From Biological Clocks to Unspeakable Inequalities: The

Intersectional Positioning of Young Professionals

Abstract

The article examines how gender and age influence the experience of being a professional by drawing on intersectionality as an act of positioning for which different discursive resources are employed. Through interviews with employees at two professional services firms, it is shown how younger men and women make sense of professional experiences. First, the biological clock is used to explain the divergence of career patterns of men and women while ignoring that all women, regardless of actual maternal status, suffer a maternity penalty. Second, individual strategies for overcoming being in a minority are suggested that indicated that the individual rather than societal structures shape chances of success. Finally, generational change is used to argue that gender inequality belongs to a previous generation, which indicates that inequality is becoming unspeakable. The article shows that young professionals position themselves in unique ways with regards to age and gender, which entails emphasising individual agency over systemic inequalities.

Introduction

The concept of intersectionality has refined a static conception of gender (Davis, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Staunæs, 2003; Kamenou, 2007; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). Intersectionality draws attention to the fact that women's experiences are not uniform but instead are polymorphous and asymmetric. Differentiators such as race, class and age position women in different ways in relation to their access to power and resources and structure their experiences (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012; McCall, 2005). Specific intersections between these differentiators shape how inequality manifests itself.

Professional organizations are central settings where the intersectionality of differentiators leads to a unique positioning. Black and ethnic minority women and women from lower social classes often struggle to enter professional organizations (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Duffy, 2005) while white middle class women have the right cultural and social capital to enter professional organizations but the masculine dominated structures of those organizations make it difficult for them to advance (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Scholarship in this area has contributed vivid analyses of how women are positioned and disadvantaged due to their differences (Acker, 2000, 2006; Hartmann, 1981; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1998; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Kamenou, Netto and Fearfull, Early View; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Duffy, 2005; Harvey, 2005; McCall, 2001, 2005; Holvino, 2010).

Whilst intersectionality studies have often focused on race and gender, a particularly powerful example of intersectionality can be found when considering gender and age. Research has clearly set forth illustrations of how older female workers are discriminated in the work context (Krekula, 2007; Ainsworth, 2002). The way in which gender and age can frame individuals' experience has been less regularly studied in relation to younger women (cf. Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011). The scarce research in this area has provided powerful analyses of how younger women in organizations no longer perceive gender as a factor through which to explain their experiences (Scharff, 2011). Rather than seeing gender as a potential explanatory factor for their experiences, younger women more often attribute it to age and lack of experience (Scharff, 2011). This resonates with the idea of post-feminism where feminism is constructed as an out-dated concept that has lost its relevance in modern times (cf. Coppock, Haydon and Richter, 1995; McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007).

The article presents an analysis of how age and gender intersect and impact the experience of being a professional. The article draws on intersectionality to highlight how young professionals are positioned by age and gender. The article starts by discussing intersectionality from a theoretical and empirical perspective. The next section explicates the methodological approach employed in this study. The empirical part sets out how young professionals are positioned by gender and age. The following section connects the empirical findings with the literature in the field to show potential silences and omissions. The final section summarises the article and indicates avenues for further research.

Intersectionality - Age and Gender in Professionals

Intersectionality is one of the key contributions of feminist and gender theories to the analysis of social relations. Intersectionality has drawn attention to the fact that women are positioned very differently due to their unique intersections of differentiators (Davis, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Staunæs, 2003; Kamenou, 2007). The professional work setting is a particularly potent area to explore those dynamics because it is one of the sites where inequalities are reproduced (Acker, 2009; Gill, 2002). Research has focused on the intersections between gender, class, race but also other dimensions such as age (Winker and Degele, 2011). The research on age mainly centres on older women with fairly limited research being conducted on younger women. Studying how men and women make sense of gender in the work context has been a neglected area of research (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011).

Intersectionality has become one of the central concepts in feminist and gender theories (Davis, 2008). Intersectionality can be defined as the interaction between different categories of difference (Davis, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Staunæs, 2003). The concept of intersectionality was originally developed in relation to the specific experiences of women of color that were ignored by feminist theories (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989). Although it has been argued that black women are overlooked in feminist theories for some time prior to this (e.g. hooks, 1984), it was Crenshaw who coined the term intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality was introduced to 'focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and

social movement politics. It exposes how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice' (Cho et al., 2013: 787).

McCall (2005) has further specified different conceptualisations of intersectionality by distinguishing between anticategorical, intracategorical and intercategorical (categorical) intersectionality. The anticategorical approach arose in the 1980s when various scholars questioned the validity of modern analytical categories (McCall, 2005). It was argued that gender as well as other categories are socially constructed, which means that identities and experiences do not fall within one single category and those categories need to be deconstructed (McCall, 2005). Methodologically this meant that existing categories are broadened, for example by identifying more than two genders (McCall, 2005). Intracategorical approaches also see gender and other categories as socially constructed but take a different approach methodologically. The initial point of interest for intracategorical intersectionality was to explore how single category accounts cannot explain the lived experience which was to be found that previously neglected points of intersection, such as black women's experiences (McCall, 2005). This led to studies of one group that shared a single and neglected location or a specific social setting (McCall, 2005). Examples are provided by narrative approaches that illustrate the social location embodied in one individual and how this complexity is managed. These studies are characterized by a partial perspective which can include case studies and in-depth studies of single groups (McCall, 2005).

The intercategorical approach, also called categorical approach, departs from the other kinds, on the basis that there are 'relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis. The main task of the categorical approach is to explicate those relationships, and doing so requires the provisional use of categories' (McCall, 2005: 1784f). Thereby categories are seen as points of reference but without seeing them as static. This approach also presumes that inequalities might not exist and does not make a prior assumptions how large or small they might be (McCall, 2005). There are normally a range of structural and cross-categorical comparisons which are being explored to highlight the extent of inequality (McCall, 2005). This article will use a categorical perspective on intersectionality to explore how age and gender shape the professional experience. I highlight how categories of gender and age are relevant in explaining individuals' experiences.

Intersectionality has been used to explore the intersection between class and gender (Acker, 2000, 2006; Hartmann, 1981), gender and race (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1998; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Kamenou et al., Early View; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010), gender, class and race (Duffy, 2005; Harvey, 2005; McCall, 2001, 2005; Holvino, 2010) and gender and sexuality (Fotaki, 2011). Intersectionality is also a concept of relevance for studies on work-life balance (Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli and Bell, 2011) as well as diversity work (Tatli and Özbilgin, Early View). Some research has also tried to understand more unusual intersections, such as how feminist-identified, working class and educated Latinos view masculinity (Hurtado and Sinha, 2008).

Age is increasingly used to highlight inequalities (Snape and Redman, 2003; Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Love and Torrence, 1989). Historically age discrimination was seen as a form of discrimination applying to older workers (Butler, 1969). Research for instance has shown that older workers find it more difficult to secure new jobs after being made redundant (Love and Torrence, 1989). While in the past older people would have been regarded as wise and worthy of respect, this is no longer the case today (Warren, 1998) with youth being constructed as a valued commodity in most Western cultures (Twigg, 2004). However increasingly age is also a relevant category for inequality for younger workers (Loretto, Duncan and White, 2000). In a study on business students it was shown that many had experienced employment discrimination such as being seen as untrustworthy (Loretto et al., 2000). Other research found that being seeing as 'too young' is as common as being seen as 'too old' (Snape and Redman, 2003).

So far, the intersection between gender and age has received comparably little research attention. An exception is research on gender and age that has focused on older women, who confront ageism (Patrickson and Hartmann, 1996). For older women in particular the centrality of the ageing body is regularly stressed (Twigg, 2004). Womanhood is often considered in relation to appearance and sexuality and women's bodies are viewed as less attractive as they age (Duncan and Loretto, 2004). This contributes to the fact that older women workers are often invisible or ignored (Krekula, 2007; Ainsworth, 2002). Older women perceive age as an impediment for entering or re-entering the labour market (Moore, 2009). Research on the

intersectionality of gender and age has therefore often focused on the inequality that older women face.

Research has also shown that how 'young' and 'old' is defined varies widely and largely depends on perceptions. Women in their thirties are for instance perceived as 'too old' and 'too young' at the same time (Duncan and Loretto, 2004). At their age it is assumed that they will soon leave the workplace to have children, yet they are perceived to be too young to be in senior leadership positions, due to a presumed lack of experience. Thus female workers in their thirties face ageism and discrimination on three grounds: their gender, being too old, and simultaneously being too young (Duncan and Loretto, 2004).

It has been argued that women of the Millennial generation, also called Generation Y, who are born after 1977, particular show a strong sense of optimism with regards to the achievement of gender equality; they presume organisations are meritocratic and that any residues of gender inequality are due to choice (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011). An example of this optimism can be found in research that examines how MBA students in their late twenties and early thirties describe their experiences: they were often try to avoid seeing gender as limiting them and instead constructed MBA education in such a way that gender is assumed not to matter (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010). This is the case even though some of their experiences resonated strongly with gender discrimination (Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010).

In another piece of research, women born in the late 1970s and early 1980s reported what could be seen as traditional forms of gender inequality, for example earning less than their male counterparts, or finding it difficult to gain respect from others (Scharff, 2011). What is interesting however is that rather than attributing their experiences to their gender they instead made sense of their experiences of inequality using their age as an explanation (Scharff, 2011). They express not only a rejection of feminism but also an expression of individualisation where the individual is responsible for shaping his or her life chances a opposed to traditional categories of inequality such as gender, class and race (Scharff, 2011; Beck, 2000).

This research resonates strongly with the concept of post-feminism in which is it presumed that liberatory discourses like feminism are no longer needed in times when gender equality is supposedly achieved (Coppock et al., 1995; McRobbie, 2008). Ignoring the shaping power of gender is seen as unpopular and unmodern (Lewis, 2006) and instead it is believed that gender equality has already been achieved (Heiskanen and Rantalaiho, 1997). This often happens through showing gender awareness which is acknowledged but at the same time disavowed (Gill, 2007). The systemic nature of discrimination is thereby disguised (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000).

It is regularly presumed that when studying intersectionality the centre of the study should be the subordinate location, in contrast to a dominant or even mixed location (cf. Denis, 2008; McCall, 2005; Cho et al., 2013). Such studies then serve to show how inequality is perpetuated by highlighting the experiences of those that suffer from intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). Intersectional

visibility refers to cases where only the prototypical 'norm' is visible. For instance, when one thinks about gender white women are seen as the norm, and when discussing race, black men are the norm. This therefore neglects the experiences of black women (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). While focusing on intersectional invisibility is important, this does not help in exploring how privilege by dominant groups such as white men is retained (Browne and Misra, 2003). This means that 'progressive scholarship requires a nuanced conception of identity that recognizes the ways in which positions of dominance and subordination work in complex and intersecting ways to constitute subjects' experiences of personhood' (Nash, 2008: 10). Nash (2008) eloquently argues that scholarship should explore the fluid ways in which privilege and oppression intersect in individual subject experiences and explore the mechanisms of domination that are often neglected if one simply focuses on those who are marginalised. This article therefore, in addition to highlighting how categories of age and gender are made relevant in young professionals' experiences, breaks new ground by not assuming a pre-existing web of power and oppression, and aiming to explore how it is brought to life.

Even though there is considerable debate in feminist theory about what intersectionality is and how it can be researched (cf. Walby et al., 2012; Winker and Degele, 2011), it has been argued that it is exactly the vagueness of the concept that is the secret of its success (Davis, 2008). Research on intersectionality has fulfilled the important function of highlighting how intersecting categories shape the experience of individuals. While research has explored a wealth of intersections between gender and other forms of difference (e.g. Essers and Benschop, 2009; Kamenou et al., Early View; Harvey, 2005; Holvino, 2010), the intersection between age and gender in

young professionals is so far not explored in great detail. Using the perspective of categorical intersectionality and a conception of a fluidity through which power and oppression manifest themselves, the aim of the article is to explore how gender and age shape the experience of being a professional.

Methodology and Methods

Studying intersectionality empirically is challenging, particularly if one does not wish to see intersectionality as simply additive but rather to explore how multiple and fluid subject positions are established (Browne and Misra, 2003; Nash, 2008). While this article draws on categories for the purpose of the analysis, categories are conceptually seen as socially constructed (McCall, 2005).

Warner (2008) argues that intersectionality research needs to take into account that individuals will mobilise and ignore different identities in a specific situation, rather than focusing only on the norm of the intersection. In order to explore how young professionals mobilise different identities in relation to gender and age, female and male young professionals were selected. Exploring the views of female and male young professionals allows exploring potential similarities and differences in their positioning and in how categories are being made relevant. This avoids studying only the norm of an intersection, which would be young professional woman, by adding the usually invisible intersectionality of younger professional men. As the research will indicate however, gender was mainly understood and discussed in relation to women with few men discussing their own experiences of gender. While one can include a multitude of comparative groups, it was decided not to include other groups

such as older professionals because the focus of the research was how younger men and women experience being a professional.

For Warner (2008) doing intersectionality research means that different forms of privilege need to be made visible which can include, for instance, the researcher using the fact that research subjects are white as a form of insight, even when research subjects are not making this visible. Although the focus of this study is on gender and age, the oppositions of dominance and subordination will be cross-referenced with other dimensions of diversity such as nationality and ethnicity when relevant. While theoretically important when analysing the material, few instances were found where nationality or ethnicity played a role in the analysis.

Intersectionality studies have been critiqued on the grounds that most do not address concrete social interactions (Fenstermaker and West, 2002). Similarly Warner (2008) suggests that doing gender approaches are able to show the dynamic nature through which identities are negotiated. Research on doing gender has indeed stressed how subject positioning processes can be explored through, for instance, the use of discourse analysis (Kelan, 2007, 2009b). Key insights from discourse analysis based on Potter and Wetherell (1987) are used in this research to explore how subjects position themselves. This allows a better understanding of how gender and age influence the experience of being a professional.

For this research two professional service firms that operate globally but were based in the United Kingdom were selected. Both organizations focus on technology consulting and are major recruiters of graduates. The research was positioned as being about young professionals and their expectations of work, life and gender. The interviewees were selected from a list provided by the organisations with people having joined the organization in the last three years. All interviewees were approached individually asking them if they might be interested in participating in the research. The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

A research assistant and myself conducted 32 interviews with graduates. The interviewees were born between 1977 and 1985 and thus would be described as belonging to the older cohort of Generation Y or the Millennials (Twenge and Campbell, 2008; Broadbridge, Maxwell and Ogden, 2007). This age bracket was chosen because 1977 is one of the earliest years where Generation Y is supposed to begin and although this generation extends to the 1990 (Broadbridge et al., 2007) those individuals in graduate programmes during the time of the study in 2008 were born in or before 1985.

We interviewed men and women in equal numbers and also made sure that we included as many different ethnic backgrounds as possible to avoid focusing only on the norm of the intersection (Warner, 2008). The semi-structured interviews lasted about an hour and were audio recorded. The interviews followed an interview guide covering a range of issues pertaining to expectations about work, life and gender. The analysis for this article is mainly based on the topic of 'gender', which included the

following questions: 1) In your opinion, do you think men and women experience work differently? 2) What is your personal experience of being a man/a woman in this organisation? 3) Do men and women need to be different to succeed here? 4) Do you think that there are differences between generations when it comes to men and women at work? We also drew on other areas of the interview where gender was discussed.

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service following a simplified Jefferson system[1]. The first coding was done using the qualitative software package NVivo 8, and was following the interview topics. The sections were then coded further into finer subcodes, and those subcodes were then printed and were further analysed. The hardcopies of the text were annotated. During the analysis special attention was paid to themes or codes that could potentially challenge the analysis to ensure that results are robust.

Through this process three ways of talking about gender were identified that worked together in structuring how age and gender matter for being a professional. These 'ways of talking' are called interpretative repertoires in discourse analysis '(i)nterpretative repertoires are recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena. A repertoire (...) is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical construction.' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 149). These interpretative repertoires can also be called discursive repertoires. A particular focus on this research was on exploring silences in the interpretative repertoires used, for instance, to disassociate with unfavourable subject positions (Billig, 1991; Gill, 1993). Those

silences can be studied by exploring what a person can be expected to know but does not deploy in a situation (Huckin, 2002). Very often it is then necessary to depart from what is actually said to make a wider judgement on why that is the case (Billig, 1988). Silences are particularly relevant for exploring the unspeakability of inequalities.

Both of the interviewers were female academics and were about the same age as the interviewees. Being of a similar age created a basis of trust that helped to ensure that the interviews were informal. The fact that both interviewers were women is also likely to have impacted the interactions and what points were discussed. It may, for instance, be unlikely for an interviewee to express gender discriminatory views, so as to appear politically correct (Ely, Meyerson and Davidson, 2006; Barreto and Ellemers, 2005). However both interviewers felt that the interviewees did not hold back in their views and most of them were very articulate about their gender experiences. In our analysis we included an awareness of how our own presence might have shaped the interviews (Cassell, 2005).

In this study intersectionality is used from a categorical approach with an awareness that categories are mobilised by individuals to position themselves. Thereby it is possible to show how gender and age shape the experience of being a professional. The analysis will focus on three discursive repertoires which are used in making sense of intersectionality between gender and age in young professionals.

The Biological Clock, Being in a Minority and Generational Change

In this section the three discursive repertoires that were used by young professionals to position themselves in relation to age and gender are discussed. They refer to women and the biological clock, women's experiences being structured by their minority status, and by referring to generational change.

The Biological Clock

In many interviews there were traditional assumptions about women and the biological clock, which, it is assumed, leads to their opting out of work to bring up a family.

> Christine: I'm sure you've got the statistics on our firm, and there's a lot fewer women at the top here than there are men, but yet in all other ranks there's, it's more equally balanced. And I think that has a lot to do with the fact that women hit about 32 and they think, oh I've got to have a baby, and then they kind of go off and have a baby. And a senior exec did this very recently. She went off and she was like, 'guys, I'm only probably going to take two months of my maternity, I'll be straight back.' And then she actually extended from six months to the full nine months and then to the full year. Because she just, she loved having a child and so she kind of like, that's what happened to her. And so many women think that they're going to come back part time or they're going to come back and then they don't and so that, I think that predominantly

is the reason that there's not many people at the top of the hierarchy in this firm, not that there's not the opportunity for them to be there.

Christine cited children as a reason that women initially drop out of work and then not return or not return full time to explain the lack of women in senior positions. From Christine's perspective, who does not have children, the issue of child bearing is seen as meaningful in explaining the scarcity of senior women in the organization. What this also hints at is a sense of dilemma when it comes to having children and taking leave and returning to work. It seems to Christine like a complex labyrinth to navigate. She is also very specific in regards to age, stating that 32 is when women go off to have children. This alludes to women's decreasing fertility with age or the 'biological clock' that is often presumed to hit women after 30 (Friese, Becker and Nachtigall, 2006). She also refers to the fact that many women drop out of paid work completely or work part-time (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). This suggests that the experiences of women who are older and do have children will differ markedly from Christine's current experience as a younger woman without children.

Similarly, Harry suggests the following:

Harry: Erm (.) yes. I think because there's a lot, there's so much emphasis on that period, erm with promotion cycles, if you join straight out of university you know - I mean getting promoted at each level is hard, but the kind of the biggest step is going from a senior manager to (…) partner. And that's kind of, that's your early thirties. Like if you've excelled, that's kind of 31, 32

onwards, you might make that. And I guess that's the kind of period which lots of women are looking to start families. And I think they need extra support in that period. Because I know- you know if you look at the workforce, I mean, my intake (of graduates) was pretty much roughly split between men and women. (…) So by the time it gets to senior manager I think- I mean my impression is I've met as many senior managers who are women as men. But for senior executives who are women, I mean I can almost count them on one hand.

Harry makes the argument that promotional cycles coincides with women having children, also pointing to their early thirties. Although men and women are recruited in equal numbers, the 30s are when women start their families and they also have to make the transition to partner which is perceived as one of the most challenging transitions in a consulting career (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008).

While the biological clock is seen as creating differences between men and women as they age, it was also suggested that it not simply having a child that means that women step off the career ladder:

Imelda: I wouldn't sacrifice my career to have children. I think it's a choice you make. Um, whether or not your focus on the kids or you focus on the career. Or you focus on both and if you focus on both, both suffer. So it's a decision that a couple needs to make whether I do it or whether he does it and he wants to do it. (…) Um, where my, my, my background has always taught me differently. So, I would take care of the child or my partner would, it

doesn't really matter, you know, he can take time off work as much as I can. So [mm hmm], to me it's more equal.

In Imelda's view it is necessary to focus either on the career or a family. She seems to suggest that her partner would be expected to play an active role with children to allow her to pursue her career. Later on in the interview, she elaborates that she would expect her partner to be in a stable career position by the time they have children, which would give him the flexibility necessary for childcare. As she was younger than her partner, she did not expect to be settled in her career by the time they have children and instead indicated that she would want to advance afterwards. The difference here is that Imelda talks about her own plans whereas in the previous accounts these were general rather than personal arrangements. Imelda has clearly reflected on her personal situation and in such personal accounts the complexities and negotiations attached to those decisions become explicit.

As none of the interviewees had children at this stage, these statements remain hypothetical. What the interviewees suggest is that the careers of men and women, who are largely similar at this age, start to diverge in the early 30s, once children enter the picture. This is when women are not being able to pursue their careers fully but also the time when particularly white men start moving ahead and experience the 'daddy bonus' of enjoying higher earnings than their female peers (Hodges and Budig, 2010). In interviewees' views the careers of men and women start to diverge with age. Further differences might also appear between those men and women who decide not to have children, and those that do. It is often commonly accepted that family

responsibilities are different for men and women, and this is adopted as an unequivocal explanation or winning argument.

Being in a Minority

Many of the responses that the young professionals provided were structured around the fact that women are in a minority position. This minority positions leads to three ways to talk about experiences at work: the male-orientation of an area of work, the importance of networking and the feminine advantage.

Many interviewees talked about the male-orientation of their work environment:

> Grace: there's not erm in my experience there's not too much kind of macho culture at (organization) you know, again maybe it's 'cos of the part that I work in. I think maybe if you work in sales there's a lot more of that. And like I do know so I've got a friend who works in sales and he does go and PLAY GOLF with the people he works with, that kind of thing, like nobody I know really does that you know. So that's obviously a bit more kind of male orientated and maybe if you work in sales it's a bit harder to find where you fit in as a woman, but it's not really like that in consultancy, lots of people have families there, you know they're not kind of (.) part of a boys gang or a girls gang you know I don't think it's like that.

Grace offers here one example of what is often referred to as a male-dominated work environment, which expresses itself through the need to play golf. However she is

cautious to stress that this is mainly an issue that happens elsewhere in the organization rather than in her immediate work context.

> Christine: Um, (.) well, I mean, it, just from like personal experiences, um, I can be in a client meeting and nine times out of ten I'll be listened to. Um, ten times out of ten a man will be listened to. So I could say the same, and I've done it before, been in meetings where I've said something and it's been ignored and then the guy next to me has made the same point and they're like, 'oh yeah, yeah, great point.' (…) So I don't ever feel like I've experienced sexism from the firm, but I've been in situations where I've felt that had I been a man, um, I wouldn't have had to shout so loud to make myself heard, I think.

Christine refers to a common experience of women that their comments are overlooked. She is careful to stress that this is not a common experience and that it mainly happens outside the organization to minimize the impression that such behaviour plays a major role.

> April: Yeah I think you can't get away from the sort of I mean male, white male orientated dominated business it's true but I don't really ever I don't really find that a problem occasionally you get referred to as doll or whatever but it's never a sort of derogatory way since I have been here I have not been treated like a secretary or anything like that being young and female occasionally you know you might think it might happen, I have never had

anything like that I mean everyone here respects why you are here you have obviously got something to offer.

While April thinks that the business is dominated by white men, the only time she finds this problematic is if they refer to her in derogatory ways as a young woman and 'as a doll' but she asserts that this does not happen often to her. The expression of a being a doll is insightful because it could be seen as belittling the woman. What is achieved in all of the three accounts is that sexism is presented as unlikely or uncommon occurrences in their workplace and it is up to the women to make themselves heard and to construct themselves as 'useful' to avoid this treatment. Most of the experiences seem to be related to being in a minority position as a woman.

Being in a minority was also associated with advantages in relation to networking. Kim here talks about men's networks:

Kim: [T]hey (men) might go out and play golf and they can make decisions whilst playing golf. But, which isn't, there's nothing malicious there, there's nothing intended to rule the women out because they don't play golf then they're not there as part of that decision making process. So I know of women that have learnt to play golf to be part of that. Erm, and I think that's a really clever way of combating that because there's no, like I said there's no malintent there, you know, you just, you've got one commonality with these

people other than golf at that moment is your job so you're going to talk about it. And, and so they play golf and they get involved in that. (…).

Kim's account starts off by talking about women's networking claiming that women need to catch up on this with specific events but men do this naturally by planning golf where they also make decisions. Kim is careful to stress that men do not do this intentionally to disadvantage women but she constructs this as what men naturally do. She also offers a strategy for women to combat being excluded: start to play golf. For Kim it is a clear question of women starting to adopt male pursuits if they want to succeed in a male-dominated culture. What this account achieves is to conceptualise women's disadvantage at work as a function of being in a minority position. As long as women are in a minority position, they need to start pursuing past times like men to get the same benefits from a network. For Kim this is unproblematic.

There were also accounts in which women's minority position was dressed up as an advantage.

Kareena: But then most of the time you just think >well because those aren't inherited in the old days and particularly actually being women now probably in the advantage< because erm HEHE they try to get women to get up a bit further so I actually see that as quite a good thing erm (.) and I think sometimes it's-it's- it's good to be a woman because they just (.) because you STAND OUT straight away HEHE in a team. So when you say something

people will probably remember it because oh that's you know if you are sitting in a room of like twenty people.

Here being a woman in a minority position is seen as an advantage because women stand out and because many organizations want to have more women in leadership positions. Being a woman in business is constructed as an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

When considering the impact of gender and age on their professional experience, the young professionals talked about women as holding a minority position. While this is not necessarily unique to their age group, their age gives them a vantage point that does not see the minority status as problematic, stating, for example, that women can learn how to network like a man. Being a young professional woman therefore means to counteract the disadvantages of being in a minority by adapting one's own behaviour. Furthermore they presume that being a woman is actually an advantage. This creates the perception that traditional power relations are inversed.

Generational Change

In many accounts that the young professionals offered, gender and generational changes were brought together thus highlighting one way through which gender and age interact. We asked the young professionals about whether they thought that previous generations had experienced gender differently, which might explain why they often referred to generations in their answers. The accounts focused on the old

boys' network, a belief that they have never experienced gender discrimination but also the sexism that they experienced as young women.

> Kareena: Well, I know this firm when it was still kind of smaller it's, you know, (…) (it) was a VERY (much a) boys' club they go to, you know, have a cigar and play golf HEHE and things like that, where as now that culture, its just- its stopped because its just (.) it wouldn't be seen appropriate.

For Kareena the old boys' network was in operation when the firm was smaller and presumably less professional.

> Quinn: Erm I suppose in the old (.) in the olden days I suppose it was the perception that women had to work long hours and really prove themselves whereas men might be more in the old boys' network and could do well without, without needing to do that. Erm I think that's hopefully changed and that nowadays erm women could prove themselves by their achievements and that there isn't this kind of issue.

For Quinn, women had to work harder whereas men could rely on an old boys' network. Both women quoted above state that this has changed now and an old boys' network no longer appears to limit women's opportunities. This is in contrast to the earlier account, where Kim talked about the necessity for women to join the old boys' networks to succeed.

We also encountered many proclamations that blatant sexism and gender discrimination really belongs to earlier generations.

Dan: I think, yeah, but maybe it's just like a stereotype that, you know, I think how my dad would react or something like that, and he'd be, oh you know, you can't have a woman leader, they're not going to be strong enough or what not. I think maybe, but it's not like I've actually ever seen that, it's just some stereotype that [okay], you know, and it's not really, no. I think maybe it's a little bit more balanced now because I see, I've not known anything apart from being told about equal ops and I'm not sure if it is truly equal yet or what's going to, I think maybe men earn a little bit more still on average.

Dan talks about how his father would not have accepted a female boss but how equal opportunities have moved on since then, yet he acknowledges that women earn less than men.

Kim: My dissertation project was on women, erm, senior women and the kind of glass ceiling thing. And we (she and her supervisor) talked about that at quite some length and I don't feel that I have to break boundaries or I don't ever feel that I'm the first woman to have ever done a thing but I do feel speaking to the likes of her who's, you know, she's, I think she's about mid-fifties now. She was, erm, so and I do think, so I kind of take it for granted that I am an equal. It doesn't matter who you are, I'm an equal, I can have the same, exactly the same opportunities. But back then she wasn't so they, by the very nature of her generation she had to act and behave differently. But because she did I don't have to and so that's, I think that's the generation difference.

Kim makes very clear that she has never confronted any gender discrimination and attributes gender discrimination to a previous generation. One of the ways in which age manifests is belonging to a different generation where gender discrimination is no longer as pronounced. Part of what it means to be a young professional is thereby presuming that gender discrimination is a thing of the past. This seems to hold for men as well as women.

In contrast, we also heard several examples where younger women in particular felt that they confronted some special treatment which often bordered on or was outright sexism. April being addressed as a 'doll' in an earlier account is one such example. She also talked about being bought more drinks as a young woman, but maintains that apart from that she is not treated differently.

> Olivia: JUST IN TERMS OF LIKE (hhh) the way that (.) I mean I, I've seen it, you know, here and in other businesses the way that men (.hhh) treat YOUNG women especially. Erm, you know I've been quite (.) appalled really at some of the comments that are made about, you know, physic, the physical appearance of a woman [huh], erm things like that which you would never hear (.) erm a woman saying about a man. Erm (.hhh) and that kind of (.) objectifiying (.) erm young women in the workplace. (…) it's not in a, you know the, it's not that they don't treat them as equals because when it actually comes to getting down and doing the job they DO, but it's actually more on the informal kind of side of things the, you know, there's comments and jokes and things and you just think.

Olivia seems clearly upset by how young women in particular are treated as sexual objects through seemingly casual banter. Olivia was one of the few women who voiced her concern about this so clearly. While these accounts do not talk specifically about being treated like young women by older men, they clearly see this behaviour as belonging to a previous generation that has little play in today's world of work.

Overall, these accounts construct gender inequality as being a feature earlier generations or older people. For them there are only rudimentary traces of this gender inequality noticeable today, even when they then go on to describe many examples of this behaviour or attitude.

Discussion

When looking at the professional experience through the prism of gender and age, three interpretative repertoires were drawn upon. First, the biological clock was used to explain why the experience of men and women starts to differ once they hit their thirties. Second, I discussed what being in a minority means and which strategies can be used to learn the dominant way or to use the minority status as an advantage. Here individual younger women were seen as responsible for overcoming inequality due to their minority status, which reflects that young professionals seem to believe in their own agency rather than structures. The final interpretative repertoire refers to generational changes in regards to potentially sexist behaviour where it is stressed that sexism is a more common feature in older individuals.

These three interpretative repertoires resonate with scholarship in the field. The biological clock or women as child bearers and primary carers is a common reason associated with women's lack of progress to reach higher echelons in organizations (Gatrell, 2007; Pringle, 1998; Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). Mothers often work part-time and are regularly not considered when it comes to further training and promotion. Part-time work is often considered incompatible with a senior position in organizations (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2003; Manning and Petrongolo, 2008; Liff and Ward, 2001). This constructs women leaving the workplace as a matter of choice. However others have suggested that women without children confront a maternity penalty due to their potential motherhood (Wajcman, 1998). This suggests that regardless of whether or not women are mothers they are always seen as potential mothers. While the young professionals in the sample would see the biological clock as a reason that the experiences of men and women differ as they age, the idea of potential motherhood indicates all women regardless of their maternal status experience disadvantage due to their potential for motherhood. In the young professionals' accounts the differences among women in regards to motherhood are silenced and instead the inequality that women might experience is reduced to their choice to be mothers.

What the young female professionals describe as being in a minority has in academic research been analysed under the term demography. Kanter (1977) argued that women are 'token' in organizations and experience performance pressures due to increased visibility which empirical research substantiated (Spangler, Gordon and

Pipkin, 1978; Roth, 2004). The minority/majority relationships have also been shown to impact networking behavior of women (Ibarra, 1992, 1993), their gender identity at work (Ely, 1994) as well as the language resources women use (Baxter, 2010). The research participants focused a lot of attention on strategies that could be used to overcome the disadvantages of being in a minority (playing golf) or to turn the minority position into an advantage (standing out). While academic literature would discuss the female advantage in regards to skills and attributes (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Billing and Alvesson, 2000), the young professionals discussed it mainly in relation to being more visible. The strategies that young professionals suggested to overcome the minority position were individualized. It was the individual woman who had to take action to overcome disadvantage rather than suggesting a more wide-ranging systems change (Gill, 2002; Scharff, 2012). Changing systems and structures rather than the individual was a silenced strategy for cultural change.

The interpretative repertoire of generational change resonated strongly with the fact that gender inequality in modern workplaces is often buried under a strong rhetoric of gender equality (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998) and gender neutrality (Eisenhart and Finkel, 1998). Gender inequality is regularly constructed as happening elsewhere or as something that occurred in the past (Kelan, 2009a). This became evident in the responses of the interviewees; it was more common to talk about gender inequality in regards to client work that is outside of the organization itself, or in this case attributing sexist behaviour to the previous generation. Attributing sexism to the previous generation is from the perspective of young professionals a way to linking such behaviour to the past. By linking potential inequality to a previous generation, the young professionals made clear that they do not expect it to play a major role in

their life. While young women sometimes experienced sexism and young men were aware of it, the experience of sexism was constructed as a difference between older and younger employees. This is where the importance of intersectionality becomes visible: age is used to make gender unspeakable (Gill, 2002, forthcoming; Kelan, 2014). The unspeakability of gender inequality means that a repudiation of gender inequality is necessary to allow the individual rather than external structures being in control. Here age is used to repudiate gender inequality.

The positioning by age and gender influences the interpretative repertoires the young professionals draw upon. However the young professionals also silence certain aspects that would allow different views to emerge. The biological clock is a commonly accepted interpretative repertoire for the young professionals, which indicated that the experiences of men and women might be different as they age. However the young professionals did not draw on alternative ideas such as the motherhood penalty (Wajcman, 1998), which would show a more systemic form of gender inequality. The young professionals acknowledge that women are in a minority but suggested potential strategies of individual change to overcome them. The onus of change was thereby on the individual, which relates to individualization (Scharff, 2012). The existing forms of gender inequality were largely seen as relevant for previous generations and older workers rather than themselves. Thereby the gender inequality became something that is unspeakable for this younger generation (Gill, 2002, forthcoming). Overall, the interpretative repertoires focused strongly on the agency of the individual while ignoring the shaping forces of structural inequality. This supports the conception of post-feminism (Coppock et al., 1995; McRobbie, 2008) where structural gender inequality is presumed to be an issue that is long passé.

Conclusion

The article explored how the intersection between age and gender impacts the experience of being a professional. The article drew on an approach of intersectionality that not only explored the intersection of different categories of difference but also highlighted the fluidity of positions of power as a central tool for analysis. The foci of the research were younger professionals whose experiences have rarely been analysed from a gender and age angle. The analysis of the interviews with male and female young professionals led to three interpretative repertoires. First, the biological clock was seen as positioning men and women developing their career. However the young professionals did not discuss the maternity penalty that all women experience regardless of their maternal status (Wajcman, 1998). Second, it was acknowledged that women are in a minority and strategies were developed for overcoming this by adopting dominant behaviour or constructing women's difference as an advantage. Thereby the individual was put in charge to overcome potential gender inequality which expresses individualisation (Scharff, 2012). Finally, generational change was seen as changing gender relations beyond recognition and positioning older workers are distinct from younger workers. For older workers gender inequality was seen as normal while for the younger workers gender inequality appeared only as residue from old-fashioned practices. Young, female professionals did not expect that gender inequality would limit them. This can be described as supporting the notion of unspeakable inequalities where a repudiation of gender inequality is necessary to allow the individual rather than external structures shaping individual experiences (Gill, 2002, forthcoming).

The way the young professionals constructed their talk not only shows a clear intersectional positioning of them as young male or female professionals but it was also apparent that they tend towards individual agency explanations rather than seeing structural inequalities. The systemic nature of gender inequality was silenced which has been explored through the concept of the unspeakability of gender inequality (Gill, forthcoming; Kelan, 2014). Focussing on silences that emerge from the interpretative repertoire has thus given the research the possibility not only to explore intersectionality between age and gender but furthermore to highlight the mechanism through which advantage and disadvantage was constructed by the professionals. Such a focus on silence is useful for studies on intersectionality because it allows exploration of the unspeakability of inequality. Further studies on inequality in general and on intersectionality in specific should highlight how far the unspeakability of inequality is relevant in other contexts. It would for instance be interesting to explore how age and gender influence the experience of older professionals. It would also be interesting to explore how class interacts with gender and age in professional workplaces. For instance it could be explored how younger working class women talk about their work experience in law firms. Equally, it should be studied if similar mechanisms around age and gender are at play in other areas of work that are not deemed 'professional'. Such studies might explore how younger and older men in retail work articulate inequality. Such studied could significantly add to the field of intersectionality and gender studies and would also enhance theory building around the unspeakability of inequalities.

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