Title: Into the depths of the feminine: A Jungian perspective on postfeminist working life

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Abstract:

How do women reject the feminine in postfeminist working life, and to what effects? Organisational scholars have long argued that the feminine is discouraged or reconfigured in neoliberal, postfeminist organisations that value masculine-oriented traits. But what the feminine encompasses, how it is rejected, and to what effects is less clear. In this paper we draw on feminist post-Jungian theory which understands the feminine as archetypal, emerging over thousands of years of human history and characterised by paradox, circularity, being, and descent. Feminist Jungian thinkers agree that the archetypal feminine is neglected, if not denigrated, in neoliberal, capitalist cultures, much to our detriment. Reflecting on data from a qualitative, longitudinal study on early career formation and work experiences with 15 young women, we reflexively discuss how in postfeminist working life, disavowing the archetypal feminine manifests by: adhering to ascensionist ideals to the detriment of slowness and inactivity; engaging linear thinking to the detriment of cyclical, paradoxical being; and avowing rational objectivity to the detriment of embodied instinct. This engenders both collusion with postfeminist power structures and psychic effects such as dis-ease and anxiety, which we argue can be ameliorated by recognising and embracing the archetypal feminine within.

Keywords: postfeminism, feminine, Jung, feminism, career, neoliberalism
Feminist organisational scholars have long argued that femininity is either rejected or reconfigured by neoliberal and postfeminist workplace structures that enforce masculine mores (Adamson, 2017; Bell et al., 2019; Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017; Kelan, 2008; Lewis et al., 2017; McRobbie, 2009). But what does femininity signify? This question is not well explored in a literature that often assumes a form of the feminine defined by and through the masculine (Fotaki, 2013; Höpfl, 2002; Lewis, 2014; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017; Wickström, 2021). Post-Jungian thinkers instead define the feminine archetypally (Austin, 2005; Crowley, 2017; Kulkarni, 2012; Rowland, 2002; Wehr, 2015), describing an instinctual way of being symbolically embedded in thousands of years of history, folklore, and myth (Lauter and Rupprecht, 1985; Neumann, 1992). This archetypal feminine, characterised by paradox, circularity, being, and descent, is argued to be germane to all though utterly neglected in patriarchal, neoliberal cultures (Austin, 2005; Kulkarni, 2012; Rowland, 2002; Wehr, 2015). As such, in this study, we explore the feminine as archetypal to understand how it is disavowed in neoliberal, postfeminist working life, and to what effects.

Neoliberalism pervades modern society and working life (Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2013). Defined as a hegemonic ideology that valorises privatisation, deregulation, and minimal state intervention, neoliberalism affords individuals the ostensible freedom to pursue their own successes while internalizing failures (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal conceptualisations of selfhood emphasise the individual as self to the point that “one becomes a subject for oneself” (Rose, 1990: 240). Failing at work and in career is thus considered a failure of the project of self (Rottenberg, 2014). That a lack of success may stem from structural inequalities—related to, for instance, gender, race, and social status—is understood as either an excuse or a challenge to overcome through hard work, self-mastery, and entrepreneurial drive (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021; McDonald, 2018).
Neoliberalism’s common-sense status in Western societies profoundly impacts feminism, femininity, and the role of women in all aspects of life (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2008). As Gill (2007: 164) observes: ‘[to] a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen’. The overlap between neoliberalism and feminism is often understood by the concept of postfeminism, a gendered cultural discourse that rejects both social structures and the prevalence of gendered inequalities, while emphasising women’s individual responsibility, agency, and self-transformation (Fraser, 2013; Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017; Kelan, 2009; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017; Scharff, 2016). Organisational scholars examining the effects of postfeminism in working life ask both how a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ constitutes gendered subjectivities at work (Gill et al., 2017), and how women, by identifying with a postfeminist subject position, experience and manage certain ‘psychic effects’ such as anxiety (Baker and Kelan, 2019; Carr and Kelan, 2023; Gill, 2017; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021; Scharff, 2015).

To explore the psychic effects of women ascribing to postfeminist ideals at work, organisation and management scholars often employ psychoanalytic theory (Fotaki et al., 2012; Gabriel, 1999; Kenny and Fotaki, 2014; Vachhani, 2012). In doing so, they illustrate how those identified with a postfeminist gender regime engage defensive responses to fend off anxiety-provoking threats that challenge their postfeminist idealisations of work and career (Baker and Brewis, 2020; Baker and Kelan, 2019; Carr and Kelan, 2023). For instance, female finance and accounting executives may split off negative experiences of gender discrimination at work or blame others for their lack of career success (Baker and Kelan, 2019). While this research yields important insights about how women, consciously or unconsciously, embrace a postfeminist sensibility, we know relatively little about the processes by which women disavow aspects of their psyche when assuming a postfeminist subjectivity. Furthermore, though the
literature does reference, as Scharff describes (2016: 119), ‘the exclusionary processes that lie at the heart of neoliberalism’, exactly what is disavowed, and to what effect, is unclear.

A particular feature subject to disavowal by women under a postfeminist gender regime is femininity (Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017). By ‘femininity’ organisational scholars typically refer to a gendered subjectivity, or discursive set of norms, characteristics, and roles—e.g., empathic, emotional, patient, caring—performed based on contemporary cultural scripts typically associated with, though not exclusive to, women. Lewis (2014: 1847) explains that ‘femininity should be understood in the plural as femininities, connecting to a performative understanding of gender as a situated social practice’. To succeed in neoliberal workplaces, scholars argue that women often either ‘resignify’ such femininities (Lewis, 2014), or privilege masculine traits and behaviours (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). For instance, the agentic ‘doing’ of organizational femininities entails the ‘successful balancing’ (Adamson, 2017), ‘careful calibration’ (Cairns and Johnston, 2015), or ‘fusion’ (Lewis et al., 2017) between masculine ideals and femininity. Therefore, by avowing postfeminist ideals, women necessarily disavow aspects of their femininity. After all, neoliberalism is constituted predominantly by masculine values (Kelan, 2008), relating to rationality, competitiveness, aggressiveness, high-risk taking, etc. (Fotaki, 2013; Scharff, 2016).

Femininity from this perspective retains a phallocentrism that places woman-as-other in relation to male sameness (Vachhani, 2012). As Carlson (2011: 80) observes, “‘doing femininity” subsumes the doing of masculinity as well’. Men are framed as espousing ‘a core essence of the self’; women by contrast are portrayed as lacking such a coherence (Carlson, 2011: 85). This is problematic from a feminist perspective as the feminine remains ‘repressed and censured’ (Fotaki et al., 2014: 1244) into a masculine symbolic order. To address this, Fotaki et al., (see also Oseen, 1997; Vachhani, 2012) draw on Luce Irigaray’s understanding of the feminine as difference deserving symbolic representation separate from the masculine,
advocating for the feminine to exists in its own right as ‘a female symbolic that creates possibilities of social transformation and organisational/social change that resists logics of domination’ (Fotaki et al., 2014: 1245). But more research on the feminine in working life explicitly focused on the loss, repression, and disavowal of the feminine that occurs because of ascribing to masculine (neoliberal) values and behaviours is needed, along with a deeper understanding of the feminine itself – what this encompasses and represents.

To address this, we draw upon insights from feminist post-Jungian theory (Bassil-Morozow, 2018; Crowley, 2017; Gardner and Gray, 2016; Rowland, 2002). While Jungian-inspired theory does occasionally feature in organisation and management studies (Bowles, 1991, 1993, 1998; Gabriel, 2020; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Kostera, 2012; Mitroff, 1983), this theoretical approach remains significantly underutilised compared to other psychoanalytic approaches, most notably those of Freud, Klein, and Lacan (Arnaud and Vidailet, 2018; Vachhani, 2012). This is unfortunate because Jungian and post-Jungian theory offer valuable insights both into the human condition (Samuels, 2003), and of particular interest here, into the nature of the feminine and the consequences of its denigration in a patriarchal, neoliberal cultural context.

In what follows, we detail the feminist Jungian theoretical framework that we employ to reflect on data generated from a qualitative longitudinal study on early career formation and work experiences involving 15 young women establishing their career trajectories. In doing so, we reflexively demonstrate how, in postfeminist working life, women are entreated to disavow three aspects of the feminine in particular: descent, or ‘a state of being with’ nothingness, boredom or depression; cyclical thinking, or paradoxical, both/and thinking; and embodied instinct. We conclude by discussing the effects of such disavowal, including both complicity with postfeminist power structures and psychic effects.

**Jungian theory and postfeminism**
Carl Gustav Jung offers a rich corpus of psychoanalytic work and theories aimed toward bringing that which is unconscious into consciousness, both individually and societally (Storr, 1983). He does so by suggesting potentiality for wholeness and healing by connecting with mythical and spiritual life, an antidote to secularised and frankly more pessimistic approaches. For example, where Lacan sees lack, Jung sees (potential for) wholeness (Rowland 2002). Whilst critiques of personal sexism and gender essentialism in his theories do have merit (e.g., Goldenberg, 1976), there is also much emancipatory power to be found, particularly in how Jung’s theories have been furthered and applied by post-Jungian scholars and psychoanalysts who also engage with feminist theory (Austin, 2005; Bassil-Morozow, 2018; Crowley, 2017; Gardner and Gray 2016; Mozel, 2019; Kulkarni, 2012; Rowland, 2002; Wehr, 2015). From a post-Jungian perspective, there are two main theoretical areas that are particularly important for our study which we discuss in turn below: 1) psychic reality and psychic structure; and 2) the persistent disavowal of the feminine.

Psychic Structure

Jungian theory posits that reality is psychic reality; that is: ‘we can know nothing that has not already been filtered through our psyche’ (Rowland, 2002: 29). Here, we note two important and intersecting distinctions of psychic structure: the personal and the collective, and the conscious and unconscious (Zinkin, 1979). Jung posits that the collective unconscious influences the personal (un)conscious, which he considers superficial compared to the universality and depth of the collective unconscious that consists of collectively derived but individually constituted archetypes (Hillman, 1992).

Archetypes are fluid, socially constructed, historical and global motifs that inform subjectivity and self-identity (Hillman, 1992; Jung, 1958; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012a; 1

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1 We use the terms Jungian and post-Jungian to indicate thinkers who are inspired by and further his concepts and ideas, acknowledging that, as was Jung’s view, the only Jungian can be Jung himself (Hillman, 1987)
Ryland, 2000) in a myriad of creative ways. Importantly, archetypes are neither gender nor role specific in practical, material terms, though they may explain symbolic manifestations of both (Mitroff, 1983), nor are they prescriptive, limiting or categorising. Rather they are universal themes of subjective heritage that inform and construct subjectivities we experience as part of the human condition (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012a; Kostera, 2012; Mitroff, 1983; Moxnes, 1999; Moxnes and Moxnes, 2016). Archetypes are informed by symbols, which hold a particular significance in Jungian thought. As Jung (1964: 20) defines, ‘a word or image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained’. Jung gives the example of how we might associate the wheel with a divine sun, for example, but we will not be able to quite define what we mean by divine. Or when animals are depicted in English churches, we may not realise their symbolic consequences; how, for example, the oxen, eagles, and lions depicted are associated with Hebrew prophet Ezekiel’s visions and analogous to Egyptian sun god Horus’s four sons (ibid).

On a personal level, four main archetypes influence psychic structure – persona, Self, shadow and anima/animus – in relation to the ego, or the organising centre of the psyche. The ego represents our field of awareness, that which we are conscious of, bridging our inner and outer worlds. We may also be aware, or conscious, of our persona, ‘a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual’ (Jung, 1966: 306). A neoliberal workplace, for example, encourages construction and maintenance of a postfeminist persona (Lewis et al., 2017) that continuously maintains an impossible equilibrium between masculine and feminine ideals (Lewis, 2014).
At the centre of the psyche is the archetype of the *Self* (intentionally capitalised) which represents an individual’s wholeness and potentiality, the complete expression of the individual (Jung, 1958). Recognizing the Self requires ‘total inner transformation’ (Woodman, 1985: 30) through *individuation*, a process of becoming, as Jung (1958: 275) explained, an ‘in-dividual’ or ‘a separate being’; that is, psychologically whole. This requires shedding light on that which is unconscious, thereby integrating it into conscious awareness (Storr, 2013: 212). This process of individuation can happen spontaneously, but more often requires intentional psychic work (Jacobi, 1958). Importantly, in the context of postfeminism, we cannot realize our Self if, as a postfeminist gender regime requires, we relegate elements of the feminine into our unconscious. For instance, in Baker and Kelan’s (2019) study of female executives, intense emotions engendered by experiences of workplace discrimination are repressed by splitting off or blaming others; from a Jungian perspective, the Self therefore cannot be realized because the subject refuses to recognize, and therefore integrate, parts of herself into conscious awareness (Kulkarni, 2012).

The personal unconscious contains the *shadow* archetype, arguably the most utilised Jungian concept in organisation and management studies (Bowles, 1991; Forrest, 1991; Gabriel, 2020; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2010; Kostera, 2012). Jung (1966) compares the shadow to the Freudian unconscious as it represents that which is denied, rejected, and repressed from the awareness of the conscious ego. If there is not an effort to ‘see’ one’s shadow, it ‘grows darker and darker’ and operates in and through the individual (Jung, 1989: 14). The shadow is often easier for others to detect than the individuals themselves because it represents the opposite of the conscious desires of the individual (or organisation, see Bowles, 1991): it is that which we detest, and do not want to be, but are. The shadow can be detected in humour, slips of the tongue, and in our strong opinions of others (Zweig and Abrams, 1991). This understanding of the unconscious contributes to Jung’s argument that psychic reality is
the only reality we can know, because of how difficult it is to see and integrate our shadow and unconscious influences. An example of how the shadow operates regards sexism: employees, for example, may believe that they espouse progressive values at work (Lewis, 2014), but instead may be repressing that which postfeminist discourses exclude—e.g., radical, counterhegemonic feminist voices emphasising persistent discrimination (Bell et al., 2019).

Anima/animus are archetypes of the unconscious that represent so-called contrasexual attributes present in those identifying with the opposite gender (Kulkarni, 2012; Jung, 1990). From this perspective, anima is the inner feminine in man, and animus is the inner masculine in a woman. However, even in traditional Jungian theory, this is not necessarily determined by biological sex but rather by consciously identified gender (McKenzie, 2006). This does not detract from essentialism that can result from the application and theorisation of these concepts.

What is more useful for our study and the feminist application of Jungian theory is to consider what Rowland (2002) terms Jungian feminisms, a swath of post-Jungian theory (Samuels, 2003), application and understanding. In creating a field he terms ‘archetypal psychology’, for instance, Hillman (1985) understands anima as ‘soul’ and animus as ‘spirit’, both present in all persons regardless of gender. This framing does not detract from the archetypal characteristics of feminine and masculine associated with soul and spirit respectively. But it does help liberate women from ‘having her devious unconscious qualities stamped upon them as women’s intellectual inferiority’ (Rowland, 2002: 75).

Importantly, personal psychic structure is influenced not only by the four main archetypes but also by archetypes of the collective unconscious. Jung (1959) mentions such archetypes in his initial treatise including the mother (Höpfl, 2002), the child, the maiden (Greek mythological figure, Kore) and the trickster (de Vries, 1990). These archetypes are underpinned by a primordial feminine and masculine that can also be described archetypally. In organisation and management studies some scholars draw on masculine-informed
archetypes, such as the King (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012a) and the Priest (Hatch et al., 2006), to explore leadership dynamics. Others utilize archetypal theory to explore how the feminine is lacking in contemporary organisational structures. Höpfl and Kostera (2003), for example, draw on the mother archetype to explore the organisation as maternal, and Höpfl (2002) discusses the concept of anima to explore feminine aspects of (masculine) organisations. There is scope, however, to further develop our understanding of the feminine as archetypal, without relation to maleness or masculinity (Rowland 2002).

The feminine as archetypal

Feminine archetypal energy informs self-understanding and experience to varying degrees in people of all genders. The feminine is symbolically anchored in thousands of years of history, folklore, and myth, with remarkably similar characteristics across time and space (Campbell, 2008; Eliade, 1959; Harding, 2017). For example, in ancient civilisations worldwide, the feminine was often related to the moon; cyclical lunar patterns analogously link to the cyclical nature of women’s bodies and life courses (Harding, 2017; Neumann and Matthews, 1994). In Jungian and post-Jungian theory, the feminine relates to mythical and spiritual dimensions such as: Eros, matter, darkness and chaos, soul, descent, creativity, inwardness, yin, and (active) receptivity. This is defined separately, though harmonising, a masculine energy related to: Logos, the sun, spirit, light, ascent, aspirations, outwardness, and yang. While this construction of feminine and masculine may risk them appearing as ‘complementary opposites’ (Kulkarni 2012), we do not consider them as delimiting or concrete, instead exploring the feminine as part of a way of being discouraged by postfeminist power dynamics. This feminine part is described by Jungian analyst Marion Woodman as “the valuing side, the feeling, the body. The feminine is a state of Being, of receiving other people, of holding paradox. Whereas the patriarchal world lives in either/or, the feminine lives in both/and. [...] That Beingness can be in men and women” (De Llosa, 2006: 52). In this way, we understand the archetypal feminine
not as a material feature of the body nor as able to be contained by gender, cultural construction, or personality traits.

The archetypal feminine is pre-patriarchal. Its form can be understood through one of the most significant feminine archetypes: the Great Mother (also known as Great Goddess, Eternal Mother, or Mother Earth) (Bolen, 2004; Neumann, 1992). The Great Mother, encompassing a kaleidoscope of traits derived from ancient (Palaeolithic and Neolithic) peoples, fosters “awe and wonder and the sacred beautiful mystery of life”; the Earth is her womb from which life springs (Ayers 2011: 13). Like Indian goddess Kali (Jung 1959), this Mother archetype is paradoxical, representing on the one hand maternal attentiveness; that which sustains and nurtures; fertility and growth; wisdom transcending reason; constructive impulses and instincts; and (magic) transformation. And on the other, it signifies darkness; the underworld; that which devours or seduces; that which is secret or hidden; and that which is terrifying or inescapable, such as fate (ibid). In the patriarchal capitalist society underpinning postfeminist discourse in working life (McRobbie, 2008), the archetypal feminine is devalued, shadowed, rejected, detested (Estés, 1995; Perera, 2010; Rowland, 2002; Woodman, 1985), notably including by Jung (see Lauter and Rupprecht, 1985). This is most flagrantly exemplified by the denigration and exploitation of the natural world, of Mother Earth herself (Estés 1995; Woodman 1985).

Jungian analysts writing particularly in the 1980s and 1990s argue that individuation necessitates descent into the feminine (for persons of all genders but perhaps most vitally women) that is routinely dejected in a culture demanding rationality, logic, order and linear attainment. These analysts noticed that their analysands often identified with masculine or animus-oriented traits; they called them ‘daughters of the patriarchy’ (Perera, 2010; Woodman, 1990). As such, they encouraged analysands to embrace the feminine in order to individuate and realise the Self. Describing such a process, Perea (2010) reflects on an ancient Sumerian
myth where upper-world goddess Inanna-Ishtar feels called to descend to encounter lower-world goddess Ereshkigal. This myth highlights an archetypal journey into the depths of the feminine, involving a certain death and rebirth reflected in tales across cultures including the Greek Demeter-Persephone myth, Japanese Izanami, or fairy tales delineating the journey to Slavic goddess Baba Yaga (e.g., Hansel and Gretel) (ibid). Metaphorically, focussing on ascent, the sky and sun (fundamentals of masculinity) means that what is in the Earth, in the ground, in the (feminine) underworld, is unacknowledged, feared, and therefore shadowed into the unconsciousness. The feminine energy festers (Harding, 2017).

While management and organisation studies have advanced theorizing around postfeminism and the psychic life of women and work, we lack detailed empirical exploration of the processes involved with rejection, disavowal, and (often) repression of such instinctual, archetypal feminine energy. As such, Jungian theory—and particularly its feminist adaptation—offers a valuable corpus of concepts that might help us explore this further. We therefore ask, what aspects of the archetypal feminine are women encouraged to disavow in a postfeminist gender regime and to what effects?

**Methodology**

To answer the above question, we apply a feminist post-Jungian theoretical framework, drawing inspiration from psychosocial research methods (Fotaki et al., 2012; Frosh, 2003; Frosh and Young, 2014; Hoggett, 2008; Hollway and Jefferson, 2008). Psychosocial research methods integrate psychological concepts and perspectives into social research (Frosh 2003), and often use psychoanalytic theory to explore how subjectivities are constituted in relation to wider social life and discourses (Baker and Kelan, 2019; Dashtipour et al., 2021; Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Nixon and Scullion, 2021). A psychosocial approach goes beyond discursive methods by focussing on affect and feeling, seeking to ‘bring feelings and ideas to life in words’
(Frosh and Young, 2014: 5). In this section we first discuss the study and then detail our feminist post-Jungian application of psychosocial research methods.

The presented data is derived from a three-year longitudinal study consisting of multiple open-ended depth interviews with 15 women aged 20-34 (median 26). The study was inductive, broadly centred on the topic of identity formation in early career and work settings. Initially, psychosocial research methods – predominately underpinned by Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalytic theory (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008) – informed study design without an explicit emphasis on Jungian theory. We integrated feminist post-Jungian theory during data analysis, discussed below. All participants experienced some form of higher education and were engaged in non-linear roles/occupations without set boundaries or organisational hierarchies (Tomlinson et al., 2018) which contributed to postfeminist ideations of self-entrepreneurship in career formation (Baker and Kelan, 2019). We gained institutional ethical approval for the study and followed principles of informed consent and confidentiality; the presented data has been anonymised using pseudonyms and concealing any identifying characteristics. Participants were fully informed of the study’s aims. Moreover, given the study design (see below), participants became aware of themes developing from the study, such as anxiety in early career formation, as part of the final reflective interview. When sensitive topics were broached, e.g., related to mental health issues, the interviewer (first author) checked in with participants to ensure they were happy to discuss the topic as part of a research project.

Fifty interviews, each lasting approximately two hours, were conducted in total, contextualised with observational data. The interviews were participant-driven and usually conducted in a location of their choosing (e.g., a favourite café), with at least one interview taking place in participants’ homes. We followed the psychosocial research principle of free association in interviews; that is, we avoided set questions and imposing our own ideas, instead following the associations elicited by the participants (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008). Most
participants were interviewed four times, and in cases where this was not possible, the same interview material was condensed into two or three interviews. The first interview typically focussed on participants’ biographical narratives and life history, beginning with the open-ended question ‘tell me about yourself’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008). The second interview, conducted in participants’ homes, facilitated discussion of their homes and possessions through spontaneous show-and-tell. The third concentrated on participants’ digital activity, involving a self-directed tour of social media accounts and favourite websites. The final interviews were reflective, focussing on participation in the study and ongoing life events, as well as reflection on key themes emerging from previous interviews pertaining to being a woman, working life, ideals, and expectations. This was the only interview containing set questions, both open-ended and projective, derived from analysis of prior interviews.

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process and involved open coding methods using qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO. This coding process involved identifying key informative themes across the data (Frosh and Young, 2014). For example, it became evident in this phase that participants were concerned with career progression; that they had changed careers at least once, while some desired a future career change; and that gender and equality in working life was a key concern, whether overtly acknowledged or disavowed. Conflicting feelings about their careers were starkly apparent, as during some of the interviews, participants expressed contentment and confidence with their workplace and career choices, whilst at other points they expressed doubts in relation to more successful peers, or worry about concrete situations in the workplace, such as, for example, gender discrimination. We noticed that participants sometimes rejected parts of themselves that they were also somehow strongly identified with. For instance, some talked extensively about career aspirations that would preclude everyday involvement with their (future) children, yet also discussing at length their desire to “be there for my kids” instead of pursuing ambitious
goals. Likewise, most participants supported gender equality; however, some concurrently expressed an inner desire for a man to play a leading role in the family. These participants struggled to find words to justify what they seemed to experience as conflicting perspectives.

Informed by this initial phase, we turned to feminist post-Jungian theory given not only its focus on the neglect of the feminine in patriarchal culture (Rowland, 2002) but also – realised by our personal engagement with Jungian analysis and Jungian-inspired personal development work – its focus on recognising the internalisation of mechanisms of oppression in a way that provides opportunities for hope and wholeness through self-scrutiny (Woodman, 1985). Data analysis involved personal reflexivity from the first author who designed the original study and collected the data, and the second author who engaged in the application of Jungian theory. Reflexivity in this process was ongoing: there were several layers including during the data collection process which occurred when the first author was in a similar position as participants over the three-year period (a woman in her early thirties studying and navigating career choices); and then when writing and revising this manuscript, a period that incorporated the first author’s second maternity leave. During data analysis and while writing this manuscript, the second author reflected on his position as a man in his mid-30s on a psychic journey to realise how the feminine has been neglected in his own life.

To be reflexive from a Jungian perspective is to expose our rawest, most vulnerable parts to a wintry wind; to escape the machinations of the sometimes Trickster ego (Plaut, 1959). Our process of reflexivity involved recording our dreams throughout the data analysis process, as well as making note of, and discussing, our judgments, reactions, and first impressions even if, or especially when, these thoughts and ideas felt uncomfortable or repulsive. Integrated with reflexivity, we wrote case studies of key participants, selecting those with the most divergent stories and histories. In this process we paid close attention to what was being said, along with what was not being said, both by the interviewer and participant, as
well as in the process of data analysis, by both authors. We also researched and reflected on
symbols and archetypes that emerged during interviews as well as in our own experiences and
dreams. Identifying symbols was vital to this process as symbols inform archetypes and in
dreams can reveal unconscious processes of the psyche (Jung, 1964).

Reflexivity is central to psychosocial research methods; the process of “feeling with”
participants’ stories is crucial to untangling affective experiences of both the participant and
researcher (Hollway, 2016). Moreover, engaging with reflexivity helps us to acknowledge that
the interview space is never occupied by one voice, but is rather a dialogic exchange between
the researcher and researched; data is created together (ibid). This accords with the Jungian
idea that what is being written (or researched) is unavoidably filtered through the psychic
reality of the author (Rowland, 2002). Therefore, we write the findings below reflexively to
demonstrate a feminist post-Jungian perspective that asks us to write from the place of the
feminine (Fotaki et al., 2014) reflected here by the centrality of the ‘I’. This hopefully also
contributes to feminist organisational scholars’ call for us to ‘write differently’ (Gilmore et al.,
2019) in order to resist restrictive norms that inhibit creative expression and what it means to
be human. We write the empirical sections mainly from the reflexive perspective of the first
author given that this study was born from her motivation, inspired by her life experiences.

The disavowal of the feminine in postfeminist working life

The sections below reflexively illustrate three processes that inhibit the realisation of the
feminine, and therefore individuation, in postfeminist working life. First, ideals are imbued
with a desire for upward momentum and ascension, while periods of stagnation and inaction
are maligned. Second, linear, progressive reasoning is adopted to the detriment of cyclical,
paradoxical thinking. Third, rational goal-orientation alienates embodied feminine instinct, in
our study reflected by discussions around motherhood. Whilst reflexive throughout, the first
author’s specific reflections, dreams, and experiences germane to each theme introduce each section and are thus indented.

Identification with ascension

I am craving professional inclusion that has evaded me on my inward journey of pregnancy and birth over the last eighteen months, though my body begs me to gather in. I dream of finding a giant tortoise on my bed in my late grandmother’s house; wise, old, and slow. In the dream I rush upstairs from my grandfather’s dark basement office to discover the tortoise, implicitly associated with my grandmother, on my bed looking for food. Mortified, I realise I forgot to feed her. A tremor runs up my spine when I later read that in Jungian theory the tortoise is a theriomorphic symbol of Self (de Vries and de Vries, 2004). My Self – in the dream associated with my Colombian grandmother whose shrewd intuition led to the nickname ‘la bruja’ (the witch) – is hungry and I have forgotten to feed her. My conditioned mind (ego) demanding action and momentum feels at odds with my body (as Self?) starving for intuitive passivity, inaction, and following the rhythm of the baby.

Jungian thinkers describe how a descent into the feminine, marked by periods of inactivity or depression, facilitates fully connecting to Self (Rowland, 2002), as I experienced during the birthing period. Von Franz (1999: 27) observes how in many fairy tales there is ‘a long period of barrenness before the hero child is born’. She reflects that when nothing is happening, ‘an enormous about of energy accumulates in the unconscious’ (von Franz, 1999: 27). Moments of inaction therefore facilitate the emergence of something significant. But ‘nothingness’ is not honoured in this postfeminist society that values animus-oriented action. Perhaps this is why, in the above example, although my body tells me to rest, to be, my mind (as ego) races with thoughts of what more I ‘should’ be doing.

A chorus of doing ‘more’ reverberates across the data. Sophie, 34, a Scottish university administrator, and I are discussing career goals in our final interview over a tea after the working day. Struggling to name exactly what she wants, Sophie considers: ‘Definitely within my peers and friends, I don’t earn as much as most of them, and I’d like to have more responsibility, and more money, more of... sort of, say high powered... but it’s not high powered, but you know what I mean. Just a bit more...’. When I first meet Charlotte, a 24-year-old French woman recently graduated with a master’s in law, at a trendy bakery, she
describes her job in a tech start-up as ‘just perfect’ after being rejected for ‘prestigious’ jobs at international law firms: ‘It’s very different from everything that my friends are doing in law firms and all that, but I think at 23 I’m actually a shareholder and I would never have this anywhere else’. But by our fourth interview in the same bakery a year later, she describes herself as ‘very demotivated’ because:

I think that the job has been quite similar, like the same, for a year, even though like I’ve been doing so many other projects around it to keep myself motivated, so. I’m the kind of a person needs to keep momentum from different stuff and I’ve kind of like reach the limits of what the role can be offering.

A desire for momentum and ‘more’ often corresponds with participants sharing their disappointment over how their careers have unfolded, which of course may be influenced by my academic persona in an interview setting. Recounting her undergraduate career ideals in the first interview, Sophie acknowledges: ‘I didn’t really get the career I was hoping for or had expected’. She continues, describing the hazy and universal career goals that evaded her:

I don’t know what I thought I was going to get, but I wanted to work for the government and do policy or research type roles then when I graduated. That’s what I thought I was gonna do, but, or work for the BBC making history programmes. Everyone wants to do that who’s got a History degree, and I didn't try hard enough really.

Citing her lack of effort, Sophie seems to interpret the career that she didn’t achieve as a loss that taught her the (perhaps postfeminist) importance of taking charge: ‘Now I know I have to make things happen’. We discuss how her expectations have changed over the years since her career took an unexpected path, first working in ‘repetitive and boring’ online marketing jobs, and then finding work in the university setting. She describes:

I did think I was going to be a professional. And I’m not really a professional in a sense. I work with students and help them with their problems and do a lot of admin work. But that’s not a professional job in a sense. I thought I was going to be, I don’t know, have a really good career.

Sophie’s disappointment over not achieving a ‘professional’ job or a ‘really good career’ is, however, counterbalanced by a sense of fulfilment she expresses throughout the four conversations we have. She pauses before clarifying the above reflection: ‘But actually, doing
the job I do now, helping people, I went on an introduction to counselling course a couple of years ago and it’s actually something I’m really enjoying and liking about the job’. This enjoyment makes it ‘easier to sort of think, “well this isn’t the job that I thought I was going to be doing when I was 30, but actually, it’s a really good job and I get satisfaction from it”’. Sophie’s perhaps unexpected satisfaction is amplified by gaining self-confidence on the job: ‘I’ve definitely got more confidence; it’s allowed me to do a lot more things that I wasn’t able to do before’. Nevertheless, creative empowerment that Sophie cultivates by ‘helping students with their problems’ may be subsumed by her ascensionist objections: ‘but I do feel like more’.

Charlotte’s reference to becoming ‘demotivated’ and ‘just bored’ in her current role that she describes as lacking exciting opportunities for upward movement is likewise driven by a desire for more and fear of inaction: ‘I mean I could do another year, but I’m scared to wake up next year and say, “you haven’t done anything”’. She relates a feeling of being stuck in her career to postfeminist entrepreneurial archetypes whose books line her shelves, such as ex-Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In, and to ‘successful’ peers. For instance, by the fourth interview she has begun to date the man she will eventually marry who has what she considers a successful corporate career: ‘I realised that I did, not the same studies, but I did law and finance and somehow seeing how those people are moving into their career, and I’m like maybe I did something wrong. Maybe I should have like a more corporate career’. I wondered, when talking with both Charlotte and Sophie, whether they could have embraced a sense of inner contentment more in the absence of ostensibly ‘successful’ peers. Acknowledging ‘not that it would have made me more happy’, Charlotte nevertheless seems anxious that her career does not correspond with not only a desired persona, but also her inner potential: ‘I don't feel really proud to say, not where I’m working but what I’m doing [marketing manager]. And I don't feel like it’s really matching, that sounds a bit pretentious, but the potential that I have’.
The feeling Charlotte conveys of doing something ‘wrong’ relates to inaction and non-movement. Sophie similarly reflects on her work environment: ‘It’s not a very fast-moving environment and people just get stuck’. She asks me to corroborate the reputation of senior university administrators of being stuck in their ways (‘you’ve met them, right? They don’t like change’) and I can’t help but agree. Describing herself as ‘fairly happy’ in her role, she confides her fear: ‘I think I could just end up being one of those old women who work for the university and doesn’t have a clue what’s going on’. She jokes that she might have ‘Stockholm syndrome’, when a captive identifies with their captor. The symbol of the captive suggests a total loss of agency and Self; Sophie fears losing her Self by becoming identified with women who, admittedly from both of our perspectives, suffer stagnation and disempowerment. During this conversation in the third interview, Sophie sandwiches her fear of being stuck between fantasies of movement and ascension that she implicitly blocks from manifesting. Initially she ponders whether she should ‘just move away from the university completely and start afresh’ only to immediately present a roadblock: ‘but that’s easier said than done’. Afterwards she imagines: ‘Maybe I’ll just leave and do a PhD instead! Master’s more likely’ but consigns this fantasy to an eternal temporality: ‘You never know what’s gonna happen’. By the fourth interview Sophie is applying for promotion, adopting a ‘sit back and see’ approach that, however tentatively, does accept staying (stuck?) in her current role: ‘I’m just gonna try for at least both [positions] and see if it doesn’t work out, then I’m still fairly happy where I am so, you know...’.

When discussing her career demotivation, Charlotte confesses, ‘I feel like I’m a bit, like a tourist to my life’. The tourist is an outsider, a spectator not materially linked to the comings and goings of the place visited. Reflecting my own feelings, Charlotte describes herself as caught between two halves, active and passive. Charlotte frames the tourist as not taking action in a place of significance and relates this to her fear that she has become identified with her
passive side, which she refers to as ‘scared’: ‘I think maybe there’s the scared side or it’s like, “you’ve done fine in business, [...] it’s a good career and you can just like settle”’. Sophie likewise describes herself as ‘a bit of scaredy-cat’ which conjures an image in my mind of a skittish, small black cat with yellow eyes reflecting a wet Scottish street in the darkness of early morning. The cat has a rich symbology associated with the feminine, ‘closely linked with consciousness and all creative processes’ (von Franz, 1999: 55). It is paradoxical, representing both reproduction, fertility, and abundance, and darkness, destruction, and frenzy. Sophie relates her anxiety (“I’m quite an anxious person”) through this symbol to her tendency toward inaction. Does this insinuate a shadowed fear of the paradoxical feminine itself, a fear that blocks her taking action?

This fear, or ‘scared side’, contrasts what Charlotte somewhat tentatively refers to her action-orientated side as rebellious: ‘And then there’s like the, um, more I guess, um, rebellious side of me that’s like, “Oh but, I don’t want anyone above me and I want to put my own ideas into, into tangible stuff”’. She compares this entrepreneurial, productive side to tech mavericks – whose neoliberal sensibility and casual sexism personally repulse me – espousing masculine energy: ‘When you look at people like Zuckerberg or Steve Jobs, you know, [...] they did not wait to be 30 to be like, “Oh okay let’s now create”, it was something they always did’. I interpret Charlotte as longing to express her creativity, which she explains entrepreneurially and views in opposition to ‘settling’ into her current role (her ‘scared’ side). What has certainly been difficult for me to understand is that settling into periods of inaction and slowness may foster (feminine) creativity, creativity linked to Self, that may be exemplified by the fulfilment Sophie experiences in her role.

*Linear Thinking*

*I dream I’m in my grandparents’ house, again! I’m getting ready to attend an event, a party or something. I look for the dress I will wear in my grandmother’s coat closet and find the bottom of a light blue, shimmering gossamer dress sewn to pieces of wood punctuated by nails and splinters, wood that I once needed. I realise I don’t need it*
anymore and I begin to rip pieces off. The dress feels much lighter. The wood was stifling: I wonder, during analysis, whether it represents the burden of the feminine in my family. It seems to have once kept me in my place, weighing me down. This reminds me of a time in my early twenties when I followed societal and familial expectations, seeking a certain career track (finance) and a certain type of romantic relationship (traditional). When both went catastrophically awry, I slowly relinquished my adherence to linear expectations, adopting a see-what-comes approach. This does make me feel lighter; perhaps, as my dream signifies, I am no longer burdened by the feminine. I can rip the tortuous wood off.

Creativity linked to the Self does not manifest logically: it is characterised by both/and thinking, paradox, and circularity. Such feminine energy embraces darkness, chaos, and spontaneous possibility, seeking as Perera (2010: 14) explains: ‘the potential of cleansing immersion in the darkness of the unknown’. This willingness for total transformation requires ‘great patience’ and resolve (ibid). But the darkness of the unknown is frightening. As Charlotte reflects, ‘death scares me a little’. She explains: ‘It’s not really death in itself. I think it’s the… a new, completely new chapter and, you know, the end of things, so then that I don’t know, I don’t know how it’s going to be so that scares me a little’.

Rather than embrace the transformative potential of the unknown, we seek out ways to stay in control, adopting linear, rational thinking typical of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill et al., 2017). Participants often describe existential anxieties using bureaucratic metaphors, such as ‘ticking the boxes’, that informed my own expectations as a younger adult. Career choices and life events are compiled as ‘to-do lists’, or as one participant suggests, ‘an excel spreadsheet’. For instance, 27-year-old Madison, an American postgraduate management student, suggests that being ‘happy’ was ‘a matter of […] ticking every box’: ‘[…] when I get a kick-ass job I’ll feel successful, when I get married, I’ll feel successful, when I have my first child, I’ll feel successful, when I close on our dream home, I’ll feel successful’. It is unsurprising that such life events remain significant, as they have always been ‘crucial thresholds in the human psyche’ (Woodman, 1985: 17). However, when they become objectified, profane markers of a successful, or indeed unsuccessful, life course in postfeminist
terms, the numinous and life-altering potential, for instance of forging a meaningful career, is stripped. This renders the thresholds as benchmarks ‘not recognised for what they are’ as they are no longer mediated through ritual, which connects us to the divine, or initiation rites, which connect us to communal obligation (Woodman, 1985: 17).

Linear thinking with attachments to specific outcomes has two potential consequences: first, it negates spontaneous possibility, and second, it forebodes disappointment when intended outcomes are not achieved or achieved in a way that does not match ideals. Resonating with Sophie, twenty-six-year-old Scottish law clerk Catriona reflects:

I don’t know. I’m just fed up… I’m fine on a day-to-day basis, but it’s the long term. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. [...] I guess it’s just the kind of aspirations, but I’d say day to day, I’m quite lucky. But then you see your longer-term aspirations. Don’t know. I feel anxious, I would say, sometimes of the unknown.

Catriona has difficulty putting into words her contradictory feelings: feeling ‘fine’ and ‘lucky’ in daily life and feeling exasperated – ‘fed up’ – by her ‘longer-term aspirations’ which she relates to anxiety of the ‘unknown’. Here, and across the data, time is understood linearly or mechanistically; the present ‘day-to-day’ contrasted with the future ‘long term’ rather than rooted in the circularity of the present. I palpably experience this irreconcilable contradiction in my own body as a sense of discomfort and disembodiment, lacking connection to time in its infinite present when getting caught up in fears about the future. My feet can’t find the ground.

Later in the interview Catriona links anxiety about the future to her age, wondering if she is ‘on track’ as she nears 30: ‘I kind of think that I’m 27 next year, oh my God, that kind of thing, and I should be doing more stuff—more adult type stuff. Just like getting a better job, buying a house, partner, blah, blah, blah’. A sense of seriousness (‘oh my God’) collides with indifference (‘blah blah blah’) that reinforces the uncertainty of Catriona’s internal perspective toward pressures and expectations that somehow seem externally derived. For instance, Catriona shows me the Instagram feed of a ‘successful’ school friend she follows: ‘She’s working for [corporate firm] now and she’s earning like, loads, and she’s got the perfect man,
and she’s got like, she owns her own flat’. In this context age sets a benchmark that begets feelings of *torschlusspanik* – which literally means panic of the gate shutting and figuratively a fear of missing out on life’s opportunities: ‘the marriage that did not take place; the baby that was never born; the job that never materialized’ (Woodman, 1985: 13). Catriona’s *torschlusspanik* rhythmically emanates from her heart centre: ‘I can really feel my heart sort of pounding and that gets me worse’. The heart is the seat of emotions, central to feminine energy. It also represents intuitive understanding that contrasts masculine reason (de Vries and de Vries, 2004); in Hindu philosophy, the heart *chakra* (*anāhata*, meaning unstruck) is the transition between lower (feminine soul) and upper (masculine spirit) chakras (Beshara, 2013).

The significance of age 30 is perhaps unsurprising given societal discourses around markers of success (McDonald, 2018), and the innate biology of cyclical female bodies that eventually move from menstruation (mother) to menopause (crone) (Harding, 2017). Sophie understands the age of 35 as a tipping point into middle-age, noting that as a 34-year-old ‘there’s definitely a sense of urgency’, namely with respect to moving forward in her career and thinking about having children. This echoes Madison, 27, who constructs goalposts according to what she should achieve by or near age 30: ‘I think because of where I am in life (near 30), there are very specific goals I have in mind. So once I tick those boxes, like I guess in the next three to five years, that’s what I’m looking at in terms of, what do I want in the next three to five years?’ As mentioned, the boxes she refers to include ‘getting an amazing job’: ‘I said when I was six ‘I will be an executive and/or make six figures by 30’’ to which she adds: ‘I’d like to be married in three to five years, I’d like to have a baby in the next three to five years. I’m baby crazy’. Charlotte constructs similar age-related goals (‘I’ll be manager by 25 and then 30, either be managing a company or having my own. Hopefully having the right man (laughing)! And thinking of having kids, I think’). She associates her need to plan toward such goals with fear and a resultant need for at least imagining that she’s in control: ‘I
think it’s an, it’s an anxiety thing. Or controlling thing’. She explains: ‘Putting stuff in writing helped me a lot. Even like visualizing, uh, I used to do like maps of in six months I should be here and should have done this and this, and in even if it doesn’t happen it makes me feel like I’m in charge of my own destiny’.

In discussing her future and career, Catriona evokes the symbol of a train, relaying shadowed fears of being ‘totally off track’ by reflecting on one of her colleagues: ‘There’s a girl who I work with and she’s thirty-four and still renting. I don’t know – she’s gonna get a wake-up call soon. [She’s] not being independent and not on track. She does my head in at work as well cos she’s so slow’. The imagery of a track denotes the confines of a preconceived, clearly delineated path – perhaps one such as Madison describes above – that must be followed, and ‘wake up call’ of being mechanically awoken in a sterile hotel room. Linearity and orthodoxy imbued by these images impedes potential alternatives, or spontaneity and chaos in the life course that may open unexpected avenues for awakening and creativity. Moreover, I can sense Catriona’s frustration toward being unable to rationally – from the mind (‘she does my head in’) – comprehend dependency and slowness, echoing my discussion with Sophie about senior university administrators at that particular university. Relating to her feelings of torschlusspanik to age once again, Catriona emphasises her desire for independence by rejecting fixity (sitting): ‘I don’t care if I’m single, but please just don’t let me be like that. You know what I mean, before she’s at that age […] just not very independent or where you want to be sitting at thirty-four’. This suggests animus-oriented ideals of action, quickness, and independence, potentially to the detriment of the sometimes static, slow feminine resting in the depths of the ground, the Earth (Perera, 2010).

Importantly, ‘goal-directed development’ that sparks torschlusspanik loses touch with unity with nature and cosmos (Perera, 2010: 14). Furthermore, it can foster psychic fragility, relayed by Charlotte’s fear of death or Catriona’s fear of the unknown, as Woodman (1985:
17) reminds us: ‘our society’s emphasis on linear growth and achievement alienates us from the cyclic pattern of death and rebirth, so that when we experience ourselves dying, or dream that we are, we fear annihilation’. Indeed, linear thinking, planning, and benchmarking – although perhaps providing a false sense of security, as Charlotte explained and as we both have experienced ourselves – contradicts a feminine way of being that asks us to be active in receiving what comes to us, to slow down, to birth from our creative centre in ways which may or may not obey linear and cemented life course ideals. As Woodman (1985: 17) reflects of not meeting objectified benchmarks linearly, ‘without this broader perspective, [we] see no meaning in the rejection. The door thuds leaving [us] bitter or resigned’. The alternative is to embrace the unknown, the dejection, in order to ‘pass over or fall back as in a rite of passage’, testing who we are in a way that is productive, contrasting the disillusionment and despair we otherwise might feel at not ‘ticking a box’.

**Alienation from embodied instinct**

_I was so profoundly identified with a postfeminist order that I could not recognise my embodied instinct to bear children, resulting in an unexpected (though very welcomed) pregnancy. The birth was complicated, and I only realised the power I could find in motherhood as I began to learn – through effort and psychic/body work – to raise my son through embodied instinct. A few years later while writing this paper, after the peaceful, empowering birth of my daughter, I dream of giving birth in a sterile hospital to a glimmering pink serpent. The snake in mythology often represents the limbic system and spine – the instinctive self (von Franz, 1999). I wonder if this represents the unexplainable, lifechanging power I attained by embracing my mothering instinct. Of course, I know my (academic) career will be indelibly decelerated, though – unexpectedly – far more fulfilling._

Spontaneous possibility and descent into the feminine rely on accessing embodied instinct and intuition that transcend reason and rational thinking – emanating from the Great Mother archetype and symbolising the ‘magic authority of the female’ (Jung, 1959: 82). But adhering to an animus orientation alienates the psyche from the body and therefore from instinct (Holland, 1995). Instinct, in this study, is discussed in relation to ideations of motherhood, a significant psychic threshold for women with or without (biological) children (Katila, 2019).
But mothering is not valued in postfeminist organisational contexts that often discourage mothers’ participation literally and symbolically (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). Accordingly, we may consider and desire motherhood but fear the effect on professional ambition.

Madison reflects an embodied instinct to have children that she experiences as conflicting with professional goals. As noted above, she describes herself as ‘baby crazy’. When I ask, ‘What’s making you baby crazy’? Madison replies with conviction: ‘My uterus’. She explains, ‘I feel like the alligator in Peter Pan, the clock is in my belly’. Encapsulating the eternal child archetype, Peter Pan is ‘abetted by all sorts of creatures whose primary mode of behaviour is instinctual’, (Hallman 1967: 67) such as the crocodile (de Vries and de Vries, 2004). A clock in its belly, the crocodile is ‘chronology personified’, and with that, symbolises (deadly) fate: the clock stopping spells Capitan Hook’s demise (Egan 1982: 52). Moreover, the crocodile facilitates transformation as Peter Pan imitates its ticking to push Capitan Hook to his death. Madison’s analogy therefore imbues a sense of eventuality: her (deadly or transformational) fate to become a mother is inevitable. Perhaps it also portends a death of her professional ambition that she imagines I, also from the American South, can relate to (at the time this was more difficult given my rejection of a traditional background, but I could empathise more upon becoming a mother):

I have always been competitive and driven, but I don’t know, I am conventional in lot of ways too. I don’t know if it’s like the Southern thing. You are probably going to relate to that. I want to be married and I want to have kids and I want to, you know, be able to make soccer games and piano of course and not feel, you know, that burden of choosing between being professional or being a mother and…So it is legitimate, I guess, it is a concern, if you will.

Without other cultural discourses to rely on in a postfeminist context that denigrates mothers and sequesters them away from ‘productive’ life (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014), Madison hesitantly relates her desire for mothering to conventionality; a return to tradition somehow seems more appetising than forsaking this sacred experience. With the caveat ‘it’s not Mad
Men but…’2, she confides: ‘I do believe in that he [the father] should be a provider he should be strong; he should be the captain of the ship […] I do think there is something that is meant for some of the traditional works. Especially when the divorce rate is up to 50%.’. The ship is associated with the feminine, a womb-like vessel (von Franz, 1999), which therefore suggests that men should lead the feminine.

Gender roles in the family and divorce are topics that are particularly salient for Madison who, as a teenager, experienced her parent’s divorce as a major upheaval: ‘It was very sudden and kind of out of nowhere’. Importantly, Madison shared her reflections on these topics with me directly in reference to a conversation she had with her mother, who Perera (2010) and Woodman (1990) might call a ‘daughter of the patriarchy’. Although she admires her mother’s inspirational career as a Black American woman whose hard work led to powerful executive positions in white, patriarchal corporate America, Madison describes her mother’s career and position as the family breadwinner for many years as both something that had ‘caused burdens’ and that her dad had ‘weird issues about’. She implies that tradition must somehow be upheld and that the progressive values underpinning her mother’s high-powered career either directly caused or played a significant role in her parents’ divorce. Madison recounted that ‘actually I was talking to my mom the other day about being single’, who then responded, in reference to Madison being single and independent, ‘I feel mothers of my generation we just hammer, hammer, hammer into our daughters like being strong and being independent, but then, like, what consequences does that have?’ The hammer, a symbol of fertility and power (de Vries and de Vries, 2004), somehow captures the masculine, yang essence that Madison’s mother describes as instilling in her daughter with the consequences implied in our conversation to be a single and childless life (Woodman, 1990).

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2 *Mad Men* is an American period television drama depicting 1960s advertising executives in New York City. It highlights themes related to the sexist and violent consequences of traditional gender norms.
For Emily, 24, an American postgraduate student, having children is not necessarily inevitable given her career goals and desire to ‘live for myself’. She describes, using an objectifying metaphor: ‘I don’t like have that like drive that I must be married and have kids by the time I’m 36 or else I’ll reach an expiration date’. But she envisions a desire to be with her child if she would have one, perhaps a reflection of the time she has spent with parents and children as part of her social work degree programme:

If I ever ended up having a kid, I wouldn’t want to have the career that I would want otherwise cos I know how important it is to develop relationships with your children like in the first three years in particular but longer, and I would know that I would be setting them up for their life later on based on how I lived my life with them when they were really young so. I would not be, like, the 9-5 career woman. I’d probably work part-time or something so I could be around for my child.

Emily anticipates that an emotional connection may supersede her professional goals: ‘I know so many more emotions would be involved and like “Oh this is my daugh-my baby I never want to leave her I want to be with her all the time”’. She references instinctual desire to support this: ‘I’d kinda say it’s in our DNA (laugh) to be nurturing. Because we are childbearing. Built to be childbearing. Yeah […]’. Laughter and hesitation may indicate discomfiture with sharing what feminist academics, such as myself, might consider ‘traditional’ views. At the time of the interview, before I had children, I did somewhat attribute these views to my interpretation of her upbringing as very traditional. But since having children, I understand that societal and organisational structures repudiate a very natural instinct of mothers and children to be physically and emotionally close. This does not negate the importance of fathers or demand that mothers take ownership of domestic duties in some patriarchal housewife fantasy. Rather it suggests that instincts – and with them forms of empowerment – are complicated and shadowed in postfeminist organisational structures (Gabriel, 2020).

The lack of support and encouragement of natural embodied instincts leads mothering to be interpreted as a kind of death sentence in such neoliberal organisational structures. Like Madison, Scottish university administrator Emma, 28, can feel in her body that she would like
to have a child: ‘There is that kind of weird biological feeling that actually I would really quite like to be pregnant, to have a child’. However, she described herself as ‘trying to suppress it’ – it perhaps being her body’s ancient wisdom – to fulfil career aspirations and have a social life that she believes she would inevitably have to give up if she fell pregnant:

I was speaking to [my husband’s] mum about it. And his mum was like, “Em, you decide when you have a child because his life won’t change, yours will. He will still go to the pub, he will still do things with his friends, he would make the sacrifices, but you’ll find it’s just easier that you’ll just do it. You’ll be at home. Because it’s just not worth the argument”. And it’s…like that hit home that actually I want to make sure that I’ve had a good time before I kind of give up my body, give up my career aspirations I guess, give up my social life, to become a mum.

Emma’s concerns reflect my understanding before having children: that a baby is loss of oneself rather than a transformational, numinous death/rebirth process. Emma heeds her mother-in-law’s advice despite earlier in our conversation critiquing her husband’s family for their traditional gender roles (‘they’re all just pretty old school’) and lack of ascendent ambitions (‘they’re not highflyers’). Supressing a biological need to pursue her career aspirations for at least another year, Emma implies feeling constrained by gendered, traditional understandings of parenting that construe mothers as bearing the brunt of childrearing in the guise of empowerment, describing the women in her husband’s family conveying ‘this idea that being a mum and having a baby is the best thing you could ever do, like that has all the value’. Perhaps from this dualistic, either/or perspective that discounts creative alternatives, Emma instead values forging a career that she worries will be risked by motherhood. Working toward a promotion, she feels she has made progress in being valued in the organisation: ‘I’ve made headway. I’m being asked to do things; people know my name’. With pregnancy she fears disappearing: ‘I don’t want to disappear for a year and people will forget you’.

Although feeling an inner, biological desire to one day have a child, Emma explains that her husband is pushing for parenthood, noting, ‘he’s desperate to be a dad’. Anchoring herself in her husband’s desire to have children, she wonders: ‘If I was with a husband who
wasn’t that fussed about having a baby, I don’t think I would be that fussed about having a baby’. Further in our conversation, Emma describes herself as quite ‘nervous’: ‘As I said before, I’m a worrier. I worry about everything to an extent’. She links her anxiety to difficulty grounding herself in her own actions and desires, instead seeking validation from others – ‘I don’t self-regulate very well. […] I seek approval of others to validate what I’ve done’ – and in particular her husband: ‘I do a fair amount of attention seeking through him and say like I need him to say that he’s proud of me all the time and things’. I sense her husband’s influence over their decision to have a child, echoing Madison’s metaphor of the husband being captain of the ship. Emma reflects that he is ‘allowing’ her to wait: ‘I think he’s giving me a stay of execution’. Desiring to establish her career before she imagines ‘disappearing’ into motherhood, Emma describes trying to push her ‘execution’ back: ‘I keep edging, eking out. I’m pretty sure I got one year last year as well, but I think I edged it more’.

Edging and eking allude to pushing against or moving a boundary, and ‘stay of execution’ links motherhood to death, in this example her husband in the position of executioner. The implication is that once she becomes a mum, she will die, or more accurately, be killed, akin to Madison’s allusion to the crocodile in Peter Pan. This is not false: until the 19th century, many women died in childbirth, so pregnancy naturally is related to a sense and fear of death (von Franz, 1980). But more symbolically, for the pregnant woman, a transformational process occurs: ‘a form of the woman has to die, and for a woman birth is also a rebirth of herself. She is different afterward. She is not the same woman. She’s transformed’ (von Franz, 1999: 48). Fear of death and transformation accords with organisational structures that do not value what can be gained from pregnancy and birth and instead expect women to ‘perform’ or be the same as they were before (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). But this, as Von Franz (1999: 43) reflects, robs women of ‘tremendous amounts of deep realizations, religious, sacred, archetypal realizations’ that come with pregnancy, birth, and childrearing, as I too have
discovered. Perhaps, somewhat corroborating Emma’s fears, such realisations are not and cannot be tolerated in postfeminist organisational structures that shadow feminine energy.

**Concluding discussion**

We began with the question: what aspects of the archetypal feminine are women encouraged to disavow in a postfeminist gender regime and to what effects? We reflexively answered this question using Jungian-inspired psychoanalytic theory to reflect on data emerging from a longitudinal study of the psychic life of women and their experiences of work and career (Baker and Brewis, 2020; Baker and Kelan, 2019; Binkley, 2011; Carr and Kelan, 2023; Gill, 2017; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021; Scharff, 2015). The data, mediated by and through the researchers’ psychic reality, indicates how the process of individuation, of realising the Self, is hampered by postfeminist working life that denies the archetypal feminine, instead avowing masculine ideals. This will be somewhat obvious to organisational scholars long asserting the dominance of masculine power in organisational structures (Fotaki, 2013; Lewis, 2014; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017; Wickström, 2021). What this study contributes to this literature is an understanding of the feminine as *archetypal*, thereby expanding psychoanalytic inquiry in management and organization studies to include feminist interpretations of Jungian concepts that help us understand how this archetypal feminine is disavowed in working life, and to what effects (Ayers, 2011; Estés, 1995; Höpfl, 2002; Neumann, 1992; Perera, 2010; von Franz, 2017). While our motivation is empirical rather than clinical and focussed on working life and career (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Gill et al., 2017; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017), we note that the disavowal of the archetypal feminine manifests by: adhering to ascensionist ideals to the detriment of slowness and inactivity that builds creative energy; engaging linear thinking to the detriment of cyclical, paradoxical being that honours life’s thresholds; and avowing rational objectivity to the detriment of embodied instinct that facilitates intuitive reasoning. True to a Jungian approach that avoids rigid conclusions in taking a circular approach to writing
(Hillman, 1975), we offer not a conclusion per se but reflections on how this study furthers our understanding of the pernicious effects of postfeminist discourse in working life and organisational structures (Lewis et al., 2017), and how we might counteract these effects.

Our focus in this paper was to explore how archetypal feminine energy is suppressed in postfeminist working life. Postfeminist organisational settings reject what the feminine asks of us: to trust our bodies in their natural rhythm (Estés, 1995), which includes the mind as not separate from but intimately connected to the body, if we let it be so (Gardiner, 2020). Likewise, embracing an archetypal feminine requires accepting slowness and stagnation, cyclical or chaos thinking, and embodied instinct, which confronts postfeminist discourses encouraging a can-do attitude, ambition, and logical, linear, analytical reasoning (e.g., Adamson and Kelan, 2019). This does not negate the value of productive masculine energy which may complement or more aptly blend into the feminine. Indeed, as management and organisation scholars drawing from archetypal theory have shown (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012a; Kostera, 2012; Mitroff, 1983; Moxnes, 1999; Moxnes and Moxnes, 2016), masculine attributes can be vital to taking decisive action, formulating effective plans, inspiring organisational members, and so forth (Bowles, 1993). Instead, we illustrate how masculine attributes have been overvalued in neoliberal postfeminist discourse, thereby shadowing, rejecting, or not recognising the feminine (Höpfl and Kostera, 2003; Wickström, 2021).

Throughout the findings we hint toward the consequences of not exploring feminine potential given a postfeminist sensibility; these resemble what the literature may recognise as psychic effects of neoliberalism (Layton, 2014). Such ‘postfeminist disorders’ (McRobbie, 2009: 94) include general feelings of dis-ease, dissatisfaction, consternation, anxiety, and depression to name a few. Moreover, we interpret, and see in ourselves, a desire to fend off or avoid such psychic effects, when a descent into the feminine might ask us to examine them more closely: to turn toward discomfort and delve into the unconscious to ask from where these
feelings manifest, or for what reason we are unable to embrace them (Hillman, 1975). We do so in order to individuate by confronting our ‘inner tyrants’ that aid our own oppression (Woodman 1990: 119). By adhering to postfeminist discourses that encourage logical, linear thinking, challenging emotions are not recognised or are actively repressed, which Jungian thinkers might argue gives them more power as they operate unconsciously of their own accord, rather than through conscious, integrated awareness.

This understanding of the effects of repressing negative emotional experiences in working life hopefully enhances the literature on defensive responses and the psychic life of women at work (Baker and Kelan, 2019; Carr and Kelan, 2023; Gill, 2017; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021; Scharff, 2015). We suggest that any ‘temporary reprieve’ (Baker and Kelan, 2019: 90) engendered by engaging in defensive responses may instead reproduce the distressing psychic effects of neoliberalism. As we indicate through our data, by continuously repressing or disavowing challenging emotions and experiences deriving from a postfeminist sensibility at work, we ‘remain detached from reality’ (ibid: 87); psychic effects thus linger in the unconscious and ‘continuously haunt the psyche’ (Layton, 2009: 113). Indeed, from a feminist post-Jungian perspective, rejection of emotions that arise from gender inequality at work (e.g., Baker and Brewis, 2020) only perpetuates postfeminist workplace structures that are, by their very nature, discriminatory and patriarchal (Bell et al., 2019; Woodman, 1990). What Jungian analysis would instead have us do is to realise our complicity by looking toward our most difficult emotions and experiences, diving into the depths of paradoxical feminine energy, to take responsibility in a way that is not neoliberal but liberating, elucidating the Self. To put it bluntly, if we know and understand our motivations and emotions, we can work with them and cease to collude with oppressive power structures, rather than them – and the power structures they facilitate – working with us.
These reflections highlight the value of Jungian-inspired theory in more deeply understanding mechanisms of power and, importantly, offering a means of subverting and overcoming such power dynamics (e.g., Ryland, 2000). They do so by infusing a sense of magic and spirituality into secularised forms of psychosocial thinking (Gabriel, 2020; Jung, 1959), and by drawing on a collective history that socially constructs present psychic conditioning. By using Jungian theory from a feminist perspective (Austin, 2005; Bassil-Morozow, 2018; Crowley, 2017; Gardner and Gray, 2016; Kulkarni, 2012; Rowland, 2002; Wehr, 2015), we can see how our collusion with the masculine continues to rob people of all genders of psychic richness and insights that emerge from embracing the archetypal feminine (Estés, 1995; Perera, 2010; Rowland, 2002; Woodman, 1985). Moments in the data, particularly around discussions of motherhood, show how the “granddaughters of patriarchy” feel their feminine power in instinctual desires that stubbornly remain. In short, these granddaughters – like Madison, Emily, Emma and myself – sense this important threshold will call into question an ascendent ambition with which they identify, and seemingly they are prepared, however reluctantly, to take the risk to embrace it, perhaps unlike their “daughter of the patriarchy” mothers. The feminine instinct is unabating, although we can see that a postfeminist sensibility presents a contradictory force with which to be reckoned.

We urge organisational scholars to continue this line of inquiry – both personally and professionally – by expanding on Jungian theory and addressing archetypal forms, including of femininity and masculinity, to generate potential for superseding dominant neoliberal, postfeminist power structures. There is scope to do so in endless creative forms, from an archetypal feminine perspective. Research in management and organisation studies using archetypal theory also recognizes the need for more work that explores the dance between the archetypal feminine and masculine both as partners and in their own right (e.g., Höpfl, 2002; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012). Where the feminine has been tentatively explored
archetypally, the concept of anima is used (the inner feminine in a man) (Höpfl 2002) which inadvertently threatens the ability of the feminine to be on its own, unrelated to maleness (Rowland 2002). Therefore, we encourage scholars to further examine how the archetypal feminine manifests in organisational life; for instance, how do managers and leaders embrace the feminine not by rejecting or being defined through masculinity, but rather walking alongside it? Illuminating the feminine as such avoids its relegation into the shadow or definition through masculine values (Baker and Brewis, 2020). And while a critique of this study may be our examination of the feminine only in relation to cisgender women, though the value of journeying through the feminine may be particularly vital for them (Irigaray 1993), it is certainly not limited to those identifying as such (Kulkarni, 2012). There is a similar critique in scholarship on archetypal theory that often attributes, and thus may conflate, masculine archetypal energy to male gender roles – e.g., the King, Trickster, and Hero are typically associated with male CEOs or managers (de Vries, 1990; Parker, 2008; Hatch et al., 2006; Mitroff, 1983). Despite this tendency, feminist post-Jungian theory illustrates the value for all people to explore a spiritual type of femininity and masculinity that are part of us all, whether acknowledged or unseen (Höpfl, 2002). Embracing the feminine in the context of our study helps us realise the potential for liberation and wholeness through a subversive – at least in a postfeminist, patriarchal regime of gender – way of being that embraces darkness, slowness, chaos, being, paradox and intuition.

References


