**Waiting like a girl? The temporal constitution of femininity as a factor in gender inequality**

**Abstract**

This paper explores temporal constituents of the female self in terms of their role in underpinning ongoing gender inequality. Drawing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young, together with sociological approaches to ambivalence, I suggest that these temporal subjectivities are embodied, arise from the split subjectivity associated with woman as simultaneously subject and object, and counterpose the neoliberal emphasis on ‘choice’ and agency with a more traditional gendered ‘expectation’, or ‘waiting’ style. The dialectic between both temporalities, in which neither is hegemonic, results in a chronic state of ambivalence which impedes women’s ability to fully project themselves into the future, a skill significant to planning and career ambition and the absence of which suspends women instead in an extended present. The paper aims to do two things in particular. In conceptual terms it aims to explore aspects of the configuration of the gendered self that underlie the stalling and slowing down of the gender revolution and which can be seen to provide a ‘missing link’ between structures, institutions and micro-cultures. In empirical terms, it suggests a future research agenda, of which this paper constitutes a beginning, through which such gendered temporalities can be explored in greater detail via ethnographies of women’s lived experience of time throughout the life course.

**Key words**: Gender, time, temporality, ambivalence, choice, expectation

**Background and introduction**

There is considerable evidence that the ‘gender revolution’ begun in the 1970s in Europe and North America is not yet complete, has indeed always been uneven and in certain key ways has stalled. Not only did it affect the middle-class more than the working class (which had retained more traditional gender patterns) but changes applied to work life more than private life (which continued along a gendered division of labour), to women’s lives more than men’s and to younger women’s more than older women’s (Bass 2015; Cha 2013; Charles and Bradley 2009; England 2010; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Kohli 2007). There is a stubbornly persistent gender pay gap which opens up from some six months after graduation (University of Oxford 2015) and proceeds apace as women advance through the life course (for example, 12 years after birth of the first child women earn 33 per cent less per hour than men), being at its highest for women in their fifties (ONS 2019) and culminating in a gender pay gap of around 40 per cent with regard to pensions (Dakers 2017).

Where much feminist research suggest the necessity of an adjustment of state policy, cultural norms and individual or household practices in ensuring a greater balance between labour and love, or work and care, by contrast this paper focuses on the structures of the self, suggesting that it is also to temporal dispositions that we should look in order to discover obstacles to further equality. To advance my argument I will draw on Simone de Beauvoir’s work on gendered temporality, whose value to sociological understanding of temporality is as yet insufficiently recognised. By contrast to neoliberalism’s imperatives on the individual to reflexively mould the self, Beauvoir’s concern is with the lived body and on the associated dispositions which, in that they are embodied, habitual or tacit and largely pre-conscious, are less amenable to reflexive transformation. In the case of the feminine habitus, these dispositions are generated by a gender hierarchy as bedrock of inequality that has persisted over decades of socio-political change and that shapes a constrained embodied style which is then carried into arenas recently opened up for women.

The nature and consequence of embodied feminine spatial dispositions is the focus of the well-known and influential collection of essays by Iris Marion Young, *Throwing like a Girl,* (2005) which directly builds on Beauvoir’s work. Young noted that the tension between immanence and transcendence results in an ‘ambiguous transcendence’ in which women’s capability for bodily movement (‘motility’) and use of space is inhibited, balancing a mixture of activity and passivity, agency and constraint, identifiable in terms of such features as constriction, reaction, timidity, uncertainty, hesitancy and inhibition. Seeing oneself as simultaneously both subject and object results in a defensive posture and a ‘closed’ body, leading both to women’s inability to take up literal space and to extend their abilities and ambition fully into the world, where ‘the point, for Young, is not merely the restriction of physical movement, but that motility is the foundation of subjectivity’ (Carel 2012: 102)

Whilst Young has concentrated on spatial attributes, her observations (as indeed the concept of motility itself) can equally be extended to include the temporal, although this dimension has not been developed to the same extent in feminist scholarship (with philosophers such as Bonnie Mann and Megan Burke important and pioneering exceptions here). That is, these temporal aspects are similarly relational and constricted and can perhaps be summed up by the disposition of ‘waiting’, a passive, constrained embodied style that suppresses women’s agency in a fundamental way if, as Lois McNay suggests, ‘agency is an act of temporalisation where the subject transcends the present through actions that have an inherently anticipatory structure’ (2000: 46). Waiting thus imposes a brake on further progress in the gender revolution as well as on women’s individual freedom, a largely invisible structure that, along with institutional and other factors, shapes and underpins the gender pay gap, among other things.

The paper will proceed as follows. I will first explore the temporal constitution of gender inequality, drawing on Beauvoir’s original work, supplemented by recent feminist scholarship that has helpfully developed her ideas. I will then explore the way that temporal constitutions can be understood in the context of contemporary or ‘hybrid’ femininities (Budgeon 2014), which combine traditional femininities with aspects associated with traditionally male subject positions. This combination results in a marked ambivalence, in which the two contrasting modalities can be experienced as fragmented or contradictory on the one hand, or else can be mobilised flexibly according to context. In the second part of the paper I will look at the lived experience of these temporalities, drawing on a range of published empirical accounts that provide insight into the texture of the interplay in a range of everyday circumstances and which are implicated with more or less agency in women’s lives. This paper’s contribution is the modest one of offering a theoretical outline of this area with some illustrative examples of women’s lived experience. In the final sections, therefore, I suggest future directions for both empirical and theoretical work to take in fleshing out this promising focus more substantially.

**Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of ‘becoming woman’: the temporal structures of femininity**

In *The Second Sex* (1997) Beauvoir demonstrates how gender is a temporal structure, how femininity is constructed in such a way that temporality is a major feature of inequality in the gender regime and how sexual objectification involves and constitutes a particular and gendered experience of time (Burke 2018). What is unique about Beauvoir’s contribution to gender performance can be highlighted by comparing it to Judith Butler’s approach (Burke, 2018). While Butler’s (1990) approach to gender similarly stresses the temporal dimension, it differs from Beauvoir’s in its social constructionist emphasis on a sex/gender split and, specifically, the notion that gender is i) based on repetition of performative styles of femininity/masculinity over time and ii) that this can be disrupted and replaced by a different style/gender performance. By contrast, Beauvoir’s phenomenological focus is on the lived body and the constitution in time within this framework is more profoundly constituted, because embodied, and less voluntaristic. According to Beauvoir (1997), girls learn to become women by means of a process of socialization that involves a restricted mode of embodiment, the result of experiencing themselves simultaneously as subject and object, and which is one and the same time an attitude towards the world. This double(d) consciousness is moulded and intensified at key points in the female life course, associated with bodily events such as puberty, menarche, heterosexual sex, coupledom, pregnancy and motherhood; it gives rise to friction and tension in that at all times the woman uses her own subjectivity and holds simultaneously her own view of the world and the view that the male gaze holds of her, an outward directedness that always loops back on the self. This ‘rupture’ from the more androgynous child’s state of unitary consciousness constructs the category ‘woman’ as a temporal being located in a condition of immanence, characterized by a passive, constrained temporal condition which is that of ‘waiting’. Beauvoir meant, by the term ‘immanent’, and drawing on Hegel, a subjectivity embedded in the cyclic rhythms of care and domesticity, as compared with the masculine transcendent, operating in the world of creativity and freedom (Deutscher 2008). Beauvoir sees this dyad, or dialectic, as a general structure of human existence but whilst both men and women can experience both aspects there is a ‘significant difference in *how* they live these temporalities’ (Burke 2018:117).

Indeed, for women this involves an inhibition on agency seen as a projection towards the future. Burke, explicating Beauvoir, notes: ‘waiting is temporal hiatus between the past and future… a distinct experience of the present as passive’ (2018: 117), that is, without strong intentional links to past or future. It is, moreover, an experience in which woman is annexed ‘into the universe of men, the world that is *for* men… insofar as they come to create and solidify a woman’s situation, as a *relative* existence’ (Burke 2018: 118). Carmen Leccardi and Marita Rampazi describe this mode of gendered subjectivity as ‘expectation’, which is a ‘gendered representation of the future’ (Leccardi and Rampazi 1993: 369) involving a hopeful, but essentially powerless, anticipation of personal events – romance, marriage, children – and, by contrast with planning, cannot be conjured into being through will and effort but rather, the antithesis of choice, relies on contingency, fate, and receptivity to the agentic choices of others. That ‘waiting’ is a key constituent of power relations, extending to gender, class and race, is highlighted in the sociological and anthropological literature (Schwartz 1974; Crapanzano 1985; Bourdieu 2000b) . Crapanzano’s ethnographic study of apartheid South Africa depicts the texture of this experience as one ‘directed towards the future – not an expansive future, however, but a constricted one that closes in on the present. In waiting, the present… is a sort of holding action – a lingering… in waiting, the present loses its focus in the now’ (1985: 44).

Whilst Beauvoir was writing from the point of view of a middle-class white European, and whilst clearly some women will have greater resources at hand to resist this subordination, or may on the contrary, acquiesce in it, deriving a sense of power and value from it, Beauvoir’s point is that this temporal constitution, and thereby subjugation, applies to (all) women, in relation to men, in so far as women are disadvantaged in the terms of a hierarchical gender regime. Burke notes: ‘what is key for Beauvoir is that temporality is a central way the existential, political, and material differences between women and men are lived’ (2018:120) and further notes that: ‘The ways a woman is positioned in time through her relation to men… underscores that being anchored “in time” is the temporal dimension of objectification and subordination’ (2018: 121-2). The masculine self is not founded on the self-body split and there is a continuity between masculinity and agency and hence an intentional arc leading towards an open horizon. By contrast, marriage, pregnancy and motherhood, as they are socially constituted, have the effect of closure for a woman, as if her own story is somehow ended: further in the life course the menopause discourse additionally encourages a woman to look backwards to her true self and to view the present in terms of loss and deficiency (Gullette 2004). Indeed, nostalgia is a disposition associated with femininity per se, where one’s ‘best self’ is associated with the self of extreme youth, a trope fed by the discourse of the ‘double standard of ageing’ (Sontag 1979). Moreover, the shifts and disjunctures in women’s consciousness and the changes in social status associated with menarche, motherhood and menopause, disrupt biographical continuity, undermining ability to project oneself imaginatively into other stages of the life course, both forwards, in youth (Brannen and Nilsen 2002) and backwards, in later life (Gullette 2004).

Although they cannot evade the consequences of the male gaze entirely, Beauvoir suggests that women can, and do, challenge and resist this process in a variety of ways. These include refusing to take up ‘feminine’ subject positions such as heterosexuality, motherhood and so on; invoking everyday resistances in gender performativity (and this is where Butler’s work is most salient); and leveraging the experience of uneven degrees of freedom including empowerment in certain fields to effect changes in others (McNay 2000; Risman, 2018). However, by contrast to the era in which Beauvoir was writing marriage and motherhood are no longer the main roles that define many women today with employment central to identity for men and women. In the next section, I consider how the temporal dyad or dialectic Beauvoir noted operate in this new context, some seventy years after she published *The Second Sex*.

**Temporal structures of femininity in late modernity: hybridity and ambivalence**

The enduring manner in which freedoms and oppressions together constitute the feminine self in late modernity becomes clear when we explore the form taken by contemporary ideals of femininity which have been described as hybridized or hybrid femininities (Budgeon 2014). This is centred upon women’s largescale involvement in the labour economy *together* with their continued responsibility for domestic roles; their involvement in obligatory sexuality with an emphasis jointly on sexual empowerment *and* conforming to traditional feminine norms in order to be desirable to men (McRobbie 2009). In other words, hybridity comprises both traditional modes of femininity and more masculine styles and roles. The resulting composite forms, in which traditional femininities, newer femininities and dispositions or capacities are intertwined, complicate the traditional binary relationship of masculinity and femininity yet do not replace it. This is because whilst young women incorporate traditional aspects of masculinity alongside traditional aspects of femininity in order to succeed, firstly in the classroom (Ringrose 2007) and later in the workplace women remain ‘reassuringly feminine’ (McRobbie 2009) suggesting that such hybrid femininities do not challenge hegemonic masculinity but complement it (Budgeon 2014).

Hybrid forms are heterogeneous in terms of their mix of a feminine and masculine elements across both class divisions, age/stage and fields within the same society. There are also differences between local cultures. For example, as Sofia Aboim notes in her review of gender practices across Europe, despite globalizing processes that affect all countries, ‘local gender cultures’ do not disappear: ‘they are simply transformed into stages, that invite hybridizing processes to occur as a result of the different appropriation of cultural norms’ wherein ‘each system or structure of the gender order, from production to cathexis… can have its own set of norms where juxtapositions may promote plurality’ (2010: 173). A common theme through this complexity, however, is that of an ongoing gender inequality, including in countries with a strong commitment to gender equality such as Sweden, suggesting a deep and obdurate source lying in that of ‘gender contracts at the micro-level of individual agency’ (Aboim 2010: 192) and below this of the gendered self that makes up each half of the couple.

Hybridity brings with it particular temporal challenges, comprising managing in a coherent way modes associated with work and care, or the masculine and the feminine, which are not neatly associated with discrete realms, public and private, but rather form a complex multiplicity of overlapping temporalities implicated in gendered ‘timescapes’ (Adam,2000): concerns and rhythms of care accompanying women to work and vice versa. In the context of planning a career, young women must knit together two temporal orders – that of relational and economic time respectively - that differ ‘in terms of logic, scansions, rhythms, types of rationality’ (Leccardi and Rampazi 1993: 354). That is, (young) women have to manage the co-existence of a rational-instrumental approach to time, associated with transcendence and the future, and the caring time of immanence. Unlike for young men, whose forward projections are not marked by discourses such as the biological clock or double standard of ageing, and who moreover have seen a ‘temporal destructuring’, enhancing agency as the constraints of conformity to normative timings have relaxed, women thus face a highly challenging temporal regime and Leccardi and Rampazi (1993: 361; 370) suggest that the co-existence of these elements in fact results in ‘considerable ambivalence when the time comes for making choices and projecting oneself into the future’ because ‘choice’, although an undisputed good and mark of competence in neoliberal times, produces particular anxieties resulting from its potential to destabilize this delicate temporal balance and disrupt expectation.

The condition of ambivalence, including temporal ambivalence, can be understood further through sociological approaches beginning with Georg Simmel. His focus was on the ambivalence that results from the dialectic tension inherent in social forms arising from the co-existence of ‘a diametrically opposed element’ and the resulting ‘sociological dualisms (Levine, 1971: xxxv-vi), some of which may gain ascendancy at certain times, but none of which are hegemonic. Merton later expanded this seeing ambivalence as an element of social structure resulting from ‘incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour assigned to a status’ or social role (Merton 1976: 6, quoted in Cassidy 2000: 15). Subsequently many theorists of modernity, including Bauman, Beck and Giddens, have also maintained the centrality of ambivalence in both socio-structural and psycho-social dimensions to individualized late modern society. In terms of gender and time, we can see choice/ agency and the more passive expectation similarly held in a dialectic tension which may be more or less manageable in some situations, or else contradictory and fragmented in others where ambivalence may lead to temporal paralysis. Ambivalence maps onto the ‘extended present’ (Nowotny 1994), which is an uneasy combination of linearity and recurring cycles is experienced as both speeded up and endlessly prolonged so that ‘tomorrow never seems to arrive’ (Brannen 2005: 114). Characterised by a surging busyness of tasks at hand that, as Julia Brannen puts it, ‘leaves little time or space to contemplate what lies beyond the present’ (2005, 116-7), we can see that, whilst used by Nowotny to refer to a general condition in postmodernity, it has a particularly gendered dimension.

A more fine-grained approach to the multiple kinds of future orientation is provided by Iddo Tavory and Nina Eliasoph who, building on Husserl, distinguish protentions or ‘moment-by-moment anticipations that actors usually take for granted’ (2013: 909) from actors’ trajectories through time that involve certain projects and goals, and finally from the enframing temporal landscapes, such as those associated with industrial time and with late modern time respectively. Narratives are key to temporal orientations: trajectories sit within narrative structures organized by individuals in order to produce a coherent biographical whole, whilst temporal landscapes are accompanied by specific framing narratives, which shift in line with changing governmentalities and discourses. Neither temporalities, nor the narratives that enframe them, are either unitary nor necessarily compatible and Tavory and Eliasoph note:

‘Rather than expecting the smooth operation of tightly interlocked dimensions,

then, we expect people to choreograph these modes of future-coordination in

ways that may often seem effortless but that always require skill and may

sometimes be quite fraught’ (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013: 922).

Bourdieusian theory highlights how both protentions and planning are linked to deep-seated, corporeally-embedded inequality wherein ‘people’s social positions come with implicit future orientations, toward both the immediate and the longer-term future [which] lead to different courses and strategies of action and different evaluations of what is possible within a specific situation’ which in turn maintains inequality (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013: 912-3). In that gendered expectation may impact on planning but not on protentions allows it to be largely invisible from the outside as well as inarticulable in lived experience; in that both agency and expectations remain part of the gendered habitus in late modernity allows us, following scholars of social mobility (e.g. Friedmann 2016; Lawler 1999) to understand gender hybridity as a kind of habitus clivé. To my mind, the continued presence in cultural debates of the trope of ‘having it all’, signals this hybridity, simultaneously juxtaposing both the fullness of masculine transcendent agency and its absence, in feminine immanence and lack, and does so without a true understanding of its structure (Pickard 2018; Risman 2018).

**Methods**

Having provided a conceptual discussion of gender, time and temporality, in the second half of the paper I turn to examples of lived experience. For reasons of space I will focus on two key points in the life course, namely young women’s temporal experience, and secondly that of mid-life and older women. In both cases my aim is to capture something of the texture of the dialectic between agency and expectation, highlighting the common themes across the heterogeneity, the consequences of ambivalence when it becomes particularly fraught, and the kinds of factors that can tip the balance more or less in favour of agency.

In terms of method, in a field as wide ranging as this – essentially women’s everyday lived experience, my search was necessarily both broad and eclectic, comprising a mixture of systematic searching supplemented by snowballing via bibliographies in relevant articles and citation searches in google scholar to encompass both journal articles and books. I began with a database search using JSTOR with ‘gender’ and ‘time’ as my search terms going back to 2010, and supplemented this with a manual and electronic search in the archives of appropriate journals including generalist and specialist sociology journals in the fields of gender studies, employment studies and life course (both youth and age studies). In all cases I read relevant articles alongside Beauvoir’s theoretical schema employing what Jennifer Mason has called an ‘investigative epistemology’ and following Mason’s call to creatively, reflexively and ‘greedily’ re-use secondary data ‘to answer pressing research questions in quite distinctive ways’(Mason 2007:40). Some articles focused on time and temporality specifically, others considered time in the context of women planning families and/or career progression, discussing experiences of IVF and egg freezing, juggling work and family commitments and describing dating practices at college and beyond. The excerpts I present are, as far as possible, among the most rich and nuanced illustrations of temporal texture I came across, but at the same time indicative of themes running across many empirical research projects and echoed in other published scholarship. Limitations of the data include the fact that the women were mainly professional or white-collar middle-class, heterosexual (as far as this information was provided) and mostly white [[1]](#endnote-1). Additionally, I was able to find more examples of empirical research with younger women as compared with those at mid-life or older, a fact reflected in the balance of the following sections. For this reason, the analysis and discussion is not intended to offer generalised conclusions, only pointers to further research, including research that will take this theoretical framework as its starting point. Whilst Beauvoir’s thesis as presented here provided a helpful filter with which to make sense of lived temporal experience, I acknowledge that this was not the purpose of any of the original research projects per se. Disadvantages relating to the latter include data that was often tantalising in what it did not reveal or explore further; however, I agree with Mason that its strengths lie in the fact that ‘some forms of interpretation are *only possible from a distance’* (2007: 41).

**The dialectic between choice and expectation in the lives of young women**

Gendered expectation is a factor whose influence can be traced very early on in younger women’s approach to career planning. For the young women in Hakim’s (2003) study it directly shaped career choice: ‘I knew from a very young age that I was going to get married and have children, that was my career in life… I went to work in a bank for four or five years. And I always knew it was just a job until I had children’ (p. 54), said one.

For other women its impact appears later, ambivalence manifesting in a reluctance to throw themselves wholeheartedly into a demanding career in case they thereby ‘block’ contingent opportunities of an emotional/personal kind. This was famously described by Facebook Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg, in her best-selling self-help career guide, as a failure to ‘lean in’ professionally:

‘A law associate might decide not to shoot for partner because someday she hopes to have a family. A teacher might pass on leading curriculum development for her school. A sales representative might take a smaller territory or not apply for a management role. Often without realising it, the woman stops reaching for new opportunities’ (2013: 93).

Indeed, the spinning of the wheels in the continuous present, a temporal stalling, is very much at the heart of the experience of gendered ambivalence. For many of these young women, as Sandberg herself acknowledges, ambivalence is frustratingly open-ended as they are not even partnered and thus a long way off from making real and concrete family plans. Moreover, many women find themselves lacking the power to set the tempo on this dimension of life. Much research shows that within the heterosexual dating field, women’s temporal orientations both frequently clash with men’s and are dominated by masculine temporality setting the ‘pace’. In terms of plans and trajectories, heterosexual romantic scripts continue to require single women to wait to be chosen, or chosen again, or to achieve girlfriend status, as many studies of ‘hook-up’ culture make clear (for example, Bogle 2008). In her study of the casual culture of dating and relationships among students, in which casual sexual encounters, or hook-ups, are prominent, Bogle observes, ‘women feel that men have the power to decide whether a hook-up turns into “seeing each other” or “going out”’ (2008: 173). (This is paralleled in the continued gendered pattern of men proposing marriage: see England 2010.) As Bogle further describes women put emotional labour into trying to manipulate men’s agency: ‘It’s putting in the brainpower and working to mould him into thinking I am his girlfriend and keeping myself back and not bother[ing] him..’ (p. 176). This indicates also the kind of labour that goes into ‘passive’ temporal modes, agency that is directed at self, rather than at the world, or at attracting rather than achieving and part of the doubling back associated with the fragmented consciousness. It is the kind of consciousness upon which some women’s dating self-help books both rely on and cultivate in emphasising working on the self whilst waiting, which ‘reconstitute feminine passivity as agency’ (Taylor 2012: 84). Another skill women need in this context is that of deciding whether and when to give up ‘hoping’ (a more immediate form of gendered expectation). Bogle notes, ‘When the two parties were not on the same page, women struggled with whether to keep “hanging on” with the hope of a happy ending or to “move on” and start searching for a new partner’ (p. 177). The result is more ambivalence; more stalling.

Middle-class college girls far more than their working-class peers subscribed to hook-up norms as consistent with ‘self-development scripts’ (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) at the same time, unlike their male peers/potential partners, they did so because they felt relationships to be incompatible with self-actualisation (with the incompatible temporal approaches). This was a way out of ambivalence, a method for concentrating on planning agentically by disentangling career and romantic trajectories and putting the latter ‘on hold’. An upper-class woman told researchers Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth Armstrong, ‘It’s hard to have a boyfriend and be really excited about it and still not let it consume you’ (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009: 603); she elected, then, to forego the boyfriend experience. Similarly, young women in Brannen and Nilsen’s research based in Manchester, UK and Bergen, Norway, also mobilise agency by splitting planning and expectation and staggering them in time; the result, however, is an inability to imagine themselves beyond a certain age (when this splitting no longer seemed appropriate). One young woman wanted children but told the researchers: ‘No, not right away . . . I’m talking about the future, way ahead in the future. No, I couldn’t think of having a child now. It wouldn’t be me. I couldn’t imagine doing that now . . . In ten years time, I don’t know’ (Brannen and Nilsen 2002: 522).

However, even achieving stable coupledom, including marriage, does not necessarily resolve this temporal friction for high-flying professional women as suggested in Brooke Bass’s research. When she asked a sample of young childless professional couples about the direction they perceived their career would take over the next 5-10 years one thirty-year-old married professional woman, like 77 per cent of her female respondents, mentioned parenthood without prompting and furthermore as a confounding factor, introducing uncertainty and undermining planning. ‘”I don’t know when we’re gonna have kids. We’re thinking about it. So I’m not sure how that would work in (sic) with the career path”’ (2015: 371). The women across Bass’s study consistently deferred educational or training opportunity and hesitated both to change careers and accept leadership roles, all in order to leave themselves ‘open’ to possibilities as well as to the anticipated challenges of (potential) parenthood. Thus anticipation of motherhood - a specific kind of gendered expectation - impinged on women’s career trajectories before the point at which they have children and in some cases long before.

Women’s temporal ambivalence is one factor accounting for a slower career trajectory towards promotion as compared to male peers; indeed ambition itself, with its clear agentic grasp of the future, is more compatible with masculine temporal dispositions, where ambition can be seen in terms of temporal assertiveness and the fluent linking of protentions and plans or trajectories. Thus, the male half of Bass’s couples, by contrast to their partners, ‘had no problem clearly planning out their career paths; indeed they imagined a full-time uninhibited investment in more satisfying and senior-level positions’ (2015: 373). Only 10 percent of the men in her sample mentioned parenthood when looking ahead and, where they did so, it was often linked to an emphasis on career success in the context of preparing for family responsibilities, a perspective clearly compatible with planning. In other words, for men there was not gendered expectation but gendered choice meaning that family was consistent with career focus.

Ambivalence as structuring both a stalling or procrastinating and a suspension in an extended present is tangible in Elizabeth Szewczuk’s (2012) account of (slightly older) women’s use of IVF technologies. Her study suggests that technology – in this case, the contraceptive pill – props up this ambivalence, allowing a balance between agency and gendered expectation which is only ruptured, for the women in her study, with the discovery of age-related infertility. Fertility ‘intentions’ took the place of expectation, rather than plans in these women’s lives, and in many cases had never been discussed with their partners: ‘I don’t actually remember sitting down and discussing it.. I guess in my mind, with rosy glasses, I thought that at some point I would have children’; ‘It was more of an unspoken kind of thing, if you know what I mean’ (Szewczuk 2012: 435-436). Thereafter, for these women, the technology of IVF prolongs further expectation with a direct impact on other roles and focuses and Szewczuk relates: ‘Some respondents left the workplace altogether while others cut their working hours… In contrast to their silence on modern contraception they narrated in thousands of words details of times, dates, places, sensations, techniques, discussions, frustrations and expectations of their IVF experience.’ (2012: 440). Although this was not the focus of Szewczuk’s research, one need only juxtapose this with Bass’s data to start to develop a picture of how the agentic possibilities theoretically enabled by not being a mother might in practice have aided everyday protentions and short-term projects while expectation impacted on longer career trajectories and other life plans.

However, in other circumstances use of technology can help tip the balance from a deep ambivalence to one permitting the mobilisation of greater agency. Brown and Patrick’s (2018) exploration of the experience of time for single women who had frozen their eggs reveals how they felt that, by doing so, they might be able to transform themselves into agents who were no longer at the ‘mercy’ of time, and their ‘biological clocks’. Many felt that, by disentangling their desire for a relationship from their possible future as a mother, they could free the relationship from an imperative to ‘lead’ to this, allowing it to stay ‘pure’. The researchers observe: ‘Jackie expressed a desire to use egg freezing to help her disconnect the protention, or moment-to-moment anticipations, of her romantic life from the long-term project of having children’ (2018: 971). However, ambivalence remained insofar as many women also sought to reassure prospective partners of their absence of plans, thereby using this freedom in the service of highly gendered scripts: ‘he was like, *You’re 42, you’ll want a family right away*, and I was like, *No*, I said, *I’m not in a rush. I froze eggs’* (p. 971; original emphasis).

A potentially more radical resource in strengthening the agentic side of the dialectic or hybrid is derived from the use of certain self-help and other inspirational texts and memoirs championing the single life and resisting the mentality of waiting. Despite the conservative scripts reproduced by some, as noted earlier, I agree with Kinneret Lahad (2016) who notes that nevertheless ‘such a reading at times misses the political alternatives that these texts may offer’ (2016: 15). As a good example, in the self-help text ‘*Single Girl’s Manifesta*’ (Stewart 2005), the message directly addresses temporal dispositions that are a key source of inequality and exhorts a new attitude to time enabling more general self-determination: ‘“Don’t wait till you are tying the knot to celebrate your marvellous self” [You are] the head of the household you can buy a home on your own, invest for yourself and in your future”, “Don’t wait for someone else to make this timely decision” , “Making choices in your life equals gaining control over your future”’ (Stewart 2005: 172, 129, 130; quoted in Lahad 2016:15). As Lahad notes ‘this is a future which offers another happy ending, one which does not follow the socio-temporal linear trajectory of marriage with kids’ (p. 16). This is a temporal disposition that Kate Bolick’s (2015) celebrated memoir also encourages, when she urges the revaluation of the ‘spinster’ identity, by which she means one focused on intentionality and self-determination. Such texts enable access to imaginaries of possible lives which value a woman’s life in and of itself regardless of marital and reproductive status and have the potential to reconfigure temporalities accordingly.

However, the material quoted above has focused more on middle-class young women with careers where their adoption of more ‘balanced’ hybrids (involving more masculine aspects alongside the feminine) may involve greater ambivalence. Empirical research in some cases suggests that working class femininities may have an advantage in terms of agency in some circumstances, compared with both middle-class women and men more generally. In a study of young Italian NEETS (those not in education, employment or training) Gaspani notes that the temporal destructuring that facilitates young middle-class men’s agency does not help those without the ability to choose self-development, career and leisure. For young women, however: ‘Potential family responsibilities appear on the horizon of biographical choices placing constraints, but also guaranteeing additional resources for the elaboration of decisions’ (2018: 158). That is, if work plans remain unfulfilled, ambition for home and motherhood still enables future projection, unlike for their male peers, for whom the fact of not having a job precludes the planning of family life. This is evidenced in the following examples. Beatrice, with a technical education, reflected: ‘My boyfriend has a stable job, and surely we’ll start a family shortly… while I have no idea how my working future could be’. Antonio, with an MSc, by contrast says, ‘Maybe I notice that I’m interested in a girl but because of work uncertainty I don’t take a further step’ (pp 157-8). Here, in circumstances of devastating social change and individualized risk and precarity, gendered expectation in fact gives an advantage to women over (even well-educated) men and may indeed be seen as a form of agency.

**Temporal dispositions in mid-life and beyond**

Later in the life course, with the advent of motherhood or other caring duties, comes a complex set of temporal circumstances wherein planning and waiting, protensions, projects and long-term plans relating to home and work in various combinations, are not aligned and may even be directly opposed. As a female professional told researchers Lisa Mainiero and Sherry Sullivan:

‘Most of my career changes have been influenced by family reasons. …It is time for me to move on career-wise. [But] my family would be very disrupted by a position that required me to put in extensive overtime which any new job… would demand (2005: 111).

They go on to describe how women’s plans factored in the possible needs of a variety of others, from spouse, children and ageing parents, to friends and co-workers. By contrast, later in their careers, among their study of high achieving professionals and managers, the researchers found that men were able to move towards clear goals, career-wise, and ‘tended to examine career decisions from the perspective of goal orientation and independent action’ (2005: 111). Women attempting to balance the demands of work and care may experience suspension or even paralysis in a kind of temporal immanence which leaves little room for extension of self into the future. As one female manager aged 51 told Atkinson and colleagues:

‘I struggled with the whole issue of the guilt associated with not being there for my child and, in a sense, created my own glass ceiling. I found it difficult to embrace some of the recent activities that were required as a member of the Board because I felt that pull in terms of my child. My career was very important, my family was very important and I didn’t quite know how to manage both without one suffering’ (2015: 1024).

Indeed, ambivalence is often accompanied by a number of uncomfortable emotions, including guilt, anxiety, or anger: one might suggest that part of the performance of ‘reassuring femininity’ (confirming their femininity to self and others) involves not only carrying out care roles but also suffering for their success and ambition at work through accepting overwhelming demands that involve exhaustion, self-sacrifice and self-abnegation performed on the temporal level (Hochschild’s (1997) study is replete with examples of this swirling mesh of emotions as well as suggesting links to lowered well-being). Julia Brannen’s study of call centre employees’ time management similarly illustrates how such processes embed working mothers in the extended present, as she specifically points out. One example is that of ‘J.J’, a woman in her late 40s, part of a dual-earning couple with two children. J.J and her husband shared the housework but J.J. felt responsibility for care, both of the children and of older relatives, in a way her husband did not share. Meanwhile, at work she was a team supervisor but still undertook emotional labour, such as organizing collections for retiring colleagues. The result for J.J. of this harassed juggling of care and work was a ‘treadmill of the extended present’ (p. 127), involving short-term goals mixed with a responsive mode, a stuttering forward-orientation combined with waiting, with little feeling of agency or control, and little opportunity to work out a better future accommodation of work and family demands. In this situation, temporal agency is restricted to an extended protention or short-term planning: the temporal horizon is narrowed to the days and weeks ahead.

There is a distinctive element of looking back clear in later life temporal orientations, moreover. A study of women University professors (Macfarlane and Burg 2019 ) found that promotion to this rank came both later in life compared to men, was based more on past achievements than future potential, and involved a considerable commitment to pastoral roles and other ‘academic housekeeping’ with future-orientation often focused on generativity through mentoring younger women. Furthermore, it was often perceived by line managers more in terms of a career’s ‘closure’ or completion, rather than as entering a new hierarchical rank which one could ascend. This is echoed in other employment situations where older women are both considered to ‘peak’ in professional terms ten years’ earlier than their male peers and denied training opportunities that are given to older men. However, women themselves internalise the double-standard of ageing and in a study carried out by the TUC the authors write: ‘A participant in a union learn project reported that she felt “too old” to undertake new training and development opportunities in spite of regular emails from her employer offering her courses.’ Another said: ‘I sort of think to myself “I’m not getting any younger”. Would they think that maybe they ought to have somebody a bit more on the ball and young?’ (TU, 2014 :25-7).

**Discussion and concluding thoughts**

This paper has taken up Paula England’s (2010) suggestion that explanations for the stalling of the gender revolution should be sought in the constitution of the self. Specifically, it has looked at gendered temporality, bringing together the conceptual framework of Simone de Beauvoir with insights from the sociology of ambivalence, originating in Georg Simmel and exploring this in the context of feminist analyses of gender hybrids in the context of late modernity. What this conceptual framework has facilitated is an understanding of hybrid femininities as involving a heterogeneous dialectic or interplay between feminine and masculine temporalities comprising a more constrained state of expectation on the one hand and an agentic intentionality on the other, interplay between which characterise women’s subject positions in both public and private realms. Whilst the ensuring ambivalence can lead to a temporal gridlock and sometimes irresolvable procrastination there are consequences for one’s private life, including the loss or severe delay of motherhood, as well as for one’s career trajectory and ambitions.

Drawing on a variety of reported experiences gleaned from a secondary analysis of qualitative data, suggests that the imaginative use of reproductive technologies as well as liberatory discourses and texts can serve as levers of change opening up an intentional arc linking protentions, projects and long-term plans. Yet, technologies and texts can also serve the opposite function in being used to prolong more disempowered states of expectation. The weight of the data across a wide range of diverse publications seems to suggest that middle class professional women may find ambivalence more of a challenge partly because of the degree to which they have embraced masculine norms and attributes alongside the femininities; the (admittedly limited evidence) suggests that, by contrast, working class younger women can turn such traditional femininities to their advantage.

There was less empirical material illustrating the nuanced temporal experience of older women, indicating the necessity for further research in this area. Several themes of interest suggest themselves here. In particular, whilst the gender pay gap is particularly significant for older women and whilst one response by organizations in very recent years has been to introduce ‘menopause policy’ into workplace organizations it is unclear how this works in terms of temporal dispositions. However, given the predominance in such policy of menopausal ‘problems’, based on a negative biomedical model and a presumed departure from a fertile youthful ‘norm’, it is less likely to encourage temporal agency than to instil the message that it is ‘too late’. By contrast, countertexts in the form of the midlife memoir indicate a more positive and liberatory experience. Indeed, Beauvoir’s framework suggests that the menopause mediates entry into the ‘third sex’ position, with the possibility of leaving behind fragmented temporal subjectivities (associated with the subject position ‘woman’) and regaining a unitary selfhood. How this occurs, what factors may facilitate it, and what effect this may have on temporal experience is of great theoretical and empirical interest. It is, moreover, important not only for older women but earlier in the life course in countering the double standard of ageing and its experiential dimension for young women that their time (of value) is short.

Whilst the temporal focus I have employed here enriches the understanding of the gender regime in general, and of hybrid femininities in particular, overall the notion of the dialectic suggests both that the gender order is not fixed and furthermore that the impulse to change in a positive way conducive of greater temporal equality may come from a variety of sources. The imbricating of all layers of society, as Risman suggests, is such that ‘like a game of dominoes, when one part changes, it can set off a chain reaction’ (2018: 27). It also suggests the need to explore further how class and race, as well as age, impact on this. This work thus both confirms the continued relevance of Beauvoir’s insights and holds out the possibility of enriching it and elaborating it in a more sociological sense.

A finer grained identification of the constituents of feminine subjectivities provides an alternative lens onto the causes and consequences of the continued gender gap throughout the life course and supplement the already significant focus on the gendered consequences of structural temporalities (see Bryson 2007). This focus can provide an explanatory framework for findings that otherwise remain elusive, such that ‘being a woman’ in itself (when all other factors, such as children, age, gendered division of labour at home and so on have been accounted for) has a negative effect on success in the workplace (e.g. Santos and Dang van Phu, 2019). The temporal dispositions and practices that comprise ‘being a woman’ are thereby revealed as the next frontier for feminist sociology, for feminist activism, and for contemporary culture itself, to address.

**Notes**

1. Respondents in Brown and Patrick’s (2018) study were all professional middle-class women but in terms of ‘race’ and ethnicity included Black, Latina and white professional women

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)