Enterprising femininity
New modes of work and subjectivity

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Abstract
This article introduces a group of ‘enterprising women’ in occupations dealing with ‘impression management’ and ‘care of the self’. It argues that this brand of worker successfully transforms skills acquired through consumption and the making of the feminine into increasingly valuable marketable skills. As such she embodies a blurring of consumption and production and inhabits a particular form of enterprising femininity. Through a reflexive life story method, questions of the role of consumption and self-help literature in the construction of this subjectivity are explored.

Keywords
consumption, cultural intermediaries, enterprise, identity, self-help

Introduction
One of the contentions of this article is that the boundaries between those practices and processes associated with ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ are becoming increasingly blurred, especially when approached through an examination of new kinds of occupations that are based on what the popular management discourses refer to as ‘impression management’. As du Gay (1996) and McRobbie (1998) point out, cultural studies has largely neglected the worlds of production, whether those of cultural industries or the cultures of the workplace. In relation to service work, Allen and du Gay (1994) suggest that the economic and the cultural become blurred and refer to this as a qualitatively different kind of work, a ‘hybrid’ of the economic and cultural. What cultural studies might bring to an analysis of these occupational shifts is a way of getting under the skin of the subjects involved in this kind of work. My project seeks to engage with changing subjectivities, work and consumption, with a particular emphasis on the production of subjectivities especially in relation to femininity.
Women in management

I will begin with a story. Some four years ago I was invited by a friend, a graphic designer who runs her own business, to one of the regular meetings of a group called Women in Management. This was the ‘heart of England’ branch of a national professional organization that was established in the 1950s, but had witnessed a major boost to its membership (both in scope and numbers) in the 1980s. In 1998, the directory of members listed over 1000 members.1 Nationally, the distribution of occupational groups is as follows:

- Small businesses/consultants: 50%
- Corporate: 22%
- Public sector: 25%
- Professional (accountancy, legal, medical): 4%
- Charity: 1%2

I was immediately struck by the women who turned up to this meeting in a hotel conference room. Collectively they appeared to be extremely well attired and groomed in formal business mode, perhaps best described by Gough-Yates in her study of constructions of the ‘new woman’ in glossy magazines as ‘seriously glamorous’ (Gough-Yates, 2005). We wore name badges, and my status as a guest was signified by a red square. I was soon approached by friendly and socially-skilled women who were ‘working the room’ or, as I was later to understand the function of the opening half hour of the meetings, ‘networking’. Business cards were being exchanged along with gossip and general social conversation. I discovered later that the particular and palpable energy that fired the room was engendered by their mainly entrepreneurial activities. Many ran their own businesses and had been persuaded by the entrepreneurial rhetoric of Thatcher’s Britain (du Gay, 1991). They were pragmatists and ‘can do’ personalities; they asked sharp questions; they were full of self-belief and confidence; they worked hard, but were excited by and passionate about their work; they were breathtaking and refreshing. Fascinated and curious, I was hooked. I joined the organization and became a member of Women in Management.

The group has monthly meetings which consist of ‘networking’, a presentation dealing with some aspect of work or personal life, such as ‘Opening the Boardroom Door’, ‘Making Change Effective’, ‘A Healthy Lifestyle Means a Healthy Business’, ‘Change Your Mind and Change Your Life’, ‘Feng Shui: Perfect Placing for Your Happiness and Prosperity’ and, practically every year, ‘Colour Me Beautiful’! Occasionally, more well-known speakers are invited from the world of politics, policy making and business. Thus, MPs Clare Short and Edwina Currie, the local MEP, the chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission, as well as ‘successful’ business women, are included in the programme. In addition
to networking, functions of the meetings include sharing skills and expertise, mentoring and development and general support for women mainly working alone.

I have ‘lingered’ around this group and with these women over a four-year period, attending social events, meeting up socially with some and attending a weekend ‘conference’ packed with workshops and activities. Although lingering is not necessarily a recognized research method, I would redefine my activities as that of a participant observer in and of the organization. I have learnt a lot from them along the way and realize that I find the culture of this group stimulating in many ways, but in particular because of its mix of work skills, knowledges and cultures of femininity. We have great discussions, for example about shopping, eating, cooking, decorating, colour schemes, cosmetics, as well as marketing techniques, how to construct a budget, understanding finance, using IT, public relations, managing difficult people, and so on. During this time, I have talked to many women about their work and, in 1998, I started to ‘interview’ women, but through the deployment of a lifestory method, of which I will say more below.

One of the distinctive developments in the job market in late modern societies is the expansion of the role of those engaged in work as ‘cultural intermediaries’, especially in the fields of advertising, media, design and management consultancy, but also the emergence of a new type of ‘consultant’ who offers symbolic and material services in such areas as the presentation of the self (image consultants, presentation and communication skills); care of the body/mind (stress counselling, nutrition, alternative medicine, therapies); aesthetics and design (interior design, dress design, feng shui, gardening and landscaping).

Many of the women in the group are involved in these kinds of occupations, which Bourdieu describes as occupations involving ‘presentation and representation’: sales, retailing, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, interior decoration. Bourdieu notes: ‘The fact that a large proportion of these new positions are occupied by women no doubt contributes to the realization of their potentialities, which express themselves precisely in this recruitment’ (1989: 361; emphasis added). He suggests that the ‘socially inculcated’ dispositions with which women are endowed, particularly the inclination towards style and taste, are now the basis of the ‘vocation’ which brings them to the new occupations. . . . Not the least of these, are the aesthetic dispositions required both in the production or sale of goods and services and in the self-presentation which is often an essential condition for successful symbolic imposition. (1989: 362)

Here Bourdieu is describing the occupations of the ‘cultural intermediaries’, but what Bourdieu argues about particular feminine predispositions has resonance for my understanding of how to approach more analytically the women in the group.
In a notebook entitled ‘Jobs for the Girls’ and dedicated to my field notes for the project, I wrote down some characteristics of the members that I wanted to explore further with them:

1. **Flexibility** There is very little sense of occupational stability or conventional career routes for the women; rather, their employment trajectories are piecemeal and, in some cases, a responsive opportunism to both their own economic needs and the shifting labour market. For some, this is for the usual domestic child care reasons, but, for others, redundancy from corporate organizations has cast them out into the labour force. One of my respondents had worked within a large corporation whose rationalist and hierarchical style alienated her from her management role. She explained how her observations of the poverty of the working practices, which ignored the emotional and expressive dimensions of the employees, had first led to her acceptance of the offer of redundancy, but also to developing her skills as a consultant in ‘communication management’. Most of the women were constructing and sometimes reconstructing, of necessity, what they themselves referred to as ‘portfolio careers’.

2. **Valuable skills** The women possess and are developing skills that are in increasing demand in the marketplace, both by individual clients and also by business, commerce and corporate organizations; for example, so-called ‘interpersonal skills’, being a good communicator, listening to others and elements of new management forms. In addition to these more generic competences are those of self-presentation and image; for example, care and maintenance of the body, including stress counselling, therapies, nutrition, fitness and body care and ‘alternative’ remedies, and also skills in the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’, such as interior design, wardrobe management, specialist cooking, party-giving and fashion design.

   The communications consultant referred to above had learnt her skills through a combination of corporate training and self-help, but the third characteristic of the women indicates the appropriation of informal knowledges that are central to their presentation as workers.

3. **Informal knowledges** The attainment of these skills and knowledges is often not through formal education, but through, among other things, the use of ‘self-help’ literature, including women’s magazines, TV programmes, books and videotapes, and the ‘work’ of consumption, browsing, shopping for clothes, fabrics and furniture, which develops competence in selection, combination, construction of a ‘look’ or ‘lifestyle’ and other forms of personal expression. It is easy to underestimate or trivialize the use of self-help literature, particularly by those finding their way in new workplaces. But the popular self-help books, which
occupy increasing amounts of shelf space in book shops, offer a range of knowledges and techniques for everyday life in areas such as health, spirituality, food, alternative medicines, dieting, exercise, and so on. A respondent who worked in a small computer company as a project leader talked to me about her reading: ‘I have started reading novels again now’, she commented. I asked her what she had been reading previously and she replied, ‘oh, mainly self-help books’. These, in addition to advice from an image consultant and communication consultant, had enabled her to develop a working identity and persona which, she argued, had led to an effective and successful working life.

Self-help literature and various consumer and women’s magazines are important sources of knowledge and skill. However, from my interviews, other less formal and more intangible routes were often the sources of the most useful knowledge, especially in learning about the cultures and practices of different habitus. Bourdieu (ever insightful about class and culture) describes the learning subject as having ‘the restless eye of the excluded’. Self-improvement, especially in relation to class, was a theme that emerged through my conversations with women and I will return to this notion later in the article as a process of the production of identity.

While these characteristics (flexibility, valuable skills, informal knowledges) would easily inhabit the discourses of enterprise, ‘new’ management and postmodernity, they are also strikingly present in critiques of ‘the feminine’. For example, flexibility is arguably a constant dimension of feminine subjectivity, especially, but not only, in relation to the labour market and the workplace. Now, in the post-Fordist economy, this is a necessary ‘attitude’ for all workers, from manual to professional occupational groups. Similarly, those skills more often attributed to the feminine (listening, supporting and facilitating, caring and encouraging, emotional intelligence and intuition) are now endorsed within management literature. But what is more remarkable is the accumulation of skills and knowledges about ‘care of the self’ and the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’ through the very processes of the construction of the ‘feminine subject’. The achievement of femininity in western cultures involves work on the body and appearance through the knowledge of and use of commodities and the creation and maintenance of the domestic, which is the site of consumption par excellence. In the following section, I suggest how the construction of the feminine subject is intimately linked to the practices and processes of consumption.

**The consuming self**

Retailing and the retail sector are increasingly significant in ‘spear-heading the progressive penetration of the market into all walks of British life’ (du Gay, 1996: 99). Thus, we are increasingly positioned and constructed as consumers rather than citizens. ‘Shopping therefore
becomes constitutive of subjectivity in a fundamental way’ (1996: 99). We might conclude from this observation that shopping has acquired a new status in the conduct of everyday life as well as in national economies. This is acknowledged, if a little reluctantly, by Falk and Campbell in the introduction to their study: ‘at first sight shopping does not appear to be a phenomenon of any societal significance, especially when compared with the long list of serious social, political, economic and environmental issues that face modern Western societies at the end of the second millennium’ (1997: 1). In spite of these rather revealing reservations, shopping and, more broadly, consumption are being taken seriously by sociologists both in their critique of the construction of market logic, which invades all aspects of our social lives, but also as the major site of economic growth.

What is rarely acknowledged in these studies (see, for example, Featherstone, 1991; Miller, 1998) is the long history of the link between femininity and consumption and the figure of the female consumer (Bowlby, 1985). This history is important in understanding current practices/pleasures/displeasures of consumption. Campbell, for example, notes that shopping is a ‘deeply gendered activity’ in that men tend to shop to satisfy a ‘need’ and, as such, are instrumentalist and rational shoppers (Falk and Campbell, 1997: 167–9). Women, on the other hand, while practising some instrumentalist shopping (say, for food), are more likely to see shopping as having an intrinsic value in and for itself. I agree with his observation, but find Campbell’s explanation rather weak, which is that women enjoy shopping, especially for clothes, because their ‘fantasies tend to revolve around what they look like much more than is true of males’ and ‘that females are socialized into being the aesthetically skilled gender and hence find it easier than males to appraise and assess aesthetically significant goods’ (1997: 171).

The two elements of Campbell’s explanation are, of course, closely allied. Men, it suggests, are not engaged in the pleasures of certain kinds of shopping because they are neither competent nor skilled in aesthetic judgement. They take no pleasure in ‘just looking’ and, when they walk into the high street shops, they see a sea of goods which, as they lack the appropriate criteria for judgement, remains indistinguishable and undifferentiable. I would further argue that the explanation for the difference is more radical than Campbell suggests in that women who inhabit a consumer culture are produced as consuming subjects. Femininity, we could argue, is in large part about inhabiting consumption. Thus skills attained through a wide variety of forms of consumption – the market, the department store, the corner shop, the dress shop – are important, often unacknowledged, feminine skills. In addition to these skills, the productive roles, clearly linked to consumption, such as cooking (purchase of ingredients, knowing which are the best for the particular purpose) and dressmaking and knitting (buying patterns, fabrics and
yarn), provide a fund of knowledge that can be mobilized in order to make appropriate choices and transactions. Even the stamina and resilience to spend a whole day shopping requires a particular sense of time and flow and use of ‘tactics’ (de Certeau, 1984) often exhausting those less practised in the art.

As shopping rises to the top of the table of leisure activities, especially for families, there are clearly issues here for gender relations and further validation of feminine skills. However, I wish to take acknowledgement of these skills in a different direction and ask how women become good consumers.

**The female consumer or the possibility of the ‘makeover’**

Women’s magazines offer fruitful lines of investigation into how the editors and advertising and marketing industries have addressed women, past and present, and a number of feminists have looked at these forms which mediate between producer, advertiser and consumer/reader. Within the discourses of popular women’s magazines, becoming feminine is presented as a project and, for Winship, this is intimately linked with consumption. She describes the transformation of the ideal reader of women’s magazines from the 1950s as that in which ‘woman’ becomes ‘individual’ (Winship, 1987). Thus, through advertising and editorial, the ideal female reader was addressed and constructed as an individual consumer. Winship suggests that feminine subjectivity, within the discourses of the magazines, is constituted through the practices of consumption. Femininity is the product, and successful femininity is the outcome, of work of which a major element is selecting and purchasing the right commodities.

While Winship is writing about the development of discourses of consumption in postwar Britain, popular magazine genres for women continue to address feminine skills and competencies in the aestheticization of the body and everyday life. Joke Hermes’s study of readers of women’s magazines identifies a reading repertoire, which accumulates an inventory of practical knowledge, that furnishes the reader with ‘a temporary fantasy of an ideal self’ (Hermes, 1995: 59), picking up tips, both practical and aesthetic, such as ‘table settings, fashion, colour, fabrics, cut of clothes’ (1995: 59).

Women’s magazines are examples of popular print media that have provided a lengthy set of manuals for being a woman and inhabiting femininity, but there is another dimension to the engagement with and investment in this genre, which Hermes is hinting at when she speaks of ‘an ideal self’. If we were to try and identify dominant narratives across a broad and diverse range of such magazines, one would most certainly be that of the possibility of ‘transformation’. This premise is almost always
implicit in the very act of purchasing the magazine, as its cover, through visual and textual codes, suggests both an identification for the reader and a fantasy of becoming who you want to be. Women are encouraged to see themselves as a project, their bodies and their selves as a site of production. ‘New regimes’ are the practical vehicle whereby the dedicated follower can achieve the transformation of body size, diet, face and hair, while fashion, cookery, interior decoration and sexual tips promise the same magical resolutions to the dilemmas of modern living. We might add to print media the more recent televisual versions for daytime and increasingly, in the UK, evening viewing and their obsession with the ‘makeover’ (Brunsdon et al., 2001; Medhurst, 1999). Thus, within these popular genres, the constituted feminine subject is a self in the process of transformation with the expectation, or at least the possibility, of achieving an ideal self. Self-management is required in order to be successful in this enterprise, and underpinning transformativity is the possibility of the plastic body, the flexible subject, and of becoming a more desirable self through ‘performativity’.

Magazines are but one example of the rapidly expanding market of self-help genres referred to earlier, a booming area offering ‘advice’ from sources of authority.3 Deborah Cameron points to the long history of self-help literature as an authoritative source for the making of the feminine subject (Cameron, 1995). Examples of these texts include all aspects of appropriate feminine appearance and behaviours. Cameron argues that, in advice literature of all kinds, we see the norms of what counts as acceptable and unacceptable performance, we see people actually being taught how to perform particular identities, where descriptions of ‘normal’ gendered behaviour very soon become a blueprint for ‘normative’ gendered behaviour.

A striking example of the normative advice on ‘professional’ dress codes given to women is that produced by the House of Colour (a UK image consultancy franchise specializing in ‘colour analysis’), whose catchphrase is, ‘Everyone is more attractive than they think they are’ and who say, ‘don’t to: trousers; patterned or coloured tights; bare or hairy legs or ladders in your tights; using paper tissues to blow your nose in public; scent; hair which is too long and hangs over your face; ankle chains, dingly dangly earrings or clicking bracelets; clothes that are too tight or revealing; visible underwear; carrier bags or overstuffed handbags.4 Heidi Marie Rimke (2000) is justified in emphasizing the role of self-help technologies in encouraging self-surveillance and self-governance, but there is, perhaps, a potential offered in the notion of self-help and transformation that suggests subjectivities in flux – even multiple and conflicting. As Cameron would have it, self-help literature can suggest different ways of enacting gender, offering women increased control over their lives. Thus, ‘self-help’ is powerful both as a tool of oppressive “regimes of truth”, that tell women who to be and, potentially,
as a stimulus to the imagination, an arena in which women can experi-
ment with alternative possibilities’ (Cameron, 1995: 210; emphases in
original).

**Subjectivity and governmentality**

In order to take Cameron’s insights about potentiality further, we need a
way of thinking about how these knowledges might be mobilized in
practice and to yoke this to a theory of dynamic subjectivity. According to
Rimke, in her interesting analysis of the ‘psychological’ subgenre of self-
help literature which is dedicated to encouraging ‘personal growth’,
these texts engender a highly individualized autonomous subject which,
paradoxically, is the ideal subject of liberal government.\(^5\) However,
Nikolas Rose argues against those who suggest that a ‘single model of a
person dominates within a particular culture’, stressing the importance
of paying attention to the ‘heterogeneity and specificity of the ideals of
models of personhood deployed in different practices’ (Rose, 1996: 133). I
have found this a useful way of thinking about the feminine subject,
particularly in thinking about the *articulation* of enterprise and
femininity.

Rose’s formulation, following Foucault, suggests that subjects are
subjected to a complex mixture of technologies in shaping the self, but
are at one and the same time active subjects engaged in deploying the
tactics of the self when inhabiting different sites and concomitant
identities. This allows us to envisage the often contradictory nature of
feminine subjectivities and is useful in understanding the ways in which
human beings respond to opportunities through the deployment of
human technologies in specific and contingent ways. Human beings, for
Rose,

> are not the unified subjects of some coherent regime of domination that
> produces persons in the form of which it dreams. On the contrary, they live
> their lives in a constant movement across different practices that address
> them in different ways. Within these different practices, persons are
> addressed as different sorts of human being, presupposed to be different sorts
> of human being, acted upon as if they were different sorts of human being.
> (1996: 140–1)

In taking Rose’s formulation, we can open up for analysis the different
institutions and practices that human beings encounter and look at what
kinds of subjectivities they invite and the ways in which people employ
different technologies of language, speech and narrative, demeanour,
embodiment, and so on. Rose thus argues for a ‘genealogy of subject-
ification’ which would move ‘towards an account of the ways in which
[the] modern “regime of the self” emerges . . . out of a number of
contingent . . . practices and processes’ (1996: 129). This involves

thinking about how humans give meaning to experience and how they produce experience. Humans, thus, are not produced by experience, but rather, through devices such as meaning-production, storytelling, vocabularies, repertoires, employment of codes and conventions, and so on, produce experience themselves. These techniques are not readymade, but must be activated, often differently in different social and cultural sites. These are what Rose refers to as processes of subjectification, a diverse range of processes and practices ‘by means of which human beings come to relate to themselves and others as subjects of a certain type’ (1996: 130–1). Thus, for Rose, subjectification has its own history. Importantly, he is not using the term to imply the subject as the object of domination and repression; rather, he is suggesting that we look at the process through which the subject is ‘made up’ as a certain type. There is, in Rose’s formulations, the possibility of thinking of subjectivity as being both subject to governance, normalization and domination, but also as something that is made up through the processes of subjectification which are contingent, often contradictory and by no means fixed.

‘The enterprising self’

Two of the most interesting studies that inspired me to move on with the project have been studies of cultures of work, specifically Angela McRobbie’s (1998) study of young fashion designers, which traces their careers from graduation from art school into the industry; and Paul du Gay’s Consumption and Identity at Work (1996). What these authors share is a desire to understand the production of subjectivities and identity in the changing world of work and leisure. They both draw on Nikolas Rose’s (1996) work on what he calls the ‘subjectivizing processes’ of social institutions, outlined above.

Unlike cultural studies, work has been a key category for sociology and some aspects of human geography, and recent research has begun to explore the changing nature of both organizations and modes and styles of work. Authors such as Hochschild (1983) have understood developments historically as processes of the commercialization of feeling in late 20th-century capitalism which has necessitated a re-examination of the notion of labour as split between mental and manual. She notes the shift in paid work from the commodification of physical labour to the commodification of feelings and emotions of the worker. Thus, emotional labour is sold for a wage in the so-called postindustrial society. This notion clearly resonates with well-established theories of emotional labour and its role, especially in relation to female employees, in the workplace. What Hochschild and others suggest is that the emotional, in contemporary forms of work, becomes embodied, as this key aspect of provision must be performed if it is to be seen and understood by the customer or client.
In her subtle and nuanced study of workers in the City of London, McDowell (1997) examines the way in which the body must be presented in this particular kind of work and particularly in relation to gendered performance, while Crang’s (1994) study of workers in an American themed restaurant notes how waiters inhabit different kinds of roles when performing for different client groups. Particular kinds of performance, style and deportment can be observed in many of the newer forms of retailing, bars and restaurants, whose staff present a particular kind of style, image and relationship to their clients. This suggests that employees are not only trained in style, but are, during the public elements of their working hours, trained to produce an embodied self which performs the working identity.

Warhurst et al. (2000) argue that these new forms of work are producing particular kinds of self-identity in workers which they refer to as ‘aesthetic labour’. They emphasize the importance of the performative as (drawing on Bourdieu) inhabiting embodied ‘dispositions’. What their study of hotel workers in Glasgow suggests is that employees are required to make up a particular kind of performative identity as aesthetic labourers. This identification of changing forms of work and workers is relevant to my study in that it points towards the increasing significance of aesthetics, style, presentation and performativity in the workplace which require the particular kinds of skills and competence that I have outlined above.6

I now want to return to the Women in Management group and think about them as enterprising selves; that is, subjectivities that are activated within the broader context of ‘enterprise culture’. In the course of their work, they are consultants both to individuals who are keen to develop the project of the self and work on ‘personal growth’, but also to organizations of all sizes, from homeworkers to corporate industries (Wellington and Bryson, 2001). As such, they inhabit the worlds of the highly personal and intimate in their dealings with individual clients. In addition, they work for large organizations whose changing management cultures recognize the need to train their employees in the practices of self-development and personal growth as well as how to manage the self in an increasingly competitive world. Through their work, they are ‘intermediaries’ of culture and the symbolic, to be sure, but also of the public and the private, of production and consumption, of the economic and the symbolic. They are able to inhabit these often contradictory discourses, but are also skilled in marketing their creative syntheses of knowledges and competences across these sites.

The women are themselves classically ‘enterprising subjects’, many with histories of moving in and out of occupations before setting themselves up in business and ‘portfolio’ careers. However, they are also offering those skills to others, especially those who inhabit a self that ‘calculates about itself and that works upon itself in order to better itself’
(Rose, 1989: 7–8, cited in du Gay, 1996: 60). While this subjectivity is often described as new, I want to suggest that many of the characteristics of this subject are shared with those of the ideal feminine subject of modernity and, increasingly, postmodernity, which may well, in its fusion and the processes of subjectification, especially in cultures of work, transgress those more traditional binaries of gender. In activating ‘human techniques’ of subjectification, to use Rose’s terms, subjects/workers are making themselves into, among other things, aesthetic, emotional, personal labourers, creatively producing themselves as enterprising subjects.

Du Gay (1991), using Miller and Rose’s (1990) work, notes how companies and corporate organizations are seeking to cultivate enterprising subjects that are autonomous, self-regulating productive individuals. Here, enterprise refers to that plethora of ‘rules of conduct’ for everyday life, energy, initiative, self-reliance and personal responsibility. Du Gay points out that the notion of the entrepreneur not only describes those who have set up in some business initiative alone, but extends into the ‘ideal employee’ of larger corporations. Examining management literature, he notes that: ‘Self-management’ is the key here, ‘how to handle yourself to your own best advantage’. The advice given to all workers is to ‘make a project of themselves’; that is, to work on their relations with employment and on all other areas of their lives in order to develop a ‘lifestyle’ that will ‘maximise the worth of their existence to themselves’ (du Gay, 1991: 55).

This description of the pervasiveness of the enterprising self-governing self is useful here in two ways: first, it is helpful in understanding the women themselves and the ways in which they inhabit their professional lives as ‘can do’ business women – enterprising, resourceful, creative and well organized; and, second, the need for businesses to encourage their employees to ‘find the entrepreneur inside themselves’ offers potentially rich pickings for consultants who can enable this (such as the women in my study). Thus, the skills and competences that many of the women in my study share are those required in the project of the self. In addition, they are marketing these skills of self-management. The project of the self requires labour: aesthetic, corporeal, physical, emotional and related knowledges which I have suggested the women have accumulated through a range of ‘advice literature’, but also by inhabiting femininity.

**Changing technologies of the self: questions of method**

It is clear that we need to explore these new forms of subjectivity, if such they are, in terms of how they are lived. McRobbie and du Gay have made important contributions to this and both indicate the complex
relationship between those forces that shape the self and subjectivity and
the ways in which actors can and do respond to different kinds of
opportunities through the exercise of human technologies.

I have already learnt a lot about the women in my study from the time
spent with them and to a great extent by sharing some of their
experiences, not only by belonging to their group, but also, during the
time of my membership, by becoming a manager of my university
department and, in common with many academic colleagues in the UK
and elsewhere, feeling the pressure of the discourses of enterprise,
autonomy and self-management within that institution. I was certainly
conscious of the necessity to produce myself as a more entrepreneurial
worker, but also, under the pressure of a more individualized and
competitive workplace, to avail myself of the psy-discourses embodied in
the notion of the ‘care of the self’. At this stage of my research, I began to
recognize the ways in which my contact with the women in the group
was both revealing and constitutive of new forms of identity and
articulation of the self; that is, my own self-in-flux.

In order to develop the project further I needed more data and
considered carrying out open-ended semi-structured interviews with the
women. However, I formulated a method which, in its very process,
would encourage and activate a reflection on ‘the self’. I encouraged (or,
Among other things, these detailed (auto)biographies recount experi-
ences, trajectories and the accumulation and deployment of knowledge
in the process of identity formations through personal and other forms of
relationship, employment and other types of life chance. In retelling
their stories, my respondents are activating their sense of self and, in so
doing, reflecting on their identity.7 Our discussions are defined and
shaped by the categories through which the women articulate and
express their own sense of themselves through accounts of their own life
experiences. By refusing, as it were, a prescriptive, critical or even aca-
demic viewpoint, certain discourses of deconstruction of notions of the
self, gender and work are enabled. This approach also applies to the
accounts that the women give me of their use of different kinds of media
texts and artefacts as well as their explanations of, for example, self-
improvement. I am interested in these artefacts and their observations on
the extent to which they invest them with meaning and their accounts of
how they have put them to use in working on the self.

I now want to draw on one constant theme that has emerged thus far
from my interviews: that of ‘self-help’. My opening question is, ‘tell me
how you got to be where you are’, which invites this reflection and self-
construction. One of my participants, born in 1950 and who has run her
own design company since 1975, took me back to her working-class
childhood, her father who taught her to read through the newspaper
headlines before she went to school and who persuaded the local
librarian to devise a reading programme for her. He also made it his business to find out about educational scholarships, which resulted in her attending a grammar school where she met and formed a close friendship with the daughter of an upper middle-class bohemian family. She spoke of her astonishment when she first visited their house:

it was heaven to me. A large house overlooking Greenwich Park. I was a quick learner ... ‘never eaten avocado before? Well, find out.’ I had never eaten brown bread toasted! Her mother was a set designer in the theatre and the house was a dream. The walls in the drawing room were very dark green, and the curtains were floor to ceiling, black cotton with a satin finish with huge dark red poppies. I can remember every detail of that house... I learnt a lot from that family.

Her family background, her father’s encouragement, what she described as the ‘self-help idea’, her friendships and the fact that, in her words, ‘I was a quick learner’ are the complex formations of an ‘enterprising’ subject. A particular mix of class and gender threatened to operate as barriers to her educational and career opportunities, but she responded to the opportunities which her introduction to a different *habitus* enabled in the construction of her identity.

This seizing of opportunity was also evident in Jane’s account of her progression towards her current job as a public relations manager. At one point in our conversation, she said that she had now turned to reading novels. I asked her what she had read before, to which she replied:

Self-help books. [A: ‘What kind of self-help books?’] *How to Win Friends and Influence People* – I still have that by my bedside – that was the one which really helped me and made a difference. Then there’s one called *Skills with People* which is absolutely brilliant – and it really works! I read a lot of that kind of stuff, but I am doing it less now. But they taught me to be really positive – and that you can achieve what you set out to.

Jane had also learnt a lot from the Women in Management group:

[they’ve] given me a lot of confidence. I always think of Judith’s talk – think about a golden thread holding your head up. And I never ‘trip’ around the office, like taking small steps, like a little woman – I stride around! You just pick up these little things, don’t you? It does make a difference those things, oh yes. Oh yes, and image, how to present yourself... I am getting better at that – I have learnt a lot. I never used to wear a suit – I thought it was too... formal ... but now I think it looks business-like and professional – and it is important.

Two other slightly older women, Helen and Wendy, are, as Helen puts it, ‘climbing down the corporate ladder’. They have both been employed in larger corporations and become disillusioned by the hostile conditions of working: highly competitive, assuming no family responsibilities, the
necessity of ‘presenteeism’ to prove your dedication, and so on. Wendy has her own communications consultancy and Helen runs a dress agency. Both draw on a mixture of the skills they learnt in their corporate employment and on what they describe as their own intuition and knowledge of the working world.

I am getting complex accounts of women’s lives that interweave biography with history, enabling me to interpret these stories within the context of changing landscapes of opportunity and constraints in an expanding consumer society. This work continues slowly, but it is worth saying, at this point, that the women themselves are engaging in the project with me reflexively which affords them opportunities to participate in the research process. It is in this self-reflexive space that the work of the production of the self is going on and it is the self-awareness of the subjects of the study that is often not acknowledged in more conventional uses of lifestories and the conversational interview. I am also aware of the ‘therapeutic’ nature of what we are doing together and that the lifestory encounters between the respondents and I are imbued with the very discourses of self-help and care of the self.

Conclusion

Through this project, I aim to explore the usefulness of theories of subjectivity and the extent to which discourses of enterprise, creativity and self-actualization are salient in lived practices and trajectories of the self. By casting my ‘interviews’ as lifestories, I will also, albeit via the unstable vehicle of memory, obtain accounts of biographies and identities in process across time and can invite reflection on shifting modes of subjectivity.

My proposition that consumer skills and knowledges are not simply used actively in, say, the construction of identity or the use of products in combining lifestyles, but are being actively transformed into marketable commodities (especially, but not exclusively, by women) articulates the enterprising subject and the feminine subject, but is also, because of the informal accrual of these skills, suggestive of more complex accounts of class and gender. I am arguing that these skills, knowledges and authorities are being given new value within the developing consumer culture and enable women to enter the labour market as different ‘made-up’ market subjectivities.

While I am now pursuing individual lifestory interviews, I remain part of the Women in Management group, as their existence as a collectivity is an important dimension of the ways in which the women engage with the discourses of normativity and potential governmentality. For example, the rigidity of the dress codes presented by the House of Colour representative was greeted by hoots of derision, while most of the women believe that you can make the best of yourself by wearing the
'right' colours; a trivial example, perhaps, but there is a space within this collective for debate, discussion and reflection on the working worlds they inhabit.

Finally, I want to say something about feminism. This term does not appear in the discourse of Women in Management, but much of what they do is underpinned by an assumed feminism. Returning to my description of my first meeting with the group, I can now acknowledge that what intrigued me most about the participants was that I was looking at a powerful version of feminine feminism. But that is another story.

Notes
1. In December 1998, 95 percent of members voted in favour of a proposal to merge with the Institute of Management. Since 1 January 1999, Women in Management has been an IM Special Interest Group, focusing on the management development needs of women.
2. These figures reflect a more general trend in Britain, where women account for 50 percent of all business start-ups, and in the US, where female-owned businesses employ 27.5 million people and generate $5.6 trillion in sales annually.
4. ‘House of Colour: Professional Dressing for Women’, leaflet circulated to members of workshop. Deborah Cameron (1995) analyses career advice for women which encourages them to emulate men’s language and speech patterns if they are to be successful – the ‘verbal equivalent of power dressing’. I will be exploring this aspect of self-help literature with the women in my study.
5. Angela McRobbie makes a similar point in relation to the new ‘creative’ worker/subject within cultural intermediaries for whom work is ‘the self’. Thus, work itself is the source of reward and society has no obligation of provision (McRobbie, 1998: 83).
6. Warhurst et al. (2000) quite rightly insist that these performative identities are not restricted to female workers. In the light of my study, this is suggestive of the fluidity of performativity and embodiment which destabilizes or at least troubles gendered working identities.
7. For a discussion of the value of different forms of interview to research in cultural studies, see Gray (1997, 2005).
8. Judith ran her own consultancy in communications and ran a workshop for the group.
9. One of the main constraints on progress is the availability of time, partly due to the choice of method which is time-consuming, but also a consequence of researching busy ‘cultural intermediaries’.
References

**Biographical note**
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