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“Stop whining and be a badass”: a postfeminist analysis of university students’ responses to gender themes

Students’
responses to
gender themes

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper critically examines how female students at a Finnish business school understand gender in management.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis is based on female students’ learning diaries from a basic management course.

Findings – The findings show how students respond to the topic of gender inequality through a neoliberal postfeminist discourse. The students’ discourse is structured around three discursive moves: (1) rejecting “excessive” feminism, (2) articulating self-reliant professional futures and (3) producing idealized role models through successfully integrating masculinity and femininity.

Originality/value – This article contributes to current understanding of the role of postfeminist sensibilities in shaping student participation in the management profession. Awareness of students’ responses to gender-equality initiatives offers management educators insight into the inclusion of equality topics in teaching in ways that support equal gender socialization in the management profession.

Keywords Gender, Discourse, Postfeminism, Management education, University students, Professionalization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

To summarize my opinion on gender stereotypes, I find that each party should change their behavior so that we can achieve a more equal working life between women and men. But, in my opinion, the change must definitely be initiated by women; if women are not ready to give up certain things and really work hard for their careers, then I do not think there is much we can do about this. – Sofia, management course student

This article examines how university students attending an introductory course on management and leadership at a Finnish business school perceive the role of gender in management and how they respond to gender-equality education initiatives. I focus on how students engage with “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill *et al.*, 2017) as they navigate their relation to gender and inequality. The opening quotation from Sofia echoes postfeminist sensibilities by stressing women’s responsibility for managing their careers and bridging the gender gap while disavowing the need for political action (Lewis *et al.*, 2017). Postfeminist

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discourses are particularly powerful in creating expectations about how women in contemporary society ought to approach feminism and perform their femininity.

Management education is embedded in a postfeminist climate (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010), and I anticipate this to also be a feature of Finnish business schools. Neoliberalism has shaped Finnish academia: equality is increasingly viewed through liberal and individual views (Lätti, 2017). Lätti (2017) examined Finnish universities' equality policies and found that they purport a highly liberal, individual approach to promoting women's ambition in advancing academic careers and purporting individual responsibility rhetoric while neglecting structural issues affecting women's careers. Studies from Finnish business schools evince how neoliberal requirements within the new international and market-oriented realities individuate academic work, futures and identities in ways that purport gendered effects (Lund and Tienari, 2019; Katila *et al.*, 2020).

Education has a central role in determining the discourses of gender (Brunila and Ylöstalo, 2015), yet gender issues are rarely mainstreamed in business school education (Mavin *et al.*, 2004). In Finnish business schools, teaching gender issues typically rests on women: women tend to include gender in their courses more often than men and perceive the need for increasing the amount of teaching on gender issues (Hearn *et al.*, 2011). Even though Finns consider gender equality an important value, there is a tendency toward the equality-already-achieved rhetoric (Brunila and Ylöstalo, 2015; Ylöstalo, 2019). Equality work is often resisted both in educational institutions and workplaces (Brunila and Ylöstalo, 2015), and gender-equality activities are sometimes met with irritation in practice (Ylöstalo, 2019).

Research has highlighted university students' tendency to neglect the existence of gender discrimination and its effects (Sipe *et al.*, 2016). Kelan (2014) showed that young professionals often avoid the topic of gender inequality and frame it as an issue of previous generations. Dyer and Hurd (2018) suggested that such agentic worldviews are related to students' preliminary stage of learning. I adopted a slightly different angle, seeking to explain how and with what consequences students engage with postfeminism. Postfeminism is particularly associated with young women (Showden, 2009; Ikonen, 2020). The focus of my analysis was learning diaries in which female students reflected on their learning and discussed course themes, particularly a lecture on gender issues. The study addresses how postfeminist sensibility offers significant resources to construct viable subject positions within contemporary demands (e.g. Kelan, 2014; Baker and Kelan, 2019) by enabling female students to produce personally meaningful articulations of feminism that support their professionalization in the management field. The critical approach of the study allows to make visible how management education continues to encompass gendered norms and expectations. The study also shows how engaging with postfeminist sensibility has powerful effects that can contribute to the marginalization of certain femininities and silencing gender discrimination, which requires attention from management educators.

Building on earlier studies' indications of the relevance of postfeminist subjectivity for women's understanding of feminism and femininity and their assumed responsibilities in neoliberal society (e.g. Gill and Orgad, 2015; Adamson, 2017), examining female students' views of gender in management is center-staged. Because the label "feminism" invites disapproval, particularly among young women, I focus on female students' discourse to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do female students engage with postfeminist sensibility to negotiate and articulate their relationship to feminism?
- (2) How do female students constitute women in the management profession?

This paper contributes to the understanding of (1) how postfeminist articulations of gender issues occur in management education as responses to gender-equality initiatives and (2) how

to develop more nuanced pedagogies to support equal gender socialization in the management profession. The findings showed the distinct nature of Finnish cultural contexts as part of shaping the ways that postfeminist ideas are incorporated in discussing gender in management.

Theoretical background

The postfeminist subject position

Postfeminist sensibility is understood as the constellation of ideas and discourses that pattern contemporary beliefs about gender (Gill *et al.*, 2017). Postfeminism offers alternative lenses on gender inequality because feminism evokes exasperation (Scharff, 2012), and young women particularly avoid adopting the “feminist” label (McRobbie, 2009; Zucker, 2004). Postfeminist worldviews generally undermine the relevance of gender as a factor in contemporary workplaces (Kelan, 2009; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). This is achieved by framing gender inequalities as relics of a bygone era, constructing them as happening elsewhere, presenting women as the advantaged sex and accepting the status quo (Gill *et al.*, 2017). Yet, postfeminism constitutes a contradictory set of discourses that incorporate both feminist and antifeminist themes (Gill, 2007). Postfeminist sensibilities range from the repudiation of sexism and expression of gender fatigue to the resurgence of sexual difference and femininity as a bodily property and espousing women’s empowerment (Gill *et al.*, 2017, p. 230).

Postfeminism is structured around a “gendered neoliberalism” (Gill, 2017); it takes for granted the requirements of the neoliberal economy by encompassing an individualized form of feminism where the resolution of work–life challenges is viewed as women’s responsibility. Postfeminist rhetoric foregrounds women’s work–life choices and supports their self-directiveness in favor of structural interventions, such as quotas (Lewis *et al.*, 2017). Postfeminist parlance emphasizes women’s agency (Showden, 2009) and self-discipline (Gill *et al.*, 2017), celebrating subjects who refuse to be portrayed as victims (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010).

Postfeminist femininity

The postfeminist view locates “blame for gender inequality” in “women’s psyches and bodies” (Gill and Orgad, 2015, p. 340), something evident in the study by Mavin (2006) on senior women and women academics, which showed women’s admiration of male confidence and their tendency to self-blame. Accordingly, postfeminism invites women to mold themselves to promote confidence, independence and self-regulation as keys to advancing their careers (Gill and Orgad, 2015).

Performing postfeminist femininity requires women to actively “manage” and “balance” the mixing of masculinity and femininity (Adamson, 2017; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). As Adamson’s (2017) analysis of female celebrity chief executive officer (CEO) autobiographies showed, women are invited to embrace their femininity *as long as* they carefully avoid excess. The female CEOs in her study, for example, balanced their feminist attitudes to avoid negative associations. Postfeminist sensibility calls upon women to celebrate their beauty and motherhood (Lewis *et al.*, 2017). Insecurity and vulnerability are treated as problems (Gill and Orgad, 2015), which may prevent women from articulating their sense of unfairness (Baker, 2010). Sullivan and Delaney (2017) found this in evangelical entrepreneurial femininity, which silences women’s accounts of inequities and reifies traditional gender ideals, with women appearing to effortlessly sustain their entrepreneurial careers and families. Baker and Kelan (2019) discussed how executive women’s tendencies to hold other women accountable through blaming are explicable as relieving their anxieties, maintaining the neoliberal ideal and participating in professional discourses. Thus, postfeminist sensibility encompasses a profoundly contradictory construction of contemporary gender relations that promotes women’s agency and choice while subjecting them to surveillance, discipline and vilification (Gill, 2007, 2017).

Postfeminism in management education

Student perceptions of management. Managerial positions are still characterized by a gender gap: on a global scale, women typically occupy one-fifth [1] of management positions, and research has identified numerous barriers to women's managerial careers, such as double bind expectations and discrimination (Eagly and Carli, 2007). However, regardless of the underrepresentation of women in top managerial positions, business and management students show little concern for gender issues. Students promote postfeminist discourses by purporting the naturalization of male dominance, denying the impact of gender in business schools (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010), viewing gender inequality as history and relegating it to other places (Rumens, 2018). Even when students recognize the presence of gendering, gender discrimination does not constitute a major concern for them (Sipe *et al.*, 2016).

Prior research shows that business students conform to the masculine idea of management. This is perceptible in business school students' tendency to associate both managers (Fernandes and Cabral-Cardoso, 2003) and leadership (Greenhalgh and Maxwell, 2019) with men. Masculine notions also remain largely uncontested with students' acceptance of the gendered management playing field. Kelan (2012) discussed how Master of Business Administration students constructed the ideal businesswoman as professional and needing to hide her sexuality, indicating self-regulation to fit the masculine subtext. Business students in Finland have also imposed a double bind on female business leaders, expecting them to show softer sides and business success (Katila and Eriksson, 2013). Examining university students' perceptions of gender in management is critical to knowing the kinds of worldviews they bring into the workplace. The discussion above gives us reason to expect contemporary management education classes to be somewhat postfeminist.

Data and analysis

Course context

The data for this study were gathered from an introductory management course that targeted undergraduate and graduate students at a Finnish university. One-third of the students enrolled in the course were business majors, while the rest took it for a business studies minor. The course objective was to provide students with basic knowledge and key concepts on management theories and organizational behavior, lectures covering organization and leadership theories, human resource management, strategy, organizational culture and gender. Guest speakers from the industry were invited to share their managerial experiences. As the course instructor, I decided that one lecture in the series would deal with gender issues, a choice inspired by my earlier realization of my tendency to invite male guest speakers and draw on male examples. This course is one of the first courses for business school students, and the curriculum of the management major only includes a few optional courses on diversity themes. Management education plays a central role in circulating and transforming notions of gender (Smith, 2000), and I regarded a lecture on this topic as an initiative to build student awareness of gender inequalities in management.

Nevertheless, I found myself worrying that raising gender issues might be interpreted as a female educator's bias and possible "over-emphasis on the female perspective" (Smith, 2000, p. 162). I recalled the student evaluations from my pilot lecture; one student contested the selection of the gender topic, claiming that he had not "signed up for this." Unlike other lecture topics, this one heightened my awareness of my gender (see Sinclair, 2000), and I thought more about how to frame the lecture. My usual pedagogical strategy was to start with statistics on the underrepresentation of women in management, as I have noticed that students have been more receptive to factual information.

My assumptions were heavily guided by anticipating a postfeminist climate, which gave me uncertainty about my position. I also subconsciously anticipated that the Finnish

management context might heighten resistance to the topic, as Finland has enjoyed an image as a pioneer in gender equality. A country that regularly ranks highly in global-equality evaluations (e.g. third place in the [World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Report](#)) certainly seems egalitarian at first sight. However, in 2016, only one in five executive team members in listed Finnish companies was female. Women's representation in listed Finnish companies' boards is slightly better: in 2019, women held 29% of seats ([Finland Chamber of Commerce, 2016, 2019](#)).

I intended the lecture on gender to increase the students' awareness of the gender gap and gendered assumptions in management. The three-hour lecture covered issues such as statistics, occupational segregation, barriers to women's career progress and gender stereotypes in management. The lecture took place in an auditorium, but it included class exercises and discussions to enhance student participation and dialog. I asked probing questions, such as what they thought of current media coverage of women leaders, and used images to stimulate the discussion of normative expectations about gender ([Kelan, 2012](#)). I had the students discuss a job advertisement for an open managerial position in a Finnish city. This ad featured a male Lego figure dressed in a suit, with accompanying text calling for applicants ready to "loosen their ties." The image prompted debates about whether one should be offended by masculine representations. In addition to this dedicated lecture, gender topic was touched on throughout the modules. I always began the course's opening lecture with a picture collage depicting Google search images for keywords manager/leader. This served to place "gender on the agenda explicitly from the beginning" ([Mavin et al., 2004](#), p. 300), as it invited reflections of gender during the first 10 min of the course with the students noticing how "almost all of the leaders pictured were white males." During the course, some management stereotypes were also dismantled. One of the female students, for example, reflected how she thought her characteristics were not suited for managerial positions because she was either "charismatic" or "loud." She viewed the leadership lecture as offering positive socialization: "*(It) offered a positive transgression of my views into realizing that a manager does not have to be a certain kind*".

Data

I examined the female students' assumptions about gender by analyzing their learning diaries gathered over three consecutive years. During the collection of the first dataset, the course was taught in English (nearly 270 students, one-fourth of participants being international exchange students). The next two courses were taught in Finnish (450 students each). Most students were White, but students of Asian and African ethnicities were also present. The two genders were almost equally represented. I analyzed 90 female students' diaries, ignoring the 21 diaries by male students.

Writing a learning diary was optional, but with successful completion, the students received bonus points on their exams (the diaries were graded pass/fail). I requested the students' consent to use their diaries for research after they had received diary evaluations and course grades. However, the diaries may have been affected by the students' attempts to impress the teacher ([Bilimoria et al., 2010](#)).

The students selected five of the ten lectures to write about in their diaries. My analysis focused on the parts of the diaries about gender (either writing specifically on the gender lecture or addressing gender in other diary sections). The learning diaries varied in length from 3,600 to 4,500 words. The students were advised to discuss their understanding of the main theme, critically evaluate the issues discussed during the lectures and reflect on their learning. They were encouraged to discuss the topics from the perspective of their respective fields and to consider their experiences as leaders or followers.

Throughout the lecture, I quickly learned that the topic engaged students in lively class debates. The same applied to their learning diaries: where diary entries dealing with other

lectures typically involved less critical debate, the students' reflections on gender were emotionally charged. The diaries were also somewhat polarized: where some students self-identified as feminists and recited their enjoyment of the lecture theme, others heavily contested it, although most diaries expressed ambivalent views on gender issues. The learning diaries reflect on the controversy in the contemporary feminist landscape: while postfeminism suffuses a reluctance toward feminism (Scharff, 2012) and downplaying of gender issues (Gill *et al.*, 2017), we simultaneously witness a surge in the popularity of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Analysis: examining discursive moves structuring "resistances" of the gender theme

As an "educator," I was surprised and uneasy at how some female students seemed to reject the idea that gender pertained to them (for similar educator dilemmas, see Sinclair, 2000; Stead and Elliot, 2012; Dyer and Hurd, 2018). I also had difficulty understanding how female students positioned men as better suited for managing large organizations, reproducing "feminine devaluation" (Ronen, 2018). On what basis did they construct worldviews that positioned the male gender above their own?

To understand these "resistances," I selected the diary entries informed with postfeminist sensibility and opposition to closer analysis. Dyer and Hurd (2018) argued that students in preliminal and liminal spaces hold on to agentic self-identities and ignore gender issues, whereas those in postliminal spaces offer deeper structural critiques of discrimination against women. While I agree that students' perceptions may evolve, appreciating their viewpoints is also important, including the purposes their discourse serves in postfeminist cultures (see Baker and Kelan, 2019). Realizing that I was holding them accountable for their views on gender, I sought to understand how the students negotiated their understanding of gender inequality and what purposes their discourse served in this specific management-education setting.

In shifting my "disappointed" educator's gaze, I drew on Wetherell and Potter's (1988) discourse-analytical approach to study the meanings informing the diary entries, seeking to address how the students understood gender and constituted the social world using discourse. In the first analytic phase, I traced the students' overall discourse on gender, following repeated patterns, expressions and themes. The students anchored their meaning-making to highly individualized accounts and positioned themselves as "outsiders" to feminist initiatives. They also engaged with postfeminist themes to articulate their unease with projections of women as vulnerable objects of gender-equality policies. Paying attention to their speaker positions and argumentation allowed me to discover that at the heart of their resistance was their difficulty in finding feminist ideas and positions personally meaningful. This is understandable given that most of them have little or no work-life experience. At this stage, I noticed how the postfeminist parlance seemed to constitute the main discursive backdrop of the students' repertoire and deployed the postfeminist lens to code the data further. The cyclical process between data and analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 167) enforced my belief that postfeminism could be used to explain and theorize the students' resistance. I then carefully coded the data according to the "tropes and figures of speech" (Wetherell and Potter, 1988, p. 172) and the recurring similarities in the way that the students articulated their resistance (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). I examined the argumentative structure of the diaries and further categorized their discourse as three interrelated discursive moves (repertoires) (Edley, 2001): (1) rejecting "excessive" feminism, (2) rearticulating positive positions for themselves and other women as feminist subjects by articulating self-reliant professional futures and (3) constituting idealized femininities through role models that successfully integrate masculinity and femininity. These three moves were the predominant forms of repertoires that recurred in

the diaries to articulate resistance and respond to the equality topic and initiative. The uses of these repertoires overlapped, meaning that one or more of the three repertoires could be found in one diary entry at the same time.

While postfeminism offered key discursive resources for these repertoires, I paid attention to the ambiguity inherent in the data. Rather than assuming that the students are simply governed by one version of postfeminism, I acknowledge that their discourse is fractured and can draw on multiple interpretative repertoires (Edley, 2001). Yet, there is always active selection (Wetherell and Potter, 1988) in that some linguistic resources are used, while others are omitted. I remained open to the idea that their discourse entails multiple interpretations. I was particularly addressing how the discourses of gender equality emanating from the Finnish sociocultural context were entangled in the way postfeminism was produced.

To conclude, the students' discourse centralizes postfeminist interpretations of gender related to gendered management discourse and Finnish societal discourses of equality (see Table 1 for analysis process). All names in the following diary extracts are pseudonyms.

Findings: female students making meaningful feminism

Rejecting "excessive" feminism

The students' resistance to the gender topic revolved around their difficulty in finding meaning in the versions of feminism they interpreted as dominating the social arena. The first discursive move captures how students produce a critique of an "excessive" form of feminism through postfeminist sensibility.

People fuss over gender equality everywhere, and it is still a sensitive topic that gives rise to different kinds of emotions. I'm not denying that there is inequality in work-life (and elsewhere), but people often take the idea of equality too far. Personally, I find it hard to understand the valuation of characteristics and that we should make everything equal. It is yet a fact that the characteristics between men and women are different in certain matters just based on their physical characteristics and hormonal behavior. – Ellen.

For Ellen, gender-equality debates are a "fuss" that sometimes go "too far," which demonstrated her boundaries for acceptable feminist activism. Ellen drew on an impersonal, categorical reference to "people," and distanced herself from these unspecified feminist debates by emphasizing her perspective ("personally"). She used a disclaimer (Wetherell and Potter, 1998) to acknowledge that gender inequalities do exist ("I'm not denying"), which serves various functions, such as allowing her to position herself as willing to consider alternative views. By arguing against making "everything equal," Ellen resisted the idea of pursuing equality just for the sake of equality (Tienari *et al.*, 2003). Ellen directs her opposition toward a generic debate, and her discourse can be interpreted within the frame of equality initiatives typically meeting resistance in the Finnish context (Ylöstalo, 2019). Typically, students challenge a version of feminism that was hinted at as driving a "totalitarian" change. Ellen also portrayed differences between men and women as facts of nature (Lewis, 2014) to depoliticize the issue.

Altogether, the students expressed their lack of engagement with the simplistic solutions hyped in the gender-equality debate. Laura, for example, explained that one bumps into "writings or campaigns that take a stance" and adds that "'a woman's Euro is x cents' is a phrase that I've heard so many times that, at least for me, it fails to raise any thoughts on the societal injustice." Laura's comment revealed her reluctance to accept gender-equality work at face value and her disappointment in the mantras repeated in gender-equality campaigns. While such discourse can be read as an illustration of gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009), it can also be interpreted as an attempt to advance the discussion because contemporary gender-inequality debates fail to resonate with women's experiences.

EDI

Interpretative repertoire	Phase 1: Tracing recurring discursive elements (themes, vocabularies) to identify interpretative repertoires	Phase 2: Examining argumentation related to the recurring themes	Phase 3: Interpreting the repertoire's functions and socio-cultural linkages
1. Discursive move: rejecting "excessive" feminism	Negative projections of claiming equality for the sake of equality and Black-and-White argumentation	Using modality to condemn particular actions Distancing through emotional reactions (frustration, exhaustion) Pejorative descriptions ("ridiculous," "fuss")	Portraying dominant gender inequality debate as remote and repudiating structural discrimination
2. Discursive move: articulating self-reliant professional futures	Achieved through polarity: Eliciting negative views of women's victimization, blaming men, complaining, playing "martyr" Articulating beliefs in self-reliance, confidence, determination, and choice as key constituents in women's careers	Speaking for oneself and on behalf of other women Using modality to encourage particular actions Using disclaimers and emphasizing one's opinion and experience ("in my opinion," "from the people I know") Using modality to condemn particular actions Distancing through emotional reactions (frustration)	Distancing from potentially harmful "victim" identities and arguing for women's responsibility Embedded in the Nordic strong women discourse and reliance on equal opportunity
3. Discursive move: producing idealized role models	Idealized femininity built from attributes and behaviors that integrate strength, confidence, gutsiness, self-reliance and energy with calmness, maternalism and beauty	Using superlatives to idealize the role model	Survival in the neoliberal society depends on one's ability to "balance right" in the masculine profession

Table 1.
Analysis process

Another student, Kirsi, reflected on the city job advertisement from the lecture:

I don't feel discriminated if I see a male person on the advertisement. It is true that it is not neutral, but I as a female feel also addressed. I must admit when I think of a leader, I also think of a strong male person because I am used to that since childhood. It doesn't mean that women shouldn't have the same promotion opportunities as men or don't have good management skills, but the image of a man is still fixed in mind because it is more widespread. I don't feel discriminated about pictures or words which appeals to men rather than women if both have still the same chances to get hired independent from their gender. – Kirsi

We see how Kirsi downplayed the discriminatory effects of gendered representations by an acceptance and naturalization of the masculine status quo of management (Lewis *et al.*, 2017). By emphasizing equal hiring practices as the core question for equality, Kirsi places gendered representations as a trivial matter. It is also notable that she does not question the existence of equal employment opportunities. While Kirsi's discourse remains ambiguous, her reliance on gender equality may emanate from Finnish society, where equality populates the public parlance (Ylöstalo, 2019).

During the lecture, I presented gender stereotypes associated with management. While I was using it for critical reflection of the stereotypes, I noticed how the students were using

these to counter the structural view through naturalized gender differences (Lewis, 2014). Paula, for example, recalled an incident with three females and one male working on the same task and concluded how *“the male did a far better job than any of the women. There was only one difference, which made the male expert stand out in a far more positive light compared to the women, namely confidence, which was also listed as one of the male traits in the lecturer’s slides (. . .) compared to the women, the “man” really owned the situation due to his confidence”*.

Articulating self-reliant professional futures

The students accompanied their rejection of “excessive” feminism with an articulation of their preferred version of feminism through an interpretative repertoire that was constructed upon rejecting female vulnerability and articulating female agency.

Women would lift their position in work-life without this fuss. [. . .] for quite many, family is their priority, and there simply are more of those men than women who prioritize career over everything else, or whose life centers on power or money. Finland is full of strong women; it is a matter of focus—what you use your energy for. And I don’t find there is anything wrong if women are more interested in poorly paid health sector or family life [. . .] let them invest in those in that case. – Olga.

For Olga, as for Ellen, gender-equality discussions are a “fuss.” Her diction reveals frustration and distancing. In her view, feminism may do more harm than good. Olga explains the gender gap as women’s choice evident in their tendency to elect nurturing roles while also assuming men’s natural career orientation. Categorical talk about female disadvantage and segregated work markets fails to resonate with Olga’s personal views. In Olga’s account, family and career represent two alternative routes in women’s lives. While her quotation contends that having both is possible, it produces family/work conflict as a potential impediment for women. Her comment reads as a postfeminist backlash to feminism, as she insists women should be “let” to do whatever they wish and frames their decision to stay at home “as a matter of choice, not obligation” (Lewis *et al.*, 2017, p. 214). Her discourse eschews the need for collective, structural-level implementations, such as leveraging women’s paths to male-dominated sectors, by casting the idea of “strong” Finnish women. Finnish women have typically been portrayed as strong (see Katila and Eriksson, 2013), and in management, they are featured as “iron ladies” (Lämsä and Tiensuu, 2002). Olga’s contentment with women choosing lower salaries can be understood within the frames of neoliberal agency, where futures depend on individual responsibility. Finally, the ease with which she perceived stay-at-home motherhood may be partially explained by Finnish support structures, such as extensive, state-subsidized maternity leave.

As the students navigated their relation to feminism, they relied on reproducing empowered senses of themselves and other women. The following excerpt from Sofia’s diary shows how she drew on postfeminist arguments to reject and rearticulate the way women are positioned in public discourse:

The discussion itself doesn’t have much point. This is because women, in general, apply for jobs that have lower wage levels and to the so-called care industries. So, should we aim to change women’s aims and personalities just for the sake of getting more egalitarian wage levels? I find this especially strange, for what are we to do about the situation that women, in general, are not as ambitious about their careers as men? It is up to them to decide what industry they apply for and what position they get into. [. . .] If women really wanted to be in the lead, they would find the way as long as you work hard enough for it. [. . .] Women lack a particular type of arrogance that helps one advance in your career. But who is to say that this is wrong? [. . .] I think the ball is in women’s court, so to speak, and in this discussion, one should stop complaining about men’s attitudes and start complaining about womens’. In my view, women should shape up on this matter instead of taking the position of so-called martyrs. – Sofia

A postfeminist sensibility suffuses Sofia's account: she assumes the managerial scene as a naturally competitive, masculine field and explains women's career barriers as absences of required (masculine) qualities, such as "ambition" and "arrogance." Evaluating women in this manner has become heightened with the expectations of the confidence culture (Gill and Orgad, 2015). Sofia's comment maintains the neoliberal belief that the gender gap is an individualized problem and highlights women's choices in the matter.

Sofia embraces women's freedom to enact traditional femininity and make their own choices. With her claim "just for the sake of," Sofia voices how grand structural changes and equality policies remain impractical in her view, and also read out as a criticism of the psychic labor requirements targeted at women, as she questions whether we should "change women's aims and personalities". Her rhetorical question, "who is to say that this is wrong?" is highly ambiguous. One alternative interpretation is that she resists collective measures against segregated job markets. Alternatively, her discourse may also be interpreted as a critique of the requirements of the confidence culture (Gill and Orgad, 2015) – who is to say it is wrong if women lack arrogance?

Sofia's account can also be interpreted as expressing a desire to move the discussion forward and renegotiate the roles occupied by women. Sofia voices her dislike of blame-the-men feminism, and her discourse reduces current forms of feminism to undesirable positions of "complaining" and playing "martyrs." Baker and Kelan (2019) have explained blaming and holding other women accountable as ways to relieve one's anxieties, maintain the neoliberal ideal and participate in professional discourses; for student diarists like Sofia, blaming allows confidently imagining one's professional future as contingent on self-reliance. Sofia found it important that women can maintain their self-pride, claiming they need to "earn their respect." She internalizes the postfeminist belief in self-reliance as she resolutely addresses the behaviors and attitudes required for women – work "hard enough" and "shape up." Her assertions can also be regarded as attempts to avoid victimhood (Baker, 2010). However, her reference to "women" also entails ambiguity. Whether she counts herself among these women who need to "shape up" is unclear.

Like Sofia, Paula expresses her frustrations with the current debate on pay gaps and glass ceilings:

I find it rather annoying to listen to complaints about these issues if one only bases them on arguments such as "because I am a woman, and someone is a man. . ." [. . .] As a young woman in the early stages of my career, I can relate to this discussion to some extent and sympathize with the frustration of us women getting paid less than our male counterparts. However, I find that critical articles [dealing with pay gap issues], are real eye-openers, so I don't want to complain myself as I know that it is an issue of many [emphasis in original] things coming together. [. . .], therefore, think that before women start to complain, they must also look in the mirror to see if they have done what their male counterparts have done in the same situation and also ponder the bigger picture, for example, the industry in question, to see if the reason for their lower salary lies in some of these aspects. If women can then honestly say that they are still in this sense a lot unequal to men, then yes, we do have a problem in terms of gender equality. – Paula

Paula explained her reluctance to blindly accept the idea of systemic inequalities. She voiced her irritation with the gender card with Black-and-White arguments ("because I am a woman"), rejecting such superficial positions.

Paula used various discursive tactics to claim an alternative feminist position. She engaged with positive agency through authorization: backing her claims with research findings enables her to speak from an informed position and avoid association with the types of feminist argumentation that might be interpreted as "complaining." She calls for a more in-depth discussion of gender inequality, as she suggests that the pay gap contains a gray area with "many" issues. I interpreted Paula's diary entry as an attempt to further the discussion

we had in class. The pay gap theme is one of the most contested topics in gender lectures and one for which the students typically question how and on what basis the pay gap is calculated. Here, Paula built her response using an article she sourced for her diary. The pay gap debate tells of the strong discourse that Finland has on gender equality (Ylöstalo, 2019). Paula's discourse seems to be embedded in these beliefs, as she questions the existence of pay discrimination. She is noncommittal in addressing structural concerns, as she holds women answerable for making justified claims ("if a woman can then honestly say"). She also seems willing to accept some gender bias, claiming that a problem exists if women are obviously "a lot unequal."

The female students were also hesitant regarding the positions reserved for women in current gender-equality initiatives:

If a woman gets a leading position only because there are too few female leaders in a company, I don't believe that this woman will be proud of herself. Rather, I think that she will feel discriminated against and weak, as if she is getting special treatment. – Maria

For Maria, quotas entail stigma (Lewis *et al.*, 2017, p. 220). She seemed to be conforming to a societal discourse particularly prevalent in the Nordic context, where differential treatment is shunned, as the societal discourse predominantly promotes fairness (Tienari *et al.*, 2003). Quotas would force women to recognize their vulnerability (feeling "weak"), which is to be avoided in postfeminist reasoning (Baker, 2010).

Producing idealized role models

The diarists rejected victimizing positions and constructed alternative, empowered, self-reliant subject positions. Role models are central to socialization into certain professions (e.g. Adamson and Kelan, 2019) and the students offered real-life examples of "ideal", strong, role models to justify the attainability of agentic managerial identities:

It is true that as a woman, you may have to prove yourself, but prejudices disappear very quickly as long as you don't give power to them. I have grown up with mentally, emotionally, psychically, and physically strong women. My role models since childhood include strong girl and female figures, such as Pippi Longstocking, Little My, my grandmother, and my mother. In the end, it is up to yourself how you let others treat you, and how far and into what kinds of positions you aspire in your career. – Irene

Irene narrated her personal growth history and socialization in her family as a story of female strength. She attributed her readiness to encounter hardships to her strong female role models while repudiating the effect that external matters would have on her future. She rejected the idea of women as victims and deployed postfeminist argumentation, advising women to take charge of their careers. By telling this personal story, Irene offers an alternative view of women; she recognizes that they may socialize into positions of strength and agency rather than assume the role of the weaker sex. Remaining upbeat embeds the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2017). Irene connected her socialization through Nordic children's literature, introducing Pippi Longstocking, a character in Astrid Lindgren's children's novels, and Little My, a character in the Moonin book series by Tove Jansson. Both female characters can be described as fearless, fiery and independent. These examples, together with the women in her family, are a way to frame one's view of equality within the Nordic and Finnish culture of strong women and tie these into the neoliberal and postfeminist characterizations of gendered self-confidence.

The construction of idealized femininity relies upon examples of female leaders who encompass a variety of masculine attributes:

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We had some men as [a] secondary coach, [a] physiological coach, and [a] mental coach. However, they were overshadowed by our female coach, she being very strong, saucy, and cheeky. My coach thus was a woman who I could not imagine in any other role than in a leading position; she in particular had the natural characteristics and charisma that are associated with leadership. – Ingrid.

Ingrid spoke of a female leader with “natural” leadership charisma articulated with masculine attributes (“strong, saucy, and cheeky”) rather than traditional femininity. The chosen adjectives are parts of positive parlance, and allow to describe a woman who breaks gender norms but succeeds in avoiding the double bind. Yet, this idealization reifies the idea that management is only attainable to those who meet the norm.

The idealized managerial femininities also entailed a perfect balance of masculine and feminine:

My mother as a leader of the daycare center was unbelievably human-centric, but in the right situations [she was] also a “cold” boss, who made wise decisions whenever it was a matter of business. Even though many of my mother’s subordinates were her close friends, she was able to keep work issues separate from others. – Elsa.

Elsa emphasized her mother’s aptitude to execute “cold” managerial duties, yet the examples of her friendships with her subordinates mitigate perceptions of her as an iron lady. Such juggling between masculine and feminine identities is typical for female managers who attempt to fit into the masculine managerial role (Priola, 2007). These examples are illustrative of how women’s management of work/life boundaries signals their abilities to perform according to masculine norms in management and hence their worth to be taken seriously.

The idolized female role models were often portrayed as exceptional by all measures:

If we think about charismatic women in leading positions, I first come to think of Michelle Obama. She is a female hound dog—a leader type, full of energy, sportiness, and even beauty radiating personality and an excellent performer who seems very confident when in the spotlight. She supports women’s and youngsters’ causes and stresses the importance of education. Michelle Obama is perceived as the archetype of the contemporary ideal woman, and I admire her greatly. Yet she has risen to the top of the political field together with her husband and supports matters that are “typical of a female leader,” so it may be easy for people to resonate with her. She emanates a certain kind of maternal figure but also determination and strength. – Linda

Linda considered Michelle Obama a charismatic leader, which contrasts with earlier findings that charismatic leadership is associated with male leaders (Katila and Eriksson, 2013). By labeling Obama “the archetype of the contemporary ideal woman,” Linda posited that attributes of an ideal woman exist. With postfeminist sensibility, she evaluates Obama positively for her traditionally maternal figure and physical appearance (Lewis *et al.*, 2017) but also describes her with adjectives reflecting (masculine) agency and strength. Characterizing Obama as a confident, physically and emotionally fit “hound dog” aligns with postfeminist expectations (Gill and Orgad, 2015) and contemporary norms of managerial athleticism (Johansson *et al.*, 2017). By mentioning Obama’s support of social causes, Linda emphasized her fulfillment of feminine expectations. This excerpt illustrates how balanced masculinity and femininity continue to subsume women within the heterosexual, masculine matrix.

Emma wrote in her diary about a female guest lecturer:

I think she is a good example of how a woman can be an equal manager side by side with men. She has made it happen through her work. I think that she has ended up as a manager in the company through her interest in the industry. Her personality and self-esteem have surely affected her career progress. We can ask if the reason why we don’t see many female managers in business might be because there are not that many women who have the will and courage for this kind of leadership.

What I also found great in her company's growth story was that she smoothly combined family life with running the company and her leadership. – Emma

Emma attributed the guest speaker's successful career development to her performing postfeminist femininity, emphasizing the leader's "interest," and "self-esteem" and linking having "made it happen" to one's "work," illustrating how achieving this position entails no assistance. She deployed the postfeminist interpretative repertoire, producing the postfeminist archetype that idolizes women for their heroic characteristics, particularly courage, confidence and control (see Kelan and Mah, 2014). Emma attributed the gender gap to choice and fear, constructing the guest speaker as a superwoman whose personality traits helped her pursue a managerial career while combining work and family (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017).

This idolized female identity emerges from women who typically possess masculine characteristics of strength, aspiration and daring, while maintaining their femininity:

I would like to share my favorite quote that could be of help for women aiming to combine the roles of woman and leader: "Be a badass with a good heart." – Sara

In this statement, a woman must possess "heart" and a "badass" attitude. This constructs a positive, hearty, modern version of the iron lady, combining strength and femininity (Kanter, 1977).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper studies how female students in basic management class understand gender in management by analyzing their learning diary entries through a postfeminist lens. I show how postfeminist sensibility offers the students discursive resources to construct personally meaningful versions of feminism in three discursive moves. The findings offer suggestions on structuring gender equality education in the context of management and offer key implications for teaching gender issues, particularly in contexts featuring high gender equality.

The study corroborates earlier findings on young women's reluctance to assume feminist identities (Zucker, 2004; McRobbie, 2009) and the postfeminist climate in management education (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010; Rumens, 2018). Rumens (2018) suggested that postfeminism provides an approach to the "challenging" topic of gender inequality. Engaging with postfeminist sensibility allows students to shape and produce meaningful versions of the feminism/gender-equality debate. This study shows that "resistance" and "denial" are responses to feminist tropes that treat equality as a structural problem. The Finnish context, where equality is often considered an already-achieved benefit, has influenced the ways in which examples of structural marginalization of women were contested and downplayed.

The female students distanced themselves from feminist discussions that are potentially harmful to female subjects (being framed as vulnerable or scapegoating men for their lack of success). By engaging with postfeminism, the students distinguish themselves from the "less desirable, feminist "types"" (Adamson, 2017, p. 321) and gain a sense of empowerment (Showden, 2009), likely as part of women's professionalization in management (see Powell *et al.*, 2009). By upholding the view that women are not constrained by lasting inequalities, and constructing agentic subject positions (Gill *et al.*, 2017), the diarists believe that they can direct their futures and avoid being perceived as the weaker sex or less capable of management. Self-reliance is further exacerbated by incorporating the idea of a strong Finnish woman into neoliberal postfeminism.

While the student discourse may be considered promising because the students expressing self-reliant identification are likely to consider managerial positions within their reach, the analyzed discourse simultaneously helps maintain gendered requirements for

women. Within their interpretative repertoire, women perceived as successful managers are brave, gutsy superwomen who maintain their femininity (see Kelan and Mah, 2014). Hence, idolized leadership and career advancement are available to women who are agentic rather than passive, strong rather than weak and gutsy rather than modest. One potential problem of this positioning of women is suggesting that successful women are the exceptions who overcome their feminine qualities (see Lämsä and Tiensuu, 2002). The ideal conveys that women must work on themselves and leave the masculine frame of management uncontested by reproducing the masculinist, strong, in control view of management. Women who do not meet the requirements become easy targets of misogyny and blame, as shown by the students' vocabularies (Baker and Kelan, 2019). The construction of ideal managerial femininity also includes a paradox: although the student's discourse built on the expectation for women to work hard, women's hard work was absent from the examples. Instead, the idealized role models "naturally" possessed perfectly balanced sets of masculine and feminine traits and effortlessly, energetically performed their roles (see Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). We must question expectations of women's desire to maintain "pride," as it frames prevailing gender disparities as the result of women's lack of contribution (e.g. Mavin, 2006) and attributes their career challenges to weakness. Altogether, deploying the imagery of strong Finnish women and situating gender equality within the equality tropes in Finland served to shape a gendered neoliberal professionalization while omitting collective actions.

Given that many of the students may still possess relatively little experience of working life, it is understandable that postfeminism provides an easily attainable, and seductive, resource for identifying with the management profession. As they acquire more work/life experience, they may construct gender in management beyond individual responsibility rhetoric. It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies by following female students as they proceed in their studies and enter the workforce.

There is a need to further address the power effects of postfeminism in different management education settings. The present study is limited by its sample size (mostly self-selected student reflections of a single lecture). Future studies could analyze class discussions and include male students; Lund *et al.* (2019) addressed how young male academics in a business school negotiate masculinities in a neoliberal university context.

Implications for teaching gender

The findings enlightened me to the challenge of introducing gender issues in a single lecture (Sinclair, 2000): I entered the classroom with an agenda to educate on the topic of women's exclusion, but the way I focused on structural discrimination may have left the students with little opportunity to relate to the issue. Carefully adopting a "critical dialogue" to resonate with students' personal lives (Stead and Elliott, 2012, pp. 386–388) would likely improve management education initiatives. The diaries and their analysis offer a view of student perceptions "on entry" (Mavin *et al.*, 2004, p. 294) that should be further utilized in teaching. The students' discourses would serve as a starting point for further reflection and could be utilized to understand how postfeminist sensibilities may mask inequalities by offering the students targeted questions for self-reflection. For me, understanding how students structure their discourse, has helped to develop my pedagogical strategies. For example, the last time I taught this course, I asked the students to select an example of "good" or "ethical" leadership as part of a course demo. These were discussed in small groups, and the exercise proved useful in allowing us to reflect on the examples that dominated (male leaders/managers) and to unmask the dominant ideas of management. However, I acknowledge that gender should be integrated even more into other course lectures. For example, addressing how gendered norms can structure male-dominated workplaces during an organizational culture lecture might be more relatable to students who have not yet personally been affected by issues such as work–family integration.

The selection of industry guest speakers is also essential. For example, relatable female leaders may provide possible reference points for female students. However, we must attend to how postfeminism silences discussions of women's hardships and urge guest speakers to address career hardships to challenge postfeminist demands to "shape up" and the precarious effects these demands have on young women evaluating their fitness for management.

To mainstream gender equality issues, such topics must be discussed as a part of mainstream management courses. This necessitates commitment from business schools (Mavin *et al.*, 2004) and removing gender as female teachers' responsibility (Hearn *et al.*, 2011). Based on my experiences from this particular course, contents considered supplemental to the core of management are only included if they are within the personal interests of the teacher. The inclusion of gender themes is not part of the business schools' official curriculum planning (for example, the curriculum of the management major only includes a few optional courses on diversity themes, dealing with work–family interface and culture, diversity and gender), which tells of the continued gender blindness of neoliberal management education institutions.

To conclude, the paper has addressed how students intertwine societal discourses, notably postfeminism within a Nordic gender equality context, to produce their ideas of gender and resist particular versions of gender themes in management class. It is important to recognize how the tropes in students' discourse should be understood as an element of the management schools' suppression of gender themes in teaching (Mavin *et al.*, 2004; Hearn *et al.*, 2011) and the incorporation of neoliberal policies in higher education institutions (Lätti, 2017; Lund and Tienari, 2019; Katila *et al.*, 2020).

Note

1. Women hold 24% of senior management roles globally (Grant Thornton, 2016). Among *Fortune* 500 companies, women held 20.2% of board seats in 2016 (Deloitte and the Alliance for Board Diversity, 2017).

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