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Using discourse analysis to compare women managers' identities
in Britain and Singapore

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Aims

This paper considers research on women managers' identities and their relationship to social change in Singapore and Britain. It aims to explore the use of discourse analysis as a methodology to investigate how dominant majority women are responding to the changing nature of their identities as managers in corporate cultures in two countries with different gender regimes (see Connell 1987; 1995; Pfau Effinger 1993). Although the research for my doctorate explores wider questions of similarities and differences between women managers in both Singapore and Britain, this particular paper will explore why the methodology used of discourse analysis was particularly pertinent in illuminating the contradictions and functions of women's talk on gender and ethnicity in each country and how useful the methods may be in cross cultural comparison.

Research Questions

The questions I want to consider in this paper are about the relationship of women's agency to 'perform' their identities (see Butler 1990) in the light of structural and cultural constraints. I hypothesise that these constraints and thus women's agency, or 'room for manoeuvre' are changing in the light of the entry of large numbers of women into management. Recent social changes suggest that the system of gender relations has been shifting from one based on women in the domestic sphere, to one in which women are increasingly represented in the 'public' sphere (Walby 1997). A key aspect of this growing representation of women in the public 'visible' sphere has been the entry of women into management (Walby 1997; Castells 1996; Adler and Israeli 1994; Crompton and Sanderson 1990; Fagenson 1993; Davidson and Cooper 1992; Tanton 1994; Crompton 1997; Wirth 1998; Wirth 2001; Rubery et al 1999; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

As such these changing patterns of women's employment beg a range of questions about gender relations and women's identities. How far does the entry of women into management positions change how they are defined? How do these gendered and work identities vary in different countries and how closely are gendered identities linked with class and ethnic identities in each country?

How far are women in both countries able to use their agency to impact on the construction of their gendered identities in corporate cultures and in the family? To what extent are multiple identities constructed and constrained by governmental policy and discourse, and do differing gender regimes differ in how far women have room to manoeuvre over the multiple identities they perform?

Theory and identity

I begin with the ways in which we currently understand identities. The concept of identity in social theory has undergone much change. Identities are arguably not a 'fixed core' of self, but multiple, shifting, contradictory and subject to change depending on both structural and cultural constraints. They are never complete, always in 'process'. Recent writings have argued that identities are not 'determined' or changed by class and the material world, but also produced and re-produced through the mass media and through language (du Gay 1997; Hall 1997). Recent theories stress that human beings are also *agents* of their worlds (Lash and Urry 1987; Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; du Gay 1996; Lash 1990; Bauman 1996; Bauman 1998; Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002). In an uncertain risk laden world they have to act reflexively. Since stable ascribed groups can no longer be taken as given and there is no anchoring of identity in family, workplace or community any more, individuals have to 'make up' identity (Bauman 2001). In this way it is argued identities are individualised.

As part of the theoretical context on identity, I use Connell (1987; 1995) who has brought together a theory on gender which links personal agency/life with social structures and ideologies. Connell argues that identities are structured through a variety of institutions, family, workplace, the state and in public life in the street. These identities reinforce the sexual division of labour, but in different ways in different sites. They each have their own 'gender regimes' for maintaining male authority. However, they are not without resistance from human agents, either individually or collectively. These resistances may come about at the same time as massive changes, for example through the decline of manufacturing or changing technologies, and their effects on working class men. Cultural practices then become a site for struggle over identities of masculinities and femininities.

Beginning the empirical analysis

I began the field work analysis by comparing the representation of women as managers in both Singapore and Britain, concentrating specifically on the financial sector. The statistics demonstrated there were similarities in women's representation in senior positions (6%) as well as in the expansion of their employment in 'new' jobs in the financial sector, particularly at middle management level. Women as managers in both countries in the financial sector largely work full time.

I have dug deeper into these ostensibly similar experiences by relating corporate, global as well as national discourses to transcribed interviews with 23 women managers in Singapore and Britain. Firstly, I used some newspaper journal and government reports to understand historical and current gender regimes in each country. The main points from this review produced the following points:

Historical context

In Britain the creation of a white middle class identity for women has had a long process which was steeped for many decades in the white middle class or bourgeois woman's responsibility for all things domestic. The ways in which middle class women's identities were constructed in both countries are not just to do with gender and class positions, but they were also racialised. These identities were intimately

connected with one another in both countries. In Singapore, the British had encouraged the special harnessing of the strengths of each of the 'races' in Singapore and the colonised immigrants came to adopt and reformulate these discourses of 'race'. (Purushotam 1998). The 'racial' characteristics of the peoples of Singapore were read with reference to the occupational niches that particular groups were to have a penchant for, because of their numerical dominance in these occupations. Particular significance was accorded to 'hard working' 'economically / financially astute' Chinese peoples. The governing elite in constructing a Singaporean national identity used the harnessing of 'race' differences, particularly the identities and fertility of Chinese middle class women in supporting the nation (see below).

Britain's long oppressive and extensive colonial relationships in the Indian subcontinent and in the Caribbean formed the definition of white British middle class women. In the later phases of colonialism and the onset of industrialization, white middle class women's identities became ascribed both in relation to colonised women and men and in relation to their white male counterparts with industrialisation (Stoler 1999). They were defined primarily in domestic terms to signify their dependence on men, their roles ascribed in relation to *managing* housekeeping and childcare, and keeping away from the dangers of the public sphere, particularly to prolong the 'purity' of the 'race'.

Current British context

More recently British governments have emphasized women's equality with men, but primarily in the public sphere. Managerial women in Britain have been surrounded by a discourse which stresses 'being the same' as men, for example, the ability to have a career, reach great heights in the labor market and be equally represented as men in the visible public sphere, such as politics.

The state's reluctance to intervene in the private sphere and the emphasis on individual choice in domestic care arrangements leaves women with guilt and worry about how individually they can work out the balance in their lives. The struggle for equal rights, women's visibility in the public sphere and the emphasis on choice and individualism has, unlike Singapore, created the possibility of a more heterogeneous identity ascription or 'more room to manoeuvre' for the middle class managerial woman. She can 'act' like a man' or show she can be different as a woman. These decisions come at a cost. A 'gender neutral' and meritocratic discourse accelerates the greater individualisation of middle class women's identities in Britain.

Current Singapore context

In Singapore the managerial and middle class women's identity has been created rapidly and simultaneously. The workplace has no recorded history or legislation based on women's equity with men. Instead, economic and nation building goals have emphasized Asian family values based on the traditional separation of gendered roles and responsibilities. Women in Singapore are encouraged to feel Singaporean, Chinese and women all at the same time. Family, workplace, community and nation are integrated. Women's identities are more homogeneously ascribed. They are about being a good loyal middle class wife and mother who still puts her husband and children first, even though she is also a loyal full time employee. The discourse of meritocracy, dominant since independence, was a reaction to colonialism which had privileged key groups over others. This discourse has encouraged notions of Singapore as a 'fair' society, free of discrimination, where legislation is not necessary.

Women managers' unpaid work has been supported by the State, with no question however, that women remain responsible for it. The integration of these various identities and the discourse of meritocracy reinforces homogeneously women's responsibilities as mothers and wives. There appears to be less room to manoeuvre out of this identity ascription despite economic independence and family changes.

Conclusions on social context

The analysis of government reports and journal articles has revealed the ways in which government policies and discourses both legitimate the identities of women relative to men, but also provide differing constraints on their identities. It shows that different gender regimes affect women differently with women in Singapore more likely to have homogeneously ascribed identities and women in Britain have greater levels of acceleration towards individualization.

Probing the ways women in management are responding to contradictory processes would illustrate how they were responding to these discourses, and the implications for their agency.

Interviews

Lastly then methodologically, it was decided to carry out in depth interviews about women's career stories. This is a key method used in qualitative research (Hakim 2000). In using the idea of a narrative or a career story, it made sense to explain that I was interested in women managers' career stories and how they spoke about them. The questionnaire began with factual information about education, ethnic origin, age, and level in hierarchy. The rest of the questionnaire consisted of

- the story of women's careers and the influences on their careers, and their futures
- their relationships at work, generally and more specifically with women, men and other minority groups and the organisational culture
- domestic helps and hindrances
- opinions of women and minority groups as managers in the context of the labour market

Since the interview is a conversational encounter the transcriptions of the interviews were in full. I recorded and analysed the interviewer's questions and prompts, as well as the respondents' questions and responses.

In carrying out the research, I drew upon feminist research which stresses that the researcher is also part of the social interaction in research and as such her/his values must be transparent. The values I brought are informed by my understanding of inequality across gender, class and ethnicity in our society and by an approach to research which is broadly feminist in its perspective.

It has been argued that feminism is not a research method, but a perspective, which may include a variety of feminist research methods (Reinherz 1992). The perspective itself is also multiple, since there are many perspectives on feminist research. One other tenet which feminist researchers do share is that women's lives are important. They are not considered an add-on, because of the belief that women are worth examining as individuals and as those whose lives are interwoven with other women.

Feminist research then tries to make the study of women visible, whilst not presenting this agency as deviant (K Bhavnani 1995; Essed 1991). The researcher of this thesis used women managers' discourse not so much to analyse attitudes or study individual difference but to examine how far their talk illuminates an awareness of contradictions and suggests possible social change.

Some feminist researchers argue that research by feminists often makes a link between personal experience and intellectual experience (Reinherz 1992; Oakley 1972; Finch 1993; Mies 1993), quashing the view that research is value neutral, detached and objective. However, using personal experience in the context of a cross-cultural study could lead to accusations of 'ethnocentrism' (Reinherz 1992: 261).

I was fully aware that this needed to be avoided. I have brought to the study my own previous research and work experience which has attempted to counter ethnocentrism. I have been working on issues of 'race' and gender for many years, and am aware of the ways British society has perceived me and the 'other' as an 'exotic' 'passive' Indian origin woman. My perspective is also influenced by my own contribution as a middle class woman researcher of Indian origin, who has experienced being both an insider and an outsider in Britain as an immigrant, and then as a British national, but have also lived in Singapore for almost two years where I was classified for entry as a dependent wife. In Singapore, Indians are a small minority and they are usually in an inferior role to the dominant Chinese. As a British Indian woman, I was placed in an ambiguous relationship to the interviewees in both Britain and Singapore. My position as a middle class educated woman influenced the access to the women managers in Singapore, which is a highly achieving society. My experience of living in Singapore society enabled me to observe at first hand an overtly publicised '*multi-cultural-family-values*' society in action and to question gender and ethnic identities not only in Singapore but through a different standpoint in relation to Britain.

These identities of the researcher of this thesis influenced the interaction with the women interviewees in both countries and the kind of data generated. In the analysis of the results the researcher of this thesis explores the ways her role as a researcher influenced the talk that was generated.

Discourse Analysis

I have chosen discourse analysis because the approach allows a researcher to examine everyday social practices and how these connect to wider structures and cultures. Although I began with an approach designed to understand individual women's attitudes and intentions, I realised as I transcribed the interviews, that each of their accounts had a much broader relevance. The approach of discourse analysis enabled me to explore how women managers' discourses are constructed and what function they play in the construction of their identities. I became less interested in attitudes and intentions of the women on a personal basis. I wanted to examine discourses for their broader currency and how they related to national and corporate discourses. How have these discourses arisen? What does it mean that they are present? What does it mean if certain discourses are absent in one country and present in the other, or vice versa? What implications are there for women managers, their agency and their 'choices'?

There has been an explosion of interest in discourse analysis in social sciences in the last twenty years. Discourses implying the way knowledge and power are reproduced in all contexts, micro and macro, owes much to the writings of Michel Foucault, but also to the older tradition of feminists studying language.

Discourse analysis is argued to be particularly attractive to feminists since in the study of discourse, language is viewed as an interactive activity and one concerned with producing socio-cultural knowledge and constituting a site for the construction of identities and subjectivities (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). Our social identities are produced and reproduced through discourse and as such remain an important area for investigation. Language is not just a vehicle for reflecting reality, but actively constructs that reality. The analysis of discourse as regards ethnicity and racism has also received recent attention in the UK with work of van Dijk (1993; 1999), Frankenberg (1993), Hewitt (1996) and Back (1994). The examination of narrative interviews in Singapore has been used to examine notions of ethnicity and 'race' with particular reference to language (Purushotam 1998). There is less work within Singapore on discourse in relation to gender or ethnicity.

Discourse analysis – the definition adopted in this paper

Foucault has argued that discourse is part of the dynamics of power, which is located not in macro structures and tangible material areas, but in our ideas through what we say, how we say it and what we don't say. He further argues that the formation of what he terms 'objects', or 'things' for example, the formation of a set of ideas, such as psychopathology, medicine, religion and for the purposes of this thesis, a body of knowledge about women and men, or the creation and reproduction of ideas of 'race' and ethnicity, and so on takes place between groups. These include relationships between institutions, economic processes and words. These relationships are not linear, nor hierarchical, but the creation of knowledge itself is discourse. It is not about the link between language and reality, but it creates reality, it is more than the signs, or the symbols.

The implication for understanding discourse is then that one communicative act or text cannot be seen as self contained, but as intertextual, since discourses are related and do not have a so called objective beginning and end (Wodak 1997). Discourses are social practices and can only be understood in social contexts; they include the integration of verbal and non verbal language and *behaviour and action (my emphasis)* (Wodak 1997).

The following definition of discourse is taken as a starting point for this research:

Critical discourse analysis sees discourse - the use of language in speech and writing - as a form of social practice. Describing discourse as social practice implies a particular dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation, institution and social structure that frames it: the discursive event is shaped by them but it also shapes them. That is discourse is socially constituted, as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and social identities of and relationship between people and groups of people. It is constitutive

both in the sense that it helps sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it.

(Wodak 1997: p.6)

The ways in which discourse may be reproducing or challenging the status quo is based on power. Power according to Foucault is limitless and productive and that it is coextensive with knowledge (Ramanzoglu 1993). There are many kinds of knowledge and there are many political struggles about the deployment of power and knowledge. There is therefore no single truth, but productions of different truths, which can be and are contested.

Discourse and human agency

Discourse has a range of subjective positions and functions. What therefore, does discourse imply about intentionality or human agency? Does Foucault's concept of discourse dissolve the agency of the human subject and replace it with a passive conception? Or is the human agent simply a tabula rasa? (Ransom 1993). There are opposing views to the idea of the passive human subject implied by Foucault. However, even though identity as such may be denied by Foucault, the idea of subject positions through discourse suggests an idea of agency. As Weedon argues: *Although the subject is socially constructed through discursive practices, she nonetheless exists as a thinking feeling and social subject and agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices* (Weedon 1987: 125 quoted in Ransom 1993).

In other words, subjectivity is itself a site contested in discourse; for example, discursive constructions of the perfect mother/wife exist, but these can be challenged in different ways. Thus subjects are able to resist and act within the constraints of historical context. They can act as political agents.

Using discourse analysis as a research methodology

The research uses discourse analysis as a research methodology. Discourse analysis itself has been developed as a research methodology in its own right. As has been pointed out, the analysis of discourse does not mean researchers are searching for the attitudes behind the words, or the real meanings the speakers have intended; discourse analysis is interested in discourse as a thing in itself; it is interested in its construction and how it is tied to other meanings in society, but also its function (Wetherell and Potter 1993). Discourse gives rise to discursive formations, which are marked by the regularity of practice and their effects (Foucault 1971).

The analysis of discourse then is *“not concerned with hidden meanings, but to understand how they have appeared – what it means that they have appeared.”* (Foucault 1971:109). For example, what functions does the talk by senior women serve in wider society; how is it resisted? What are the contradictions inherent in it? What does this talk tell us about the status quo and new sites for change? One way in which change may come about is through examining contradictions.

Differences in women's gendered subjectivities: Singapore and Britain

The discourse analysis of the interviews reveals interesting differences in the ways these gendered identities are ascribed in Singapore as compared to Britain and women's responses to these ascriptions.

For example, women in Singapore discussed corporate cultures in local Chinese banks as differently constituted, compared to British women. Singaporean women talked about paternalism and being 'looked after' in these cultures and 'giving way' to men. Decisions made about their restricted access to promotion were 'accepted' largely as related to their position as married women with domestic responsibilities. Their discourses were suffused with concepts of 'ladies' and 'gentlemen', in the workplace, compared to British women who talked about 'women' and 'men'. In contrast, women in Britain discussed the ways they resolved to keep work *separated* from family. They did not openly discuss family responsibilities or referred to paternalism at work, as if it was assumed. Some women were openly critical of 'male' cultures and male domination. Some embraced women's differences in leadership styles. In fact these British women were being strategic in their 'choices' by keeping domestic and caring duties hidden in the workplace, so that they could be viewed on equal terms with men.

These contrasts suggest that women as managers do not experience work cultures in similar ways in the two different countries. These experiences have implications for how they feel able to act to resolve various contradictions. In Britain the women are uncomfortable with having to repress their family identities at work. They view with 'envy' the fact that men are able to discuss their family responsibilities at work without fearing the perception that men would be seen as lacking commitment to their jobs. In Singapore the women were more open about the differences between women and men in the workplace; they appeared to be more comfortable with these ascriptions of the complementarity in gendered 'roles'. They did not voice discomfort with being perceived as less committed to their workplace than men, because it was assumed they would prioritise family life over paid work.

The meanings women attributed to 'meritocracy' were however expanded upon but differently interpreted in both countries. Although both countries used discourses of meritocracy in relation to achieving status and higher graded jobs, Singaporean women were more likely to use the discourse of meritocracy to support their country's 'fairness', after de-colonisation. The country was meritocratic, unlike under British colonialism, and you would be recognized and given rewards of promotion or money if you worked hard. Singaporean women saw themselves as *recipients* of a fair society, for which they were grateful.

In contrast, in Britain women managers talked actively about having to seek promotion, challenging job decisions, questioning recruitment approaches or sexist interview questions, and so on. They reflected in their discourses, not a sense of being recipients of rewards in a fair society, but one where individual proactivity in relation to careers was assumed to be the way you 'got on'. Talent was only recognized if you took control of what happened.

Interpretations of Findings

These differently expressed subjectivities in Singapore and Britain are important to interpret further. I argue that the subjectivities of managerial women in Singapore and Britain and the ways their identities are constructed through discourse supports wider theoretical work on the gendering of corporate organisational cultures in both countries. In both Singapore and Britain, women in corporate cultures continue to be ascribed *gendered* managerial identities, despite working full time and mimicking male career patterns. But the corporate discourses in the banks articulate with government discourses and policies as well as with historical processes of the two countries, to produce *different gender regimes* in corporate cultures. Gender regimes in financial corporations in Singapore and Britain are thus differently constituted.

It can of course be argued that the financial sector itself has been massively restructured as a result of global change, and that these findings can be interpreted on the basis of corporate cultural change in this sector rather than national gender regimes. Work carried out in London in the 1990s has argued that global change affecting the financial sector has transformed social relations in this sector. Conventional ways of doing business through networks and personal contacts has led to an ‘Americanisation’, or meritocratisation of the financial sector (McDowell 1997: 3). Financiers began to typify the individualist attitudes and lifestyles from the 1980s in the City of London. All financial sector workers were thus perceived as individualised and women perceived to be equal with men. Women have entered this sector and gendered performances as well as gendered identities have changed, according to McDowell (1997). A range of masculinities and femininities in work situations have been found.

On the other hand, it can be argued that in Singapore, this ‘Americanisation’ may have lagged behind the changes in the British financial sector. Why this may be so could be about the ways in which the Singapore government has utilised Asian family values as critical to Chinese Singaporean gendered identities. The processes towards individualisation are constrained by government discourse and history which has explicitly linked gendered identities to ethnicity, class and nation. As global corporations increase their influence in Singapore, we might well see a greater individualised meritocratic style in this sector in future years, as the government becomes less restricting. It may be more sensible to state that government policies and discourses as well as histories *articulate* with corporate change to produce different gender regimes.

Closely or Loosely Articulating identities

But the attention to gender alone prevents us seeing how *closely* other identities intersect with gender to constrain or ‘free up’ choices for women. In the analysis of the transcripts, there emerged a need to explore concepts of *closely* or *loosely* articulating identities. For example, the continued ascription of identities based on Chinese ethnicity and class are integrally linked to gendered identities in Singapore. These represent what it means to be Singaporean. In Britain, women talk about gender, their white ethnicity and their class as separated categories, which are not necessarily bound up with each other in their subjectivities.

In Singapore, essential social traits are more clearly linked to differing groups in the women’s talk. It is assumed these traits are ‘fixed’. These traits have also been

connected with national identity in government discourses. Women managers are 'bound' to be Singaporean Chinese *and* middle class, because they are efficient and hard working in paid work and in the family. Indian and Malay women in Singapore are mostly absent as managers, because they are 'warm' and are expected to prioritise family responsibilities, with Malays being more 'laid back', whilst Indians are able to make it to only certain professions i.e. they make 'good lawyers'

In Singapore, there was little variation in how women ethnically described themselves. They were either Chinese or pure Chinese. Boundaries around these social identities are rigid and appear 'fixed'. They are inextricably and explicitly linked as Chinese, Singaporean middle class women. In their talk, women as managers in Singapore link these identities together, and do not separate gender out as women do in Britain.

In Britain, although there were expressions of cultural constraints being responsible for women of colour lagging behind white women, it was also assumed these factors would change in time with effective government and corporate intervention. Discrimination against women of colour was also discussed by some women managers in Britain. The language of discrimination in everyday organizational discourse may partly explain these expressions. The boundaries around class and ethnicity appear more fluid in Britain relative to Singapore. Women in Britain described their ethnic identities in a variety of ways, including using regional identities, national identities, town identities as well as those related to whiteness, such as Anglo Saxon or Caucasian (see page 188). These social identities appear to occupy separate social spaces and are not always linked to their subjective experiences as women.

Using the homogenizing concept of 'women managers'

The findings also suggest that the use of the concept of 'women managers' may not mean the same thing in both countries. Women and men managers in Singapore appear to be constructed as feminised and masculinised in the workplace along the axis of being either 'ladies' or 'gentlemen'. Managers are also assumed to be Chinese and dominant discourse assumes everyone in Singapore is middle class. The concept of women managers does not mean the same thing as it does in Britain. In Britain women are represented as managers on the assumption of equality with men, or 'being the same as' *men* managers. But they fail to be treated as individuals as men managers are, and continue to be constructed as women, hence 'women managers'. In Singapore, managers are already feminised and masculinised, ethnicised and classed and it may be more important to talk about Chinese men and women in management in Singapore. The concept of women managers cannot therefore be viewed as a homogeneous category, understood to mean the same thing in every national context.

Explanations

In all three chapters on the research findings, my contention that government policies and discourses, or country specific gender regimes, which include historical traditions, create different subjectivities for women managers, has been largely borne out. These policies, traditions and discourses constrain women managers' room to manoeuvre within their gendered identities in different ways. One key explanation for

these differences is in the historical and cultural discourses in both countries, which I discussed earlier.

Implications for changing gendered identities

In the light of the above explanations for my findings, I would like to suggest that women in Singapore have a stronger possibility of acting collectively as women, but they will have to challenge at the same time, the boundaries of their national and ethnic identities. Contradictions in how these identities are ascribed may sharpen up as government responds to global and technological change. The contradictions involved in imposing centralised planning with a desire to be more fully competitive in the global economy are beginning to grow sharper. Singapore's government has set up a new commission to restructure the economy and re-consider how to make residents more entrepreneurial and creative. There is a focus on reviewing education and a possible opening up of the mass media (Financial Times 2002). These developments may exacerbate the contradictions for managerial women in Singapore and open up possibilities of collective change.

In Britain, gendered identities are only implicit in family and ethnic discourses. They are absent in discourses around national identity. There is growing gender 'neutrality' in relation to social policy. Dominant 'white' ethnicity is not *explicitly* discussed, nor is class. All these are subsumed under social exclusion. I think women may be able to challenge their gendered identities within the confines of dominant discourse, if the language of discrimination is present. Recent policies, however, have attempted to, neutralise 'gender'. The increasing availability of childcare, the arrival of immigrant domestic workers and the drive to encourage all to participate in specific work for the economy may make Britain converge more with Singapore.

But class and ethnicity and gender currently remain separated in official discourse, so that each aspect has to be challenged separately. Government discourses on boundaries around these identities are more fluid than in Singapore, and appear to have more potential to change quickly. Contradictions in how women are constructed and their own subjectivities will hasten the processes of individualisation for managerial women in Britain. The potential for collective change needs further research.

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