

**‘Femininities at Work: How Women Support Other Women in the Workplace’**

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### **Abstract**

Recent research has highlighted the negative intra-gender relations that occur between women in organisations, focusing on aspects such as micro-violence, the queen bee syndrome, negative intra-gender relations, and competition and distance between women. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with 16 women, we draw on material where women were asked to consider their intra-gender relationships at work. We suggest that women are actively supporting each other and aligning themselves with each other; they are ‘mobilising femininities’ to help negotiate dominant hegemonic masculinity. However, the women also demonstrate contested femininities, creating distance from women who are not displaying an appropriate femininity. The article thereby examines the affiliated and contested femininities that women bring to bear in the workplace. It makes a contribution towards understanding mobilising femininities, the extent to which this is a conscious or liminal process for women and how, through mobilising femininities, gender as a social practice is demonstrated.

**Track – Gender in Management**

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## Introduction

Within the media and popular press, women's relationships with other women at work are portrayed in negative ways and associated with images of 'cat-fights' and 'bitchy behaviour'. Within the academic community, women's intra-gender relationships have been a growing topic of interest for researchers. Much of this focus has been on understanding and conceptualising the 'queen bee syndrome'; a term used to describe senior women who make it to the top in an organisation and then act in a way which is unhelpful or negative towards other women (Staines, Tavris, & Hayagrante, 1973). It is proposed that these behaviours are driven by senior women's need to remain unique in the organisation and to stave off competition, although it has been suggested that factors such as gender identification (Derks et. al., 2011), career experiences (Ellemars et. al., 2004), competition and collective threat (Duguid, 2011), and the perceived risk of promoting other women (Klenke, 2003), can influence its occurrence. The queen bee syndrome can be conceptualised as a sexist concept as it holds women accountable for their behaviour which occurs within a gendered organisational context where women are positioned as being competitive with each other (Mavin, 2008). However, research still seeks to conceptualise this behaviour and examine whether its occurrence within organisations acts as a barrier to other women (Ellemars et. al., 2012). Research has for instance looked at aspects of women's relationships such as female misogyny (Mavin, 2008), micro-violence (Mavin et. al., 2014) and competition among women (Parks-Stamm et. al., 2008), focussed again on the more negative aspects of women's relationships.

We draw on the conception of gender as a social practice (Alvesson, 1998; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Martin, 2001), emphasising how gender is socially constructed at work. Following West & Zimmerman (1987), we adopt a social constructivist approach where individuals are 'doing gender'. However, it is a 'situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126); consequently gender is created and recreated through interactions with others (Gherardi, 1994). West & Zimmerman suggest a difference between sex, sex category and gender. Sex is the classification of male or female whilst sex category is the application of the sex criteria, hence these two can vary independently of each other. For example, an individual can claim membership to a sex category when the sex criteria are not present. Gender is subsequently 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate from one's sex category' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). When individuals are 'doing gender', they are accountable to the audience to do gender in line with normative beliefs, otherwise they are at 'risk of gender assessment' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 136) so that femininities and masculinities are assessed in the context of time and circumstance.

Masculinities are practices that are interpreted as 'masculine' within a system of gender relations (Martin, 2001). Hegemonic masculinities can be distinguished from other masculinities as the normative conception that denotes being a man. Only certain men can achieve this whilst others perform subordinate masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, those who display subordinate masculinities still gain advantages from hegemonic masculinity, what Connell refers to as 'patriarchal dividend', whilst women gain no advantage as femininities are positioned as subordinate. Women's femininities are 'empathised femininities', which are sexualised for younger women or mothering for older women, or subordinate femininities that are not given voice (Connell, 1995). Femininities

differ to masculinities as they do not hold cultural power in the way that hegemonic masculinities do (Connell, 1995).

Martin's (2001) draws a distinction between 'doing masculinity' and 'mobilising masculinity', the latter being where men collectively bring to bear masculinity/ies. We extend this concept to consider mobilising femininities, building on van den Brink and Benschop's recent work (2014) looking at networking practices in Dutch academia. Van den Brink and Benschop (2014), find that women mobilise femininities at work to support other women as candidates for professorial roles, however, they suggest that this incurred a risk of being associated with nepotism or radical feminism. This scrutiny or risk does not occur when men mobilise masculinities. Within this article, we seek to explore the ways in which women mobilise femininities and if it does incur risk for women as van den Brink and Benschop suggest.

Much of the recent literature has focused on the negative aspects of women's intra-gender relationships; however, women seek affinity with other women as it offers them a support and stability in organisations that are still dominated by a masculine hegemony (Gherardi, 2001). Considering this, within this article we look to two organisational settings to draw our findings. Firstly we look at multi-national bank where, typically for the sector, women are underrepresented in senior positions and a masculine gendered culture exists (Ozbilgin & Woodward, 2004; Neck, 2015; North-Samardzic & Taksa, 2011). Secondly we look to women's business networks where women meet with other women to network and discuss business issues. We presume that these varying contexts will impact on women's relationships and how they mobilise femininities and the research design therefore allows us to capture different ways in which femininities are mobilised.

This article brings together the literature of women's intra-gender relationships and the concept of mobilising femininities. Within this article, we suggest that our current understanding of women's relationships with other women at work do not address the depth, nuances and complexity of women's relationships. This article makes a contribution towards understanding the contested and affiliated femininities that women display at work.

### **Women's intra-gender relationship at work**

Women's intra-gender relationships are a contentious subject and in studying them, researchers risk blaming women for behaviour which occurs within gendered organisational contexts (Mavin, 2006, 2008). This avoids focussing on the need to change structures and systems within organisations that keep women in a subordinate position. Women's relationships are often portrayed in stereotypical ways, based on the expectation that women should engage in solidarity behaviour and operate by rules of sisterhood (Ely, 1994; Mavin, 2006). If these rules are not adhered to, then women are accused of demonstrating queen bee traits and their behaviour is problematized and used as an explanation of why women are not advancing in organisations (Derks et. al., 2011; Ellemars et. al., 2004; Warning & Buchanan, 2009). However, this overlooks the gendered culture in which women work and the masculine hegemony in which women are operating (Ely, 1994; Acker, 1990; Gherardi, 2001; Simpson, 2000). This masculine value system intersects to form a 'cultural web' of values, beliefs and assumptions which is difficult for women to break through without assimilating into the dominant culture (Miller, 2002). Women are the 'Other' which sits in contrast to men as the 'Self' or norm (de Beauvoir, 1949). This places women in a subordinate position where aspects associated with women are devalued, for example,

characteristics associated with being feminine such as compassion, caring and sensitivity are positioned in a subordinate role (Gherardi, 1994). This distinction frames power relations that operate within organisations and keep women in the position of being the 'Other' so that women are constantly seeking to find a place and an identity (Bryan & Mavin, 2003). This has implications for women's intra-gender relationships at work.

A recurrent theme within the literature suggests women seek to distance themselves from other women (Warning & Buchanan, 2009; Cooper, 1997; Fotaki, 2011). It has been suggested that women use negative labels such as 'dollybirds' or 'corporate transvestite' (Olsson & Walker, 2004), or the 'executive tart' (Mavin, 2006) to differentiate themselves from other women. For women, a fine line exists between being feminine but not over-feminised, therefore judgements about the way in which other women 'do gender well and differently' are made (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). It is argued that female misogyny is a tool for women to disassociate themselves from other women (Mavin, 2006), and in doing so they align themselves with men and power, further weakening women and strengthening existing power structures. Research has also stressed that women position themselves as different to each other (Davies and Harre, 1990), often by denying that gender had been an issue for them in their careers and taking a gender-blind stance, therefore disassociating and being critical of women's only networks and other women who may reference gender as having been an issue within their careers (Jorgenson, 2002). Not only do some women seek to create distance from other women, but they are tougher on them, and hold more negative perceptions of them than their male colleagues (Ellemars, et. al., 2004). This identity threat can be reduced by either looking to improve the social standing of your group, or disassociation from the group which is negatively impacting on your identity, in other words, creating distance (Derks et. al., 2011). This suggests that gendered cultures and gender identification impact on women's negative intra-gender relationships.

Core to our understanding of disassociation between women, is a process of self-regulation women engage in, regulating their appearance and gender identities. In 'doing gender' fittingly, individuals are accountable to a sex category which maintains that gender is done in a specific form (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Management is a masculine concept built on masculine principles (Acker, 1990), therefore women are in a double-bind concerning the way they 'do gender' (Gherardi, 1994). If they conform to masculine norms, they are criticised for being too masculine, however, if they are the 'wrong type of feminine', they are also criticised (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). This 'right' type of femininity is a 'respectable femininity' within management that constrains women's behaviours so that they self-regulate and regulate others appearance according to 'respectable femininities' (Mavin & Grandy, 2014).

Kelan and Mah (2014) found that whereas male MBA students were able to talk about role models they idealised, the women were more critical, dividing other women's characteristics into elements that they admired with underlying tensions between being a female business leader and a 'good' mother. These powerful stereotypes confine people to gendered expectations so that working women with families are questioned on the degree to which they can be a 'good' mother but childless, career-orientated women aren't 'normal' women (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005). In this way, women managers are victims of the male norm (Billing, 2011), in other words, they position themselves in relation to managerial jobs and to real or imagined others which mean that women are seeking to be both 'managerial enough' and 'feminine enough' (Gherardi, 1995). This regulatory behaviour can be manifest in 'micro-violence', described by Mavin et. al (2014) as imperceptible every-day insults and

put-downs, that often occur at a liminal level for both recipient and executor but leaves the recipient with a feeling of loss of well-being. This raises issues around the extent to which women engage in supportive or unsupportive relationships with each other, in other words, collaborate and compete (Mavin & Williams, 2013). An alternative perspective on women's relationships looks at the way in which women 'mobilise femininities' (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014) to which we turn next.

### **Mobilising femininities**

The concept of mobilising masculinities was developed by Martin (2001) to refer to 'practices wherein two or more men concertedly bring to bear, or bring into play, masculinity/ies' (p. 588). Martin develops this concept to discuss the 'contested', defined as emphasising distance and separation, and 'affiliated', defined as aligning and connecting, nature in which men mobilise masculinities. Whereas contested masculinities negatively impacted on women, for example, dominating or sequestering others' labour, affiliated masculinities were focused on other men. Men were gaining benefits from mobilising masculinities, whereas women were harmed by this behaviour. However, men were only liminally aware of these masculinities and the impact they were having.

Martin (2001) defines liminal awareness as a point where 'phenomenon is imperceptible or a state of consciousness that is supposed to exist but is not strong enough to be recognised' (p. 606). Van den Brink and Benschop (2014), revisit Martin's (2001) work in their study of the gendered practices that occur within networking and recruitment in Dutch academia. Men identified with the similar in that they recommended other male colleagues thus gaining benefits from homophily. Again, this was a liminal activity at the subconscious level. Conversely women found it harder to promote another female candidate, in other words, mobilise femininities, because their support was more visible. Female candidates 'otherness' was seen as risky and mobilising femininities more problematic than mobilising masculinities. Van den Brink and Benschop (2014) argue that women cannot mobilise masculinities in the same way that men do as this is a collective practice of men connecting to each other. Women can however take part in it by aligning with the masculine hegemony. The challenge for women is that if they affiliate, their behaviour is scrutinised in a way that male colleagues are not. For men, affiliating is a liminal activity; it could be argued that for women it is a conscious activity that, in part, involves a degree of risk.

The review of the extant literature suggests that women's relationships hold elements of contested femininities as women seek to create distance between themselves and other women. This is one-dimensional and does not reflect the complexity of women's relationships and ways in which women mobilise femininities. Within this article, we seek to further our understanding of women's intra-gender relationships. Specifically, we wish to understand the ways in which women mobilise femininities in both a contested and affiliated way.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the research is to explore women's intra-gender work relationships through the process by which women mobilise affiliated and contested femininities. In order to explore this we consider gender as a social practice (Alvesson, 1998; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Martin, 2001), highlighting the social construction of gender at work. Following West & Zimmerman (1987), we adopt a social constructivist approach where gender is created

through social interaction. The social constructivist approach led to an adoption of qualitative research methodologies with semi-structured interview being used as the method of data collection. A feminist epistemology was adopted in that the aim of the research is to give attention and 'voice' to the lived experiences of women so that instead of generalising, the commonalities that women share can be explored (Skeggs, 1997; Mavin, 2006).

The data presented here forms part of a wider study considering women's intra-gender relationships at work. Sixteen interviews were conducted with women that were selected from two different contexts, selected to theoretically link to contested and affiliated femininities. The first group of women all worked at a British multinational bank with its headquarters in London, for the purposes of anonymity, this is referred to as 'BankCo' throughout. BankCo was specifically selected as it was theorised from our understanding of the literature and the impact of gendered cultures on women's behaviour, that women operating within this gendered culture would be more likely to show contested femininities. The majority of women interviewed from BankCo worked in the global payments division which is fairly representative of the banking sector in that women are under-represented at senior levels in the organisation. Eleven women were interviewed from the bank, they ranged from vice-president level through to managing director, had between 3 and 28 years tenure in the bank and ranged from their late-20's to late 50's. They were drawn from the London office and offices around the country as it was recognised by the women that the London office had a particularly different culture to some of the other offices. They were selected as candidates for interview through an email which asked for volunteers to take part in a piece of research about women's careers at the bank. Once they had made an expressed an interest, further details about the research focus were provided.

The second group of women consisted of five interviews conducted with women who attended a women's networking event, again anonymised and referred to as WBN throughout. This group were specifically selected as the women had made a conscious decision to attend a women's only network rather than a mixed-gender group. Therefore we theorised that this group would be likely to demonstrate affiliated femininities. This women's network met monthly and had a later breakfast meeting format specifically designed at a time which would allow women to attend after dropping their children off at school. The first author attended the meetings and spoke briefly to the audience about the research. Contact details were provided and volunteers sought to take part in the research. This group of women therefore came from a range of backgrounds, however, had similarities in that they all ran their own businesses, employing between 3 and 40 people respectively, they were a similar age to the bank group and had previous experience of working in larger organisations.

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data which sought to understand their experiences of working with other women. It was designed to understand the contested and affiliated nature of women's relationships. The interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, they were all recorded and transcribed verbatim after the interviews. The material was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was chosen because of the flexibility it provides in that, rather than being tied to one epistemological position, it can be applied across a range of approaches whilst still providing rich material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a method of organising and describing rich material, it allows themes around the contested and affiliated nature of women's relationships to be generated and explored. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that whilst thematic analysis is not tied to an epistemological position, the researcher must make this position clear instead. Following the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), initially, all the transcripts were re-read several times

to search for meaning and patterns in the material. The transcripts were then coded using a deductive approach, working with specific research questions which link to the theoretical perspectives arising from the literature on mobilising femininities and women's intra-gender relationships. The software package NVivo was used to support the process of coding. Analysis involved an iterative approach, returning to earlier transcripts as new codes were introduced. These codes were then reviewed and grouped into themes which were represented in a thematic map. For this article, themes around contested and affiliated femininities were explored in further detail.

### **Mobilising femininities**

In this section, we analyse how the research participants mobilised femininities in both and affiliated and contested way. This article focuses on two of the themes that emerged from the interviews within the affiliated relationships which in many ways were inter-linked. We then go on to look at two contested themes which emerged from the data analysis.

### **Affiliated femininities**

Affiliated femininities occurred where women provided support and collaboration with each other. Two of these affiliated femininities are presented here, both of which related to providing support within the hegemonic masculinity; 'I've got your back' and 'How am I doing?'

#### **'I've got your back'**

Women talked explicitly about the value of having female colleagues to support them and defend each other against their male colleagues and the pervasive masculinity that existed in the organisations. Most of these incidents came through the conscious recognition of men mobilising masculinities and the damaging impact this could have on women. The women described groups of men as intimidating and the empathy they felt for women who were struggling with this contested masculinity. For women in BankCo this was directed at their male colleagues whilst for the WBN group, this extended to clients and external suppliers. Sarah describes this feeling in the following comment (VP BankCo):

Sarah	I don't know, not that the men want you to fail, definitely not that, but they're kind of, they'd ask you a challenging question and put you on the spot...Whereas I think women are really more sympathetic to the fact that you put yourself out there and...I don't know, I just think there's something there that as men they just want an answer, babe, just what was the answer?
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Sarah describes the empathy that the women show for each other and attributes this to inherent gender differences with women being more sympathetic to other's needs (Katila & Eriksson, 2013). Her use of the word 'babe' to portray men addressing women is interesting and deliberate. In this way, she brings gender to the forefront of this dynamic and hints at a hierarchical relationship with an implicit seniority for men whilst women are positioned as a sexualised object (Olsson & Walker, 2004). In this way, gender is done through the gendered interactions and relationships that occur in these meetings (Kelan, 2010).

The women's intra-gender support extended beyond coping with the pervasive dominant masculine to helping other women manage their workload. The women discussed stepping in to help other women and to pick up on areas of their work if they were struggling. Underlying this was an awareness and empathy of the other demands that women had outside of work. It



was also striking that women drew comparisons here between men and women with women positioned as supportive and team orientated and men positioned as individualistic and unaware of other's needs. Here, whether the women came from BankCo or WBN did not seem to influence drawing on this resource, however, seniority within BankCo did, with junior women more able to talk about the support with workload than senior women. This reflects the impact that organisational demography has on the gendered culture of work with the senior women having fewer peers to draw upon and perhaps less likely to identify with other women (Ely, 1994). This intra-gender work collaboration and support is demonstrated in the quote below from Alison (VP BankCo):

Alison      'Yeah, I mean my leadership team, so I've got three ladies that work with me and they're very much, a close network; they're all on different teams but if somebody has got a lot on and they need to sort of deprioritise something, they work really well together...They're definitely quite collaborative, they will take things off each other to give them that time to be successful in their roles'

Whilst the often held view of women's relationships is that they are based on competition (Mavin et. al., 2014; Parks-Stamm et. al., 2008), conversely Alison directly links supporting each other to allow others to be successful in their roles. This suggests a mobilised femininity that sits in contrast to the negative stereotype of women's intra-gender relationships (Mavin, 2013). Furthermore, she explains that there is no retribution in this, which alludes to a previous negative experience, perhaps of a contested masculinity.

For both the BankCo and WBN women, this intra-gender support was a conscious rather than a liminal activity. However, as van den Brink & Benschop (2014) found, they recognised a risk in supporting other women as their male colleagues, particularly the more senior men, made uncomfortable by. Some even tried to create dissent and conflict between some of the women. This is demonstrated in the quote below from Annie (VP, BankCo):

Annie      So, I know that with 'Jane'... and we work so closely together, I can tell if (name of male Director) or (name of male Director) or any of the men are maybe being a bit too hard on her, I can just see it on her face and I'll quite quickly jump to her defence and she'll do the same for...so I think it's something that we've started doing, it drives (name of male Director) mad because we'll just be like at team against him sometimes...

This demonstrates the risk in mobilising femininities as by doing so, women's actions become visible and are scrutinised. Here women are seeking to draw on the benefits of homophily by providing support to each other, in other words, mobilising femininities. However what we see here is the persistence of the 'gendered-substructure of organisation that operates to help reproduce gender divisions and inequalities' (Acker, 1998). When women mobilise femininities, this challenges this gendered sub-structure and the gendered distribution of power (Acker, 1992).

### **'How am I doing?'**

The second way in which women mobilised femininities was again in relation to the dominant masculinity that pervaded the organisations. This related to women managing their

professional persona and using other women as a sounding board to check they were 'doing things right' and demonstrating 'respectable femininity' (Mavin & Grandy, 2014). This sat within the context of a feedback culture that existed, principally within the bank. For the BankCo women particularly, perceived differences in the way that men and women gave feedback meant that women's feedback was taken less personally than their male colleagues. This is demonstrated in the following quote from Heidi, a Director within BankCo, talking about the differences between male and female colleagues giving feedback:

Heidi ... it's well thought through and it's done in a sensitive way as opposed to... whereas I find that with the female peers that I interact quite strongly with, the way in which they'll deliver the feedback is still giving you the point but in a way in which you can receive it quite softly.

Here we can see that through feedback, gender becomes a social practice (Acker, 1990). Gender as a social practice concerns the 'multi-layered everyday social practices of distinguishing between men and women, masculinity and femininity' (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014, p. 465). Here, Heidi describes men's feedback as 'hard and firm', and women's feedback as 'soft', in other words, by attributing men's feedback to 'behaving like men' she describes how they are mobilising masculinities (Martin, 2001).

Gender as a social practice is further illustrated through the intra-gender relationships that existed for men and women. The women talked about socialising together and having relationships that went beyond work, however, these were differentiated from men's relationships which happened 'down the pub'. For the women, the relationships were deeper and more personal, as demonstrated by the following quote from Sally (VP, BankCo):

Sally So, definitely informally, lot of contacts, you might find that you get a group of girls who'll go out for dinner and, you know, that's quite nice, so you do have the social side.

Sally's use of the term 'girls' suggests a highly-feminised friendship that operates beyond the professional work arena. Interestingly, later in the interview Sally refers to female colleagues and uses the term 'women'. This suggests a differentiation between these two types of relationships. Women expressed the importance of these relationships as a way to gauge the appropriateness of their behaviour but also to add support to their female peers so that they could develop and grow in their roles. However, at the core of these conversations, women talked about using each other as a sounding board to support each other progressing. This was particularly important for the WBN group who had consciously selected a women's only network to meet this need for support and feedback, suggesting this would not be present in a mixed-gender group. This is best summarised in the following quote from Liz (WBN):

Liz 'I think people like to see other women succeeding. I think we're a bit more sort of rallying the troops together and ... if you're a strong woman and you're confident in who you are then I think you will try and help other women to feel the same and bring them up'

Liz's description of the desire to see other women succeed demonstrates women mobilising femininities; using this support to actively help other women progress. She attributes this to being 'strong' and having 'self-confidence', although one of the founders of the women's network, Liz demonstrates high gender identifier characteristics which suggests she could be

more driven to improve the status of women as a group (Derks et. al., 2011) than herself as an individual (Cooper, 1997; Ellemars et al., 2004).

Both the BankCo and WBN group were very aware of the dominant masculinity in which they were operating and mobilising femininity was conscious rather than liminal (van de Brink & Benschop, 2014). Women's position of 'Other' means that their behaviour is visible and subject to scrutiny so that mobilising femininities sits within the context of a dominant masculine hegemony, risking being associated with a radical feminism (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014).

### **Contested femininities**

Whilst the women provided examples of affiliated femininities, they also could provide examples of contested femininities where women created distance from each other and did not collaborate or provide support. We present two contested femininities here; 'Not a real woman' and 'Mothering and Smothering'.

#### **'Not a real woman'**

A recurrent contested femininity theme concerned perceptions around women who were seen to be not doing gender well or appropriately and therefore in some way letting other women down (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). Whilst there were multiple stories of affiliated femininities through admiration, support and collaboration, the women also discussed 'other' women that they sought to create distance from. Often these were specific examples but sometimes this focused on the perception of a 'type' of women that was not doing gender well. Much of this focused around physical appearance and management style and in this way gender boundaries were constructed (Kelan, 2013) with women having to appear feminine but not too feminine (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001). In our interviews, women were criticised for being too 'polished' and professional looking and therefore seeming inaccessible and distant from 'real women'. Having air of vulnerability made the women more likeable, in fact one woman (surprisingly from the WBN group who we theorised as more likely to show affiliated femininities) referred to these 'polished' women as 'aliens', a term which suggests they are literally unreal and of another world. The women also sought to distance themselves from women who brought femininity into the workplace in a way which they saw as inappropriate (Mavin & Grandy, 2014). This was manifest around revealing clothes and behaviour that was seen to be flirtatious. The women paid a high penalty for being perceived as demonstrating these behaviours, as Jane (VP BankCo) put it:

Jane       ...there are some people who like to wear short dresses and high-heels and be flirty and that's fine! If it's just them and they're not using it to manipulate people I guess, when I see women do that, it just ... I feel like they're letting our side down a bit...

Here Sam shows her disappointment with women who are highly-feminised and use their sexuality suggesting that in doing so, they tarnish the image of professional women, alluding to the complexity of the relationship between sexual attractiveness and professionalism for women (Kelan, 2013). By creating distance, women are positioning themselves as different to 'other' women who are damaging the reputations of all women (Lewis, 2006; Jorgenson, 2002).

'Not a real woman' extended beyond appearance to also included descriptions of women who were emulating their male colleagues' behaviour and therefore managing like men (Wajcman, 1995). This contested femininity was particularly prevalent in BankCo where women were described as 'bombastic', 'aggressive' and intimidating, and for some interviewees, referred to with pity and scorn. Angie (VP BankCo) describes this behaviour in her previous boss:

Angie: I've seen a (job title) who used to be my boss, 'Eve', I'd see her copying mannerisms and sort of characteristics of other men in the room to try and get them to listen to her, and you can sort of see that they don't respect her for it, and they almost try not to laugh and I just want to say, just be you... it's like she's in the pub with them...I just think it's so sad when women sort of do that'

Here Angie talks about her boss emulating the men's behaviour and trying to match their style (Campbell, 2004). She suggests that in emulating men's behaviour, Eve is participating in mobilise masculinities by being 'one of the boys' (Powell, et. al, 2009). Interestingly, some women realised that they were more critical of women's behaviours and held higher expectations for them than their male colleagues (Messerschmidt, 2009). In this way, creating distancing from other women seemed important, as if the behaviour of one woman represented the behaviour of all women (Lewis, 2006).

### **'Mothering and smothering'**

The second contested femininities related to 'mothering' in two ways. Firstly, women talked about the distance that ensued between women with children and women without children. Most of this focussed on differing perceptions between the two groups. For the women with children, they discussed women without children as having opportunities to pursue their career without barriers, creating a distance between them, likening them more to men (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005). Jenny (Director, BankCo) states this perception of women without children:

Jenny I think women who have kids feel like the women who don't have kids. They probably think that they are a bit cold to be honest; that's probably a really unfair thing to say but I do think there is this perception that if you don't have kids you've just put your career first...

Here Jenny uses the term 'cold' to create distance between herself as a working mother and those without children therefore demonstrating contested femininities. In this way she creates gender through social practice, however, there appears to be three genders; men, women and childless women. This echo's Wilson's (2000) study of a professional service firm where three types of gender existed: men, honorary men who were childless women and mothers. However, whilst there was distance between the working mothers and women without children, the working mothers expressed an affinity for other women with children. Kathy (WBN), who doesn't have children, describes having observed this and how it feels:

Kathy I have sometimes felt a bit like mums stick together and those that don't are seen as tough, tough for...and I end up joining in a conversation with my five god-children and my nieces and nephews

and things, so like I'm like that as well.

Kathy recognises here that she risks being perceived as 'tough' by the working mothers if she is not seen to empathise with them and join in their conversations, therefore she draws on her extended family to feel included. In this way, Kathy perceives women with children to be mobilising femininities and to be included, she needs a point of similarity otherwise she is seen as different, demonstrating a subordinate femininity to these women's emphasised femininities (Connell, 2005).

The other way in which 'mothering' became a contested femininity, was when mothering became 'smothering'. Both the WBN and BankCo women referenced women's 'maternal instinct' which they transferred into the workplace, although this was largely framed in positive terms, related to empathy and caring for others feelings. Here, women attribute behaviours to some inherent differences that existed between men and women (Katila & Eriksson, 2013) so that men were seen to be blind to others feeling whilst women intuitively cared and nurtured for people. One woman described this as taking on the 'mummy role', bringing gender to the forefront of the relationships at work (Haynes, 2007). However, several of the women provided examples of women who they had felt overstepped a boundary by smothering the people that worked for them. They described women who had 'mothered' their teams to the point where 'protecting' them from organisational realities was holding them back which, although not benefiting the individual, occurs at a liminal level, with the intention of protection. However, other women talked of a type of less benign 'mothering' that smothered individuals and held them back, stifling people and not encouraging people to grow and develop. This seemed to occur with older women who had junior teams and were not on a career trajectory, so had been in their posts for a while. Jill provided an example of this in her early career of her line manager who managed an all-female call-centre team. Although she would buy people gifts and treat them in a highly 'motherly' way, people ultimately felt suffocated and quickly moved on. Here, the female manager is 'doing gender' so that the maternal emphasised femininity (Connell, 2005) is brought into the professional arena and although it initially appears benign, it damages individuals' development. This mobilised femininity is contested as it does not benefit other women and in fact holds them back to junior positions. However, these maternal, close relationships mobilised femininities for some women and not for others, as one woman describes it, creating a buffer so that individuals could not receive negative feedback as it would fall on the deaf ears of the maternal manager. Jane (VP BankCo) sums this up:

Jane (name of colleague)...that she has then had that bond with, so on a professional and personal level - which again then makes it more difficult to give that feedback because people get to a point where they're like, well she's not going to do anything about it because they're such good friends

An important distinction is made here in that mobilising femininities does not necessarily benefit all women. Here the strength of some women's relationships means that others are excluded. In this way we can see how women seek to distance themselves from some women and affiliate with others, therefore demonstrating both contested and affiliated femininities.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This article has addressed the contested and affiliated femininities that women demonstrate within their intra-gender relationships at work. The first affiliated femininity, 'I've got your back', suggests that women both draw support from each other to manage their workloads

and therefore help other women succeed, and protect each other from the dominant masculinity that exists within organisations. This sits in contrast to the literature that suggests women's relationships are based on competition and queen bee behaviours. This was perhaps due to the nature of the interviewees in this research as the majority were in a middle management role or active members of a women's network. Therefore they were not 'token' women in senior management suggesting, as Ely (1994) suggests, that organisational demography influences behaviour. We demonstrate that women are conscious of the risk of mobilising femininities as it provoked scrutiny from their male colleagues. The second affiliated femininity, 'How am I doing', looked at the way women used each other as a source of feedback and a sounding board for advice, again as a buffer from some of the occurrences of men mobilising masculinities. Here we saw how gender becomes a social practice as the women were seeking feedback on whether they were demonstrating respectable femininity within their work context. We found support for the literature which suggests that organisations are based on masculine principles and values, and therefore by affiliating with other women to provide feedback, the women sought to gauge how they were doing gender well and negotiating their organisational reality.

We also found two contested femininities; the first, 'Not a real woman', showed how women created distance from women who were too polished or over-feminised. This supported previous research which suggests that women self-regulate and regulate others in line with doing gender well. Women are in a double-bind of being feminine enough but not too feminine and this was played out through this contested femininity. Furthermore, we argued that is emulating male colleagues' behaviour, women were managing like men and participating in mobilising masculinities. Our second contested femininity; 'Mothering and smothering', showed how distance was created between working mothers and women without children and how 'mothering' can become a contested femininity. Again, here we saw gender as a social practice as a distinction was drawn between mothers who held and emphasised femininities and women without children who were positioned in a subordinate femininity. Finally, throughout the article, the degree to which mobilising femininities as a liminal or conscious process was raised. The extant literature suggests that when women mobilise femininities, this is a conscious process in contrast to mobilising masculinities, one which they are very aware of as they recognise the risk of having their behaviour scrutinised. We found similarities here. Women's affiliated femininities were conscious and related to acknowledged benefits and support that came from helping women negotiate dominant masculinities. Furthermore, the women were aware that affiliation was visible and scrutinised. Only in the contested femininity 'mothering and smothering' did there appear to be a more liminal process occurring. This related to women whose behaviour which appears to be affiliative but actually constrained women and prevented their progression.

The article contributes the following to our knowledge. First we suggest that women's relationships are complex and extend beyond the negative images in which they are portrayed both within the media and academic research. Specifically we suggest that women draw on each other as a source of support which adds protection from the mobilised masculinity within organisations (Martin, 2001). Furthermore, our research suggests that women actively seek to promote and support other women succeeding within organisations and, in this way, they are consciously mobilising femininities. This offers an alternative perspective to the dominant perception of queen bee behaviour (Staines et. al., 1973; Davidson & Cooper, 1992). Secondly, we further our understanding of the contested nature of women's relationships. We suggest that whilst women seek to distance themselves from some women who do not demonstrate appropriate femininity, this is a conscious activity. However, at the

liminal level, women hold others back by mothering and smothering them, a gendered position which is benign in intent. Finally, we make a contribution not just to our understanding of women's intra-gender relationships but also to the concept of mobilising femininities, an area which we suggest is worthy of further research. To conclude, by exploring how women mobilise femininities at work, this article has shown two contested and two affiliated femininities which women display in their intra-gender relationships at work. However, the range of femininities that women draw upon and the degree to which they are liminal or conscious has not been fully explored and offer an area for further exploration.

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