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## Embodied women in the work context: The case of Portuguese businesswomen and their female subordinates



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### SYNOPSIS

Drawing on a feminist poststructuralist approach, this exploratory research studies the embodied construction of female workers produced in two focus groups of Portuguese businesswomen when they discuss their female subordinates. We sought to understand the positioning ascribed by the businesswomen to the female body in relation to an ideal professional body and its implications for the relations between the businesswomen and their subordinate female coworkers. An analysis of the group interactions shows that the embodied constructions of female workers entail two opposing interpretative repertoires through which the businesswomen participate in the discipline and/or resistance of the female employees' bodies to a professional masculine and heteronormative discourse. We also reflect upon the implications of the power relations between women in the conception and perceived adequacy of the female body in the work context.

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### Introduction

Several studies (e.g. Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Fenwick, 2002; Kelly, 2014; Lewis, 2013) have demonstrated the effects of the gender double condition on the entrepreneurial experiences and identities of businesswomen. In their organizations, businesswomen are subjects with power in relation to their subordinates (Edley, 2000). However, businesswomen are constrained by gender discourses that define the entrepreneur as masculine and position them as the “other” in the entrepreneurial context (Ahl, 2006), thus preventing them from gaining full recognition as “real” business subjects.

Few studies have explored how the gender double condition of businesswomen affects their relations with other working women in lower hierarchical positions (Edley, 2000; Harvey, 2005), although it is relevant to explore how relations between women who occupy different hierarchical positions in work contexts contribute to their subordination or emancipation in work and organizations. This article argues that gender

discourses about the body can be used to understand relations between businesswomen and their female subordinates. Feminist organizational authors (Gatrell, 2013; Trethewey, 1999) believe that studying the way in which masculine normative discourses constrain and produce female bodies in working settings is central to understanding the complex processes of women's subordination, resistance, and discrimination.

According to the poststructuralist feminist approach (Butler, 1993; Lorber, 1993; Sutherland, Forbes, Hodgson, & McLaren, 2014), the body is understood as a discursive construction that implies power relations in which masculine embodiment is the norm in public contexts. Based on this conceptualization, several studies explore the gendered processes of production and regulation of workers' bodies by a normative masculine professional discourse that defines the ideal body as rational, self-controlled, totally available, and detached from reproduction and emotions (Acker, 1990; Gatrell, 2013; Trethewey, 1999). This masculine discourse enacts the invisibility of male bodies that correspond to the masculine norm and marks the female body by difference and exclusion (Gatrell, 2013).

This article studies how the female body is constructed by two focus groups of businesswomen when they talk about

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female subordinates. An analysis of group interactions identifies two opposing interpretative repertoires about the female body based on appearance, self-presentation, working behaviors, sexuality, competence, and maternity. The repertoires allow businesswomen to occupy different and contradictory subject positions in relation to female workers. This study helps us to rethink gender discrimination in the work context, more specifically in situations that imply hierarchical relations between working women.

We start by presenting the theoretical background on relations between working women, gender discourses about body, and the female body in the workplace. We then present our methodology and analyze the interpretative repertoires about female body produced by two focus groups of Portuguese businesswomen. In our discussion and conclusion, we reflect on the implications of the repertoires for businesswomen's relations with female subordinates, and to women discrimination or emancipation at work.

### **Businesswomen and working women relations**

The literature on entrepreneurship and gender (Bruni et al., 2004; Brush & Gatewood, 2008; Fenwick, 2002; Kelly, 2014; Marlow & Patton, 2005; Ogbor, 2000) has shown the exclusion and discrimination of businesswomen in their work and business contexts, where they remain the “other” due to a masculine norm that relates to contradictory gendered discourses (Ahl, 2006; Lewis, 2013): while their gender is woman/feminine, the business/entrepreneurship they are doing is masculine. For businesswomen, the gender paradox deriving from these contradictory meanings demands a continuous negotiation of their experiences and identities. As business and entrepreneurial subjects, they occupy positions of power and authority; as women they are not totally recognized and accepted in their work contexts.

As such, both businesswomen and other female workers may share the gender burden of discrimination in their work contexts. However, the relations between businesswomen and their female subordinates have been rarely explored (Edley, 2000). How do women in positions of authority perceive their female subordinates and contribute to the discrimination or emancipation of the latter? Trethewey argued that women can be very judgmental of other women and can function as a “powerful normalizing force” (1999, p. 445). Nevertheless, few studies have focused on the interactions between women (Edley, 2000; Harvey, 2005; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). Among these studies, Khumalo, McKay, and Freimund (2015) showed that tensions can emerge in the patriarchal discourse on feminine respectability that is used by women to exert power and control over other women who disobey norms about marriage, motherhood, collaboration with community, and hard work. In private and paid domestic labor, Gorbán and Tizziani (2014) demonstrated that in their daily interactions with their domestic female employees, women (and men) contribute to stereotypes and social hierarchies that legitimize their higher position and simultaneously diminish the position of the employees. The authors focused on the interpersonal nature of the relationships between employers and domestic workers as a crucial aspect for work exploration and the production of social, gender, class, and racial differences and hierarchies.

Other studies have focused on the relations between working women in professional and public contexts. Sotirin and Gottfried (1999) showed how the use of bitching as mundane women's talk among corporate secretaries can feed stereotypical gender attributes and threaten the construction of a feminized secretarial ideal. The bitching in which the secretaries engage affirms but also defies the ideal secretarial identity as white, heterosexual, and middle-class gentility (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). This contradiction can be either accommodative or emancipatory of that secretarial ideal. Harvey (2005) explored the relationship between black women's hair salon owners and their stylists. She described the businesswomen's support to stylists in professional development and assistance in the transition to entrepreneurship as the “helping ideology.” The desire to help other black women to start their own businesses derives from a shared experience of race and gender discrimination that results in solidarity among black women. This helping ideology is undermined by feelings of mistrust and skepticism that result from a negative image of the stylists based on their appearance, behaviors, or lifestyle, and decreased black women owners' willingness to put the ideology into practice. Edley (2000) showed that businesswomen and their female workers use discourses of femininity to control and explain their behaviors in the work context, either as accepting women as more emotional in their work relations or expecting them to be loyal to authority. Thus, businesswomen perpetuate patriarchal and hierarchical forms of structuring, organizing, and exerting control over their female employees. Instead of working against the dominant patriarchal system and toward more egalitarian organizations and feminist forms of organizing, women comply with and contribute to women's subordination.

This research shows that working women who interact with other women can act as privileged and powerful subjects that reproduce or destabilize gender discrimination in work. But existing studies overlook the role of the body, particularly the female body, in the way women relate with or talk about each other. We must understand how the female body is constructed in the workplace when relations between professional women—specifically within different hierarchical positions, as is the case of businesswomen and their female subordinates—are considered. This is thought-provoking because the bodies of all of them are perceived as the same, as they all share the social and cultural gender mark of feminine.

### **Gender discourses about body and the female body in the workplace**

Feminist approaches (Hughes & Witz, 1997) have sought to obtain a better understanding of the processes through which bodies are regulated and controlled and/or the terms under which they participate in social life. Poststructuralist feminism contends that subjects are always dynamically embodied by feminine and masculine social discourses (Butler, 1993; Trethewey, 1999; Weedon, 1987). This theoretical perspective challenges the biological discourse of sexual difference (Lorber, 1993), which fixes and “naturalizes” bodies in two dichotomic and asymmetrical possibilities: the male body and the female body (Butler, 1993; Lorber, 1993). As Butler (1993) states, we cannot deny the corporeal matter of the sexual body (menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, pain, pleasure, and aging), and

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