

## **Splitting and blaming: The psychic life of neoliberal executive women**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the article is to explore the psychic life of executive women under neoliberalism using psychosocial approaches. The article shows how, despite enduring unfair treatment and access to opportunities, many executive women remain emotionally invested in upholding the neoliberal ideal that if one perseveres, one shall be successful, regardless of gender. Drawing on psychosocial approaches, we explore how the accounts given by some executive women of repudiation, as denying gender inequality, and individualisation, as subjects completely agentic, are underpinned by the unconscious, intertwined processes of splitting and blaming. Women sometimes split off undesirable aspects of the workplace, which repudiates gender inequality, or blame other women, which individualises failure and responsibility for change. We explain that splitting and blaming enable some executive women to manage the anxiety evoked from threats to the neoliberal ideal of the workplace. This article thereby makes a contribution to existing postfeminist scholarship by integrating psychosocial approaches to the study of the psychic life of neoliberal executive women, by exploring *why* they appear unable to engage directly with and redress instances of gender discrimination in the workplace.

### **Keywords**

Blaming, individualisation, neoliberalism, postfeminism, psychic life, psychosocial, repudiation, splitting

## **Introduction**

There has been a concern for the dearth of women in senior leadership positions in organisations in recent years (World Economic Forum, 2015, 2016, 2017). This is also the case in accounting and finance where only 18 per cent of senior roles are filled by women (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009) and the number of women at partner level in big four and medium sized accounting firms remains low at 15 per cent (FRC, 2016). Research in this area has, therefore, tried to understand the reasons for the continued underrepresentation of women in accounting and finance (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2009; PwC, 2013; Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010).

What is often ignored is the psychic life of women under neoliberalism. The burgeoning area of research that explores the connections between gender and neoliberalism often does so under the notion of postfeminism, commonly used in the humanities (Gill, 2009, 2015; Gill et al., 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2015; Scharff, 2011, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). Scholarship exploring the intersection between neoliberalism and gender has only recently been introduced into organisation studies (Cullen and Murphy, 2017; Gill, 2007b; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2011). A small body of this work has begun to explore what has come to be termed “the psychic life” of neoliberal subjects. This scholarship primarily draws on discourse analysis to trace the neoliberal self as, for instance, entrepreneurial, anxious, shamed, and as a subject who disarticulates, individualises and frames others responsible for wider-structural inequalities (Gill, 2009; Scharff, 2015a, 2015c, 2016). The term is drawn specifically from the work of Scharff (2015c), who appropriates it from the seminal text “*The Psychic Life of Power*” (1997) by Judith Butler. In sum, the term, “the psychic life”, is employed in this small body of research to show primarily how neoliberalism constitutes subjects at work.

However, there remain unanswered questions regarding *why* rational individuals under neoliberalism come to invest in such positions. The connections between “the psychic life” and neoliberalism would, thus, be enriched further by exploring the reasons *why* women sometimes take up positions whereby they, for instance, repudiate, individualise and blame others for structural inequalities. On the discursive plane, these patterns seem contradictory but may reflect unconscious needs to manage deeper anxieties evoked from working within highly individualised and demanding neoliberalised workplaces. Psychosocial studies provide compelling ideas and methods for tracing some of the deeper ways in which anxiety is unconsciously managed at the subject-level. The work of Melanie Klein (1946) on splitting and blaming is particularly useful in understanding how individuals manage anxiety through the splitting off of objects into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fragments. However, there has been little use of psychosocial ideas and methods (Fotaki, 2013; Kenny, 2012; Vachhani, 2012), particularly those of Melanie Klein (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014; Menzies, 1960), in organisation studies. Psychosocial scholars or ‘cultural psychoanalysts’, as Wetherell (2013) sometimes helpfully refers to them as, provide a unique perspective on how subjectivities are constructed across socio-cultural, discursive and psychological contexts (Gough, 2009; Hollway, 2006). In this way, they provide a more holistic view on the construction of the self by neither reducing the individual to the social nor the social to the individual (Hollway, 2008; Hollway and Jefferson, 2008).

Accounting and finance is also a particularly interesting field in which to explore how anxiety evoked through neoliberalism is managed. Women are not only underrepresented in this sector but accounting and finance is also a neoliberal field of work *par excellence*. A key feature of neoliberalism is that there is a focus on the ‘self’ as an enterprise (Scharff, 2016) in which the self has to operate based on economically efficient rules. The highly pressurised nature of work

generates subjects who understand themselves as a 'business' and engines dedicated to chronic, frenzied productivity. Individuals working in accounting and finance can be expected, therefore, to have internalised the perspective of the self as a 'business', completely agentic, productive and separate from others. This can be expected to be particularly present in women who have 'made it' and are in executive positions. Exploring the psychic life of executive women in the neoliberal sectors of finance and accounting using psychosocial ideas is a particularly important omission from current research. Drawing on psychosocial ideas would allow scholars to understand *why* women become emotionally invested in positions in which they repudiate and individualise structural gender inequities.

The article aims to explore the psychic life of executive women in accounting and finance under neoliberalism using a psychosocial approach. We explore this by focusing on the processes involved in managing the anxiety evoked from threats to neoliberal ideals of the workplace. Despite enduring unfair treatment and access to opportunities throughout their careers when compared to their male peers, executive women remain invested in the neoliberal ideal that if one works hard and perseveres, one shall be successful, regardless of gender. In the first section, we will offer a contextualisation of women's experiences in neoliberalism by discussing, firstly, the literature on neoliberalism and ideas regarding its psychic life, as well as the theory of splitting and blaming by Melanie Klein. This is followed, secondly, by a discussion on the methodology and methods of the research. The empirical sections present two different processes involved in the management of anxiety at the subject-level. The article then offers a discussion and conclusion. The article makes a contribution to our understanding of *why* women under neoliberalism are repudiating and individualising gender inequalities by either minimizing or framing others as at fault for not overcoming them. The article thereby makes a contribution to understanding the psychic life of executive women in neoliberalism by

showing the reasons *why* women take up those positions through splitting off negative experiences and blaming others for their lack of success.

### **The psychic life of women: Repudiating and individualising**

While the lack of women in senior positions in organisations is regularly lamented, there is less research exploring how women are shaped by neoliberalism in the workplace. Exploring neoliberalism is important as it draws attention to the fact that it is not simply about adding more women to leadership positions; there is also an ethical responsibility to understand at a deeper level how women manage the effect of neoliberalised organisational systems and cultures that continue to exclude them from equal opportunities. Neoliberalism is a highly contested term which was originally associated with economics but is also now widely drawn on in relation to the construction of subjectivities. The era before neoliberalism is described by Harvey (2005) as ‘embedded liberalism’ in which the state actively intervened on industrial policy, deploying Keynesian fiscal policies and state ownership of important sectors, such as coal and steel, which alleviated economic downturns, ensuring full-time employment, growth and welfare. However, this economic era began to rupture in the 1960s and 1970s as employment, inflation and discontentment became widespread. Neoliberalism emerged in the UK and US with the elections of the Thatcher and Reagan governments respectively (Duggan, 2003). This represented a move away from civil rights and progressive left alliances, and the convergence of centrist liberal and right-wing, ‘compassionate’ conservatives, who wanted to reduce welfare and the overall role of the government through the promotion of ideas of economic liberty (Ong, 2006). For Harvey (2005), this deployment of rhetoric reflected a class project to consolidate the power of the rich and elite through de-industrialisation, offshoring of production to cheaper geographies and deregulation (Larner, 2003). One of the implications of this has been the rise of prerogative ideological terms, such as “dependency” in the US, to describe, particularly, married and single

women who are struggling to support their family due to the collapse of the traditional male breadwinner occupation under neoliberalism, and their increasing need to turn to the state for basic welfare (Fraser, 2013).

Scholarship has also explored how these economic shifts have transformed subjectivities. The theories by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991) on 'individualisation' and 'reflexive modernisation' have, in particular, been explored at some length. The central idea is that reflectivity has intensified in recent decades and altered the relationship between social structures and individual agency. It is argued that the individual has become liberated from traditional structures and constraints, such as those pertaining to gender (Giddens, 1991). The individual creates his or her own 'internal structures', independent from others, as a way to become agents of their own success. Individuals are encouraged to act like entrepreneurs where success and failure are personalised (Beck, 2000). Neoliberalism is, thus, understood as a transformation of the individual in which they perceive themselves to have agency to navigate changing economic structures, obstacles and inequalities. However, when failure is encountered it is individualised and personalised (Allen and Henry, 1997; Beck, 2000).

Scholars sometimes employ the notion of postfeminism to analyse the current patterning of discourses around gender under neoliberalism. Postfeminism is neither an historical nor theoretical break from feminist movements, but a discursive 'sensibility' of how current sense making around gender is structured (Gill, 2007a; Lewis, 2014). Gill et al. (2017) have identified three important connections between neoliberalism and postfeminism: first, individualism dominates to the extent that one is no longer perceived of as influenced or impacted by constraints from wider society; second, there are significant parallels between neoliberal ideas of autonomy and postfeminist ideas of self-transformation and reinvention, choice and agency;

third, women more than men are commanded to reshape their subjectivity to become, for instance, more 'confident'.

Two central tenets of a postfeminist sensibility used to understand the gendered patterning of discourse under neoliberalism centre on repudiation and individualisation (Gill et al., 2017). Repudiation and individualisation are often summarised in this body of work as the psychic life of gender and neoliberalism. Scharff (2015c), for instance, traces the discursive constitution of neoliberal female classical musicians while her earlier work explored how young women position themselves in regard to feminism, as something irrelevant to their life experience (2012). This repudiation of feminism is similar to how, in other workplace related studies, interviewees claim that gender inequalities no longer play a role, as way to construct the workplace as gender neutral (Kelan, 2009a). This contributes to a phenomenon whereby men and women are increasingly unable or unwilling to articulate how gender might shape their experience (Gill, 2014; Kelan, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Prior research has presumed that constructing the workplace as gender equal is a mechanism to defend against the possibility that one might encounter daily inequalities, which challenges the neoliberal idea of the agentic subject (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010).

The second and related tenet of those studies centres on individualisation as the idea that the individual is in charge of their own life. It is regularly pointed out that traditional markers of gender inequality, such as the gender pay gap, have not disappeared but subjects rationalise those differences as simply due to individual aspects rather than structural issues (Gill, 2002; Kelan, 2008). Scharff (2015c) identifies how the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject turns competition "inwards" (p.2), through a discursive focus on individualisation in which discriminatory and broader impediments to career progression by women are individualised

and perceived of as their responsibility. Such research has also suggested that the desire for self-improvement, as a way to feel liberated, empowered and autonomous, is dominant in neoliberalism as it glosses over the gender inequalities that continue to exist (Gill, 2014; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2007, 2009, 2015; Scharff, 2015a). Women were also found to express disdain for other women who they considered lazy, and as Scharff (2015c) suggests, were, thus, used as a way to direct blame on others for the insecure nature of work in the sector. Rather than acknowledging unfair structures as impediments to individuals, this implies that individuals just have to make themselves useful and, if they fail to do so, they only have themselves to blame. This suggests that those individuals who do not 'get on' and 'make it' are to blame for their own failure.

However, questions remain regarding *why* women individualise and repudiate gender inequalities. Such questions require scholars to move beyond 'what is said' to understand the deeper motivations of individuals. Psychosocial studies provide a compelling approach for scholars wishing to explore the relationship between the psychic life of women at the subject-level, and broader neoliberal discourses, and the way in which anxiety is managed in the workplace. The work of Melanie Klein (1946) is particularly relevant in beginning to address some of these questions. Klein identifies two key processes. Firstly, 'splitting' occurs when objects are psychically split into 'good' and 'bad' parts, as a way to defend oneself from anxiety. Whilst the former is perceived as carrying potential harm and, thus, felt as persecutory, the latter is idealised and introjected in order to shield it from the threat of the bad object. The splitting of objects into persecutory and idealised fragments provides temporary relief from anxiety. However, if overused, splitting can distort one's reality and decrease one's capacity to engage directly with, and resolve, the source of this anxiety. In addition, the fear of reprisal by the bad object and the introjection of the idealised object in order to preserve it from further threat, come

to be felt of as a loss, which can trigger incessant self-directed anger, and the spiralling of further internal threats, anxiety and anguish. Secondly, whilst splitting enables the individual to distort and deny reality, 'blaming' enables splitting to continue and often follows it. Blaming is an unconscious self-deception process involving the projection of undesirable aspects, and their mistaken attribution onto others, by imagining them as threatening. Thus, blaming enables an individual or group to be framed as 'the' culprit for undermining one's idealisation.

Splitting and blaming are useful processes to begin explaining the emergence of defensiveness at the subject-level, as expressed through the incapacity of the individual to challenge inequalities within organisations. Psychosocial scholars appreciate how defensive positions are unconsciously reproduced and their deceptive quality, as they prevent uncomfortable ideas from entering into the consciousness and threatening one's idealisations. In denying inequalities, women may be responding to anxiety evoked from neoliberal-inequalities by splitting off the bad aspects of the workplace, and projecting and apportioning blame onto others. This could be one of the reasons why women deny their own challenges and those of others by investing in irrational idealisations regarding the neoliberal workplace as fair.

Much of the literature on women in accounting and finance, in particular, appears complicit rather than critical of how they are positioned in a neoliberal sector *par excellence*. Existing scholarship on women explores their horizontal segregation from the profession and the historical feminist campaigns to remove barriers to their access (Cooper, 2010; Crompton and Sanderson, 1990; Kirkham and Loft, 1993; Mckeen and Richardson, 1998; Shackleton, 1999; Walker, 2003a, 2003b). A second body of scholarship regards the vertical segregation experienced by women once within the sector (Boyer and England, 2008; Ciancanelli et al., 1990; Cooper, 2008; Jeacle, 2011; Kirkham, 1992; Lehman, 1992; Walby, 1988; Walker, 2011;

Wescott and Seiler, 1986). This body of research focuses on the way in which masculine norms permeate the structure and culture of organisations in the sector (Broadbent, 1998; Hull and Umansky, 1997; Jeacle, 2008), and the adverse implications of this on the experiences and progression of women (Adapa et al., 2016; Almer et al., 2012; Dambrin and Lambert, 2008; Grey, 1998; Hull and Umansky, 1997; Joyce and Walker, 2015; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010; Lupu, 2012; Maupin and Lehman, 1994; Mueller et al., 2011; Qental and Kelan, 2015). A third body of work explores gendered embodiment in the profession, for instance, the transformation of masculinity in the sector in parallel with broader economic shifts (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; McDowell, 1997) and how women attempt to hide perceived negative aspects of femininity whilst displaying masculine behaviours (Haynes, 2012).

Current scholarship in accounting and finance, thus, broadly tends to explore unquestionably issues regarding, for instance, whether women opt in or out of work-life balance initiatives, or prevalent perceptions of them as 'less confident' in comparison to men in the workplace. The literature on gender in the finance and accounting sector, therefore, side-steps more profound questions regarding, firstly, the relationship between contemporary neoliberal socio-economic rationales, and how these interconnect with subjectivities and, secondly, how these macro processes carve out the texture of neoliberal life, shaping how subjects live and feel in the workplace. In doing so, the literature appears somewhat trapped within a neoliberal paradigm (Kokot, 2015), unable to step outside the structures that reproduce and re-entrench gender inequalities in organisations.

Rather than looking at the scarcity of women in leadership roles, a key priority for scholars should be to explore the psychic life of women in neoliberal workplaces to understand *why* such positions emerge. Postfeminist research has explored the interconnections between

neoliberalism and gender, and this has more recently been taken up in organisation studies (Cullen and Murphy, 2017; Gill, 2007b; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2011). This scholarship draws on discourse analytic approaches to identify the shared sense making tools drawn on by women, such as repudiation and individualisation (Gill, 2009; Scharff, 2015b). This work could be extended by engaging more closely with psychosocial ideas and approaches to understand the reasons *why* women, for instance, deny and blame others for broader neoliberal inequalities. The work of Melanie Klein (1946) concerning splitting and blaming would be a particularly useful theory for scholars wishing to move beyond the discursive plane to understand the psychosocial processes at the subject-level that are evoked through neoliberalism (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014; Menzies, 1960). This would contribute to both our understanding of neoliberalism and psychosocial studies in organisations (Fotaki, 2013; Kenny, 2012; Vachhani, 2012). Women in executive roles are especially interesting to study as, whilst experiencing the workplace in uniquely gendered ways, they have also been successful in the neoliberal system and, therefore, may express specific processes in the defense of neoliberal ideals. The aim of this article is, therefore, to explore how neoliberalism is managed at the subject-level by women in executive roles drawing on psychosocial ideas and approaches.

### **Methodology and methods**

As the aim of the article is to explore the psychic life of women executives under neoliberalism in accounting and finance – a neoliberal profession *par excellence* – we wanted to develop an approach that would enable us to identify not only important discursive formations within accounts but also move beyond them to understand the reasons *why* these patterns emerged in talk. This called for an integration of psychoanalysis and discourse analysis. However, previous attempts at an imbrication of psychoanalysis and discourse analysis have been fraught with intense exchanges between the two intellectual camps (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005a, 2005b;

Spears, 2005; Wetherell, 2005). It is impossible to capture the scope of these debates in this relatively short section, but they centre on psychoanalytical critiques of discourse analysis as deterministic for its continued disregard of internal processes and, in particular, for ignoring the reasons *why* individuals become invested in certain discursive positions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000b), which we outline in the following against the backdrop of the empirical data collection.

Discourse theorists, however, take something of an agnostic view of the 'psyche', and suggest that, if there is one, it is more porous than suggested by psychoanalysts, and forged through discursive and cultural resources rather than emanating from a separate 'realm' within the individual (Wetherell, 2003a, 2003b). They remain skeptical of psychoanalysis which they believe risks individualising and pathologising participants (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Midgley, 2006; Parker, 1997a, 1997b). These criticisms came to a head in a set of heated exchanges between Hollway and Jefferson (2005a, 2005b) and Wetherell (2005) and Spears (2005), regarding their study of unresolved internal conflicts in the case of a working-class man named Vince. Hollway and Jefferson (2005a, 2005b) suggest that Vince became ill as a way to resolve the conflict between his fear of losing a job, which he greatly disliked, and fulfilling his duty as head of the household. Spears (2005) criticised the study for its pathologisation of Vince, as it presents his psyche as the source and destination of his actions. Wetherell (2005) criticises the study for understanding Vince through 'internal conflicts', when external factors, such as the pressure to narrate a coherent self to multiple groups and individuals in his life, would have clearly taken its toll on his health.

Despite these disagreements, there is much congruence between discourse analysis and psychoanalysis than is perhaps acknowledged, including a similar conceptualisation of the

subject as fragmented and dynamic, and a common concern with how they are constructed through discourse and in relation to others. Thus, the use of psychoanalysis, or at least in part, with discourse analysis is not out of the question (Wetherell, 2013). Psychosocial scholars have been at the forefront of this imbrication, particularly with their interest in studying emotional investments. Emotional investments raise new and interesting questions for discourse analysts regarding *why* individuals become invested in particular discursive positions. Although discourse analysts have largely ignored ideas regarding emotional investments, Margaret Wetherell has made a number of attempts to explore how they could be investigated (Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell, 2003a). Perhaps her most serious and sympathetic engagement with psychosocial ideas was in her analysis of the ‘interests’ of Jade, a reality TV contestant, in which Wetherell (2007) traces a number of up/down subject investments accomplished across stretches of interaction that echo past practices, and provide insight into aspects of power and pleasure between Jade and other actors.

This raised important questions for us regarding how we could begin to understand the emotional investments of executive women under neoliberalism whilst remaining sensitive to the aforementioned concerns raised by discourse theorists. With this in mind, we designed an *eclectic approach* to study not just the discursive tools present in the accounts given by our participants and how they resonated with their neoliberal context, but also the role of emotional investments at the subject-level, which would help us to explain *why* individuals become embedded within particular discursive positions. This meant: firstly, identifying the ‘shared’ ways in which subjects sensed and made sense of the workplace using interpretative repertoires from across individual accounts; secondly, whilst ‘shifting back’ or ‘tapering in’ to consider the *shape* of individual cases using a psychoanalytically inflected discourse analytic approach; and finally, attempting to connect both the ‘shared’ and individual cases to their wider,

neoliberal context. We draw on the term discourse primarily in reference to the ‘interpretative repertoire’. The interpretative repertoire is a discourse analytic tool used to represent the broader building blocks in talk, such as lexicons, metaphors, images and figures of speech, which individuals draw on in the characterisation or evaluation of actions and events (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988). This approach extends the work of scholars such as Gill (2009) and Scharff (2008, 2011, 2012, 2015c) who explore the psychic life of individuals by connecting the building blocks of sense making with their broader neoliberal discourses. However, our ground-up, ‘holistic’ psychosocial approach enriches this work by studying the processes at the subject-level, whilst simultaneously connecting them to the broader sense making tools drawn on by individuals, and how these, in turn, resonate with their neoliberal context. We wanted to explore this as it would allow us to understand not only the shared discourses drawn on by subjects and their relationship with neoliberalism, but also how positions are enhanced or secured through the take up of certain positions (Frosh, 1999; Frosh et al., 2003; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000b; Parker, 1997a).

To support our approach, we decided to draw on psychosocial methods and, in particular, the significant methodological contributions made by Hollway (2010, 2013, 2015, 2016), Hollway and Jefferson (1997, 2000a, 2000c, 2009), and Walkerdine (2007, 2008). Psychosocial methods are apt at capturing the complexity of emotions and experiences of people (Frosh, 2010; Glynos, 2010; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Walkerdine, 2005; Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012) but are rarely employed in organisational studies (Cox and Nkomo, 1990; Fotaki, 2013; Kenny and Fotaki, 2014; Stavrakakis, 2008). However, the focus of psychosocial methods on understanding biographical information and interrelations, as embedded in socially shared meanings and interactions, supported our investigation on how subjects make sense discursively of their experiences, *past* and *present*, as well as identifying processes at play in

talk. We chose psychosocial methods rather than traditional qualitative research methods, as psychosocial scholars have been critical of how interviews are typically carried by researchers. In particular, they have been critical of how the proscriptive, ‘question-and-answer’ form, sets the tone of who is in charge, what can or cannot be said, and overall, works to suppress the voice of the participant. This approach also assumes that the questions and words of the interviewer are understood in exactly the same way as the participant (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000b, 2008). Psychosocial scholars are more concerned with conducting interviews that provide maximum scope for participants to raise pertinent issues and challenges, which enables them to identify contradictions and defensive positions in talk, and how these are affectively bound together (Walkerdine, 2007).

We drew on some of the principles of the Free Association Interview (‘FANI’) or ‘participant-led’ interview, as espoused by Hollway and Jefferson (2000b, 2008). The FANI method was designed based on the ideas of Freud and seeks to identify unconscious pathways structuring discourse, rather than just analysing associations between individual words or word-clusters, which psychosocial scholars claim reflect emotional and unintentional motivations (Strømme et al., 2010). Firstly, we developed interview questions that were as open-ended as possible. This was done to give the participant as much flexibility as possible to raise pertinent stories, events or issues regarding their experiences at work. We felt that if questions were too specific then this would undoubtedly impose on the responses of the participants, potentially generating ‘narrow’ and affectively ‘shallow’ or ‘thin’ answers. The broad questions would, therefore, provide ample opportunity for contradictions to emerge during an account. Secondly, we also avoided using, as much as possible, ‘why’ questions, as psychosocial scholars argue that these can evoke anxiety in respondents and the over-intellectualisation in the answers given. We wanted to understand defensive positions relationally rather than as a subject who simply

resists exploring our questioning. This would give time for the subject to explore the themes and space for new ideas and, moreover, psychosocial processes to emerge in talk (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000a, 2009). Thirdly, we also resisted the temptation to intervene or disrupt the participant, whilst they were giving an account of themselves. This meant giving the participant as much time as possible to come to the end of their account and allowing for gaps or silences to take shape in talk, rather than, for instance, trying to fill in awkward silences. We also noted down any pertinent points on a notebook during the course of the interview to come back to and discuss with the participant. This also enabled us to capture the words, phrases and imagery employed by participants, which could then be used to form further probing questions. Fourthly, we also withheld from interpreting the accounts as the participants gave them. This was crucial so not to close off new stories, events or ideas, which may later on, during the data interpretation stage, provide further insight into the psychic life of subjects. Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

We developed a three-level framework of data interpretation. Although we structured the framework into three levels, this was not with the intention of self-imposing a proscriptive check-list of items to analyse, but rather to create a rhythm to the process of data interpretation and ensure, ultimately, that important aspects were not overlooked. Firstly, in the surface analysis, we read the transcriptions and listened back to the interviews with the aim of breaking down the information into analysable chunks. These data-parts contained whole or sections of the interpretative repertoires drawn on by participants and, therefore, reflected key themes, stories and sub-plots. We were particularly interested in understanding how participants drew on what we termed, 'heightened imagery', including metaphors and analogies, to symbolise their psychic lives. We used an online tool called Dedoose to break down the data and interrogate it. At this point, we followed a typical iterative qualitative approach of assigning

different parts of an interview transcript one or more codes, such as “frustration”, “fear”, and “anger”, and then developing new codes and collapsing old codes into new ones. These codes corresponded to categories, such as “vulnerability”, “individualism” or “personal choice”.

The second level of interpretation involved the analysis of sub-textual interactions, particularly the identification of associations to others, and the affective tenor evoked in these accounts. We were, therefore, concerned with identifying how relations with others were discursively constructed, the affective significance of relations, and how these associations connected, disconnected or diverted accounts tropologically. At this point, we became particularly attuned to the presence and implications of psychosocial processes. To initiate the excavation of such processes, we would pose ourselves questions, such as: ‘Who is being spoken to or about by the participant?’ ‘What are the implications of this on the identity construction of others, for instance, could these constructions be perceived as ‘grossly’ detrimental in some way?’ ‘How did [we] feel at that moment e.g. did [we] feel uncomfortable with what was being said?’ and ‘How did this position compare to others in the accounts given by participants e.g. did the position feel disproportionate in any way or ‘out of the blue’?’ We were also aware at this stage that breaking down complex and rich data into analysable chunks and the application of codes and categories ran the risk of decontextualising accounts and presenting a static, unitary view of subjects. We drew, therefore, on some of the principles of ‘Gestalt’, German for shape, outline or figure, as a way to move back and conceptualise the shape of individual accounts of participants, and the importance of inter-relational ties tropologically. We employed Pen Portraits, similar to Hollway and Jefferson (2000c), a one page A4 detailed description and analysis of the interview with each participant, which enabled us to create a sense of ‘fragmentary wholeness’ and agency, whilst keeping in mind the shared contours of accounts given by participants. The central aim of the Pen Portrait was to enable us to trace, firstly,

constellations of positions through whole accounts and, secondly, contradictory oscillations from different positions within accounts. This included identifying moments when participants trailed off the question posed, and how perhaps returning to a consistent idea or theme might reflect the central preoccupation of the participant. The Pen Portraits were, therefore, an important technique for us in creating rich interpretations of our encounters with participants.

Thirdly and finally, we were concerned with understanding the ‘harmonics of the relationships’ that were established with the participant during the course of the interview. Broadly speaking, the researcher paid significant attention to their own feelings during the interview and contemplated these afterwards in the writing up of field notes. Moments of uncomfortableness, boredom or nervousness prompted the researchers to contemplate whether these affects indicated examples of, for instance, projections from the participant. In exploring the psychic lives of women in accounting and finance, we were not interested in producing an “ivory-tower” critique but one which we are distinctly aware of as academics researching in a highly neoliberalised academy (Gill, 2015). The first author, for instance, is a new-scholar who, due to university and journal rankings, must publish in prescribed journals before even securing an academic position. This reflects the increasing precarity and precariousness of academic work, and in the case of the first author, a resignation by universities of their responsibility to develop junior scholars. However, we believe that by understanding neoliberalism and how it shapes subjectivities, we can begin to understand how it can be challenged discursively and politically.

The study formed part of a wider project examining the career histories of 66 women and men financiers and accountants in the UK working in executive and non-executive roles. We defined executives as those men and women with a minimum of fifteen to twenty years of experience in the finance and accounting sectors, holding *Heads of*, partner or leadership

positions in their respective organisations. Non-executives were defined as those who typically held upper and middle management positions. We have decided to focus on the accounts of 36 women in this paper, as we believed that there is an ethical responsibility for scholars to explore the experiences of neoliberalism in the workplace. We concentrate on the accounts of the executive women as they have presumably ‘made it’ within the neoliberal structure, and are, thus, more invested in neoliberal discourses. Their relative success also puts them at a unique position in terms of managing anxieties. While we draw on executive women in this article, we compared their positions carefully to those of non-executive women and found that they express different processes in the management of their anxieties which are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article. The vast majority of our participants were white and European. We had decided to focus on gender rather than ethnicity but had not actively avoided other identity categories.

### **Managing neoliberalism: Splitting and blaming**

In the following empirical sections, we show how two interdependent processes of ‘splitting’ and ‘blaming’ underpin the accounts given by women, and express how women manage threats to idealisations of the neoliberal workplace. In the first section, we explore how mistreatment and discrimination were managed through splitting. We show how women maintained an ideal of the workplace as fair and, thus, repudiated gender inequality, by splitting off the undesirable elements of the workplace, as a way to shield it from further attack by the bad object. Rather than recognising instances of discrimination for what they were, executive women rationalised and individualised experiences as their own making. In the second section, we explore how blaming enables the continuation of splitting. Executive women blamed less successful women for threatening the idealisation of the neoliberal workplace as fair and, thus, individualised failure as something to overcome by the individual. Blaming, therefore, enables senior women

to frame others for their own circumstances and displace their own anxiety-laden memories, pertaining to past experiences in the neoliberal workplace.

### *Splitting*

The first process we identified was splitting whereby women split off and, in some cases, individualised the challenging moments they had experienced during their careers in order to shield neoliberal idealisations of the workplace as fair, regardless of one's gender identity. We found that many of the accounts given by women touched upon moments which had adversely impacted their career progression, for instance, moments when men had, for little reason, made promotion before they had, received higher pay or bonuses, or had been given career enhancing opportunities and projects before them. Although they recognised these challenges, they did not frame them as 'gender discrimination'. Instead, they spoke passionately about how they had single-handedly fought for the same opportunities as their male counterparts. In this section, we explore how women managed the anxiety evoked from unfair treatment by splitting it off. Splitting enables executive women to continue idealising the 'good' aspects of the neoliberal ideal as fair, providing one works hard and perseveres. However, in splitting, the 'good' object is introjected to preserve the ideal but the loss sets off blame towards the self for the external inequalities that they have experienced. Splitting enables reality to be distorted, providing temporary relief from anxieties evoked from past experiences, and maintains the idealisation of the neoliberal workplace as fair by repudiating gender inequality.

Jane is an executive in her 50s in a mid-tier accounting firm. She describes how she had recently given in her notice, as she had been offered a new role at a different organisation. However, expecting support from her long-standing colleagues, she emotionally describes the

‘destruction’ of these relationships with partners and her mistreatment:

**Jane (Executive):** You build trust and they’re destroyed because I’ve said to them, ‘I kinda don’t wanna work here anymore for all of these reasons, I’ve been given this great opportunity, it’s a no-brainer’ and surely they all understand that?’. The ‘tone’ of the correspondence changes and you suddenly feel like, ‘oh my gosh, I thought these people were kinda people that I’d been in partnership with, and had a relationship with, and suddenly all the s\*\*\*’s gonna and they don’t treat you like a human being, ‘you’re a leaver, out the door!’

Jane confided in the interviewer that she felt deeply uncomfortable being in the office that day, and had, consequently, organised other meetings at outside venues. She explained that there was one particular male colleague who made her nervous, and had been aggressive towards her on several occasions, despite her attempts to address his behaviour:

**Jane (Executive):** I actually don't feel comfortable. I've arranged for all my meetings to be off site so I don't have to see anybody today. There are one or two people who I've observed behaving in a way that I don't feel comfortable about but sadly in the last 18 months, I would prefer not to interact with them further. I find it quite hard when you've checked a behaviour, and somebody doesn't respond to maintain a normal relationship.

**Interviewer** What was that behaviour? Do you mind me asking?

**Jane (Executive):** There are certain ways of doing things and certain people who are direct and people who find a softer way to deal with stuff. If you’re direct and it’s a little bit malicious, goading, and a bit, dare I say it, bullying, pushy, that’s not right,

and I've been in meetings where [pause] I've felt so backed into a corner I've had no way out but to sort of act like a child, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' that sort of behavior, when you move from that from adult to adult conversation, and you get into that parent-child dynamic, and I don't mean petulant child, but where somebody's sort of 'tell, tell, tell', so the child's sort of in fear. It's those kind of behaviours that unfortunately have been, not all the time, don't get me wrong, but incidents of them have happened, and it happens in every organisation, not just here, but when you give somebody an opportunity because you tell them 'actually, in that scenario, you made me feel really uncomfortable and it wasn't appropriate, and I wonder if in future we can find a different way', and then it happens again, you have to wonder whether you're in business with the right people. There are pockets within it where those behaviours are evident, but then, I dare say, they are across the road and that's not a firm brand, that's a person and you can't change people, if that's how they are then that's how they'll be.

The distressing interaction with her colleague was significant enough to evoke a "parent-child dynamic" between the two in which Jane felt fearful and forced into an apology. Jane draws on heightened imagery to represent the dynamic as being "backed into a corner" and "with no way out", which evokes senses of suffocation, immovability and silencing. Drawing on the work of Klein, Jane splits off the gendered aspects of the interaction, which enables her to rationalise instances of mistreatment, such as aggressive male colleagues, as the characteristic of "people", the individual, or as something that one can find in any organisation. The implication of this is that it disassociates aggressive behaviors from men and as something that one perhaps 'has to put up with' in any organisation, which reconfigures the workplace as gender-neutral. However, what Jane fails to realise is how such behaviours in the workplace privilege aggressive, competitive and individualistic attributes, whilst rendering other forms of

expression, such as softer, 'feminine' forms, inappropriate at work. Despite the aggressive behaviours of her male colleagues, splitting enables Jane to continue idealising the workplace as fair in which instances of mistreatment by male colleagues are reconfigured as something that can affect anyone and, therefore, have to be managed by the individual.

Judy, an executive in her late 40s in an international investment bank, explained how she had never been discriminated against during her career:

**Interviewer:** What are the key moments that have shaped your career? What has helped or held you back?

**Judy (Executive):** I come from a non-hierarchical approach to life, so everybody has the ability to get on and succeed if they're determined enough, and they work hard and they've got the fundamental ability. I don't have any issues about, 'oh I shouldn't be able to do x, y and z because I'm female', or 'I didn't go to the right school'. I think we have a very 'can-do' attitude and you just roll your sleeves up and you get on with it. I think actually working for my previous boss was very good because he didn't care whether you were male or female - as long as you could do the job, that was all he cared about. I don't feel that I have been discriminated against at any point because I'm a woman. What is very challenging is actually having a successful career and balancing family life. I don't think that is an easy fit that is the issue that continues to be an issue for everybody. If you want to have children and you want to do well, there are aspects [pause] that don't sit very comfortably with a very demanding job that requires a lot of hours and a lot of focus. That is actually the challenge for us as a society, as a whole to work out, and I'm not totally convinced you can. The reality is being a mum is a

full-time job; having a career in finance is a full-time job and you are basically trying to bash two things together, and so there's an element of compromise.

Judy responds to the broad, opening interview question by describing herself as “non-hierarchical” and believes “everybody has the ability to get on and succeed”, providing they are “determined” and “work hard enough”. She explains that she has never been discriminated against as a woman, as she has never doubted herself and has a “can-do” attitude to work, ‘rolling up her sleeves’ and ‘getting on’ with the job at hand. However, the account shifts, as Judy states that balancing a successful, corporate career in the finance sector with domestic responsibilities is challenging. From a Kleinian perspective, Judy splits off the gendered aspects of this challenge, and rationalises it as “an issue for everybody”, which disassociates the problem from women. Despite vehemently denying that she had never experienced discrimination, she accounts for the challenges of work-life balance by splitting off the idea that women in particular bear this challenge. This splitting enables Judy to continue shielding neoliberal ideas of the workplace as fair, as long as one ‘works hard’, ‘rolls up their sleeves’, and has a ‘can-do attitude’ towards work.

The process of splitting was often accompanied by trying to ignore things out of one’s control in the workplace. Deborah, an executive in a large multi-national investment bank, movingly recounted the fear and suffering she had endured throughout much of her career at the hands of a number of aggressive and intimidating bosses:

**Deborah (Executive):** What's held me back? I have a boss who yells and bullies and I'm a 47 year old woman, and I still break out in a sweat when I need to call my boss. It's on me for some reason that I irritate him, and I don't irritate many people, I irritate

myself and him probably the most, and my husband sometimes, but it's something I've never been able to fix. The thing that's held me back from success is, there's something in my brain about hierarchy and not being able to deal with them and that relationship as well as I deal with things that are outside of my perception of hierarchy. This boss and my boss before, I left one position and went to go work for a friend and another boss, he was the same way. I just shut down. I didn't know what to say, I didn't know what to do. It comes back from not wanting to sound stupid or make a mistake, or there's something in my psyche. I 'yes' him now, I just shut down and say, you're right. I need to solve that. You panic a little bit.

**Interviewer:** No, it's not uncommon. I had a senior woman talk about something very similar actually in her role. It's more common than you think, really, that is.

Deborah appeared on the verge of tears. The dialogue immediately evoked in the interviewer a feeling of despair for Deborah. He was surprised to find himself holding back tears to her vulnerable admission. However, the interviewer instead attempted to reassure Deborah that 'such misogynistic workplace relations were unfortunately common'. This perhaps indicates the incapacity of the first author to contain the emotions of Deborah. Psychosocial scholars, such as Hollway (2012, 2011, 2016), suggest that it is better to reflect the reality of an emotional experience of a participant rather than, for instance, attempting to reassure them. It would have been better from a psychosocial perspective, if the first author had, for instance, responded by shedding a tear, which reflected how he actually felt in that moment, or with words to the effect, 'that is terrible, you must feel awful or trapped in that situation'. This would have demonstrated a greater sense of emotional containment (Bion, 1983) than the attempt by the interviewer to generalise and even, perhaps, indirectly reduce the experience, as a way of managing the anxiety evoked in him.

This raised questions for us later regarding the ‘need’ of the interviewer to stop himself from crying and reassure Deborah, and what this might indicate about her psychic life. The interviewer had felt aspects of the sadness and despair of Deborah. He had felt fearful, even paranoid, exploring the sensitive and moving issue of bullying, as if they ‘were doing something wrong’, ‘in danger of being found out’ or even ‘being listened into’. The deep senses of anxiety felt by the interviewer alerted us to the presence of deeper psychosocial processes in this part of the account given by Deborah. Although Deborah attempted initially to counter aggression from her bosses by ‘shouting back’ or ‘getting angry’, she explains how she now just appeases by ‘shutting down’ or ‘yessing’ them. Despite recognizing her boss as a bully and aggressive, Deborah splits off the idea that this could have adversely impacted her career progression. In the process of splitting off the bad experiences, Deborah moves to blame herself for the actions of her bosses, as she explains, “it’s on me for some reason that I irritate him”, and that “there is something in [her] brain about hierarchy”, which she believes has held back her career. This splitting off is used as a way of managing the anxiety evoked from a situation in which Deborah finds herself bullied by a senior colleague at work, and the reality that this toxic dynamic may have adversely impacted her career progression. The emotional dialogue between Deborah and the interviewer pointed us towards deeper psychosocial processes in which Deborah splits off the bad aspects of the workplace, and introjects the ‘good’ aspects of the neoliberal object, as a way to maintain ideals of agency and self-change.

Sharon, an executive in her 50s at a mid-tier accounting firm, explained how mentoring and coaching were important to successful careers. However, before receiving coaching to support her promotion to executive level, Sharon described her frustration with the slow progression of her career, despite working hard, doing a good job, and generating good fees for the firm:

**Sharon (Executive):** I was Director, I worked for somebody who wanted it all, he didn't want to share anything. If I got a fee, he was very frustrated and it was a really bad working relationship, I wanted to get out of that, which is why I changed roles. I was kind of bored with thinking the way I was. I think before the coaching I was saying, 'well, I know I can do it.' 'But, do what?' 'Where is your added-value?' 'What is really going to make you stand out, so that if you have a situation that perhaps is not going to plan, how do you deal with that?' There are lots of things I did on the way that had a leadership characteristic, but over the last few years, I am the leader of lots of things, it gives me the confidence to challenge and it becomes like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Sharon begins her account with a brief explanation of a "really bad working relationship" with a male superior at work, who she constructs as egocentric and unsupportive. She found the relationship frustrating to the extent that she changed roles. However, the account shifts and Sharon instead explains how, before being coached, she was not cognisant of how she could 'add value' and "stand out" in her role in order to move up to executive level. Drawing on the ideas of Klein, Sharon splits off the distressing relationship she had with a male partner by individualising her challenges to career progression. The process of individualisation and its discursive rationalisation as 'adding value', 'confidence' and 'standing out', enable Sharon to continue idealising neoliberal perceptions of the workplace as entrepreneurial in which one is conceptualised as agentic and willing to transform their subjectivity. Neoliberal expressions such as 'adding value' resonate with demands under neoliberalism to be constantly productive and working on the self, as a project that must always be rationalized and improved.

In this section, we have explored how women managed anxiety through splitting and repudiating gender inequalities. We suggested that women deal with negative experiences at work by splitting off the anxiety associated with unfair treatment. This enabled executive women to maintain idealisations of the neoliberal workplace as fair, providing one is entrepreneurial and willing to transform their subjectivity to comply with neoliberal organisational demands. This enables broader external factors to be sensed as 'good' and as an opportunity to ensure that such negative experiences are managed in constructive ways that align with neoliberal idealisations of the workplace. Temporary relief from anxiety is achieved through senses of the self as agentic within idealisations of the workplace as fair, as long as one works on the self and perseveres through challenges. In the next section, we explore the second process we identified in which successful women blame other women for their lack of success.

### *Blaming*

Executive women often engaged in individualising the experiences of others by blaming less successful women for gender parity at senior levels in organisations. In this section, we explore how through the continuation of splitting, executive women blame other women as 'victims' for failing to embody the neoliberal ideal, which renders them individually at fault for their lack of success. Blaming enables executive women to displace their own experiences of mistreatment and individualised 'failures' by projecting them onto other women. This provides temporary relief from their own anxiety-laden memories through maintaining the 'good' aspect of the neoliberal ideal. The implication of this is that executive women collude in processes of inequality by splitting off the bad-part object and blaming indirectly less successful women for their own experiences of broader structural inequalities. Splitting and blaming, like repudiation and individualisation, are not independent processes

but blaming entails splitting. When undesirable elements of the workplace are split off, individuals may look for a culprit to blame for this.

We drew on the account of Jane in the previous section to explore how she split off the anxiety evoked from her experiences of working with aggressive male colleagues. In the following extract, we show how Jane continues the process of splitting, and how this enables her to blame less successful women:

**Interviewer:** I think a lot of the women particularly have felt quite lonely.

**Jane (Executive):** There aren't any role models. It is a lonely thing because you feel things [and] you don't always want to talk about what you're feeling because they might say, 'get over it'. It's not 'I'm a victim' but there's a lot of this is 'being done to me' or 'I'm a woman and I'm being treated differently' but just take yourself out of that space and think, 'I am here on merit, I'm good at what I do'. You can cut out the worrying and this feeling lonely disappears but you've got to be self-assured and a lot of the women I've worked for might come across as confident, some of them are like, 'god, you wouldn't mess with her', but inside they're a bit self-doubting. Unless you've got evidence that shows that you've had to work harder, you're probably putting that on yourself and loads of women put pressure on themselves to try and be something absolutely superb. The same as it is for the chap coming through. I've trialled this a bit at work because I feel like I've got to be super mum and super business women, and I stopped. Who is telling me that I have to be those things? Who? Nobody. We put the pressure on ourselves. Youngsters do it too; I see them coming through.

In the extract, Jane acknowledges the loneliness she had felt during her career due the lack of

female role models in whom she could confide. However, the interviewer felt uncomfortable when Jane suddenly changed her position, and contradictorily began suggesting that women who vocalize their challenges are somehow playing the victim. Klein may suggest that such a significant shift indicates a defense against painful experiences. Jane appears to split off the importance of affective embodiment at work, and attempts to render this irrational, as she suggests that women are 'playing up' to their bad experiences at work. Jane suggests that through reassuring oneself, women are able to forget any preoccupations or feelings of loneliness at work. Splitting in the extract enables Jane to continue idealising the neoliberal workplace, which constructs others as agentic, entrepreneurial individuals, who are, therefore, responsible for managing their irrational feelings and having greater confidence in their own abilities.

Stella, an executive in her late 40s in a big four accounting firm, also appeared to blame less successful women for the continued under-representation of women in the sector:

**Stella (Executive):** I think women tend to go for their feet and move away from the profession on the basis that they can't see their career path all the way through in exactly the same way as I did, I had the view I couldn't be partner, and I've got it. I think there's a lot more to be done around enabling women to understand that they cannot have it all, but that they can have the opportunity to have a very fulfilling career on the side. But there are choices to be made and I think we need to help them in making choices.

The extract supports aspects of Kleinian ideas as, in addition to examples of splitting, Stella appears to blame other women for their lack of progress. Blame is important in the continuation of splitting and in the idealisation of aspects of the 'good' object. Less successful women at

work threaten the idealisation of organisations as fair, and therefore, in order to defend against this threat, projection enables senior women to blame others for their own circumstances and remain detached from reality. From a Kleinian perspective, they reflect a depersonalisation of others and a denial of individual experience, which is, in turn, reinforced ironically through the use of individualistic, neoliberal tropes. Stella suggests that women who are less successful are not making the right decisions, which denies unfair structural outcomes in organisations. Distorted ideas of limitless choices at work help to position less successful women as at fault rather than an organisation.

In the previous section, we explored how Judy split off the gendered aspects of work-life balance in order to idealise success at work as achieved through perseverance. In the extract below, we identified how splitting enabled Judy to continue defending neoliberal ideals regarding the workplace as fair, providing one perseveres, by blaming less successful women for their challenges:

**Judy (Executive):** I think it matters how you present yourself, full stop. When you're dealing with people, people take on board how you look, sound, and then they listen to what you're saying. I think your own personal presentation is important in terms of how you come across, and how authentic people think you are. If you want to be successful, being authentic is very important, and you need always to give people a sense of who you are and how you are to deal with.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about what you mean by 'authentic'?

**Judy (Executive):** I think people aren't very comfortable dealing with people that they don't have a good sense of. If you look at the qualities that people always rate highly, they want to be able to trust who they're dealing with. It's all about making it easier for

people to be able to do things with you and then ultimately, it helps you to be more successful because people are comfortable, they know what you are really like as a person and everybody can be more successful. Today, jobs are all about groups of people working together to do stuff, so it's all a bit animal and herd behaviour isn't it? We all need to feel that we know what the rules are because we're all working to a set of sort of norms.

Judy forthrightly states that 'it does matter how 'you' present yourself at work'. Judy splits off the gendered aspects to challenges as a way to construct them as 'personal' and, therefore, the fault of the individual. The implication of this is that women are not disadvantaged in the workplace as of their gender identity, but due to their incapacity to demonstrate desired qualities to achieve success at work. Judy draws on the word "authentic" which resonates with neoliberal ideals of individuality and expression. However, the definition offered by Judy is highly contradictory as, whilst saying that one must be 'authentic', she always suggests that authenticity is about being easy to read by another, and that everyone must 'work to a set of norms' to be successful. However, Judy does not recognise how these 'norms' are deeply gendered and privilege masculine expressions in the workplace.

In the previous section, we drew on the account given by Sharon to explore how she split off the distressing working-relationship she had with a senior man by individualising the career progression challenges she faced. In the following extract, we draw again on a later part of the account given by Sharon to elucidate how executive women blamed inequality on less successful women by drawing on gender-neutral discourses:

**Sharon (Executive):** It's about presenting yourself as appropriately as you can. I used

to think many years ago that to become a partner you needed to be like a man, I mean there still are not many women partners. There also was a number of people who were very sort of ‘girly girl and giggly’ and I don’t think that went down brilliantly. It’s about being professional and if you happen to be a woman and you’re professional, that’s fine. I’m often asked ‘how is it to be a woman in a man’s world?’ because very often meetings are just men, I mean that’s the way it is, you know and it’s learning to deal with different sorts of people. There are men who present themselves very aggressively and very chauvinistically, and that is just behaving inappropriately and they happen to be men, I think it is behaving according to circumstance. Many could do better and it is back to coaching and mentoring and not making excuses because there are many of us who just made it work rather than saying, ‘oh there is this ceiling there and that is my excuse’. It is getting beyond the excuses. I think it is more likely to happen to women and women are more likely to make excuses for the situation and that becomes perpetual.

The experience of women in the workplace is associated with the idea of not fitting-in and the need to take on attributes that are perceived as less feminine and, therefore, more aligned to masculine norms, such as wearing a suit, tying one’s hair tightly back, or behaving aggressively (Fotaki, 2013). This extract by Sharon shows how women in accounting and finance attempt to present success and getting-on in the workplace as presenting oneself as “appropriately” and professionally as one can. From a Kleinian perspective, Sharon’s story reflects a splitting off of the gendered aspects of body and work, such as being “girly girl and giggly”, and rationalising these attributes as unprofessional and inappropriate at work. The implication of this splitting is the shielding of neoliberal ideals of the workplace as fair regardless of one’s gender, providing one is “professional”. This enables Sharon to rationalise instances of

discrimination, for instance, aggressive male colleagues, as the characteristic of the individual rather than of gender discrimination, whilst blaming less successful women as making excuses up for their mistreatment. However, Sharon fails to recognise how ideas surrounding professionalism are shaped in the image of the masculine norm, and how this renders other attributes, such as ‘giggling’ and ‘girl behaviour’, inappropriate at work. Women are, therefore, drawn to perform indirect forms of masculinity through ‘professional discourses’. However, splitting enables subjects to defend and take comfort in idealisations of the workplace as gender-neutral through these ‘professional discourses’.

Cassandra, an executive in her late 40s in a global investment bank, elucidates how some of the executive women attempted to make recommendations to other women facing inequality and impediments during their career, which re-entrenched neoliberal individualistic discourses:

**Cassandra (Executive):** It’s a little bit like when you’re at this race and you need to jump a hurdle it’s every little hurdle is maybe a centimeter higher so the men have the one meter we have the one meter you know plus one, 101 centimeters, and it’s always a little bit harder, in some ways a little bit harder and you can get frustrated by that and say ‘oh my god why is my hurdle 101 and the guy’s 100’ or you can just say ‘it’s 101’ you know just train harder and keep going and you’re going to keep going and that’s it and you know it’s satisfying because when you make it to the top you know it’s like ‘wow, I’ve made it’. For a woman to be successful you just need to keep working very hard and never give up and when things don’t go well take it with humour and keep going.

Cassandra draws on the heightened imagery of a hurdle-race to represent careers

metaphorically as a track-race in which men and women compete against each other, but the hurdles that women have to jump are 'slightly' higher than those of men. The heightened imagery suggests that women have greater impediments to career success than men. However, Cassandra recommends that women should 'train' and work harder to overcome these additional barriers, and to take unfair set-backs with "humour". Psychosocial scholars may suggest that the use of such heightened imagery, such as metaphors and symbols, enable subjects to construct distressing experiences in ways that provide perspective and distance. Using such heightened imagery, Cassandra is able to rationalize her adverse experiences as 'normal' and, therefore, other women just need to accept this, and work harder. Those who do not, only have themselves to blame. Failure here is personal – you simply did not train hard enough - and the structural inequalities – indicated by the different size of hurdles – is accepted as 'the way' in the world of business (Gill et al., 2017). Rather than adjusting the height of the hurdles, women are told to jump the higher hurdles and if they do not succeed, they only have themselves to blame.

In this section, we have explored the process whereby executive women individualise gender inequality by blaming other women for their lack of success. Executive women attempt to blame less successful women for the continued underrepresentation of women at senior levels in organisations. Blaming is a form of projection through which women displace and escape their own anxiety pertaining to past experiences and 'individualised' failures onto other women. Blaming, thus, enables the continuation of splitting and the maintenance of the 'good' aspect of the neoliberal-ideal through which women emotionally invest in idealisations of success as dependent on one's hard-work, effective personal decision-making, and perseverance through challenges, regardless of one's gender identity. The implication of this is that executive women collude in justifying inequality by blaming other women for their

failures and, thus, reproducing broader neoliberal frames which position subjects as completely agentic and responsible for their outcomes, which work overall to detract from broader structural and cultural inequalities at work. Executive women, thereby, not only engage in splitting but also blame other women in doing so.

### **Concluding discussion**

In the empirical sections, we have shown how women executives unconsciously deal with the psychic consequences of neoliberalism through the intertwined processes of splitting and blaming. Despite experiencing unfair treatment and access to opportunities throughout their careers, executive women remained emotionally invested in upholding the neoliberal ideal that if one works hard, one shall be successful, regardless of gender. We suggested that splitting and blaming were responses to threats to an idealisation of the neoliberal workplace. We elucidated these processes by drawing on Kleinian ideas (1946). The findings indicate how executive women uphold neoliberal idealisations of the workplace as fair, regardless of one's gender. We extended, thereby, previous research on the psychic life which explores how neoliberalism is made sense of using shared aspects of discourse (Gill, 2009, 2015; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2011, 2015c, 2016). This body of work has identified how gender inequality is repudiated and individualised (Scharff, 2011, 2012). Our article goes beyond this by explaining *why* executive women might produce such irrational and contradictory accounts.

Splitting facilitates the defense against any suggestion that workplaces are not fair and, thus, enables women to deny the undesirable aspects of the organisation. Splitting provides, thus, reprieve from anxiety when apparent instances of discrimination and mistreatment arise in the workplace. The maintenance of the 'good object' of the neoliberal ideal involves the splitting off of the 'bad object', and the introjection of the good object as a way to shield it from further

persecution by the bad object. However, the loss of the object as a way to preserve the ideal constitutes a reflexive turn in which women direct criticism and anger towards the self. Women were, therefore, prone to repudiate pernicious external neoliberal inequalities that were out of their control such as, for instance, the inappropriate behaviours of male colleagues towards them or unfair reward structures. Splitting is, thereby, the underlying process that elucidates *why* executive women have to deny and repudiate gender inequalities: they are defending the neoliberal idealisation that they are emotionally invested in upholding (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Wetherell, 2003a).

The article also shows how executive women blame less successful women for their failure to embody neoliberal ideals. We found that executive women evoke a victim position whereby they blamed other women for their lack of success. Executive women split off undesirable elements of organisational reality and projected these onto less successful women, who came to symbolise part-objects that tore the psychic fabric of their neoliberal idealisation. Less successful women became, thus, the culprits for the anxiety-laden recollections of executive women from working within highly unfair and discriminatory neoliberal workplaces. Blaming is, therefore, important in the continuation of splitting and the idealisation of the good object. Others can threaten the idealisation and blaming enables subjects to defend against this threat by disassociating themselves from whilst blaming others for their own experiences. However, this process also shifts responsibility for change and success directly onto the individual rather than allowing any room for collective action. It is, thus, serving neoliberal ideals. Blaming is the underlying process that responds to the individualisation tendencies that prior research has explored: the individual is blamed for not taking the correct actions that would turn them into ideal neoliberal subjects. Therefore, blaming fulfills the function to individualise gender inequalities.

Rather than simply exploring the lack of women in senior roles, we have suggested that there is an ethical imperative for feminist scholars to explore the deeper ways in which women are shaped by neoliberalism. Neglecting this would leave the over-arching system unexplored, unexamined and, therefore, unchallenged. While this article has explored the psychic life of executive women in accounting and finance, further scholarship could explore, firstly, in greater detail the deeper dynamics at play in *how* women self-blame for broader structural inequalities, as a form of psychoanalytical self-reproachment, and *why* this may indicate more profoundly the loss of the neoliberal ideal. Secondly, while our focus has been on women, it should not be neglected that men also have gendered experiences that are shaped by neoliberalism. The psychic life of men, for instance, could also be traced including exploring whether they respond to anxiety evoked from neoliberalism through splitting, and what the ‘direction’ or unconscious intention is of these psychic-fissures. This article has, thus, provided a detailed analysis of how individualisation and repudiation are underpinned by the unconscious processes of splitting and blaming to uphold neoliberal idealisations of the workplace. The persistence of gender inequality can, thus, be understood as an expression of psychosocial processes: through engaging with the traditional psychoanalytical work of Melanie Klein, the article has shown how women in executive positions are invested in a broader neoliberal system, which makes it difficult for them to articulate and address gender inequalities in their work-environment.

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## **Many thanks!**

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