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Title: Rationalising the Postfeminist Paradox: The Case of UK Women Veterinary Professionals

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Rationalising the Postfeminist Paradox: The Case of UK Women Veterinary Professionals.

Abstract

This paper critically evaluates how highly qualified women veterinary surgeons make sense of their constrained professional career progression in a context of postfeminism. Postfeminism posits that agentic individualism, combined with professional accreditation, generates a meritocratic pathway for career attainment. A dilemma emerges in the form of a postfeminist paradox however, as this rhetoric of opportunity is not translated into a reality of achievement. To make sense of this dilemma, women can either assume blame for their lack of career-progression or accept the presence of discriminatory bias, contrary to postfeminist assumptions of individual opportunities premised upon agency. To illustrate these arguments, we explore how these professional women rationalise their constrained career-progression and in the process, illustrate the impact of postfeminism upon the psychic lives of individual women.

Keywords: Postfeminism, veterinary profession, postfeminist paradox, blame discourse, postfeminist charade

Introduction

Since the 1980s, a postfeminist discourse has emerged suggesting new possibilities for extending women's emancipation through the exercise of individualism and agency in a context of regulated equality (Bae, 2011; Keller 2015). Postfeminism is a contested term. It has alternatively been mooted as an historical epoch within feminism following second wave feminism, an epistemological break within feminism, and, a backlash against feminism (Lewis, 2018). However, the increasingly employed and most useful approach is one regarding postfeminism as an object of study (Lewis, 2018). Scholars draw upon contemporary notions of postfeminism as a 'sensibility', 'discursive formation' or 'gender regime', terms reflecting that postfeminism is comprised of related themes and discourses that together "*describe the empirical regularities observable in contemporary beliefs about gender*" (Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017: 230). This approach recognises that postfeminism operates as a mode of governance at the individual level (Lewis, 2018; Dean, 2010). The constellation of ideas, beliefs and discourses that constitute the postfeminist sensibility is

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typified by an emphasis upon individual choice and agency, and a repudiation of sexism and structural gender inequalities (Gill et al., 2017:227). Such postfeminist ideas are so pervasive they have become fundamental organising principles in society influencing the daily behaviours and thinking of individuals (Gill, 2017; Lewis, 2018).

The postfeminist obfuscation of structural gender inequalities underpins a shift from the traditional, collective, feminist desire to engender external, social change that advances the position of women as a group, towards an individualised, seductive postfeminist regime where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved. This postfeminist sensibility is characterised by internalised self-regulation and self-monitoring as women are encouraged to change themselves and their subjectivities in order to achieve (Rottenberg, 2014). As such, it impacts upon the 'psychic life' of individual women, that is, how postfeminism is registered, negotiated and lived out on a subjective level (Gill et al., 2017); it polices acceptable emotions and dispositions with positivity, resilience and confidence deemed appropriate while other emotions, such as anger, are prohibited (Gill, 2017). Postfeminism, thus, operates as a form of governance placing dictates upon women's identity construction and their permitted subjectivities (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). We, therefore, position postfeminism as a sensibility which co-opts and subverts traditional feminist values of equality, empowerment and choice in order to reproduce and maintain traditional gender relations (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017) and subordinate women.

Postfeminism has been explored in some depth within cultural and media studies (McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009; Butler, 2013) but only more recently within Gender and Organisation studies (Adamson, 2017; Baker and Kelan, 2019; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al, 2018). In this context, the postfeminist female is an individualistic, entrepreneurial, empowered woman who is responsible for and proactive about their own lives and careers (Rottenberg, 2014; Lewis et al., 2018). Postfeminist discourses advocate that women can

'have it all' (Rottenberg, 2014; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017:839), foregrounding individual endeavour. In contemporary society, women are expected to *want* to work and to aspire to career success which is portrayed as attainable if they expend sufficient effort. However, the ability to attain that success is questionable, a fact "*rarely acknowledged*" (Lewis, 2018:27); it is this disparity between rhetoric and reality that represents the postfeminist paradox.

The postfeminist focus on individualism does not acknowledge context; yet, permitted postfeminist entrepreneurial subjectivities must be enacted within work contexts characterised by patriarchal and oppressive constructions of women (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017) maintained by traditional and entrepreneurial masculinities (Treanor and Marlow, 2019). Against such a backdrop, the requirement for constant monitoring and self-regulation and for women to change their subjectivity has raised the issue of how postfeminism is understood, experienced, negotiated and lived on a subjective level (Gill, 2017; Gill et al., 2017; Lewis, 2018). Unsurprisingly then, Lewis et al. (2018) call for greater attention, within organisation and management studies, to be focused upon how postfeminism acts as a contemporary sense-making vehicle to analyse women's positioning.

To contribute to this debate, we focus upon UK women veterinary professionals. We use the veterinary sector as our case example as, although dominated by highly qualified female clinical practitioners since the late 1980s, it exhibits persistent occupational segregation to the detriment of women (Clarke and Knights, 2018; Treanor and Marlow, 2019). There is a well-rehearsed debate exploring gendered bias within professional occupations (Merluzzi and Dobrev, 2015; Baker and Kelan, 2019). This illustrates how diverse forms of structurally embedded discrimination constrain women's career progression and the strategies employed to navigate such constraints (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). Within this paper, we take a different stance when focusing upon how women make sense of limited career attainment in the context of alleged postfeminist possibilities. In this context, the

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application of ambition, high levels of human capital and objective accreditation equip highly qualified women with the expectation of career progression. Yet, women remain stubbornly segregated within lower status echelons of veterinary medicine (Begeny and Ryan, 2018). We suggest this presents women with a sense-making dilemma given the pervasive contemporary postfeminist rhetoric of agentic possibility and the reality of structural gendered bias. To resolve the dilemma of constrained career progression despite ambition and effort, we argue women are faced with a stark choice of internalising or externalising blame. That is, they either adopt personal blame narratives suggesting they have either failed to appropriately exploit their potential or that they are somehow lacking, or, they ascribe to the alternative explanation that structural gender discrimination persists. The latter runs counter to the postfeminist discourse whereby agency can address gendered challenges, instead drawing upon a subordination explanation suggesting women are at the mercy of external forces which in turn, confers an undesirable 'victim' status (Leskinen, Rabelo, & Cortina, 2015). In a postfeminist context, where women control their destiny, being passive is neither appealing nor sustainable (Hunter, 2002). We capture these arguments through our research question focused upon: 'how do women veterinary surgeons make sense of their gender-constrained career outcomes in a contemporary postfeminist context of alleged possibility?'

To explore these issues, the paper proceeds by presenting our analytical framework, outlining the foundations of postfeminism, highlighting the dilemma between the possibilities suggested by postfeminism and the constraints arising from gendered subordination and the blame narrative this informs. We then outline our methodology before describing our findings. These are presented as vignettes, where women veterinary surgeons reflect upon their career attainments and associated constraints. We then discuss the implications of our results, concluding by outlining our contribution to prevailing debate.

Postfeminism: Related Discourses and Discursive Manoeuvres

Neoliberalism is characterised by the retrenchment of Government and the State in favour of free market economics and individual endeavour. Neoliberalism also extends the operationalisation of power beyond the market to the social realm, incorporating subjectivity; such that market values are extrapolated into social domains and actions (Brown, 2006; Adamson, 2017; Gill et al., 2017). It has become “*a calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising*” (Gill et al, 2017: 231). Neoliberalism can then be regarded as a form of personal governmentality emphasising individualism through the exertion of entrepreneurial agency within a free market to attain rewards (Marttila, 2013; Featherstone, Strauss and McKinnen, 2015). This neoliberal ideology influences individual constructions of a ‘good worker’ and (re)configures worker subjectivities (Adamson, 2017). In a society advocating individual endeavour characterised by the mainstreaming of equal opportunities legislation and policies within organisations, there is an assumption of meritocracy whereby those appropriately qualified and experienced will progress. As such, neoliberalism is gender-blind and advocates that individual effort will result in meritorious advancement. This has created the space for the related discourse of postfeminism which contends that women, having attained appropriate qualifications and expending sufficient effort can through their own agency, achieve success in this environment where equality of opportunity is enshrined in legislation. The assumption, or contention, being that the existence of such legislation and related organisational policies has de facto secured gender equality, and thus, progression is awarded on the basis of merit with gender no longer relevant (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Thus, the self-regulating, agentic, entrepreneurial postfeminist woman who enjoys free-choice and the ability to ‘have it all’ echoes the autonomous, enterprising, self-managing neoliberal citizen (Gill et al., 2017).

Such a focus on individualism and agency negates consideration of the context in which the individual is located or the influence of this context upon the potential actions or likely outcomes for these individuals. Structural barriers are omitted from consideration; the implication being that individual agency and effort can overcome. Applying this analysis in the context of professional career attainment shifts the focus from structural subordination and discriminatory bias as barriers to progression. Rather, the individual attainment of professional accreditation combined with determination and personal strategies to negotiate existing hierarchies will enable women to progress. The postfeminist woman is an individual responsible for her own success and, conversely, must be responsible for her lack of success.

When faced with instances of discrimination or inequality in juxtaposition to the postfeminist discourse of agentic possibility, women have been found to draw upon interpretive repertoires to repudiate sexism and uphold the notion of a meritocratic workplace. As postfeminism does not extend collective politicised articulations of feminist theory but rather, positions the individual woman as central to her own personal emancipation, this necessitates distancing from, and repudiation of, feminist axioms.

In their analysis of how a postfeminist sensibility may be expressed in relation to Gender and Organisation studies, Gill et al. (2017) identified the meta-level interpretive repertoire of repudiating sexism. This, it was claimed, was underpinned by a collection of four postfeminist interpretive repertoires. The first, 'pasting' is where inequalities are located in the past, with sexism enacted by historical actors, suggesting it is a problem attached to a former generation. A second repertoire involved 'relocating' inequalities by suggesting they occur geographically elsewhere; sexism occurs in developing, patriarchal societies, for example. Third, was the construction of 'the female advantage' in the modern workplace due to women's ability to draw upon their sexual attractiveness, appearance or charm. This effectively undermines the role of skill, experience, hard work or qualifications of women in

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securing their advancement. This is clearly a sexist discourse that contradicts the pervasive meritocratic logic but is obscured by claims of feminised agency. Finally, the use of 'C'est la Vie' accounting – a repertoire which presents inequalities as 'just how it is', a status quo that must be accepted, was frequently deployed. Individual organisations were not sexist, for example; fewer women in executive positions were explained as the consequence of individual women choosing to have families instead of pursuing career progression. In using the concept of postfeminism as the subject of analysis in this way, Gill et al. (2017) facilitate our understanding of the accounts and justifications provided for the gender patterns and inequalities maintained in the modern workplace. They acknowledge however, that the interpretive repertoires they identify are not comprehensive; rather, they are reflective of the psychic machinations employed by individual women in order to make sense of their lived reality (Baker and Kelan, 2019). In this paper, we seek to explore the impact of the postfeminist paradox upon women who do not readily attain their career ambitions in professions that are gendered masculine. We, therefore, seek to explore the influence of the postfeminist sensibility upon highly qualified, agentic, women veterinary professionals when they are making sense of their gendered career outcomes and negotiating a gendered professional landscape.

Making sense of professional segregation

The persistent exclusionary practices that impeded women's career progression within the professions were highlighted in the academic literature of the 1980s and 1990s (Crompton and Lyonette, 2011). The outcomes of such exclusionary practices were distinct gender patterns i.e. evident horizontal (pooling within subsectors deemed of lesser value) and vertical (pooling within the lowest echelons of high-status subsectors) segregation within the professions. Crompton and Lyonette (2011) highlight that since the mid-2000s research has neglected the effects of such segregation given assumptions that access to appropriate entry

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qualifications, and equality policies and practices in the context of postfeminist individualism, are ameliorating issues of structural discrimination. However, evidence highlights the persistence of occupational segregation across the professions including law (Muzio and Tomlinson, 2012), medicine (Ozbilgin, Tsouroufli and Smith, 2011), accountancy (Flynn, Earlie and Cross, 2015) and engineering (Powell, Bagihole and Dainty, 2009). How women respond to such bias and related strategies to navigate its effects have also been explored at length for example, adopting ‘honorary men’ personas (Baker, 2016), ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome (Mavin, 2006) or abandoning formal careers for alternative forms of economic participation such as self-employment (Braches and Elliott, 2017). Thus, there is a robust body of literature upon professional careers that interrogates how structural gendered biases generate discrimination, how status issues exacerbate this discrimination and the strategies women employ to navigate them.

Within this paper, we adopt a different approach by exploring how postfeminism reconstitutes this debate when fragmenting structural discrimination into an individualised challenge. Mackenzie-Davey (2008) highlights how professional women in male-dominated occupations draw upon organisational politics as a means of making sense of gendered career outcomes. This sense-making strategy positions gendered career outcomes as the result of individual actors as opposed to systemic or structural issues. However, the existence and outcomes of organisational politics undermine the postfeminist conceptions of meritocratic workplaces and career progression. Drawing upon evidence from the accounting and finance profession, Baker and Kelan (2019) identify a psychosocial process of ‘splitting and blaming’ whereby successful, executive women dissociate themselves from discriminatory experiences and internalise good outcomes, due to their emotional investment in upholding the postfeminist ideal. As a result, they apportion blame directly to other individual women for their lack of career progress, denying broader structural discrimination.

We contribute to this debate with an analysis of women veterinary surgeons struggling to achieve such vertical progression and in particular, highlight how they are more likely to *internalise* a blame narrative to make sense of the dilemma presented by the promise of postfeminism and their experiences of discrimination. As such, we suggest that personal blame becomes the only logical explanation for a lack of vertical progression for many women, but this must be reconciled with the evidence of both overt and covert discrimination. This suggests a paradox whereby postfeminism promotes a pathway to individual emancipation but actually serves to generate a camouflaged form of subordination. As such, the pivotal emphasis within postfeminism of emancipation through agency is transposed into a damage discourse when internalised as corrosive blame for inadequacy.

The UK Veterinary Context

The context for this research is the UK veterinary profession, which is undergoing demographic feminisation. In 2018, women constituted around sixty percent of UK veterinary surgeons in practice (Begeny and Ryan, 2018) and 80% of undergraduate students (Castro and Armitage-Chan, 2016). However, women remain significantly under-represented in higher status roles (Treanor, 2016; Begeny and Ryan, 2018); they dominate companion animal work whereas men dominate higher value large animal, food safety and Government roles (Treanor, 2016). This segregation emanates from essentialist gendered assumptions of 'fit work' - work best suited to a particular sex due to essentialist or biological aptitudes (Bradley, 2013). Regardless of speciality, veterinary career ladders are quite short; once qualified, employment is typically as an 'Assistant Veterinarian' within a private practice or a corporate chain. To advance within clinical practice the next step is usually to become a salaried or equity partner; a sole proprietor in private practice; or to progress within the management ranks of corporate providers.

Similar to most professions, there has been a structural shift within veterinary medicine whereby large corporates are rapidly displacing small private practices (Begeny and Ryan, 2018) since the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (the regulatory body) relaxed the rules pertaining to practice ownership eligibility in 1995. There has been an overt association between the changing profile of the profession and increasing feminisation; the decline of private practice has been associated with a feminised reluctance to assume the risks related to self-employment and a preference for flexible working incompatible with senior private practice/ownership roles (Myers and Gates, 2013; Treanor, 2016). Thus, whilst feminisation is deemed at the root of structural shifts (Treanor and Marlow, 2019), new opportunities are emerging in the corporate sector with possibilities for advancement to senior management or clinical directorships. Indeed, the context of larger organisations with formal equality policies should be advantageous for women's progression. Thus, although notably dominated by well qualified women, the UK veterinary profession remains both vertically and horizontally segregated to their detriment. Our interest here, however, is not in exploring the antecedents of such segregation within prevailing socio-economic gendered discrimination. Rather, we focus upon how highly qualified women professionals make sense of the ensuing detriment to their career progression aspirations, in the light of postfeminist notions of meritocratic achievement through agency in a context of professional accreditation.

Methodology

We draw upon an interpretive ontology and a social constructionist, feminist epistemology to address our research question: *how do women veterinary surgeons make sense of their gender-constrained career outcomes, in a contemporary postfeminist context of alleged possibility?*

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Stratified, purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases; such sampling enhances credibility and contributes to theory development rather than simulating representativeness (Bryman and Bell, 2016). The women were all UK based, qualified and practising veterinary surgeons, aged 30 – 45 years. This age category captures professional women with extensive post-qualification experience, likely to be at a career point where they would be considering further progression. The random sample of 296 contacts was provided by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the regulatory body, from their register of Members licensed to practice. Once cleaned to remove those no longer practising, 123 women were contacted; 50 replied with 31 meeting the criteria. The participants were employed across diverse specialisms (both male and female dominated), across practice types (sole proprietorships, traditional partnerships, privately-owned corporates, specialist referral centres) with a range of working patterns (part/full time assistants, locum, junior partners). Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were undertaken at a location of the respondent's choice. Topics covered included: their attraction to, and expectations of, the profession; their initial career aspirations; their career pathways and experiences; future career plans and the feminisation of the profession.

Additionally, eight key stakeholders holding leadership positions within key veterinary organisations and associations (including the British Veterinary Association, Society for Practicing Veterinary Surgeons and the RCVS) were interviewed. These stakeholders were positioned to provide an overview of the trends and challenges within the profession. Given the roles held by these respondents, they regularly spoke on behalf of the profession or significant proportions of its membership; consequently, they were well-versed in, and key proponents of, the common discourses and assumptions at play within the profession. These respondents were a mixed-sex group selected due to their expertise and

role; given their seniority, the majority were male. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, stakeholder roles and positions are not specified.

Data analysis

Given our intention to explore how postfeminism acts as a sense-making vehicle interview data were subjected to thematic analysis which, as a constructionist method, “examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on, are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society” (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 81). Coding was undertaken in a theoretically-driven or deductive manner at the latent level, that is, with the aim of extending beyond the semantic meaning of the data in order to identify the underlying ideas, ideologies, assumptions and discourses that shape the semantic content of the data. Our thematic analysis identified various codes and themes relating to gendered career outcomes such as gendered work allocation, as an example of blocking strategies employed by (typically) male owners/managers, that maintains observable horizontal and vertical segregation patterns within this profession.

Informed by theory, our analysis sought, in part, to identify the use of Gill et al.’s (2017) interpretive repertoires. Interpretive repertoires are the building blocks of discourses, the “*recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations*” (Edley and Wetherell, 2001:443), drawn upon by these respondents when evaluating their career outcomes. The use of these repertoires both reflects the influence of postfeminism as a sense-making device and also, supports the maintenance and reproduction of the discourses comprising the postfeminist sensibility. It is accepted that words construct, and are constructed by, social realities (Potter and Wetherell, 1987); talk and texts are social practices which can be analysed to identify and understand the social construction processes operating in a given context, such as blame and responsibility (Potter, 1996). To that end, Potter (1996)

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asserts interviews are particularly effective at identifying the range of repertoires individuals have available and how they are employed. Hence, having become thoroughly familiarised with the data set through the transcription process, reading and re-reading interviews and noting initial ideas, initial codes were sought relating to theoretically informed concepts, such as ‘fit work’ for example. As part of this iterative process, we sought to identify specific examples of Gill et al.’s (2017) interpretive repertoires (pasting, relocating, C’est la vie and the female advantage) to collate relevant data across the data set. These constituted level 1 codes, as per Braun & Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic data analysis. Given that these interpretive repertoires were used as cognitive resources to support the ‘repudiation of sexism’, this meta-level repertoire identified by Gill et al. constituted the related level 2 code, which was consistent both in terms of the individual extracts and across the data set. However, our analysis highlighted that this meta- repertoire was, in turn, deployed as a discursive strategy to support notions of meritocracy and the postfeminist promise; using the meta-narrative thus, contributes to the reproduction of the postfeminist sensibility which is the overarching theme identified (see Appendix 1).

In seeking examples of these interpretive repertoires, we found repeated instances of women being identified as somehow at fault, lacking merit – for example, women were discussed as being essentially ‘less entrepreneurial’, ‘less profitable employees’ or ‘being (biologically) unreliable’. These were recorded as level 1 codes, supporting a ‘women as deficient’ level 2 code, equivalent to a meta-level interpretive repertoire as per Gill et al. (2017). We found this meta-level repertoire related to an overarching theme of a blame discourse.

At this point, it is useful to acknowledge Braun & Clarke’s (2006) point that thematic analysis within a social constructionist epistemology can range from including no discourse analysis, through the interpretive repertoire form of thematic discourse analysis, to thematic

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decomposition analysis. As such, they highlight that thematic analysis and discourse analysis frequently overlap. Given that a constructionist perspective regards meaning and experience as being socially produced and reproduced, and “*seeks to theorise the socio-cultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided*” they contend that “*thematic analysis that focuses on latent themes tends to be more constructionist, and it also tends to start to overlap with thematic discourse analysis at this point*” (Braun and Clarke, 2006 p. 85). We acknowledge that such an encroachment occurred herein.

Presentation of Findings

A limitation of the thematic analysis approach is that it frequently results “*in a less rich description of the data overall*” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p84). To compensate for this potential shortcoming, we present our findings in a series of vignettes, complemented by a selection of supporting quotes from other respondents available in Appendix 1. A vignette is a “*brief, evocative account, description or episode*” (Collins English Dictionary). Vignettes are frequently used within psychology and social work fields, their power lies in “*showing, not telling about, your findings*” (Hubbard and Power, 1993, p. 113). The benefits of this approach are that, in showing our data through providing lengthy excerpts, we give the reader an insight into the sense-making process undertaken by individual respondents as they rationalise their gendered career outcomes. These extracts also enable the reader to identify how the respondents deploy the interpretive repertoires and discourses influenced by, and in turn maintaining, the postfeminist sensibility, in their conversation. In using vignettes, we invite the reader into the analytic process and proffer greater methodological transparency given that vignettes offer greater support for the interpretative analysis (Hubbard and Power, 1993, p. 113). Thus, vignettes are also a useful tool to strengthen the voice of respondents in research. In answer to many of the questions posed, the women engaged in free-flowing

discussion about their career progression and experiences. These longer excerpts are used within these vignettes. In cases where a relevant prompt was used, this is indicated.

Findings

The following vignettes provide an insight into how postfeminism influences the sense-making process undertaken by these respondents, as they attempt to rationalise the postfeminist paradox. The vignettes facilitate this insight into the sense-making process by conveying how the women draw upon different postfeminist interpretive repertoires, often several within one vignette, as they attempt to rationalise their lack of career progression despite their effort and possession of relevant credentials and experience.

Adherence to Postfeminism – Individualisation and Internalisation of Blame

Vignette 1: Margaret – Is it Me?

Margaret graduated in 1995, entered large animal practice but now works part-time in a small-animal practice owned by a woman. Within this extract, Margaret first reflects upon segregation in the profession, suggesting it arises from essentialist gendered assumptions of ‘fit work’, before considering her career experiences and progression.

*“I was keen to work with large animals. Within vet school, I think the perception as a whole was that if you were a girl, you’d go into small animal. There were certainly concerns, even amongst the students, as to how the profession would end up... I think a concern certainly from the farm animal side of things, would we get enough women willing to be farm animal vets and also would they stay once they’ve had kids and whatever, would they want to be part time and how will that work... [when working in a large animal practice] sometimes clients would ring and say, “Don’t send the girl” or when you showed up, you could see their disappointment. I think it depends very much on how you handle it and I always used to have a laugh and a joke about it. I wasn’t overly, “I’m a woman I can do everything” person. I think some women.... they’ve got a chip on their own shoulder. I think you can make a good situation out of most things if you put the effort in and get on well with people and stuff. I’ve picked up the phone and they’ve said, “Oh, is it you that’s coming out? Well this is going to be a tough one you might get in touch with *** [a male partner] and I’ll go, “Alright then, but I’ll come out first and have a look anyway and we’ll see, and if I need them I’ll shout for them”. I think, “Fair enough they’ve got their misgivings and until I’ve proven myself that’s fine”. And I’ve not had the attitude of jumping down their throats about it, so I think it depends on how you handle it really. You’ve only got to go out and do a few good jobs. Some of it was just because you’re a woman and maybe they’ve had a woman out before but then you do a good job and they’ll have you again and they’re no bother at all.*

[Reflecting on her Career Progression] When I look back on what I’ve done, very few bits I wish I’d done differently, but then equally I think, I’m gone 40 now and I would have liked to have been in a partnership or, on the cusp of, being in that position and I’m not. When I’d thought of my career, I thought by this time I probably would be, so no, on that front - but then when I look back and think, “Well, where could you have changed it?” I can’t pinpoint

The essentialist notions and sexist attitudes that underpin the horizontal sorting of women within the profession into small animal work is evident here, as is the ‘problematism’ of increasing numbers of women entering the professional body. Rather than challenge the gendered assumptions that large animal work is not fit work for women, Margaret outlined the negotiation tactics used to circumvent such attitudes. These ranged from reassuring cynical clients through specific demonstrations of competence, not required from male colleagues, to indicating that male ‘back-up’ was available if required. Having to prove her competence, as opposed to being afforded the assumption of competence, was not deemed problematic or offensive to Margaret. Gill et al.’s (2017) postfeminist repudiation of sexism is evident as Margaret uses the ‘C’est la vie’ repertoire when accounting for her acceptance that this was how things were and she just had to work harder to overcome these attitudes to progress. Margaret also engages in ‘pasting’ here (Gill et al., 2017), minimising the sexism that did occur and highlighting it belonged in the past and “*wouldn’t be an issue now; farmers are used to women now*”. Pasting is used here, not only to refute sexism but also, to support the narrative that the UK veterinary sector is a contemporary meritocratic profession aligned with the postfeminist sensibility.

Margaret also employs a discursive strategy of ‘distancing’ as she distances herself from technically less competent women (Kelan, 2009); assuming part of the issue is that she was a woman “*and maybe they’ve had a woman out before but then you do a good job.*” Margaret infers that she was technically more competent than an assumed predecessor; this positions Margaret as technically superior and closer to meeting the technical criterion for career advancement. However, it also minimises and excuses the sexist behaviour exhibited by clients by providing a supporting justification that the clients had negative previous experiences with women possessing either poor technical skills and or a bad attitude. Effectively, Margaret draws upon the trope of women’s questionable competence, positioning

women as deficient. A series of similar interpretive repertoires, positioning women as being less entrepreneurial, less profitable employees, less risk-embracing and so, less willing to assume leadership roles (see Appendix 1), were identified in interviews with women veterinary professionals and stakeholders. Collectively these repertoires constitute a meta-repertoire of 'women as deficient' which inform a discourse blaming women for their negative experiences and lack of career progression.

Margaret also articulates the self-monitoring and self-regulation required of women in the contemporary postfeminist context. In addition to her competence, she attributes her acceptance in a masculine domain to her gender-appropriate behaviour in the situation; she was deferent, agreeable, light-hearted, rather than being argumentative or confrontational (Fine, 2017). Additionally, in using this discursive strategy of distancing herself from women who might choose to object to, or resist, such sexist treatment, Margaret again positions such women negatively. Women who articulate sexist treatment or highlight gender inequalities can be regarded as 'troublemakers' (McRobbie, 2009) but here, Margaret characterises them as having a 'chip on their own shoulder', suggesting they have adopted a victim status (Leskinen et al., 2015). Margaret seeks to discursively distance herself from these women and, through her behaviours, ensures she could not be mistaken for one of them. Margaret's account of acceptance within a male-dominated profession is portrayed as being achieved through regulating personal behaviours and proving technical ability (Baker and Kelan, 2019); as such, she condones the privileging of masculinity as normative and desirable. Yet, despite this postfeminist self-regulation and conformist behaviour, career progression still eludes Margaret.

In her current post, Margaret works part-time to accommodate her childcare responsibilities. Despite her interest in large animal practice, she now works in a small animal practice since, due to the horizontal sorting of practice specialisms within the profession,

“small animal practice is really the only practice area offering part-time work”. In considering why she had not achieved the Partner status to which she aspired, Margaret reflects upon what *she* ‘might have done differently’. Since responsibility for career success rests with the individual, her recourse is to examine her past choices and behaviours that may have been problematic. As she portrays the contemporary veterinary profession to be meritocratic and gender not an issue, structural barriers, sexist assumptions or discriminatory attitudes are not possible avenues of explanation. This seems to lead Margaret to internalise responsibility for her lack of career progression as she asks, ‘Is it me?’ Margaret then admits rationalising the lack of career progression is ‘really hard’ and it ‘gets her down’ if she ‘thinks about it too much’.

Vignette 2: Jenny – “I’m really beginning to think it’s me!”

Jenny was 37 at the time of interview, unmarried and without children. She was asked to outline her career history and career aspirations and how these may have changed over time.

"I always wanted to be a vet since I was about ten. I've a farming background; it really was James Herriot stuff. That was my idea of a vet and, even when I graduated, that's where I saw myself. My first post was a mixed practice in a rural area so it did quite a lot of large animal practice. I was there for seven years before moving to another mixed practice; I thought I'd be in large animal work all the way up through my career but I came here about five years ago. It's entirely small animal here. In large animal practice the occasional farmer would say "don't send me out a girl", normally the older ones that are fairly set in their ways - but not often. I don't think being female is disadvantageous in small animal practice. In some respects, it has been an advantage. Dogs prefer women to men, and often clients like a woman if they're emotional. It might have been an issue in the profession years ago but farmers are used to women vets now. Perhaps in other specialisms - like equine - I hear it can be bad. There isn't an issue with small animal though - it's actually a good option for many women; a lot of practices offer no on-call and part-time jobs which suits women with children. I don't have any [children]. I ended up in small animal here because of the location of the practice - it's close to my parents - and I wanted a change.

[Career aspirations and progression to date?]

In terms of aspirations, I always thought I'd have my own practice either on my own or in partnership - that James Herriot image. Financially, a partnership is more accessible plus you have an established business and client base. I was in my first practice seven years. At interview they said partnership would be a possibility. It wasn't; but in the end, I wouldn't have wanted it! I would have had to be like them and I couldn't have lived with that. I was sort of left out on my own - some people, if I called, would come and help, others would say 'just get on with it'. There was a lot of politics and some bullyish personalities. An Assistant killed herself, poor girl; it was a very difficult experience! I joined here five years ago thinking partnership was an option, but it's just been sold to a large corporate. I thought I'd buy in here or buy it over. Instead, he sold it to a corporate without even mentioning it to me beforehand. We always got on well. This was his baby;

Maybe he didn't think I was a safe pair of hands. It stung a bit; knocked my confidence a bit – maybe he didn't think I was up to it sort of thing?! I've never run a practice before; I've no formal business training but I am a competent vet. I manage my clinics efficiently, I understand about the need to make money. I've always thought I could do it. I'm really beginning to think it's me and if it is, if there's something I haven't recognised, then going out on my own would be a massive risk.

Jenny also draws upon Gill et al.'s (2017) 'pasting' interpretive repertoire to repudiate discriminatory treatment generally, and her own specifically, positioning sexism as a historical issue no longer relevant in the contemporary profession.

Interestingly, Jenny 'relocates' sexism. Unlike Gill et al.'s (2017) reports of women highlighting sexism as an issue in other geographical contexts, Jenny draws upon this repertoire to relocate sexism to a different sub-specialism within the profession, specifically, equine practice: *"I hear it can be bad. There isn't an issue with small animal though."* This reflects a nuanced difference, a contextualised usage of this interpretive repertoire in this professional context that may resonate in other professional contexts.

A new interpretive repertoire of 'women's essentialist professional advantage' is identified here, as Jenny highlights how women have essentialist advantages over men in small animal practice, *"Dogs prefer women to men, and often clients like a woman if they're emotional."* This repertoire was frequently drawn upon by other women interviewed who noted the benefit of small hands when calving or lambing, or how women being more nurturing led to higher productivity rates in farrow houses, for example (see Appendix 1). This could be regarded as a discourse of resistance to the 'fit work' narrative which traditionally has emphasised how women are essentially ill-suited to large animal work due to their physicality and relative lack of strength. However, this strategy reinforces gendered

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stereotypes and essentialist expectations that could serve to (re)produce and maintain horizontal sorting of women into small animal practice and seems to be an attempt to amplify the gender congruence of the work, rather than a resistance discourse. However, some women chose to emphasise technique as being more important than ‘brute strength’; positioning technical skill as superior to physicality in relation to large animal work in particular, which perhaps better reflects a resistance discourse employed in opposition to the fit work narrative.

When it transpired that her employer had sold his practice to a corporate without consulting her, Jenny begins internalising the blame for her lack of progression in this meritocratic profession because there is no other explanation available to her. Postfeminism individualises women’s problems, such that their solutions must be found internally, forcing Jenny to analyse and question her skills, experience and suitability. The latest ‘knock to her confidence’ has caused her to reflect somewhat negatively upon her career – was she given a difficult time in her first role because she was a weak vet? Was she not offered partnership elsewhere or here because they could see she was lacking in some skill, aptitude or ability that she had as yet failed to recognise? Considering external factors to explain gendered career outcomes was not even a possibility for Jenny in her meritocratic profession; she only had recourse to self-blame for her failure to succeed in attaining partnership.

Publicly Acknowledging Gender Inequalities

Vignette 3: Uma – Being ‘THAT’ woman

Uma is highly qualified, having completed numerous additional training courses post-qualification; she has been an Assistant in a large privately-owned practice for over seven years. The practice partners are all male. Despite being a long-serving staff member, being the most qualified and the only staff-member able to undertake a particular procedure, Uma

has been consistently overlooked when it comes to promotion; an issue Uma raised with Partners.

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Our clients are quite old fashioned in their approach and, many of them are super but for a lot of them, I've earned my relationship with them. It hasn't been automatic...it's been earned which is definitely what falls to a female within [this] environment whereas a male tends to be much more accepted. It really is, it's a boy's network. Without a doubt, there is pressure, certainly within an old fashioned group like this, to still be showing your worth and still showing that actually you're within your rights to be in the job you're in and you've earned it still – for women generally but especially if they have had a child. There's no part-time working here; the women here didn't even take maternity leave! I'm sure that's part of the ceiling I'm hitting next door [with the Partners] because they would see me as wanting to do that – have a child, take maternity leave and come back to work.

Essentially the partners in a practice decide who they will offer partnership opportunities to – they might set 'objective criteria' but then they can allocate work in such a way as to position people so they are ineligible for promotion. That's what they have done here with me. I went and said I would like to be a partner and was disappointed when they made one of the guys a salaried partner over me. I had trained him and then they got him to take over doing that role while I was given responsibility for [specific procedure]; I'm the only one here who can do that. People come from all over the country and the practice gets a certain amount of prestige because we offer that service, it is so specialised. When I asked them about it, they said, "if you earn a certain amount and you're worth it to the group, then that's where the promotion comes in" and my response was "my income isn't..[higher]...because [a] I'm being allocated work and [b] the nature of what I'm doing isn't generating as much." They had moved me on to a prestigious but less profitable work area – they control what my revenue potential for the practice is. I didn't make a secret of the fact I was unhappy about it, that I thought it was unfair.

Effectively, they blocked me from promotion because, at that time I was just married, they were afraid I would be going off on maternity leave. It was sexism. Of course then I was the problem child! I was 'THAT' woman – the ardent feminist, crying foul when someone else got promoted over her. I was a bit marginalised; everyone treated me a little differently. I actually got very depressed and was on medication. It really got to me. Just recently they made a female colleague a salaried partner – she is here less time than me; she is less qualified than me but guess what?! She is in a relationship with one of the partners! They've told me I have to train her to do [specific procedure] now. It seems her gender was an advantage for her! It's clear that I am unlikely to ever be promoted here. The 'worth' I have to the firm, my USP, will be gone now when I train her to do this. I don't know what I am going to do. I'm in a new relationship and I want a child but I don't know how I could do that working here.

[Asked about general attitudes towards feminisation within the profession] "it's seen as a hugely negative thing, I'm almost a bit embarrassed about it myself actually! I know it sounds weird but you feel like it's seen as something which is going to make the profession fall apart....definitely...in my experience, it's seen as a negative thing and almost you feel a bit apologetic for that.."

Uma draws upon Gill et al.'s (2017) 'the female advantage' repertoire here, identifying her female colleague as benefitting from her femininity through attaining a promotion by being in a relationship with one of the practice partners. She draws upon tropes and clichés such as the 'old boy's network' and 'old fashioned' clients and partners to convey the prevalence of 'traditional' i.e. sexist attitudes towards women which necessitates them having to prove their competence and continually 'prove their worth'. Whereas Margaret 'pasts' this proving of

competence as something that had to be done once, Uma portrays it as an ongoing negotiated (re)construction due to persistent sexist attitudes.

Uma's experience of being 'the problem child' and being marginalised by colleagues, as a result of challenging the merit and fairness of someone else being promoted above her, is telling. It explains Margaret's desire to distance herself from feminist colleagues challenging gender inequalities or sexist behaviours. Margaret and Jenny internalise blame for their lack of career progression, regarding it as being due to some personal deficit they may not have previously recognised. Uma, however, externalises blame and publicly acknowledges her gendered career outcomes as being due to gender discrimination; she attributes the Practice Partners as, on the basis of sexist attitudes and stereotypes, using work allocation as a blocking strategy to ensure she cannot meet the criteria set for promotion. Despite the different strategies employed and positions adopted, none of these respondents have attained career progression; the lack of which gets Margaret 'down' if she 'thinks about it too much', with Uma experiencing depression and requiring medication. The literature highlights that those women who do enjoy career progression are often highly visible, treated as 'tokens' that are lauded as evidence of gender equality in the contemporary era, while being held to higher performance standards, facing heightened career barriers and often hostile work environments (Kanter, 1977; Lewis and Simpson, 2012). The final vignette demonstrates that the career progression Margaret, Jenny and Uma may aspire to, in this gendered professional context, may also come at a cost.

Private Acknowledgement of Gender Inequalities, Public 'Postfeminist Charade'

Vignette 4: Violet – "I honestly felt that...I...would be as equal as anybody else"

Violet was recently made a salaried partner with an agreement that allowed for equity partnership in the future. From previous experience, Violet had encountered what she described as 'old-fashioned' attitudes but again, was inclined to 'past' these experiences, but

did not associate these with gendered career barriers. Violet expected that her skills, work ethic (she works seven days per week), loyal client base and significant income generation, would support her partnership ambitions. Consequently, it came as a shock to Violet to find that the practice owners had deliberately not offered her partnership due to gendered assumptions around commitment and women's assumed life ambitions.

Three years ago I was driving it, everything was driving forward and I felt like I was in control of my career. I run my own department, I lecture all over the world, I have a client base which would follow me around if I left; all these things that you think you have to do and I was purposefully driven to get that so that - and they've always known I wanted a partnership - and then you see people that are younger than you, been here less time, less experienced. I've sometimes thought they have already made decisions about my career, even before I knew what I wanted. It's been a harder slog for me, ticking all the boxes and then still having to prove something else; something they don't even tell me that I have to prove but it feels like there's something else that you have to do which is not said openly, but you feel, "come on, if I was a guy, you'd have made me a partner three or four years ago." So I had to go that extra mile and there is really only one explanation for it. I flagged it up with the partners and said, "just so that you're aware, I know that sometimes it's a case of miscommunication so I am definitely interested in a partnership", and as soon as I mentioned that, they all tried to talk me out of it saying they didn't think I understood what a commitment it was. I mean, of course I understand what a commitment it is, I'm not a fool! And they said perhaps for women it's better to have the freedom of not being tied financially to the partnership and if ever you wanted a family, it wouldn't be possible to stay in the partnership. They seem to see women here as a bit of a ticking time bomb. That was really hard to take because I honestly felt that if I just did everything I possibly could, that the chances I had would be as equal as anybody else; it was up to me to do it and to actually then find out that there's something else, outside my control that I

used to things being outside of my control, everything is within my power to achieve these things I've always thought, and to find later down the line that there was something which you could do nothing about ...just because I'm a girl.

On the whole – and the older I get, the more I realise that you don't get to have everything in life – if I could have written my job description 15 years ago, this would be it, what I have now. So, I'm totally satisfied as far as what I saw myself doing, the practice I want to work in, where I'd progress - all of those things I'm very happy with. In my contract that I have now, it's been stipulated that if I have children, then I have to come back to exactly the same job and be as committed, so there's no leeway for me to change or go to four or five days a week. So I know that if I have children...the way that my job is, I can't see it even being a realistic prospect; to do that, I'd have to leave this practice.

[Q: Are you considering that?] I do want to stay here because it's the best practice I'd ever work in but the problem is that if you are labelled a little bit of a sort of militant ... very quickly things start to turn against you as far as the other partners are concerned, and I've seen it happen to other people... I will be the first female equity partner here, I want to give them a good experience of that so I almost feel indebted to be somewhat compliant. I don't know if by leading the way, I'm actually doing a disservice to people further down the line because it might become ingrained that all these people aren't allowed to change their working hours and

Violet fulfilled every condition of partnership, except for being female. Whilst Violet *did* achieve a salaried partnership, it too was bounded by conditions directly related to discriminatory expectations of gendered responsibilities. The terms of the contract [which appear unlawful] hold implications for her personal life; while these were not applied to her male colleagues, Violet considered these as the necessary exchange for the role offered. An extreme example of 'C'est la vie' accounting, perhaps. Such conditions did not however, prompt Violet to challenge these overt gender inequities.

This illustrates Mackenzie-Davey's (2008) contention that women are positioned in a no-win dilemma. Thus, Violet must oscillate between her assertion that individual agency informs her success whilst acknowledging overt gender discrimination. Making sense of this dilemma requires the acceptance of male politics and hierarchies and the suggestion that women must navigate these hierarchies. This creates a conundrum, whereby the solution seems to be that contemporary emancipation gives women the means to successfully navigate inequity, but the male template is the only 'sensible' one for the profession which negates the discriminatory basis of the detriment.

Violet, however, only acknowledges this sexism privately. She does not want to be "labelled a little bit of a sort of militant ... very quickly things start to turn against you as far as the other partners are concerned", the equivalent of McRobbie's (2009) feminist 'troublemaker' – this resonates with Uma's experience. Violet also seeks to distance herself from 'victimhood feminism', as people like Margaret might contend she had 'a chip on her shoulder', especially in light of her attaining some vertical career progression.

While Violet has externalised blame for her lack of career progression (although some progress, albeit highly qualified, has been achieved) she must do so privately. In wanting to give the Partners a good experience of having their first female salaried partner, Violet feels "indebted to be somewhat compliant", she must regulate her behaviours and keep her true opinions private while publicly appearing to be the same happy, positive employee, celebrating her success. This is also necessary to retain the possibility of progressing further, from salaried partner to equity partner. In short, Violet is engaging in what could be termed a 'postfeminist charade' whereby the partners can point to her limited progression as a sign of gender equality and progress, while Violet must 'play along' despite now being aware of the gendered barriers and discrimination in play. Extensive emotional labour is likely necessitated to maintain such a charade in the workplace. Violet's experience provides a

telling insight into the exacting, and potentially negative, influence of postfeminism on the 'psychic lives' of women; that is, how postfeminism is registered, negotiated and lived out on a subjective level (Gill et al., 2017), necessitating internal work on their subjectivity, thus, constituting a form of governmentality.

Discussion

Within this paper, we sought to critically analyse how postfeminism acts as a contemporary sense-making vehicle to address our research question, *how do women veterinary surgeons make sense of their gender-constrained career outcomes, in a contemporary postfeminist context of alleged possibility?* Drawing upon postfeminism as an analytical construct, we show how several related postfeminist ideas are consistently employed by the respondents as they rationalise the postfeminist paradox that confronts them. As such, these patterned arguments constitute the 'common sense' of postfeminism that is so pervasive in daily life (Lewis et al., 2018), constituting the taken for granted assumptions that shape the gendered landscape of the UK veterinary profession. Thus, despite enduring occupational segregation, personal experiences of sexism and limited, or no, vertical career progression, respondents tended to locate sexism historically. Many upheld the notion of a contemporary, meritocratic veterinary profession where individual agency will prevail, with structural barriers ignored or denounced. Gill et al (2017) contend that this pattern of rationalisation is underwritten by four distinct discursive repertoires: 'pasting', relocating, the female advantage and 'C'est la vie' accounting which underpins acceptance of the status quo.

We offer an empirical contribution, extending current knowledge by illustrating how these interpretive repertoires, which both reflect and reproduce the postfeminist sensibility, have travelled, changed and been contextualised within the UK veterinary profession. There were examples of Gill et al.'s (2017) four repertoires being used in the sense making processes of women veterinary professionals, as originally delineated. However, the

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‘relocating’ repertoire, which involves the geographical relocation of sexism, is deployed differently here. This repertoire is contextualised, and within the context of a contemporary profession in a developed Western economy, is used to relocate sexism to a different sub-specialism within the profession, such as equine practice. In this way, relocation is used by respondents as a means of displacing the possibility of sexism within their speciality. This may reflect a strategy employed by these respondents in order to manage the tension arising when faced with challenges to the postfeminist sensibility; thus, enabling them to adhere to their construction of veterinary medicine as a meritocratic profession, where personal advancement remains a possibility. We suggest this strategy may also be employed by women in other traditionally masculine professional contexts such as medicine or engineering.

Uma discusses ‘the female advantage’, as per Gill et al. (2017), when discussing how a female colleague is benefitting from career progression through using her sexuality and engaging in a relationship with a practice owner. However, we identify a different context specific repertoire of ‘essentialist female professional advantage’ wherein women’s physicality and innate feminine qualities, such as nurturing and an assumed aplomb with emotional labour, communication and handling emotional clients, render women better suited to veterinary work. This was drawn upon by several respondents who spoke of *‘dogs not liking men’*, *‘clients preferring women if they were emotional’* and women being *‘more nurturing’*. This interpretive repertoire may be used by these respondents to amplify the gender congruence of their work (Denissen, 2010). The women use this repertoire to suggest that women’s innate suitability for veterinary medicine is widely recognised by clients, patients and colleagues; such widespread recognition of women’s aptitude and suitability would be expected to facilitate professional progression. This repertoire, therefore, serves to repudiate sexism and ultimately, to maintain and reproduce the postfeminist promise of

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opportunity. The contradiction in the women's argument, whereby gender is irrelevant in this profession and contemporary society, as reflected by their 'pasting' such occurrences, but simultaneously provides a natural advantage, is not recognised.

A number of respondents including Margaret, Jenny and Violet, spoke about technique and skill being more important in large animal practice than physical strength, countering the fit work narrative. Drawing upon this repertoire may reflect a strategy of positioning themselves as technically competent, closer to the ideal vet construction and, consequently, closer to promotion benchmarks, while simultaneously distancing themselves from other less competent women responsible for their own lack of progression. Additionally, the notion of the contemporary veterinary profession being a meritocracy where people progressed on merit was another commonly employed resource drawn upon to repudiate sexism and uphold the postfeminist sensibilities to which most of the women seemed steadfastly attached.

This paper also contributes both empirically and theoretically to contemporary understanding of the postfeminist sensibility. We conceptualise a postfeminist blame discourse which influences the sense-making and subsequent positioning of women who have attained no, or limited, vertical career progression, despite harbouring such aspirations. Empirically, we demonstrate how this blame discourse is operationalised, identifying a new collection of interpretive repertoires that feed into a meta-level repertoire of 'women as deficient'; women are less entrepreneurial, less profitable employees, less risk-embracing and less willing to take on the responsibility of partnership, as examples.

A core strand of discourse within the postfeminist sensibility thesis is the repudiation of sexism, this is deployed to support the notion of meritocratic, agentic advancement (Gill et al., 2017). We contend that postfeminist blame constitutes another strand of discourse, intertwined with the discourse of meritocratic advancement, that together constitute the DNA

of the postfeminist sensibility. On the other side of the positive meritocratic, individualised opportunity coin, lies personal blame for opportunities not realised. On the level playing field posited by postfeminism, formalised and regulated by legislation securing equality of opportunity, structural barriers have been eroded leaving women able to succeed; where they do not, the problem must lie in an individualised lack of agency. This logic dictates the first position adopted by many of the women veterinary professionals.

Women, such as Jenny and Margaret, who have not achieved their desired career progression despite personal effort, requisite skills, qualifications and experience, resort to individualising and internalising blame for their lack of career progression. We contend that, to them, this is a logical recourse, given a prevailing postfeminist sentiment advocating that individual progress is attainable dependent upon sufficient individual effort and requisite talent. These respondents engage in a process of self-questioning; trying to identify a deficit in their skills or something they could have done differently, i.e., identify an opportunity they failed to recognise and exploit.

Within the UK veterinary profession there already exists a wider blame discourse holding women responsible for the corporatisation of the sector (Treanor and Marlow, 2019). It has been established that women attaining vertical progression blame unsuccessful women for their lack of progression (Baker and Kelan, 2019). Here, we find that both male and female colleagues, managers and gatekeepers in the profession, and indeed the respondents themselves, blame women for their lack of career progression, informed by postfeminist beliefs. This professional context may increase the likelihood of women, who have not attained vertical progression to equity partner or director, internalising blame.

In masculine professional contexts more widely, there is an acknowledged tendency for women professionals to minimise gender differences (Denissen, 2010), align with the masculine (Kelan, 2009) and distance themselves from feminism and feminist

‘troublemakers’ (McRobbie, 2009). The internalising of blame seems the more likely outcome in similar contexts. This is especially so given Uma’s experience.

The second position available to the women necessitates being what Uma terms, ‘That woman’; publicly acknowledging and externalising blame, highlighting that structural gender inequalities and blatant sexism have constrained her professional progression. Consequentially, Uma reports being marginalised by colleagues, suffering clinical depression and requiring medication. When Margaret was discussing women like Uma who ‘called out’ sexist treatment, she described them as having a ‘chip on their own shoulder’ suggesting their adoption of the victimhood status (Leskinen et al., 2015) that many contemporary women associate with traditional feminism. In positioning oneself as an agentic, competent, professional suitably poised for promotion, aligning with such ‘victimhood’ feminism is an anathema. This may be particular to the UK veterinary profession, but it seems likely to resonate with experiences of women in other masculine, professional contexts. Such women might be more inclined to internalise blame given the prevailing masculinist, postfeminist discourses.

The final position identified in our findings relates to one respondent, Violet, who having previously strongly aligned with postfeminist beliefs, came to privately recognise the influence of sexism and gender inequalities as the reason for her delayed and constrained career progression. To retain her new position as a salaried partner and the possibility of future progression to the equity partnership to which she aspires, Violet is positioned as having no viable alternative but to engage in a ‘postfeminist charade.’ Violet is celebrated as this practice’s first female salaried partner, which the existing equity partners acknowledge is merited as a result of her expertise and commitment to the practice, where she works seven days per week. While privately recognising the postfeminist fallacy, Violet publicly acquiesces to being used as a token of the postfeminist promise realised, a signifier that

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progress is occurring within this given practice and specialism. This places Violet in an unenviable position of ‘playing along’ with the charade of postfeminist opportunity, her promotion regarded by other women in the practice as indicating progression possibilities for themselves. Privately, however, Violet knows that her limited and delayed progress remains highly contingent, and future progress precarious. Violet’s success is, paradoxically, based upon compliance with, and reproduction of, a subordinating gendered order that reinforces the postfeminist trope of self-improvement and personal agency (Rottenberg, 2014). While women are often accused of being complicit in the maintenance of gendered practices that contribute to their subordination, it seems in this instance, that Violet is more a hostage of circumstance than a willing collaborator.

Violet’s experience of engaging in a ‘postfeminist charade’ provides a telling insight into the exacting, and potentially negative, influence of postfeminism upon the ‘psychic lives’ of women. Internalisation of postfeminist blame is also likely to be detrimental to individual women; Margaret spoke of suffering from low mood if she thought too much about her career progression to date and future progression prospects. Uma suffered clinical depression as a result of being ‘that woman’ and being marginalised in the workplace. In conjunction with demanding work schedules and the common occurrence of ‘workplace bullying’, the toll of postfeminism on the psychic lives of UK women veterinary professionals resulted in many women experiencing mental health issues (see Appendix 1).

Our study has a number of limitations; our participants were subject to hindsight bias which shapes how they constructed their reflections of career progression; thus, future longitudinal work using real time methodologies would be informative to explore the rationale applied to career choices. Such approaches would offer further insights into everyday gendered practices that contribute towards discrimination and ensuing exclusion from senior roles and provide insight into the dynamic sense-making undertaken by women

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in this professional context. At the other end of the spectrum, more survey data is required to build a broader picture of the profession to generate a contemporary picture of where men and women are positioned within the profession as it continues to feminise and corporatise. Finally, we have focused upon experienced veterinary surgeons and their experiences; it would be illuminating to engage with the current generation of veterinary students or newly-qualified practitioners to assess their ambitions, how they intend to realise them and the challenges they envisage and encounter. Following on from this research, further exploration of the influence of postfeminism on the mental health of women professionals confronted by gendered career outcomes would be worthwhile. Longitudinal research with women engaged in a postfeminist charade would also be beneficial, to ascertain the impact upon such women over the longer-term and how that may differ depending upon future career progression, for example.

Conclusion

Within this paper, we have illustrated how postfeminism influences the sense-making of women professionals attempting to rationalise their gendered career outcomes in contrast to the postfeminist promise of meritocratic progression, contingent only upon individual agency and accreditation. We extend understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility to illustrate that a key component is a masculinist, blame discourse, which these respondents both draw upon and reproduce when rationalising the postfeminist paradox. These professional women must choose to either internalise or externalise blame for their lack of career progression, both options having potentially negative consequences for their personal happiness, career satisfaction and, in some cases, mental health. In the context of limited and precarious vertical progression, we identify the 'postfeminist charade'; comprising a private realisation of the influence of sexism and gender inequalities upon career progression but a public acquiescence with being positioned as a token of the postfeminist promise realised. We

contend these findings add further nuance to our understanding of the postfeminist sensibility and its influence upon the psychic lives of women, particularly those that have not attained the career progression to which they aspired. These findings may also resonate with the experiences and positioning of women in other traditionally masculine professions such as, for example, medicine, engineering, science, technology and finance.

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Appendix 1

Theme	Level 2 Code	Level 1 Code	Supporting Quotes
Maintaining meritocratic construction of profession (supports reproduction of Postfeminist sensibility)	Repudiating Sexism – meta repertoire	Pasting (as per Gill et al.) Interpretive repertoire	<p><i>“There’s the old thing with the farmers not respecting women vets and things but I think that’s well out the window now ... not anymore, everyone’s used to the idea.”</i> Alicia</p> <p><i>“Some male colleagues as well as farmers, the bosses, yeah a lot of the bosses were kind of old, old fashioned...sort of making jokes about whether you’d cope with this, that or the other, you know, dehorning and that sort of thing. I wouldn’t think it would happen really now”</i> Grace</p> <p><i>“Definitely not within the vet profession. I think initially, when the change percentage wise from males to females, I think lots of older generation farmers struggled, but I’d say the majority are used to having female vets now, and so now it’s accepted as the norm. So, I think, probably about 20 years ago it was harder for girls, but I would say it’s definitely not now.”</i> Henrietta</p>
Maintaining meritocratic construction of profession supporting reproduction of PF sensibility	Repudiating sexism meta-repertoire	Relocating interpretive repertoire (Gill et al. but contextualised to sub-specialism)	<p><i>“Small animal is very women-friendly with part-time jobs and no on-call. The equine profession is quite old fashioned or very old fashioned actually – still!”</i> Uma</p>
Women’s ability to progress - Supporting reproduction of PF sensibility	Repudiating sexism meta-repertoire	The female advantage (using sexuality as per Gill et al.) Interpretive repertoire	<p><i>“young girls do sometimes just manage to get away with stuff a bit more than they ought to...you smile nicely at someone and you might get yourself just a bit further along than you otherwise might, not that that’s ever been a calculated thing... I re-sat my first year and re-sat my second year and the second year...I just was told you’ve got some people smiling down on you there. I was a young 20 year old girl and I certainly smiled at lots of people and, I mean, I was friendly and outgoing and... there was some personal help there, other than people just genuinely saying look shall we give her another go. I did have a relationship with a teacher at vet college.”</i> Donna</p> <p><i>“My first practice I worked at, the bosses,</i></p>

			<p><i>especially one of them, liked pretty ladies. I think everyone that they've employed since me have been pretty. Also one of the ones where I did six months part-time in one of the practices in Surrey and he liked pretty ladies too, so I suppose that might have been an advantage."</i> Olivia</p>
<p>Maximising gender congruence – Vet Med is 'fit work' for women – supporting reproduction of PF sensibility</p>	<p>Repudiating Sexism meta-repertoire</p>	<p>Women's essentialist professional advantage - New Interpretive repertoire</p>	<p><i>"Women are probably more empathetic and certainly lots of people's animals don't like strange men, they will say I want to see a female vet because my dog's nervous of men. So women have got that side of things. And are more nurturing, women are supposed to have better statistics in the farrowing house. [Sorry, what's a farrowing house?] Where the pigs have their babies. The piglets you have reared per cell is higher when there's a female stockperson than a male stockperson. Men aren't that interested. When I was there all the men wanted to do was knock the pigs on the head that needed ... you know, if they were weak they couldn't wait to hit it on the head. But I know females would maybe be holding them onto the teat, weighing them and moving them around and supplementary feeding, and it's a known fact in the pig industry that female stock people get better results, so that's their strength."</i> Yvonne</p> <p><i>"I think on the whole women tend to be better communicators. When you've got 10 minutes to put something across, if you have a degree of people skills/communication you can hopefully appear trustworthy, knowledgeable and all those things that people require from a professional, and have some gravitas still even though you're a girl and you're not a man with a beard, silver hair and the white coat and everything. It's all to do with communication, and I think being a girl has helped me with that."</i> Suzanna</p> <p><i>"Women have got smaller hands so for obstetric things, women are better – they can get in and get the animal turned"</i> Alicia.</p> <p><i>"I think in some ways, some clients really like to see a female vet...because they see females as being more gentler, and more caring"</i> Emma</p>
<p>Women's agency and effort required to overcome – supporting reproduction of PF sensibility</p>	<p>Repudiating Sexism meta-repertoire</p>	<p>C'est la Vie accounting – just how it is (as per Gill et al.) Interpretive repertoire</p>	<p><i>"Historically, it's been such a male oriented profession, farmers for example want male vets to pull out cows and there's no doubt that men probably are stronger so that's just the way it was."</i> Terri</p>

Blame discourse – supporting reproduction of PF sensibility	Women as deficient (blaming women for their lack of progression) meta-repertoire	Women are less profitable employees	<i>“In the consultation room, girls are less risk-embracing in clinical cases. They go for the more medical route and less often for the more radical forms of intervention...Guys are more surgically inclined ‘just chop it off’ and will do more elaborate investigations whereas the girls will say, ‘let’s just try another course of antibiotics first’...guys definitely turnover more money than females.” [Male stakeholder 1]</i>
Blame discourse – supporting reproduction of PF sensibility	Women as deficient (blaming women for their lack of progression) meta-repertoire	Women are less entrepreneurial	<i>One, they have their kids, two, do they have the risk profile? I believe they are less entrepreneurially oriented, vets generally, but women significantly less so than male vets..... I think they are risk averse and less assertive than males and so that would be a factor. If you give me 100 guys and 100 girls, I’d say many more of the guys would be entrepreneurial.” [Male stakeholder 1]</i>
Blame discourse - supporting reproduction of PF sensibility	Women as deficient (blaming women for their lack of progression) meta-repertoire	Women are (biologically) unreliable	<p><i>“If you look at it from a vet bosses’ point of view, males are less likely to take maternity leave. I think if you’re in a small practice having female workers can be tricky.” Emma</i></p> <p><i>“I think again you would be concerned thinking, oh well, they might want to start a family and might want to take time off and are they going to particularly contribute to the practice in there in the way that you want them to if they’re buying in” [Charlotte]</i></p> <p><i>“I think most of the points raised are valid, even though instantly I felt offended when people raised those points; I really do now, looking at the business side of it, think they’re valid. You want to have an employee that you want to stay long-term, well maybe they’re not going to stay long term if you think they’re going to have children and whether they’re going to come back again” (Francesca)</i></p> <p><i>“As a business owner, well, it’s much better to have men, because they don’t go off and have babies as a general rule. I think there are veterinary, older generation partners out there who would choose a male over a female, you know, all else being equal. I think probably there might even be ones that would go for one, you know, even if they maybe were the weaker candidate, just because of the time and the hassle of recruiting is a nightmare. It’s just the way it’s worked.” Henrietta</i></p> <p><i>“I think at the moment, when there are positions offered here,...they will look harder...for a male candidate for the position...I think if you had a male and female candidate of the same standing, they</i></p>

			<i>would certainly choose the male over the female. ...it probably does come down to the family side of things and the potential for the woman to go off and have kids.” (Eve)</i>
Blame discourse women - Supports reproduction of PF sensibility	Women exercising choice – blaming women for their lack of progression	Women’s lack of representation as Practice Partners	<i>Corporates sense an opportunity - increased feminisation and fewer women wanting to be traditional partners.... women don’t step up.” [Male Stakeholder 1]</i> <i>“Personally I think the corporates will have more practices as women don’t want to take on the responsibility of practice....society conditions you.” [Female Stakeholder 1]</i>
Internalising Blame discourse – supports reproduction of PF sensibility	Reconciling outcomes – self-blame for lack of progression?	Self-questioning	<i>“I wish I was in more of a position to be in a partnership – I do have some money. I still would like to become a partner, that’s always been my intent. I don’t know whether it’s just me getting older, or... As far as finances and management - I have actually no understanding whatsoever, but I don’t think... I think even if I had learnt it, I’m not sure... it might still happen, I hope so but sometimes I wonder [Q. what do you wonder?] if there’s something with me – maybe they don’t think I fit here as well as I think I fit or if I’m not quite as good as I think I am or something – I’m gearing myself up to ask.” [Ida]</i>
Internalising Blame discourse - supports reproduction of PF sensibility	Reconciling outcomes – self-blame for lack of progression?	Self-questioning	<i>This is a difficult thing for me, this job now is the job I always wanted, this is where I always wanted to get to and so I’ve been here three years now, I’ve got all the qualifications now that I really would aspire to take and so I guess, I sort of view my future as here and hopefully progressing in the practice. In terms of progressing, in terms of responsibility and financially I guess is a big part of it, becoming a partner is the only next step. They have just taken on three new partners – 2 equity and one salaried. With them taking on these new partners now, it’s just meant that we’re looking at now, probably another 6/7/8 years before there’s any prospects again. And I couldn’t work any harder – I work till 6 Monday to Friday, 8 till 4 on Saturday and then, I personally do five nights on call a week and then three weekends out of four on call. I don’t know how sustainable that work pattern is long-term, so I don’t know what that means for promotion for me. I’ve got all the qualifications, I have experience, I work hard but I wasn’t even on their radar for promotion. So, I have to ask myself, why is that? Maybe I’m not doing something I should be doing? I’m going to sound big-headed now but I think I’m really good at my job, talented. Then I wonder if maybe I’m wrong or if, maybe, I’m just not good enough?! [Kerry]</i>

Mental health issues	Lack of progression	Low mood	<i>I'm gone 40 now and I would have liked to have been in a partnership or, on the cusp of, being in that position and I'm not. When I'd thought of my career, I thought by this time I probably would be, so no, on that front - but then when I look back and think, "Well, where could you have changed it?" I can't pinpoint it, so it's really hard. Is it me? It gets me down, to be honest, if I think about it too much. Margaret</i>
Mental health issues	Lack of progression	Depression	<i>Effectively, they blocked me from promotion because, at that time I was just married, they were afraid I would be going off on maternity leave. It was sexism. Of course, then I was the problem child! I was 'THAT' woman – the ardent feminist, crying foul when someone else got promoted over her. I was a bit marginalised; everyone treated me a little differently. I actually got very depressed and was on medication. It really got to me. Uma</i>
Mental health issues	Hostile work environment	Workplace bullying	<i>I was sort of left out on my own – some people, if I called, would come and help, others would say 'just get on with it'. There was a lot of politics and some bullyish personalities. An Assistant killed herself, poor girl; it was a very difficult experience! Jenny</i>
Mental health issues	Hostile work environment	Work pressures and bullying	<i>I think that has a big influence on your quality of life because you spend so much time at work. If it's someone who puts you down all the time life can just be miserable and not bearable. I've seen quite a few friends in that situation, they've been probably bordering on depression because other people just aren't nice and they're under a lot of other pressures as well. Diana</i>
Mental health issues	Hostile work environment	Workplace bullying	<i>The work was okay. My colleagues were variable. Some of them were quite unpleasant, actually, you know, sort of criticising things I did and said, and sort of looking down on me, and I felt I had very little support there. I was really, really unhappy. It was just an awful, awful experience, and by this stage I was really quite depressed. I felt like I'd made a terrible mistake becoming a vet. I handed my notice in with nothing else to go to, because I really felt at my wits' end. In fact, there's a body, a charity called the Veterinary Helpline, which I called because I was so depressed, and he said to me, oh, you sound very depressed, I think you should call the Samaritans, which wasn't terribly helpful. Grace</i>
Mental health issues	Hostile work environment	Marginalisation	<i>I was a bit marginalised; everyone treated me a little differently. I actually got very depressed and was on medication. Uma</i>