

# **Women Elite Leaders Doing Respectable Business Femininity: How Privilege is Conferred, Contested and Defended through the Body**

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers a theory of respectable business femininity. Respectable business femininity is theorized as a discursive and relational process that explains tensions women elite leaders experience at the nexus of being both One and Other and sometimes privileged, embedded notions of leadership as masculine and wider expectations of acceptable embodied femininity. Such tensions manifest through a disciplining of women leaders' bodies and appearance by self-and-others, as a means of appraising women as credible elite leaders and respectable women. Through a qualitative study we show how, within sites of ambiguity, embodied leadership and subjectivities are both enabled and constrained. Accounts highlight how privilege is fluid and (de)stabilized in that it is conferred, contested and defended through women's bodies and appearance. We advance understandings of contemporary respectable femininity, privilege at work, and body work, and consider practical implications for women leaders and management education.

**Keywords.** Women leaders, Identity, Doing Gender, Elite, Body work, Privilege, Respectable Femininity

## Introduction

While numbers of women in elite leader positions are rising in the UK, progress remains slow and women's experiences at this organizational level remain under researched (Mavin and Grandy, 2016). Women elite leaders accumulate privilege through hierarchical positioning but this is juxtaposed with social disadvantage based on gender (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). Further, as a minority, women's doing of leadership renders them highly visible and open to scrutiny, particularly their bodies and appearance (Sinclair, 2011). We argue that women elite leaders live within paradox and negotiate at least two cultures (Krane *et al.*, 2004): that of the elite leader role which is inherently masculine and where they are 'sometimes privileged' (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014, p.433) and the wider societal culture where they are socially disadvantaged and particular notions of 'respectable' femininity are expected from women. Recently, Meriläinen *et al.* (2015) offered empirical work which suggests that there are normative standards defining the right kind of executive body for women, as well as for men. However, others have argued, implicitly and explicitly, that while women leaders strive to achieve credibility or respectability and hold onto their privilege through particular enactments of embodiment, such body rules are ambiguous and complex (see Kelan, 2013; Trethewey, 1999). Extending this work we contend that the fragility of women elite leaders' privilege may be played out through the body and appearance, whereby contemporary notions of respectable femininity alongside embedded notions of leadership as masculine, both constrain and enable embodied leadership and subjectivities. Our purpose here is to better understand these complexities and explore the question, *how does contemporary respectable femininity play out for women elite leaders?*<sup>1</sup>

We offer a theory of *respectable business femininity* as a discursive and relational process that explains the tensions women elite leaders can experience at the nexus of being sometimes privileged, embedded notions of embodied leadership as masculine and wider

expectations of acceptable embodied femininity. These tensions manifest through a disciplining of the body and appearance amidst expectations of self-and-others in the elite leader role through which women confer, contest and defend privilege. Three research objectives guide our work: 1. To problematize privilege for women elite leaders; 2. To explain the dynamics of privilege, embodied leadership and contemporary respectable femininity for women elite leaders and propose a theory of respectable business femininity; and, 3. To illustrate empirically respectable business femininity as interpreted from the experiences of women elite leaders.

Respectable femininity has been historically associated with the intersection of class and gender and is described as ‘an ideological construct leading to a set of behavioural norms commonly likened to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Radhakrishnan, 2009), where respectable women dressed modestly (Whitehead 2005), demonstrated self-restraint (Whiteside, 2007), were sober and well-mannered and confined themselves to mainly private spheres (Thorpe, 1996)’ (Fernando and Cohen, 2014, p.149). Skeggs (1997) suggests that women in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries could ‘prove’ their respectability through conduct and appearance. It is women’s bodies, dress and appearance as conveying respectable femininity in contemporary organizations and its interconnection with privilege for women which is our focus here. Respect reflects self-worth and value felt by an individual and bestowed by others (De Cremer and Tyler, 2005; Grover, 2013). In order to feel and be seen as a credible and respectable elite leader, we contend that women are subject to modern day notions of respectable femininity.

To illustrate a theory of respectable business femininity we draw upon empirical data from a wider qualitative study of women elite leaders’ experiences at the top of hierarchies and across sectors in UK organizations. This study focused upon women elite leaders’ social relations with other women. The women were not asked about the bodies and appearance in

the interviews, rather our theory of respectable business femininity emerged through an iterative process of data analysis, interpretations and theoretical development to explain unexpected findings (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011; Trethewey, 2001).

In exploring how contemporary respectable femininity plays out for women elite leaders we advance research into gender, body work and leadership in several ways. Theoretically, we offer respectable business femininity to explain women elite leaders' experiences as they struggle to be evaluated as credible and respectable as leaders *and* as women. We also integrate privilege, inferred through organizational position, into contemporary understandings of respectable femininity. We extend Gatrell (2013) and Brunner and Dever's (2014) studies on self-management at work and the regulation of women's bodies by offering insights into the ways in which women elite leaders self-other regulate women's bodies and appearance against subjective constructions of contemporary respectable femininity. Further, we support and advance Atewologun and Sealy (2014), Berry and Bell (2012) and Leonard's (2010) work on privilege and highlight how privilege is a dynamic, relational and unstable phenomenon. Our findings support privilege as contested and conferred (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) when explored at intersections of gender and elite leadership and we offer 'defending privilege' as an additional dimension to highlight how privilege is (de)stabilized through the body and appearance.

We begin by discussing women elite leaders as sometimes privileged and outline research into bodies and body work in organizations. We develop a theory of respectable business femininity and progress to our research approach. To illustrate the theoretical value of respectable business femininity we then discuss accounts from women elite leaders and highlight their struggles to be evaluated as credible and respectable as leaders and as women, through the body and appearance. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for theory and practice.

## **Women Elite Leaders as Sometimes Privileged**

We understand ‘elite leader’ to include women who hold significant positions of power and influence at the top of organizational hierarchies (participants hold, for example, CEO, COO, CFO, MD, Director/Non-Executive Director positions). Our focus is on women leaders’ experiences within these positions, not their skills, attributes and activities. Women who secure top positions have achieved ‘parity’ with the One (De Beauvoir, 1949), in that they share ‘space’ with men within a gendered order and hold significant organizational power. Yet as women and a minority; socially disadvantaged, these leaders are ‘simultaneously on the borders, paradoxically both One and the Other’ (Mavin and Grandy, 2016, p.5). Women elite leaders can find themselves in a ‘dynamic interplay of holding power, whilst marginalized in social relations’ (Mavin and Grandy, 2016, p.5). Within this context, they are afforded privilege, as social advantage, through their organizational position; advantaged by virtue of their formal titles (e.g., wealth, power and so on). However, we see the term ‘elite’ as contested and also recognize that experiencing privilege is dynamic, sometimes problematic and mediated by gender and understand privilege as socially constructed, fluid, relational and unstable (Berry and Bell, 2012; Leonard, 2010).

Similar to Atewologun and Sealy (2014) we problematize privilege accumulated through organizational position and expect privilege to be experienced as complex by women elite leaders. For example, as simultaneously One and the Other women elite leaders may move in and out of privilege (Choules, 2006). Atewologun and Sealy (2014) offer an elaborated conceptualization of organizational privilege and propose three privilege dimensions: contested, conferred and contextual, noting the changeable aspects of privilege over time and across context. Following their approach we consider women elite leaders as a ‘sometimes privileged’ (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014, p.433) minority in organizations,

where they face tensions and contradictions in performing as leaders. We seek to better understand the subtleties of privilege as interpreted through their experiences as women, One and the Other, in elite leader positions.

Women elite leaders operate within gendered contexts whereby patriarchy as socio-structural practices (Walby, 1989) shapes gendered relations. Gender is enacted within a web of non-discursive and discursive power relations (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006). Engaging with patriarchy can constrain the femininities appropriate for women to gendered stereotypes, that which Connell (1987, p.228) suggests are ‘emphasized femininities’. To be admired and held in high esteem women elite leaders face gendered double binds and ‘are expected to perform femininities associated with being a ‘woman’ whilst also demonstrating masculinities expected of those in elite positions (Gherardi, 1994; Maddock and Parkin, 1994)’ (Mavin *et al.*, 2014, p.441). Thus women elite leaders can find themselves doing gender well (femininity) and differently (masculinity) simultaneously against sex-category (Mavin and Grandy, 2013), expected to perform feminine behaviour through bodies socially perceived to be female, while simultaneously challenging by doing gender differently. In doing gender there is space for agency and women have learned to accommodate, resist and mould within elite leader roles (Benschop, 2009; O’Leary, 1988).

Like gender, femininity is socially constructed and contextual; it changes over time, has multiple permutations and ‘acceptable’ femininity may be perceived differently on the basis of, for example, race and sexual orientation (Chow, 1999)’ (Krane *et al.*, 2004, p.316.). Cultural constructions of femininity around body and emotions and of masculinity around disembodiment and rationality, reinforces leadership as the domain of men and masculinity, where men are institutionalized as ‘natural’ and women are dangerous (Pullen and Taska, forthcoming). As femininity can guide expectations for women’s appearance and demeanour (Bordo, 1993, cited in Krane *et al.*, 2004, p.316), we contend that ‘acceptable’ femininity

may also be perceived differently on the basis of organizational position and be played out through the body. Cole and Zucker's (2007) study outlines how the cultural practices associated with femininity reflect a gendered power structure where some women attain higher status than others through enacting prescriptive feminine behaviours e.g. Black women create and maintain a feminine appearance; placing emphasis and investment in clothing, grooming, and public elements of 'doing' femininity. This can be simultaneously experienced as power and pleasure and efforts to meet a frustratingly exacting ideal (Cole and Zucker, 2007). The dynamic of privilege, embodied leadership and acceptable or respectable embodied femininity is therefore paradoxical and manifested through a type of contemporary respectable femininity, namely respectable business femininity.

#### *The Body and Respectable Business Femininity*

Women's (and men's) bodies and appearance in organizations make a statement about their acceptability and credibility as leaders and about how women and men position themselves in relation to 'ideal masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004)' (Kelan, 2013, p.46). For women leaders this is a process of negotiation within dynamics of privilege as elite leader, embodied leadership, and acceptable femininity. The normatively defined male body has neither sexuality nor gender, while the female body introduces gender and sexuality into the workplace (Acker, 2003; Sinclair, 2011) and as such, 'women come to stand for the Body itself' (Twigg, 2006 p.148, in Brunner and Dever, 2014). Bodies are 'maps of power and identity' (Haraway, 1990, p.222) and extant research into the body, body work/body labour and embodied social relations at work (e.g., Gimlin, 2002; Wolkowitz, 2006), highlights how 'the work environment is literally "written on" the body' (Gimlin, 2007, p.363). 'Body work' is the work that people do on their own and others' bodies (Wolkowitz, 2011) which conveys that labour is an embodied practice (Brunner and

Dever, 2014). Sinclair (2005, p.90) further argues that ‘bodies need to be re-attached to managers to understand what’s going on in organizations’. Women leaders have been definable by bodies, reproductive capacities and shaped by expectations of what is perceived to be respectable for women’s bodies i.e. ‘what should be worn, what mannerisms, demeanour, voice, size and shape are appropriate’ (Sinclair, 2011, p.119) [read respectable femininity]. Brunner and Dever (2014) note how, in their study of sexual harassment at work, ‘troubling bodies’ (p.463) were not men’s but women’s bodies. In this way, the woman (elite) leader as feminine Other holds a marginalized position relative to the masculine (Kenny and Bell, 2011).

While we acknowledge that ‘the body entails more than appearance’ and that it is both material and social (Meriläinen *et al.*, 2015, p.6), here we primarily focus upon the visual gaze. Dress and appearance expectations at work are gendered and sexualized so that workers are ‘corporately made up’ to embody the look of an organization (Caven *et al.*, 2013) or by our extension, to embody the hierarchical level. Women in professional and leader positions face challenges in knowing and negotiating expectations of dress, appearance and self-presentation (Haynes, 2012) in order to be evaluated as credible and respectable. The suit for men is the accepted, masculine symbol of ‘management’ (Kelan, 2013) and for us reflects a form of respectable masculinity. Norms for women’s embodiment as elite leaders, however, are absent or ambiguous at best (Kelan, 2013). Sinclair (2011, p.123) argues ‘women have a wider range of “acceptable” clothing’, yet she also acknowledges that women’s clothing ‘attracts significantly more scrutiny and criticism’ (Sinclair, 2011, p.123). While embodiment norms for women elite leaders are unclear, women continue to strive to control maternal bodies in line with perceived professional norms of bodily comportment (Gatrell, 2013). As ‘bodies are inscribed with gendered images, symbols, roles and expectations’ (Binns, 2008, p.605), women struggle to reduce the impact and invisibility of their bodies without



compromising requisite heterosexual femininity (Brunner and Dever, 2014). Women within masculine environments face increased pressures to control their embodiment against expectations of credibility and evaluations of hierarchical worth (Haynes, 2012). Thus, women elite leaders face tensions in negotiating embodied leadership as masculine, ambiguous expectations of acceptable or respectable femininity and moving in and out of privilege, as they strive to become credible leaders.

The bodies of women elite leaders are surfaces to reproduce dominant practices of power and social control (Bell and Sinclair, 2014). We propose that historical notions of respectable femininity and related social control emerge for women elite leaders through respectable business femininity. We recognize that particular forms of femininity are constructed within a predominantly White class-based structure with strong associations to heterosexual sex and strong emphasis on appearance, communicating dominant notions of an ideal feminine body (Krane *et al.*, 2004). Historical respectable femininity is reflected in etiquette guides emerging in the 18<sup>th</sup> century which construct ‘the figure of the middle class lady as a way of policing and maintaining classed and gendered boundaries’ (Allan, 2009, p.146). Whitehead’s (2005) approach to respectable femininity identifies how women teaching recruits in the 1920s were advised to dress neatly and suitably to maintain respectable femininity, which in turn restricted their identities.

Much of the recent work on respectable femininity focuses upon women marginalized on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, and / or nationality in non-western settings (Fernando and Cohen, 2014; Fischer, 2014; Radhakrishnan, 2009). As ‘feminist theorists have long argued that respectability and (sexual) reputation form key dimensions of contemporary femininity’ (Griffin *et al.*, 2009, p.7), we propose that 21<sup>st</sup> century constructions of respectable femininity may play out and be appraised through women’s embodiment of elite leadership, specifically through socially respectable bodies and appearance. Here we develop

research into respectability femininity, as it relates to becoming reputable, decent and dignified through the body and appearance (rather than societal morality and class division), alongside embodied leadership (for women) and privilege (as it pertains to women elite leaders) to propose a theory of respectable *business* femininity. This theory offers an explanation of how women elite leaders may experience contemporary respectable femininity through the body and appearance.

Respectable business femininity is a discursive and relational process that explains the struggles that women elite leaders engage in at the interconnection of elite leadership as masculine, respectable embodied femininity and being sometimes privileged. These struggles manifest through a disciplining of the body and appearance, specifically self-and-others' expectations of women's bodies in the elite leader role. Respectful behaviour is socially, culturally and contextually constructed (Bolton, 2012; Grover, 2013). Respect is identified as important to social relations and treating people with respect supports human dignity (Barilan, 2011; Rosen, 2012), with those who are respected feeling worthy and recognized (De Cremer and Tyler, 2005; Grover, 2013). Further, the positive attitude towards a person that comes from a favourable appraisal is known as 'appraisal respect' (Darwall, 1977; Grover, 2013). We see appraisal of women's embodiment as part of a process of respectable business femininity whereby women confer, contest and defend privilege through appraisals of their own and other women's bodies and appearance as elite leaders. Respectable business femininity helps explain how embodied leadership and subjectivities are both constrained and enabled through particular appraisals of respectability, professionalism and credibility in leader roles. The process of becoming respectable and maintaining respectability or being highly regarded, well thought-of, dignified, decent, credible and reputable as an elite leader occurs within subjective and fluid expectations of what it is to be a 'proper' idealised feminine woman elite leader and the fragility of their privilege.

To summarize our discussions, we propose a theory of respectable business femininity to explain how contemporary respectable femininity may play out for women elite leaders. Respectable business femininity reflects social processes within sites of ambiguity where women elite leaders struggle with dialectical experiences as One and the Other and sometimes privileged, within embedded notions of leadership as masculine and expectations of embodied acceptable femininity. We propose that we can 'see' the struggles and tensions through a disciplining, by self-and-others, of women's bodies and appearance in the elite leader role. This disciplining is a means of appraising women as credible leaders and respectable women where privilege is unstable. We now turn to our research approach and introduce the women elite leaders whose accounts illustrate the theoretical value of respectable business femininity.

### **Research Approach**

This paper has developed from a wider project where women elite leaders were interviewed about their experiences of social relations with other women. We understand these social relations as a way of being in-relation-to other women. We draw upon an intersubjective view of the world where meaning is socially mediated and where it is 'a way of thinking about who leaders are in relation to others within the complexity of experience' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011, p.1434). The women participants were prompted to discuss their experiences of relations with other women and in their talk of projects of the self this involves intersubjective recognition (Harding *et al.*, 2013). In the interviews women leaders sometimes reflected on their own identities and also constructed themselves in-relation-to other women and to men.

Eighty-one women from UK-based organizations were interviewed in the wider study: 36 Executive Directors/Non-Executive Directors in FTSE 100/250 companies and 45

elite leaders in an annual regional newspaper supplement of the top 250/500 influential leaders. The women were aged between 33 and 67 years: 73 self-declared as white British/Irish/Other white backgrounds, two black/mixed backgrounds, with six non-declared; 62 women worked full time; 14 part time with five non-declared. Thirty-five women had at least one other Non-Executive Director/Chair of Board role and eight had at least another Governor/Trustee role in education, charities or legal organizations. These women leaders hold significant power and status. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken by three RAs utilizing an interview guide. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and coded. The wider study did not set out to investigate women's bodies and appearance and the interview guide did not include questions about body work. Within a context of women's social relations with women the questions focused on women's progress to elite leader positions, ambition, friendship, cooperation, competition and key issues for other women. In their answers a number of women talked of bodies and appearance and we were surprised and intrigued by this.

Analysis of women's responses and cross-transcript analysis was highly iterative, moving between 'phases of coding, literature review, and conceptualization of the data' (Ladge *et al.*, 2012, p.1456). In analysing the data from the wider project Sharon followed a process of 'literal readings', 'interpretative readings' (Mason, 2002) and constant comparison to identify 40 initial themes (managed via Nvivo) and then 10 refined themes. One theme reflected embodied leadership within a context of women's relations with other women and was initially labelled Erotic Capital for convenience. In joint readings of the data and interpretative discussions, we both discussed how we were unsettled and intrigued by participants' references to the body and appearance even though they were not asked about body work. We were also struck that despite their significant accomplishments and 'power' inferred through their organizational position many participants were, by our interpretations,

concerned about how they and other women met expectations around femininity and elite leader. We became reflexively aware of how we too engaged in body work and the complexity of our responses to the women leaders' accounts. This was also experienced by the three RAs when in post-data collection meetings with Sharon they discussed the women leaders as amazingly dressed and immaculately groomed e.g. perfect nails and spectacular jewellery. One RA recounted how she was so impacted by a woman's appearance that at the end of the interview she bought a new outfit to wear to the next interview. It was through these reflexive experiences that we became aware of how we too struggle with embodied leadership and of ways of being within gendered contexts.

We turned to the literature to make sense of these findings. Through a to-ing and fro-ing between data and literature we concluded that respectable femininity, body work and privilege helped us further explain women elite leaders' experiences of embodied leadership. A further stage of analysis across transcripts led us to develop and refine how, through bodies and appearance, the women struggle with contemporary notions of respectable femininity, embodied elite leadership and the fragility of privilege. We now discuss accounts from women elite leaders (identified using pseudonyms) working in different industry sectors. We acknowledge that the women participants are not a homogeneous group. While they share experiences as elite leaders, they do not share the same experiences (Bryans and Mavin, 2003). We are not *testing* empirical data through a lens of respectable business femininity, rather illustrating how the theory may help better understand how contemporary respectable femininity might play out for women elite leaders. To focus attention on how the women leaders navigate the dynamics of privilege, masculine elite leadership and acceptable femininity, the accounts are organized around three themes. The first two themes, *Conferring privilege* and *Contesting privilege* extend Atewologun and Sealy's (2014) research into

privilege as unstable. The third theme, *Defending privilege* is a new dimension of privilege that we offer.

### **Respectable Business Femininity and (De)Stabilizing Privilege: Conferring, Contesting and Defending Through the Body**

We interpret various ways in which women elite leaders appraise their own and other women's bodies and appearance in a context of 'proper' femininity and where they are both One and Other and 'sometimes privileged' (Atewologun and Sealy, 2013). The women strive to feel and be seen as credible, competent, decent, reputable, and dignified women / leaders through particular enactments of embodiment. In doing so they confer, contest and defend privilege. We contend that these efforts reveal how privilege at the intersection of gender and elite leadership is unstable, dynamic, relational and negotiated. The women's efforts are often contextualized in comparative terms to the efforts of other women, whereby women elite leaders can confer, contest and / or defend privilege through bodies and appearance in-relation-to other women. The women leaders stabilize and de-stabilize their own and other women's privilege through particular enactments of embodiment as they confront dynamic pressures of embodied (masculine) leadership and acceptable (embodied) femininity. In what follows we discuss three themes to illustrate the theory of respectable business femininity. The accounts of contesting privilege or contesting privilege alongside conferring and / or defending privilege were more prevalent in the data.

#### *Conferring Privilege*

Following Atewologun and Sealy (2014) we understand that privilege can be conferred, in that 'privilege is relational', bestowed and 'is shared amongst in-group members' (p.428). In extending their work we propose that privilege is conferred when women's bodies and appearance are perceived as appropriate as part of appraisal respect, and recognized as an

important and influential part of becoming a credible elite leader. Privilege depends upon a disciplining of the body/appearance. Many of the women elite leaders frame their expectations of respectable embodiment in a mirror image type process, that is, in-relation-to other women. They recount personal stories and stories of other women who engage in particular enactments of acceptable or respectable femininity, conferring privilege to themselves or other women elite leaders.

When women elite leaders get the body and appearance ‘right’ and ‘look the part’ (Shona) against ambiguous standards of embodied respectable femininity, feelings of autonomy and dignity are expressed and privilege is stabilized. We interpret a ‘beauty premium’ whereby those women leaders who embody particular constructions of femininity are rewarded and privilege is conferred and accumulated. Rewards are reflected in some women’s accounts as feeling empowered, credible and in control – respectable and confident in the leader role and therefore having dignity (or not having their dignity threatened), because their appearance is in balance with some perceived notions of appropriate embodied femininity and embodied elite leadership. For example, Shona describes a women elite leader who has ‘incredible clothes’ ‘brilliant figure’ and who can run downstairs in ‘really high heels.’ Shona gives the impression of a powerful and in control attractive woman, worthy of respect. In doing this, Shona presents the woman’s body and appearance as important in becoming a credible leader (‘people are impressed’). She thereby confers privilege to the said women elite leader.

She’s got incredible clothes, a brilliant figure for it and wears really high heels and all that. She really looks the part. I think that’s quite helpful sometimes... because people are impressed by... so first impressions and physical appearance is part of the picture and some women really are good at that and I quite admire it, almost because I could never do that. Red high heels are not me if I can’t walk and she can. She can run downstairs in them. It’s amazing. (Shona)

Shona indicates that she does not wear high heels herself because she is unable to

walk in them. In-relation-to the other woman who gets it 'right', Shona's privilege is suspect and fragile ('I could never do that'). Similarly, Serena expresses that particular expressions of femininity are of benefit for women elite leaders. 'I have seen women use what my mother would have described as feminine wiles. Which she always thought I wasn't very good at and I should have got better at' (Serena). Such 'feminine wiles' is, by her own admission, not one of Serena's strengths and may put her perceived respectability and credibility as an elite leader at risk ('I should have got better at it').

For others getting body and appearance right and 'looking the part' (Anita) is a threshold point by which a woman's respectable femininity and privilege is steadied and less likely to be threatened or questioned. Anita identifies how the body and appearance serve to create and maintain liminal zones of acceptable femininity and embodied leadership; credibility and privilege as an elite leader is at risk if women get their looks, movements, and talk 'wrong'. She also acknowledges later in the interview that these pressures are more pervasive for women leaders than for men leaders.

You ain't going to be an eighteen stone ballerina and you can't go on with all your point shoes all torn and looking a mess. Looking the part is the way a pilot will have to look the part ... people take me at - not face value but who I am inherently and intrinsically, it's a load of old bullshit because we're very tactile, aesthetic people. We make a lot of split second judgments from the way people look and it's not just look, its move, its talk, its eye movement and it happens fast and we judge each other quickly so these things matter. Even if it's only... to create a level playing field. (Anita)

I think men... there's still more leeway for men to be characters than women [in terms of appearance] and I think there's a certain element that you have to conform but it's knowing that you're conforming and you're playing a game. That's the clever thing. That's what successful women do. (Anita)

While she does not explicate specific body expectations for women elite leaders, Anita does express how the body and appearance (and related behaviours such as speech, body language) are important in creating 'a level playing field', and by our extension in maintaining and conferring privilege as an elite leader. If the woman does not get embodied



femininity 'right', then she risks judgment and criticism in a relational context which may threaten her sense of self-worth, respectability, credibility and privilege. Here privilege is relational and shared; conferred (or not) around what is perceived to be 'appropriate' disciplining of feminine bodies and appearance.

### *Contesting Privilege*

As women elite leaders' find themselves experiencing tensions at the interconnections of embedded understandings of leadership as masculine and perceived expectations of acceptable femininity, they can 'move in and out of privilege' (Choules, 2006). These dialectics can emerge in the ways that they self-other discipline and appraise on the basis of their bodies and appearance. As One and the Other, operating within sites of ambiguity, women elite leaders can challenge privilege through these body appraisals and when they do so, we 'see' how 'privilege cannot be assumed: it is contested and asserted at its intersection with other dimensions' (e.g. gender) (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014, p.428). Privilege is destabilized when women elite leaders' bodies and appearance do not meet ambiguous expectations of embodied femininity in an elite leader role. Privilege is not a given, despite organizational position, and in support of Atewologun and Sealy's (2014) work, privilege is dynamic, fluid and ever at risk of contestation. We interpreted many more accounts of contesting privilege than conferring privilege. Also contesting privilege often occurs alongside other dimensions of privilege (conferring and defending), thus highlighting the on-going fragility of privilege for these women leaders.

We begin with Sarah who illuminates this 'contesting privilege' process when she describes another woman elite leader whom she perceives to appraise women by what they wear, rather than 'professionally.' Sarah also generalizes such efforts to other women when she refers to this as 'expected female behaviour.'

There's a woman who's... in the [sector] quite high up in her area. And it's kind of totally absolutely expected female behaviour. Where you know someone's not looking at you professionally but they're looking at what you're wearing and how your behaviour is... [against respectable femininity norms] and you don't want people to think anything of you that isn't complimentary [for not being correct in how you look]. So you always wonder 'well is there a reason that person acts like that? Was there a reason they feel I'm like that?' [Am I not meeting expectations?]. (Sarah)

Sarah perceives that other women appraise her on the basis of appearance and in doing so she reveals a desire to be viewed positively by others; to be highly regarded and well thought-of, demonstrated through her appropriate appearance. We interpret from Sarah's account that when privilege is contested it can manifest through self-doubts. Sarah's struggle and feelings of self-doubt ('was there a reason they feel I'm like that?') highlight how her privileged status as elite leader is contested through her body and appearance.

Trethewey (1999) more than 15 years ago argued that women continue to be evaluated with respect to their competence based in part on dress and appearance and that wearing 'appropriate' dress makes women more confident in their roles. This appraisal process of competence-body/appearance continues today. The women elite leaders discuss how, despite feeling 'competent' in their positions, they are criticized unfairly because of some perceived weakness or flaw in their bodies or appearance; they fail to meet dialectical expectations of the double bind in their role and this can destabilize their privilege. Paula demonstrates this appraisal process and refers to women who do not have 'attractive' bodies and appearance as having a 'hard time'. In-relation-to men where the suit is the uniform which normalizes men in the elite leader role ('they all look alike') and which stabilizes their privilege, women's bodies and appearance are the means through which credibility, and privilege, is contested.

I think on the negative side I think honestly women who aren't attractive have a hard time so things like personal grooming, a certain look and style are very important and that style has to be very thoughtfully developed ... .. Men are very fortunate in a sense that they've never left having the uniform... but still at a distance in particular they all look alike but women don't. (Paula)

When women elite leaders' bodies and appearance fall outside ambiguous expectations of acceptable femininity women are suspect to resentment, disgust and loss of privilege as a leader and a woman. Navigating these ambiguous expectations is tricky. For example, Tonia notes that while emphasizing femininity through flirting at work might secure some advantage in certain circumstances, it comes with the risk of retaliation from colleagues. The overall risk to self-worth, credibility and respectability is substantial and we interpret how, when privilege is contested, these women 'sit' at the borders of disgust and *disrespectability*.

I have witnessed in the past women trying to use the feminine... to their advantage; they're doing a bit of flirting and all the rest of it. ... That can work quite well when they're quite junior. And then they suddenly find out that it doesn't... they're not taken as seriously. I'm not saying you come in wearing a hair shirt... and not being a woman. I am a woman in the office - I'm not a pretend man. I walk... with my nail varnish and all the rest of it ... perhaps a [name of senior role] might talk to them for five minutes... [but] the more senior people will start pigeonholing them and their peers will really resent them. When ...25 year old chaps think that they're being sidelined by a 25 year old woman because the woman's wearing a short skirt, they will find a way to pay her back. (Tonia)

Tonia implies that ambiguous expectations of femininity for an elite leader do not entail 'denying' femininity; being 'a woman in the office' is appropriate. Yet there are limits to emphasizing femininity that if crossed, result in the woman not being taken seriously by others and privilege is contested rather than conferred (Atewologun and Sealy, 2013). We interpret this account as emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) which destabilizes privilege and risks loss of dignity as a woman. Sayer (2007, p.569) argues that dignity is 'associated with seriousness and being taken seriously... if they are serious but are never taken seriously by others, it is hard for them to maintain their dignity and self-respect.' Maintaining dignity, like privilege, is relational and depends on 'how we conduct ourselves and whether others accord us respect for this' (Sayer, 2007, p.568).

The women leaders also engage in 'fat talk' as they appraise acceptable femininity as an elite leader. They highlight how weight is related to competence and respect, supporting

Meriläinen *et al.*'s (2015, p.14) recent study of the ideal executive body where 'being overweight is unacceptable in executive management.' For the women leaders being overweight or putting on weight is perceived as a weakness. It signals a lack of control of one's body, of femininity, and of work. Mary's comments exemplify how she perceives weight to be associated with dignity, worth and competence as a woman elite leader.

But if you stand up in a conference, is the first thing that somebody's going to say 'oh she's a bit overweight'? ...Is that how they judge their successes? So if they are then blown away by what you say, is it a surprise to them because oh, I didn't realize fat people could say good things. Or fat women. (Mary)

This failure in disciplining of the body and appearance and lack of control of one's weight affects self-worth and respect from others. A focus on the body (aesthetic) and not the person (embodiment) reduces the individual to less than a 'normal' person, stigmatizing them and destabilizing their privilege. To be overweight as an elite leader infers you are not respectable and your privilege is at risk and contested. In sum, contesting privilege highlights privilege as relational and fluid. It demonstrates how privilege is both enabled and constrained through a disciplining of the body and appearance as women elite leaders navigate self-other (ambiguous) expectations of acceptable embodied femininity.

### *Defending Privilege*

The women's accounts highlight how their bodies somehow construct them as in (or out of) place as elite leaders. Following Russell (2013), the women also experience ambivalence as it pertains to the body and appearance and this provokes a reaction in themselves and others. Some women respond through particular embodiment expressions that reject and challenge certain performances of the ambiguous idealized feminine woman via the body and appearance. As the women elite leaders reject and/or challenge certain constructions of

acceptable femininity we interpret that they can also defend their privilege. Privilege can be defended when women take a stand *against* their bodies and appearance being part of their credibility as an elite leader and when they protect ‘who they are’ as leaders - not what they look like. For example, Anna makes it clear that she refuses to buy into expectations of how she looks to meet perceived expectations of femininity and respectability through her clothes; ‘I’m not interested in what colour clothes I wear and whether somebody’s matching this, that or the other, that’s not my thing, I’m not a shopper, I’m not into [it]’. In a similar way, Eliza expresses she ‘can’t bear it when women focus on being women first and foremost’. We interpret Eliza’s account to be a defense of her credibility and of her privilege in the elite leader occupational role, rather than as a woman elite leader.

So I can’t bear it when women focus on being women first and foremost. I mean if they do it they want to talk about female stuff like where you can get a decent manicure and have they got a [laughs] spare pair of tights because mine are laddered. (Eliza)

The pressures of respectable business femininity for women elite leaders can be seen through ‘defending privilege’ and often emerge alongside processes of conferring and / or contesting women’s privilege through the body and appearance. In what can be interpreted as efforts to resist conforming to or rejecting certain notions of acceptable femininity expectations of the body and appearance, some women leaders position the performative choices of other women leaders as less desirable, less ‘authentic’ and inferior to their own approach. Charlotte emphasizes being ‘authentic’ in rationalizing her rejection of certain acceptable femininity expectations. She acknowledges that there may be consequences to transgressing embodiment expectations in that her privilege may be contested. Yet she defends her approach and in doing so we argue she strengthens her own privilege, as superior to those who do ‘try to hide’ their ‘real self’.

I think you need to be authentic. ... and once in my career some man said to me you should wear less flamboyant clothes and basically my response to that was “get

stuffed, it's got nothing to do with you what I wear and I am who I am", I like dressing how I am and I will take the consequences of how I am and for me that's an important and genuine part of being me and I bring my whole self... It's really important for women to bring their whole self to work. They don't have to pretend that they don't have a family life or a social life or children or any of that. I think they try to hide it. (Charlotte)

Charlotte illustrates the discursive and relational processes of respectable business femininity as her talk surfaces the tensions she experiences at the nexus of being sometimes privileged as an elite leader, embedded notions of leadership as masculine and wider ambiguous expectations of acceptable femininity. Charlotte resists and defends her privilege, while acknowledging the possible negative consequences ('I will take the consequences of how I am') in that 'alternative femininities' may be sanctioned (Fernando and Cohen, 2014). In response to possible sanctions she 'Others' women who buy into expectations of femininity in the elite leader role; contesting their privilege. Simultaneously, Charlotte confers privilege to those who 'bring their whole self to work' and resists expectations where privilege, gender, and body work coalesce.

Defending, alongside contesting and conferring privilege also emerges in Janette's account when she contests a woman leader's privilege for presenting herself in a 'masculine manner'. Despite expressing empathy for the possible reasons why a colleague may feel she has to do this, Janette disapproves of the 'boyish haircut' and 'male suit.' She contests privilege while conferring privilege elsewhere. Janette confers privilege onto her own and her colleagues' bodies and appearance and adds strength to her opinions of appropriate 'dress' by noting 'I don't think those of us that work in [type of organization] feel that' phrasing it as a view that she and other women share. In-relation-to other women Janette constructs a shared norm of conferred privilege amongst the in-group (Atewologun and Sealy, 2013). Within that process she defends her own and the in-group colleagues' privilege when she states 'we just dress however we turn out.' She downplays the need to be overly concerned by expectations

of the body and appearance whilst simultaneously critiquing her colleagues' body and appearance. This critique, we argue, serves to destabilize privilege for her colleague while simultaneously stabilizing her own 'in crowd'.

She's [colleague] an interesting example because she even dresses in a very male way, she always wears a male suit, she's got a very boyish haircut and she's got a lovely face that works with that sort of haircut but it did strike me when I met her that... if I just could talk to you longer, pluck up the courage to say 'why are you wearing a... is it deliberate?' And partly it's because she's worked for the [name of department] and because of her [professional] background. I don't think those of us that work in [type of organization] feel that, we just dress however we turn out but perhaps she's had to do that and that's become her personality stamp. But it's interesting isn't it that she's felt that she's had to do that. (Janette)

Defending privilege is a type of resistance whereby women elite leaders reject the pressure that certain expressions of body and appearance inform their credibility as women elite leaders. Defending privilege efforts serve to protect their identities as elite leaders and as women; identities which are not tied to body and appearance expectations. Defending privilege also occurs simultaneously alongside contesting and conferring privilege, revealing how the pressures of respectable business femininity are relational, dialectical and complex.

The choices women make under the pressures of respectable business femininity can be seen in how they contest, confer and defend privilege through women's bodies and appearance. Table 1. outlines this respectable business femininity and how privilege for women elite leaders can be (de)stabilized, alongside further data examples for illustrative purposes.

<< TAKE IN TABLE 1 >>

## **Discussion**

### *The Subtleties of Respectable Business Femininity for Women Elite Leaders*

There is limited empirical work exploring how women elite leaders, in their everyday lives,

navigate the ‘choices about how to dress, display, reveal, perform, in short to discipline their own and other women’s bodies at work’ (Trethewey, 1999 p.427). We have discussed women elite leaders’ accounts of these choices to illustrate a theory of respectable business femininity. Respectable business femininity helps explain women elite leaders’ struggles to be evaluated as credible and respectable as leaders and as women. Respectable business femininity reflects a discursive, relational and social process experienced by women elite leaders as One and the Other, holding power while simultaneously marginalized. At the nexus of embodied elite (masculine) leadership, ambiguous expectations of respectable femininity and moving in and out of privilege, women elite leaders’ experience tensions that manifest through self-and-other disciplining of the body and appearance.

We have extended notions of historical respectable femininity by theorizing how pressures of respectable business femininity reflect efforts to become reputable, decent, and dignified through the body (rather than including societal morality and class division) and we translate these notions into ‘business’ contexts. Our intent is not to ‘impoverish the meanings attached to respectable femininity’<sup>2</sup> rather to theorize how contemporary versions of respectable femininity *might* play out for women elite leaders through the body and appearance. We have extended Fernando and Cohen’s (2014), Fischer’s (2014) and Radhakrishnan’s (2009) recent work on respectable femininity into particular contexts (e.g., non-Western societies, elite positions) by illuminating *subtle* ways in which various constructions of ‘modern day’ respectable femininity have consequences for women elite leaders. We acknowledge that these accounts are from primarily White women often made in reference to White men in power and women in short skirts, dresses, with ‘done’ hair and nails and are aware of the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and how this supports existing research (Krane *et al.*, 2004).

Similar to Cole and Zucker’s (2007) study into Black and White women’s



perspectives on femininity, the women leaders place significant emphasis on and investment in their bodies and appearance, including clothing, grooming, image and public ‘body’ elements of ‘doing’ acceptable or respectable femininity. These efforts reflect a woman elite leader as highly regarded, dignified reputable and well thought-of, against fluid subjective expectations of femininity. For us women are suspect to the reflections of a multi-pane mirror; they experience pressures to conform to notions of respectable femininity through their body and appearance in order to maintain respectability and retain privilege as a credible woman elite leader. While exact performative expectations are less clear, the accounts reveal efforts to self-and-other discipline of women’s bodies and appearance to ensure women are ‘correct’ and ‘proper’; thereby conferring, contesting and/or defending privilege. Following Radhakrishnan (2009), women leaders’ disciplining reflects a discourse of balance, self-restraint and knowing the limits of women’s performances against respectable femininity. This is exacerbated within a context where women are simultaneously part of the masculine symbolic order while marginalized.

Following Atewologun and Sealy (2014) we theorize and empirically illustrate how privilege as social advantage is not guaranteed for women elite leaders, despite their senior level positions. At the intersection with gender, privilege (through organizational position) is relational, fluid and dynamic and can be stabilized and destabilized through self-and-other appraisals of body and appearance. Achieving the ‘right’ body and appearance against ambiguous respectable femininity norms is vital to having privilege conferred by other women (and men). We extend Atewologun and Sealy’s (2014) work by integrating women’s body and appearance into existing understandings of ‘conferring’ and ‘contesting privilege’ and theorizing how women elite leaders engage in ‘defending privilege’, often simultaneously with contesting and conferring. Thus we further problematize the fragility of privilege, particularly when combined with embedded notions of masculine leadership and

embodied acceptable femininity. Future research could explore how privilege can be (de)stabilized in this way for men and women elite leaders. Our work, alongside Meriläinen *et al.* (2015) into the ideal executive body serve as useful starting points to better understand such complexities.

### *Advancing Understandings of Body Work through Respectable Business Femininity*

The women elite leaders exerted considerable efforts in ‘looking the part’ (Anita), yet contrary to the work of Meriläinen *et al.* (2015), we are left with questions around these norms (e.g. femininity is not to be exploited, not too sexual or too masculine, bodies are not to be overweight but the ‘right’ weight is unclear). Getting ‘it’ right (incredible clothes, brilliant figure – Shona) affords a premium and enables privilege as conferred by other women. Yet in Tonia’s account we see how emphasized femininities (Connell, 1987) and ‘girly girl’ hyper-femininity (Paechter, 2006) are not acceptable standards of respectable femininity for women elite leaders and neither is being ‘a pretend man.’ Some women self-and-other regulate to avoid the taint of girly femininity (Griffin *et al.*, 2009). These accounts surface how those who present themselves in sexual ways, are overweight, or fail to discipline bodies and appearance (e.g., nails and hair), transgress boundaries of respectable business femininity into *disrespectful* business femininity. They are sanctioned by other women (and men) through disapproval, disgust and loss of status, dignity and respect as a leader – and as a woman. Maintaining privilege, and dignity, at the intersections of gender, body work and organizational position is relational, played out through how women leaders conduct their bodies and appearance and subsequently how other women (and men) afford them privilege and respect. When they do get respectable business femininity ‘right,’ privilege as an elite leader is rewarded and conferred by self and others e.g. feeling/being perceived as empowered, powerful and in control. The accounts reveal a prevalence of

contesting privilege (sometimes alongside conferring and defending), raising questions about any clear norms of body and appearance for women elite leaders.

Privilege can be conferred through shared constructions of in-group agreement around the body and appearance (see Janette's account) and there are felt pressures around women's body and appearance. Overall, however, the norms of respectable business femininity are ambiguous. Efforts to confer, contest and defend privilege illustrate how women re-construct, embrace, resist, fail, and navigate through such ambiguous constructions of acceptable embodied femininity and leadership. Extending our work (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013), women do both gender well and differently through the body and appearance in that they acknowledge particular constructions of respectable business femininity but challenge and/or reject them, defending their right to be who they want to be as an elite leader. We see how women recognize possible sanctions they may face by not engaging (e.g., Charlotte) and how they are aware that 'alternative femininities' can be sanctioned (Fernando and Cohen, 2014) and their privilege contested. The women defend themselves against these sanctions (loss of privilege) and position their approach as superior to those of other women. For Charlotte, while there is no manual for women outlining how to 'do' respectable business femininity, those guided by values of 'authenticity' may be less affected by respect-based identity threats (Hazan and Shaver, 1990). We realize that respectable business femininity is perceptual and contextual so that similar to respect, in one context what may be interpreted as disrespectful may be neutral in another (Grover, 2013). We suggest that in rejecting the disciplining of bodies, women's efforts to contest and defend privilege may offer space for challenge and disruption. We acknowledge that many expressions of acceptable of body and appearance discussed here sustain stereotypical images of feminine which does not reflect the experiences of all women leaders.

Through our theoretical and empirical work on respectable business femininity we offer a contribution to understandings of gender and body work by extending Gatrell's (2013) and Brunner and Dever's (2014) studies on self-management at work and regulation of women's bodies - where women's bodies are 'troubling bodies' (Brunner and Dever, 2014). We show how, through efforts to confer, contest and defend privilege, the women's gaze may be as controlling and normalizing as the men's gaze (Trethewey, 1999) in disciplining bodies and appearance. Following Fernando and Cohen (2014), these self-other efforts reflect ways in which constructions of respectable business femininity through the body and appearance are both rewarded and sanctioned. These sanctions and rewards manifest in the context of women's social relations with other women. Our theorizing of respectable business femininity highlights how complex and ambiguous gender boundaries inform women elite leaders' relations with other women and contributes to emerging research into social relations between women (e.g., Mavin, 2006; O'Neill and Reilly, 2011). We suggest that future research look further at these complexities.

## **Conclusion**

Doing leadership is not a matter of 'having a body and taking it into an organization, it is about creating and experiencing our bodies, careers and lives, through 'embodied participation with others'' (Bell and Sinclair, 2014, p.270). In exploring how contemporary respectable femininity can play out for women elite leaders through their bodies and appearance we have theorized respectable business femininity as a dynamic, discursive and relational process. Respectable business femininity can explain the dialectics women elite leaders may experience at the nexus of being sometimes privileged, embedded notions of embodied masculine leadership and acceptable embodied femininity. Here, respectable business femininity is subtly played out in social relations *between* women as they self-and-

other appraise and discipline against ambiguous embodiment norms. These appraisals can provoke sanctions and rewards which (de)stabilize women's privilege as elite leaders. We have highlighted how, at the intersection of gender, privilege is relational, fluid, dynamic and unstable as manifested through self-and-other appraisals of body and appearance.

Our experiences of talking about this research suggest that women's bodies and appearance at work are uncomfortable subjects. Women are judged on job performance *and* appearance, while men are judged on their work (Brower, 2013). Such judgements create barriers to women's progress and normalizing in elite roles. Yet there remains resistance to critiques of how and why this gendering happens, constraining opportunities for disruption. Responses to our work have been polarized; highly supportive from individuals whose experiences resonate with our findings and those who respond in confrontational ways, strongly challenging our interpretations and the implications. We suggest that in naming respectable business femininity we have both communicated its potential power in constraining women's identities and strengthened women's agency in becoming more consciously aware of self-in-relation-to own and other women's bodies and appearance. Integrating discussions of respectable business femininity into organizational diversity, talent management and leader development programmes as well as in Business School curricula, executive education and coaching, has provocative potential to raise consciousness and to disrupt gendered discourses of women doing respectable business femininity and elite leadership. It can also contribute to current debates on increasing women's participation in elite leader roles.

## Notes

1. We may be challenged for focussing our study on experiences of elite, privileged, primarily White, western women. However, women elite leaders' remain rare, their

experiences are under-researched and their unique achievements offer us much in new avenues for theorizing.

2. We thank a reviewer for bringing this to our attention.

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