

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

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Introduction

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

Kristeva (1982) argues that object experiences are common in everyday lives (e.g. you might experience an 'object response when the skin that forms on top of warm milk unexpectedly touches your lips, or when you see blood' (Tyler, 2009:79)). Abjection has become associated with 'all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies' (Tyler, 2009: 80). We draw upon abjection to explore how women can experience a fascination with their own and other women's bodies and appearance. We conceptualize this self-in-relation to other fascination as a process of simultaneous distaste and intrigue. We develop the theory of *Object Appearance* to explain this process. Through a lens of *Object Appearance*, women elite leaders' embodied identity work within a context of women's intra-gender relations can be understood as a possible material effect or consequence of women's abjection in organizations. Through our analysis of women leaders' accounts, we offer insights into varying intensities of possible consequences of women's abjection. *Object Appearance* explains a dynamic, dialectical and relational process within an intra-gender context, whereby women elite leaders manage felt ambiguities of their 'in-between' (Tyler, 2011: 1490) or 'object' (Kristeva, 1982) status. They hold power because of their formal positions, yet remain marginalized because their feminine bodies are 'out of place' in organizations. *Object Appearance* explains women elite leaders' active efforts to navigate fascination (as simultaneous attraction and repulsion) with their *own* and *other* women's bodies and appearance through embodied identity work in an intra-gender context.

We contribute to organization studies' theorizing of abjection (Fotaki, 2011, 2013; Gatrell, 2013; Höpfl, 2004; Kenny, 2010; Rizq, 2013; Tyler, 2011). Specifically, we respond to the call for a consideration of possible *consequences of abjection* within specific social and political locations (Tyler, 2009: 77). We offer an intra-gender dimension to possible consequences of abjection and propose explanations of why and how women leaders evaluate and monitor their own and other women's bodies and appearance. In addition, we raise consciousness to this dialectic process thereby strengthening

women's agency. We also extend research into bodies and body work by exploring women leaders' embodied identity work. Specifically, we contribute to Sinclair's (2011) call to consider bodies in understanding women's embodied experiences of leadership, where women's bodies are made visible and available for judgement. We highlight the ambiguity of the 'female gaze' (Trethewey, 1999: 445), which regulates women's embodied elite leadership within contexts where there are gendered norms for the 'ideal' (man) elite leader and the embodied leadership occupational identity (Ashcraft, 2013). We consider the potential for disrupting gendered norms and challenging notions of gendered bodies at work (Gimlin, 2007). We also suggest that there are practical implications for leadership development.

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

The research context

This article on Object Appearance has developed from a wider empirical project exploring women elite leaders' experiences of intra-gender relations with other women at work. Women in the study were not asked directly about the body or appearance, yet references to body work (our term) emerged across accounts (we return to this in the methods). In our re-readings of the transcripts we were struck by the accounts, in that they aroused in us mixed feelings of embarrassment, empathy, shame, disgust and anger. For example, when women recounted feeling that we interpreted as hurt or anger about how other women treated them because of how they looked (e.g. hair style, skirt length), we too felt these emotions. At times we shared feelings of shock and even anger towards those women perceived by participants to be 'judging' other women unfairly. At other times we identified with participants or felt shame because we heard our own voices in their accounts. We became reflexively aware of the body as a site for identity work, recalling situations when we too projected similar body and appearance expectations onto ourselves and other women as that expressed by and imposed upon participants (e.g. being overweight can be a disadvantage). The project research assistants (RAs) also responded emotionally to this disciplined body work. In post-data collection meetings the three RAs discussed the women leaders as impeccably dressed, groomed with perfect nails, immaculate dresses, and amazing jewellery. One RA recounted her own embodied identity work when she felt intimidated by a woman leader's appearance to such an extent that on finishing the interview she bought a new (more professional) outfit to wear to the next day's interview.

It was through these reflexive experiences that we became acutely aware of how we too negotiate, comply, resist and sustain embodied identities. Our identities are embedded

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

Women elite leaders: Lurking on the boundaries

Research has demonstrated that management and leadership work is historically and culturally associated with masculinity and men, contributing to a gendered order (Connell, 1987; Gherardi, 1994). Within this context people co-produce 'gendered realities that become sedimented and naturalized over time, reflecting the ability of the powerful to align such realities with their own values and interests' (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006: 80). Leadership work as an occupational identity is interwoven with the embodied social identities of leaders. These social identities shape the configuration of work as an evolving co-construction of what leaders do and the recognizable categories of people who do leader work (Ashcraft, 2013). Leadership work can therefore be known by the embodied social identities aligned with it (Ashcraft, 2013). We see the 'ideal' elite leader body as male; an idealized bounded space, where gendered body constructions position women's bodies as an embodiment of the failure to live up to the norm (Russell, 2013). Women leaders and their feminine bodies may violate biological, normative and moral boundaries in organizations (Longhurst, 2008; Waskul and Van der Riet, 2002). Women leaders may also, however, support or mould along the lines of the ideal leader, or challenge and change embodied practices of leadership.

Following Bell and Sinclair (2014), we do not view doing leadership as a matter of having a body and taking it into an organization. Rather, leadership 'is about creating and experiencing our bodies, our careers, our lives, through embodied participation with others' (p. 270). For us becoming an elite leader is gendered and complex. Gender is viewed here as a 'situated, embodied communicative praxis (Schrage, 1986) that is enacted in a complex field of discursive and nondiscursive relations of power, accommodation and resistance (Jermier et al., 1994)' (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006: 75). Despite the pervasiveness of masculine hegemony, in doing gender, there is space for agency (Benschop, 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) in how people relate to gender socialization and patriarchy that contribute to structural restraints (Benschop, 2009). Women have learned to sway, change, circumvent and subvert the decisions of the powerful (O'Leary, 1988).

Our focus concerns women elite leaders' experiences and interpretations of their embodied identity work that emerges in a context of intra-gender relations. Within the competitive masculinity of elite leadership, women who secure positions historically held by men have achieved a particular parity with the One (De Beauvoir, 1949). They

'share' space within a gendered order, holding significant organizational power. Yet, as female bodies, women simultaneously exist on the boundaries, threatening and disturbing the strategic masculine prerogative (Tyler, 2005); paradoxically both One and the Other. Their maternal bodies can serve to remind themselves and others of their ambiguous, in-between (Tyler, 2011) or abject (Kristeva, 1982) status. Thus, women elite leaders risk disturbing clear boundaries between 'self/other, order/disorder, inside/outside, clean/unclean' and 'lurk on the borders of identity' (Phillips and Rippin, 2010: 487). In other words, as active agents they can find themselves lurking on the boundaries in a dynamic interplay of holding power, whilst marginalized in social relations. Within this dialectic, women's subjectivities are understood as fragmented, unstable and constructed dynamically in relations (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006).

Women's abjection, where women's bodies may provoke simultaneous distaste and intrigue, can be understood as part of gendered organizing. Abjection of the woman leader, while socially constructed and experienced differently (if at all), can have material effects. Tyler (2011) calls for more research that looks to consequences of women's abjection and we respond to this call. We argue that such material effects or consequences of abjection can manifest in embodied identity work; where women ascribe, enact, resist and transform as they inhabit and encounter bodies in their daily lives as leaders (Ashcraft, 2013; Fenstermaker and West, 2002). Such material effects can surface, for example, when women elite leaders who relate to the symbolic order¹ disassociate from Other women (Tanenbaum, 2002) or receive back-lash responses from other women (Camussi and Leccardi, 2005; O'Neill and O'Reilly, 2011).

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

A theory of Abject Appearance

In *Powers of Horror*, a theoretical account of fascination, revulsion, disgust and subjectivity, Kristeva (1982) develops what is referred to as 'the abject paradigm' (Tyler, 2009:

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

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

Butler's (2004) work also advances our understanding of subjectivity and abjection. Butler (1989) is critical of Kristeva's understanding of maternal as essentialist: 'Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to cultural itself' (Butler, 1989: 105–106). For Butler (2004), the development of the subject is cultural and constituted by societal norms. Butler describes abjection as a discursive process (Meijer and Prins, 1998). Kenny (2010: 859), in a study of the powerful discourse of 'ethical living' in an organization, draws upon Butler, noting that when 'a subject finds herself outside a dominant societal norm at a given point in time, for example, outside the terms that make up one's gender, then this is experienced as abjection'. Thus, the desire for recognition and the maintenance of one's perceived position relative to the gendered order can be powerful (Kenny, 2010) and seductive. Kenny (2010) outlines how, if we seek a reflection of ourselves in another and find that they do not recognize us, then 'the subject can experience *itself* as abject (Butler, 1990)' (p. 860, emphasis in original). For both Kristeva and Butler, individuals work to avoid abjection (e.g. attraction/repulsion and possible rejection) and engage in processes of subject formation. Therefore, women may work to comply with existing normative frameworks, even when it can be detrimental (Butler, 1993; Fotaki, 2011) to themselves and other women. For example, women engage in body work to meet expectations that women's bodies are controlled, ideally fit and not fat, and if not, then their bodies represent professional liability (Trethewey, 1999). Drawing from Rizq's (2013) study of how feelings of psychological distress come to be abjected within organizations, we propose that consequences of women's abjection may be seen through women's embodied identity work surfacing in a context of intra-gender relations. In other words, women may relate to women's bodies felt to be appropriate/

inappropriate (including their own) to establish and strengthen their own subjectivity and to retain a self that is 'clean' and sterile against the elite leader occupational identity.

Abjection may not be experienced by every woman or in the same way by every woman. However, as women elite leaders find themselves outside a dominant social norm (as One and the Other; in-between genders), we propose that some women will experience abjection with related feelings of anxiety, repulsion and fear, as well as attraction, and this may play out through embodied identity work. Women leaders' bodies and appearance make a statement not only about their occupational identity and professionalism, but also how they position themselves in relation to the ideals of masculinity and femininity within a heterosexual paradigm (Kelan, 2013).

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

Method

Following Cunliffe and Erikson (2011), we take a relational approach, placing emphasis on social constructions of organizing. We draw upon an intersubjective view of the world where meaning is shaped by one's experiences and is socially mediated (Anderson, 2008). It is 'a way of thinking about who leaders are in relation to others within the complexity of experience' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011: 1434). An intersubjective approach provides a bridge between the personal and the shared, the self and the Other to interpret meanings of social and cultural life. We understand women's intra-gender relations as a way of being in-relation-to other women. The aim of the wider empirical project was to explore women elite leaders' experiences of intra-gender relations. The invitation to engage in the research made this explicit, as did preliminary correspondence and the introduction at the interview. The interview guide was designed to prompt discussions of

women leaders' experiences of intra-gender relations. In response to questions within this intra-gender context we understand the women's accounts as intersubjective. This means that even when talking of projects of the self this involves intersubjective recognition (Harding et al., 2013). For example, participants sometimes construct projects of the self and reflect on their own identities, as well as construct themselves in-relation-to other women, and in-relation-to men. In our analysis, we include diverse accounts to recognize the 'entwined nature of our relationships with others' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011: 1434): accounts of women leaders' in-relation-to men; accounts of self-in-relation-to women and to men; and accounts of, and reflections on, their own experiences offered for other women.

Data collection

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

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken by three RAs utilizing an interview guide. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and coded. The wider study did not set out to investigate women's bodies and appearance and the interview guide did not include questions about body work. Within a context of women's intra-gender relations, the questions focused on women's progress to elite leader positions, ambition, friendship, cooperation, competition and key issues for other women. A number of women talked of bodies and appearance in response to questions about competition, but these references also emerged across a range of interview questions. We were surprised and intrigued by this. Indeed, we are aware that bodies and appearance as a source of women's competition have been raised historically (e.g. Campbell, 2004; Kanter, 1987; Tanenbaum, 2002), but remain an under-researched area in organizational and leadership studies. Further, it is rarely discussed in leader development practice. We suggest there is insufficient research to establish the expectation that asking women elite leaders about women's competition will result in talk of the body and appearance. Further, there is a lack of research establishing the same expectation for questions about women moving in and through senior positions, women's friendships, ambition and reflective learning for other women.

Data analysis

In analysing the data from the wider project the first author followed a process of 'literal readings', 'interpretative readings' (Mason, 2002) and constant comparison to identify 40 themes (managed via Nvivo). Two themes reflected embodied leadership within a context

Table 1. Women elite leaders’ industry sectors.

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

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

Our aim is not to test empirical data through a lens of Abject Appearance, but to illustrate how the theory of Abject Appearance may help us better understand how women, in-relation-to other women, simultaneously transgress boundaries of elite leader positions whilst negotiating embodied leadership. In what follows, we discuss vivid and varied accounts from 22 women elite leaders working across industry sectors. Twelve accounts are included in the main article as ‘power quotes’, in that we selected what we see as compelling data (Pratt, 2009: 860) to illustrate Abject Appearance. A further 10 accounts are presented in Table 2 as ‘proof quotes’ (Pratt, 2009: 860) to highlight the salience of the themes in the wider study. The women leaders are identified using pseudonyms, and we note the interview questions that prompted references to the body, as well as the women’s industry sectors.

Table 2. Example research questions, data excerpts, themes and theme description.

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

Table 2. (Continued)

Question posed to participant	Data excerpts	Theme	Theme description
Can you tell me about a time when you have been competitive with other women to develop your career?	[Three are women] And we are the same rank. So yes we are competing. So there is an element of— and this can play itself out in meetings, as I say, this sense of a dynamic going on between the women in the meeting, creating the right impression with the men. . . . There is a slightly competitive situation. . . it is about getting the level right, getting the balance right and woman X and I joke about - We compete 'in quotes' on our 'we dress up when we go out for the evening', you always have a new dress and a new pair of shoes and that is fine. . . When it comes down to competition, there is a competition across all the [name of senior role] about who has done the most work (Carol - Public Administration and Defence).		
If we think about ambitious senior women that you've met through your career, can you think of any particular behaviours that have been successful or unsuccessful in helping them to progress?	I remember having to ask the [lead] of [the department] who was also a woman, very fortunately for me, to go have a conversation with her [another woman] about how she dressed. . . . She was a beautiful woman but the cleavage issue arose. I had the [lead of department] say you may think you're stylish, we think men are looking down your shirt instead of paying attention to your face when you're talking and really because you want to be respected. . . if you wear that low cut blouse you're broadcasting I'm a sexual being and. . . it's distracting from the message that says I'm a leader here. In the end she got a bit of a wardrobe change and she's gone on to be a [senior X] of a company. . . some people would say that that's a conversation that should never have been had but the truth of it is, we wanted this leader to get ahead and we saw this problem (Sandra - CEO Professional, Scientific & Professional Services).	Achieving a Professional Balance	An embodied identity strategy within intra-gender relations between women. The construction, monitoring and resisting of 'professional' self-other body and appearance norms in the women elite leader occupational identity.
So how do you respond to competitive behaviour towards you from other women?	If you are going into a situation where you are negotiating with somebody and it is quite stressful or it is going to be tough, it is about the manner you adopt, the clothes you wear, whether you smile at the room, whether you are serious, all of these things: the body language you deploy, all are all factors. And I suppose either subconsciously, sometimes consciously, but mostly subconsciously you do kind of fall into that mode. (Rebecca - CEO, Public Administration and Defense).		
Of the women that you've observed and drawing on some unsuccessful behaviours or successful behaviours, have any of those influenced your style as you grew as a leader?	I do think you feel under some pressure to be groomed at work. . . I had incredibly short hair [in some pictures on a website] which I did when the kids were little cause it was just so easy but you did get comments about [it] so I do try. . . I'll wear clothes that I quite like. . . but I do think that not looking like a bag lady is quite important (Emma - Director, Wholesale and Retail Trade).		

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

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

Fascination with bodies and appearance

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

We begin by highlighting the felt ambiguity women talked about in-relation-to the ideal leader role and other women. When asked to describe her experiences as a woman moving in and through senior positions, Louise (Director, Information and Communication) talks of the inescapability of embodied leadership. It is something necessary and desirable, yet problematic for women, given what she feels is a lack of 'good role models' and 'common assumptions' for women leaders:

Everyone knows what a man in a senior position looks and sounds like – there are exceptions but by and large that's what they look and sound like. There is that authority. There are no very good role models and there's certainly no good sort of common assumptions about what a woman in a senior position looks and sounds like. (Louise - Information and Communication)

Louise implies that without clarity around embodied norms, in contrast to men leaders, women leaders are disadvantaged and can lack authority.

Within this ambiguity, women leaders attempt to construct and project embodied norms for the woman elite leader occupational identity. When asked 'what has it been like for you as a woman moving into senior positions?', Sufia (Director, Manufacturing) constructs herself in-relation-to other women. She provides an example of how she 'supports' women in her workplace by providing advice on acceptable embodiment in the workplace. She highlights how women are suspect by the nature of their bodies in that they attract attention. Such desirability, however, has to be censured, otherwise women risk bordering on disgust:

I've had girls on my team dress inappropriately and I've said to them would you like somebody to just sit and stare at your boobs for the whole meeting because that is precisely what they're going to do and by the way I can't help it. I'm looking at them and I'm a woman. (Sufia - Manufacturing)

Sufia constructs particular norms for women's embodied leadership and projects these onto other women. We were struck by the crudeness of Sufia's language. We interpreted a subtle disgust that sets up the women as Other. Sufia distinguishes herself from other women, separating herself from her team in the use of 'girls' (team) versus 'woman' (herself). As such, girls' bodies and appearance are unwelcome, unfit for her work context and may threaten her subjectivity.

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

Right this is a really, really sad, sad comment about the whole way that women have progressed because – I actually still really believe that success is measured by what you look like. And I think that is still critical. If you're overweight, or you're not particularly attractive, you're not taken as seriously and you're not seen as successful. And I think that other women do it to other women. And I do think that is really, really sad and I think that is really true. When you go to a room full of [women leaders] I think that's the first thing . . . They look around and they will say oh her hair looks awful . . . She's put on weight hasn't she? (Sarah – Education)

Sarah reveals a preoccupation with her own and other women's appearance (success/being taken seriously is based on what you look like), noting that 'other women do it to other women'. Sarah expresses repugnance for those women who do judge other women based on bodies and appearance. This is reflected in her repetitive expressions (these women are 'really, really sad'). She simultaneously acknowledges a fascination with the body and appearance for women leaders, yet rejects and/or distances herself from those women who actively create norms for themselves and other women. Like Sarah, many of the women elite leaders commented on women's weight in their accounts. We also identified with the notion of women's fat bodies being a source of disgust and attraction when in positions of power, as well as a site for women's intra-gender relations. We reflected on our identity work associated with our own thin-fat-thin-fat bodies in-relation-to other women both inside and outside the work place.

Whether they embrace or reject particular embodied subjectivities, the women elite leaders illuminate a preoccupation with women's bodies and the body as an identity project. Their own (and other women's) body and appearance are a source of desirability *and* disgust entangled in intra-gender relations. Without established embodied norms as leaders, the women's subjectivities are precarious and enveloped in ambiguity and contradiction. In-relation-to other women, the women leaders use their own and other women's bodies and appearance as a means to unsettle and reinforce the gendered order. They construct, comply and resist particular subjectivities. Further, we see how women construct themselves and other women as more or less viable as elite leaders. An example can be seen when women come together in 'agreeing' or come apart in 'disagreeing' on acceptable bodies and appearance. We now turn to two specific embodied identity strategies that further illustrate consequences of women's abjection.

Shifting focus from the body and appearance

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

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

There are a lot of very successful women . . . that I have worked with and they may be very glamorous – I'm not against people being very glamorous in the roles but that's very different I think than being simpering females. Powerful and glamorous women in the world I've operated in but they were always bloody smart and brought their intelligence to bear in terms of the nature of the business either in the way that they handled people or the business issues. If you combine those things then you get a very powerful body. (Fiona – Information and Communication)

Fiona expresses the fascination women feel about bodies and appearance. She positively compares 'very glamorous' (strong; admired) women to 'simpling females' (weak; distasteful) who Fiona 'Others'. She reveals women's position as One and the Other. She is 'not against people being very glamorous', but then manages the risks that women's glamorous bodies pose by shifting focus from the body alone to connecting

women's bodies and minds (when combined 'you get a very powerful body'). She attempts to manage the risks associated with her own possible abjection by moving apart from 'simplering females' and aligning with women who are powerful (bodies). This reveals how embodied identity work involves efforts to modify one's position relative to the symbolic order. Fiona refocuses normative views of women's bodies to women's powerful bodies, thereby challenging the status quo.

Tina (Director, Manufacturing) also shifts focus in her identity work. She emphasizes the need to manage femininity against the risks her body poses as a leader, so that 'gender' becomes 'an irrelevance' in evaluating women leaders' performances. In response to the question 'what are the key issues that women need to be aware of or deal with if they want to progress to senior roles?', she demonstrates the ambiguity, complexity and tensions associated with women's embodied leadership as One and the Other. This surfaces through such contradictions as 'don't be a man', 'be different', 'be you', but do not use your femininity. This dialectic shows us how elite leadership can be comprised of inherent embodied characteristics that are a natural fit for some (men) and a stretch, if not an impossibility, for others (women) (see Ashcraft, 2013). Tina speaks about how it is OK to be 'yourself', 'a girly', as long as expressions of femininity are in the 'right balance' with a particular notion of perceived professionalism as required by elite leadership (therefore not too 'girly' and less risky). She combines embodied expectations with other measures of credibility (e.g. delivery and performance):

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

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

I don't have a size 8 figure, I never have and never will so you just get beyond all of that . . . I'm not particularly bothered about participating in it I suppose. I just want to get on with the job really . . . Some [women] try and use attractiveness . . . whether it is power dressing or whatever it might be, but I'm not convinced. This whole kind of thing of it's the first five minutes and how people look at you but actually most people get beyond what somebody looks like very quickly so that just doesn't seem to be the way that it works but I have seen people using it. (Alison – Other Service Activities)

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

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

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

Achieving a professional balance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For some women leaders, embodying 'professional' appearance is not about neutralizing gender nor does it equate with masculinity. Lucy (Director, Manufacturing), in-relation-to other women, responds to the question 'what has it been like for you as a woman moving into senior positions?' by talking about a woman leader who wears suits that Lucy perceives to be 'very masculine'. This woman suggested to her that she should also 'wear trousers'. Lucy said:

I have no intention of wearing trousers and I have no intention of denying my femininity simply to make everyone else feel comfortable. Now do I wear tops with cleavage on display? Well of course not, I'm at work and there's a sense of being professional. (Lucy - Manufacturing)

In defending her particular expression of 'professional' femininity, Lucy compares it to inappropriate, risky and unprofessional (repulsive) appearance for women leaders (i.e. tops showing 'cleavage'). Lucy separates from women who engage in this body work (e.g. trousers, showing cleavage) and 'pushes back' against intra-gender monitoring of her body and appearance by consciously not denying femininity. In solidifying her own agency, however, Lucy privileges her approach of achieving a professional balance and subtly denigrates various other expressions of the body and appearance.

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

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

While Susanna was explicitly asked about competition, she does not directly address the question, rather she focuses on herself in-relation-to another woman's body and appearance. The woman interviewee was perceived to present herself in a way that provoked simultaneous disgust and attraction towards her body and appearance. Her embodiment was unwelcome as it did not achieve a professional balance. After Susanna's intra-gender efforts, the change in the other woman's appearance was 'much more business-like' and in-line with 'appropriate' embodiment. Following Kenny (2010), we interpret Susanna's desire for recognition, strengthened subjectivity and maintenance of her own perceived position relative to the gendered order, as powerful and seductive. Her account highlights the dynamic, dialectical and intra-gender relational process through which women elite leaders traverse the in-between of assimilating the symbolic as the One and the tension of being the Other. Here, we see how women may have to be 'fixed' to achieve a professional balance. They have to overcome the difficulty of not fitting in or faking it, 'to the extent that one's own embodied social identities do not readily align with those used to construct the identity of [leader] work' (Ashcraft, 2013: 16).

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

Discussion

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

Summary of key findings

Through the theme *Fascination with the body and appearance*, we highlight how, as a part of women's embodiment of elite leader within masculine and competitive structures and cultural contexts, attention is directed to the presentation of women's bodies and appearance. *Fascination with the body and appearance* demonstrates how women elite leaders engage in modes of control at the borders of the symbolic order. We see simultaneous and dialectic experiences of disgust/repulsion and attraction/desirability with self-other bodies and appearance. We illustrate that in the absence of (or ambiguity

surrounding) embodied norms for the women elite leader occupational identity and in a context of intra-gender relations, women comply with, reject, monitor and negotiate embodied norms for themselves and other women. In doing so, women leaders constrain and enable ways of embodying leadership.

Our empirical analysis offers two embodied identity work strategies co-constructed in a context of women's intra-gender relations. These strategies highlight particular complexities. The strategy *Shifting focus from the body and appearance* reflects how some women leaders acknowledge body work and disciplining of the body, yet they shift focus from or recalibrate the importance of the body and appearance with competence or intelligence. They direct attention to more 'credible' means of embodying leadership. In her work on abjection, Kristeva focuses upon the various ways in which boundaries of the symbolic order are policed and maintained. Here, we illustrate how women elite leaders may engage in Othering women as an expression of repulsion and possible non-recognition, as they position their strategy more favourably to those women who do body work in general or particular versions of body work (e.g. emphasized femininity). In revealing this empirical insight, we extend Kenny's (2010) interpretation of Butler's work on abjection in organizations and see how 'we hold the potential to "undo each other", in the ongoing drama of identification and abjection' (p. 860), and how women can relegate some women into a 'zone of uninhabitability' (Butler, 1993:3): an unthinkable space that constitutes a 'site of dreaded identification' for the subject (Butler, 1993: 3).

Women elite leaders also strive to *Achieve a professional balance* as an embodied identity strategy. We advance Kelan's (2013) research to consider self-in-relation-to and intra-gender nuances. The accounts reveal the lack of norms about how to 'look' as a woman elite leader. At the same time, the women exert considerable effort to look 'professional' and not be unprofessional (e.g. too feminine, too Mother-like, too child-like, too slutty, too masculine). Their accounts depict tensions in their identification within the 'symbolic order of professionalism' (Haynes, 2012: 499). Similar to participants in Haynes' (2012) research, they experience a pressure to present bodies that appear to be self-contained, slender and controlled. The empirical data extends Fotaki's (2011, 2013) and Fotaki et al.'s (2014) work on abjection, gender and women in academia, highlighting how, through their efforts, women elite leaders are not only 'subject to forms of gender domination and subordination, they may (albeit unwittingly) reproduce those forms' (Fotaki et al., 2014: 2).

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

The theory Abject Appearance advances understandings of women's intra-gender relations and embodiment of leadership in several ways. Abject Appearance enables us to see how women leaders monitor the self and the Other to manage material effects or consequences of abjection. We progress Rizq's (2013: 1293) use of abjection as a lens to examine mental health services, in that Abject Appearance offers a way of examining women elite leaders as they perpetually engage in the struggle to develop their subjectivity. Through Abject Appearance we offer glimpses of how women elite leaders control their maternal bodies to become/not become a man. Abject Appearance reveals nuances of women's intra-gender relations as that which can silence and Other women. It brings

to light how women come together around 'agreed' bodies and appearance as elite leaders and where they come apart in 'disagreeing' about appropriate bodies. In this way, we also advance Kenny's (2010) research into abjection in organizations by offering a view into some of the relations and identities women leaders adopt to avoid the consequences of abjection. The women's accounts demonstrate conflicts, clashes, contentions, harmony and agreement (in-relation-to other women) against the elite leader occupational identity. The women's seduction-repulsion towards their own and other women's bodies and appearance is complex, intense and 'mediated by and materialized through' (Tyler, 2011: 1493) patriarchal structures and highly masculine competitive cultures. These are contexts where 'leader' is socially constructed as male, where 'everyone knows what a man in a senior position looks and sounds like' (Louise), and where women are under-represented.

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

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

Our theorization and empirical exploration of Object Appearance also extends organization studies' theorizing of abjection by revealing how women elite leaders' struggles to maintain their almost-subject status can turn them away from other women who threaten their subjectivity. Kristeva (1982: 2) might argue that this reflects the 'compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them'. It explains the interplay of domination and submission between male/female and masculine/feminine, where women elite leaders perform for both sides of these binaries (Benjamin, 1998). Through a lens of Object Appearance, dominant interpretations of manager/leader are challenged that enables us to see how the subtleties that make working lives so fraught for women are 'entrenched in modernity's presumptions of how to do [leadership] work' (Harding et al., 2013: 58). Object Appearance therefore builds upon Kenny's (2010) and Harding et al.'s (2013) discussions of the politics of recognition, where the absence of intersubjective recognition can lead to abjection. Further, non-recognition or misrecognition can 'inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with

crippling self-hatred (Taylor, 1994)' (Harding et al., 2013: 57). We contribute to these understandings by revealing how, through their efforts, some women elite leaders discard demeaning expectations of their bodies and appearance 'to produce a self-affirming' (Fraser, 2000: 109–110) identity of their own. However, paradoxically the symbolic is seductive; we cannot escape our need for acknowledgement by another, as we need both assertion of self (freedom/lack of need of recognition) and recognition (need for the other/dependency) (Benjamin, 1998; Harding et al., 2013).

In questioning where our analysis leaves us in understanding experiences of women elite leaders, our research points to how disruptive push-backs have possibilities for women's subjectivities and agency. An example can be seen when women leaders attempt to modify women's position by refocusing normative views of women's bodies to constructions of women's 'powerful bodies' (Fiona) as leaders. Through *Object Appearance* we begin to understand how women, as constituents of the margins, might be in the best position to transgress boundaries (Kristeva, 1982). Jones (2007) tells us that object beings can push back, performing difference and 'challenging the stability of readable and enforceable norms' (p. 63), as there are 'gaps, tears and leaks' (p. 70), where, we argue, women as *One* and the *Other* can challenge. Future research could delve deeper into how awareness of *Object Appearance* might raise consciousness and enable opportunities for women elite leaders, as 'sometimes-subjects', lurking on the borders, to disrupt, act and create space for difference. For example, part of the utility of *Object Appearance* as a theory is an ability to reveal women elite leaders' bi-sexuality (Cixous, 1976; Philips et al., 2014); in the hyphen between masculine and feminine. We extend understandings in that through the accounts we see how women's feminine bodies betray and/or use this space for disruption. We see women elite leaders as disturbing identity, system, order, borders, positions and rules, as 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva, 1982: 4). *Object Appearance* explains women's struggles with this bi-sexuality in the space of, and marginalized from, the symbolic. It reflects how masculine and feminine subjectivities are jointly crafted in realities of power (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006: 81). In this way, *Object Appearance* as a theoretical tool has the potential to illuminate how women in-relation-to other women are influenced by women's concerns about becoming a man, not becoming a man, performing as a woman and not performing as a woman; an ambivalence that subverts our views of masculinity and femininity.

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

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

Practical implications

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

Conclusion

Abject Appearance as a theoretical tool provides an understanding of how women, in a context of intra-gender relations, simultaneously transgress boundaries associated with elite leader positions and negotiate embodied leadership. In terms of broader theories of gender and organization studies, Abject Appearance is an under-researched area that contributes to understanding the invisible intra-gender barriers constraining women's progress. Such barriers require continual and unrelenting navigation. Finally, we may be challenged for focussing our theory of Abject Appearance on elite, privileged, primarily white, western women, yet we make no apology. Women elite leaders in organizations remain as rare as pandas, their experiences are under-researched and their unique achievements offer us much in new avenues for theorizing and stretching ourselves.

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Note

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

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