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'Neoliberal feminism': Legitimising the gendered moral project of austerity

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Abstract

This article focuses on how middle-class women identify with 'neoliberal feminism' within the context of UK austerity by drawing on interviews with 17 women in Leeds, London and Brighton during 2014 and 2015. The article argues that the way in which these women identify with, understand and discuss whom feminism is important for, converges with a range of values present in the austerity discourse. In line with the principles of 'late modernity', feminism is spoken through an individualised lifestyle discourse, with an emphasis on the need to be resilient and have a positive mental attitude to deal with forms of inequality. Due to the particularity of the context, women create distance, and classed and racialised distinctions away from women who are suffering in the current context. This distancing is crucial to the maintenance of the austerity project, since, instead of helping to put an end to gender inequality, this form of feminism aids the legitimation of hierarchical relationships and gendered socio-economic inequalities. This is produced via a form of indifference towards those who are understood as 'bad subjects', perceived as being unable to manage and who are thus undeserving of help. Mapping out the contours of the entanglement of feminist narratives with an anti-emancipatory narrative is thus crucial for widening understandings of the politics of austerity and contemporary engagements with feminism.

Keywords

austerity, class, feminist identification, neoliberal feminism, women

Introduction

This article brings scholarly debates on the politics of UK austerity and the 'neoliberalisation' of feminism (Farris & Rottenberg, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018) into dialogue with empirical research on feminist self-identification. Drawing on interview accounts with 17 middle-class women in Leeds, London and Brighton during 2014 and 2015,

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this article demonstrates how a particular form of 'neoliberal feminism' has converged with a range of values present within austerity discourse. In line with the principles of 'late modernity', feminism is spoken through an individualised lifestyle discourse, with an emphasis on the need for resilience and a positive mental attitude to deal with forms of inequality. Due to the particularity of the context, women create distance, and classed and racialised distinctions, from those suffering in the current context. This distancing is crucial to the maintenance of the austerity project, since, instead of helping to put an end to gender inequality, this form of feminism aids the legitimation of hierarchical relationships and gendered socio-economic inequalities. This is produced via a form of indifference towards those who are understood as 'bad subjects' – working-class single mothers and minority ethnic women – perceived as being unable to manage and who are thus undeserving of help. Mapping out the contours of the entanglement of feminist narratives with a profoundly anti-emancipatory narrative is thus crucial for widening understandings of the politics of austerity and contemporary engagements with feminism.

It is important to note here that the embedding of 'neoliberal feminism' within such a process of austerity does not mean, as some scholars have argued, that feminism is 'dead' (see Power, 2009). Such an argument is problematic since, as Lisa Adkins (2004) has previously contended, this is premised upon an assumption of what the proper objects of feminism should be. Attempting to define the parameters of feminism, or police its borders, can result in violent exclusions (Butler, 1994; Crenshaw, 1989; Rottenberg, 2018). Analysing the discourses and practices around the term 'neoliberal feminism' allows for an understanding of the complex ways in which this new feminist subject is being cultivated in the context of austerity. By focusing on this discussion, this article does not dismiss the fact that there are diverse and continuous forms of feminist engagement and activism taking place within this context.[1] Nor does it assert that only middle-class women hold such values. Additionally, it does not state that women have no empathy for those most affected by the austerity agenda. This distinct feminist position can be held in tandem with a concern for women as a group more widely. The arguments made here can therefore coexist with more affirmative and collective accounts of feminism in the context of austerity.

This article has four main parts: this first analyses the politics of UK austerity, exploring how it produces its own moral landscape. By demonstrating how this landscape is distinctly gendered and creates certain kinds of subject positions and sensibilities, the article then explains how this particular form of feminism can be seen as a productive site for the reproduction and legitimisation of dominant austerity values and discourses. The article then briefly unpacks the current feminist topography, drawing specific attention to the application of 'neoliberal feminism' by other feminist scholars. The following sections draw on interview data with 17 middle-class women to explore what they say about feminism – how they identify with it, what they understand it to be and for whom they think it is necessary. Having shown how this form of feminism is coalescing within the current context of austerity and explaining its distinctive traits, this article concludes by making suggestions about how we might raise questions to comprehend the limits of such a type of 'neoliberal feminism'.

The austerity agenda: Reproducing division and blame

Since 2010, in seeking to legitimise and gain consensus for the programme of UK austerity and welfare reform, successive Conservative governments have repeatedly stereotyped and stigmatised certain groups of people for diminishing social resources inside of the population. Migrants, single-mothers, people with disabilities and those in receipt of welfare have been demonised and misrepresented. These groups have frequently been portrayed in political terms as economically unproductive, who deplete, or are undeserving of state support, and which need confinement, regulation, or moral reform (Allen et al., 2015; Jensen &Tyler, 2015; Shildrick, 2018; Tyler, 2015). It is these groups (particularly disadvantaged groups of women) who have been disproportionately affected by austerity policies (Cracknel & Keen, 2016; Women's Budget Group [WBG], 2016). In speeches, policy documents and interviews, politicians have recurrently characterised these groups as being 'skivers', imagined in opposition to 'strivers' – good citizens who, George Osborne (former Chancellor of the Exchequer) described in 2012, help the nation recover by 'working hard and getting on'.

These classifications are highly gendered. The 'good citizen' combines the behaviour expected of the modern neoliberal subject with traditional gender roles (the loving wife and mother). The 'striver' not only withstands the consequences of the recession by being resilient and thrifty, but, at the same time, she helps to reinvigorate the economy and society by governing herself and her children in the 'right' ways (Allen & Taylor, 2012). In contrast, the 'bad' or 'failed citizen' is depicted as uncivilised, inactive and morally corrupt. The immigrant or working-class mother who has too many children in order to exploit the benefits system being typical examples. The 'skiver' is thus met with various kinds of contempt; shamed for her absence in the workforce and thus her inability to provide for her children (Allen et al., 2015; Jensen, 2012, 2014).

Media platforms have worked to reinforce these ideas, with reality television shows being used as 'proof' of the need for such drastic reform. Tracey Jensen (2014) terms this 'anti-welfare common sense', where political figures and the media tell stories of the problematic behaviour of these gendered figures – most notably 'White Dee'[2] – which they argue is supported by the excessive welfare state. These examples, Tracey Shildrick (2018, p. 787) notes, 'are often carefully timed and deployed in unison to ensure the message is received and to invoke public outrage towards the welfare state and those in receipt of out of work benefits (Allen, Mendick, Harvey, & Ahmed, 2015; Jensen, 2014; Jensen & Tyler, 2015)'. Shildrick (2018, p. 784) calls this 'poverty propaganda', which, she explains, works to stigmatise and label those experiencing poverty and related disadvantages as feckless, lazy and work-shy and cause confusion about the root causes of inequality. The production and circulation of these subject positions across political and media discourse demonstrate, as Allen et al. argue, 'how austerity has afforded opportunities to reboot classed and racialised discourses that have historically positioned black and working-class mothers outside of the hegemonic ideal of white, middle-class maternity (Gillies, 2007; Phoenix, 1991)' (Allen et al., 2015, p. 918). Austerity thus reproduces difference and inequality through gendered moral discourses (and economic policies).

Scholars have explored how consent for austerity and the dismantling of the welfare state have been achieved and legitimised through micro-level everyday discussions

(Shildrick, 2018; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Research has specifically focused on the different ways in which austerity is considered across, and within, different groups, through processes of Othering, distinction-making, distancing and boundary formation (Bramall, 2016; Dhaliwal & Forkert, 2015; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Stanley, 2016). For those labelled as 'strivers' by the government, scholarship has shown that there is often a process of boundary-making and differentiation between themselves and classed and racialised 'Others'. Exploring how members of the public made sense of the fairness of austerity, Liam Stanley (2016) noted how the morally 'undeserving poor' were the focus of such debates. Participants made moral distinctions between the 'squeezed hardworking middle' and 'undeserving Others'. Gill Valentine (2014) observed similar behaviour. When discussing austerity, middle-class respondents tended to identify and condemn 'chav' culture, reinforcing individualised, less compassionate attitudes towards such groups. Research has also demonstrated how cultural mechanisms such as reality television tend to feature in such narratives, where protagonists can appear as evidence when making distinction between 'us' and 'them' (see Allen et al., 2014). Describing the use of such boundary-making language, Imogen Tyler, drawing on the work of Joe Rigby (2014), has argued that when 'the precarity effected by neoliberalism is not confined to those living with poverty, the antagonism between capital and living labour is no longer concentrated in specific places of work, but traverses the whole of society (Rigby, 2014: 87)' (Tyler, 2015, p. 506). For the middle-classes, it therefore becomes even more important to set boundaries separating 'us' from 'them'.

It is important to find other unexplored and less obvious avenues that permit us to further unpack the micro-level classed and racialised dynamics of such legitimisation: more specifically, the avenues which allow us to understand the gendered micro-dynamics of these processes. Adding a new dimension to the politics of austerity, this article highlights how a specific form of 'neoliberal feminism' has become a key site through which consent for austerity is being achieved and legitimated, and a way through which moral, classed and racialised differences are further reproduced.

Unpacking the 'righting' of feminism

In the current context, feminism has (in various forms) become highly visible and a subject of interest. Feminist scholars have mapped this complex terrain, highlighting the emergence of diverse and (often) conflicting modalities of feminist thought and action. Attention has thus been drawn to representations of, and women's engagements with, feminism within and across different social spheres: in popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Favaro & Gill, 2018), across digital media (Gunn, 2015; Keller, 2015), within the corporate sphere (Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018), the global marketplace (Farris, 2017; Farris & Rottenberg, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018) and through emergent or ongoing anti-austerity, environmental, intersectional and collective forms of feminist activism (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Craddock, 2017).

Whilst some scholars have examined the linkage between certain forms of contemporary feminism and notions of visibility, autonomy, authenticity and radicalism (see for example, Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Craddock, 2017), others have highlighted their profoundly uneven visibility (Gill, 2016). The celebratory and optimistic framing of specific

forms of feminism has also been questioned, with feminist writers noting how various iterations – most notably 'corporate', 'lean in' and/or 'neoliberal feminism' – do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (see Farris, 2017; McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2018).

Catherine Rottenberg (2018) notes that with the 'neoliberalisation' of feminism, political critique and collective struggle to change society are replaced by psychologies of positivity, confidence and an entrepreneurial spirit to transform the self. Examining mainstream feminist self-help books from high-powered elite women in the USA, Rottenberg demonstrates how, in the clear majority of these texts, emphasis is placed on crafting a 'work–family balance'. Since it is most often working-class, black and minority ethnic and migrant women who serve as 'unacknowledged care workers that enable professional women to strive towards balance in their lives', 'neoliberal feminism', Rottenberg (2018, p. 20) posits, is 'helping to produce and legitimise the exploitation of these Other female subjects'. Her argument here is that 'neoliberal feminism' produces a splitting of self-hood: the worthy capital enhancing feminist subject and the 'unworthy' disposable female 'Other' who perform the reproductive and care work (p. 20). This form of feminism thus becomes complicit with, rather than critical of, capitalism and other systems of (classed, racialised and transnational) injustice (Gill, 2016, p. 617). From a somewhat different perspective, Sara Farris (2017) unpacks the entanglement of feminism with reactionary policies in Europe. Coining the term 'femonationalism', Farris documents attempts by right-wing parties and neoliberals to push xenophobic and racist politics through a women's rights agenda. She also highlights the involvement of various well-known feminists and femocrats in the framing of Islam as a characteristically misogynistic religion and culture.

Despite the particularity and contingency of the contexts in which they occur, Farris and Rottenberg note that these examinations (and others[3]) not only underscore 'the *righting* of feminism' but that it has become 'a global phenomenon' (2017, p. 8). Arguments made in this article thus give visibility to the ways in which this entanglement of feminism with neoliberalism is unfolding within a context of UK austerity. Examining the ways in which women themselves are producing a form of 'neoliberal feminism' through self-identification adds a novel dimension. It is this concern, with how broader political and socio-economic shifts interact and converge with feminist identification, that this article will now focus its attention upon.

Middle-class feminism in the context of austerity

This article draws on interviews with 17 self-identifying middle-class women from Leeds, London and Brighton, that took place during February 2014 to June 2015. These geographical areas were chosen due to the different impact austerity has had on each city, which is linked to discussions of their wider political, economic and social context. Fourteen of these women identified as white, one as Anglo-Indian, one as Indian and one as mixed other. Ten of these women worked in the public sector, five in the private sector and two were full-time students. These women were aged between 18 and 35. Discussions of feminism and equality centred on participants' opinions on gender roles, the state of gender inequality in the context of austerity, and attitudes towards, and feelings about,

feminism. These considerations are part of a wider project which understands the gendered impact of austerity by exploring the symbiotic relationship between how austerity is produced and legitimised by the state, and articulated and experienced by a diverse group of women in their everyday lives (Dabrowski, forthcoming).[4]

All 17 of the middle-class women that were interviewed self-identified with the term feminist. Identifying positively with the label being a feminist was synonymous with gender equality, opportunity and women's rights. Yet, despite feminism being understood as important for, and relevant to their lives feminist identification was also marked by contestations and ambiguities. Many answers had caveats: feminism should 'not go over the top', 'should not try to make women be better than men', or should 'not be too radical or extreme'. Comparisons were made between so-called 'new' feminism and 'serious, staunch' feminism, as Susan, a 30-year-old, white, account manager from Brighton noted: 'it doesn't have to be serious, staunch, it's not man-hating, it's just fun, self-loving . . . has more of an edge'. Francesca, a 28-year-old, Indian, accountant living in Leeds, also described her feminism by contrasting it to another form that she did not want to embody:

> We [feminists] have our choices and beliefs, which we incorporate into our lives, but not actively fighting, burning bras, shouting and stuff. We have beliefs, which we incorporate into society and our lives.

Contrarily, as shown by Susan and Francesca, feminist values of self-love and choice were manifestly valued and deemed appropriate characteristics to take up and embody. Serious, staunch, actively fighting, bra-burning feminism was, on the other hand, not. Two 'types' of feminism were therefore identified, which can be seen to be in direct conflict with each other: the 'old' – appearing to produce hostility and rejection – and the 'new' – which is valued and seen as necessary.

The large majority of women who self-identified as this 'new' type of feminist, articulated their identification through a neoliberal individualised narrative. Polly, a 27-year-old, white, occupational therapist from Leeds described her feminism as being 'an approach to life'. Continuing she said, 'it's about the way you are and the way that you think'. Madeline, a 24-year-old, white, complaints mediation officer living in Brighton, also described her feminism using similar terms. Explaining, she said: 'I'm a feminist, I'm pro-women, about equality, it's part of my lifestyle, it's part of who I am as an individual, what I think'. Finishing she said: 'I'm not actively [feminist] but yes, I'm a feminist.' Madeline and Polly's choice of words 'individual', 'approach' and 'lifestyle' thus produces a specific kind of feminist consciousness – internalising, rather than collectivising, feminist action.

This internalisation was evidenced when women discussed solutions to help eradicate continued signs of gender inequality. Most commonly, it was thought that individual women should be encouraged to 'ask' and 'do'. When discussing inequality between men and women in the workplace, Francesca said, 'there is unfairness but how many [women] would ask for a pay rise or a promotion themselves? Sometimes I think it just comes down to being assertive and confident'. Assertiveness and confidence were thus displayed as necessary traits that would aid women's progression. Noting that it was

'tough out there', Polly also drew on individual solutions to combat continued signs of gender inequality – women needed to be 'strong' and 'not pathetic' or 'weak'. According to Polly, a 'strong woman' had certain attributes: she would ask, she would speak up and she would be assertive. By contrast, 'pathetic', 'weak' women would not. Asking for more and being proactive echoes, as Mary Evans notes (2016, p. 444), 'the exhortations from highly paid female employees in the corporations of the United States who believe that individual woman have only to ask and they will be given'. Sheryl Sandberg, for instance, the COO of Facebook (2008–present), in her book *Lean In* (2013), urges women to be more assertive in their workplace through individualised means. By 'internalizing the revolution', 'triumphing over their internal obstacles' and 'actively leaning in to their careers', women, Sandberg argues, will be poised to 'close the leadership ambition gap' (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 66). A similar message can also be seen more recently within Ivanka Trump's how-to guide, *Women Who Work: Rewriting the Rules for Success* (2018).

Despite discussing the importance of feminism and gender equality, individualising discourses about the importance of agency, self-management and personal responsibility were thus present within women's interviews. In the case of such middle-class feminism, in line with the neoliberal emphasis on self-improvement, solutions are proposed via the individual. Challenges and effects brought about by broader political and socio-economic shifts were recoded as private matters to be managed by individually 'asking' and 'doing'. This not only shuns feminism's commitment to social solidarity, care and interdependence, as noted by Wendy Larner (2000) and Wendy Brown (2005), but also erases classed, gendered and racialised power differentials.

Creating and reinforcing distance and distinctions via resilience and 'bouncing-back'

Women's discussions about austerity, like their relationships with feminism, were complex and often contradictory. Women would frequently question and talk back to austerity discourse, expressing disaffection and distrust towards those in positions of privilege and power. When considering other women's experiences of austerity, middle-class women showed empathy towards their situations. It was women they felt – especially mothers – that had been most affected by welfare cuts and reform. Yet, when discussing this in further detail, women were expected, for example, to overcome and navigate through this landscape using a combination of intensive self-management and a positive mental attitude. Resilience and the ability to 'bounce-back' were two such traits that were deemed to be extremely necessary within this context.

The notion of resilience has become prominent in the last decade. Not only promoted and demanded within austerity discourse (Bramall, 2013), Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2018) have tracked where it has appeared across, and within, other domains, such as: public policy (Allen & Bull, 2018; Burman, 2018), the workplace (Gill & Orgad, 2015) and within different cultural and media forms (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Employed to train people (particularly women) with how to cope with stress, overwork and precariousness, Gill and Orgad (2018, p. 478) argue that, 'at the heart of these very different iterations is

the promotion of the capacity to "bounce-back" from difficulties and shocks whether this is getting divorced, being made redundant, or having one's benefits cut' (see also Neocleous, 2013). It is middle-class women, these scholars suggest, that have gradually taken centre stage as the 'idealised "bounce-backable" resilient neoliberal subject', which in turn 'renders "non-resilient" women redundant and disposable' (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 490).

Figured as another domain resilience discourse has colonised, the need to be resilient and 'bounce-back' was promoted as a key feminist message when middle-class women spoke about how to navigate through the impacts of austerity. Working as a content producer in London, Pippa, 27, noted that she had seen many redundancies in her firm during the early period of austerity (2011), most of those being female middle-managers. When discussing how women might 'weather the storm' of redundancy, Pippa said:

> I can imagine women who were affected by the recession, who lost their jobs going into reflection mode, thinking, 'what can I do?' To move them out of the hole they are in, they need to think outside the box, think about how to transfer skills.

Recognising that these women had been 'placed' in a 'hole' through no fault of their own, Pippa understood that changes to their employment were beyond their control. Nevertheless, resilience was promoted as a way to navigate through, and survive, the context and was assumed as a solution that would allow women to 'move out of the hole that they were placed in'. Women who were unable to actualise resilience and 'bounce-back' were then labelled by Pippa as being 'dwellers', or of 'dwelling'. Explaining she said, 'I don't mean that unkindly, but individuals who cannot see past an obstacle, who just make do'. As Mark Neocleous (2013) has argued, it is the 'good subject' that will survive and thrive in any situation. In this instance, the 'dweller' thus becomes the 'bad subject', unable to construct and/or transform themselves into the resilient austere citizen.

'Neoliberal feminism' thus converges here with the political rhetoric surrounding austerity. The figure of speech regarding those who 'just make do' ('the dweller') is interesting – it mirrors that of the 'skiver' discussed in an earlier section of this article. Theoretically, those who 'dwell' are simply not able to adapt and withstand disruption. Pippa continued, 'opportunities are there for everyone, it depends whether you have a glimmer of get up and go that will push you'. Pippa saw success (or the lack of it) as a product of self-responsibility, self-management and (a lack of) resilience. Those who do not have the 'glimmer of get up and go' are thus understood through the lens of individual pathologies and deficits – weakness, laziness, lack of motivation and poor choices.

Other women who also saw the gendered unfairness of the austerity programme drew on heroic individual stories as evidence that 'bouncing-back' was possible with a positive attitude and the 'right' values. Erica, a 25-year-old black woman, working as an account manager in London, acknowledged that women's experiences of austerity had been difficult; she herself had had trouble finding work after a year working abroad. During that time, she had navigated her way through the benefit system and had been witness to women struggling to find work, whilst having to care for children, with the constant threat of sanctioning and benefit changes. Yet, she labelled most of those women that she had observed struggling at the job centre as 'not having the right attitude'. This,

she said, had affected their ability to 'bounce-back'. Contrasting her experience with 'a lot of people in that situation', Erica gestured that the reason she was now in a better position was because of her strength of character.

Resilience discourse, in the case of 'neoliberal feminism' – and with other forms and iterations – has heavily classed undertones. Through an emphasis on, or idealisation of, character and resilience, middle-class feminists produce particular subjectivities and understandings of social problems and their solutions. Women who appropriate 'productive' feminist values (by having the economic, physical and psychological resources to actualise resilience) are seen to possess the necessary tools to 'weather the storm'. If women cannot become resilient, their struggles become framed, as Dorothy Bottrell notes, as 'personal crises or accomplishments decoupled from economic and social circuits of accumulation and dispossession' (2013, in Gill & Ograd, 2018, p. 479). Despite initially having sympathy for their situation, 'neoliberal feminism' works to further 'Other' women who, it is suggested, lack the psychological (and economic) tools needed to overcome precarious conditions (also see Gill & Orgad, 2018; Jensen, 2016). The particularity of 'neoliberal feminism' in the context of UK austerity can therefore be seen here – situation's outside women's control become understood as a consequence of personal characteristics, rather than an outcome of structural inequalities reinforced by austerity and uneven wealth distribution. This framing of women's experience thus helps to silence any critique of structural inequality.

Drawing differences through feminism: Who needs feminism?

Those women who were unable to become resilient and 'bounce-back' were understood by middle-class 'neoliberal feminists' as being 'in need' of feminism. Feminism, it was argued, would equip women with the skills they would need to 'weather any storm'. By framing feminism in this way, moral difference, hierarchy and distinction could be further drawn through feminist identification, thus legitimising and further reproducing the moral project of austerity. Emphasising moral codes through feminism is nothing new; establishing difference through morality and hierarchy have underpinned certain forms of feminism throughout history. Victorian 'bourgeois feminist' campaigns, for example, assumed class and 'racial' division and moral hierarchy through forms of intervention and moral reform (Hall, 1992; Rendall, 1994). In the current context, this division and hierarchy are assumed through self-identification.

Anna, a 27-year-old, white, physiotherapist living in London, made this distinction clearly in relation to working-class women. Explaining why she thought feminism would be beneficial, she said, 'it might help the girls, to do more at school, work harder and have a goal, instead of thinking "I don't need to do this as I am just going to bring up a family or whatever"'. Here Anna indirectly draws distance between the traditional and the modern – 'them', who will just 'stay at home, bring up a family' and 'her', who already possesses and embodies all of these feminist characteristics. As Christina Scharff (2012) notes, the neoliberal self is often constructed in opposition to an allegedly powerless 'Other' (also see Williams, 2014). Such a form of 'Othering' becomes explicit in 'neoliberal feminism' and within a context of austerity. When explaining why the working-classes needed feminism, Anna said:

> A lot of working-class women are uneducated, don't know what feminism is, and if they are brought up into a life where they claim benefits, have kids, stay at home and don't work, they won't strive for anything different. I think that's why they don't. I just think they wouldn't have much of an understanding of feminism and kind of care about it because they will think that's what my life's going to be like.

Anna's narrative supports Beverley Skeggs's (1997, 2004) claim that definitions of class often entwine ideas of a person's moral as well as economic value, linking the working-class with a non-modern, degenerate lifestyle. Working-class women's (assumed) lack of feminist identification is thus characterised by Anna through a focus on morality and lifestyle. This description of women – as being uneducated, claiming benefits, not working, and 'not striving for anything different' – mirrors the depiction of the gendered figure of the 'skiver' within austerity discourse and the reason it is claimed that they are suffering within a context of cuts and reform. Women's differing morals, values and lifestyle are also assumed by Anna as the reason why feminism is not 'understood' or 'cared about'. The 'inferior', 'uneducated', 'dependent', working-class woman is thus said to need feminism to release her from the dependency of her lifestyle, and to enable her to overcome her struggle independently.

Middle-class women drew on the attributes of 'drive', 'education' and 'ambition' to define and defend their own position as knowing about and thinking that they need feminism less than 'Other' women. As Anna said, 'maybe we don't need it as much; we already have the drive and ambition to do what we want to do'. This statement reasserts her class position, in which she distanced herself from the uneducated, traditional women in need of feminism. As Stephanie Lawler (2005, p. 429) argues, 'to distinguish oneself from the working-class is crucial to middle-class identity' – this is of utmost importance when the precarity produced by neoliberalism and crisis is not restricted to those living and experiencing poverty. The idea of 'needing feminism' is thus a way of building and reinforcing such class boundaries amongst women, since as Skeggs (2004) notes, 'middle-classness' is about what is good, normal, appropriate and proper. Middle-classness in the context of austerity encompasses those 'hard-working' people who, as Evans (2015, p. 148) notes, 'have properly understood the ideal relationship of the citizen to the state' – they provide for themselves and they work hard. 'Neoliberal feminism' is thus understood and framed as being middle-class, used to draw distinctions between middle-class feminists and those in 'need' of feminism. This creates distance between those who are seen as morally worthy and those who are dismissed as failures of self-governance. The indifference of the 'good/productive' feminist towards such 'failures' is constitutive of this feminist position.

Culture and feminism: Non-white women and 'Other' cultures

Middle-class women also pointed to other cultures and parts of the world that they thought needed feminism. 'Culture', like class, was used to dismiss these women as 'victims of culture' and to cement their position as self-responsible, individualised feminists. Liberal feminists from Mary Wollstonecraft onwards have drawn upon histories of 'civilisation', which frame the progressive history of women and the family in the West

at their centre and their idealised and domesticated role as characterising the modern commercial societies of the West. Such progress was indicated through comparisons with the harems and polygamy of an undifferentiated Orient, and the burdened and labouring women of 'savage' populations (Ware, 1992). In the current context, progress has now been framed in comparison to the figure of the Muslim woman, which has taken shape within a background of shifts in multiculturalism, and the production of 'dangerous' Muslim 'Others' (Mirza & Meetoo, 2018, p. 228). The reification of their cultural/religious difference, and in particular, the preoccupation with their over-determined dress, has, Mirza and Meetoo note, made them 'an Islamophobic signifier, symbolic of the "barbaric Muslim Other" that has become more sustained in the contemporary western imagination since the terrorist attacks of 9/11' (2018, p. 228; see also Mirza, 2013; Rashid, 2016). This, Angela McRobbie has argued, pre-empted 'the formation of critical solidarities amongst women from a range of backgrounds and displacing possible post-colonial criticism of the construction of the west as progressive' (in Scharff, 2012, p. 62).

When discussing her life in the UK, Mia told me that she felt 'happy' and 'lucky' to live here, having seen the 'horrendous' treatment of Muslim women abroad on the news. Explaining that she felt the 'Muslim world' was 'particularly hostile to women', Mia can be seen to be drawing on the well-worn binary that positions the liberated West in opposition to the subjugated rest (in this case the 'Muslim world') (Khan, 2005; Pedwell, 2012; Scharff, 2012). In order to reinforce her understanding of non-western women as oppressed subjects, Mia drew on examples of cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage. Talking about FGM, Mia said, 'it's horrible, I mean it's atrocious, these poor women having to go through that over there, it's just awful'. Such cases of 'ethnicised' forms of gender-based violence often feature, not only in these women's narratives, but also in state multicultural discourses, some feminist literature and western media. These cases, Mirza and Meetoo (2018) have previously noted, are often held up as evidence of backward and barbaric Muslim traditions, to represent their lack of civility relative to western models of gender equality (see also Meetoo & Mirza, 2007). The rationalised European woman therefore, Farris writes, becomes seen as 'the standard against which to measure women from elsewhere' (2012, p. 186; see also Farris, 2017), a standard employed to justify an anti-immigrant agenda and imperialist interventions in countries with majority Muslim populations.

Yet the feminist gaze was not simply turned towards other parts of the world, but looked inwards at the continued oppression of women in the UK. This inward gaze was largely focused on the plight of Muslim women and their assumed lack of feminist values. Despite Asian women being most affected by the economic and symbolic effects of austerity – Asian women in some of the poorest families will be £2247 worse off and black and Asian lone mothers stand to lose about 15 and 17% of their net income by 2020 (WBG and Runnymede Trust, 2017) – inequality was assumed to be the result of a cultural lack of feminist values. Describing herself as an empowered feminist woman, Anna said, 'all my doors have been opened for me as far as they can be'. This, she said, was partly due to her family pushing her to be successful and independent. Imagining her experience in relation to others, she mused: 'maybe if I was brought up in a Muslim family, rather than a white British family, I might not find myself in a similar situation?' Continuing she said:

> Each culture is very different. I work a lot with the Bengali Muslim culture at work and they don't have feminism at all, they are the complete opposite, women must cover up, cook, clean, look after the kids, a male must be present when they are with another male, like it's the completely opposite way.

Through this prolonged focus on cultural difference, Anna draws a distinction between her own experience – growing up in a white British family – and the experience of (racialised) 'Others' – in this case, Bengali Muslim women. Describing these women's experiences as 'the opposite way' to her own, Anna infers from her own observation that familial regulation, specifically patriarchal gendered control, means Bengali Muslim women do not have feminism and thus, have fewer doors open to them. In other words, governed by culture, Bengali Muslim women do not possess the same values that allow white British women to be successful and independent. Inequality is therefore explained through 'culture', which becomes a structuring force. 'Culture' thus homogeneously determines the behaviour of those who share it and fails to account for its constant creation and revision (see Alexander, 1996; Brah, 1996).

Yet, it was not just white women, but women from other minority groups that also drew on this Islamophobic discourse in order to position themselves in progressive, 'neoliberal feminist' terms. Mia, who identified as Anglo-Indian, distinguished between Indian culture and Muslim culture, employing the 'traditional/progressive' dichotomy. Mia stated that Indians were less 'traditional' because they 'wanted their children to be successful', they 'valued education' and 'wanted girls to have good jobs'. Success was therefore framed in neoliberal terms. In contrast, Mia described Muslim culture as 'having a lot of inequality' stating that Muslim women had 'a lack of freedom' and 'a lack of education'. Through this discussion, despite not being able to fully embody a white British subject position, through this boundary-making process, Mia could position herself closer to the 'enlightened' trajectory of the middle-class 'neoliberal feminist' and away from the racialised non-feminist 'Other'.

Just as for the working-class woman discussed above, feminism was seen as a tool which would 'enlighten' the non-feminist 'Other' and help to 'save' her from the dependency of her traditional culture and backward religious ways. Appropriating feminist values was seen as the route to 'empowerment' which would raise Muslim women out of their hapless plight (see also Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1994). By explaining inequality through culture, the solution for these women is therefore to 'step out of culture' (Scharff, 2012), and appropriate white, middle-class feminism. Instead of, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994, p. 93) notes, 'white men saving brown women from brown men', brown women can now save themselves, using feminism. If minority women are unequal, within such a narrative, this is due to their 'backward' culture, and not structural inequalities borne of the austerity programme. This indifference from the 'good/productive' feminist towards such 'victims' is, once again, constitutive of this feminist position.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a certain type of 'neoliberal feminism' has converged with austerity policies and discourses, helping to legitimate austerity measures, which

reproduce inequality. An analysis of middle-class women's understandings of, affiliations with, and positioning within, feminism has illustrated how this convergence takes place via narratives of morality, culture, distance, distinction and blame. 'Neoliberal feminism' paradoxically acknowledges inequality – between men and woman, and among women – only to disavow it. Framing success as within reach if women 'ask' and 'do', this form of feminism helps to displace the current social, cultural and economic forces producing inequality – especially in relation to gender, classed and 'racial' differences – by placing an individual's misfortunes into their own hands. Despite showing empathy for women's experiences, this language thus de-contextualises and naturalises such experiences.

It is not just its focus on individualism and responsibility, but the production of the feminist through a moral hierarchy which makes this form of feminism particularly dangerous. In line with the language of resilience, hard work and responsibility used by right-wing politics and building from a previous history, 'neoliberal feminism' becomes an active force field to reinforce these political values and discourses, helping to mute the language of inequality and unfairness under an 'equalities umbrella'. This particular form of feminism not only serves to create and reinforce distance and distinctions between those struggling from austerity, but also to blame them for their own suffering. It distinguishes between those deemed to be uneducated, traditional and dependent, and those who are educated, modern and independent. It suggests that those who are suffering should learn how to be a particular kind of feminist in order to cope. The 'proper/good feminist' and the 'woman in need of feminism' therefore become the binaries through which classed and racialised differences are drawn. This precludes any kind of solidarity across gender, class or 'race'. This form of feminism thus becomes a means through which inequality is exacerbated, not reduced.

The convergence of 'neoliberal feminism' and austerity's moral project is crucial to understand how contemporary forms of inequality are produced and justified through 'good', 'bad' and, as a result, 'indifferent' gendered subject positions and sensibilities. However, it is also important to note its implications for wider issues of feminist identification. While it might be tempting to see 'neoliberal feminism' as undermining feminist goals of collective change, the task for feminism in this current context is to remember that the convergence of feminism outlined here into a programme of austerity does not mean that feminism is 'dead' (Adkins, 2004). Instead, it is important to see how feminism has evolved into different forms, whereby in the context of austerity, the configuration of 'neoliberal feminism' can be seen as another austerity discourse, reproducing and legitimising its principles. It is by understanding these processes of affiliations, within such a context, that we can raise questions to comprehend the limits of this particular form of feminism and strive to challenge it.

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Notes

1. The implementation of austerity reforms by the UK government have added impetus to feminist politics and campaigning (see Craddock, 2017). The Fawcett Society made a legal challenge to the emergency budget in 2011. There have also been other online campaigns by smaller grassroots feminist groups such as Focus E15, Black Activists Against the Cuts and Feminist Fight Back, which are headed by working-class, black and minority ethnic women and anti-capitalist feminist collectives.
2. Deirdre Kelly, also known as 'White Dee', was the central protagonist in the reality television show *Benefits Street*, which aired on Channel 4 in 2014. The show 'documented' the lives of several residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham. The series was mentioned numerous times in the House of Commons and prompted political debate on the topic of welfare. 'White Dee' was often used as 'evidence' for the need for welfare reforms by certain MPs.
3. See, for example, the work of Fekete (2006), Bernstein (2007) and Eisenstein (2017).
4. Interviews with 61 women took place in Leeds, London and Brighton between March 2014 and May 2015. Fourteen interviews and two group discussions were conducted in Leeds, 19 interviews in London and 16 in Brighton. Women were from working- and middle-class backgrounds and identified as white, black, mixed race, Indian, Anglo-Indian and south Asian, aged 18–35 years.

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