Feminisation of Success or Successful Femininities? Disentangling "New Femininities" under Neo-liberal Conditions

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Abstract

This paper critically examines what might be entitled the feminisation of success that is ascribed to optimistic characterisations of new constructions of femininity for young women in the UK, particularly in relation to classed positions. In order to do this it is necessary to understand the complex relationship between feminism, post-feminism, neoliberalism and femininities, especially since the millennium. Young women have been positioned as the benefactors of successful social and political change which, together with ideas of individualism and reflexive constructions of identity, almost mandate young women to embody success. The article seeks to examine and assess the discursive constructions of "successful femininities" in relation to their normative limitations and ask in particular whether the putative existence of "new femininities" is attainable for all young women. With the impact of over a decade of neo-liberal policies and austerity measures being felt by many, it is argued that the discourses of "successful femininities" work to obscure the recalibrated inequalities that have been forged by neo-liberal conditions.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of wider social, cultural and political changes the UK has witnessed an ascendancy of "successful women" both in media representations, in educational achievements and in labour market participation. In the media, a post-feminist heroine has appeared who is empowered and autonomous whilst also playful and youthful. This new heroine regularly makes choices which overlap with traditional femininity and pre-feminist ideals (McRobbie, 2009). In education, the attainments and successes of young women are frequently highlighted, but only to be pitched against failing or underachieving boys (Ringrose and Epstein, 2015). In the labour market, young women's participation has increased dramatically in the last 50 years and the gender pay gap has been progressively getting smaller (though it has by no means disappeared). Significantly, these changes are increasingly presented as a "feminisation" of education and of the labour market and this is perceived as a "problem" for boys and young men.

These social and cultural transformations are also set against an economic shift from production to consumption which, coupled with the fervour of neo-liberal ideas, have reshaped the contemporary gender order. This often presents (young) women as

having opportunities freed from old constraints and with new educational and labour opportunities which have come to signify progress, equality, "girl power" and "having it all" (Ringrose, 2007). Within a neo-liberal economic environment young women in particular have been discursively presented as being more adaptable to changes and able to refashion themselves as empowered, flexible, creative and resilient whilst also responding to a rhetoric of aspiration attached to the framing of upward mobility as a universal goal (Negra and Tasker, 2014; Allen, 2014). Young women are said to succeed above all in the individualistic late modern condition[1] by constructing their own individual identity independent of the previous constraints and distinct from the identities that were previously prescribed to them as women. In addition, 'feminist ideals of autonomy, choice, and self-determination have become key normative features of "modernized" femininity' (Budgeon, 2011: 17). Young women are interpellated to inhabit these values, not so much as "feminists" but as liberated, self-made subjects.

In what McRobbie (2004: 5-6) calls 'the cultural space of post-feminism' feminist theorists have acknowledged the construction of such "new femininities" (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007, 2009; Gill and Scharff, 2013) which suggests that young women are imagined as the successors of social and political change in the widespread discourse of "Girl Power" and the construction of females as "future girls" (Harris, 2004) and "top girls" (McRobbie, 2007). However, for many commentators feminist ideology and concepts such as choice, power and independence have been individualised, absorbed and appropriated by neo-liberal agendas, turning some of the goals of feminist theory and activism on its head.

It can be argued, however, that women from disadvantaged backgrounds hardly have the same opportunities, resources, and privileges as their more privileged counterparts yet they are still interpellated into the new femininities. As Harris argues, 'the material resources and cultural capital of the already privileged are required to set a young women on the can-do trajectory' (2004: 35). Against such an optimistic "can-do" trajectory and narrative of success and aspiration, structural components and prerequisites remain, which enable those with relative advantage to perform the new femininities. Alongside other authors mentioned here who have pointed to the importance of "structuring structures" we argue here that working-class young women do not have the same resources or capital to abide by the individualistic and neo-liberal imperative of choice, effort and success. Moreover, in light of the continued impact of "economic austerity" following the election of a conservative government in May 2015 in the UK, the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on women (Allen et al, 2015; Biressi and Nunn, 2013; Negra and Tasker, 2014) is likely to create starkly different experiences for some young women contrary to the discourse of aspiration and success. This holds importance because in a neoliberal discourse those who are not successful are portrayed as 'failures' as a consequence of individual choice or insufficient effort. For twenty-first century feminism(s), this makes it necessary to mount a social and political critique against the "truth effect" of the successful and the

unsuccessful individual and clearly point to the (reinvigorated) influence of class, especially in a global economy.

In this article we seek to assess recent feminist work around the concept of "success" and its (lack of) potential for "new femininities" within a framework of neo-liberal subjectivities and the impact of "austerity measures" in the UK. Through an analysis of the discursive constructions of "successful femininities" in relation to their normative limitations we ask in particular whether the putative existence of these "new femininities" is attainable for all young women. Following Valerie Schmidt and Mark Thatcher's (2014) question of why neoliberal ideas retain their resilience despite the failure of core organs and institutions of financial capital, we are guided by the question whether the idea of "success", "aspiration" and feminisation of education and labour market have been absorbed and appropriated by neo-liberal discourses, thereby contributing to perceptions that social class and inequalities no longer affect young women.

The article begins by providing an account of how feminism(s) have become entangled with neoliberalism, how that has impacted upon the constructions of femininities and how the notion of successful women has acclaimed such prominence, especially within media representations. We follow by untangling the idea of success as applicable to all women by examining how social class provides a counter current to these constructions in education and the labour market. We finish by querying how not displaying aspiration or success for working class women is held against them whilst also constructed in essentialist terms, thereby concealing class divisions in the constructions of "successful new femininities".

Neoliberal Femininities

According to Angela McRobbie (2009:12), when the politics of feminism became mainstreamed into popular culture a "double entanglement" emerged wherein popular culture reinforced the aims of feminism whilst at the same time discrediting it and rendering it aged. As the assumed subject of second-wave feminism was the subject liberated from domesticity, millennial public discourses started to question whether feminism is still applicable to the contemporary context and the modern young working women (Budgeon, 2011). Furthermore, many took the social recognition of feminism's basic values, such as gender equality, as a signal that feminism had achieved its goals, was now considered as common sense, and therefore should no longer be an area of concern. One significant change in the recognition of gender equality was the introduction of "gender mainstreaming" which, as a global strategy, has appeased feminist agendas by framing gender equality as a central policy goal (Squires, 2007). Adopted by international institutions such as the UN, the OECD and the World Bank (Squires, 2007), gender mainstreaming entailed a shift from autonomous feminist groups to an endorsement of gender equality by institutions, state and state policies

(Walby, 2002). Whilst some are supportive of gender mainstreaming in that it signals reorientation and an adjustment in "repertoire and form" (Walby, 2002), others are critical and characterise it as a "technocratic-managerial strategy" (McRobbie, 2009: 155) and as 'co-opting feminist achievements rather than developing them' (Squires, 2007: 43). Whilst gender mainstreaming is undeniably a multifaceted phenomenon, its innocuous rise alongside neoliberal governance, whilst appearing to celebrate the success of feminism, also risks the abandonment of important debates of feminist theory and practice at a time when some interpretations of "postfeminist culture" question the very need for feminism itself (Budgeon, 2011).

The double entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas constitutes a culture of post-feminism (Gill, 2007, 2016). There is little agreement about the amorphous concept of post-feminism though it is generally considered in three ways; as an epistemological break within feminism, a historical shift within feminism, or as a backlash against feminism (Gill and Scharff, 2013). However, Gill states that post-feminism 'is best thought of as a sensibility' (2007:148) which simultaneously accepts and repudiates feminism (Tasker and Negra, 2007). It takes on a feminist rhetoric whilst creating an 'othering of feminism' (ibid: 4) associating it with 'man-hatred, lesbianism and unfemininity' (Scharff, 2012:2). Feminist terms such as "empowerment" and "choice" are adopted but redirected towards self-transformation rather than social transformation (Anderson, 2015), thereby surreptitiously emptying them of their political relevance. Thus, in the post-feminist terrain - which is 'part backlash, part cultural diffusion, part repressed anxiety over a shifting gender order' (Ringrose 2007: 473) - aspects of life are presented as freely chosen and uninfluenced by external factors. Furthermore, in an age where consumption is represented as a means to achieve empowerment and self-fulfilment feminism has also become commodified (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

The post-feminist sensibility can most evidently be observed in media culture with examples such as *Bridget Jones's Diary, Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City* being frequently cited as post-feminist. Within these texts, and others like it, the female protagonists are represented as being freed from the constraints of feminism – which is characterised as a policing force forbidding women from modes of traditional femininity that they desire (McRobbie, 2009). The post-feminist heroine is empowered and autonomous whilst also playful and youthful, she is oft contrasted to the doe-eyed female victim said to be portrayed by feminism and also to the female professional said to be deceptive and repressive (Tasker and Negra, 2007). The empowered female in post-feminist media regularly makes choices which overlap with traditional femininity and pre-feminist ideals (McRobbie, 2009). The new femininities that arise are constituted through this complex post-feminist sensibility – women are called upon to be 'autonomous and self-monitoring' whilst at the same time retaining features of traditional femininity such as 'heterosexual desirability and emotional sensitivity' (Budgeon, 2011: 54). This new femininity is assembled across different sites, yet always with the mandate of being aspirational and successful; or, as McRobbie (2015) has

suggested, by seeking "perfection" which she perceives as an extension of "aspiration". The "makeover paradigm" has been key to an incitement for transformation coupled with a mandate for women to believe that they are able to transform their lives by abiding to guidelines created by experts. The ideology of individualism contends that, through reflexivity, individuals can reinvent themselves in adherence to their subjectivity. Thus, the makeover paradigm is perceived as an enabler for the performance of ideal, or perfect, femininity. Self-transformation has been particularly meaningful for women who are more often enticed into becoming "potentially aspirational". However, the consequences of failure, Skeggs (1997) reminds us, are always equated with failed femininity.

Thus, post-feminist femininity is contradictory as it aligns notions of choice and self-improvement with surveillance and the criticism of those who make the wrong decisions (Gill, 2007; De Benedictis and Gill, 2016). For example, an article written for the Metro newspaper titled "*17 Killer Mistakes a Girl Should Never Make on a First Date*" lists a paradoxical number of "don'ts" for women such as "don't spend ages being overly glam" but "don't lose your feminine side… we are attracted to you because you're a woman" although "there is such a thing as too much makeup" (Lindsay, 2015). Suggestions have been made that these types of articles which appear to be sexist, particularly those found within 'Lad Mags' such as *FHM* or *Nuts,* use sexism in an ironic way and that representations of women that may reinforce traditional femininity ideals must be viewed as playful and satirical rather than sexist. However, Gill (2007: 159) argues that this is just a tactic which is deployed to make it appear as "having it both ways". Those who critique this as a construction of contemporary sexism are depicted as ugly, part of the 'feminist thought police' (ibid: 161), or 'not sophisticated enough to read through the irony' (Genz, 2009: 10).

It has been broadly recognised that the post-feminist sensibility has a significant resonance with neoliberal ideologies (Gill, 2016; Gill and Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2015). The emphatic focus on individualism and the prominence of the autonomous, self-regulating subject characterises both post-feminism and neoliberalism (Gill, 2007). Thus, post-feminist femininity is argued to have been constituted partly through neoliberal ideas that individuals should be free, ungoverned and unregulated by the state which is perceived as tyrannical and oppressive (Hall, 2011). They value above all else 'competition, entrepreneurialism, market participation, privatisation, lack of state intervention, individual responsibility, surveillance, assessment, and managerialism' (Phoenix, 2003 cited in Budgeon, 2011: 54). The idealised neoliberal subject is expected to psychologically internalise these values and truly desire self-actualisation and self-sufficiency (Kingfisher, 2007). Therefore, neoliberalism is a rationality which informs 'not only what kinds of institutions we should have, but also what kind of subjects we should be' (ibid: 94). In this sense neoliberalism has shifted from a political and social movement to a mode of Foucauldian governmentality shaping conduct towards the pursuit of specific desired objectives (Rose, 1999). Neoliberal governmentality produces individuals that are autonomous, self-monitoring and that do not perceive

themselves as constrained by external controls. Furthermore, neoliberal subjects are required to take responsibility for risks which were previously considered to be governmental obligations (Inoue, 2007). It is claimed that this governmentality 'quite literally "gets inside us" to materialise or constitute our subjectivities' (Hook, 2007 cited in Gill and Scharff, 2013: 8).

If women were once considered a "reserve army of labour", they have become central to a restructured economy and have, moreover, been considered as the 'ideal neoliberal subjects' (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 52). They are argued to benefit from the conditions of post-feminism and neoliberalism by experiencing unparalleled amounts of freedom, individuality, and choice. But, the new femininities are offered to young women only so long as they 'take advantage of educational and occupational opportunities, pursue successful careers, achieve economic independence, delay motherhood, and become full participants in consumer culture' (Budgeon, 2011: 68). Neoliberal governmentality therefore shapes feminine subjectivities to adhere to normative ideals. According to McRobbie, young women's 'bodies, ... labour power and their social behaviour are now the subject of governmentality to an unprecedented degree' (2001: 361). McRobbie (2007) terms this the "new sexual contract" through which young women are rewarded by neoliberal discourses by taking up these forms of empowered femininity. She argues that this sexual contract permits the renewal of gender inequity, classed inequalities and patriarchal norms as they are overshadowed by the visibility of the successful female. Furthermore, the new femininity is offered to young women as a substitute for feminism; they are given freedom so long as they disregard feminist politics and activism (McRobbie, 2009). Hence, feminism is regarded by young women as 'a collective movement which robs them of the opportunity to navigate their lives self-responsibly' (Scharff, 2012: 1). Hence, the power of neoliberal governmentality works through, rather than against, the subject (McRobbie, 2009, 2015).

Class and the Feminisation of Success

'Being and becoming, practising and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes' (Skeggs, 1997: 98).

In establishing which young women are successful and which are not, class remains, according to Walkerine, Lucey and Melody (2001), the most reliable indicator, particularly in the UK context. The young woman who is excelling in educational attainment and the labour market is highly visible, particularly within the widespread worries of girl "outperforming" boys. Young women, rather than youth as a whole, are constructed as the most able to succeed in this postfeminist and neoliberal condition through identifying with new femininities. Class divisions are obscured by the omnipresence of the successful female and the focus upon individualism, equal opportunities, and meritocracy. Moreover, as we argue here, structural inequalities have an unprecedented effect on the differential life trajectories of young women. Class remains decisive in who succeeds and who does not and there is evidence that class still

matters upon leaving Higher Education: the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report June 2015 indicates that elite firms are sidelining the UK's bright working-class applicants in favour of privileged, "polished" candidates who articulate themselves in a certain way, and in the right accent. Those who have experienced foreign travel and the kind of social situations, such as large dinners, are seen as helpful to business and are considered safe bets (Ashley, Duberley, Somerlad, Scholarios, 2015).

In education, the discourse of the successful female and the failing male has become a well-known paradigm. Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, league tables are released in order to study the efficacy of the policy changes (Ringrose, 2007). The results show girls as outperforming boys across the spectrum and the figures are taken up and inflated by the media, creating a huge moral panic about failing boys and a "crisis of masculinity" (ibid). What is significant in this postfeminist positioning of girls' success is the reinstallment of a binary gender order because the success of young women is framed first and foremost as being detrimental to young men.

Success is understood as contingent upon sufficient effort and appropriate personal choices, and failure is constructed as idleness, poor individual decisions, or defiance. In this frame structural accounts of (persisting) inequalities have a hard position; certainly in the political sphere where the discourses following proclamations that "the class war is over" (Tony Blair, 1999 in Tyler, 2015) or 'society can no longer see […] social classes' (Margaret Thatcher, 1987 in Tyler, 2015) have given public legitimacy to the responsibilisation of the individual or the individualisation of responsibility. As Tyler (2015: 497) puts it so eloquently: 'understanding contemporary transformations in class-relations […] has been made more difficult by the three-decade-long struggle on the part of elites to jettison class as the lens through which to perceive and contest social and economic inequalities'.

The "retreat from class" has also been documented within sociology where some struggles have emerged around it during the 1990s (see Skeggs 2004). The disorientating effects of post-industrialisation on understandings of class-relations and subjectivities as life projects of the self have led Beck (1992) to argue that class has become a "zombie category", and some more recent attempts to incorporate cultural aspects of class formations[2] have suggested that class antagonism and resentment has diminished in neoliberal Britain (Bennett et all, 2009 in Tyler, 2015). Beck's analysis is not to be taken at face value as his intention was to outline how class decomposition and individualization were central to the imperatives of neoliberal policy with its intensive governing through competition over resources in every area of social life. Dismantling class identification or "class solidarity" has been perceived to be one of the effects of the transition from industrial to post-industrial or financial capitalism in which "austerity measures" are not fiscal policy but also a normative technology. Recent years have been productive of discourses where "the poor" are blamed for their poverty and where the populace is called upon to disassociate from "the poor" and particularly from the most abject of all - "the welfare dependent" (see also Shildrick and MacDonald,

2013; Allan et al. 2015). Indeed, as McRobbie (2004) and Jensen and Tyler (2015) argue, the public humiliation of those failing to adhere to middle-class standards and their creation as abject has become so common place in the media that it is justifiable to speak of a veritable cultural economy of disgust. Driven by anti-welfare common sense narratives which foster class disassociation and a lack of solidarity, consent for policies of impoverishment[3] are thereby incited.

This state of affairs was made possible by the cultural celebration of meritocratic achievements by the New Labour Government of 1997-2010 which itself followed on from Thatcherism, and supported equality of opportunities and self-made success (McNeil, 2012). Attempts to embed this in legislation such as the 2010 Equality Act have been criticised for betraying liberal roots, namely the centrality of market values and the conflation of moral responsibility with rational action (Burton, 2014). In addition it embraced financial capitalism and focused other policy efforts on the privatization of welfare and the deregulation of financial markets (Tyler, 2015).

Since then, the coalition government (2010-2015) has followed suit by focusing upon the gender gap in education rather than the class gap (McNeil, 2012). They have disregarded the structural forces that produce and reproduce inequalities by endorsing a behavioural perspective on disadvantage. The promise of equal opportunities is encompassed in "the new meritocracy" (McRobbie, 2001), which is distinctively gendered in that young women are imagined as the 'standard bearers for the new economy, as creators of wealth' (ibid: 362). All young women are subjected to the truth effects (Foucault, 1980) of the endlessly repeated discourse around the feminisation of success which thereby generates normative expectations of success and succeeding. Despite this, the gap between the rich and the poor is constantly increasing and social mobility rates in the UK are some of the lowest in the world (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). According to Savage (2000), middle-class practices have become the ideal standard and thus to succeed entails making the right (and therefore, middle-class) choices. What was once conceived as "bourgeois femininity" (Walkerdine and Ringrose, 2006: 36) is now simply normative (new) femininity/ies and upward mobility has shifted from being a possibility to a necessity (Walkerdine, 2003). This serves to conceal, demonise and eviscerate the women who are not successful, constructing them as "other" (Francombe-Webb and Silk, 2015). Young women must take responsibility for success (or failure) regardless of the constraints or privileges that they experience. Therefore, the new femininities and the focus upon successful young women may assist the concealment of the ever prevalent structural inequalities by validating individualist ideology.

Bourdieu (1986) contended that possession of social and cultural capital is important as they are convertible into symbolic capital – power, which ultimately increases an individual's value. The 'acquisition, conversion and accrual' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 475) of these capitals entails an embodiment into habitus. The middle- and upper-classes are the possessors of these capitals, and therefore habitus facilitates the

production, maintenance, and reproduction of class inequalities whilst also reducing the chances for social mobility. When examining femininity, cultural capital is a particularly interesting concept to consider. Cultural capital must be legitimised in order for it to be converted into symbolic capital and therefore, capitalised into power. Femininity does not hold the same social significance as masculinity, thus the embodiment of femininity does not lead to symbolic capital in the same way as masculinity does for men (Skeggs, 2005). This may be further constraining for working-class women, Skeggs (1997) suggests, as representations of working-class young women work to further inhibit their capacity to obtain other capitals. Working-class femininity may be determined as a form of cultural capital through which access to symbolic capital is obstructed. Hence this individualistic condition, within which female success is considered normative, aids the social exclusion of working-class young women. However, in discussing how class impacts on young new femininities it is worthwhile not assuming homogeneity and pointing to the debates around class as an analytical tool in understanding and conceptualising exclusion and deprivation. Furthermore, classed subjectivities are also intersecting and dependent on other dimensions such as ethnicity, nationality, migration experiences and so forth.

Successes and Failures in Education and Work

Life course research by Walkerdine et al (2001) showed significant discrepancies in accessing Higher Education between middle-class and working class women and whilst not generalizable, this research provides a different image than that offered by the government of equality of opportunities and meritocracy. Since the Millenium there have been significant developments in terms of the education system. The Coalition Government introduced new requirements which state that young people should now stay in some form of education or training until 18 whilst, at the same time, it withdrew the Educational Maintenance Allowance scheme in 2010, which may have enabled working-class young people to accrue social and cultural capital. Furthermore, in 2010 the Coalition Government proposed that the tuition fees for universities were to rise from £3000 a year introduced by New Labour to £9,000 a year, justifying the reduction in governmental funding through neoliberal values of self-enterprise (Evans and Riley, 2015). This sparked outrage and led to protests being held across the UK, but especially since 2010. The ICoF (The Independent Commission on Fees) was set up in order to determine the impact of the increase in fees. A report produced by the ICoF insisted that there was not a distinct drop-off in relation to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds (ICoF, 2012). However, in another report it was stated that students from advantaged backgrounds are nearly 10 times more likely to go to university than those from disadvantaged backgrounds (ICoF, 2014). So although the rise in university fees may initially not have had a substantive effect on students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university, the access gap is still a noteworthy figure. In relation to young women, the ICoF ascertained that the number of working-class women going to university had fallen by 3.7 percent since 2011 (ICoF, 2014). However, this figure made now headlines due to the fact that the number of working-class males had

declined even more; another example of the crisis of masculinity acting as a smokescreen and masking ever prevalent class inequalities.

There is a similar situation in the labour market: although working-class young women are investing more time into education they are still not experiencing success like the privileged. As argued by Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 35), 'the tendency for [all] young women to remain in full-time education… is partly explained by the demand of service sector employers for educated female workers'. However, it is working-class young women that are being relegated into lower-paid feminised sectors. These sectors are underpinned by risk and uncertainty and working-class young women often struggle to find security as they cannot rely on their families or social networks for financial support, a stable home and social capital in similar ways to middle-class young women (Harris, 2004). The idea that the self 'has to be reflexively made' (Giddens, 1991: 3) puts forward the individual as able to adapt to insecurity by rationalising it as freedom.

Clearly, the restructuring of the labour market, due to the deindustrialisation of society, has meant that "men's work" such manufacturing, has experienced a large decline (Walkerdine et al 2001; Harris, 2004) while female employment has undergone a dramatic increase due to the introduction of the service and communications sectors which have typically demanded feminine characteristics such as 'service, empathy, communication, nurturance [and] to be looked-at-ness' (Ringrose, 2013: 12). It is expected that workers perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and present an aesthetic of femininity (Adkins, 2002). Furthermore, where the labour market has seen the influx of part-time, zero-hour, and short-term work which creates feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, women are imagined as being the most able to reconstruct any feelings of insecurity as feelings of flexibility and freedom (Harris, 2004). Thus (some) women become symbolic of neoliberal ideology where individuality, personal responsibility and hard work breeds success. Therefore, the narrative surrounding young women is often contradictory. On the one hand, they are celebrated for their ability to individually succeed and, on the other hand, they create angst due to the "feminisation of education" and the consequent crisis of masculinity. They are held responsible for all of the social changes in society, whether good or bad (Walkerdine et al, 2001). This inherently postfeminist and neoliberal characterisation of success is troubling, not least because it serves to legitimise the social condition of risk and insecurity (Ringrose, 2013).

Walkerdine et al (2001) argue that the conception of individuals as autonomous neoliberal subjects is idealistic. All young women are led to believe that they have the same opportunities and the ability to succeed through neoliberal ideologies. Hence, a form of neoliberal governmentality has emerged through the introduction of "cooling out" strategies which aim to reshape young women's ambitions in order to coincide with their class. The strategy aims to minimise disappointment 'caused by the gap between the ideology of "chances" and the reality of lack of chances' (Jones, 1991: 170). The economy is dependent upon young women's labour and therefore, it is essential for

many young women to fail in order for the spaces within the low-skilled and poorly paid sectors to be filled (Harris, 2004). Although somewhat overgeneralised, it seems that female employment often entails working-class young women entering the service and communications sectors and middle-class young women entering the professional and managerial sectors (Walkerdine et al 2001). For working-class women, work is thus characterised by internal segregation and segmented opportunities rather than by lacking aspiration. The danger and risk for working class women is about becoming the "right kind" of aspiring subjects and demonstrating class appropriate ambitions which are neither excessive nor misdirected (Allen, 2014). Similar to Skeggs' (1997) work on achieving respectable femininity, aspiration here is differentiated by class and in need of being displayed in class appropriate ways.

Nevertheless, although middle-class young women are entering previously inaccessible sectors they become devalued as males are entering the finance and technology sectors which are more esteemed in contemporary society (Walkerdine et al 2001; Harris, 2004). Thus, 'patterns of inequality are no less stark, just differently organised' (Walkerdine et al, 2001:4) and this becomes consolidated under ongoing "austerity measures" which are set to shape people's lives in the UK in the near future.

If becoming successful is one of the main conditions of performing the new femininities this is a contradictory site for young women, and it extends beyond education and work into family life and parenting expectations (for a wider discussion of how this affects family life and parenting see Allen et al 2015; De Benedictis, 2012; Gillies, 2011; Tyler, 2008). According to Walkerdine et al (2001), young women experience difficulties in handling femininity and the desire for excellence, which has traditionally been associated with masculinity. The neoliberalisation of the education system means that it is traditionally masculine qualities which are demanded. As put forth by Reay (2001: 165) there is a 'growing emphasis on measured outputs, competition and entrepreneurship' and this demands 'the assertiveness and authority of masculinity'.

Therefore, as the education system requires masculine qualities and the labour market increasingly entails aesthetics of femininity these young women must create a complex combination of the two in order to succeed. Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006: 37) term this a "postfeminist fantasy" wherein young women are able to conform to the neoliberal ideal of individualised success whilst maintaining their femininity. This is not that simple, as exemplified by Adkins (2002) who argues that men are actually more able to enact feminine attributes than women are able to perform masculinity. This may help to explain why men are still achieving higher status than women in the workforce. Successful women experience high volumes of pressure and anxiety about failure and never being good enough (Wyn, 2000; Walkerdine et al 2001) and Harris (2004) argues whilst that middle-class young women who face these feelings are persistently helped back onto the right track by their parents or through therapy, working-class young women do not have access to these resources. Regaining confidence, it seems, also has class dimensions. When working-class young women fail, by contrast, they are not

constructed in emotional or psychological terms like their middle-class counterparts, but rather constructed as defiant or criminalised (Harris, 2004). Middle-class young women's problems are likely to be seen as temporary and remediable, whilst their working-class counterparts may be constructed as innately bad, or unfixable. The only similarity between the two experiences is that both problems are located within the individual, thus reinforcing an individualist ideology, while essentialising one group and concealing class divisions.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to underline the prominence of social class in the construction of new femininities. Whilst the success of discourses of individualist achievement may uphold the idea that class has become less relevant, we have forged the argument here that this discursive strategy does not hold true. Instead, the feminisation of success was highlighted as a process which conceals class divisions. The discussion has shown that it is generally the middle-class young women who are outperforming others rather than all young women. However, it is noteworthy that middle-class women also experience troubles following the ideals of the "new femininities".

New femininities construct success as a mainstream experience for young women. The essentialist postfeminist idea that men and women are innately different adheres to this notion as it pits successful girls against failing boys. This serves to characterise young women and men as homogenous categories and entails the assumption that gender equality has been achieved. Furthermore, the neoliberal ideal of individualism constructs success as obtained through making the right choices and extensive effort. Women who fail are rendered unimaginable or must take personal responsibility for their failings. Through this narrative, class as a concept is concealed. But, as we show here, the pervasiveness of structural forces still determines opportunities, resources, and privileges that are on offer to young women, making femininity and success inextricably classed. Working-class young women struggle to adhere to the ideal of performing the new femininities. Yet neither is the middle-class woman's path to success always smooth, as she must learn to manage her femininity with attributes of masculinity and the relentless pressure to succeed. In this sense, regardless of success or failure, working-class or middle-class background, the ideology of the new femininities generates in young women the feeling of never achieving the "right" femininity and never being good enough.

Given the ostensible structural changes that have been effected by Welfare Reforms in recent years a feminist politics needs to (continue to) address the ways in which the neoliberal success narrative is damaging because of its divisiveness. "Success" in a feminist reformulation might best be articulated and vocalised as the defeat of individualising narratives and policies; "success" would be to undo the self-responsibilisation inherent in neoliberal discourses. It would mean exposing the insidious effects of the absorption and appropriation of feminist goals by neoliberal

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discourses which gloss over structural explanations for inequalities. At the juncture of a Post-Brexit culture, where class resentment has already been reformulated into a particular racialised version – namely a "political economy of disgust" (Tyler 2015) towards the "welfare exploiting migrant" and unleashing more widespread xenophobia – the "feminisation of success" risks to become a particularly elusive to most young women but the very few already relatively privileged.

Notes:

1. See also Giddens' notion of the reflexive self (1991) and "choice biographies".
2. It should be noted that Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) work has been hugely influential in developing a different approach to analysing class.
3. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 initiated by the Liberal-Conservative coalition government 2010-2015 commenced a series of policies of impoverishment such as the Household Benefit Cap, the "Bedroom Tax" (Under-Occupancy Penalty), new work capability assessments with "fit for work" tests, benefit sanctions, the introduction of universal credits, the abolition of the Independent Living Fund and changes to child support. All of which have had profound impacts on the those less wealthy, attested to by the growth of food banks and homelessness and captured in Ken Loach's film "I, Daniel Blake". The same time period has also witnessed the recovery of the financial sector and its populace, some discussion of, but ultimately an inability to tackle, tax avoidance contributing to the growing inequality in post-millenial and now Post-Brexit Britain rather than diminishing it (see, for instance, Dorling, 2014; Sayer, 2016)

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