Mavin S, Grandy G. A theory of Abject Appearance: Women elite leaders' intra-gender 'management' of bodies and appearance. *Human Relations* **2016, 69(5), 1095-1120.**

DOI link to article:

https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715609107

Date deposited:

12/09/2017

A theory of Abject Appearance: Women elite leaders' intra-gender 'management' of bodies and appearance

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Abstract

In this paper we develop a theory of Abject Appearance to explain women elite leaders' embodied identity work within a context of intra-gender relations. The theory of Abject Appearance illuminates a dynamic and dialectical process whereby women elite leaders 'manage' the ambiguities of their 'in-between' and 'abject' status. This process is understood as a possible material effect or consequence of women's abjection in organisations. Women elite leaders hold power through their formal positions, yet remain marginalised in social relations because their feminine bodies are out of place in organisations. In a qualitative study with women elite leaders we illustrate how the theme *Fascination with bodies and appearance* depicts a dialectical process of simultaneous disgust and attraction with women's bodies and appearance. We discuss how this material effect of abjection may be played out through two embodied identity work strategies in an intra-gender context, namely; *Shifting focus from the body and appearance* and *Achieving a professional balance*. We offer insights into how women's embodiment in elite leader roles may be constrained in a context of intra-gender relations. We suggest opportunities to strengthen women's agency by raising awareness to the theory of Abject Appearance and women leaders' associated body work.

Keywords

abjection, identity work, women elite leaders, embodiment, body work, intra-gender.

Introduction

There is a dearth of research into experiences of women elite leaders (Terjesen et al., 2009) and into how women relate to each other at work (e.g., Mavin, 2006; Rodriguez, 2013). Exploring women's relationships with women, however, comes with the risk of reducing issues to individual women rather than problematising these relations (Chesler, 2001; Mavin, 2006). We suggest that a better understanding of women's intra-gender relations can offer insights into women's lack of progress in organisations. Women are under-represented in elite leader positions despite growing North American, UK and EU governmental interventions to increase numbers appointed to company boards and senior public posts. Those women who achieve leader positions are intensely scrutinised, including assessment of their bodies (Sinclair, 2011). Women's bodies at work (Wolkowitz, 2006) are subjected to a controlling masculine rationality through embodied characteristics (e.g., voice, weight, self-presentation) which are crucial to legitimating hierarchical evaluations of worth (Haynes, 2012). Despite extensive literature into the body and women's body work (Gimlin, 2007; Wolkowitz, 2006) research to date has yet to fully explore how women leaders relate to each other through bodies. In this paper we develop a theory of Abject Appearance to further understandings of how women leaders relate to each through bodies and appearance and highlight the implications of this theory for management and leadership practice.

Kristeva (1982) argues that abject experiences are common in everyday lives e.g., you might experience an 'abject response when the skin that forms on top of warm milk unexpectedly touches your lips, or when you see blood.' Abjection has become associated with 'all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies' (Tyler, 2009:79/80). We draw upon abjection to explore how women can experience a fascination with their own and other women's bodies and appearance. We conceptualise this self-in-relation-to other fascination as

a process of simultaneous distaste and intrigue. We develop the theory of *Abject Appearance* to explain this process. Through a lens of Abject Appearance women elite leaders' embodied identity work within a context of women's intra-gender relations can be understood as a possible material effect or consequence of women's abjection in organisations. Through our analysis of women leaders' accounts we offer insights into varying intensities of possible consequences of women's abjection. Abject Appearance explains a dynamic, dialectical and relational process within an intra-gender context, whereby women elite leaders manage felt ambiguities of their 'in-between' (Tyler, 2011:1490) or 'abject' (Kristeva, 1982) status. They hold power because of their formal positions, yet remain marginalised because their feminine bodies are 'out of place' in organisations. Abject Appearance explains women elite leaders' active efforts to navigate fascination (as simultaneous attraction and repulsion) with their *own* and *other* women's bodies and appearance through embodied identity work in an intra-gender context.

We contribute to organisation studies' theorising of abjection (Gatrell, 2013; Rizq, 2013; Fotaki, 2011, 2013; Kenny, 2010; Tyler, 2011; Höpfl, 2004). Specifically, we respond to the call for a consideration of possible *consequences of abjection* within specific social and political locations (Tyler, 2009:77). We offer an intra-gender dimension to possible consequences of abjection and propose explanations of why and how women leaders evaluate and monitor their own and other women's bodies and appearance. In addition, we raise consciousness to this dialectic process thereby strengthening women's agency. We also extend research into bodies and body work by exploring women leaders' embodied identity work. Specifically, we contribute to Sinclair's (2011) call to consider bodies in understanding women's embodied experiences of leadership, where women's bodies are made visible and available for judgment. We highlight the ambiguity of the 'female gaze' (Trethewey, 1999:445) which regulates women's embodied elite leadership within contexts where there

are gendered norms for the 'ideal' (man) elite leader and the embodied leadership occupational identity (Ashcraft, 2013). We consider the potential for disrupting gendered norms and challenging notions of gendered bodies at work (Gimlin, 2007). We also suggest that there are practical implications for leadership development.

In what follows we draw upon research into women elite leaders, women's intra-gender relations and abjection of the feminine body to develop the theory of Abject Appearance. We outline the qualitative research study and present women leaders' accounts to illustrate the theoretical value of Abject Appearance. We discuss the theme *Fascination with bodies and appearance* to depict dialectical intra-gender processes of simultaneous disgust and attraction with bodies and appearance. We highlight how material effects of abjection may be played out through two embodied identity work strategies, namely *Shifting focus from the body and appearance* and *Achieving a professional balance* in a context of women's intra-gender relations. To provide a background to the iterative and emergent development of the theory of Abject Appearance we now move to describe the research context.

The research context

This paper on Abject Appearance has developed from a wider empirical project exploring women elite leaders' experiences of intra-gender relations with other women at work. Women in the study were not asked directly about the body or appearance, yet references to body work (our term) emerged across accounts (we return to this in the methods). In our re-readings of the transcripts we were struck by the accounts, in that they aroused in us mixed feelings of embarrassment, empathy, shame, disgust and anger. For example, when women recounted feeling what we interpreted as hurt or anger about how other women treated them because of how they looked (e.g., hair style, skirt length), we too felt these emotions. At times we shared feelings of shock and even anger towards those women perceived by

participants to be 'judging' other women unfairly. At other times we identified with participants or felt shame because we heard our own voices in their accounts. We became reflexively aware of the body as a site for identity work, recalling situations when we too projected similar body and appearance expectations onto ourselves and other women as that expressed by and imposed upon participants (e.g., being overweight can be a disadvantage). The project research assistants (RAs) also responded emotionally to this disciplined body work. In post-data collection meetings the three RAs discussed the women leaders as impeccably dressed, groomed with perfect nails, immaculate dresses, and amazing jewellery. One RA recounted her own embodied identity work when she felt intimidated by a woman leader's appearance to such an extent that on finishing the interview she bought a new (more professional) outfit to wear to the next day's interview.

It was through these reflexive experiences that we became acutely aware of how we too negotiate, comply, resist and sustain embodied identities. Our identities are embedded in particular notions of femininity and masculinity where the boundaries of body acceptability are often not well demarcated. We were intrigued by the complexities of our responses, emotions and interpretations in reading and talking through the data. We reflected on how we embody our own work; how our own bodies and appearances are received by men and women; our personal precarious proximities to the gendered order and how we defend or challenge it; how we talk in relation to other women; and, how we respond to other women's body work. We became reflexively aware of ways of *being* within gendered contexts which we felt strengthened our agency. We set out to make further sense of the women leaders' experiences within a context of intra-gender relations. We were guided by a working research question of 'how do women, in relation to other women, simultaneously transgress boundaries associated with elite leader positions whilst negotiating embodied leadership?'

Women elite leaders: Lurking on the boundaries

Research has demonstrated that management and leadership work is historically and culturally associated with masculinity and men, contributing to a gendered order (Connell, 1987; Gherardi, 1994). Within this context people co-produce 'gendered realities that become sedimented and naturalised over time, reflecting the ability of the powerful to align such realities with their own values and interests' (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006:30). Leadership work as an occupational identity is interwoven with the embodied social identities of leaders. These social identities shape the configuration of work as an evolving co-construction of what leaders do and the recognisable categories of people who do leader work (Ashcraft, 2013). Leadership work can therefore be known by the embodied social identities aligned with it (Ashcraft, 2013). We see the 'ideal' elite leader body as male; an idealised bounded space, where gendered body constructions position women's bodies as an embodiment of the failure to live up to the norm (Russell, 2013). Women leaders and their feminine bodies may violate biological, normative and moral boundaries in organisations (Longhurst, 2008; Waskul and van der Riet, 2002). Women leaders may also, however, support or mould along the lines of the ideal leader, or challenge and change embodied practices of leadership.

Following Bell and Sinclair (2014) we do not view doing leadership as a matter of having a body and taking it into an organisation. Rather leadership 'is about creating and experiencing our bodies, our careers, our lives, through embodied participation with others' (p.270). For us becoming an elite leader is gendered and complex. Gender is viewed here as a 'situated, embodied communicative praxis (Schrag, 1986) that is enacted in a complex field of discursive and nondiscursive relations of power, accommodation and resistance (Jermier et al., 1994)' (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006:75). Despite the pervasiveness of masculine hegemony, in doing gender, there is space for agency (Benschop, 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) in how people relate to gender socialisation and patriarchy which

contribute to structural restraints (Benschop, 2009). Women have learned to sway, change, circumvent and subvert the decisions of the powerful (O'Leary, 1988).

Our focus concerns women elite leaders' experiences and interpretations of their embodied identity work which emerges in a context of intra-gender relations. Within the competitive masculinity of elite leadership, women who secure positions historically held by men have achieved a particular parity with the One (De Beauvoir, 1949). They 'share' space within a gendered order, holding significant organisational power. Yet, as female bodies, women simultaneously exist on the boundaries, threatening and disturbing the strategic masculine prerogative (Tyler, 2005); paradoxically both One and the Other. Their maternal bodies can serve to remind themselves and others of their ambiguous, in-between (Tyler, 2011) or abject (Kristeva, 1982) status. Thus, women elite leaders risk disturbing clear boundaries between 'self/other, order/disorder, inside/outside, clean/unclean' and 'lurk on the borders of identity' (Phillips and Rippin, 2010:487). In other words, as active agents they can find themselves lurking on the boundaries in a dynamic interplay of holding power, whilst marginalised in social relations. Within this dialectic, women's subjectivities are understood as fragmented, unstable and constructed dynamically in relations (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006).

Women's abjection, where women's bodies may provoke simultaneous distaste and intrigue, can be understood as part of gendered organising. Abjection of the woman leader, while socially constructed and experienced differently (if at all), can have material effects. Tyler (2011) calls for more research that looks to consequences of women's abjection and we respond to this call. We argue that such material effects or consequences of abjection can manifest in embodied identity work; where women ascribe, enact, resist, and transform as they inhabit and encounter bodies in their daily lives as leaders (Ashcraft, 2013; Fenstermaker and West, 2002). Such material effects can surface, for example, when women elite leaders who relate to the symbolic order[1] disassociate from Other women (Tanenbaum,

2002) or receive back-lash responses from other women (Camussi and Leccardi, 2005; O'Neill and O'Reilly, 2011).

In an earlier study from the wider empirical project we theorised negative intra-gender relations between women through a micro-violence lens (e.g., interpersonal mistreatment, incivility, micro-aggression) (Mavin et al., 2014). We identified a range of negative psychosocial relations that served to harm the target woman's doing of gender and impact detrimentally on the target's self-worth, self-esteem, self-image, character, reputation, confidence, credibility and/or status, thereby threatening women's identities. One of the three intra-gender micro-violence themes which emerged from our data analysis was labelled abject appearance. We interpreted abject appearance as a type of '*sexual / self-objectification* gender micro-aggression, as women are reduced to their sexuality or physical appearance' (p.450, emphasis in original). The work of Tyler (2011) on abject labour was incorporated into the description of abject appearance and is drawn upon again here. We noted our intention to further theorise abject appearance in future work. We also identified that women engage in negative relations with other women through bodies and appearance at work as consequences of the struggles, tensions and contradictions women face when performing as leaders. Here we develop this work and understand these struggles as possible material effects or consequences of abjection. We draw upon different participant accounts to those presented in the first study. We elucidate these material effects through a theory of Abject Appearance which contributes to explaining women elite leaders' embodied identity work within a context of intra-gender relations. It is to this theorisation of Abject Appearance that we now turn.

A theory of abject appearance

In *Powers of Horror*, a theoretical account of fascination, revulsion, disgust and subjectivity,

Kristeva (1982) develops what is referred to as 'the abject paradigm' (Tyler, 2009:77). Abjection describes and accounts for temporal and spatial disruptions within the life of individuals and those moments when individuals experience a frightening loss of distinction between themselves and others (Tyler, 2009:79). Kristeva, as Höpfl (2004:92) points out, was an exiled foreigner and a woman in the masculine world of French intellectuals – this strangeness/estrangement was important in Kristeva's ideas. Kristeva's writing highlights someone who has 'experienced isolation, estrangement, a sense of being alien(ated), being an outcast/cast out, being a woman and a mother, (ambivalently) both abject and sublime' (Höpfl, 2004:92). When writing of the 'not-yet-subject,' Kristeva's (1980) position is of 'a woman restrained by the regulation of the Name-of-the Father' (Höpfl, 2004:91), where the child becomes the abject to avoid both separation from and identification with the maternal body which evokes anxiety/disgust, fear/anger for the male child; 'the problem he came from a woman's body and yet must become a man' (Kristeva, 1980:39).

Kristeva (1982) proposes that abjection - feelings of intrigue, disgust, repulsion and fear - are experienced as individuals attempt to distance from what is 'felt to be improper or unclean in order to establish and strengthen his or her own subjectivity and retain a self that is "proper" or clean' (Rizq, 2013:1280). For Kristeva, abjection is something that intrigues and disgusts you. It provokes a strong feeling that is somatic and symbolic (Thatcher, 2008). Her concern is the abjection of women's feminine maternal bodies and women's exclusion from symbolization (Fotaki, 2013). Even the threat of pregnancy carried through women's bodies can render them abject and out of place, so that at work the maternal body can be a source of disgust and perceived as alien, unwelcome (Gatrell, 2014) and polluting (Jones, 2007).

Butler's (2004) work also advances our understanding of subjectivity and abjection. Butler (1989) is critical of Kristeva's understanding of maternal as essentialist: 'Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to cultural itself' (Butler,

1989:105/6). For Butler (2004) the development of the subject is cultural and constituted by societal norms. Butler describes abjection as a discursive process (Meijer and Prins, 1998). Kenny (2010:859) in a study of the powerful discourse of 'ethical living' in an organization draws upon Butler noting, that when 'a subject finds herself outside a dominant societal norm at a given point in time, for example, outside the terms that make up one's gender, then this is experienced as abjection'. Thus the desire for recognition and the maintenance of one's perceived position relative to the gendered order can be powerful (Kenny, 2010) and seductive. Kenny (2010) outlines how, if we seek a reflection of ourselves in another and find that they do not recognise us, then 'the subject can experience *itself* as abject (Butler, 1990)' (p.860, emphasis in original). For both Kristeva and Butler, individuals work to avoid abjection (e.g., attraction/repulsion and possible rejection) and engage in processes of subject formation. Therefore women may work to comply with existing normative frameworks, even when it can be detrimental (Butler, 1993; Fotaki, 2011) to themselves and other women. For example, women engage in body work to meet expectations that women's bodies are controlled, ideally fit and not fat, and if not, then their bodies represent professional liability (Trethewey, 1999). Drawing from Rizq's (2013) study of how feelings of psychological distress come to be abjected within organizations we propose that consequences of women's abjection may be seen through women's embodied identity work surfacing in a context of intra-gender relations. In other words, women may relate to women's bodies felt to be appropriate/inappropriate (including their own) to establish and strengthen their own subjectivity and to retain a self that is 'clean' and sterile against the elite leader occupational identity.

Abjection may not be experienced by every woman or in the same way by every woman. However, as women elite leaders find themselves outside a dominant social norm (as One and the Other; in-between genders), we propose that some women will experience abjection

with related feelings of anxiety, repulsion and fear, as well as attraction, and this may play out through embodied identity work. Women leaders' bodies and appearance make a statement not only about their occupational identity and professionalism, but also how they position themselves in relation to the ideals of masculinity and femininity within a heterosexual paradigm (Kelan, 2013).

To develop our theory of Abject Appearance we look to Tyler's (2011) research into how individuals feel towards their work in London's Soho sex work district. Tyler (2011:1492) offers the term 'abject labour' to capture the simultaneous attraction and repulsion, or fascination, with the various taints associated with this type and place of work. We extend this line of thinking to tease out how women elite leaders' bodies and appearance can be a source of fascination; disgust and attraction within gendered contexts, as that which simultaneously 'beseeches, worries and fascinates' (Kristeva, 1982:1). Abject Appearance explains the dynamic ways in which women elite leaders can be reminded of their abjection through their feminine bodies. The process is dialectical in that it reflects tensions. It explains women elite leaders' active efforts to navigate a *fascination* (simultaneous *attraction* and *repulsion)* with their *own* and *other* women's bodies and appearance and the relational efforts to monitor boundaries and risks through embodied identity work. The theory of Abject Appearance reflects how women traverse the 'complex, ambiguous and precarious in-betweens of masculinity/femininity, revealing/hiding one's body, conservative fashionable dress, social conformity/individual creativity and sexuality/asexuality' (Trethewey, 1999:426). As power envelopes women's co-constructions within a paradox of One and the Other, Abject Appearance explains how women elite leaders as embodied speaking subjects can engage in agentic praxis (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006:75). In this way women may negotiate, resist and comply in their dialectical experiences. This can materialise through identity work as self-in-relation-to their own and other women's bodies and appearance. We

now turn to our research approach and introduce the women elite leaders whose accounts illustrate the theoretical value of Abject Appearance.

Method

Following Cunliffe and Erikson (2011) we take a relational approach, placing emphasis on social constructions of organizing. We draw upon an intersubjective view of the world where meaning is shaped by one's experiences and is socially mediated (Anderson, 2008). It is 'a way of thinking about who leaders are in relation to others within the complexity of experience' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011:1434). An intersubjective approach provides a bridge between the personal and the shared, the self and the Other to interpret meanings of social and cultural life. We understand women's intra-gender relations as a way of being in-relation-to other women. The aim of the wider empirical project was to explore women elite leaders' experiences of intra-gender relations. The invitation to engage in the research made this explicit, as did preliminary correspondence and the introduction at the interview. The interview guide was designed to prompt discussions of women leaders' experiences of intra-gender relations. In response to questions within this intra-gender context we understand the women's accounts as intersubjective. This means that even when talking of projects of the self this involves intersubjective recognition (Harding et al., 2013). For example, participants sometimes construct projects of the self and reflect on their own identities, as well as construct themselves in-relation-to other women, and in-relation-to men. In our analysis we include diverse accounts to recognise the 'entwined nature of our relationships with others' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011:1434): accounts of women leaders' in-relation-to men; accounts of self-in-relation-to women and to men; and accounts of, and reflections on, their own experiences offered for other women.

Data collection

Eighty one women from UK based organisations were interviewed in the wider study: 36 Executive Directors/Non-Executive Directors in FTSE 100/250 companies and 45 elite leaders in an annual regional newspaper supplement of the top 250/500 influential leaders. The women were aged between 33 and 67 years: 73 self-declared as white British/Irish/Other white backgrounds, 2 black/mixed backgrounds, with 6 non-declared; 62 women worked full time; 14 part time with 5 non-declared. Thirty five women had at least one other Non-Executive Director/Chair of Board role and 8 had at least another Governor/Trustee role in education, charities or legal organisations. These women leaders have significant power and status at the top of organisational hierarchies. The industries / sectors in which these women work (based on primary employment as per standard codes of the UK Office of National Statistics) are shown in Table 1.

------INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE------

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken by three RAs utilising an interview guide. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and coded. The wider study did not set out to investigate women's bodies and appearance and the interview guide did not include questions about body work. Within a context of women's intra-gender relations, the questions focused on women's progress to elite leader positions, ambition, friendship, cooperation, competition and key issues for other women. A number of women talked of bodies and appearance in response to questions about competition, but these references also emerged across a range of interview questions. We were surprised and intrigued by this. Indeed, we are aware that bodies and appearance as a source of women's competition have been raised historically (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Kanter, 1987; Tanenbaum, 2002), but remain an under-researched area in organisational and leadership studies. Further,

it is rarely discussed in leader development practice. We suggest there is insufficient research to establish the expectation that asking women elite leaders about women's competition will result in talk of the body and appearance. Further, there is a lack of research establishing the same expectation for questions about women moving in and through senior positions, women's friendships, ambition and reflective learning for other women.

Data analysis

In analysing the data from the wider project the first author followed a process of 'literal readings,' 'interpretative readings' (Mason, 2002) and constant comparison to identify 40 themes (managed via Nvivo). Two themes reflected embodied leadership within a context of women's intra-gender relations: Female Misogyny and Erotic Capital. References to appearance and the body were then explored in separate discussions with the RAs and the second author. In further reflexive coding discussions between authors, we became intrigued to explain the ambivalence, contradiction and ambiguity interpreted in the accounts. We turned to the literature to make sense of these findings. Both authors re-read accounts referring to the body and appearance, analysing separately then collaboratively. Through a to-ing and fro-ing between data and literature, we identified women's abjection and the lack of research into possible consequences of this abjection as a way to explain these dialectic experiences and intra-gender embodied identity work. Thus, the process of data analysis, interpretations and theoretical development of Abject Appearance was iterative, marked by an on-going back-and-forth between data analysis and theory to explain unexpected findings (Trethewey, 2001; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011).

Our aim is not to test empirical data through a lens of Abject Appearance, but to illustrate how the theory of Abject Appearance may help us better understand how women, in-relation-

to other women, simultaneously transgress boundaries of elite leader positions whilst negotiating embodied leadership. In what follows we discuss vivid and varied accounts from 22 women elite leaders working across industry sectors. Twelve accounts are included in the main paper as 'power quotes,' in that we selected what we see as compelling data (Pratt, 2009:860) to illustrate Abject Appearance. A further 10 accounts are presented in Table 2 as 'proof quotes' (Pratt, 2009:860) to highlight the salience of the themes in the wider study. The women leaders are identified using pseudonyms, and we note the interview questions which prompted references to the body, as well as the women's industry sectors.

Abject appearance: Surfacing women's embodied identity work in an intra-gender context

We offer the women elite leaders' accounts to illustrate a theory of Abject Appearance and more nuanced views of how women engage in embodied identity work within a context of intra-gender relations. Analysis across accounts reveals ambiguity around 'one right way' for a woman elite leader to 'look.' At the same time, the women not only express how they 'manage' their own appearance, but also how *other* women leaders *should* manage their appearance. This getting bodies 'right' is theorised here as a consequence of women's abjection, where women leaders, read through bodies and appearance, are viewed as disruptive and censured 'to minimise sexuality through dress and demeanour' (Sinclair, 2011:124). We first discuss the theme *Fascination with bodies and appearance* to depict the dialectical process of simultaneous disgust and attraction with the body and appearance and how and why this plays a role in how women leaders 'are.' We then discuss how this material effect of abjection may be played out through two embodied identity work strategies within an intra-gender context, namely; *Shifting focus from the body and appearance* and *Achieving a professional balance*.

Fascination with bodies and appearance

We have interpreted *Fascination with bodies and appearance* as a preoccupation with leadership as embodied and in-relation-to self and others' bodies and appearance. Women elite leaders find themselves in a precarious position as both One and the Other. As they will never be 'men,' the ideal, their in-between status can mean that women leaders experience a pull in different directions. They are required to navigate amidst ambiguities, tensions and contradictions to make their place. Women leaders' feminine bodies may serve as a reminder to themselves, other women and men, of their ambiguous and possible abject status - a material effect of women's abjection in the workplace. Simultaneously, their bodies can also become a source of agency in opening up space to unsettle notions of elite leadership. In the absence of norms for women leaders and in a context of intra-gender relations, some women actively create embodied norms for themselves and other women, thereby both constraining and enabling ways of embodying leadership.

We begin by highlighting the felt ambiguity women talked about in-relation-to the ideal leader role and other women. When asked to describe her experiences as a woman moving in and through senior positions, Louise (Director, Information and Communication) talks of the inescapability of embodied leadership. It is something necessary and desirable, yet problematic for women, given what she feels is a lack of 'good role models' and 'common assumptions' for women leaders. 'Everyone knows what a man in a senior position looks and sounds like – there are exceptions but by and large that's what they look and sound like. There is that authority. There are no very good role models and there's certainly no good sort of common assumptions about what a women in a senior position looks and sounds like.' Louise implies that without clarity around embodied norms, in contrast to men leaders, women leaders are disadvantaged and can lack authority.

Within this ambiguity, women leaders attempt to construct and project embodied norms for the woman elite leader occupational identity. When asked 'what has it been like for you as a woman moving into senior positions?,' Sufia (Director, Manufacturing), constructs herself in-relation-to other women. She provides an example of how she 'supports' women in her workplace by providing advice on acceptable embodiment in the workplace. She highlights how women are suspect by the nature of their bodies in that they attract attention. Such desirability, however, has to be censured, otherwise women risk bordering on disgust. 'I've had girls on my team dress inappropriately and I've said to them would you like somebody to just sit and stare at your boobs for the whole meeting because that is precisely what they're going to do and by the way I can't help it. I'm looking at them and I'm a woman.' Sufia constructs particular norms for women's embodied leadership and projects these onto other women. We were struck by the crudeness of Sufia's language. We interpreted a subtle disgust which sets up the women as Other. Sufia distinguishes herself from other women, separating herself from her team in the use of 'girls' (team) versus 'woman' (herself). As such, girls bodies and appearance are unwelcome, unfit for her work context and may threaten her subjectivity.

Some women express that this construction of embodied norms for women elite leaders (as revealed by Sufia) and associated identity strategies, serves to punish some and reward others. When asked about women's progress to senior positions, Sarah (Head, Education), expresses discomfort with the construction of particular embodied identity strategies.

> Right this is a really, really sad, sad comment about the whole way that women have progressed because - I actually still really believe that success is measured by what you look like. And I think that is still critical. If you're overweight, or you're not particularly attractive, you're not taken as seriously and you're not seen as successful.

And I think that other women do it to other women. And I do think that is really,

really sad and I think that is really true. When you go to a room full of [women

leaders] I think that's the first thing… They look around and they will say oh her hair

looks awful... She's put on weight hasn't she? (Sarah - Education).

Sarah reveals a preoccupation with her own and other women's appearance (success/being

taken seriously is based on what you look like), noting that 'other women do it to other

women.' Sarah expresses repugnance for those women who do judge other women based on

bodies and appearance. This is reflected in her repetitive expressions (these women are

'really really sad'). She simultaneously acknowledges a fascination with the body and

appearance for women leaders, yet rejects and/or distances herself from those women who

actively create norms for themselves and other women. Like Sarah, many of the women elite

leaders commented on women's weight in their accounts. We also identified with the notion

of women's fat bodies being a source of disgust and attraction when in positions of power, as

well as a site for women's intra-gender relations. We reflected on our identity work

associated with our own thin-fat-thin-fat bodies in-relation-to other women both inside and

outside the work place.

Whether they embrace or reject particular embodied subjectivities, the women elite leaders

illuminate a preoccupation with women's bodies and the body as an identity project. Their

own (and other women's) body and appearance are a source of desirability *and* disgust

entangled in intra-gender relations. Without established embodied norms as leaders, the

women's subjectivities are precarious and enveloped in ambiguity and contradiction. In-

relation-to other women, the women leaders use their own and other women's bodies and

appearance as a means to unsettle and reinforce the gendered order. They construct, comply

and resist particular subjectivities. Further, we see how women construct themselves and

other women as more or less viable as elite leaders. An example can be seen when women come together in 'agreeing' or come apart in 'disagreeing' on acceptable bodies and appearance. We now turn to two specific embodied identity strategies which further illustrate consequences of women's abjection.

Shifting focus from the body and appearance

We offer *Shifting focus from the body and appearance* as an embodied identity strategy which reflects how women can simultaneously acknowledge, as well as reject or recalibrate, self-other body and appearance work. We understand this strategy as a possible consequence of abjection; a simultaneous disgust-attraction towards women, which plays out through embodied identity work. Some women talk about how women are evaluated on their bodies and appearance, but should not be - it is irrelevant as a leader. While others contend that appearance, in concert with other attributes or skills, are the means through which women leaders are, and should be, evaluated. Following Irigaray, as noted in Metcalfe's (2003) work, we interpret this as attempts at disruption or modification to existing norms; an alternative to the instrumental mode of being.

Viewing women leaders' experiences through a lens of Abject Appearance highlights how, in the context of intra-gender relations, women can Other women by engaging in a strategy of shifting focus from the body. Some women view their own approach to body work more positively than that of women who engage differently. An example comes from Fiona (CEO, Information and Communication) in response to the question, 'what successful behaviours have you observed in ambitious senior women that you've met?'

> There are a lot of very successful women... that I have worked with and they may be very glamorous - I'm not against people being very glamorous in the roles but that's

very different I think than being simpering females. Powerful and glamorous women in the world I've operated in but they were always bloody smart and brought their intelligence to bear in terms of the nature of the business either in the way that they handled people or the business issues. If you combine those things then you get a very powerful body (Fiona - Information and Communication).

Fiona expresses the fascination women feel about bodies and appearance. She positively compares 'very glamorous' (strong; admired) women to 'simpering females' (weak; distasteful) who Fiona 'Others.' She reveals women's position as One and the Other. She is 'not against people being very glamorous,' but then manages the risks that women's glamorous bodies pose by shifting focus from the body alone to connecting women's bodies and minds (when combined 'you get a very powerful body'). She attempts to manage the risks associated with her own possible abjection by moving apart from 'simpering' females and aligning with women who are powerful (bodies). This reveals how embodied identity work involves efforts to modify one's position relative to the symbolic order. Fiona refocuses normative views of women's bodies to women's powerful bodies, thereby challenging the status quo.

Tina (Director, Manufacturing) also shifts focus in her identity work. She emphasises the need to manage femininity against the risks her body poses as a leader, so that 'gender' becomes 'an irrelevance' in evaluating women leaders' performances. In response to the question, 'what are the key issues that women need to be aware of or deal with if they want to progress to senior roles?', she demonstrates the ambiguity, complexity and tensions associated with women's embodied leadership as One and the Other. This surfaces through such contradictions as 'don't be a man,' 'be different,' 'be you,' but do not use your femininity. This dialectic shows us how elite leadership can be comprised of inherent

embodied characteristics that are a natural fit for some (men) and a stretch, if not an impossibility, for others (women) (see Ashcraft, 2013). Tina speaks about how it is OK to be 'yourself,' 'a girly,' as long as expressions of femininity are in the 'right balance' with a particular notion of perceived professionalism as required by elite leadership (therefore not too 'girly' and less risky). She combines embodied expectations with other measures of credibility (e.g., delivery and performance).

> Be yourself. Be a girly, don't pretend to be a man, but under no circumstances start thinking that you can use a bit of your femininity to gain some form of advantage... I think if you can just be you… be different, so you're not pretending to be a man… make it perfectly clear that what you actually want to be judged on is your delivery and your approach and your professionalism… Then very quickly, where it matters, your gender will become an irrelevance. Where it matters is the appraising of your performance and your delivery (Tina – Manufacturing).

Some women leaders, in-relation-to other women, talk of how they shift focus by not engaging in disciplined body work. We interpreted this in accounts where women Other women as an expression of repulsion, comparing their approach of shifting focus from body and appearance (e.g., I could never do that) to those women who do engage in body work. This Othering can be observed in the accounts of Alison (CEO, Other Service Activities) in response to a question about competiveness between women, and Teresa (Director, Art, Entertainment and Recreation) in response to a question about observed successful/unsuccessful behaviours in ambitious women.

> I don't have a size 8 figure, I never have and never will so you just get beyond all of that… I'm not particularly bothered about participating in it I suppose. I just want to

get on with the job really… Some [women] try and use attractiveness… whether it is power dressing or whatever it might be, but I'm not convinced. This whole kind of thing of it's the first five minutes and how people look at you but actually most people get beyond what somebody looks like very quickly so that just doesn't seem to be the way that it works but I have seen people using it (Alison - Other Service Activities).

I could never do that but she [friend in a senior role]… used to be a buyer [name of company] and she's got incredible clothes. She's got a brilliant figure for it as well and she wears really high heels… she really looks the part and I think I am reasonably happy with how I look but I've never been like that and I'm never going to be… some women are really good at that and I quite admire it in a way almost because I could never do that …there's a behaviour that my husband used to call eye batting and I've never been any good at [it] (Teresa – Arts, Entertainment and Recreation).

Alison shifts focus from body and appearance ('attractiveness') to competence as an elite leader ('get on with the job') and in doing so moves apart from other women, privileging herself relative to women who do engage in 'power dressing or whatever.' She recognises that other women 'do it' but she is 'beyond all of that.' Viewing Alison's account through the lens of Abject Appearance we see how Alison's simultaneous intrigue and disgust with the body work of other women becomes a framing point for her own embodied identity work. By rejecting body work she positions herself more favourably in the gendered order and strengthens her own subjectivity. At the same time, Alison restricts 'allowable' embodied identity work of other women. In this way she both sustains and challenges the status quo.

Teresa also engages in Othering as she shifts focus from certain women's bodies and appearance at work. She does so in an 'admiring way.' She positively recounts an example of

a woman elite leader who *does* engage in emphasising her femininity at work. Teresa simultaneously reflects positively on her own appearance, even though her own strategy differs from the Other ('I am reasonably happy with how I look'). However, there is an implied superiority in Teresa's identity strategy ('I could never do that'). In shifting focus she attempts to acquire success through other, more 'credible' means. Alison and Teresa's accounts highlight women leaders' struggles with their desire for recognition as elite leaders in the absence of normative frameworks for accepted embodiment at work. They offer insight into how the body as an identity project can be understood as a material effect of women's abjection. Further, they illuminate the dynamic intra-gender relational processes through which women leaders traverse the in-betweens of masculinity (elite leadership) and femininity (women) and the active efforts to navigate women's fascination with their own and other women's bodies and appearance.

Achieving a professional balance

Beyond shifting focus from women's bodies and appearance, some women elite leaders see the body and appearance as an integral part of the leader role as 'professional.' Drawing upon Abject Appearance as a theoretical tool we view *Achieving a professional balance* as an embodied identity strategy, where through intra-gender relational efforts, women construct, monitor and resist 'professional' self-other body and appearance norms against an elite leader occupational identity. For example, while the norms are opaque, 'professional' suits can be appropriate, but being overly feminine is not. In responding to the question 'what are the key issues for women that they need to be aware of and deal with as they progress through to senior positions?', Heidi (Head, Education), illustrates an intertwining of professionalism and the body through her talk of women's weight. Weight is attributed to 'willpower,' posing a risk to professionalism and 'if you can't lose weight… it is a damnation on your

professionalism and your career standing.' Achieving a professional balance when embodying leadership is a strategy that some women follow or aspire to, but the parameters of the balance remain ambiguous and contradictory.

When asked what successful and unsuccessful behaviours she has observed in ambitious women leaders, Francesca (Non-executive Director, Water Supply Activities) highlights the complexity of women's dialectical expectations of other women as embodied leaders. In-relation-to other women she expects women to embody professionalism ('looking professional'), to be confident, 'not pushed to the side' or 'too quiet,' but 'hopefully not … over-strident.'

Being professional and I think one thing that goes with that is looking professional, i.e. well turned out but not sort of over focused on personal appearance but looking business-like in a suit, don't float into [name of senior role] meeting in a dress that looks as if you last wore it on the beach. I think it is a combination of inner confidence, self-confidence and holding your position in the discussion, not being pushed to the side, not being too quiet and hopefully not being over-strident (Francesca - Water Supply Activities).

Francesca does not shift focus from the body and appearance, rather this is part of being a 'professional' as an elite leader and for her a suit is appropriate, but not all dresses. She recommends that women should not be 'over focused on personal appearance,' yet is specific in what she feels is appropriate to achieve a professional balance – 'a suit.' Francesca does not detail what defines a 'dress that looks as if you last wore it on the beach.' We interpret this as casual and 'revealing' of the feminine body in some way; too feminine, therefore unprofessional, and appearance which risks fascination.

In support of Kelan's (2013) research where the suit signals professionalism, yet norms around women's business dress are ambiguous, Jane (Director, Transportation and Storage) vividly illustrates the ambiguity and ambivalence around women elite leaders' embodiment. She responds to the question 'can I ask you to think about other senior ambitious women you've observed. What kinds of things do you think they've done that have been successful and unsuccessful in terms of their behaviours?' In her response, she recounts a woman speaker who was explicit about the importance of appearance and the challenge of being a women elite leader. It involves a delicate balance of being 'smart and attractive' without being portrayed as too 'slutty,' or feminine. We interpret Jane's account as women reminding women, whether consciously or not, of how their bodies are out of place in elite leadership. If not managed appropriately then women's bodies may trigger simultaneous disgust-attraction, risking possible abjection through a loss of distinction between themselves and others (Kristeva, 1982; Tyler, 2009).

> She [woman speaker at a senior woman's network meeting] said… 'you've got to look smart and …attractive. You don't want to look slutty…but you got to make it work for you …some of you in some t-shirt that the baby's dribbled on in the morning'…even if only it does neutralize things for you I think sometimes the way women can look doesn't help… so even if it creates a level playing field that you get the right suit, …haircut, you look the part (Jane - Transportation and Storage).

For Jane, achieving a professional balance creates a 'level playing field;' a platform from which to perform identity work and a means of both sustaining and challenging the status quo.

There are other ways for women to trigger simultaneous disgust-attraction and be

perceived as unprofessional. While the women were not asked about experiences of pregnancy or Motherhood, the ambivalence of how women leaders account for looking 'Mother-like' is a warning about their status as the Other. Talk of Motherhood brings women's abjection into sharp focus and is a reminder of women's sexuality and messy bodies that leak and contaminate (Thanem, 2006; Gatrell, 2014). Associating with Mother-like appearance (e.g., 'some of you in some t-shirt that the baby's dribbled on in the morning') is risky; it unsettles boundaries of differentiation and restraint so that femininity becomes dangerous (Tyler, 2011). Motherhood associations can threaten women's tenuous position as One and the Other so that women exert effort into 'managing' women's bodies to ensure these risks are controlled.

For some women leaders, embodying 'professional' appearance is not about neutralising gender nor does it equate with masculinity. Lucy (Director, Manufacturing), in-relation-to other women, responds to the question, 'what has it been like for you as a woman moving into senior positions?', by talking about a woman leader who wears suits that Lucy perceives to be 'very masculine.' This woman suggested to her that she should also 'wear trousers.' Lucy said, 'I have no intention of wearing trousers and I have no intention of denying my femininity simply to make everyone else feel comfortable. Now do I wear tops with cleavage on display? Well of course not, I'm at work and there's a sense of being professional.' In defending her particular expression of 'professional' femininity, Lucy compares it to inappropriate, risky and unprofessional [repulsive] appearance for women leaders i.e., tops showing 'cleavage.' Lucy separates from women who engage in this body work (e.g., trousers, showing cleavage) and 'pushes back' against intra-gender monitoring of her body and appearance by consciously not denying femininity. In solidifying her own agency, however, Lucy privileges her approach of achieving a professional balance and subtly denigrates various other expressions of the body and appearance.

Achieving a professional balance is also important to Susanna (Chair, Financial and Insurance Services). In response to the question, 'if I brought you back to competition between women that you have observed, do women compete in the same way as men do you think?', Susanna talks of having a quiet word with another woman whose appearance was 'not on.' We interpret this as policing the acceptability of certain bodies and appearance in elite leadership.

>...I was interviewing her alongside a very prominent business man … and he was totally embarrassed by this woman's behaviour. And he said to me 'you could do her a kindness by having a word with her and telling her, it's not on.'... What she was doing it's not on. So I asked her if she would come back and see me sometime for feedback and she did. The next time I saw her I didn't recognize her. Because her hair was totally different, much more business-like and much, more straight forward and her skirts weren't the same length (Susanna - Financial and Insurance Services).

While Susanna was explicitly asked about competition, she does not directly address the question, rather she focuses on herself in-relation-to another woman's body and appearance. The woman interviewee was perceived to present herself in a way which provoked simultaneous disgust and attraction towards her body and appearance. Her embodiment was unwelcome as it did not achieve a professional balance. After Susanna's intra-gender efforts, the change in the other woman's appearance was 'much more business-like' and in-line with 'appropriate' embodiment. Following Kenny (2010), we interpret Susanna's desire for recognition, strengthened subjectivity and maintenance of her own perceived position relative to the gendered order, as powerful and seductive. Her account highlights the dynamic, dialectical and intra-gender relational process through which women elite leaders traverse the

in-between of assimilating the symbolic as the One and the tension of being the Other. Here we see how women may have to be 'fixed' to achieve a professional balance. They have to overcome the difficulty of not fitting in or faking it, 'to the extent that one's own embodied social identities do not readily align with those used to construct the identity of [leader] work' (Ashcraft, 2013:16).

Achieving a professional balance as an identity work strategy illustrates how women's efforts can silence and Other women, allowing only certain gendered performances 'in ways that are often discriminatory and exclusionary towards those [other women] who deviate from the accepted norms of masculinity' (Fotaki, 2011:50). Extending Gatrell's (2013) research, this reflects women's tacit intra-gender 'managing' of women's femininity and sexuality. We see how women police what is in/appropriate for their own and other women's bodies and appearance in organisations to strengthen their own subjectivity. Viewing women leaders' experiences through *Abject Appearance* therefore further explains why and how women evaluate and monitor their own and other women's bodies and appearance.

Discussion

In developing the theory Abject Appearance and through empirical illustrations, we offer theoretical, empirical and practical contributions to understanding gendered organising, the nuances of women's intra-gender relations, and women leaders' embodied identity work. Abject Appearance explains women's efforts to navigate tensions associated with a *fascination* with their *own* and *other* women's bodies and appearance. In this way we have advanced research into the consequences of abjection (Tyler, 2009) in that women's embodied identity work can be understood as a material effect of abjection, where gendered contexts and social relations intertwine with individual thought and action.

Summary of key findings

Through the theme *Fascination with the body and appearance,* we highlight how, as a part of women's embodiment of elite leader within masculine and competitive structures and cultural contexts, attention is directed to the presentation of women's bodies and appearance. *Fascination with the body and appearance* demonstrates how women elite leaders engage in modes of control at the borders of the symbolic order. We see simultaneous and dialectic experiences of disgust/repulsion and attraction/desirability with self-other bodies and appearance. We illustrate that in the absence of (or ambiguity surrounding) embodied norms for the women elite leader occupational identity and in a context of intra-gender relations, women comply with, reject, monitor, and negotiate embodied norms for themselves and other women. In doing so women leaders constrain and enable ways of embodying leadership.

Our empirical analysis offers two embodied identity work strategies co-constructed in a context of women's intra-gender relations. These strategies highlight particular complexities. The strategy *Shifting focus from the body and appearance* reflects how some women leaders acknowledge body work and disciplining of the body, yet they shift focus from or recalibrate the importance of the body and appearance with competence or intelligence. They direct attention to more 'credible' means of embodying leadership. In her work on abjection, Kristeva focuses upon the various ways in which boundaries of the symbolic order are policed and maintained. Here we illustrate how women elite leaders may engage in Othering women as an expression of repulsion and possible non-recognition, as they position their strategy more favourably to those women who do body work in general or particular versions of body work (e.g., emphasized femininity). In revealing this empirical insight we extend Kenny's (2010) interpretation of Butler's work on abjection in organisations and see how 'we hold the potential to "undo each other", in the ongoing drama of identification and abjection,'

(p.860) and how women can relegate some women into a 'zone of uninhabitability:' an unthinkable space that constitutes a 'site of dreaded identification' for the subject (Butler, 1993:3).

Women elite leaders also strive to *Achieve a professional balance* as an embodied identity strategy. We advance Kelan's (2013) research to consider self-in-relation-to and intra-gender nuances. The accounts reveal the lack of norms about how to 'look' as a woman elite leader. At the same time, the women exert considerable effort to look 'professional' and not be unprofessional (e.g., too feminine, too Mother-like, too child-like, too slutty, too masculine). Their accounts depict tensions in their identification within the 'symbolic order of professionalism' (Haynes, 2012:11). They experience a pressure to present bodies which appear 'controlled, self-contained and slender' (Haynes, 2012:12). The empirical data extends Fotaki's (2013; 2011) and Fotaki et al.'s (2014) work on abjection, gender and women in academia, highlighting how, through their efforts, women elite leaders are not only 'subject to forms of gender domination and subordination, they may (albeit unwittingly) reproduce those forms' (Fotaki et al., 2014:2).

Advancing understandings of abjection and women's embodied leadership in a context of intra-gender relations

The theory Abject Appearance advances understandings of women's intra-gender relations and embodiment of leadership in several ways. Abject Appearance enables us to see how women leaders monitor the self and the Other to manage material effects or consequences of abjection. We progress Rizq's (2013:1293) use of abjection as a lens to examine mental health services, in that Abject Appearance offers a way of examining women elite leaders as they perpetually engage in the struggle to develop their subjectivity. Through Abject Appearance we offer glimpses of how women elite leaders control their maternal bodies to

become/not become a man. Abject Appearance reveals nuances of women's intra-gender relations as that which can silence and Other women. It brings to light how women come together around 'agreed' bodies and appearance as elite leaders and where they come apart in 'disagreeing' about appropriate bodies. In this way we also advance Kenny's (2010) research into abjection in organisations by offering a view into some of the relations and identities women leaders adopt to avoid the consequences of abjection. The women's accounts demonstrate conflicts, clashes, contentions, harmony and agreement (in-relation-to other women) against the elite leader occupational identity. The women's seduction-repulsion towards their own and other women's bodies and appearance is complex, intense and 'mediated by and materialized through' (Tyler, 2011:1493) patriarchal structures and highly masculine competitive cultures. These are contexts where 'leader' is socially constructed as male, where 'everyone knows what a man in a senior position looks and sounds like' (Louise), and where women are under-represented.

Abject Appearance explains the constraints of women's embodiment in elite leader roles as women maintain the 'right' bodies against exacting standards of corporeality (Bell and Sinclair, 2014). This advances Gatrell's (2013) work on abjection, maternal body work and women's self-regulation (e.g., maintaining boundaries by not bringing babies to work). The context of women's intra-gender relations highlights how self-regulation (Gatrell, 2013) is relational; intricately intertwined with self-Other regulation in how women's bodies are made and remade (Gimlin, 2007). Future research could explore more intense triggers of the female gaze (Trethewey, 1999:445) which occur through intra-gender regulation of women leaders' bodies and appearance, e.g., women's intra-gender competition for promoted posts in organisations.

In a related vein, our research begins to unpack the complexities of women's competition, embodiment and leadership. When asked about competition in an intra-gender context, some

women leaders responded with talk of women's bodies and appearance. For example, when asked directly about competiveness between women, Alison responded with 'I don't have a size 8 figure,' illustrating how women's attractiveness appears to be the currency of women's competition 'even when no mention is made of what the competition is about' (Campbell, 2004:19). While we were surprised by this finding, it does support the limited historical research on women's competition inside and outside organizational life (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Tanenbaum, 2002; Orbach and Eichenbaum, 1987; Kanter, 1987). We see this as an intriguing avenue for future research.

Our theorisation and empirical exploration of Abject Appearance also extends organisation studies' theorising of abjection by revealing how women elite leaders' struggles to maintain their almost-subject status can turn them away from other women who threaten their subjectivity. Kristeva (1982) might argue that this reflects the '… compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them' (p.2). It explains the interplay of domination and submission between male/female and masculine/feminine, where women elite leaders perform for both sides of these binaries (Benjamin, 1998). Through a lens of Abject Appearance dominant interpretations of manager/leader are challenged which enables us to see how the subtleties that make working lives so fraught for women are 'entrenched in modernity's presumptions of how to do [leadership] work' (Harding et al., 2013:58). Abject Appearance therefore builds upon Kenny's (2010) and Harding et al.'s (2013) discussions of the politics of recognition, where the absence of intersubjective recognition can lead to abjection. Further, non-recognition or misrecognition can 'inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred (Taylor, 1994)' (Harding et al., 2013:57). We contribute to these understandings by revealing how, through their efforts, some women elite leaders discard demeaning expectations of their bodies and appearance 'to produce a self-affirming' (Fraser, 2000:109–110) identity of their

own. However, paradoxically the symbolic is seductive; we cannot escape our need for acknowledgement by another, as we need both assertion of self (freedom/lack of need of recognition) and recognition (need for the other/dependency) (Benjamin, 1998; Harding et al., 2013).

In questioning where our analysis leaves us in understanding experiences of women elite leaders, our research points to how disruptive push-backs have possibilities for women's subjectivities and agency. An example can be seen when women leaders attempt to modify women's position by refocusing normative views of women's bodies to constructions of women's 'powerful bodies' (Fiona) as leaders. Through Abject Appearance we begin to understand how women, as constituents of the margins, might be in the best position to transgress boundaries (Kristeva, 1982). Jones (2007) tells us that abject beings can push back, performing difference and 'challenging the stability of readable and enforceable norms,' (p.63), as there are 'gaps, tears and leaks' (p.70), where, we argue, women as One and the Other can challenge. Future research could delve deeper into how awareness of Abject Appearance might raise consciousness and enable opportunities for women elite leaders, as 'sometimes-subjects,' lurking on the borders, to disrupt, act and create space for difference. For example, part of the utility of Abject Appearance as a theory is an ability to reveal women elite leaders' bi-sexuality (Philips et al., 2014; Cixous, 1976); in the hyphen between masculine and feminine. We extend understandings in that through the accounts we see how women's feminine bodies betray and/or use this space for disruption. We see women elite leaders as disturbing identity, system, order, borders, positions and rules, as 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva, 1982:4). Abject Appearance explains women's struggles with this bi-sexuality in the space of, and marginalised from, the symbolic. It reflects how masculine and feminine subjectivities are jointly crafted in realities of power (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006:81). In this way, Abject Appearance as a theoretical tool has the

potential to illuminate how women in-relation-to other women are influenced by women's concerns about becoming a man, not becoming a man, performing as a woman and not performing as a woman; an ambivalence which subverts our views of masculinity and femininity.

Through this research we are also becoming consciously aware of our own identity-body work, within gendered contexts and our relations with other women. We feel better prepared for certain relationships and can better understand our own and other women's identity-body work and actions. In developing this paper we shared stories of when we first entered paid work where we were both told to change our appearance (for wearing scruffy boots and an un-ironed shirt). These stories had stayed with us over decades. We recognise ourselves in, and relate to, the women leaders' accounts. We reflexively discussed how we too use body work as armour 'to really look the part' which we simultaneously resent and enjoy. Our body work efforts are particularly salient when operating within hyper-masculine cultures and when we need to be 'on top form' in-relation-to other women. As researchers we can feel how, as Fotaki (2011:45) argues, our abject bodies are rendered 'untenable in the knowledge creation process.' However, now aware of how we use and 'abuse' our own and other women's bodies and appearance, we feel better able to challenge when intra-gender monitoring and regulation of our bodies becomes excessive.

The dynamics that underpin Abject Appearance offer possibilities for organising differently. As gendered organisations are performed moment to moment through real people (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006), in becoming reflexively aware of Abject Appearance (as we did as researchers) and why women relate to each other in certain ways through bodies and appearance, then agency strengthens and disruption is possible. If we had the opportunity to go back to the original participants we would ask them how it feels to be told your body does not quite fit and how it feels to be told this by another woman. We would also explore how it

feels to perform through powerful bodies in elite positions.

Practical implications

There are further practical outcomes to this research. Abject Appearance deepens understandings of women's problematic experiences as elite leaders and perceived 'difficult' relations between women. The theory challenges views that women in organisations 'just do not get along' and are 'catty' and 'bitchy' to each other (used to legitimise gendered hierarchies), therefore creating possibilities for consciousness-raising, choice and disruption. This allows us to revise assumptions, as well as theoretical literature on women leaders and relationships between women leaders. Also, current debates on governmental quotas to increase numbers of women in UK and European elite leader positions and growing global feminist activism to challenge gendered media representations of women (e.g., the MissRepresentation project), draw attention to the gendered ways in which women's bodies and appearance are evaluated. Integrating discussions of these projects and Abject Appearance into policy discussions, Higher Education business and management curricula, executive education and organisational talent management and leader development initiatives, would facilitate consciousness-raising and offer language through which to talk about women's bodies and appearance in organisations without blaming or fixing women.

Conclusion

Abject Appearance as a theoretical tool provides an understanding of how women, in a context of intra-gender relations, simultaneously transgress boundaries associated with elite leader positions and negotiate embodied leadership. In terms of broader theories of gender and organisation studies, Abject Appearance is an under-researched area that contributes to understanding the invisible intra-gender barriers constraining women's progress. Such

barriers require continual and unrelenting navigation. Finally, we may be challenged for focussing our theory of Abject Appearance on elite, privileged, primarily white, western women, yet we make no apology. Women elite leaders in organisations remain as rare as pandas, their experiences are under-researched and their unique achievements offer us much in new avenues for theorising and stretching ourselves.

Funding

Notes

1. The symbolic order is understood as a language mediated order of culture where perpetuation of the law of the father occurs through ideologies, structures and social culture. Within the symbolic order there are various gendered orders e.g., organisations as patriarchal contexts where men are perceived as in their 'rightful place' in various hierarchies of power.

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Table 1. Women Elite Leaders' Industry Sectors

Industry Sectors	Number of Women Elite Leaders
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1
Manufacturing	5
Water supply; sewerage, waste management	1
Construction	1
Wholesale and retail trade	3
Transportation and storage	1
Accommodation and food services	1
Information and communication	8
Financial and insurance activities	12
Professional, scientific and technical activities	2
Administrative and support services	1
Public administration and defence	11
Education	9
Human health and social work	3
Arts, entertainment and recreation	6
Other service activities	2
Other	14
Total:	**81**

Table 2. Example Research Questions, Data Excerpts, Themes and Theme Description

Question Posed to Participant	Data Excerpts	Theme	Theme Description
Can you comment on the friendships that you've observed between senior women?	They [women] are more subtle. And I'm afraid that many of them still resort to things which you'd think you'd have evolved beyond. Appearance. I can't tell you the number of women who will comment on things like - there's two here. They'll comment on what she looks like, weight, that stuff where I think to myself God. And I won't join in (Laura – Head, Construction).	Fascination with Appearance	A preoccupation with leadership as embodied and with self-other bodies and appearance in a context of intra-gender relations.
When you are being competitive, what behaviours do you draw upon?	I am not very tall and if I am going into battle I like to get my stiletto heels on. I like big heels and I like lipstick and I will get my hair done because to me appearance is a part of it. If I want to make an impression… if you are being competitive that is an important situation to be in, so therefore I get glammed up a bit… but sometimes I don't actually believe …what I am saying (Denise – CEO, Education).		
How do you respond to competitive behaviour that's directed at you from other women? Have you experienced that?	When I've been going for interviews, for example, when I got this job and there is a slight perception at this kind of level that a senior level woman is – you feel like 'do you fit into this?', 'is what a senior level woman is supposed to look like?'. So I do get a bit of that where I go back and think 'oh, I don't know, this is me' then my husband says 'no but you can only be yourself for heaven's sake, it doesn't matter what the other women might be like, this is what you need to do' so I've seen that (Sindy - Director, Other Industry).		
You've said that men have worked out how to allow each other to be competitive and does that mean in your view that women don't allow each other to be competitive?	If you talk to women about when they're dressing for an evening out, are they dressing for the men or are they dressing for the other women? They care about the fact that someone might know that they wore this dress before, not because they believe for an instant that a man is going to notice… but they know every woman in the room will… Women compare themselves and compete with other women on a level that we don't talk about (Kath – MD, Manufacturing).		
As a woman moving into senior positions have you been aware of competitive relationships between other women and what does that look like?	And other people do it differently and I think that's fine if that's what...other women do, it helps their confidence I think to go for something statement in the way of clothes but for me it never worked for me that idea and I do quite strongly fight the idea that somehow as a woman you have to do statement clothes. I think you can also go down the route of men which is be boring as hell and wear the uniform of dark things that nobody's going to notice much. (Kimberly – Head, Public Administration and Defence).	Refocusing from the Body and Appearance	An embodied identity strategy in a context of women's intra-gender relations. A simultaneous acknowledgement and rejection / recalibration of self in-relation-to other body and appearance in the women elite leader occupational identity.
What do you think the key issues women need to be aware of as they progress into senior positions?	What I would like women to be more aware of, for example, if they are in the press, try to tell the journalist not to focus on what clothes you wear and how many children you have… If a journalist ever wanted to do that to me he would have it because it's just not acceptable…it's again about spreading awareness saying 'well actually that's not acceptable' because if we want to read about what clothes women are wearing we get a special kind of magazine for that…and I'm speaking to all of the journalists I		

	speak to. "Well, actually that's not acceptable" because if we want to read about what clothes women are wearing we will get a special kind of magazine for that. If we want to read about 'how do you run the [name of organisation]?' it's irrelevant whether you are wearing skirts or trousers Or how much make-up you put on. I was just really disappointed to see that come into the picture. (Patricia – MD, Financial and Insurance Services).		
Can you tell me about a time when you have been competitive with other women to develop your career?	[Three are women] And we are the same rank. So yes we are competing. So there is an element of— and this can play itself out in meetings, as I say, this sense of a dynamic going on between the women in the meeting, creating the right impression with the men… …There is a slightly competitive situation… it is about getting the level right, getting the balance right and woman X and I joke about - We compete 'in quotes' on our 'we dress up when we go out for the evening', you always have a new dress and a new pair of shoes and that is fine…When it comes down to competition, there is a competition across all the [name of senior role] about who has done the most work (Carol - Public Administration and Defence).		
If we think about ambitious senior women that you've met through your career, can you think of any particular behaviours that have been successful or unsuccessful in helping them to progress?	I remember having to ask the [lead] of [the department] who was also a woman, very fortunately for me, to go have a conversation with her [another women] about how she dressed… She was a beautiful woman but the cleavage issue arose. I had the [lead of department] say you may think you're stylish, we think men are looking down your shirt instead of paying attention to your face when you're talking and really because you want to be respected… if you wear that low cut blouse you're broadcasting I'm a sexual being and… it's distracting from the message that says I'm a leader here. In the end she got a bit of a wardrobe change and she's gone on to be a [senior X] of a company… some people would say that's a conversation that should never have been had but the truth of it is, we wanted this leader to get ahead and we saw this problem (Sandra – CEO Professional, Scientific & Professional Services).	Achieving a Professional Balance	An embodied identity strategy in a context of women's intra-gender relations. The construction, monitoring and resisting of 'professional' self in-relation-to other body and appearance norms in the women elite leader occupational identity.