femininity in the work and organizational context.

As previously discussed, neoliberalism is seen here as a form of governmentality that works through (re)shaping subjectivities (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1990, 1999). In other words, it deems particular mindsets, attitudes and dispositions (not just skills) of a (citizen)-worker to be more or less valuable and desirable. An ideal neoliberal worker, whose every action is subject to 'considerations of profitability' (Brown, 2003, p. 40) is expected to be individualistic, entrepreneurial and flexible, 'compelled never to rest', stretching herself beyond limits in order to self-improve (Archer, 2008; Davies and Petersen, 2005; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). Despite this extensive set of expectations of self-discipline and transformation, they are also expected to interpret their individual biographies 'in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice' (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 6). Workers then self-craft themselves to achieve this desired sense of self, and in doing so align their interests with those of economic production and enterprise, without coercion (Rose, 1999). Furthermore, neoliberal rationality casts *social* and other non-market spheres as 'appropriately dominated by [and organized through] market concerns' (Brown, 2003, p. 694). Hence, the value of the person is constructed on the basis of applying oneself as a productive subject in all spheres of life. Gill (2007, p. 443) has argued that an 'autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism'. Crucially, research has demonstrated that it is typically women who are culturally expected to self-manage and to self-discipline themselves more (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Kauppinen, 2013) and, as outlined earlier in this section, this is certainly the case for women in organizations. Thus, I suggest that understanding

of how the construction of a postfeminist subject is inevitably embedded in the neoliberal context may help further understand how and why certain femininities may be privileged in contemporary western work organizations. Before proceeding to my analysis, I shall first outline the study's methodology.

## Methodology

This paper analyzes the autobiographies of four celebrity CEOs: Karren Brady, former vice chairman of West Ham football club and star of the UK's *The Apprentice*; Hilary Devey, CEO of Pall-Ex logistics and star of *Dragon's Den*; Sheryl Sandberg, CFO of Facebook; and Ariana Huffington, co-founder and editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post*. These four texts were selected firstly because these celebrities are known primarily as *business* leaders and may therefore be seen as more credible spokespersons on issues of women in business than, for instance, pop stars. Secondly, all of these women have had considerable media presence, and all four books have topped various bestseller charts, such as those of *The Sunday Times* and *The New York Times*, which means they are likely to have been read by a very wide audience. Finally, these texts were chosen because they all contain discussions of work *and* family/motherhood experiences, which is important due to the focus of this paper on balance. Given that existing studies typically analyze between one and three autobiographies (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010; Phillips and Rippin, 2010; Watson, 2009; Wilhoit, 2014) and since I do not intend to generalize my findings across the whole scope of existing autobiographical works, this sample was deemed appropriate as it allowed me to illustrate the main patterns in the construction of a successfully balanced femininity.

Existing studies have analyzed autobiographies through a variety of approaches, e.g. narrative (Watson, 2009; Wilhoit, 2014) and a New Historicist approach (Phillips and Rippin, 2010). I approach autobiographical texts from a Foucauldian perspective as a specific form of discourse. For Foucault, discourses are practices which 'construct objects of which they speak' and have power implications, as what they construct may be held as 'truth' (Ahl, 2007, p. 219). Discourses construct particular subject positions that 'make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world' (Willig, 2013, p. 130). This is precisely how I view autobiographical texts: not as a source of factual biographical information but as discursive practices that construct certain models of subjectivities and systems of meaning for readers to interpret their social experiences (see Gilmore, 1994; McGee, 2005). In Foucauldian terms, these texts are 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18), or tools and strategies offered to individuals to transform themselves by shaping their conduct, thoughts or ways of being in order to achieve a particular state, such as happiness, perfection or, in this case, successful balance. I suggest that celebrity autobiographies are, in fact, best seen in this way because they are likely to have been written by ghost writers, influenced by editorial decisions and crafted to attract readers' attention. Hence, they are not simple life-story narratives; they are market-oriented representations of particular desirable selves, specifically aimed to influence their (female) audience, which is precisely why they are interesting. Moreover, *all four books* are not in the 'pure' autobiography genre but represent a *combination* of memoir and self-help text, and the latter has long been seen as an influential cultural technology of the self (Rose, 1990). On the genre spectrum, Devey's book is closer to a more traditional autobiography format but is interlaced with business advice; Brady and Huffington fall somewhere in between; and Sandberg's book is more of a self-help text but, rather than drawing on 'psy' knowledge to legitimate its claims (McGee, 2005), it draws on autobiographical vignettes and experiences in support of the advice offered. For Foucault, discourses are strongly implicated in the exercise of power, 'privileging versions of social reality that legitimate existing power relations' (Willig, 2013, p. 130). Hence, as my concern here is not whether these texts depict CEO's life stories truthfully, this approach is consistent with my aim of unpacking how these texts produce and position a certain feminine subjectivity as privileged in the organizational context, and in doing so 'perform a complex kind of cultural work [...] of ideology reproduction' (Gilmore, 1994, p. 23).

My analysis of data was therefore guided by a Foucauldian framework for analyzing discourses, which is concerned with unpacking how they create and legitimate particular kinds of subject

positions, and how, through these constructions, dominant power relations are (re)produced and/or (re)secured (Foucault, 1982, 1988). Overall, this approach to analyzing discourse is less concerned with identifying specific linguistic features or constructs, or building universal models of how categories are formed (Wetherall, 2001, pp. 391–3); rather, it focuses more on meso- and macro-levels of analysis, such as the relationship between discourses and subjectivity (Willig, 2013, p. 130), which is consistent with the aim of this paper. Moreover, it examines discourses as situated within social, historical and cultural conditions and ideologies (Foucault, 1988), which is also in line with my aim to understand how autobiographical discourses are shaped by the broader postfeminist and neoliberal context.

There is no set analytical method within the Foucauldian framework, in line with its assumption that there is no single universal interpretation and its aim to avoid substituting one 'truth' for another (Graham, 2005). Different studies offer various ways of analysis (e.g. Ahl, 2007; Hazleden, 2003; Willig, 2013), but the lack of a single formal model of *how* analysis must be done does not mean that it is mere unsystematic speculation; ambiguity is avoided by being explicit about *what* is done (Graham, 2005, p. 6). My analytical procedure was inspired by other instances of Foucauldian analysis of 'technologies of the self' (e.g. Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014; Hazleden, 2003) and broadly follows Willig's (2013) stages of analysis.[4] First, the books were read cover to cover to identify all implicit and explicit references to the 'discursive objects' of this paper — 'balance' and 'femininity'. Next, relevant sections were re-read, noting different instances where balance was constructed, specifically balancing feminine behaviour and characteristics, balancing feminist values and attitudes, and balancing feminine and work roles. Following this, I looked at how the constructions of balanced femininity in each instance were situated within the context of broader ideologies, noting patterns in how they drew on wider postfeminist and neoliberal discursive formations. I then noted what was accomplished through these constructions, particularly how a particular kind of feminine subject emerged and was legitimated as 'successfully' balanced. In the discussion section, I examine the implications of this discursive construction of balanced femininity for the actors involved, for gendered organizational practices and for power. Consistent with the Foucauldian framework's assumption that no universal truth exists, my analysis of feminine organizational subjectivities performed from this standpoint should be seen as one possible way of interpreting the data.

## Successfully balanced femininity in organizations

What emerged from the analysis was that, despite suggestions that 'the balance is different for everyone' (Brady, 2012, p. 13), a particular way of doing this balance and a particular kind of femininity was constructed as more *successfully* balanced and more desirable than others in an organizational context — a construction that was profoundly embedded in both postfeminist and neoliberal contexts. Autobiographies explain to the reader the importance of balancing various aspects of the author's *feminine* self, including balancing feminine and masculine behaviours and characteristics, balancing feminist attitudes, and balancing the roles of mother/carer and worker. A successful way of doing balance necessarily involves doing femininity, but doing it in a market-oriented, economically efficient and calculated way which ultimately benefits business goals. Doing balance successfully means being both a good postfeminist and a neoliberal subject.

### Balancing feminine behaviour and characteristics

All four analyzed texts are adamant that women have the right to be in management and leadership roles and have 'skills to succeed in any job' (Huffington, 2007, p. 90). They also acknowledge that certain barriers remain for women in organizations but, echoing postfeminist discourse (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007), they suggest that these could be easily surmounted if only women were to learn to self-manage effectively. The discussions and advice on what a woman needs to be like to achieve business success mainly involve debates around managing various aspects of femininity. First, it is crucial to balance feminine behaviour and characteristics:

> Women have specific work-related fears ... remaining 'feminine' while still doing a good job ... We need to conquer the workplace as women in our own unique way (Huffington, 2007, pp. 92, 100).

> I never thought a woman should change in order to be professional ... I didn't succumb to the pressure of being one of the boys ... cracking filthy jokes or hiding myself in drab clothes. I just cannot understand all those women who work in the City and go to work in a black suit every day. I was determined to be me (Devey, 2012, p. 127).

On the one hand, these quotations resonate with typical constructions of women as different from managerial ideals (McDowell, 1997; Wajcman, 1999) but, rather than conforming to the masculine image, they suggest that a woman should not shy away from her innate femininity. Yet, it has to be the 'right kind' which involves a particular way of balancing feminine behaviour and characteristics — distinct from masculine behaviour *as well as* from 'other', 'wrong' kinds of feminine conduct (see Lewis, 2013; Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013). But what is deemed as the 'right' balance, and why? Devey's quotation asserts that it is a woman's right to remain herself, specifically her feminine self, regardless of the demands of masculine workplace norms — a statement that echoes postfeminist discourses that encourage women to conceive of themselves as empowered and freely choosing subjects but, at the same time, emphasize the importance of essential sex differences (McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009). This way of balancing femininity is presented as more desirable by juxtaposing it with those of 'other' City women who seem to have achieved the feminist goal of being in top jobs, but who do not assert their femininity sufficiently, and are therefore not quite 'liberated' and progressive postfeminist subjects.

So it is not just any 'amount' of feminine behaviour and characteristics that is desirable in organizational settings:

> Just being nice and feminine is not a winning strategy. This is why a woman needs to combine niceness with insistence ... in [any business negotiations] women need to stay focused ... and smile ... it is not a perfect answer but a means to a desirable end (Sandberg, 2013, p. 48).

> I saw girls ... very emotional ... [who] got worked up about trivial things, unable to take a mature view ... I don't get emotional ... if something is wrong I try to solve the problem ... it is about being able to make decisions and communicate them clearly ... It's the way you handle yourself that is key to being a success ... You don't want to be one of the lads, and neither are you one of the girls (Brady, 2012, pp. 48, 152).

So what seems to make this balance of femininity successful is whether it benefits work and business goals. Brady positions herself in relation to 'other' girls who represent an unbalanced 'excessive' femininity — emotional and immature — that is not only undesirable in the new postfeminist climate of self-control and responsibility (see Lewis, 2014), but also undesirable because it may impede business processes and goals. The construction of a certain way of doing balanced femininity is presented as more valuable by drawing on the discourse of neoliberal rationality, which constructs calculated choice and market orientation as good and desirable qualities (Brown, 2003; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). Unbalanced femininity does not make a good neoliberal subject as she cannot apply herself productively in the business context.

## Balancing feminist attitudes and values

Another aspect presented as requiring balance is the expression of feminist attitudes. The celebrities whose autobiographies I have analyzed declare their support for gender equality, and the texts do suggest that promoting women's interests and challenging issues such as sexism is crucial. However, feminist attitudes need to be balanced. For instance, Sandberg (2013, p. 151) warns that 'we must be careful not to inject gender into every discussion'. Brady writes:

> I have never played the gender game. I've never been a 'you said that because I'm a woman' type ... but I do believe in certain things. Sexism is as unacceptable as racism (2012, p. 220).

She does not completely deny feminist values (see also Kelan, 2009), but positions herself as different from other, presumably unbalanced and therefore less desirable, feminist 'types'. These constructions are clearly shaped by the postfeminist context, in which the mark of a good postfeminist subjectivity of an empowered girl is acknowledging equality and abandoning critiques of patriarchal structures (McRobbie, 2009). While critique and confrontational behaviour are not completely out of bounds, they must be controlled, or done in a 'nice' way:

> We have to let go of the idea that we must be sweet all the time ... This doesn't mean we have to become obnoxious ogres ... We can be assertive without sacrificing charm and humour (Huffington, 2007, p. 102).

> I was convinced that direct challenge [to such behaviour] is often the worst way to get a constructive dialogue going ... I'd do what most women do: flatter enough egos to find a solution without wasting time arguing the toss ... usually I'd just ignore it [a sexist remark] and carry on discussing the business that we were there to sort out ... [but if] this wasn't working ... sometimes you just have to deliver the attack with a killer smile (Devey, 2012, pp. 129–31).

These quotations illustrate that a balanced response seems to mean being assertive in a 'nice way', with charm or a smile in line with postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), as opposed to being a 'raging' argumentative feminist. Such balanced way of expressing sentiments about gender equality allows a certain amount of confrontation but softens the critical angle, allowing one to remain a progressive postfeminist subject. But, as the two quotations above indicate, what makes this balance even more valuable and desirable is that it allows one to get on with one's work objectives. As Devey's quote shows, a balanced way of expressing feminist attitudes is presented as rational and responsible because it causes minimum disruption to business goals. Time 'wasted' standing up for oneself could be used more productively, i.e. in doing business. Sandberg (2013, p. 148) even argues a 'business case' against sexism, suggesting that women simply put their heads down and work harder to prove that they are competent. This solution appears rather futile, given that her personal example shows that being a hard worker and a resounding success offers no protection from sexism or injustice. Nonetheless, linking this 'rightly' balanced femininity with the virtue of economic gain further endows it with greater value. Balancing attitudes and values in this way is presented as more desirable for women in organizations as it allows one to remain a good neoliberal subject, one that maximizes efficiency by subjecting personal attitudes and feelings to the calculated, market-driven logic of economic productivity (Brown, 2003).

## Balancing feminine and work roles

Finally, a crucial area requiring balance is being both a businesswoman and a mother. Work and motherhood balance is acknowledged in the books as a major dilemma and a barrier that still exists for women in organizations. Feminism is often blamed for putting great pressure on women to have a perfect balance: to be a great mother who excels at her job (Dean, 2010). Therefore, in a postfeminist fashion (Gill, 2007; Negra, 2007), all four texts are critical of the 'myth' (Brady, 2012, p. 124) of a perfect 'superwoman'. As Sandberg writes: 'No one has it all. Nor can we. No one can have two full-time jobs, have perfect children and cook three meals and be multi-orgasmic 'til dawn' (2013, p. 125).

Rather than being a 'superwoman' or retreating entirely to the home (see Negra, 2009), another way of doing both roles is presented — by participating in the workplace seemingly on her own terms and achieving the balance which is not perfect but still successful (see Rottenberg, 2014). This balance still involves embracing the feminine role of a mother — thus remaining a good postfeminist subject (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) — but without abandoning ambitions for work success. According to the texts, this could be achieved by abandoning unreasonable expectations of perfection and applying further business-like efficiency to home and private life in order to achieve a balance:

> All of us are dealing with the constrained optimization that is life, attempting to maximize our utility based on parameters like career, kids, relationships, etc. doing our best to allocate the

resource of time ... each of us makes choices constantly between work and family ... I had to decide what mattered and what didn't and I learned to be a perfectionist only when things matter ... done is better than perfect (Sandberg, 2013, pp. 123–6).

Sandberg's quotation illustrates how children, relationships and work are entered into an equation, and a calculated choice has to be made to achieve a successful balance within 'constrained parameters', echoing the neoliberal vocabulary which normalizes the governance of social spheres and roles through economic rationality (Brown, 2003; Rose, 1999). Other suggestions of achieving balance include 'cutting down' on other areas of social commitment and interest, or choosing to out-source some mothering duties, hiring a nanny, or accepting 'imperfections' in doing mothering:

I didn't see why I had to [make a choice between work and parenting] ... So I concentrated on finding a way of making both areas of my life work ... The reality is that if you want a family and a career, something has to give. For me ... that thing is my social life ... I [don't] go out ... But I'm not a party animal and never was (Brady, 2012, pp. 159, 169).

Between an all-consuming job and trying to be two parents in one ... there was a lot to do ... I've hired a live-in nanny to care for [my son] (Devey, 2012, p. 176).

I was never going to give up my work for full-time parenting ... But I've become less afraid that I'm blowing it as a parent ... Less afraid that every little thing I'm doing wrong or failing to do is somehow causing permanent damage [to my children] (Huffington, 2007, p. 78).

Interestingly, these quotations seem to suggest a certain redefinition of the traditionally 'feminine' way of doing mothering through full-time caring (see Hays, 1996) through normalization of 'imperfection'. Furthermore, the books seem to allow the possibility of a more 'masculine' way of caring by providing children with a better life through earning money as exemplified in this quotation:

I was torn between my career and my child. Like most women I did the best I could. [When my son got sick] they told me to give up work and be a full-time mother. How could I do that? I wanted a better life for my son. Plus, I couldn't change what I was — a hard worker who gave her all to her job (Devey, 2012, p. 182).

Similarly to Devey, Brady (2012, p. 101) also writes that her children understand that she works most of the time, and do not complain because 'they can see the benefits of [this] hard work', such as going on luxurious holidays. A 'business case' is made for working mothers, which echoes the postfeminist sentiment of embracing femininity (Gill, 2007), but at the same time this way of doing balance is presented as successful by drawing on the neoliberal logic of market rationality. As Brown (2003, p. 42) suggests, the neoliberal discourse 'erases the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior'; hence, a (slight) challenge to the more 'traditional' way of doing motherhood is made acceptable because, in addition to being a good postfeminist subject and embracing feminine roles, these women also prove themselves to be good neoliberal subjects, enterprising, calculating and rational in their decision-making and moral in their willingness to remain in work.

Interestingly, this way of balancing appears to allow 'imperfection' only in relation to performing the feminine role of mother, while the work role is still expected to be done with utmost dedication in order to achieve success:

I spend four days in London [where] I work constantly, every minute of the day ... from the moment I wake up until the moment I go to sleep ... and three nights including weekends [I spend] with my family. In theory weekends are for family but in reality it is never as clear-cut as that. I am always at the end of my BlackBerry (Brady, 2012, p. 96).

Here, clearly, the 'balance' of roles seems to shift towards work. Brady further states that 'at work ... we don't look for shortcuts ... at home I'm always looking for the shortcuts' (2012, p. 166), but this way of balancing is presented as successful, desirable and well-justified because it positions one as a good, hard-working neoliberal subject whose every action is subject to the logic of productivity and profitability (Brown, 2003; Rose, 1999; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). For instance, Sandberg

suggests that this way of doing balance is good because it makes a woman less exhausted, and 'new evidence suggests working from home [or flexibly] might actually be more productive in certain areas' (2013, p. 131). Generally, all four texts talk about work role demands as natural, implying that business is governed by the laws of market and competition that cannot, or should not, be changed. As Brady puts it, 'nobody got successful leaving work at five o'clock' and 'if you want to be successful, that is what you have to do' (Brady, 2012, p. 95). Huffington's text (2007, p. 98) is the only one that seems to offer a critique of 'workaholism', suggesting that it is bad because we 'lose our balance'. However, despite acknowledging that women overwork because they try to 'fit' into the masculine world of work (i.e. the problem is systemic), the solutions offered remain mostly individual, such as taking naps, meditating or managing time better (see Kauppinen, 2013). Adapting and transforming the (feminine) self is therefore presented as the main way to achieve the 'right' balance, with little suggestion of change to or reduction in neoliberal workplace demands for intensified productivity (Brown, 2003).

## Discussion

This paper set out to explore the construction of a *successfully* balanced feminine organizational subjectivity in the female celebrity CEO autobiography genre, and how these constructions are shaped by the postfeminist and neoliberal context. In doing so, it aimed to contribute to the current organization studies literature on doing gender and the emergent postfeminist analysis of feminine subjectivities in several ways.

First, this paper's analysis extends existing theorization of doing gender and doing balance in the workplace and organizations (e.g. Gherardi and Murgia, 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013; McDonald, 2013; Muhr, 2013; Powell *et al.*, 2009) by providing an understanding of *how* and *why* certain ways of doing gender in organizations are allowed or disallowed, specifically how and why particular constructions of balanced organizational femininity are deemed to be more or less successful, valuable and desirable within the contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal context. Exploring how this construction is shaped by the postfeminist and neoliberal discursive formations offers a politically, socially and culturally embedded analysis of contemporary demands and normativities around doing femininity in organizations in the context of developed western neoliberal economies. My findings show the complex ways in which the celebrity CEO autobiography genre discourse invites women to balance femininity in the right way to succeed. Doing balance successfully requires women to reclaim and embrace aspects of their femininity, including feminine characteristics and behaviour, attitudes and roles, but to be careful to not 'overdo' each of these. This clearly speaks to the construction of a good postfeminist subject underpinned by discourses of natural sex differences, female empowerment and choice, yet, at the same time, with relentless self-discipline and personal responsibility (Gill, 2007). Echoing nascent postfeminist research on feminine subjectivities in organizations (e.g. Lewis, 2010, 2014; Kauppinen, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014), I have shown that the postfeminist lens allows us to see that different femininities may exist in organizations, and that those that are in line with the postfeminist sensibility are presented as more progressive and desirable. However, I extend this analysis through showing how situating postfeminist constructions of a balanced organizational femininity within a broader neoliberal context furthers our understanding of the basis of hierarchy of different femininities (see Lewis, 2014), allowing us to understand what 'amount' of femininity in organizational settings is constructed as acceptable before it becomes excessive and valueless. Specifically, it appears that a particular way of balancing femininity is constructed as more successful than others because — and as long as — the balance of all of its aspects is done in a market-oriented, economically efficient and calculated way which benefits business goals, making one a good neoliberal subject (Brown, 2003). The economic logic of the neoliberal discursive formation applied in this case to the personal sphere of attitudes, values and behaviours seems to determine the permissible and desirable extent to which women may embrace the feminine. This analysis shows how certain ways of doing gender and balance gain value, and how they are inevitably embedded in the wider context of the contemporary capitalist economy.

Such analysis of the new cultural ideals of balanced femininity indicates that its ability to disrupt gendered organizational hierarchies is further limited because neoliberal discourses appear to reinforce postfeminist endeavors to 'tame' femininity by constructing what is, in effect, a calculatedly restrained femininity as desirable and highly valued due to its link with business gain and market rationality. While some research has argued that gender identities may be *undone* by work identities (e.g. Phillips and Knowles, 2012), my analysis suggests that such disruption is limited because gender appears to be questioned not in the interest of social justice *per se*, but only in so far as is useful for the purpose of economic productivity. In fact, the promise of partial inclusion of certain kinds of very well-balanced femininity into the workplace further coopts and tames its disruptive potential. A feisty and disorderly femininity is deemed valueless, while a nice, responsibly balanced and non-disruptive one promises *individual* economic success. This construction allows the ever-growing demands of the neoliberal workplace to remain unquestioned. Since gendered power relations are imbricated within the structures of the capitalist workplace and economy (Acker, 1990; Walby, 1986), this discursive construction restrains the possibility of any significant reconfiguration of gender inequalities, as it foregrounds the very system that perpetuates them as given and 'natural'.

Second, by examining how particular ideals of balanced organizational femininity are constructed in celebrity CEO autobiographies, the paper highlights the value of exploring these texts as representations of contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal cultural norms. By using a Foucauldian approach to the analysis of these texts the paper adds to the existing exploration of the autobiographical genre (see Boyle and Kelly, 2012; Guthey *et al.*, 2009; Halsall, 2015; Hoopes, 2003; Huczynski, 2007). It argues that exploring cultural outlets such as celebrity CEO autobiographies is very valuable because these texts constitute powerful 'technologies of the self' and therefore work as influential cultural means of (re)producing gendered meanings in business. Halsall (2015) indicates that CEO autobiographies promote unrealistic and often problematic images of leadership. In the same vein, the paper has demonstrated that representations of the successful balance of femininity in female CEO autobiographies are problematic. Without a doubt, these texts reflect and try to speak to a number of pressing issues and gender barriers that women still experience in contemporary organizations; those analyzed in this article also specifically target female audiences and may, indeed, appeal to female readers by trying to offer do-able solutions. Yet, the solutions that are offered are underpinned by postfeminist rhetoric which 'offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by [any kind of] politics' (Negra, 2009, p. 2), i.e. they reassure the reader that, if the right choices are made by individuals, successful balance is achievable. While the solutions these texts provide may offer some control over one's career development, in the long run they only offer certain 'tactics' for fitting in (de Certeau, 1984), which therefore have 'no lasting effect on the rules of the game defined by dominant powers' (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Moreover, while some suggestions on how to over-come obstacles may appear agentic, they represent individualistic solutions to what are, in effect, systemic issues e.g. gender, class or race, that remain unaddressed. It is therefore questionable whether and to what extent this socially desirable, successful way of doing balanced femininity in organizations is accessible to ordinary readers who may not have the resources or opportunities to achieve this valuable subject position. These texts reproduce silences around various dimensions of social difference in an age when social inequalities of income and social mobility are, in fact, growing (Piketty, 2014). Finally, suggestions that success is possible if the 'right' balance of femi-ninity is achieved means that this genre continues to construct women as the only object in need of change, while the order of business operations and the neoliberal valorization of intensified pro-ductivity is positioned as inevitable and irreversible. This is problematic because some companies have finally started to embrace an approach to gendered organizational change that is not just about fixing women but about fixing organizations (see Ernst and Young, 2015). The fact that the celebrity CEO genre continues to posit workplace inequality as a woman's problem rather than a social challenge may potentially impede further fundamental transformation of gendered organizational structures.

## Conclusions

This paper has explored how the female celebrity CEO autobiography genre contributes to the construction of social ideas of doing gender and, specifically, doing balanced femininity in contemporary organizations, extending our understanding of the socio-cultural basis of workplace inequality. It also has contributed to the aim of this Special Issue to show the value and potential of incorporating postfeminist and neoliberal analysis into the field of gender and organization studies. However, while this paper has outlined how certain cultural representations of successfully balanced femininity come to be privileged and valued, these discursive representations are, of course, not set in stone. They may change overtime and are inevitably negotiated by readers at the level of individual identity. Future research should explore how readers negotiate these representations to understand the potential for undoing and resisting these constructions. My analysis also indicates that the CEO autobiography genre may be contributing to the emerging 'balanced femininity' discourse in management (see Gherardi and Murgia, 2014; Rottenberg, 2014), which may be argued to perform a broader social function of redressing a cultural anxiety that feminization may lead to 'too much' gender equality (Kelan, 2008, p. 437). Future research is required to explore this emerging rhetoric and its effects in more detail. Finally, I have pointed out the implications of this new balanced femininity for *gendered* power relations, but further research is needed to conduct a more intersectional analysis of newly emerging feminine organizational subjectivities.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

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## Notes

1. In using the notions of 'feminine' and 'femininity', I do not intend to essentialize them, but to highlight how characteristics, behaviours and roles generally associated with female gender (Gill and Scharff, 2011) are socially produced.
2. For further discussion on identity and subjectivity, see Strozier (2002) and Weedon (2004).
3. For a succinct discussion of definitions and approaches to postfeminism in organization studies, see Lewis (2014).
4. For further debates on Foucauldian analysis, see Ahl (2007); Graham (2005); Willig (2013).

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