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NEOLIBERALISM AND LEAN IN:
SPACES FOR FEMINIST SOLIDARITY?

by

Kristin Hübner

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Acknowledgments

Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the Lean In phenomenon, by which I mean Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's bestselling book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), its critical reception in British and US media outlets, and the Lean In Circles which it spawned. I discuss the book's messages and their link to feminist and neoliberal discourses and demonstrate how these messages were reproduced, challenged and transformed not just by the book's journalistic audience but also by women who had read and engaged with it and participated in Lean In Circles. My analysis is based on a year-long participant observation in five different Lean In Circles in England and semi-structured interviews with nine of their members. It is further based on my analysis of Sandberg's book and its media reception, both of which I examined using thematic analysis and following Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach to analysing policy texts. In the literature, *Lean In* has been considered a prime example of the entanglement of neoliberal and feminist discourses. It has been criticised for overlooking the importance of structural inequalities and for its strong focus on what the individual – and primarily white, middle-class and highly-educated – woman can do to overcome gender related obstacles in the workplace. In this thesis, I contextualise this criticism of the book by studying Lean In as a broader phenomenon and paying attention to its social effects. I show that while the text itself may be an exemplar of neoliberal feminism, the effects of the Lean In phenomenon are more nuanced and contradictory and, in some cases, have given rise to challenges to structural gender inequalities at work. This research thus contributes to the academic debate on *Lean In* and the entanglement of neoliberal and feminist discourses through its multi-layered analysis of the Lean In phenomenon.

Abbreviations

LIC/LICs – Lean In Circle/Lean In Circles

WPR – 'What's the problem represented to be'

COO – Chief Operating Officer

Chapter 1: Introduction

Can neoliberalism and feminism ever truly go hand in hand? While these two discourses seem irreconcilable to many feminist academic writers, there nevertheless seems to be a trend to use feminist language and ideas in conjunction with neoliberal values and objectives in Western media discourses. A prominent example of this entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism is Sherly Sandberg's bestselling book *'Lean In. Women, Work and the Will to Lead'* (2013). Sandberg, who is Facebook's second in command and Chief Operating Officer (COO), published her book in an attempt to combat the dearth of women in leadership positions, but journalists and scholars alike were quick to point out that her "feminist manifesto" (Sandberg, 2013: p.10) was ridden with advice that was ultimately more pro-business than it was pro-women or feminist. In this thesis, I will take a closer look at the critical reception of the book to examine which elements of *Lean In* were deemed controversial and which were considered praiseworthy and why. This way, I hope to give insight into how neoliberal feminism is picked up on and framed in the media. I will also examine the book itself and its underlying messages to study the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism in it. The thesis further includes an exploration of how women who have read the book and decided to join Lean In Circles engaged with it.

While it is difficult to neatly place *Lean In* into a particular genre, the book has elements of an autobiography, a business manual and a self-help book. Sandberg published it after the success of her TED talk in 2010, which addressed the lack of women in leadership positions. She used many of the ideas presented in this talk as the basis for her book. The book itself focuses on the various different ways in which, according to Sandberg, women make decisions that, accumulated over time, are unhelpful to their careers. These decisions as well as behavioural patterns range from not being confident and assertive enough to making the wrong choices when it comes to romantic partners and the distribution of childrearing responsibilities. While Sandberg acknowledges the importance of gender roles and gendered expectations in all of these 'decisions', she nevertheless asks women to reflect on them more deeply and make the 'necessary' changes. The COO's focus on women rather than organisations, political institutions and culture, arguably led to the book receiving mixed reviews. Critics seemed to agree that Sandberg, a privileged, white, heterosexual, highly-educated US-American billionaire, had little in common with her target audience and was in no position to give out advice to women, particularly if she was to put the 'blame' primarily on them. While these points are all valid and will therefore be discussed in-depth, this thesis aims to explore the Lean In phenomenon

in a more comprehensive way by examining not only the book's messages and their reception but also how women in Lean In Circles engaged with this criticism and found their own ways of tackling gender inequality in the workplace. This is crucial to understanding the phenomenon as a whole, as *Lean In*, like any text, can be interpreted in myriad ways. Simply focusing on *Lean In*'s key ideas, as a handful of scholars have done, neglects not only the nuances and contradicting messages within the book but also how its target audience understands and engages with it. As Stuart Hall (1993) points out: messages encoded by a sender are likely to be interpreted, or decoded, by a receiver in a way that resembles the sender's intended meaning. However, while there is a chance for the receiver to decode a text 'accurately' and completely agree with its message and even act accordingly, oftentimes the receiver will interpret a text from their individual perspective and negotiate its meaning in a way that aligns with their believes and experiences.

It is therefore important not to restrict the study of the Lean In phenomenon to academic readings of the text but to include more voices, particularly those of women who have actively engaged with the book. In order to accomplish this, I decided to not only look at *Lean In* and the academic literature concerned with it, but to also examine the media discourses connected to it and to talk to women who are members of Lean In Circles. These circles are essentially groups of women that are founded online via the leanin.org website, which was launched after the publication of the book, and that either communicate online or, more commonly, meet up regularly. The women in these circles are often brought together by a desire to improve their careers and network with other women. The circle members are often in the same industry or profession and use the group meetings to share their experiences in the workplace with others and exchange tips. The circles remain largely overlooked by journalists and scholars alike who critically engage with *Lean In*, which, as a result, neglects that Sandberg did more than write a book. The Facebook COO arguably staged an intervention, which started with a TED talk, developed into a book and an accompanying website, which, as a non-profit organisation, offers educational content and access to the Lean In Circles. In this thesis, I therefore look at the Lean In phenomenon as a whole and situate it in the media debate regarding whether women 'can have it all'. I demonstrate that Sandberg's answer to this question, based on her book, is a neoliberal 'yes, they can'. Furthermore, I show that Sandberg's optimism is not as blind to structural constraints and privilege as some critics argue as she demonstrates *some* awareness of her advice being mostly relevant to women in positions that allow career advancements and to women with the necessary cultural

and financial capital. More importantly, however, I will illustrate that her Lean In Circles initiative complicates the criticism of her approach being too focused on the individual woman. While the circles can be used as spaces for women to work on and 'improve' themselves to become more aligned with the ideal, neoliberal and "disembodied worker" (Acker, 1990), they can, as I will demonstrate, also become spaces where women transform *Lean In*'s messages. In these cases, the Lean In phenomenon is no longer about, as many critics have argued, neoliberalism co-opting feminist language to propagate the importance of the individual's responsibility for their own success and well-being. In these instances, the Lean In phenomenon creates spaces for women to come together, discuss and tackle issues related to gender inequality and bring about changes in their workplaces. While I do not argue that the Lean In phenomenon is revolutionary or not deeply rooted in neoliberal ideas and values, I suggest that it leaves room for feminist thought and actions and cannot merely be summarised under a neoliberal attempt to appropriate feminism. The Lean In phenomenon, particularly when it comes to the circles, is characterised by a certain flexibility that leaves room for different kinds of interpretations and approaches – including different kinds of feminist interpretations and approaches.

My thesis contributes to the debate on neoliberalism and feminism and the connection between the two discourses. It further contributes to the field of women, work and leadership. The study of both research areas is as important as ever, given the continued lack of gender equality in almost every aspect of the workplace. The gender wage gap, the lack of women in leadership positions or the dearth of women entering the often higher-paid STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers are ongoing global issues, which need to be continuously studied and monitored in order to tackle them. Interestingly, both neoliberal and feminist discourses address these inequalities, albeit for different reasons. Some academics argue that neoliberal discourses integrate feminist calls for gender equality when it serves the purpose of upholding neoliberal ideas such as the dominance of market logic and the decline of the welfare state. The feminist goal of getting more women to become financially independent through participating in the labour market, can, for example, be 'hijacked' for neoliberal purposes such as a decrease in the government's spending on welfare (McRobbie, 2013). It is perhaps this view on neoliberal discourses incorporating feminist language that has shaped the perception of *Lean In* the most and made the book appear in an almost sinister light. This thesis, however, aims to examine the different nuances of the book, its mixture of feminist and neoliberal ideas and values, and Sandberg's intervention as a whole more

closely. I will use the following paragraphs to outline how I have structured my thesis to explore these different nuances.

Chapter outlines

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I begin my exploration of the Lean In phenomenon by giving an overview of the relevant literature. This includes a discussion of my theoretical framework, which was mainly influenced by post-structural feminism and a focus on discourses and their performative power. I explain how I conceptualised terms such as gender, class and intersectionality drawing on ideas from Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. I further introduce Joan Acker's theory of gendered organisations and inequality regimes and give a brief overview of the literature on women, work and leadership. This serves the purpose of situating the often-negative workplace-related experiences the women I interviewed and observed in the Lean In Circles had, which I discuss in chapters 4 and 7. This exploration of the literature on women and work concludes the first part of this chapter. In the following part, I focus on the literature on postfeminism and neoliberal capitalism's appropriation of feminism, which, I argue, partially overlap. I demonstrate how the Lean In phenomenon relates to the debate about postfeminism and neoliberal feminism and how Sandberg's book was characterised and discussed by academic writers. The intention behind this chapter is not only to provide an overview of the relevant literature but to situate the Lean In phenomenon within this literature and to function as the basis for the following analysis chapters.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My discussion of the literature is followed by my methodology chapter, in which I outline the research questions that informed this project:

> 1) what are Lean In*'s key messages and underlying assumptions,*
>
> 2) how do Lean In Circle members engage with the Lean In phenomenon,
>
> 3) what were the media reactions to the publication of the book?

Here, I also introduce the methods I employed to answer these questions, which included thematic analysis, Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach to analysing policy texts, semi-structured interviews and participant-observation. I discuss the merits and demerits of these methods and explain why I chose them to help me answer my

research questions. This discussion is linked to my methodological and epistemological framework, which was rooted in post-structural feminism, and I explicate why I decided to approach my research from this angle. The methodology chapter provides an overview of my data and how I gathered and selected them. My data sets consisted of *Lean In*, the book; 27 favourable, critical and mixed reviews taken from US-American and British media outlets; my fieldnotes from a year-long participant-observation in five different English Lean In Circles; and my transcripts from interviews I conducted with nine of their members.

Chapter 4: The Lean In Phenomenon

In chapter 4, I introduce and explore the Lean In phenomenon, by which I mean the TED talk the book originated from, the book itself, the Lean In website and the circles. I demonstrate that Sandberg's TED talk contributed to and was part of a wider debate about whether women 'can have it all' and needs to be understood as part of this context. Another key player in this debate was Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former professor at Princeton University, who published an essay in *The Atlantic* titled 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All'. Her position was often contrasted with Sandberg's and praised for her focus on the responsibility the state and corporate organisations have in establishing gender equality in the workplace. In my discussion of the debate, however, I demonstrate that the positions of Sandberg and Slaughter are not as different as the media made them out to be. This chapter also illustrates the findings derived from my participant observation. I show how the launch of the Lean In website as a platform for the Lean In Circles developed *Lean In* even further and provided a tool with the potential to balance some of the book's weaknesses – namely its lack of encouraging women to act collectively or its heavy focus on the individual woman and its lack of critique towards organisations. In this chapter, I introduce the three different types of circle approaches I encountered during my participant observation and show how they can range from being self-focused to outward-oriented and how some of them resemble feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s.

Chapter 5: Lean In – Key Messages and Underlying Assumptions

My fifth chapter focuses on *Lean In* and its underlying messages. My thematic analysis of Sandberg's work brought up four prevalent themes, which I elaborate on in this part of the thesis. The themes were 1) motherhood/parenthood, 2) gender roles and biases 3) neoliberalism and 4) mistakes women make. I explore these themes by summarising Sandberg's understanding of them and analysing text passages that were representative for each theme in-depth. I focus my attention on the silences,

presuppositions and discursive effects underlying the text, following Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach for text analysis. Hereby, I demonstrate how Sandberg's use of gender-neutral language sometimes masks gender inequalities, how she frames women as a homogeneous group often synonymous with (future) mothers and how this homogeneity ignores difference in terms of race, class, sexuality or (dis)ability. This chapter further highlights how, contrary to the claims of most critics, Sandberg does explore structural and cultural factors that contribute to gender inequality but that she simultaneously undermines them by focusing her attention on what women can do to change their perceptions of them. I show how her neoliberal outlook, ultimately, frames gender issues as women's individual problems by encouraging them to un-learn negative gender stereotypes, which, according to Sandberg, only lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.

Chapter 6: Lean In*'s Reception in the Media*

The discussion of the book's underlying messages is followed by my chapter on *Lean In*'s reviews. My focus again lies with the silences, presuppositions and discursive effects produced in these texts to illustrate how Sandberg's ideas were engaged with, disseminated, challenged or transformed. I show how reviewers primarily focused their articles on three themes: feminism, motherhood and Sandberg's personality. I show how these themes were approached differently in positive, negative and mixed reviews. This chapter explores how the reviews contributed to the debate about what constitutes 'real' feminism and how Sandberg was portrayed as either too feminist or not feminist (enough). I further examine how journalists focused less on the content of the book and more on Sandberg as a person, who was either worthy or unworthy of praise depending on how the journalists perceived and portrayed her. Sandberg's 'likeability' played a significant role in most reviews and determined their tone. The chapter further illustrates how Sandberg and the debate surrounding women and work or women in leadership positions was often framed as a question of finding the right balance between a focus on career and motherhood. Sandberg was often presented as either a regular mother who struggles with feelings of guilt as much as the 'average' mother or as a privileged or even bad mother who can afford professional help.

Chapter 7: The Lean In Phenomenon from the Perspective of LIC Members

In this final analysis chapter, I explore the circle members' views on the Lean In phenomenon. Based on my interview material, I discuss why the women felt the need to join a circle and/or read the book in the first place by highlighting the various forms of gender discrimination they had experienced. I then discuss how the circle members

engaged with the criticism directed at the book and show how most interviewees were aware that the book was perceived as 'women-blaming' and written from a rather privileged perspective. By illustrating how the circle members perceived and positioned themselves towards these critiques, I want to add more depth to the critical discussion of the Lean In phenomenon. I wish to add the voices of the women who have actively engaged with the ideas and material provided by Sandberg and demonstrate that the circle members do not just follow her advice but bring in their own ideas and use the circles for a range of different purposes. I explore these purposes in the final part of this chapter where I examine how women from different types of circles (self-focused, consciousness-raising or outward-oriented) framed their circle experiences and reasons for joining.

Chapter 8: Final Reflections on the Lean In Phenomenon

In chapter 8 I summarise my methodological approach, theoretical framework and key findings. This chapter serves the purpose of linking the ideas presented in this thesis together and thereby answering my research questions. I demonstrate how my findings and analysis add new layers and contribute to the existing literature by showing the complexity of the Lean In phenomenon. By bringing the different chapters of the thesis and therefore the different parts of the phenomenon together, I illustrate that the neoliberal feminist messages in Sandberg's book are only partially reproduced and, more often than not, challenged and transformed through the media discourses discussing the book and, most importantly, through the women actively engaging with Sandberg's ideas. They use the COO's intervention as a template for their own ideas and thereby redesign what it means to 'lean in'.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework of this thesis and the relevant literature linked to this project. I have approached my research project and its underlying questions from a post-structural feminist perspective, which I explain in more detail in the first part of this chapter. In this part, I lay out how I have drawn on Judith Butler's theory of gender, Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of class and Michel Foucault's understanding of power and discourse. This theoretical framework laid the groundwork for my analysis and enabled me to examine the discourses within and surrounding *Lean In* and how they relate to feminism and neoliberalism. In the second part of this chapter, I review the literature on women, work and leadership; neoliberalism; postfeminism, and the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism. My review of the relevant literature concludes with an overview of how *Lean In* was received and discussed by academic and non-academic feminist writers. The purpose of this literature review is threefold. Firstly, I want to demonstrate what previous research has revealed about gender inequality in the workplace and the obstacles women, particularly those who aim for senior management positions, encounter as this is something that deeply relates to the experiences of the women in the Lean In Circles. Secondly, as *Lean In* is often considered to be a neoliberal feminist phenomenon, I want to illustrate how the link between the two discourses (i.e. feminism and neoliberalism) is approached and conceptualised by feminist scholars. Lastly, I want to pinpoint how exactly *Lean In* fits into the debate over the neoliberalisation of feminism and what criticisms were raised by feminist writers.

Theoretical Framework

In this first part of the chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework as well as the epistemological and ontological assumptions that informed this research project.

I have approached my analysis of the Lean In phenomenon, its messages and how women in Lean In Circles engage with them from a post-structural feminist perspective. By this I mean that I understand texts and discourses, in this case the discourses surrounding women and work in general, and *Lean In* in particular, as having performative power. They can thus "enact[ ] or produce[ ]" (Butler, 2011: p.xxi) what they articulate and take part in the creation of certain subjectivities, femininities and ways of being. I am interested in media discourses about *Lean In* and women and work, the way they interpellate women and encourage them to embody certain characteristics and how women, on the other hand, negotiate these interpellations. I

therefore do not suggest a deterministic relationship between discourses and the 'individual', but rather a dialectical one.

My theoretical framework and understanding of feminism, gender and discourse is predominantly influenced by Butler and Foucault and based on the assumption that language does not simply describe but rather produces the things it refers to. From this perspective, language and discourses produce gendered *and* sexed bodies leaving the distinction between gender and sex, i.e. the socially constructed and the biological sex, redundant (Butler, 2006). Butler's post-structural feminist approach theorises how the 'individual' is addressed and interpellated through discourses, which they then internalise, embody, perform, contribute to or challenge. This perspective enables me to think of the Lean In phenomenon as constituted through discourses that (re)produce new and old notions of gender, class, feminism and leadership and which interpellate 'individuals' to internalise and embody these notions. It does, however, also leave room for examining how women resist and negotiate these interpellations.

While there is no single definition of the term discourse, it can be understood as "the way in which a particular set of linguistic categories relating to an object and the ways of depicting it frame the way we comprehend that object" (Bryman, 2012: p.528). The term is closely linked to Foucault and his understanding of power where there is no "'centre of power', not a network of forces, but a multiple network of diverse elements - walls, space, institution, rules, discourse" (Foucault, 1995: p.307). According to the French philosopher, discourses are "mechanisms of discipline" and have "normalizing power" (ibid., p.304) as they do not only define what exists but also what is deemed normal, average or good. As discourses and power are omnipresent and putting things into a certain hierarchy and order, examining specific discourses can help researchers better understand power relations and the resulting social inequalities. The discourses that are of particular interest to this research project are the ones relating to the neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism in the context of the Lean In phenomenon and women and work.

Before I review the literature on these topics, I want to go into more detail about the theoretical understanding of gender that informed this thesis. Butler (2006) suggests that the dominant discourses that produce gender are part of the *heterosexual matrix* through which the gender dichotomy and heterosexuality are naturalised and made hegemonic. Her ideas allude to what is commonly referred to as *heteronormativity*, i.e. the assumption that people are born *either* 'female' *or* 'male' and as a result

display 'feminine' or 'masculine' behaviour and are sexually attracted to the 'other sex'. Butler's ideas therefore not only inform feminist but also queer theory as they challenge the hegemonic status and normalisation of heterosexuality. Her writing, which is heavily influenced by Foucault's understanding of power and politics of truth, further questions why only certain bodies and genders are considered to be *intelligible*, i.e. to 'make sense', and how trans people in particular are often perceived to be "at the limits of intelligibility" (Butler, 2001: p.622). Butler's contributions, alongside those of many other scholars, have therefore highlighted the importance of sexuality and trans visibility. Her writing is thus arguably informed by an intersectional perspective. "Intersectional paradigms", as Patricia Hill Collins puts it, "remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (2002, p.18). First used by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), the term intersectionality originally marked the importance of increasing the visibility of issues black women face in their daily lives and making them a more prevalent feminist agenda. Crenshaw argues that it is necessary to look at the intersection of gender and race in order to be able to comprehensively talk about black women's experiences instead of examining these categories separately or simply 'adding them up'. Intersectionality later became a concept referring more generally "to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008: p.68). Intersectionality as a concept is used to acknowledge heterogeneity amongst groups of people who share certain markers of identity such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, (dis)ability or sexuality. In other words, acknowledging intersectionality means that while certain groups of people (e.g. women) might have certain experiences of oppression in common (e.g. sexism) they will still differ in terms of the discrimination or privileges they experience based on other factors (e.g. race or class). My interview sample, for instance, consisted of women who differed in terms of age and ethnicity, but they all shared the privileges associated with a middle-class lifestyle, particularly regarding their levels of education, income and employability.

Class was thus one of the most important and simultaneously most overlooked intersections with gender in the context of the Lean In phenomenon and neoliberal feminism. My understanding of class for the purpose of this research project draws on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class as a position of status in society influenced by different forms of capital. Sheryl Sandberg, for example, has accumulated large amounts of social, economic and cultural capital, which arguably

make her part of the 'elite'. According to Bourdieu (1986; 1989), social capital describes how well connected a person is to other people and can increase and decrease not only according to the number of people a person is acquainted with but also depending on how much social, economic and cultural capital these acquaintances possess. In Sandberg's case, her large amount of social capital is illustrated by the many names of influential and wealthy people she calls friends and acquaintances in her book. Economic capital, in the Bourdieusian sense, primarily refers to a person's financial wealth or lack thereof. To use Sandberg as an example again: as a reported a billionaire, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook undoubtedly has an abundance of economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) also points to the importance of cultural capital which can take three different forms: *the objectified state* (e.g. paintings or musical instruments), *the institutionalized state* (e.g. titles and qualifications handed out by universities) and *the embodied state* (e.g. a person's knowledge or physical appearance). Sandberg's appearance and smart business attire, in combination with her Harvard degree conventionally indicate a large amount of cultural capital. She embodies a certain *habitus* (Bourdieu 1989), i.e. a set of dispositions that can be read by others as indicators of her class status. Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1989), can generally be understood as internalised, bodily expressions of class, gender and other markers of identity – e.g. the way a person speaks, dresses or moves.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus can also be helpful in understanding why *Lean In* has been particularly popular amongst middle-class women as its key messages, i.e. to be ambitious, assertive and to constantly improve oneself, might be expressions of and align with a particularly middle-class of way of living and looking at the self in neoliberal societies – in other words, a particular middle-class habitus. This type of middle-class women, referred to as "strivers" by McRobbie (2013), are usually professionals as well as mothers who aim for an ideal balance between their career and family responsibilities (Rottenberg, 2014a). This balance, however, is often achieved at the expense of less privileged women. Caring responsibilities therefore do not necessarily become less of a gendered issue with more women getting into leadership positions but are instead passed on and "produce[ ] new forms of racialized and *class-stratified* gender exploitation" (Rottenberg, 2017: p.332, my emphasis). Women's success in the workplace can therefore not merely be understood as a gender issue since it is deeply connected to the reproduction of other types of inequalities.

To briefly summarise my theoretical framework, I approached my research project and the analysis of the Lean In phenomenon from a post-structural feminist perspective focusing, in part, on how discourses and language prescribe what is intelligible, what makes sense and is seen as the norm in the context of women and work/leadership. This theoretical framework enabled me to think of *Lean In* and the media reactions it stimulated as interpellations primarily directed at middle-class women with the necessary capital and a 'striver's' habitus. While these interpellations might have "normalizing power" (Foucault, 1995: p.304) they can nevertheless be challenged and transformed by the women who engage with them. The theoretical framework outlined above, also highlights the importance of intersections between gender and other markers of identity such as class, race, age or sexuality. I approached my research from an angle that was primarily focused on gender while keeping the importance of intersections with the aforementioned identity markers in mind. A thorough intersectional analysis would have meant dissecting different intersections and their role in the context of the Lean In phenomenon, which went beyond the scope of the research. The nature of my data further did not lend itself to an intersectional analysis, as the focus of the book as well as LICs seemed to be primarily on gender. The circle members, despite there being some diversity in terms of age or race, exclusively discussed their gender as an obstacle in the workplace and rarely debated other factors such as race, sexuality or disabilities. They did, however, demonstrate an awareness of their middle-class privileges. Class was perhaps the most tangible intersection in this context and I have followed Bourdieu's understanding of it which defines peoples' class status along the lines of their economic, social and cultural capital as well as their habitus. Bourdieu's perspective on class helped me make sense of *Lean In* as a book that situates women's fight for equality in a very middle-class context as it assumes a certain amount of economic and cultural capital as well as a particular middle-class habitus in its reader. The Lean In phenomenon, however, cannot simply be analysed regarding its perspective on gender or class without seeing it in its context. It is a book that tackles gender-related inequalities in the workplace from a neoliberal feminist perspective. I will therefore use the remaining parts of this literature review to focus precisely on this context: women, work, organisations and the neoliberalisation of feminism.

Women, Work and Leadership

I want to continue my review of the literature by introducing concepts and theories from the field of women, work and leadership. The latter not only represents Lean In's focal point but this type of literature also describes the contexts within which the

women that participated in the Lean In Circles often found themselves. The literature I introduce is primarily concerned with structural barriers; its language and theoretical perspective do not completely align with my post-structural theoretical framework as this type of literature does not usually adopt this perspective. I nevertheless found it to be useful as it enabled me to draw connections to my participants' experiences in the workplace.

The women I observed and interviewed usually worked for different kinds of *organisations*, which according to Joan Acker's highly influential "Theory of Gendered Organizations" (1990), need to be understood as *gendered*. In her writing, Acker critically examines the assumption that organisational structures are gender neutral and that gender discrimination and sexism are parallel or distinct processes. Acker develops Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1975) and other scholars' arguments that gender inequality is (re)produced in organisations by arguing that organisations do not just take part in the social construction of gender but are in fact deeply gendered themselves. Acker argues that this can be seen in the way labour is divided and valued, hierarchies are formed, workers interact with one another or express their 'individuality', to only name a few examples. One of the key issues Acker points to is the assumption that the ideal worker is conceptualised as disembodied, as someone who is able to fully prioritise work over looking after their household, children and other matters that are deemed 'private' and not a corporate responsibility. Women, Acker argues, are less suitable to fulfil the role of this ideal worker as their "female sexuality, their ability to procreate and their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and child care, menstruation, and mythic 'emotionality'" (Acker 1990) prohibit them from full commitment to waged labour. She goes as far as to say "[w]omen's bodies cannot be adapted to hegemonic masculinity; to function at the top of male hierarchies requires that women render irrelevant everything that makes them women" (Acker, 1990: p.153).

Similarly, Puwar (2004) argues that Western societies' strong focus on highly rational and logical workers and leaders in particular seemingly suggests that bodies no longer matter, when, in fact, the role of race or sex are merely made invisible. The "'universal human'" (Puwar, 2004: p.56) is still white and male. Acker's later work points to this as well as she takes a more intersectional approach and expands her theory of gendered organisations by directing her focus to *inequality regimes* (Acker, 2011; Acker, 2006) within organisations more generally. These can be based on not only gender, but also race, class, physical ability, sexuality, age or religious beliefs. Acker's organisational theory is overall useful for understanding how organisations are

gendered, raced and classed and reproduce gender, race and class, among other identity categories, through use of language, dress code, job evaluations and definitions, wages and many other often miniscule aspects that accumulate and manifest themselves over time. Acker also pays attention to how most organisations rely on the distinction between the public and the private sphere[1] - "the concept of a 'job' [alone] assumes a particular gendered organization of domestic life and social production" (Acker, 1990: p.149) where the private sphere is expected to provide recreation for the worker so they can return to work the next day and be as productive as possible. The private-public divide, however, only works as long as there is someone, e.g. a partner, domestic assistant or nanny – who are more often than not women, to do the unpaid or low-paid labour connected to the private realm. Acker's theory of gendered organisations and inequality regimes provided a useful lens for this research to understand my participants' experiences in the workplace. Acker's work can, however, also be criticised for essentialising what it means to be a woman and reproducing the gender dichotomy and its relevance. From a post-structural perspective, femininity, or better femininities, are not fixed or static and are instead produced through organisational structures and demands as Leslie Salzinger (2003) demonstrates in her study on workers in Mexican factories. She points to the importance of recognising "the ongoing and variegated constitution of feminine and masculine subjectivities within production relations" (Salzinger, 2003: p.15).

Apart from organisations themselves being gendered and producing gender, women encounter a vast range of other obstacles throughout their working lives that stand in

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[1] The public-private divide has a long history in Western societies and was declared by many philosophers and political theorist as the 'natural' result of men and women's different dispositions and seen as ultimately serving society as a whole. Writers such as Georg Simmel (1890) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1991[1762]), amongst many others, alluded to a 'natural' order in which women's and men's abilities and dispositions complemented each other and predestined women to be homemakers, since, in comparison to men, they were allegedly less capable of abstract thought, physically weaker, and less fragmented (Simmel) or more fragmented (Rousseau) – whatever this may mean. Despite the differences in (male) writers' opinions on 'female' and 'male' dispositions, the conclusions were vastly the same, i.e. that men are more suitable for the public and women more suitable for the private realm. As Susan Moller Okin put it: "[t]he predominant mode of thought about women has been a functionalist one, based on the assumption of the necessity of the male-headed nuclear family, and of women's role within it" (2013: p.233). The divide between what is considered public and what is considered private is an artificial one, with nevertheless real consequences. This divide, for instance, shapes the way societies define, recognise, value and compensate different types of labour. Childrearing, domestic labour – such as cleaning and cooking – and *emotional labour*, i.e. the work that goes into managing one's feelings for the benefit of others and setting the "emotional tone of social encounters" (Hochschild, 2012: p.28) are generally considered female, private and therefore unpaid types of work. Deeming women as primarily responsible for the unpaid labour in the 'private' realm usually means that women either have to work a *second shift* (Hochschild 1990) at home in addition to their paid job or that they are dependent on a (male) breadwinner.

the way of them achieving the same achievements as their male counterparts. Although research has shown an increase in women entering management positions, even the highest ranking ones (Miller 2017), there is still a significant lack of women in top or senior management roles, with women also progressing to higher positions much more slowly than their male counterparts (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Baker, 2011; Connell, 2006). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the *glass ceiling* effect and has been developed through the addition of other metaphors such as the *leaky pipeline*. The latter describes the discrepancy between the percentage of women or other minorities entering certain educational fields and careers and the percentage that ends up in senior positions in those careers. This phenomenon is sometimes explained by women choosing to 'opt-out' and prioritise their families over their careers, which is, however, challenged by many feminist writers who argue that 'opting-out' is more commonly a result of structural obstacles leading women in the direction of prioritising caregiving responsibilities (Stone & Ackerly Hernandez, 2012; Anderson et al., 2010; Beddoes & Pawley, 2014). One of the most prominent obstacles and reasons for women to 'opt-out' is a lack of flexible work arrangements that allow parents to balance family and work commitments. This lack of flexibility and structural support affects women much more noticeably than men, as women are still disproportionally regarded as primary caregivers (Smith et al., 2011). Long working hours and presenteeism (Legault & Chasserio, 2003; Dennehy, 2012; Simpson, 1998) constitute even more obstacles for women with primary caring responsibilities for children or other family members. These factors, i.e. women being perceived and expected to be the main caregivers, the lack of flexible work arrangements, presenteeism and the expectation to work long hours to demonstrate one's commitment to work, all support Acker's theory of organisations being deeply gendered. The prevalence of neoliberal discourses in many workplaces only further contributes to the pressure on the individual (woman), as success and failure are often perceived as the result of one's actions and less as a consequence of discriminatory practices, structures or biases. Acker thus notes that "[i]Inequality is more legitimate. In a culture that glorifies individual material success and applauds extreme competitive behavior in pursuit of success, inequality becomes a sign of success for those who win" (2006, p.459).

The lack of women in senior management positions and the debate over women who 'opt-out' is often focused on white, highly educated, middle-class, i.e. the most privileged, women. Research on women in less privileged positions suggest additional structural obstacles and biases: the Hispanic women managers and professionals

interviewed by Linda Hite, for example, reported that they had found themselves "as token employees, susceptible to stereotyping and isolation" (Hite, 2007: p.33). Stereotypes and biases in general constitute another key issue for women in the workplace (Kanter, 1977) as research suggests that "the managerial body is" often regarded as "inherently masculine" (Meriläinen et al., 2015: p.6). To compensate for the preference for masculine leadership styles, women have to not only work harder but "perform both masculinity and femininity in an excessive manner" (Muhr, 2011: p.338). Women have to nevertheless carefully balance displays of masculinity and femininity in order to avoid social sanctions such as being perceived as 'too aggressive' (Pick 2014). Women's bodies, as writers such as Judy Wajcman have argued, are also perceived as the 'other' and "as out of place in senior management" (1998: p.130). The male body, on the other hand, remains the standard and is not "required to de-emphasize [its] sexual difference" (ibid.). Research also points to women being less likely to ascend to senior or top management positions in the first place due to a lack of mentoring and networking opportunities (Carbajal, 2018; Pick, 2014). This lack of mentoring support for women enables men, who are more likely to receive mentorship, to climb the corporate ladder more easily and quickly.

Overall, the literature on women, work and leadership points strongly to structural and institutionalised hurdles for women in the workplace which is important to keep in mind given Sandberg's tendency, as I will explore in the next chapters and in the following paragraphs, to focus more strongly on the individual woman and her responsibility for her own success. This type of advice will prove difficult in the context of gendered, raced and classed organisations and the prevalence of inequality regimes. The ideal worker, according to Acker, is a disembodied one who is free of caring responsibilities which makes it particularly difficult for women when they remain the one's primarily responsible for most labour connected to the so-called private realm. The rhetoric of women opting-out to leave the workforce and prioritise their families only masks the reasons leading to this 'choice'. The lack of flexible work arrangements, mentorship and affordable childcare, combined with the pressure to work long hours as well as gender, racial or other forms of stereotypes and biases, continue to make it difficult for women to compete with white, middle-class men for the top positions in their careers. Neoliberal economics and discourses further increase the obstacles women at work have to face. They make career related successes or failures appear to be the result of an individual's will power and skills as the notion of meritocracy hides the structural impediments women still encounter. I will use the next section of this chapter to discuss neoliberalism in more depth. I primarily take a look at the literature

discussing the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism as this seems to be at the heart of the academic discussion surrounding the Lean In phenomenon.

Neoliberalism and (Post-)Feminism

I would like to use the following part of the literature review to discuss two of the key concepts this research project is based on: neoliberalism and (post-)feminism. I want to mainly focus on literature that examines the overlap between the two or that has provided meaningful insights into how to better understand their entanglement.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism and feminism have in common that both terms are often used to cover a broad range of things and that there is no clear consensus on what exact meaning they entail. Critics often argue that neoliberalism as a concept "has become a 'catch-all' term incapable of explaining or illuminating anything" (Gill & Scharff, 2011: p. 6). While the term's popularity and widespread use have indeed added to its various meanings, I suggest that it nevertheless captures prevalent and ongoing social, political and economic trends. This can, for instance, be seen in the way that feminism has been used and defined within the Lean In phenomenon. The book's heavy use of language that emphasises self-surveillance, self-improvement and self-sufficiency, for example, is presented as a feminist solution to gender inequality but is also commonly linked to neoliberal discourses. In order to make sense of the Lean In phenomenon it is therefore important to understand its rootedness in neoliberalism.

Historically, neoliberalism followed a period of Keynesian economics after World War II. The US, UK and other Western governments during the period of Keynesian economics tried to regulate the market through measures such as increased spending and cutting taxes in times when aggregated demand was low, i.e. when citizens were focusing on saving money rather than spending it. Keynesian economics thus, broadly speaking, relied on governmental interventions to keep the market balanced through keeping the unemployment rate low and people's spending power high (Kling, 2016). The popularity of Keynesian economics is often believed to have diminished with the appearance of "influential thinkers, politicians, and policy-makers from the last century, including Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, James Buchanan, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Alan Greenspan" (Springer et al., 2016: p.30), whose ideas and policies gave rise to neoliberalism.

Unlike Keynesianism, neoliberalism is mainly based on the philosophy that the government should intervene as little as possible and let the market regulate itself. In

his lectures on biopolitics, Michel Foucault (2008) identified competition as one of neoliberalism's defining features. In order for neoliberalism to flourish, it becomes the government's role to disseminate market logic and "to intervene in society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society" (Foucault, 2008: p.145). As a result, an increasing number of parts of a society including its members become "oriented towards the form of the enterprise" (Foucault, 2008: p.149). From an economic and political perspective, neoliberalism, stands for a system that places the market at its centre, as it is seen as the most 'efficient' way of ensuring a well-functioning society. Neoliberal logic thus usually leads to a decrease in money spent on welfare and in economic interventions form the government's side. For the purpose of this research project, however, I am less interested in neoliberalism as an economic system and more in its normative implications. These implications primarily relate to, as Wendy Brown argues, the way in which:

> neo-liberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' — the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions". […] [T]he rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action, e.g., lack of skills, education, and childcare in a period of high unemployment and limited welfare benefits. […] The model neo-liberal citizen is one who strategizes for her/ himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options (2003).

Brown's writing suggests that members of a neoliberal society are interpellated to look after and provide for themselves. They need to focus their energy on self-surveillance and self-improvement in order to thrive in a highly competitive labour market that is based on 'meritocracy'. This leaves little room for directing attention or energy towards political or organisational change. It is precisely this kind of neoliberal logic or rationality that critics of *Lean In* have identified to be prevalent within the book and take issue with. This can, however, be seen as a trend that goes beyond the Lean In phenomenon and has been discussed in the context of the neoliberalisation of feminism and postfeminism, which I discuss in more detail in the following part of this chapter.

Postfeminism

Much like neoliberalism, feminism, as Christina Scharff observes, "is a contingent term, representing many different theories", similarly "there is no one women's movement with a unified set of goals" (2012, p. 3). Butler suggests that "[w]ithin

feminism […] there is some political necessity to speak as and for *women*" (1992, p. 15 emphasis in the original), but what the category of women actually entails and what aims they should fight for needs to remain a constant source of debate. This way the "radical democratic impetus of feminist politics" (Butler, p. 16) can be kept alive. The question therefore arises as to whether the so-called neoliberalisation of feminism should be seen as part of the dispute about what feminism is and stands for or whether feminism is simply being co-opted by ideologies that are irreconcilable with feminist values and goals.

In the following paragraphs, I want to explore the concept of postfeminism as I believe that it often closely resembles what other scholars have called neoliberal feminism or the neoliberalisation of feminism. The literature on postfeminism can therefore give valuable insight into the Lean In phenomenon. The concept of postfeminism, however, despite its popularity, is not clear-cut and can refer to different social and academic trends and phenomena. I want to first give an overview of these different interpretations, before I highlight why one of these understandings is particularly relevant to neoliberal feminism and the Lean In phenomenon. My overview of the different ways in which the term postfeminism has been deployed is based on Gill's and Scharff's (2011) typology.

Some scholars use postfeminism to refer to a theoretical shift in academic feminism that takes into account notions of difference and heterogeneity and is often understood as "the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism" (Brooks, 1997: p.4). Here, postfeminism signifies the "continuing transformation of feminism" (Robinson, 2011: p.114) towards a more inclusive theoretical approach that is critical of its past focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class women. Lotz (2001), on the other hand, distinguishes between postfeminist (i.e. more inclusive) theory and academic writing, and empirical examples of postfeminism in popular culture such as more diverse representations of women or non-binary depictions of gender in the media. Similarly, Gillis and Munford (2006) show that postfeminism is often used interchangeably with third-wave feminism and the rise of notions of 'girl power' in popular culture.

While scholars such as these use postfeminism to capture the evolution of feminism towards new, 'progressive' or post-structuralist ideas, others employ the term to encapsulate a backlash against feminism or to demonstrate its depoliticisation. When postfeminism is used to signify a backlash against feminism, scholars often refer to media discourses that portray feminism as outdated and irrelevant for 'modern'

women. Feminist writers situate these media backlashes both in the present and the past, dating back to 1970s (Mendes, 2011) or even the 1920s (Faludi, 1992).

While many scholars draw on the notion of a backlash against feminism as proposed by American journalist Susan Faludi (1992), they, however, often develop this idea and use postfeminism as a concept to reflect more complex (media) discourses that value and devalue feminism simultaneously. In fact, the use of postfeminism as a concept that refers to discourses that mark feminism as passé, has increasingly been called into question as many scholars argue that there has been a rise in popularity or a re-emergence of feminism. According to McRobbie, for example, "[f]eminism is no longer despised" (2013: p.120) but has developed from liberal feminism and re-emerged in a new, oftentimes more corporate look. Feminism, in one way or another, is now being claimed and promoted by celebrities such as Emma Watson and Beyoncé as well as other influential and powerful women such as Anne-Marie Slaughter and Sheryl Sandberg (McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014a). Rottenberg (2017), in the context of feminism's increasing popularity, even questions the relevance and accuracy of describing current, popular Western discourses as postfeminist. She argues, instead, that feminism is not invalidated but becoming increasingly popular and entangled with neoliberalism. Other scholars, such as Gill (2017), however, argue that while feminism might have gained in popularity again, so have misogyny, racism and homophobia. Gill (2017) further notes that only certain kinds of feminism, often those aligned with neoliberal logic, are given a 'stage' to shine while other types, often those associated with activism, remain overlooked (see also Foster, 2016). She therefore suggests that postfeminism as a concept referring to the ambivalent portrayal of feminism in western media should not yet be abandoned despite feminism's 'revival'. It should, instead, be used to describe the combination of feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric and the simultaneous doing and undoing of feminist ideas (Gill, 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011). McRobbie was one of the first scholars to suggest "that post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism" (2004: p. 255) while simultaneously demonstrating that feminism has become superfluous since gender equality has largely been achieved. Some researchers suggest that young women in Western countries therefore often distance themselves from feminist narratives or the notion of gender being a significant factor in their lives (Dalley-Trim, 2012; Scharff, 2012; Ortner, 2014). Other scholars, however, demonstrate evidence for an increase in feminist activism across Europe (Charles & Wadia, 2018; Charles et al., 2018) or depict a multifaceted picture of young women's knowledge of and identification with feminism in a US context (Aronson, 2003). What is left of feminism

within postfeminism, many scholars argue, is often a depoliticised and 'watered-down' version of feminism frequently linked to neoliberal discourses (Lewis et al., 2017; Rottenberg, 2014a; Mendes, 2012). Within these postfeminist discourses, women are interpellated through language that revolves around self-governance, choice, individual responsibility and self-improvement (Gill, 2007; Repo & Yrjölä, 2015) as well as "the revival and reappearance of 'natural' sexual difference" (Lewis et al., 2017: p.214). The ideal postfeminist woman is young and 'empowered' through her education, career, and sexual liberties, is in control of her body and mind (McRobbie, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007) and "combine[s] the roles of consumer, homemaker and dutiful wife" (Repo & Yrjölä, 2015: p.741).

It is *this* understanding of postfeminism that is of particular interest to this research project as it is reminiscent of what other authors predominantly describe as *neoliberal feminism*. Feminist authors writing about postfeminism from this particular angle, are generally critical towards postfeminist discourses and point to the way in which they idealise only certain kinds of femininities, usually the ones connected to a middle-class lifestyle and affluence, heterosexual desirability and the ability to have both children and a career (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Postfeminist discourses are also criticised for painting women as a homogenous group and ideal neoliberal subjects, who are seemingly outperforming men in the educational sector and increasingly conquer the labour market (Gerodetti & McNaught-Davis, 2017; Bettis et al., 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2018). Through painting women as a homogenous group – often young, middle-class, white and heterosexual – these discourses then mask the influence of class, race and other categories of difference. Many scholars further take issue with postfeminist messages reviving traditional gender roles, which McRobbie argues can be seen in films and TV series like *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City* (2009). Perhaps the most common criticism directed at postfeminism from many scholars, is its strong focus on individualism, choice and "the harnessing of individual resources to overcome precarity rather than on challenging the conditions that created precarity and inequality in the first place" (Gill & Orgad, 2018: p. 484). Discourses, such as postfeminism, that heavily rely on individualism, many scholars argue, thus make it harder to recognise, name and challenge the structural foundations that uphold inequalities. Gill refers to discourses that encourage women to self-monitor most aspects of their bodies, careers and personal lives under the disguise of freedom and choice as a "postfeminist sensibility" (2007, p.147). She points out that these discourses link self-surveillance and self-improvement with pleasure and at the same time imply that the labour that goes into the processes

should remain hidden so that women "appear entirely confident, carefree and unconcerned about their self-presentation" (ibid:. p. 155). Gill and Orgad (2018) further note that neoliberal and postfeminist discourses now increasingly emphasise notions of confidence, flexibility and resilience. These discourses are highly classed and gendered and paint middle-class women as the prime example of the resilient and "bounce-backable woman" (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Similarly, McRobbie (2013) identifies a tendency in the British media to pit the idea of the hyper-organised and self-sufficient middle-class mother against working-class mothers of several children dependent on benefits and placing the former well above the latter.

The Neoliberalisation of Feminism

While postfeminism as a concept can be used to draw a connection between neoliberalism and feminism, particularly how neoliberal ideas are being put forward through the use of feminist language, this concept is not utilised by every scholar who examines the entanglement of the two. In fact, many writers come from slightly different angles, which I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

Hester Eisenstein (2005) and Nancy Fraser (2013), for example, argue that (US) feminism involuntarily enabled neoliberal capitalism as an economic system to become hegemonic. This bold and in part questionable claim, is explained by Eisenstein through her analysis of 1960s and 70s, which saw an increase in women joining the workforce, particularly in the service sector. She argues that this increase was the result of both "the economic need for a dual-worker household and the ideology of 1970s feminism" (Eisenstein, 2005: p.491f.). Eisenstein maintains that US feminism's main concern was women's participation in the labour market and that individualism and entrepreneurialism were among the key means to this end. She notes that this end also came at a great cost as family wages became a thing of the past, women occupied mostly low-paid positions and wages stagnated. Eisenstein further argues how the expansion of capitalism and globalisation led to the exploitation of women in developing countries since they were regarded as 'cheap labour' and points to the misuse of feminist ideas to justify the 'war on terrorism'. Similarly, Fraser argues that feminism used to be "[u]nambigiously emancipatory in the era of state-organised capitalism", but that it has more recently become "susceptible to serving the legitimation needs of a new form of capitalism" (Fraser, 2013: p.223), i.e. neoliberal capitalism. One example of this, according to Fraser, is second-wave feminists' critique of the family wage which ultimately gave rise to neoliberal capitalism's preferred model of the dual-earner family. The feminist ideal of greater

financial independence for women in Western societies, according to Fraser, thus coincided with, if not contributed to an increase in their precarity through "depressed wage levels, decreased job security, declining living standards, a steep rise in the number of hours worked for wages per household, exacerbation of the double shift […] and a rise in female-headed households" (ibid. 220). Fraser's main argument is that second-wave feminism started out as an anti-capitalist movement but that its critiques were *misused* and ultimately helped give rise to neoliberalism, which started blossoming alongside second-wave feminism.

Many scholars have rightfully taken issue with the arguments presented by Eisenstein and Fraser albeit for different reasons. Nanette Funk (2013), for example, suggests that Fraser's arguments are built on shaky ground as she paints second-wave feminism as too homogeneous and as almost synonymous with socialist feminism. Funk argues that most second-wave feminists were in fact liberal feminists who attempted to find solutions for gender inequalities *within* capitalism and were less critical of the latter than Fraser suggests. Similar to Funk, Elisabeth Prügl notes a certain sense of "nostalgia" (2015: p.615) in scholars' writing on neoliberal capitalism's appropriation of feminism, ignoring the heterogeneity and often exclusiveness of past feminist movements. Ferguson goes even further and adds to this that authors like Fraser wrongly "view neoliberal feminism as a perversion, rather than an outgrowth, of earlier feminisms" (Ferguson, 2017: p.221). Ferguson therefore suggests that feminists themselves – but certainly not all feminists as a united, homogeneous group – actively contributed to the rise of neoliberal feminism.

The link between feminism and neoliberal capitalism as an economic and discursive system, in addition to the alleged connection between second-wave feminism and capitalism, has also been identified in more recent years, as I will demonstrate. Scholars who analyse the more recent connections, however, commonly turn Eisenstein's and Fraser's argument on its head by proposing that the neoliberal climate made the re-emergence of feminism possible rather than feminist movements involuntarily contributing to the rise of neoliberal capitalism. McRobbie, for example, gives a convincing overview of how the British political landscape in recent years has formed a 'breeding ground' for feminism's re-emergence: the "privatisation of the public sector, the denigration of welfare regimes as producing unaffordable dependencies, the emphasis on self-responsibility, entrepreneurialism and constant advocacy of stable (if also now flexible and gay) forms of family life" (McRobbie, 2013: p.121). For McRobbie the connection between these processes and the rise of (neoliberal) feminism lies in the notion of the way female 'empowerment' is used as a

device to legitimise neoliberal economics and austerity measures: the more women are able to successfully compete in the labour market and become financially independent, the less need there is for a welfare state and for government to intervene in the market. Feminist language is therefore being used to aid neoliberal discourses. Prügl identifies three different ways in which feminism has been seemingly co-opted by neoliberalism: by using feminist ideas to promote "deregulation, privatisation, and marketisation" (2015: p.617), by linking female participation in the workplace to greater profits and the growth of the economy, and lastly by using language of empowerment to promote self-monitoring and self-regulation to distract from actual political activism. Given the diversity of these processes Prügl suggests:

> that it is more fruitful and necessary to examine the way in which select feminist movement ideas are being integrated into neoliberal rationales and logics, what is lost in the process and what is perhaps gained. Thus, I propose to talk not about a new type of feminism, but about the 'neoliberalisation of feminism', recognising the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries (2015: p.615).

Taking Prügl's appeal to acknowledge feminism's diversity even further, Michaele Ferguson (2017) argues against the idea of feminism being 'passively' co-opted by an 'active' neoliberalism as it erases the feminist actors behind this process. Neoliberal feminism should therefore be considered a new and potentially valid form of feminism. She concludes that "[t]his is cause for hope, not despair: if feminists can contribute to the development of an ideology that they reject, this means they have the agency to contribute to its transformation" (Ferguson, 2017: p.231).

Feminist Perspectives on Lean In

The literature dissecting the neoliberalisation of feminism often includes references to *Lean In*, with a few articles focusing almost exclusively on it and discussing it more in depth. In the following paragraphs, I want to give a brief overview of this type of literature and the feminist perspectives on Sheryl Sandberg and her intervention.

While most academic discussions of *Lean In* focus on the kind of feminism proposed by the book, some scholars have studied the book in a context of leadership literature (see, for example, Ricks Scott, 2016; Kapasi et al., 2016). In their study on the construction of authentic leadership in female leaders' biographies, Kapasi, Sang and Sitko (2016), for example, compare *Lean In* with books published by Hillary Clinton, Karren Brady and Julia Gillard. The authors suggest that while authentic leadership is a seemingly gender-neutral style of leadership that revolves around managers bringing in their 'true' personality, authenticity, for these four female leaders, means acknowledging how their gender affected their career trajectories. The leaders

therefore highlight how reaching their levels of success was a struggle rather than something that occurred 'naturally', which, as Kapasi et al argue, is a more common narrative for male leaders. In their books, the four leaders also address how they balance work and family responsibilities and how being a good leader involves taking a communal rather than a self-centred approach, which Kapasi et al interpret as an attempt to appeal to their female target audiences and make themselves appear more traditionally 'feminine' and approachable to their readers. Kapasi et al demonstrate how Sandberg, much like the other authors included in their study, points to her imperfections and struggles in order to create a sense of authenticity and connect with their female readers.

The vast majority of feminist literature on *Lean In* has approached the book and its messages from a more critical perspective. Sandberg and her publication are generally viewed unfavourably by feminist writers as the COO is often viewed as the posterchild of postfeminism or the neoliberalisation of feminism. For many authors, Sandberg and the feminism she represents seem to embody the media's preference for white, upper/middle-class mothers who seemingly strike the 'perfect' balance between career success and being a present and devoted mother. Catherine Rottenberg, for example, argues that Sandberg's feminism is so focused on women achieving this career-family equilibrium through focusing on the self that the liberal feminist frame the book seems to be based on "is rendered hollow and transmuted into a mode of neoliberal governmentality" (2014b, p.424) as it leaves no room for political or structural interventions. She views Sandberg's book as an example of "neoliberal feminism […] facilitating the growing number of women living in a state of precarity" (Rottenberg, 2014b). Rottenberg thus argues that the COO's solution for gender equality only serves the most privileged women and can only do so by ensuring that most other inequality regimes stay in place. In other words, the success of the Sandbergs of this world "often rests on the underpaid, precarious, and very often exploitative work of other women" (Rottenberg, 2014b).

According to McRobbie (2013), Sandberg embodies the 'ideal mother' who gets praised by the media for her accomplishments while working-class mothers and their concerns become increasingly invisible. McRobbie is one of the few scholars to attempt a nuanced critique of Sandberg's book by acknowledging its "unashamedly feminist voice" (2013: p.134) that, nevertheless, overlooks less privileged working-class or migrant women, who are 'left behind' taking over the childcare responsibilities of predominantly white, middle-class women. According to McRobbie, Sandberg's lack of awareness of this dynamic goes hand in hand with her lack of asking for

political change (e.g. accessible childcare funded by the state). All of this ultimately makes *Lean In* "a radically de-politicised and accommodating feminism" (McRobbie, 2013: p. 135). McRobbie also briefly addresses Lean In Circles in the US, which were only just starting to emerge before the publication of her article. She calls them "a ghostly version of its more overtly feminist predecessor the consciousness-raising group of the 1970s" (McRobbie, 2013: p. 133). She later argues that Lean In and the Lean In Circles in particular embody a paradox of "solidaristic competitiveness" (McRobbie, 2015: p. 7). McRobbie views Sandberg's book as an example of (young) women, as seemingly impeccable neoliberal subjects, being interpellated to strive for 'perfection' by which she means "a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life' (McRobbie, 2015: p. 9). This kind of interpellation is part of a "transparently corporate feminism" that has joined forces with "conservatism and […] the Right" (McRobbie, 2015: p. 16).

McRobbie is certainly not alone in her criticism of Sandberg and *Lean In*. In *Lean Out*, Dawn Foster (2016) argues that the COO fails to include any real analysis of gender equality in the workplace and gives advice that is only applicable to well-educated women like Sandberg with large amounts of cultural and economic capital. Foster's book's biggest strength lies in her naming plenty examples of structural and organisational obstacles that stand in the way of gender equality and the various shapes and forms they come in. She points, amongst other factors, to the financial crisis and how it predominantly affected women, people of colour and other minorities; a lack of paid maternity leave particularly in the US; mistreatment or exclusion of pregnant women in the workplace; or the dearth of flexible working arrangements. Like many other writers, Foster sees *Lean In*'s feminism as catering to capitalism and discourses that "seek[ ] to exhibit extremely rich women, not as symbol of our increasingly unequal society and distribution of wealth, but as saviours of womanhood" (2016: p. 20). Foster is critical of notion of 'trickledown feminism' as she believes that sharing a gender does not automatically translate to solidarity between women. She believes that money and power are often seen as more rewarding than helping others 'climb the ladder' and highlights how minorities supporting other minorities in the workplace often comes at a cost, as it is likely to be perceived negatively by colleagues and superiors who do not belong to a minority or this particular minority. Like McRobbie, Foster also points to Sandberg's non-threatening, corporation-friendly feminism getting media publicity and representing feminism in the mainstream media while other feminist campaigns get overlooked. Campaigns that

are often run by feminist activists who are older and/or from working-class backgrounds and who are therefore deemed as less marketable.

While the media presence of Sandberg's book cannot be denied, the argument made by writers such as McRobbie or Foster, that *Lean In* was given a bigger stage than other feminist approaches, shrouds who is giving Sandberg this stage and remains vague in terms of where exactly her popularity is located. bell hooks frames Sandberg's success partly as a result of "[t]he powerful white male-dominated mass media […] giving her […] so much attention" (hooks, 2013). This kind of argument, however, only unveils part of the picture as it ignores the amount of critical media reactions the book received, often implicitly assumes a rather passive media audience who do not critically engage with media discourse and it also erases Sandberg's own powerful position which perhaps gave her most of the media attention in the first place. Ferguson's critique of Fraser's argument that feminism was seemingly misused to give rise to neoliberalism therefore seems to be applicable to this line of argument, too, as it "represents feminists as passive and helpless in the face of the seemingly irresistible and omnipotent force of neoliberalism" (Ferguson, 2017: p.223). It also negates Sandberg's position as a feminist and the possibility of her writing being considered a legitimate contribution to feminism.

hooks explains *Lean In*'s success further by pointing to the book's blindness towards race and class. She argues that "without a call to challenge and change racism as an integral part of class mobility she [Sandberg] is really investing in top level success for highly educated women from privileged classes" (hooks, 2013). According to hooks, Sandberg's book thus ensures that privilege, wealth and power remain in the hands of white, heterosexual, upper/middle-class men and that they are at most extended to their female counterparts. hooks does not expect this small extension of power to have any real trickle-down effects as "white women often experience a greater sense of solidarity with men of their same class than with poor white women or women of color" (ibid). bell hooks' take on *Lean In* further suggests that Sandberg has not done enough research on feminism to offer a complex contribution to discussions on feminism, which is similar to Foster's observation. Sandberg, according to hooks, neither acknowledges the heterogeneity of the category 'women' and the impact class, sexuality, ethnicity and other factors play, nor does she remotely challenge "the structures of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2013) or ask men to "unlearn sexist thinking" (ibid.).

hooks argues that Sandberg was often attacked by feminists and other writers who had not read the book and suggests that Sandberg herself is not who critics should be focusing on. She suggests that *Lean In* needs to be understood as an instrumentalised version of feminism that is primarily picked up by the mass media because of its lack of criticism towards the most powerful institutions and the people who run them. Here, hooks explicitly refers to McRobbie's understanding of faux feminism (i.e. McRobbie's early conceptualisation of postfeminism) as a replacement for feminism connected to activism and dedicated to social change. hooks' analysis acknowledges the problematic aspects of both the praise and the criticism Sandberg received – she is one of the few critics to question "the eagerness with which Sandberg was viciously attacked" (ibid.) when many critics had never even read the book. She also points to why it is hard to criticise the book as it is full of 'true' observations and argues for something most feminists would at least not be opposed to, i.e. to end gender inequality in the workplace, particularly in the 'upper echelons'. hooks, nevertheless remains critical of the lack of criticism the book contains regarding racism, classism or heteronormativity and disapproves of Sandberg's general overlooking of the role intersectionalities play. The Facebook COO therefore, according to hooks, mostly contributes to the reproduction of the status quo instead of challenging it fundamentally.

I now want to draw attention to a second publication with the name *Lean Out* (2105). This book contains a collection of essays from women in the technology industry, edited by Elissa Shevinsky (2015). It constitutes another important response to Sandberg's book particularly because it demonstrates the many ways in which women struggle to lean into male-dominated sectors and hostile work environments such as the IT industry. I decided to include this book in my discussion of the literature as it reflects voices of women from Sandberg's own industry, who discuss the idea of leaning in based on their own experiences in the IT and technology sector. Krys Freeman, one of the book's authors, echoes hooks' argument that while Sandberg's advice might ring true on a surface level, it does not necessarily hold up in women's daily lives:

> For women who do not fit in, leaning in does not always deliver automatic career success. Pressing on and leaning in, without giving real attention to oppositional circumstances, is part of pretending that there is no difference between us and our colleagues (2015: p.100).

The point of not fitting in is brought up by other contributors as well. The book shows how sexual harassment, homophobia, transphobia, racism, gender biases, 'geek' culture and a lack of social networks and mentors not only prevent women from being

as successful as men in the technology industry, particularly Silicon Valley, but also create a toxic environment they do not want to or simply cannot lean into. In one of the last chapters of the book, however, Lauren Bacon discusses the possibility of forming new feminist alliances, a note on which I would like to end my discussion of the literature:

> The lion may not lie down with the lamb for long, and neither are the Sandberg diehards likely to become BFFs [best friends forever] with more radical, overthrow-the-system types. But the history of social movements tells us that some pretty uncomfortable alliances have been formed in times of need. While I'm in no way suggesting that we all disregard (or deny) our differences in favor of some utopian confederation of techie feminists, I would argue that building targeted—and temporary—strategic alliances is one of the best ways we can move toward effecting real change (2015: p.234).

Bacon points out that feminism's fragmentation might in some cases be holding feminists back from achieving their goals. She suggests that if corporation-friendly feminists like Sandberg and those who want to tackle organisational structures and cultures first, temporarily joined forces as allies, they could bring about tangible changes.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the theoretical framework with which I have approached this research project and the relevant literature connected to it. I have shown that my theoretical approach was predominantly influenced by post-structural feminist theory and based on the assumptions that gender/sex, like any other concepts, are created through discourses which have performative power in the sense that they can create what they name. People are interpellated through discourses and can internalise, reproduce or challenge them. The study of the discourses surrounding *Lean In* can therefore reveal what (working) women are asked to embody. Examining Lean In Circles and interviewing their members, on the other hand, can illustrate how women critically engage with these discourses. As the literature on women, work and leadership suggests, women still face plenty of obstacles throughout their working lives, which might explain the popularity of *Lean In* and Lean In Circles. The literature, however, suggests that structural barriers and not the lack of '*Women's Will to Lead'* are to blame for gender inequality in the workplace. Organisations are gendered, raced and classed as a result of the way they are structured and reproduce inequalities through these structures, e.g. policies, hierarchies, dress codes, job definitions or pay differences. As childrearing and other caring, cooking and cleaning responsibilities are considered both female and private, this often constitutes men as the disembodied, ideal worker for organisations. Neoliberal discourses and their focus

on competition, self-governance and self-reliance mask the structural impediments women face (e.g. lack of flexible work arrangements or affordable childcare as well as stereotyping and biases) behind the idea of meritocracy.

Sandberg's intervention as a whole can be analysed in the context of postfeminism and the neoliberalisation of feminism. While postfeminism can refer to a range of different things, most recently and commonly feminist writers use it to describe how current (media) discourses often uphold feminism as an important movement while simultaneously either 'undoing' it and/or directing its focus away from political interventions to women's self-surveillance and constant self-improvement. This understanding of postfeminism further points to the mixture of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, which is why it is often used to describe how neoliberal ideology becomes inscribed into feminist discourses or how neoliberalism uses feminist language to further its agenda. I have shown that feminist writers approach the link between neoliberalisation and feminism from different angles and how some of these discussions erase the actors, such as neoliberal feminists like Sandberg, behind the discourses and their entanglement by portraying feminism as the 'passive victim' and neoliberalism the 'active aggressor'. Most feminist writers agree that *Lean In* is an expression of neoliberal feminism and are therefore critical of its messages. The criticisms directed at the book have pointed to a range of problematic aspects that need addressing. The book oversimplifies the obstacles women might encounter in the workplace by solely focusing on sexism while ignoring racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism or the role class plays in terms of career-related success. Critics also take issue with the lack of attention paid to factors such as political and organisational policies or the economy. They further do not see how a feminist approach that is so accommodating to the existing structures that cause inequalities in the first place, can be of much help to women in the workplace. The book and its neoliberal feminist message might help a few privileged women getting into leadership positions, but critics do not believe that this will have a 'trickledown' effect or bring about any significant change.

With this research project, I want to contribute to the literature that examines postfeminism and the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism by taking a more in-depth look at the Lean In phenomenon and demonstrating that Sandberg's angle cannot be entirely summarised by a neoliberal feminist label. I also wish to paint a more complex picture of the media discourses surrounding it, as many feminist writers tend to paint 'the mass media' with broad strokes, overlooking the nuanced debates that can be traced here. I want to further contribute to the literature by showing that

feminism is not being merely co-opted through neoliberal discourses such as the ones found in *Lean In*, but that feminism is also being actively talked about, negotiated and brought to the forefront, by Sandberg herself, her reviewers and critics, and her readers. I want to most importantly demonstrate that while women are being interpellated by neoliberal or postfeminist messages they nevertheless actively engage with them, which is an aspect that often gets overlooked in media focused academic debates. In the following chapters, I therefore wish to illustrate that while *Lean In*'s messages are indeed often conservative and follow neoliberal logic, a black-and-white discussion of the book overlooks Sandberg's awareness of the necessity of social change, the lively media debate surrounding her book and her feminist approach, and the importance of the Lean In Circles. These factors all contribute to and are part of the Lean In phenomenon; they complicate it and often challenge and transform Sandberg's neoliberal feminist messages.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter serves the purpose of detailing and reflecting on my research methods and my rationales for choosing them. I start by laying out the research questions that formed the basis of this research, how they evolved over time and how they were framed and conceptualised from a feminist perspective. The majority of this chapter is focused on how I gathered, selected and analysed my data. As this project was designed to study the Lean In phenomenon, I included a range of different data sources linked to it which included the book itself, media reviews, notes from my participant observation in Lean In Circles (LICs) and transcripts of interviews with Lean In Circle members. This chapter is intended to give an overview of the methods I used both for my data collection and data analysis, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, thematic analysis and Carol Bacchi's approach to analysing policy texts. I further explain why I chose these methods and explore their merits and demerits and present a detailed description of my data samples. This chapter also contains a discussion of some of the ethical issues I encountered during the research process as the aim of this chapter is not just to present how I have approached this project methodologically but also to reflect on the research process as a whole.

Research questions

First, I want to outline the research questions underlying this thesis which gradually changed over time as my research focus began to shift. Originally, I intended to study the figured worlds of women in leadership positions – particularly positions outside of the political realm as the latter had already received plenty of scholarly attention (see for example Brown & Gardetto, 1999; Parry-Giles, 2000; Messner, 2007; Lawrence & Rose, 2010; Dillaway & Paré, 2013; Gilson, 2015). I wanted to examine media discourses of women in leadership roles and study what is presented as 'common sense'. How are these women portrayed? What kind of obstacles are they expected to encounter? What is implied to be their typical background story? What place and role in society do the media attribute to them? How do they compare to other women? I then decided to look at the *Lean In* phenomenon as a case study to answer these questions. This case study, however, evoked a range of different queries which eventually reshaped the research project as a whole. *Lean In* itself interrogates what it means to be a woman in a powerful, i.e. leading, position and provides a neoliberal answer to its own question. The media reactions to the book pointed towards a lively debate surrounding whether Sandberg's approach should be considered a feminist or

simply a neoliberal attempt at getting more women into top positions. It thus became apparent that the *Lean In* phenomenon revealed less about the figured worlds of women in power and more about the entanglement of neoliberal and feminist discourses, which thus became the focus of this thesis. The research questions which then became the foundation of this thesis were:

1. **What are *Lean In*'s key messages and underlying assumptions?**
   a. *How are they linked to neoliberalism and feminism?*
   b. *What is problematised about women and leadership and which solutions are presented?*
2. **How do Lean In Circle members engage with the *Lean In* phenomenon?**
   a. *How do they engage with the book and the criticisms directed at it?*
   b. *What purposes do they use LIC spaces for and how do they structure their meetings?*
3. **What were the media reactions to the publication of the book?**
   a. *Which aspects were highlighted or criticised and why?*
   b. *What were the underlying assumptions and implications that structured the reviews?*

Conceptualising the problem from a feminist viewpoint

I want to use this section to outline how and why this research project was undertaken from a feminist perspective and based on feminist epistemology and what implications this had for the conceptualisation of my research questions.

I want to begin the discussion of my epistemological approach by illustrating how feminists have introduced new ways of thinking of the production of knowledge and what constitutes 'proper' knowledge in an academic context. Notions of a feminist epistemology began circulating in the 1980s and have since become their own area of research (Campbell, 2004). Given the diversity of feminist theory and activism, there is not one feminist epistemology but various approaches that can be summarised under this umbrella term. Sandra Harding, for example, identifies three different approaches "feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism" (1991: p.106). According to Harding, feminist empiricism is an epistemological lens that primarily challenges androcentric biases within research. This type of feminist researcher tends to otherwise follow a mostly positivist approach to research that suggests that research can uncover objective truths about reality given the right tools and methods. Harding argues that feminists who follow standpoint

theory or postmodern epistemologies often go further by questioning not only the researcher's biases concerning gender, class or race but by also proposing different ways for thinking of and obtaining knowledge. Standpoint feminists such as Dorothy Smith (1987), for example, argue that the production of knowledge has been dominated by men and lacks women's experiences and perspectives. This, Smith maintains, is true for the way research has been conducted as well as for the topics that have primarily been covered. As a possible feminist and alternative approach, she proposes the study of individual women's experiences as an entry point through which to better understand broader social and organisational norms and their direct implications for people's everyday lives. Stanley and Wise, however, criticise standpoint epistemology for being based on the assumption that marginalised groups, given their status, are in a better position for uncovering 'truths' about the social world. The authors thus argue that standpoint feminism, much like feminist empiricism, merely functions as "successor *sciences*" (Stanley & Wise, 2013: p.27). Critics of standpoint feminist epistemology also take issue with the way this approach essentialises and thereby manifests the differences between men and women by emphasising their different viewpoints and experiences and thus overlooking the heterogeneity amongst women and the roles intersections with, for example, class, race, age or sexuality play (Lazreg, 2002). Despite the disputes amongst researchers from different feminist backgrounds, feminist epistemologies can nevertheless be found to have some commonalities. Kirsten Campbell (2004), for instance, argues that, generally speaking, feminist epistemologies are utilised to place emphasis on making the politics that permeate the production of knowledge explicit. It is further used to highlight the importance of feminism and to "construct new feminist models of knowledge from that [feminist] theory and practice" (Campbell, 2004: p.13).

My overall theoretical framework has been heavily influenced by post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault and Butler, which ultimately reflected on the feminist epistemological perspective with which I have approached this research. I want to use the following paragraph to illustrate how this perspective has shaped my understanding of the research process. I consider the notion of neutral and purely objective research questionable as the researcher does not inhabit a privileged position from where they can 'objectively' view and grasp the (social) world, instead the "researchers' understandings are necessarily temporally, intellectually, politically and emotionally grounded and are thus as contextually specific as those of 'the researched'" (Stanley & Wise, 2013: p.23). From a feminist perspective, the fact that the position of the researcher or 'knower' (Code, 1991) will shape the research

process and its outcome, does, contrary to the ideas perpetuated by Enlightenment and positivist thinkers, not necessarily devalue the research findings. In fact, feminist researchers often value the importance of people's varied experiences and perspectives, be it of the researchers or the researched, as they reveal their *interpretations* of the (social) world and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the latter. Interpretations of reality are thus considered to be valuable knowledge – perhaps even the only knowledge researchers will ever be able to produce since

> all our interactions with reality are mediated by conceptual frameworks or discourses, which themselves are historically and socially situated. There is no way of stepping outside of these to check them against an independent reality, or to legitimate them by means of universal and discourse-transcendent criteria of rational assessment (Lennon & Whitford, 1994: p.4).

From a post-structuralist feminist perspective, the production of knowledge is therefore also always closely linked to the (re)production of power structures as it contributes to the discourses which shape our understanding of what is considered normal or abnormal, important or unimportant and how things are perceived and defined. Academic endeavours are both shaped by power relations and, at the same time, contribute to them (Pereira, 2017). Feminist researchers thus often "seek not just to generate more knowledge but also, and centrally, to question and transform existing modes, frameworks and institutions of knowledge production" (Pereira, 2012: p.284) as any kind of research has the potential to challenge and reinforce power structures. Post-structuralist feminist researchers thus try to transform conservative ways of knowledge production through highlighting the importance of the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups or, for example, through accepting the 'messiness', i.e. the multifaceted or even contradictory nature of research findings (see, for example, Baxter, 2018), which I also attempted to do with this research.

Methods

In this section I explore the methods I employed to gather the necessary data for answering my research questions. I explain why I decided to use semi-structured interviews and participant observation and explore the merits and demerits of the two methods.

Semi-structured interviews and participant-observation

In order to answer my second research question regarding the LIC members' engagement with the *Lean In* phenomenon, I chose to combine participant observation with semi-structured interviews. Doing participant observation had the

advantage of exploring first-hand how the members structured their circle meetings and what participating and being an active member entailed. It thus helped me answer the second part of research question 2 which is concerned with the purposes and structures of the LICs. Conducting interviews, on the other hand, meant that I had time to talk to circle members for a longer period and ask them in-depth questions about topics that could not be covered during the meetings. The interviews were therefore necessary to answer the first part of research question 2 regarding the LIC members' thoughts on the book and the criticisms it had received. Combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews ultimately provided a rich basis for my analysis as both added different layers and perspectives to it. The combination of the two approaches was also meant to reduce some of their respective shortcomings. Foddy, for example, shows how a range of studies have demonstrated that "the relationship between what respondents say they do and what they actually do is not always very strong" (2009: p.3). As a feminist researcher, I am, however, less concerned with finding out whether participants answer truthfully or accurately, but what their accounts reveal about how they interpret and understand the topics covered in the interview. Looking at both the verbal accounts given in an interview and observing the actions and interactions during circle meetings, nevertheless, revealed different sides of the participants' engagement with the *Lean In* phenomenon. I decided to use a semi-structured interview schedule in order to cover a range of different topics and questions I wanted to address. These questions focused on the book, the circles, the participant's careers and obstacles they faced, and their perception of women in leadership positions and how the interviewees thought these women were portrayed in the media. My full interview schedule can be found in appendix C. Using a semi-structured interview schedule also enabled to me ask spontaneous questions to explore aspects brought up by the participants that were not covered by my schedule but seemed particularly relevant to them. Semi-structured interviews and asking open questions therefore allowed me to focus on what I was most interested in learning about my participants whilst giving them the opportunity to determine how much they wanted to say or add to a particular conversation topic. Interviews, however, always create an artificial setting which will influence what participants choose to say, are willing to 'reveal' or are simply able to remember. They therefore offer highly context dependent insights (e.g. time of day, place, the interviewee's or interviewer's 'mood' and circumstances at the time). The relationship between interviewer and interviewee will further shape the outcome of the conversation and the resulting data. In my case, I was able to build a rapport with my participants before each interview which might have positively influenced how at

ease they felt during the recording. Their perception of me, of our similarities and dissimilarities or their thoughts on my research interests, however, will have further influenced their responses in some shape or form. It is therefore important to acknowledge, that the participants and I were similar in terms of our gender and educational background. Some of my interviewees were also of a similar age, white and/or, like me, had recently moved to the UK. I thus shared a range of attributes with most of my participants but was nevertheless different to some in terms of age, ethnicity and/or the fact that they had children.

The second method I employed, namely participant observation, had the advantage of taking place over a longer period of time and therefore being less dependent on the circumstances of a particular moment. Participant observation can overall be seen as less 'artificial' than for example interviews as the events observed would take place with or without the researcher's presence. The participation of the researcher does, however, still affect the dynamic of the events not only through the researcher's sheer presence but also through their input and interactions with the people present. I nevertheless opted for participant observation as opposed to simply observing the circle meetings, as it flattened the hierarchy between the participants and me, and it allowed me to get a more embodied, personal understanding of what it meant to be a member of a LIC. Participating in the meetings also had the advantage of making the meetings feel more 'natural' for everyone involved as there was no silent observer visibly 'studying people's behaviour'. Participant observation required researchers to both involve themselves in the field they are studying as well as keeping the necessary distance to observe and reflect. "Going native' is seen as a common risk and refers to instances where researchers become too immersed in the group they set out to observe, which might impede their analysis (Cottle, 2009). In my case, my involvement in circles was both intensified and weakened by a range of different factors. On the one hand, I did not feel as if I was getting too involved in any of the circles given that most of them only met once a month or even less frequently. Moreover, members would often come and go, so that I had to introduce myself and get to know new people quite regularly. Familiarity was thus something I needed to actively work on and not something that was easily achieved or developed quickly. One the other hand, however, the nature of the circle meetings made it easy to bond with other members over sharing personal stories, thoughts and feelings, which I had to do in order to fully participate. Furthermore, as explained in the previous paragraph, I was similar to many of the circle members simply by being a woman in my late twenties with a degree in Higher Education. My similarity to many of the circle

members was also rooted in the fact that, despite being a student during the observation period, I, much like the women in the groups, am interested in 'pursuing a career'. My participant observation thus did not lead to a culture shock, which can happen when the research enters "an unfamiliar cultural context" (Musante & DeWalt, 2011: p.65). In fact, while the circles did not feel like a particularly familiar environment to me, I nevertheless often found myself having to step back, question and defamiliarise myself from conversations and procedures that seemed 'normal' to me. Lastly, I did not consider a covert observation to be appropriate for this project as feminist research ethics place a lot of emphasis on informed consent. An overt participant-observation, however, means that the participants are aware that they are being 'studied'. While my presence and participation in the meetings inevitably changed their dynamics, I believe that my participation also limited the impact I had on other peoples' behaviour as it made me become a member of the groups rather than just a researcher or an observer. The nature of the circle meetings, however, sometimes made it difficult to inform every member about who I was and why I was participating. Latecomers or large meetings that had no introduction round, for example, made it difficult to explain my research interest to everyone present. I will come back to these last few points in my discussion of ethics, which will follow the next paragraphs in which I lay out how I approached the analysis of my data.

Analysis

The following passages are meant to illustrate how I analysed the book and its reviews as well as the data gathered via semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I explain why I decided to use thematic analysis alongside Carol Bacchi's approach for analysing policy documents.

Thematic Analysis

I used thematic analysis to examine all four data sets, i.e. the book, reviews, interview transcripts, and notes from my participant observation. I primarily employed this method to examine the underlying assumptions in *Lean In* and its reviews. I further used it to better understand what was relevant to my interviewees and to explore the themes and questions that structured the LIC meetings. It was therefore a helpful tool for all three research questions. Thematic analysis is a research method that is highly flexible and not connected to a specific epistemology or theoretical framework (Braun et al., 2015). Its flexibility and perhaps vagueness have led to confusion about whether thematic analysis itself constitutes a research method or whether it is more of a technique that can be applied to a range of methods (Willig, 2013).

Broadly speaking, a thematic analysis is based on "(1) discovering themes and subthemes, (2) winnowing themes to a manageable few (i.e., deciding which themes are important in any project), (3) building hierarchies of themes or code books, and (4) linking themes into theoretical models" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003: p.85). It is a very accessible method for both the researcher and the reader and it can help provide a good overview of a large amount of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke, consists of the following steps: familiarisation with the data, coding of the data set, identifying themes, testing if the themes reflect the data, finalising the themes and the story they tell, and writing up. I approached these steps in an "inductive", "latent" and "constructionist" (Braun et al., 2015: p.186) way. I will briefly explain what I mean by this: In using the method inductively, I tried to analyse the data without immediately drawing connections to concepts and theories but rather letting the data speak for 'itself'. By this, however, I do not wish to imply that I approached the data 'objectively' and without any preconceived notions as this would be impossible. Every researcher will interpret their project from a specific point of view that is influenced by their personal experiences and their position in society (e.g. their socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, etc.). Taking an inductive approach means approaching the data set without pre-existing codes and creating the codes as a result of engaging with the data instead. Conducting a latent thematic analysis means to focus on the presuppositions (e.g. about women and work) that can be found in a text (e.g. *Lean In*). If this is done from a constructionist perspective the researcher understands the text as an interpretation of reality rather than an accurate account of reality (Braun et al., 2015). I decided to employ thematic analysis to analyse my data as it offered me the chance to explore which messages and ideas were most salient and prevalent in the texts. This helped me direct my attention to these particular ideas and, in a next step (see Carol Bacchi's approach), unpack them further to understand the underlying implications and presuppositions. I want to, however, also address the limitations connected to this method and what I did to counteract them as much as possible. Braun and Clarke (2006) identify five key issues when conducting a thematic analysis. They point out that the flexibility of the method makes it possible for researcher to make unfounded claims or to exaggerate the presence of a theme when it was mostly anecdotal. The authors also stress the risk of staying on a purely descriptive level by identifying 'themes' that simply reflect the questions asked in the interview or by not embedding the themes in a thorough analysis of the data. I tried to counter the downsides of this method by repeatedly reviewing my codes and themes and checking them against the data, by weaving in theories and concepts from other

researchers into the analysis, and by highlighting the complexities and contradictions within the data sets.

The WPR Approach

I combined thematic analysis with Carol Bacchi's (2009) 'WPR' approach, as a second step in the analysis, to get an even deeper understanding of data. The abbreviation WPR stands for "What is the problem represented to be?" and reveals the approach's core question. Bacchi intended this method to be used for policy texts, but I found it to be very applicable to this research project and its data sets. I added this second step to my analysis of the book and its reviews as it was very tailored to research questions 1 and 3 concerning the underlying assumptions and implications within *Lean In* and its media reception. Combining the two methods meant that I first coded the book and its reviews so that the most prevalent themes in these texts would crystallise. I then applied the WPR approach as a more in-depth technique to analyse the four most dominant themes. I used Bacchi's method primarily for the book and its reviews as I wanted to direct my analytical focus more closely to their underlying assumptions and the way these texts (re)produced notions of gender, feminism, neoliberalism and what it means to be a woman in the workplace. I originally intended to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), but eventually decided that my data sets were too large to do a thorough CDA. Instead, I found that Bachhi's approach was very focused on the aspects that were relevant to my analysis and, in combination with a thematic analysis, would be the most tailored to my research questions. Moreover, Bacchi's way of analysing (policy) texts resembles what characterises CDA as the latter "studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk, 2008: p.352). CD analysts are interested in meaning making (Fairclough 2010) as meanings lead to attitudes and actions which can become the basis for social (in)justice. Since CDA is a methodology and not a method it does not provide the researcher with any concrete tools. Bacchi, however, is very clear about the different steps in her analysis. She suggests asking a text the following questions:

1. "**What's the problem […] represented to be […]?**
2. **What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?**
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. **What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?**
5. **What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?**

6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?" (Bacchi 2009, p.xii, my emphasis).

The questions printed in bold were the ones that primarily guided my analysis. Questions three and six, nevertheless, implicitly informed the way I studied the Lean In phenomenon: I traced back and looked at where the representations originated, i.e. Sandberg's Ted Talk and book, and I studied how these representations were picked up, disseminated and debated by the media. When analysing the data, I also implicitly asked myself how these representations could be challenged, as envisioning alternative representations helped me grasp what was presented as 'natural' or as common sense.

I decided not to focus explicitly on questions 3 and 6 for various reasons. According to Bacchi, question 3, for example, requires "a form of Foucauldian *genealogy*, focusing on the practices and processes that led to the dominance of this problem presentation" (2009: p. 48, emphasis in the original), which would have gone beyond the scope and time constraints of this project. While question 3 asks the research to consider the problem's evolution or its 'past', Bacchi's 6th question focusses on its dissemination and potential 'future'. While my analysis led me to study plenty of media articles written on the Lean In phenomenon, I nevertheless considered an examination of the whole media landscape to be far beyond what a single researcher can feasibly do. I decided to therefore concentrate on the remaining questions. In order to answer them, I analysed codes that were representative of the themes I had found: I examined the relevant quotes/pieces of text by exploring what they problematised (question 1), what assumptions they were based on (question 2), what was left unsaid or unproblematised (question 4), and what types or notions of identity they (re)produced (question 5).

All of the methods whose merits and demerits I discussed in the previous paragraphs were used to examine the *Lean In* phenomenon. They helped me gather and analyse the data from the different parts that, together, make up the phenomenon. It was important to me to study the latter from different angles and perspectives – which translated to the book itself, its reviews, and its audience – to reflect the multitude of voices in it. It was particularly important to include the experiences of women who had engaged deeply with the phenomenon to explore how they made sense of it and how it influenced their (work) lives. The inclusion of the LICs and their members further offered an insight into the obstacles the women encountered in their daily lives and why they thought *Lean In* could assist them in dealing with them. Exploring the critical

reception of the book was necessary to understand which aspects of it were deemed relevant or contentious and how they were discussed and presented in a wider public discourse. Given the amount of criticism the book had received, the circle members' perception of the phenomenon was particularly interesting. Talking to women who found the book to be helpful thus provided a more complex insight into the matter and added their lived experiences to the theoretical and abstract discussions the book had generated. Including women's accounts in this research project was further needed to understand how the neoliberal-feminist tone and ideas in Sandberg's book were picked up, reproduced or transformed.

Feminist research ethics

In this section, I explore the ethical questions linked to my research questions and this project. I followed the BSA guidelines on ethical research which among many other suggestions highlight that "[s]ociologists have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research" (BSA Publications, 2017: p. 5). I did this by treating the participants with respect, disclosing the intentions behind my research to them and by informing them about their right to withdraw at any time. I further chose not to reveal any of the circles' or participants' names especially since some of the members wished to remain anonymous.

This research was further influenced by feminist research ethics, which place a large emphasis on reflecting and, if possible, deconstructing the hierarchy between researcher and participant through attempting to avoid the objectification of the latter (Allen & Baber, 1992; Dankoski, 2000). Some feminists argue that the researcher should try to create as little asymmetry as possible between them and the participants. However, even when researchers try to reduce power imbalances and to not treat their participants as a means to an end, the two parties are likely to differ in terms of either gender, ethnicity, age, class or other social markers (Oakley, 2016). Existing power imbalances are further increased by the researcher usually being the one asking the questions, starting and ending the relationship with participants and interpreting what has been said (Preissle, 2006). They are the ones speaking *for* others – filtering, and thus sometimes homogenising, generalising and potentially misrepresenting the experiences of the researched. Lugones and Spelman (1983) point out how feminist research is not exempt from this problem as it is heavily dominated by white women's accounts that often generalise the experiences of white

women, overlook the importance of intersectionalities or speak for women of colour and thereby silence them.

Power imbalances between the researcher and the researched can be softened by, for example, establishing more of a dialogue dynamic in interview situations during which the interviewer can respond to questions from the interviewee. Imbalances can also be reduced by giving the participants the possibility to contribute to the interpretation of the data or by the researcher simply offering a range of possible interpretations of the data (Allen & Baber, 1992). Attempts to equalise the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants serve the purpose of avoiding the exploitation of the researched and help to side-step imposing the researcher's belief system on them. Allen and Barber, however, urge feminist researchers to be realistic regarding the minimalisation of these power asymmetries and ask them to "deconstruct their myths about unity and alliance with those they study" (1992: p.12).

Throughout my participant observation, I tried to establish an open relationship with my participants through being forthcoming about my research, answering any questions they had and reporting some of my findings back to them. I would argue that my regular participation in the circle meetings, during which I shared my thoughts and feelings alongside the other circle members, further contributed to a reduction of power imbalances. My participation in the meetings and learning the different circle 'protocols' made me primarily feel like a new circle member rather than a researcher, especially in the beginning of my participant observation or during meetings organised by circles that seldomly meet. The older, i.e. long-term, circle members, and founders in particular, often were the experts, knew the routines and primarily determined how the sessions were run. Given the diversity of the circle members and, to some extent, my interviewees, the participants would most notably differ in terms of age, ethnicity, nationality and work experience. The individual differences between me and the circle members most likely shaped the participants' perception of and their relationship with me, but this was never addressed by any of the circle members. During my participant observation and the interviews, I found the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched to be diminished by the fact that many of the women I interviewed were older, had more work experience and were almost exclusively native English speakers. Having said that, some of the younger interviewees, despite my attempts to reassure them there are no 'correct' answers, seemed to be concerned about saying the 'right' thing. This became apparent whenever they asked me if they were making sense during the interview or when they would tell me afterwards how they went over their responses again and were worried that they had not given a good

interview. I am not certain why this was the case, but since the 'older' interviewees seemed to be less concerned about how they had come across during the interviews, the younger participants' might have simply had more moments of self-doubt due to their age.

When it came to gaining informed consent regarding the circle members' participation in my research project, a step that is essential not only for feminist researchers (McCormick, 2013), it was easier to do so in the context of recruiting interviewees as I could explain everything in detail on a one-to-one basis. Fully informed consent was harder to gain during my participant observation as I could only ask for the founder's permission in advance, while most other members were informed when the circle sessions had already started. While I did not get the impression that anyone was made uncomfortable by my presence as a researcher, it is not entirely impossible that the members who did, just did not feel confident enough to speak up or leave if most other members did not seem to mind. I tried to fully inform the circle members about the purposes of the research during the introduction rounds, which took place at the beginning of most meetings, and by introducing myself as a researcher on the circles' websites. The interviewees were further informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To protect all participants' anonymity, the names of the circles and their geographic locations are not included in this thesis. Equally, interview passages that could potentially reveal the circles' names or locations or information that could easily lead to the identification of a circle member were left out. In terms of my data analysis, I took extra care not to create an overly simplistic representation of the women as a homogenous group when describing and interpreting my findings. Instead the complexity and contradictory nature of each data set was of central interest to this investigation "to generate a multifaceted and heterogeneous presentation of [the] research" (Preissle, 2006: p. 527).

Working with my participants also included ethical dilemmas, which I would like to discuss in the following passages. Although I never became friends with any of the circle members, I nevertheless became well acquainted with most of the regularly attending members over time. This level of acquaintance, however, also led to an instance where a LIC member revealed a rather personal story to me during a circle meeting. We were alone at that time and it felt as though she was revealing this information to me as a friend rather than as a researcher. Given that she had also been drinking that evening, I was unsure whether to include her story even though it was very much relevant to this research project. I perceived our conversation that evening as blurring the lines between a research-based relationship and a friendship.

I decided to, nevertheless, include her story in my exploration of the interviewees' struggles at work but without revealing where it had come from.

Entering the LICs from a feminist perspective, I was sometimes critical of the topics discussed in the meetings and the solutions the members presented. One of the aspects I felt conflicted about was how much the members focussed on and embraced the need for 'self-improvement'. This emphasis would occasionally make me feel uncomfortable as I perceived it as yet another way in which women were examining themselves critically, perhaps overly critically, and were internalising social norms and standards that require a lot of time and effort to reach. What is more, this type of 'self-improvement', as pointed out by many critics of neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism, might not even lead to the promised outcome of increased (professional) success and thus become more 'reasons' for self-criticism instead. While I occasionally asked the circle members what they thought of activities that heavily focused on self-improvement (they usually found them to be helpful), I never criticised any of these activities and simply participated in them in order not to influence the meetings unnecessarily.

For the most part, participating in the circles and sharing my own thoughts, fears and feelings, while often challenging, helped me understand how much organisational and emotional labour actually went into the meetings. Participating in LICs, for me, ranged from having an interesting or even helpful conversation with people who are willing to listen and offer advice to feeling as though I was part of a workshop or seminar where I was expected to engage, learn and 'develop'. Yet, these experiences have all helped me get a better grasp of the LICs.

Data gathering and access

In order to answer the research questions outlined in the beginning of this chapter, I gathered and analysed four different types of data. I will use this part of the chapter to outline how I collected and selected my data, how I got access to the circles and participants and explain the methodological decisions linked to these processes.

The first set of data consisted of *Lean In*, the book, which I acquired as a digital (i.e. Kindle) copy and then reformatted into several pdf-documents, one for each chapter. The chapters were then uploaded to NVivo, which I used for their analysis. I purchased the second edition of the book *Lean In: For Graduates*, as this included both the original as well as added content, but only uploaded the original eleven chapters from the first edition to NVivo – a decision I will explain below.

The second data set was made up of the *Lean In* reviews, think pieces and commentaries on the book. I started my data collection by saving all English language articles that appeared on the first three pages on Google when searching for "*Lean In* review" as I wanted to make sure to include and examine reviews that were likely to be read by a large number of people. In addition, I used Factiva, a database providing access to a range of newspapers, magazines and other, mostly business-related publications. I downloaded all English language *Lean In* reviews and commentaries that had been published between February and April 2013, i.e. around the time the book was released. While Factiva, which is owned by Dow Jones, does not offer access to every newspaper or magazine, it allowed me to get a good overview of the types of reviews *Lean In* had received.

The third set of data was gathered through a year-long participant observation in five different circles in England. I started contacting circles in 2016 via the *Lean In*/LIC website *leanin.org*, which allows users to start, find and join circles. The website also provides a filter to help limit the circle options by narrowing them down according to their proximity to the user's home, workplace (company or military branch) or campus. It further gives the option to search for circles that exclusively meet online[2]. In order to join circles, I had to create an account[3] on the website and was asked to include a message to the circle founder every time I sent out a request to join a group. The purpose of this message was to inform the founder about why I wanted to join their circle. I used this as an opportunity to introduce myself as a researcher and to briefly explain my intentions and research interest to them, which usually got left uncommented. I either got accepted or received no answer and no access to the circle. Only once was my rejection followed by an explanation from the circle founder. She explained that her group only allowed people from the city the circle meetings were held in to join. She did, however, offer to meet me over coffee and ended up becoming one of my first interviewees. After a three-month period of contacting circles, I had become a member of nine different groups, out of which only five were active during the time of my participant-observation, which started in June 2016 and

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[2] Some circles are part of chapters which include several circles in order to allow members to network amongst each other. During my participant observation, however, I never encountered members who actively participated in the chapters. Most people I spoke to, including myself, found the chapter system to be rather confusing.

[3] Leanin.org changed the way they run their website in June 2018. Users no longer need an account to join circles. Members were asked to "save any materials or contacts stored there [on their account] by June 27th, after which date [they will] no longer be able to access [their] account". As a result of these changes, some of the circles I observed, the ones that had become inactive or had moved to a different platform, no longer appeared in the circle search results.

ended in July 2017 (the number of meetings I attended is shown in table 2, page 50). During the meetings, I occasionally took notes, but mostly left this task for directly after the meetings as participating in the circles meant that I needed to actively engage in the conversations and activities rather than sitting on the side, observing and writing. I kept most of my notes in a research journal and some on my computer. This data set was thus not uploaded to NVivo but nevertheless analysed through thematic analysis.

The fourth and final set of data consisted of nine interviews which I conducted with members from the five circles I observed plus the circle founder who offered to meet me over a coffee. With the exception of the latter, I approached my interviewees in person at circle meetings and asked them whether they would like to volunteer to be interviewed for my research project. I would then contact them via email or text message, if they had given me their phone numbers, and arrange a time and place to meet. Additionally, I informed them both verbally and in writing about the purpose of my research, the protection of their anonymity and their right to withdraw at any time. I let my participants choose an interview place they felt most comfortable with, which in most cases was a café near to where they worked or lived. One participant invited me into her home. I had informed all participants that the interview would be recorded on my phone and then transcribed which they all consented to. Before the interview I handed out a participant information sheet (see appendix A) for my interviewees to read and allowed time for questions. I then asked them to sign a consent form (see appendix B), which they all did. After the interview, the audio files were transcribed and the transcripts uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

Sampling

After having laid out how I got access to my participants and collected my data, I want to use the following section to describe the samples that each data set consisted of in more detail and explain the rationales for my selections.

I decided to focus on *Lean In* rather than its follow-up edition *Lean In: For Graduates* as it was arguably the most influential and best-selling out of the two. The graduate edition includes the same chapters as *Lean In* as well as contributions from other authors whose stories and advice aligned with Sandberg's narrative but arguably constituted additional content rather than substantial contributions to *Lean In*'s core messages. The main reason for my focus on the original edition of the book was, however, that it had generated more reviews and media debates than its successor.

These reviews and debates were of central interest to this thesis, so it made sense to analyse the book they were referring to.

I collected and read 197 articles (all in English) to get a first impression of the media landscape at the time of *Lean In*'s publication. Eventually, I narrowed the selection down to 27 articles based on the following criteria: 1) the article needed to be from a magazine/newspaper/news website that was based in the UK or the USA and 2) the media outlet needed to have a national (as opposed to regional/local) readership. While these criteria were essential, the reviews needed to fulfil at least one of the following additional criteria: 3) the reviewer openly states their opinion regarding *Lean In* instead of purely giving an overview of other reviewers' impressions and/or 4) the article critically debates other reviews or is often referred to by other journalists. These criteria were necessary to keep the number of articles manageable, but they also helped me select the most relevant pieces of writing. Reviews that appeared in either British or US-American national newspapers, news websites or magazines often had a large, sometimes international, readership and were therefore more likely to be read and to dominate the Western discourse surrounding *Lean In*. A focus on US and UK media outlets further seemed justifiable given the US-context of the book and the fact that my participant observation and interviews were conducted in the UK. The additional criteria also helped me select the most opinionated articles that engaged deeply with and sometimes even heavily influenced the debate surrounding the book. In order to explore the differences between the reviews and to show their complexities, I decided to analyse 8-10 highly positive, highly critical and mixed reviews respectively. The 27 articles that made it into those categories were chosen because they included either particularly common or noteworthy arguments made by favourable, critical and mixed reviewers. The following table offers an overview of all 27 articles I analysed, including their name, author, the media outlet they were published in and on what date, and whether I had found them via Google or Factiva.

Table 1 – Final selection of *Lean In* reviews and commentaries

Highly Critical Reviews	Highly Favourable Reviews	Mixed Reviews
The Guardian, UK Newspaper, **Zoe Williams**, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead by Sheryl Sandberg – review*, 13/03/2013, Google top listing	**The New Yorker**, US Magazine, **Anna Holmes**, *Maybe You Should Read the Book: The Sheryl Sandberg Backlash*, 04/03/2013, Google top listing	**The New York Times**, US Newspaper, **Anne-Marie Slaughter**, *Yes, You Can*, 07/03/2013, Google top listing

Huffington Post (US), News Website, **Vanessa Garcia**, *Why I Won't Lean In* 19/7/2013 (updated 18/9/2013), Google top listing	**The Washington Post**, US Newspaper, **Jessica Valenti**, *Sheryl Sandberg isn't the perfect feminist. So what?*, 01/03/2013, Factiva	**Washington Monthly**, US Magazine, **Kathleen Geier**, *Review: Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In*, 31/03/2013, Google top listing
The Observer, Weekly UK Newspaper (affiliated with The Guardian), **Yvonne Roberts**, *Is Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg really the new face of feminism?*, 17/03/2013, Factiva	**The Washington Post**, US Newspaper, **Ruth Marcus**, *Sheryl Sandberg's valuable advice*, 05/03/2013, Factiva	**The Washington Post**, US Newspaper, **Connie Schultz**, *Review: Sheryl Sandberg's 'Lean In' is full of good intentions, but rife with contradictions*, 01/03/2013, Google top listing
The New York Times, US Newspaper, **Maureen Dowd**, *Pompom Girl for Feminism*, 23/02/2013, Factiva	**The Times**, UK Newspaper, **Sarah Vine**, *New face of Feminism, Inc*, 16/03/2013, Factiva	**NPR**, US News Website, **Maureen Corrigan**, *'Lean In': Not Much Of A Manifesto, But Still A Win For Women*, 12/03/2013, Google top listing
The Sunday Times (UK), Weekly Newspaper, **Eleanor Mills**, *We don't all want to push the boys aside*, 17/02/2013, Factiva	**The New York Times**, US Newspaper, **Chrystia Freeland**, *In Sandberg, Echoes of De Beauvoir*, 14/03/2013, Factiva	**The Sunday Times** (UK), Weekly Newspaper, **Anon (n/a),** *Sheryl Sandberg: Wise up, whizz-kids - mother knows best*, 10/03/2013, Factiva
U.S. News and World Report, US News Website, **Mary Kate Cary**, *Leaning In to a Contradiction*, 24/04/2013, Google top listing	**The New York Times**, US Newspaper, **Janet Maslin**, *Lessons From the Stratosphere, and How to Get There*, 06/03/0213, Factiva	**USA Today**, US Newspaper, **Jon Swartz**, *'The blunt truth is, men still run the world'* 10/03/2013, Factiva
Slate, US Online Magazine, **Amanda Hess**, *Lean Where?*, 08/03/2013, Google top listing	**The Guardian**, UK Newspaper, **Jill Filipovic**, *Sheryl Sandberg is more of a feminist crusader than people give her credit for*, 01/03/2013, Factiva	**The New York Times**, US Newspaper, **Jodi Kantor**, *A Titan's How-To on Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, 21/02/2013, Factiva

The New Republic, US Magazine, **Elizabeth Bruenig**, *Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In Philosophy Doesn't Just Ignore Disadvantaged Women. It Hurts Their Cause*, 09/03/2015, Google top listing	**USA Today**, US Newspaper, **Julia M. Klein**, *Facebook's chief feminist 'leans in'*, 07/03/2013, Factiva	**The Washington Post**, US Newspaper, **Monica Hesse**, *Sheryl Sandberg reaches out*, 16/03/2013, Factiva
The Washington Post, US Newspaper, **Melissa Gira Grant**, *Sheryl Sandberg's 'Lean In' campaign holds little for most women*, 25/02/2013, Factiva	**The Telegraph**, UK News Website, **Victoria Barnett**, *In defence of Sheryl Sandberg*, 11/03/2013, Factiva	
Mail Online, UK Online Newspaper, **Tom Leonard**, *A very modern Marie Antoinette*, 10/03/2013, Factiva		

My third data set, my circle sample, was the result of my own selection criteria and chance, as some circles did not grant me access and/or were no longer active. During my search for circles, I had made the decision to look for groups that were located in England, easy to reach or commute to and that had at least five members – as I thought the size of the circle would be an indicator of how active it was. While the number of members did indicate a certain popularity, it did not necessarily mean a circle was still active. Some of the circles that had accepted my request to join turned out to be inactive or had potentially never been active in the first place. In the end, I got accepted by nine circles, but only five of them were active during my year-long participant observation. What is more, only three of these five met regularly, once every month. Out of the two less active ones, one circle stopped meeting shortly after I had joined, while the other circle stayed active throughout my participant-observation via emails and using the circle message board on leanin.org, but only ever met once. The groups varied in terms of size, location, their members' ages, ethnicities and careers and the way they ran and organised their meetings. Table 2 provides an overview of these differences and the number of times I attended meetings. The circle names displayed in the table and which I will use throughout this thesis were assigned by me and do not correlate with their actual names.

Table 2 – Overview of the five circles

	Circle Amber	Circle Blue	Circle Coral	Circle Denim	Circle Emerald
Size (attendance)	3-9	2-8	3-?	20-60	6-20
Meet-up location	Café/pub	Bar	Bar	Venue for technology events	Office space + pub
Members' ages	20s-30s	20s-40s	30s	20s-30s	20s
Members' profession	Mixed	Information Technology sector	Same legal profession	Technology sector	Mixed
Members' ethnicity	White	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
Structure	Workshop – Use of leanin.org material	Informal chat/ Workshop – Use of leanin.org material	Agenda focused meetings	Professional speakers	Self-organised workshops
Meetings attended	2	10	1	8	9

Table 2 illustrates how much the circles differed in their composition and the way they organised themselves. I have to stress that members' age and ethnicity were based on my estimate as I did not think it was necessary or appropriate to ask every member about these details. I will get back to and explore the differences between the circles more in-depth in chapter 4. What seemed to unite most of the circles was that their members were most commonly in their mid-20s to late-30s. The groups overwhelmingly consisted of young professional women who were highly educated and in employment – rather than struggling to find a job. The circles I observed thus largely attracted women who were already relatively successful and now aiming for higher positions and/or looking for advice and support on how to deal with difficult, often gender related issues in the workplace. With the exception of circle Amber, all circles seemed to have members from different ethnic backgrounds; and apart from circle Coral, all circles had women of different nationalities attending. The majority of women, nevertheless, appeared to be white and British. Some circles tried to provide a space for women from the same sector (circles Blue and Denim) or profession

(Coral), another one focused on attracting women who were in the early stages of their careers (circle Emerald) and yet another tried to attract women from the same geographical region (circle Amber) as there were very few circles in their area. With the exception of circles Denim and Emerald, most circle meetings had fewer than 10 attendees. The LIC workshop material provided on *leanin.org* was only used by two circles (circles Amber and Blue) and either 'abandoned' or never used by the others.

My interview sample consisted of the nine circle members who agreed to be interviewed for my research project. I ended up interviewing all five founders of the circles, plus the circle founder whose group I could not join. The decision to talk to the founders was based on them usually being the most invested in the circles and regularly attending the sessions. I was interested in their reasons for founding their groups and what motivated them. From a practical point of view, the founders were also the ones I got to know much quicker than other circle members, not just because of their regular attendance, but also because they were often the most communicative and had been informed about my research interest before I even attended any of the meetings. It was, however, also necessary and interesting to talk to 'regular' members of the circles to understand their motivations and their perspectives on the meetings. The members I chose to interview were often amongst the more active ones, as their regular attendance made it easier for me to build a rapport with them and ask for an interview. This led to my sample of interviewees being skewed towards highly motivated circle members, which means that it might be lacking more critical or indifferent voices. Given the size of the sample, however, I did not aim for my findings to fully represent all LIC members as a whole. The interviews were conducted to explore and understand the LIC more in-depth. Their purpose was to add some of the members' perspectives to my analysis so that it would not be based on my participant observation alone and so that I could give the women themselves more of a voice in this project. The interviews also helped me get a better understanding of some circle members' opinions on *Lean In*, the book, and what struggles the individual women faced at work. Table 3 provides an overview of my interviewee sample. It shows how most of my participants were in their 20s or 30s and worked in a range of different professions and industries - with a small majority working in the technology sector. In terms of their ethnic background, one of my interviewees identified as Asian, one as North-African, five as white and another one did not disclose her ethnicity to me. Five of the interviewees were married to a man and four of them had either one or two children. They were, nevertheless, all united by the fact that they had degrees in Higher Education and worked in office-based jobs, indicators commonly associated

with the middle-class, which they all self-identified with. All names displayed in the table are pseudonyms.

Table 3 – Overview interviewees

	Job sector	Ethnicity	Age	Married/ Children	Founder/Member
Mary	Technology	White	30s	No/No	Founder
Dana	Technology	South Asian	40s	Yes/Yes	Founder
Erin	Business	White	20s	No/No	Member
Irene	Technology	White	20s	No/No	Member
Tina	Law	-	-	Yes/Yes	Founder
Victoria	Media	White	30s	Yes/No	Founder
Dakota	Engineering	White	30s	Yes/Yes	Member
Natalie	Business	North African	30s	Yes/Yes	Founder
Heather	Charity	White	20s	No/No	Founder

Conclusion

In this chapter I demonstrated how my research focus shifted from the figured worlds of women in power towards the entanglement of neoliberal and feminist discourses in the context of the Lean In phenomenon. I outlined the research questions that guided my analysis of the latter which were 1) what are *Lean In*'s key messages and underlying assumptions, 2) how do LIC members engage with the *Lean In* phenomenon, and 3) what were the media reactions to the publication of the book? I further demonstrated the ways in which this project was shaped by postmodern feminist epistemology. This epistemological lens is used to challenge androcentrism and biases linked to gender, race, class and other factors which influence the production of knowledge. It can also be seen as a step away from the search for 'objective facts' and positivist research principles. From this point of view, people's interpretations of the (social) world, even if they amount to contradictory or 'messy' narratives, are regarded as valuable knowledge. Individual accounts are seen as intrinsically linked to overarching discourses and can thus reveal plenty about underlying power structures in societies. In this chapter, I also demonstrated the merits and demerits of the methods I chose for my data collection and analysis, which included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, thematic analysis and Bacchi's approach to text/policy analysis. I discussed the implications of entering the

LICs as a white, non-British, student in my late 20s and the ways in which this affected the research process. This was part of a wider discussion concerning the ethical aspects of this research project in which I demonstrated how I tried to create an open, non-hierarchical relationship with my participants but how informing circle attendees of my research project and interests also proved to be difficult due to late arrivals, the size of the circles and new members joining regularly. In the final part of this chapter, I demonstrated how I gathered and selected my data which consisted of four different 'sets', i.e. *Lean In*, 27 favourable, mixed and critical *Lean In* reviews from US-American and British media outlets, field notes from a year-long participant observation in five different English LICs and interviews with nine of their members. The following chapters are dedicated to these four different data sets and my analysis of them. The first of these four chapters begins with an exploration of the Lean In phenomenon and its evolution and further focuses on my participant observation.

Chapter 4: The Lean In phenomenon

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the Lean In phenomenon, which started with a TED talk given by Sheryl Sandberg in 2010 and led to the publishing of her book *Lean In. Women, Work and the Will to Lead* in 2013. This was closely followed by the launch of an accompanying website/non-profit organisation, leanin.org, and the spread of the LICs. I begin this chapter by examining the evolution of the Lean In phenomenon and showing how Sandberg's book and TED were part of a wider debate on whether women can 'have it all'. I then explore and discuss the different types of LICs that I encountered during my participant observation in five different English circles. I demonstrate that their most common characteristics lie in using both personal stories and 'scientific' evidence to build up the members' confidence, to change and 'optimise' themselves, and to support other women/circle members. I further explore how the circles differed in their approaches and their closeness to Sandberg's book and the material provided on *leanin.org*. I identified three different circle approaches: 'self-focused', 'consciousness-raising' and 'outward-oriented'. While these approaches should be understood as ideal types, I want to use this chapter to explore the differences between them by looking at three different circles/circle meetings more closely. I argue that the different ways in which the circles operated means that the Lean In phenomenon cannot be summarised and understood by merely looking at Sandberg's book. Her neoliberal feminist focus on the individual was not upheld by every circle I observed. While some groups focused almost exclusively on 'self-improvement' and thus followed a more neoliberal approach, others deviated from Sandberg's neoliberal feminist message and transformed it into something new.

Introducing the Lean In phenomenon

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, who is reported to be a billionaire, received plenty of praise as well as criticism for *Lean In.* A large amount of this criticism was directed at the book's aims to help women overcome internal hurdles that allegedly keep them from reaching top positions in their lines of work. Critics argued that Sandberg should have targeted change on a social or organisational level instead of looking for 'faults' in women's behaviour. Since its publication, *Lean In* has become its own brand with Sandberg as the main ambassador. In this chapter, I explore the messages Sandberg originally communicated via her 15-minute TED talk, which explored the dearth of female leaders, and discuss a magazine article written by Anne-Marie Slaughter, which is often considered the antithesis to Sandberg's

position. Slaughter's article was published after Sandberg's TED talk but before the publication of *Lean In,* and was, at the time, along with Sandberg's speech, considered part of the debate on whether women 'can have it all'. The two women's approaches were often contrasted by journalists, especially after the publication of *Lean In*, although scholars like Rottenberg (2014b) understand both texts as part of the neoliberal feminist discourse. The contrast created by many journalists was, in my opinion, overstated, which I will explore further in this chapter.

The marketing campaign for Sandberg's book also included promotion for the LICs and the accompanying website and non-profit organisation *leanin.org*, which offers access to the circles and plenty of resources for women as well as men. The book, the website and the circles together can be understood as an intervention staged by Sandberg that went far beyond her TED talk. The combination of the three is what made *Lean In* a phenomenon rather than 'just' a book, and what contributes to its success and impact. Despite its mixed reception, the book has had noticeable impact on many of its readers. As the BBC's Gianna Palmer puts it in her review of *Lean In*'s influence in 2015:

> Lean In's initial critical reception did not predict the growing worldwide engagement of hundreds of thousands of women within the next two years. Many reviewers deemed the book too narrowly focused on women like Sandberg: educated, white, wealthy and with opportunities beyond the reach of most women (Palmer, 2015).

This global impact can, on the one hand, be attributed to Sandberg's COO celebrity status (Wade et al. 2008) and the money invested in the marketing of the book. It can, however, also be credited to the idea of giving women a platform to create groups, i.e. LICs, and meet up with other women who are in the same industry or at a similar stage in their careers. I therefore suggest that the LICs are one of the main reasons for the book's continued impact.

The talk behind the book

Sandberg's TED talk was part of the first TEDWomen event, which was held in Washington DC in 2010. This two-day event consisted of six sessions as well as short talks and performances and was advertised on its website as an exploration of how women are bringing about change in various sectors and societies. Sandberg's talk *Why we have too few women leaders* was part of the second session called 'Life's symphony', which included six other speakers, a majority of them working in the creative sector. Sandberg begins her 15-minute talk by stating that everyone present in the room that day was "lucky" since, compared to earlier generations, they were

born in a time with plenty of freedom regarding their career choices. They were also lucky because they had "basic civil rights", a privilege not yet granted to every woman. Despite all these advancements, Sandberg argues, women still have one problem, which is that most top-leadership positions across the globe are occupied by men and the numbers are often stagnating or increasing. This, according to Sandberg, is true for the political, profit and non-profit sectors. Sandberg goes on to state that women who are highly successful in their careers often do not achieve the same level of "personal fulfilment" (2010) as their male counterparts – "personal fulfilment" here meaning marriage and children. I will get back to this understanding of personal fulfilment as it also features in Sandberg's book and informs most of her writing. Sandberg wants to use her TED talk to address potential solutions to this problem by focusing on what women themselves can do:

> Today I want to focus on what we can do as individuals. What are the messages we need to tell ourselves? What are the messages we tell the women that work with and for us? What are the messages we tell our daughters? (Sandberg 2010).

Before Sandberg starts presenting her suggestions to help women not only stay but also progress in their careers, she makes sure to emphasise that she does not want people to think that she believes she has all the answer to this complex issue. She emphasises how difficult it is, even for her, to be a full-time working mother and to deal with the feelings of guilt that come along with it.

Her three key messages to the audience are "sit at the table", "make your partner a real partner" and "don't leave before you leave" (Sandberg, 2010). By encouraging women to "sit at the table" Sandberg means that women need to be aware of their tendency to underestimate their importance and performance in the workplace, which often leads to them not negotiating their salary or sitting at the back instead of directly at a meeting table. Sandberg acknowledges, however, that this advice might only get women so far, as gender biases still work against women who are outspoken and confident, even if they are merely as outspoken and confident as their male colleagues. Sandberg therefore also flips her advice for women to sit at the table by asking, "'how good are we as managers of our companies and our organisations at seeing that the men are reaching for opportunities more than women? We've got to get women to sit at the table" (2010). This part of her talk thus also puts emphasis on people who are already in positions of power to be mindful of their gender biases and to actively help women progress in their careers. Sandberg's second key argument is that women should choose their romantic partners very carefully. She argues that women might otherwise end up being responsible for most of the housework and

childrearing, which would likely lead to them dropping out of full-time employment. Women, according to Sandberg, also need to be more accommodating towards stay-at-home fathers as she fears that they are still discouraged to fully participate in the 'female' domain of childrearing. The COO's final point directly relates to what would later become the title of her book: She urges women to stop leaning back unconsciously and prematurely. To make this point, she tells the audience an anecdote about a woman who came to speak to Sandberg about how having a child might interfere with her career. Sandberg maintains that the woman's worries were unnecessarily holding her back as she was neither married nor did she "even have a boyfriend" (2010). This comment seems to imply that having children as a single woman is somewhat of an impossibility. Sandberg's anecdote was met with laughter and thus agreement from the audience. This conservative view on partnership, marriage and children would also play out time and again in Sandberg's book, which is something I explore further in Chapter 5. Sandberg's main takeaway from this particular anecdote, however, is that women hold themselves back in anticipation of one day having a child and potentially having to be the primary caregiver. The COO strongly advises against this kind of thinking and instead has the following message for the audience:

> I'm here to tell you, once you have a child at home, your job better be really good to go back, because it's hard to leave that kid at home. Your job needs to be challenging. It needs to be rewarding. You need to feel like you're making a difference. And if two years ago you didn't take a promotion and some guy next to you did, if three years ago you stopped looking for new opportunities, you're going to be bored because you should have kept your foot on the gas pedal. Don't leave before you leave. Stay in. Keep your foot on the gas pedal, until the very day you need to leave to take a break for a child -- and then make your decisions (Sandberg, 2010).

Sandberg argues that leaning back too early will only make it harder for women to return to their jobs after their first child is born. Alluding to the notion of 'maternal instincts', Sandberg claims that young mothers will most likely prefer looking after their child to going back to a not-so-rewarding career. This claim, of course, assumes that the woman in question would have a choice not to stay in paid employment and a partner who would be able to provide for the whole family. It also leaves out if the woman's partner in this scenario, i.e. the father, would be facing the same internal conflict. In this part of her talk, Sandberg tries to encourage women to make the most of their careers so that they will stay motivated to further pursue their career goals. While this certainly can be useful advice for some women, it oversimplifies the problem of why primarily women, and not men, see having children as being incompatible with a full-time, high-ranking job and evokes conservative gender roles

and clichés. It also leaves out the reality of working-class and single women as it paints paid employment as a choice or even a hobby rather than a necessity. The metaphor of the "foot on the gas pedal" (Sandberg, 2010) seems emblematic of Sandberg's understanding of the dearth of women in leadership. She tends to illustrate the way to the 'top' as a rather smooth road with surmountable obstacles and whether or not a woman makes it to her destination seems to largely depend on her driving skills. While Sandberg, both in her talk and her book, often points to big hurdles along the way, such as gender biases and negative perceptions of successful women in the workplace, these hurdles usually seem to vanish as soon as she moves on to her next piece of advice. Sandberg decides to end her talk in this optimistic fashion by saying that while her generation might not reach the goal of having 50 percent women in top leadership positions, she is hopeful "that future generations" (Sandberg, 2010) will. She concludes her presentation by saying "I want my son to have a choice to contribute fully in the workforce or at home, and I want my daughter to have the choice to not just succeed, but to be liked for her accomplishments" (Sandberg, 2010).

Sandberg, Slaughter and the debate over 'having it all'

Two years after Sandberg's TED talk, Anne-Marie Slaughter published an article for the US-American magazine *The Atlantic*, which made direct references to Sandberg's ideas. Slaughter's article was a critical take on the idea of 'having it all' and is often quoted as one of magazine's most read contributions (e.g. McCarthy, 2016). Slaughter is an emeritus professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University who also worked as the U.S. State Department Director of Policy Planning for two years – being "the first woman to [have held] that position" (Bonnyman, 2019). In her 12.000-words think piece, 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' (2012), Slaughter focuses on these two years of her career and how they made her realise what would eventually become the title of her article. The article later became a pivotal part of the media debate surrounding *Lean In*. On one hand, this was due to Slaughter making plenty of references to Sandberg and her ideas, and on the other hand, this was the result of journalists framing it as the antithesis to Sandberg's approach in their reviews. The idea that Slaughter and Sandberg have opposing views on the question of 'having it all' was based on their different take on it. While Sandberg believes that no-one can truly have it all, but that women can still have both a family and a top-job, Slaughter maintains that the current political and organisational structures in the US do not allow for this to happen yet. Despite their differences, I agree with Catherine

Rottenberg (2014a) and suggest that Sandberg's and Slaughter's texts have more in common than what is often claimed.

Slaughter's article, which has since been turned into a book itself called *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family* (Slaughter, 2015), begins with an explanation for why she decided to quit her "job as the first woman director of policy planning at the [US] State Department, a foreign-policy dream job", which had her "sipp[ing] champagne" (Slaughter, 2012) with Barack and Michelle Obama. Her decision to leave was essentially rooted in her desire to spend more time with her children, especially her oldest teenage son, who was struggling in school. It should be mentioned, however, that Slaughter did not leave her job to be a full-time mother, but rather to go back to her old position as a tenured professor at Princeton University, which meant that she could live with her family and have more flexible working hours. It should also be added that Slaughter left the State Department as soon as her "two-year public-service leave from Princeton University was up" (2012) which implies that her decision was heavily influenced by Princeton's leave policy and Slaughter having an alternative job option right at hand. It was thus not solely based on Slaughter finding working at the State Department irreconcilable with being a mother. It is from this position that Slaughter writes her article about how women cannot "have it all". The decision to return to Princeton University coincided with her idea to write this article and was, according to Slaughter, frequently met with hostility or pity from other working mothers with high-ranking jobs. Slaughter defines this as the pivotal moment which made her change her stance on whether women can 'have it all'.

> [I]t was the second set of reactions—those implying that my parenting and/or my commitment to my profession were somehow substandard—that triggered a blind fury. Suddenly, finally, the penny dropped. All my life, I'd been on the other side of this exchange. I'd been the woman smiling the faintly superior smile while another woman told me she had decided to take some time out or pursue a less competitive career track so that she could spend more time with her family. […] I'd been the one telling young women at my lectures that you can have it all and do it all, regardless of what field you are in. Which means I'd been part, albeit unwittingly, of making millions of women feel that they are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men and also have a family and an active home life (and be thin and beautiful to boot) (Slaughter, 2012).

This quote illustrates why Sandberg and Slaughter are often viewed as having diametrically opposed opinions and why journalists would often pit them against each other. Sandberg seems to fit the definition of the type of woman Slaughter used to be and who she is now criticising: the type of women who makes other "women feel that they are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men". Slaughter wants to use her article to start spreading a different message to young women, "that we can 'have it all at the same time.' But not today, not with the way

America's economy and society are currently structured" (2012). She goes on to contrast this point of view with the one expressed by Sandberg in her TED talk which, according to Slaughter, seems to be asking young women who do not find themselves in the positions they were aspiring to "'[w]hat's the matter with you?'" (2012). Slaughter challenges two of Sandberg's main arguments, which the Princeton professor frames as a) women simply needing more determination and ambition to reach the top of the careers and b) women having to find a partner who is willing to split all responsibilities equally. She believes that "[u]ltimately, it is society that must change", which is why Sandberg's advice "is not sufficient" (Slaughter, 2012). This conclusion is what would later make her the more popular choice for journalists who felt like they had to either side with Slaughter or Sandberg. Slaughter's personal advice for women is to ideally focus on their career first and aim to have children before the age of 35 or to consider freezing their eggs. Most of Slaughter's article, however, is dedicated to the way in which "society must change" (2012). She argues that school and work schedules need to be made more compatible. For this to work, institutions should offer their employees flexible working hours and the possibility of working from home and using technology to be 'present' at meetings. Slaughter also pledges for a change in the perception of parenting and motherhood, which is something she and Sandberg seem to agree on. She wants the dedication, work and skills parenting requires to become more recognised by others, particularly employers. Slaughter also argues that women might need to accept not to peak in their careers until their 50s or 60s, after their kids have finished school. Overall, she concludes, change is slowly happening, men "are joining the cause" (Slaughter, 2012) and institutions are starting to recognise that they often lose qualified women they have trained themselves, which is anything but economical. While Slaughter's article focuses largely on the part society and organisations play in gender equality, she also has a tendency to frame gender issues as 'women's issues' and to imply that being a mother ultimately eclipses having a successful career for most women.

> I do not believe fathers love their children any less than mothers do, but men do seem more likely to choose their job at a cost to their family, while women seem more likely to choose their family at a cost to their job (Slaughter, 2012).

> I finally asked myself, 'Who needs me more?' And that's when I realized, it's somebody else's turn to do this job. I'm indispensable to my kids, but I'm not close to indispensable to the White House (Slaughter, 2012).

It is perhaps this message and her focus on employers creating more flexible working environments for parents that sets her article apart from Sandberg's TED talk and book. In the end, however, Slaughter and Sandberg have similar goals in mind and merely approach them from a different angle. Slaughter, herself, gave up one

demanding and prestigious full-time job to be more present in her children's lives, *only* to work in a different, slightly less demanding and prestigious full-time job, which, I argue, for many women would still count as 'having it all'. It is striking how unaware Slaughter seems to be of how privileged her (job) position is and how this exact privilege contradicts the key argument of her essay. In the article's introduction, it says:

> It's time to stop fooling ourselves, says a woman who left a position of power: the women who have managed to be both mothers and top professionals are superhuman, rich, or self-employed (Slaughter, 2012).

Slaughter claims to be neither of these things, yet she manages a demanding career as a "top professional" herself as a professor at Princeton University after having had two successful years in another "top" position in a different line of work. On the one hand Slaughter acknowledges that she is addressing a certain type of reader, namely "highly educated, well-off women who are privileged enough to have choices in the first place […] women who could be leading, and who should be equally represented in the leadership ranks" (2012). She sees herself as part of this demographic and contrasts it with women like Sandberg "who graduated with the prize given to Harvard's top student of economics" and who thus "cannot possibly be the standard against which even very talented professional women should measure themselves" (Slaughter, 2012). Much like many of the journalists who reviewed *Lean In*, Slaughter sees a clear difference between the 'average' woman and women like Sandberg. Interestingly, however, both Slaughter and Sandberg, seem to believe that their privileged experiences are transferable to other women. The title of Slaughter's article also postulates that "*women* […] can't have it all" (Slaughter, 2012, my emphasis), even though most of Slaughter's arguments focus on mothers. The interchangeable use of the two terms, women and mothers, suggests an essentialist and homogenous understanding of 'women' as a category.

One of the last lines of Slaughter's article reads "[w]e'll create a better society in the process, for *all* women. We may need to put a woman in the White House before we are able to change the conditions of the women working at Walmart" (2012, emphasis in the original). It is conclusions and remarks like this that lead me to believe that Slaughter's and Sandberg's perspectives are not as far apart as many journalists have argued – perhaps only to turn the debate into a more interesting 'cat fight'. Slaughter and Sandberg both see the dearth of women in leadership positions as an issue that needs to be fixed and which will eventually bring about more gender equality for most, if not all, women. Gender equality would thus, according to both, eventually trickle down the ranks with more senior women at the top of organisations who can ask for

and implement the necessary changes. While Slaughter argues that women currently stand little chance to achieve true gender equality as the political and organisational structures and policies need to change first in order to get more women into leadership positions, Sandberg believes that these structural hurdles can be overcome by teaching women how to sidestep them. Both, however, see women as a homogenous group and predominantly as (future) mothers and wives (in heterosexual partnerships). Both address feelings of guilt associated with being a working mother and believe that this guilt combined with the love mothers have for their children will make it hard for them to pursue and stay in demanding careers and leadership positions. Slaughter, however, frames this as a reason for women not getting into or remaining in top positions, while Sandberg, on the other hand, believes that reaching these positions would actually encourage women to stay in these jobs 'even' as mothers. Slaughter and Sandberg also agree that gender equality is not simply a question of women "rush[ing] to adapt to the 'man's world'" and "accepting male behavior and male choices as the default and the ideal" (Slaughter, 2012). Sandberg, for example, sees gender equality as a result of mutual efforts from both men and women: she argues that "[a]s more women lean in to their careers, more men need to lean in to their families" (Sandberg, 2013: p.121). The point I am trying to make here, is that both authors base their arguments for more gender equality on the traditional gender dichotomy and the roles and attributes connected to it – albeit to partly call them into question. They both believe that what is deemed to be 'feminine' needs to be valued as much as what is deemed 'masculine'. Slaughter, however, seems to have a slightly more essentialist point of view as her arguments often emphasise the differences between men and women, which is something Sandberg tries to avoid for the most part. It is this essentialism that makes me more critical of Slaughter's article than Sandberg's book. Slaughter, for example, says that she:

> want[s] a world in which, in Lisa Jackson's words, 'to be a strong woman, you don't have to give up on the things that define you as a woman.' That means respecting, enabling, and indeed celebrating the full range of women's choices. 'Empowering yourself,' Jackson said in her speech at Princeton, 'doesn't have to mean rejecting motherhood, or eliminating the nurturing or feminine aspects of who you are' (2012).

While Sandberg, much like Slaughter, has a tendency to use women and mothers interchangeably, she often shies away from attributing "nurturing" qualities to women and from emphasising the different 'qualities' of men and women. Slaughter's tendency to imply inherent differences between and women is reminiscent of *radical feminism* in the sense that it is based on "the premise that women and men are different and that there is no need for them to [be] the same" (Dhamoon, 2013: p.93). Overall, I believe, however, that Slaughter's and Sandberg's accounts both largely

agree on *liberal feminist* ideas and goals, as they both stress the importance of the state implementing measures to promote and establish gender equality. Their differences lie in the fact that, while Slaughter argues that not much can be done unless governments as well as organisations/employers create policies that further support gender equality, Sandberg focuses on what women can do *additionally* and in the meantime as individuals, which is what ultimately makes her book promote a *neoliberal feminist* approach.

Interestingly, as I shall show, journalists often overstated the differences between the two without actually dissecting the two women's arguments and comparing them. What is more, Slaughter's privileged position was not once mentioned in any of the articles I came across, while Sandberg was criticised for it in most of them. This might be due to Slaughter potentially being perceived as having more cultural capital as a professor and 'intellectual' figure, while Sandberg was predominantly seen as a 'capitalist' with plenty of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1989). While both positions bring with them certain amounts of privilege and power, Sandberg's position gives her a bigger platform but leaves her with less trustworthiness. Slaughter's cultural capital as a scholar, on the other hand, gives her words more weight as her profession links her to the production of knowledge and the search for facts and 'objective' truth.

Lean In. Women, Work and the Will to Lead – a feminist manifesto?

With currently close to 9 million views, as of March 2019, Sandberg's TED talk did not go unnoticed. Its success perhaps even made the publication of a book the next logical step giving Sandberg space to expand on her ideas. *Lean In. Women, Work and the Will to Lead* was published in 2013 with Sheryl Sandberg credited as the main author and Nell Scovell as her co-author. It topped *The New York Times'* bestseller list from the last week in March to the beginning of May 2013 in the categories 'Hardcover Nonfiction' and 'Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction' (Anon, 2013b). In 2014, a second edition of the book was published, called *Lean In: For Graduates* (Sandberg, 2014). It included the same chapters as its predecessor plus 'A Letter to Graduates from Sheryl Sandberg' (Sandberg, 2014), six chapters focusing on business, and leadership issues from other contributors interwoven with, according to the books Kindle edition, "14 Lean In stories (500-word essays), by readers around the world who have been inspired by Sandberg" (Sandberg, 2014).

The first edition of the book consists of ten chapters, three of which, highlighted in italics, were based on ideas presented in Sandberg's TED Talk:

1. The Leadership Ambition Gap: What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?'
2. Sit at the Table
3. Success and Likeability
4. It's a Jungle Gym, Not a Ladder
5. Are You My Mentor?
6. Seek and Speak Your Truth
7. Don't Leave Before You Leave
8. Make Your Partner a Real Partner
9. The Myth of Doing It All
10. Let's Start Talking About It.

A brief summary of each chapter can be found in appendix D at the end of the thesis and I will discuss *Lean In*, its messages as well as its reception in-depth in the next chapters.

The book's co-author Scovell is a US-American TV and comedy writer and, according to journalist Laura Bennett, was asked to help make Sandberg's ideas a bit more palatable to the reader.

> [W]hen Sandberg got her book deal, she immediately tapped Scovell to help. 'I'm a pretty straightforward here is my point, here is my story, here is the data writer,' Sandberg said. Scovell, she explained, contributed the kinds of 'anecdotes and phrases and jokes that help a topic like this, which is a difficult topic — I mean, this is feminism' (Bennett, 2013).

Despite Sandberg and Scovell reportedly working closely together, most of the book's marketing focuses on the Facebook COO, who unlike Scovell, has a whole "About the Author" section dedicated to her in the graduate edition of the book (Sandberg, 2014). Scovell's name is also absent from the cover which only feature Sandberg's name and face. Sandberg, however, mentions Scovell in her acknowledgments:

> My deepest thanks go to my writing partner Nell Scovell. Nell and I have been working together on speeches, starting with the 2011 Forrestal Lecture at the U.S. Naval Academy, where I first used the phrase 'lean in.' When I was considering writing this book, I realized that I was willing to do it only if Nell collaborated with me. Nell responded that she was 'not just in, but all in,' which says everything about her commitment. She took a break from her work as a television writer/ producer and journalist to make this a priority. She put in nights, early mornings, weekends, and holidays to accommodate my limited schedule. Most of all, she was insistent that we keep searching until we found the right way to talk about these complicated and emotional issues. Nell's talent with words is matched only by her sense of humor and her unshakable belief that having more women in leadership positions will result in a fairer and better world. I am grateful to her not just for her expertise and complete dedication, but for her friendship, which I have come to cherish. Her heart rings true and clear on this book's every page (Sandberg 2013, pp.177–178).

Despite Sandberg's praise for her co-author and her highlighting the amount of work the latter had put into the writing of this book, Scovell remains hidden in the background as an author and contributor. *Lean In* is presented as Sandberg's book and idea, she is portrayed as the driving force, while Scovell is presented as having

assisted with the fine-tuning of the language and providing a certain entertainment factor and humour to "complicated and emotional issues" (ibid.). While Sandberg might have had the most input content wise and provided the book with its foundation, the marketing decision to almost make Scovell invisible as a co-author, nevertheless, noticeably clashes with *Lean In*'s women-should-support-other-women message. After all, as Sandberg proclaims in the quote included in Bennett's article, "this is feminism" (2013).

While Sandberg, on the one hand, nowadays "proudly call[s] [herself] a feminist" (Sandberg, 2013: p.159), it is important to understand what kind of feminism Sandberg is subscribing to. The book's introduction, for example, contains a statement that "[i]t is not a feminist manifesto— okay, it is sort of a feminist manifesto, but one that I hope inspires men as much as it inspires women" (Sandberg, 2013: p.10). This passage was quoted by many journalists who reviewed the book mostly with a strong focus on the part of the quote suggesting the book being "sort of a feminist manifesto". The words before and after, I argue, are however pivotal to fully put the quote into context. They demonstrate how cautiously the connection to feminism is established – first by denying the link ("[i]t is not a feminist manifesto"), then by establishing a weak "sort of" connection and finally by modifying it and making it a toned-down kind of feminism that wishes to be palatable to men. In her book, Sandberg admits that she had a change of heart concerning feminism and that there used to be a time when she and her friends "accepted the negative caricature of a bra-burning, humorless, man-hating feminist" (Sandberg, 2013: p.143). While she seems to have abandoned this stereotype, her words in the introduction still carry some of those beliefs with them by distancing herself from a feminism that is too radical or, at least, of no interest and relevance to men. While Sandberg never uses this terminology, she could arguably be classified as a *liberal feminist*. Liberal feminists "acknowledge[…] physiological differences between men and women" (Dhamoon, 2013: p.93) and aim to "integrate [the latter] into existing frameworks on the premise that men and women should be treated equally" (Dhamoon, 2013: p.92). Another goal for liberal feminism is to enable women to become "rational autonomous agent[s]" (Dhamoon, 2013: p.100), which also closely aligns with Sandberg's views. However, looking at Sandberg's arguments she could also, and perhaps more fittingly, be classified as a *neoliberal feminist* as the central actors in her feminism are women themselves, the decision they make and the amount of critical self-examination and self-improvement they are willing to do in order to be able to compete in the labour market, the existing organisational structures and with themselves

(Scharff, 2016b). Sandberg's approach encourages entrepreneurial thinking not just at work but in a range of aspects of life such as romantic relationships and family plans. Thinking of the self as an entrepreneurial subject falls directly into Foucault's (2008) and Brown's (2003) understanding of neoliberal discourses and the way they interpellate people. Sandberg's entrepreneurial approach in combination with her lack of emphasis on structural changes is therefore commonly summarised under neoliberal feminism by many feminist academic writer such as Catherine Rottenberg (2014b) or Angela McRobbie (2013). I will expand on Sandberg's neoliberal feminism further in chapter 5 where I discuss the book's message in more detail.

The Lean In Foundation

I want to use this part of the chapter to give a brief overview of the internet platform that provides access to the circles and a range of resources for women as well as men.

Leanin.org or the *Lean In Foundation* is a non-profit organisation founded by Sheryl Sandberg and her late husband. It is part of the *Sheryl Sandberg & Dave Goldberg Family Foundation*. It has been criticised for offering unpaid internships (Edwards & Smith, 2013) despite its mission to "to empower women to achieve their ambitions" (Leanin.org, 2018a). Unpaid internships are problematic as they are not only exploitative but also perpetuate social inequalities as this type of work experience is only affordable to people with the necessary economic capital, i.e. people who are, most likely, already among the most privileged.

The design of the Lean In website has changed multiple times over the years with its core content, however, remaining in place. While it is relatively easy to navigate through the website to get access to the LICs, I found the internet platform as a whole rather confusing as it not quite clear who is running it and who the different parts are targeted at. Leanin.org is divided into a "what you can do" and "what we can do" section, but the sections also heavily overlap in terms of their content. The latter section focuses primarily on the foundation itself, its research and different campaigns and offers a link to the LICs. The "what you can do" part of the website also provides access to the LICs under the drop-down menu "Join a circle". It also offers options for supporting the foundation ("partner with us") as well as a section called "learn & grow" which contains videos and other material that can be used to run circle sessions or for educational purposes more generally. It further includes a fourth drop-down menu called "support women" which offers advice for men. This drop-down menu will direct the user to the *Lean In Together* campaign whose main sponsor is the US-American

National Basketball Association (NBA). Interestingly, this part of the website used to be heavily gendered and rely on language, imagery and examples borrowed from the realm of sports, particularly basketball. Terms such as MVP (Most Valuable Player) where used to address male readers and to perhaps make the campaign more appealing to them by making linking feminism (i.e. the 'unpopular' and 'feminine') with men's sports (i.e. the 'popular' and 'masculine'). This kind of language, however, is not part of the latest version of the website anymore, not at least since May 2018. *Lean In Together* contains tips on "How to Be a Feminist Dad", how to be an equal partner, support women at work and mentor them. The "learn & grow" section of the website offers similar advice specifically for women although the wording is slightly different and it has a section on sexual harassment, which is not included in the advice for men part. This is an interesting decision as it leaves men, and thus the most likely perpetrators, out of the debate. It can therefore be argued that the Lean In Foundation is trying hard to appeal to and not scare away its male readers. Its managers and content creators appear to be assuming that involving men in the debate about sexual harassment could be interpreted as blaming them and thus as perhaps too feminist, too radical and, as result, as off-putting. This makes sense given that Sandberg (2013) says that she would like to motivate men and women equally to join her mission.

To me and many of the circle members, the most relevant content on *leanin.org* were the resources offered for educational purposes and to help run the circle sessions. This content included written material as well as videos (often in combination). It encompassed circle activities, TED talks, and featured three different "expert series":

Negotiation Advice for Women

"Understand how gender influences negotiation and get tips on confidently advocating for yourself based on the latest research"

What Works for Women at Work

"Learn how to spot four patterns of gender bias—and hear women's real-life strategies for navigating them successfully"

Centered Leadership

"Follow the Centered Leadership model to lead with impact, resilience, and fulfillment at work and in the rest of your life" (Leanin.org, 2018b).

The three series were presented by three different women in several short videos which all came with a circle guide so that members could go through the content of the video together and engage in exercises related to it. The website also offered additional meeting guides that were not connected to its expert series. Circle organisers and members could use the meeting guides to structure their sessions and

to provide a focus. In some of the circles I observed, organisers would print out the meeting guides/worksheets so that they could go through them in the meetings. The sessions varied, however, in terms of how much they actually followed the guides or by how much they agreed or disagreed with its ideas and suggestions. Other circles never used the meetings guides or only did so in the beginning before moving on to focusing on their own content or relying on conversations and debates to happen more naturally.

In order to join circles in the first place, one has to register on the website which then provides the user with a filter to help limit the circle options. The user can choose to narrow the circles down according to their proximity to where she lives, works (her company or military branch) or studies (her campus). There is also an option to search for circles that exclusively meet online. Some circles are part of chapters which include more than one circle to allow members to network amongst each other. During my participant observation, however, I never encountered members who actively participated in the chapters. Most people I spoke to, including myself, found the chapter system to be rather confusing. According to the website there at about 36.000 circles in 162 countries (as of May 2018). It is, however, impossible to stay how many of those circles are (still) active. A quick search indicates that the circles are not only found in Western countries but are in fact spread across the globe. The search did however also demonstrate that there are fewer circles in cities outside the US, particularly in the Global South. Dhaka, for example, only has three circles with more than five members, whereas Austin, Texas, has 27.

The LIC – From Changing Women to Challenging Structures

As demonstrated in the methodology chapter of this thesis, the circles differed in their format, size and professional focus, and while most circles raised similar questions in their meetings, they differed in terms of how they approached and tried to solve them. I want to use this part of the chapter to illustrate these different approaches, which I categorise as a) self-focused b) consciousness-raising or c) outward-oriented. Every circle I observed had elements of all three categories but tended to rely on one predominantly. I suggest that these approaches illustrate how closely individual circles align with and follow the advice Sandberg gives in her book and through the Lean In Foundation/website. Before I explore the three different approaches, I want to first demonstrate the commonalities between the circles by introducing a technique to gain self-confidence that was brought up repeatedly by several circle members and

speakers in four of the five circles and which illustrates the thematic overlap between the groups.

'Scientific' Psychological Tools for 'Self-Improvement'

While the circles differed in terms of how much they focused on the self and how to change or 'improve' it, the idea of using psychological tools that had ideally been scientifically proven to work was popular throughout the different circles. The following example of such a tool was mentioned by different speakers and/or circle members in all circles except circle Coral (where I only got a chance to attend one of their meetings). The example I am referring to is Amy Cuddy's TED talk *Your body language may shape who you are* (2012). In this talk Cuddy argues that her research has shown that standing in a, what she calls, high-power pose for a few minutes can increase testosterone and lower cortisol. The idea behind this being that by changing these hormonal balances, people who power pose will feel and appear more relaxed and confident. This should ideally lead to a "fake it till you become it" (Cuddy, 2012) situation – a loop of artificially creating confidence until the individual becomes more 'naturally' confident from the success they had when they were 'faking' their confidence. While the TED talk became hugely popular, the validity of Cuddy's findings was later disputed; this was only mentioned by one of the speakers who had used Cuddy's TED talk in her circle workshop. The idea of power posing to increase confidence, particularly before entering situations that tend to increase nervousness and anxiety, such as job interviews or public speaking, was nevertheless very popular amongst the circle members. It was brought up multiple times by various circle members as well as speakers who had been invited to the workshops and was also part of the suggested circle workshop material on *leanin.org*. I suggest that Cuddy's ideas perfectly embody and align with the ideas presented in *Lean In* and what the LICs represent. One of the reasons for this is that power posing addresses confidence issues, or more precisely the issue of lacking self-confidence in work-related situations, which was one of the most explicitly and implicitly talked about problems in the circle meetings. Not only does power posing allegedly tackle confidence issues, it also offers a solution that is completely within the hands of the individual. It is about controlling the body and the mind so that others will perceive the individual in a more favourable light which will, ideally, lead them to achieving more successful outcomes (e.g. getting a promotion, a new job or simply being perceived as more competent). Cuddy's advice aligns nicely with the ideas presented in Sandberg's book and on the *Lean In* website: namely, that there is always something the individual can do to improve their lot in life as long as they are paying attention to their thoughts and

actions and are willing to change them. While Sandberg received a lot of criticism for this individualistic approach, it should be noted that, despite power-posing being an individual act, the idea was always shared by the circle members. In other words, the advice was passed on instead of kept as a secret solely used for one's own advantage. It was used as a tool to support women as a group. I believe that Cuddy's power-posing was shared the amount of times it was, because of its scientific (albeit heavily disputed) nature. The circle members oftentimes had a preference for concepts, ideas, studies and statistics taken from psychology and the social sciences. While the women also relied on common sense and personal experience, they often referred to 'science' to back up their arguments. These four aspects: a focus on confidence, becoming aware of and changing one's body language and mindset, the sharing of potentially helpful tips and referring to scientific/'objective' evidence characterised large parts of the circle meetings I participated in and can be seen as the major commonalities between the circles. Having discussed common elements that characterised a range of different circle meetings, I now want to discuss how the circles varied in their approaches by focusing on their different attitudes towards change.

Different Circle Approaches

As outlined above I identified three different approaches which I named a) self-focused b) consciousness-raising and c) outward-oriented. I will explore each approach by examining circles and circle meetings that were particularly representative of them.

- The Self-Focused Approach

Circles Emerald and Denim, for example, were predominately 'self-focused' by which I mean that their workshops concentrated on what the individual woman could do to further her career and improve her life more generally. Here, the self was conceptualised as both an entrepreneurial subject and project – with limited resources, participating in 'high' and 'low value' activities, that could always be optimised which, I believe, very much aligns with *Lean In*'s overall neoliberal feminist approach. Their meetings provided advice on how the circle members could eventually more closely resemble the 'ideal worker' in the organisations they worked for. According to Joan Acker, the ideal worker is disembodied and "is actually a man, and it is the man's body, its sexuality, minimal responsibility in procreation, and conventional control of emotions that pervades work and organizational processes" (Acker, 1990: p. 152). This ideal worker is fully committed to their work, flexible and,

I suggest, also defined by neoliberal values such as viewing themselves as an entrepreneurial project that can always be further developed and improved to gain competitive advantages over other workers. While the women in the self-focused LICs did not embody the 'ideal (male) worker' in Acker's sense, their eagerness to self-improve made them, like many young women, neoliberal "entrepreneurial subjects par excellence" (Scharff, 2016b: p.109). In the circles, a large part of this 'improvement work' seemed to consist of exercises for building up confidence which took on various different forms. To demonstrate what I mean by circles Denim and Emerald being predominately 'self-focused', I will explore one session more in-depth.

I attended a session run by Circle Emerald on emotional intelligence, which I would like to examine more closely in the following paragraphs. This session had a focus on helping members identify their 'metaprogrammes' which stand for various personality traits. Two of the organisers, Sarah and Anna, had offered to run this session for the circle members after having previously attended a 'leadership course' at their workplace together where they were taught about emotional intelligence. They started the session by introducing themselves and asking the rest of the group to share who they were, why they were here and how many sessions they had previously attended. The women then introduced themselves one after the other and gave their reasons for joining the circle and coming to this session (e.g. needing a space where they could talk about work-related issues or looking for training and development opportunities). Even though the meeting was held in the evening and after work, it nevertheless felt like work to me, partly because it was held in a seminar room in an office space and included a power-point presentation, a handout that explained the metaprogrammes and group work. Sarah encouraged the other members to share if they have had any success in finding a mentor after last month's session which had been focused on how to get a mentor. Two women reported that they had approached potential mentors but did not achieve the outcome they had hoped for. Sarah then moved on to talk about the metaprogrammes and why they could be beneficial to the circle members. She emphasised that metaprogrammes can help people understand themselves and others better which could help improve the circle members' relationships to their co-workers and managers as well as to their family members and friends, and contribute positively to their mental health and well-being. Before moving on to explaining five metaprogrammes, Sarah talked about "seven habits"[4]

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[4] According to Sarah and the person who ran the leadership course she had participated in, these are: being proactive, beginning with the end in mind, prioritising, cooperating, trying to understand others first before talking about yourself, synergising, and always sharpening yourself.

successful people have and together with Anna introduced the idea of there being four different types of people: audio, visual, kinaesthetic and audio-digital. These ideas and models all derived from the leadership courses they had participated in. They explained that knowing if a co-worker or manager is an audio or visual type will help the circle members understand them better and they will be able to quite literally 'speak their language'. A visual person might use expressions such as "Let me paint a picture for you" or "Do you see what I mean?". An emotionally intelligent person would pick up on those clues and mirror the language used by the person they are talking to. The ideal outcome would be that the two people build a better relationship and are able to communicate clearly.

This use of 'emotional intelligence', as the two circle members emphasised, should make it easier to influence other people and their actions. The metaprogrammes, on the other hand, were mostly about the self and how to 'adapt' it to one's goals. Sarah and Anna had chosen five out of apparently fifty metaprogrammes to introduce to the circle, which were feedback, rapport, agreement, action and motivation. Everyone was then asked to place themselves on a spectrum for each metaprogramme. The spectrum for feedback, for example, ranged from internal, which supposedly encompasses people who make decisions based on their own thoughts and feelings, to external, which is meant to describe people who seek other people's opinions and input first. Although it felt to me as if one end of each spectrum always seemed closer to the ideal not only worker, but also 'rational modern individual', Sarah emphasised that the metaprogrammes should be understood as neutral concepts. The idea, however, was to identify one's own metaprogrammes and then reflect on whether it aligns with what the individual circle members wanted to achieve in their respective careers. This exercise was broken up into several rounds of group work where people were encouraged to share where they fell on each metaprogrammes' spectrum and talk about their goals. After each round, Sarah and Anna asked for volunteers who wanted to share the result of their reflections with the rest of the group. It seemed that most circle members eagerly participated in these exercises and enjoyed identifying their metaprogrammes and what they 'needed' to change. One member Erin (who we will learn more about in the interview chapter) reported that she had had a lightbulb moment during which she noticed that she was "away-girl" by which she meant that, according to the model, her motivation at work usually was 'away' from things, i.e. avoiding negative outcomes and focusing on problems, instead of 'towards', i.e. being more goal oriented. She concluded that it would benefit her to become more 'towards' for her particular role in her company. I will return to and discuss this example in more

depth in chapter 7. After the five metaprogrammes were discussed in groups and the results shared with the rest of the circle, the organisers invited the members to join them for a drink at a pub close by, which about half of the women did.

I decided to include this particular session in the discussion of my findings as an example for the 'self-focused' approach as it highlights its key elements. This particular session had little to no direct references to any gender issues at work, which was common for both circles Denim and Emerald. While gender discrimination was discussed every now and then, the circles mostly focused on how to become more successful at work more generally. The fact that the circles were run by and for women did however, according to one of the organisers, set the tone and turn it into a safe space where women could address issues they would not feel comfortable addressing elsewhere. Being working women thus featured as a commonality bringing the members together but would only occasionally be a topic of discussion. The key questions usually revolved around how to become more successful at work and what changes the individual needed to implement in order to achieve this goal. The session on emotional intelligence nicely demonstrates this aspect as well as the focus on concepts which appeared scientific and borrowed from the field of psychology as mentioned above: The members used the session to help each other achieve a better understanding of themselves through the use of what appeared to be scientific concepts. They were eager to find solutions to their problems at work by placing themselves on personality spectrums and identifying how they would need to adapt their personality to better fit their jobs. Judging from the group work I participated in and from what was shared by the members that day, there seemed to be no hesitation or criticism regarding the metaprogramme categories or towards having to adapt one's personality to a job role. The members seemed happy to participate in this arguably neoliberal exercise during which the self was to be closely examined as an entrepreneurial project that needed to be optimised. What made this exercise a neoliberal one, was that it focused entirely on the individual without examining the social structures and norms it is embedded in. Socialisation, be it gendered, racialised or classed, was not addressed as an ongoing process shaping one's personality or 'metaprogrammes'. The self was understood as an individual with a significant amount of power over 'who one is' and can become. Co-workers, superiors and organisational structures might pose challenges to the individual, but they can be overcome by making the individual herself undergo 'fine-tuning' processes. This way, she will be able to influence others and better fit into the criteria posed by her job description. The neoliberal undertones behind the use of metaprogrammes and

similar categories also manifest themselves in the lack of focus on change on any level that goes beyond the individual. Questioning organisational structures or job expectations was left out of the picture entirely.

Sessions like the one I just described were not just geared towards making women become a better worker but also a 'better' person in general. This points towards the neoliberal entanglement of 'private life' and 'work life' and the expectation that it is the individual and its personality as a whole that is being scrutinised in the labour market. I have found the self-focused approach to be reminiscent of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which is characterised by "three fundamental propositions: Cognitive activity affects behavior; cognitive activity may be monitored and altered; and desired behavior change may be effected through cognitive change" (Beal, 2013). I suggest that many of the LIC workshops implicitly make use of this psychotherapeutic approach by asking the attendees to reflect upon their past experiences, behaviours and cognitions and to replace the last two with more 'useful' ones that will help them achieve their work-related goals and might also help them in their personal lives.

Circle workshops such as the one held by circle Emerald are thus perhaps best understood through a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault argues that the production of and "the 'will to knowledge'" (1978: p.12) (re)produces norms, or more precisely what is considered normal or abnormal. He considers, amongst others, religion, psychoanalysis, psychology and other (social) sciences as important contributors to the production of knowledge and, as a result, the (re)production of power relations. Foucault believes that the constant search for 'truth' about a population on the one hand, and about individuals, on the other, is utilised to categorise and control people and punish those who deviate. The French philosopher also points out how the focus on the individual (body) is increasing along with the need to make it more productive (Foucault, 1995). An important part of Foucault's understanding of power and control is, however, that it is not simply exerted over the individual by the state or government, but that power relations permeate through discourses "in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior" (1978: p.11) and are re-enacted from every part of society. Power relations and norms are thus internalised by members of society who can then act within those power dynamics and even challenge and change them. These processes of searching for 'truth', placing people into categories and the internalising of social norms can be seen in the way circle members are encouraged to reflect on their personalities or their bodily feelings, reactions and cognitions and the way they are asked to identify themselves with certain types and categories. It can further be seen in the way the members are encouraged to adopt

certain social norms and expectations by being offered 'scientifically proven' or 'expert' tools and solutions that supposedly will not only help them become successful leaders but also more successful individuals outside of work.

- The Consciousness-Raising Approach

While the session I described above reflected a large number of workshops and sessions run by circles Emerald and Denim, there were also elements that resembled the other two types of circle approaches, which I will examine next. Circle Emerald, for example, also held sessions which were slightly less structured and allowed members to talk more freely and share experiences, particularly those including gender discrimination at work. This kind of circle approach, which I call 'consciousness-raising', was, however, mostly characteristic for circle Blue and partly for circle Amber.

This approach allowed for more 'natural' conversations to happen, including 'tangents', during which the women usually voiced their frustrations concerning gender discrimination at work. It was less oriented towards learning and development which was more strongly highlighted by the 'self-focused' groups. Here, the emphasis was on the circles providing a safe space where women could support each other and realise that they were not alone with their problems. The name I gave this approach derives from these circles having many parallels to the goals and ideas behind the consciousness-raising (CR) groups of the 1960s and 1970s. While the first CR groups were closely linked to the women's movement and often politically active, later on

> CR groups became widely identified as a way for women to examine issues in their own lives in terms of their social conditioning. Discussing role-related problems and sharing personal experiences as women were seen as meaningful ways to find new solutions for redefined problems. As such, CR groups were increasingly viewed as an alternative mental health resource for women […]. CR groups continued to be viewed as embodying a major tenet of the women's movement, that is, that 'the personal is political' (Kravetz, 1978: p.170).

I suggest that LICs can exhibit comparable qualities to CR groups and serve similar purposes for their members, depending on how they structure and use them. Although CR groups differed in the way they operated (much like the LICs), they would often provide a supportive environment in which women could air their frustrations, go over the personal lives and realise that many of their problems were rooted in the way they were socialised as women (Rowbotham, 1989). The groups enabled women to organise themselves and focus on social as well as, particularly later on, personal change (Enns, 1992). Circles Blue and Amber exhibited similar characteristics by integrating elements of learning and development (mostly through making use of the

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LIC's website material) with providing members with a space for addressing gender issues they would encounter regularly at work and outside of the workplace. Their discussions about negative experiences in the workplace (and elsewhere) would often help the members feel less alone with their problems. They realised that problems they encountered were not the result of personal failures or flaws but systemic problems embedded in the social structure. This type of circle also had elements of support groups as members would focus on exchanging tips and discussing potential solutions to their problems. The focus on the website material often merely provided the meetings with a structure and gave them ideas from where they could start their debates.

To demonstrate more clearly what defines the consciousness-raising approach of the LICs, I want to describe a session held by circle Blue in more detail. Circle Blue's meetings would typically begin with the members either catching up or introducing themselves if there were any new members present. The meeting I want to talk about in more detail had a few new members attending and thus started off with an introduction round. The founder was the last one to introduce herself and also explained why she founded the circle. She stated that she often felt isolated as a woman in a technological profession, struggled with confidence issues at work and was tired of being seeing as the office admin. She then asked the others what they would like to do in this particular session. She gave them the option of deciding on one of the two LIC worksheets that she had printed out from the website for this session or to simply discuss topics that were on the circle members' minds. After a very brief discussion the members chose to go with the workshop on "Managing Difficult Conversations" and started the session by freely exchanging stories about their own experiences related to this topic. One of the new members shared that she had had a difficult conversation with her manager who had told her that she would sometimes get too emotional at work. While she agreed with his criticism, she felt hurt. The other members started questioning whether she was actually "too emotional" or whether her manager's perception was skewed as a result of his gender bias. The members then started sharing stories where they had been accused of being too emotional and concluded that their behaviour was judged differently to that of their male co-workers. One member, for example, stated that she gets into a "no-bullshit" mindset when she is stressed, which she believes men then interpret as her being emotional. The women moved on to talking about how to potentially combat this gender bias and most members agreed that addressing it head-on could be a potential solution although they were doubtful at the same time that it would make a real

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difference. They then proceeded to share more stories about other instances of gender discrimination such as sexist comments at work. After a while the discussion became more focused on the actual workshop material and the group naturally split into pairs/smaller groups which partly talked through the material and partly talked about unrelated matters. Eventually, one of the new members broke up the individual conversations and read out a piece of advice from the worksheet:

Pushing with your words is like pushing with your hands

If you 'push' with words, you will get push back from your counterpart. If you listen to your counterpart with respect, you are more likely to be heard. The goal is to understand each other´s perspective and find a mutually agreeable solution (LIC material, emphasis in the original).

One of the other members then asked the rest of the group for advice as she was in a situation where she felt that someone at work had trouble understanding what she was trying to communicate. Some of the members then contributed their own personal experiences with similar situations, what they had done or what they would suggest she could do in this particular dilemma (e.g. asking the other person to repeat what it is she wants them to do, or to just communicate the end result and let the other person figure out how to get there). The rest of the workshop followed a similar dynamic but I had to leave before it finished to catch my train back home.

I want to draw close attention to how this circle approached its sessions from an informal angle. The most important aspects here were the sharing of experiences, asking other members for advice, and being allowed to take the conversation wherever the members would like it to go. While the workshop material served as an anchor, the discussions were mostly driven by the individual members and what was on their minds. The members often discussed the advice given by the worksheets but did not always take it on board, questioned it or skipped parts that they did not find helpful or interesting. They also presented alternative solutions they had come across in 'real life', other workshops and self-help books or brought in statistics and studies they remembered reading about. Given that the participants often came from different professions, albeit in the same industry, they did not tend to discuss their problems in great detail and usually talked about them in the abstract, which I sometimes felt limited the helpfulness of the members' advice. It did, however, strike me how most members made a noticeable effort to actively listen to each other: they repeated and summarised what they thought the other person had said, asked follow-up questions and refrained from any judgement as much as possible. This is not to say that there was never any disagreement between the members, but the tone always remained respectful. Debates would often occur when members expressed what they believed

to be the reasons behind certain forms of gender discrimination. Older members would often believe that sex differences played a big role, as they believed that men and women were inherently different from each other, while younger members would often avoid putting men and women in two separate categories. Sometimes members would even explicitly argue from a certain feminist perspective, e.g. by identifying with second-wave feminism and expressing criticism of third-wave feminists. Most of the times, however, the members' perspectives on feminism remained implicit and were not directly debated. The consciousness-raising circles nevertheless tended to put 'gender' at the centre of their meetings and discussions. It was rare for a discussion to be completely unrelated to it or to not be brought back to it. This differentiates this approach from the self-focused groups where gender was not the primary lens through which they analysed themselves and their career progress and obstacles. Circle Blue and Amber explicitly met to tackle and talk about gender discrimination at work, share their personal experiences, which made them feel less isolated in their experiences, hence the comparison to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s. While this marked a noticeable difference between this kind of circle approach and the self-focused groups, both types, however, have in common that they did not examine what was taking place and could potentially be changed on an organisational or even political level. In that sense, both circle approaches seemed to more or less follow Sandberg's book and the kind of advice provided on her website.

- The Outward-Oriented Approach

The final approach I came across during my field work, however, the 'outward-oriented' approach, aimed to include a focus on what organisations can do for their female employees. It therefore adds the element critics that have argued is missing from *Lean In*. I want to demonstrate what the 'outward-oriented' approach entailed by describing one last circle/circle session.

I was only able to attend one of circle Coral's meetings as they unfortunately often had to spontaneously cancel their rare sessions and I had to miss a meeting due to illness. As mentioned in the methodology section of this thesis, this circle consisted exclusively of women from the same legal profession. The meeting I went to was held in a café not far from the women's offices. The founder explained to me that they usually met in a 'fancier' place, but that it had been reserved for a private event that evening. Apart from me and the founder, another regular circle member and a woman who had just recently joined attended the meeting. The new member asked the founder a range of questions regarding the workings of the circle meetings, which was

also helpful for me. The remainder of the meeting focused on planning a networking event, in the form of a wine tasting, to which the members wanted to invite female senior professionals (who were not part of the circle). This plan, however, never materialised due the founder having to pay for the rather pricey event in advance and a lack of commitment from other circle members. The idea behind the event had been to give the circle members a chance to introduce themselves to senior professionals and ask them career related questions.

Partly to answer the new member's questions, the founder also handed out a sheet with the circle's five "core values" and five "shared goals" to us. The core values were written in capital letters and were: support, trust, share, respect, and positivity. The goals were about the members supporting each other (e.g. by referring to and recommending each other) and having fun. There were, however, also quite specific goals based on an intimate knowledge of their profession. To quote these goals directly:

> 1. Devising a positive strategy for building relationships with clients […] outside [the circle members' workplaces];
>
> 3. Combating attrition at [the circle members' workplaces] – not losing a single member of our Circle!
>
> 4. Maximising precious time to get the most out of business development opportunities and lifestyle at [the circle members' workplaces] as women.

These goals highlight how aware this circle was of gender discrimination within their profession and their willingness to actively fight it: The point of "[c]ombating attrition" referred to the trend of women to dropping out of their profession once they started having children. The circle made various efforts to actively pursue this goal: They worked together with their profession's equivalent of a trade union and had asked for an 'Equality Index' to be implemented, which they as a circle had created. This index was supposed to measure a range of factors covering percentages of women in various roles as well as parental leave policies in different workplaces. They also supported changes proposed by the 'union' to the parental leave rules within their profession. Within the circle, the members exchanged information about policies (e.g. regarding maternity leave) at each other's workplace and told me that they had used these pieces of information to ask for and achieve better policies. In my interview with the founder, she explained to me:

> [Another circle member's workplace] against the rules [had] no [maternity leave] policy at all. So, [the circle member was] able to form a group of us that was anonymised and say 'Look, this is what other very reputable [workplaces] are doing and you're actually obliged to do the, this minimum. What do you think?'

and actually managed to get quite a good policy in place. So, the information sharing has been very useful (Tina).

The circle thus had a very strong focus on making the conditions more visible that women in their professions were working under and that were potentially holding them back. This increased visibility was then used to ask for changes wherever possible. In that sense, this type of circle was reminiscent of the early consciousness-raising groups that were more politically active than their successors. This circle was, however, also characterised by a business-oriented approach which can be inferred by looking at the language used in their goals and values, i.e. by referring to "strategies", "maximising of […] time", and "business development opportunities".

Circle Coral, given its very narrow professional context, was able to focus on either concrete problem cases members were faced with at work or 'meta' issues in their profession that seemed to predominantly affect women. The specific professional focus within the circle meant that members would concentrate less on the development of more general soft skills (such as effective communication, learning to be more assertive or how to set and achieve goals) and focus more on specific and currently relevant problems at work. The professional focus circle Coral provided, also meant that the advice given from members to other members was specifically tailored to the women's actual working conditions and environment. While this perhaps limited the circle members in the sense that they received no input from women with similar problems outside their profession, this 'limitation' seemed to work in their advantage: It gave them a deeper understanding of how well their respective workplaces were doing in terms of gender equality and provided them with ideas and tools to ask for and implement the necessary changes. The members of this circle thus actively challenged and changed structural issues at work that reproduced gender-based inequalities, such as the lack of decent maternity leave policies. They brought about change as the result of a collective rather than an individual effort and can thus not be characterised as following a neoliberal (feminist) approach. This illustrates how big the gap between the agenda promoted in Sandberg's book and the circles' own goals and agendas can be.

I would like to stress that while the empirical evidence for the outward-oriented type relies heavily on a single circle, which, additionally, often struggled to arrange and commit to meetings, my typology is further based on evidence gathered from my interview with the founder and online research. This evidence provided further insight into the circle's activities and displayed the group's cooperation with their profession's equivalent of a trade union and showed continuous informal networking outside of

circle. This type of networking would happen through members meeting up over coffee or, as circle founder Tina explained to me, by "hav[ing] quite good discussions" and "trad[ing] off some ideas" via email. As a circle member, I had access to the messages that were sent between members. They used the messages to ask for each other's support in upcoming 'union' elections, celebrate work related successes such as promotions or to make each other aware of 'diversity initiatives' in their field. The circle was also in talks with one of their profession's regulatory bodies to function as a "working group" to discuss strategies concerning "equality and diversity" (Tina). The circle thus helped in creating a bond between the members and united them in their shared goals. It fostered a strong network between the circle members that seemed robust enough to function outside of circle meetings and was used as a foundation from which to tackle issues related to gender inequality in their profession.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to demonstrate that the Lean In phenomenon goes beyond Sandberg's book. What started out as a TED talk and contributed to the debate on whether women can 'have it all' was followed by a much bigger intervention tackling gender issues in the work place, particularly the lack of women in leadership positions. This intervention included the book, the website and the LICs and had significant global impact. The LICs massively contributed to this impact, added more layers to it and transformed Sandberg's messages into something new and different. While some of the circles I observed quite closely followed Sandberg's individualistic, neoliberal approach by making the members focus on the self and how to change it to become a more successful competitor in the labour market, others deviated from this formula. The consciousness-raising circles, while still close to Sandberg's approach, turned their meetings into safe spaces where members could share their experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace and how to best tackle it. These sessions helped the members feel more confident as they realised their problems were structural and not 'with them'. Circle Coral took their sessions and agenda even further by uncovering how gender inequality was structurally embedded in their respective workplaces and by asking for the necessary changes to be made. This approach was made possible by the narrow professional focus the circle provided.

Despite their different approaches, most circles addressed similar issues such as lack of confidence, maternity leave and work-life balance and tried to make sense of them and tackle them through the use of 'scientific' models and concepts, advice given by 'experts' and by referring to studies and statistics. Self-focused circles and to a lesser

extent consciousness-raising circles focused on uncovering certain 'truths' about the circle members themselves and the world they live in. These 'truths' were meant to replace old lenses through which the members used to see themselves and their environments. Self-focused groups used these 'truths' primarily so members could assimilate certain social norms and standards that would help them become more successful and resemble the ideal neoliberal worker. The other two approaches had a stronger focus on gender biases or discriminatory structures in the workplace and how they affected the circle members. This shows how much the circles differed in terms of the logic, goals and purposes they followed and demonstrates how the Lean In phenomenon is constituted of both feminist aspects, such as directly tackling gender inequalities on an individual as well as on a structural level, as well as neoliberal and potentially anti-feminist aspects, such as conforming to organisational standards that disadvantage predominately women. Sandberg's book can therefore not be seen in isolation from the circles as they reveal to what extent *Lean In*'s messages, as I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, are both reproduced and transformed into something that can strongly deviate from the book's neoliberal feminist approach.

Chapter 5: Lean In – Key Messages and Underlying Assumptions

This chapter will focus on *Lean In*, the book, and illustrate what themes I discovered to be the most dominant as a result of my thematic analysis and how they were presented to the reader. The most prominent themes in the book were 1) motherhood/parenthood, 2) gender roles and biases 3) neoliberalism and 4) mistakes women make. It should be noted, however, that there were often significant overlaps between the themes. My analysis followed Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach which suggests a focus on the problematisations, assumptions, silences and effects of a text. I will introduce the four themes individually by giving a brief summary first before analysing and unpacking two text passages more in depth that highlighted particularly interesting aspects of each theme. The quotes will be used to explore what Sandberg problematises, the things that are created and reproduced through her use of language (effects), what is taken for granted (assumptions) and what is left unsaid (silences). The aim of this chapter to enrich the academic discussion of *Lean In* and Sandberg's neoliberal feminism as most scholars do not directly engage with the text or explore it in-depth. This chapter will thus fill this gap by exploring the themes and issues Sandberg's focuses on the most, and how exactly she frames them. This is an important step in exploring what exactly makes Sandberg's book part of the neoliberal feminism discourse and where the ambiguities lie. This way her contribution can be understood in a more nuanced way which might lay the groundwork for a more constructive debate about neoliberal feminism, its arguments, merits and demerits.

Motherhood/Parenthood

The first theme I want to discuss is 'motherhood/parenthood' as it encompassed the largest number of coded text passages, despite it only appearing in 6 out of the 11 chapters of the book. First, I will demonstrate how this theme was generally framed by Sandberg. I will then examine two quotes that stood out to me and explore what they problematise, leave out, take for granted and potentially bring into effect.

I applied the code 'motherhood/parenthood' whenever Sandberg talked about her own experiences as a mother, anecdotes from other parents, statistics and research on issues related to parenting, stories about her own parents and grandparents, as well as policies and norms that reinforce traditional gender roles for parents. Sandberg's overall positioning towards motherhood and parenthood could arguably be classified as progressive yet conservative. She vehemently argues for parents

sharing domestic and childrearing responsibilities equally and urges women to *lean in* into their careers, on one hand, and men to *lean in* at "the kitchen table" (Sandberg, 2013: p.121), on the other hand. She also criticises how some men see their children as "hobbies" (Sandberg, 2013: p.107) and use the term "'babysitting'" (ibid.) for looking after their own children. According to the author, however, there is also 'hope' since younger generations have a higher percentage of "sensitive men" (Sandberg, 2013: p.120) who want to be actively involved fathers and that these men will act as good role models for their sons and daughters. With her 50-50-approach, Sandberg steps away from traditional gender roles, but nevertheless firmly clings to the heteronormative family model based on the triad of mother, father and child/children. Indeed, when Sandberg talks about women, she often means mothers. She emphasises how valuable a single woman's free time is because this is when can she can look for a suitable partner, i.e. a future husband and father. For Sandberg, having "a full life" (2013: p.133) often seems to be congruent with having a husband and children.

Throughout the book Sandberg continuously points to the different social expectations fathers and mothers are held to, with women still being viewed as the primary caregiver and seen as more likely to leave the workforce or work part-time, which I also demonstrated in my literature review (see for example Smith et al., 2011; Legault & Chasserio, 2003). Sandberg, however, also directs attention to the responsibility of the individual here, by noting how men and women internalise this expectation and fall into traditional gender roles if they do not consciously try to resist them. Sandberg also maintains that there is a conflict between stay-at-home and working mothers as both sides feel as if they constantly need to defend their parenting choices. According to the author, mothers in paid labour nowadays spend as much or more time with their children as the average stay-at-home mother in 1975 did[5]. Working mothers' concerns about having too little time for their children is hence simply a sign of the different standards mothers are currently being held to. The COO further believes that women slightly overestimate the influence having a child will have on their career and unnecessarily avoid talking to HR or asking for more support from their employers. They, according to the author, also tend to overwork after having had children in order to (over)compensate for the time spent with their child/children.

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[5] Sandberg here cites: Suzanne M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa A. Milkie, The Changing Rhythms of American Family Life (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 74–77.

Sandberg throughout the book shows an acute awareness of gender stereotypes and often tries to avoid and speak out against them, albeit not always successfully. She admits how the roles her and her husband take on, with him paying the bills and her planning birthday parties, are in accordance with gender stereotypes. While she questions this role division, the reader learns very little about who is responsible for any of the other chores. Although the COO states a few times that she is lucky to have professional help with the household and her children, it does not become clear how much work is left for her or her husband to do at the end of the day. The book often reads as if Sandberg and her husband divide all responsibilities between them. Her privilege is thus made fairly invisible and creates a false equivalence between being a parent in the Sandberg household and being a parent in a family who cannot afford help.

After having laid out how the theme of 'motherhood/parenthood' was discussed more generally, I will move on to a more in-depth discussion of a few selected quotes and the problematisations, silences, assumptions and effects they contain.

> I have heard so many women say that they wished their partners helped more with child care, but since it's only a few more years until their kids are off to school, it's not worth the battle to change the dynamic. […] The good news is that men in younger generations appear more eager to be real partners than men in previous generations. A survey that asked participants to rate the importance of various job characteristics found that men in their forties most frequently selected 'work which challenges me' as very important, while men in their twenties and thirties most frequently selected having a job with a schedule that 'allows me to spend time with my family.' If these trends hold as this group ages, this could signal a promising shift. Wonderful, sensitive men of all ages are out there. And the more women value kindness and support in their boyfriends, the more men will demonstrate it (Sandberg, 2013: p.120).

This quote was taken from Chapter 8 'Make Your Partner a Real Partner' and was selected because it demonstrates Sandberg's understanding of a good father/husband. For the most part, whenever Sandberg uses the term partner it is deployed as a synonym for husband and father. Through the use of inclusive language, such as partner or parental leave, Sandberg appears to encompass a range of lifestyle choices in so far as she does not directly exclude them. She then, however, often goes back to talking about husbands and wives, fathers and mothers with little to no mention of lesbian couples, adoption leaves, unmarried and childfree couples or single women. She thus assumes a reader who will be able to identify with scenarios mostly relevant to heterosexual mothers and wives. Gender neutral language, in the way Sandberg makes use of it, often hides gendered issues and power imbalances that would be better addressed openly. In the quote above, Sandberg illustrates that it is still mothers who are responsible for most of the

childrearing tasks and suggests that in order to change this, women (i.e. heterosexual women who have or would like to have children) take on the "battle" with their partners (i.e. men) for a more equal distribution of housework and child care. This assumes that mothers have been too passive and let the fathers of their children 'get away' with not doing their share. It also implies that the men in these scenarios would be reluctant to change. Sandberg further suggests that heterosexual women should choose partners from the ever-growing pool of "sensitive" men. Sandberg juxtaposes the latter with statistics on a new generation of men prioritising "'wanting to spend time with [their] famil[ies]'" thus equating *sensitivity* with *being a more involved father*. This part stood out to me in particular, as it seems to reinforce the notion that sensitivity is not commonly associated with men but that more and more men are taking on this 'feminine' and caring quality. The quote seems to further imply that heterosexual women do not always value this particular character trait enough in potential partners. Heterosexual women, however, are advised by Sandberg to choose "sensitive" men over "bad boys" (2013: p.115) if they want an equal partnership, particularly if they are planning on having children.

The quote further illustrates that Sandberg is in fact doing what she has set out to do and what critics often take issue with: she is focusing almost exclusively on what women, or better heterosexual mothers and future mothers, themselves can do and what they need to change. Sandberg therefore problematises women's passiveness in unequal relationships and, to a certain degree, their choice in partners in the first place. She bases her quote on the assumption that women have a tendency to be passive, which she reproduces alongside the notion that women are the ones who need to heavily invest and do the emotional labour in a romantic relationship by addressing issues in a partnership. Although Sandberg often points to the role socialisation and gender roles play regarding gender inequality, she often leaves them out of the picture when giving advice, which this quote on the 'right' partner choice demonstrates. Here, women are simply free to make the 'right' choices, ignoring that these personal and seemingly individual decisions are heavily influenced by gendered expectations in romantic partners.

Sandberg's emphasis on choice is central to her book and was one of the things many scholarly critics picked up on and saw as an indicator of Sandberg's neoliberal brand of feminism. Choice rhetoric is closely linked to neoliberalism as it downplays the role of social, political and cultural factors by making the individual feel as though they were completely free to forge their own path in life. This, however, comes at the cost of the individual accepting personal responsibility for any outcomes, good or bad,

which can become a psychological as well as a financial burden, particularly if there are no structures, such as a strong welfare state, in place to help those who struggle (see, for example, Foucault, 2008; Brown, 2003; Sweet et al., 2018). Notions of choice and self-regulation all contribute to the way in which neoliberalism, as Peter Bloom argues, "uses our ethics against us, relying on our 'good nature' and sense of personal responsibility to reduce its human cost" (2017: p.i). I will refer to Sandberg's focus on choice multiple times in this chapter since it featured so heavily in her book and the different themes.

The second quote I want to analyse was taken from chapter 7 'Don't Leave Before You Leave'.

> There are many powerful reasons to exit the workforce. Being a stay-at-home parent is a wonderful, and often necessary, choice for many people. Not every parent needs, wants, or should be expected to work outside the home. In addition, we do not control all of the factors that influence us, including the health of our children. Plus, many people welcome the opportunity to get out of the rat race. No one should pass judgment on these highly personal decisions. I fully support any man or woman who dedicates his or her life to raising the next generation. It is important and demanding and joyful work (Sandberg, 2013: p.95).

What struck me the most about this particular quote, was the tone in which it is written. The way in which Sandberg elaborates why some parents decide to stay at home to raise their children is almost overly supportive and inoffensive. By defending stay-at-home parents, she simultaneously assumes and communicates to the reader that there is something potentially problematic in being a parent who is not in paid labour. She, again, opts for the gender-neutral term parent instead of mother. In treading extra carefully, Sandberg seems to demonstrate an awareness of two different discourses. First, by rationalising the decision to stay at home, Sandberg assumes that leaving the workforce is something that needs to be justified, something a presumably larger part of society would see as the inferior choice compared to a parent continuing to work. This becomes particularly apparent when she says "[n]o one should pass judgment on these highly personal decision". Second, the author defending stay-at-home parents and supporting them could be understood as Sandberg reacting to the 'mommy wars' and pre-empting criticism against her. The term 'mommy wars' "previously described antagonisms between working and stay-at-home mothers, but more recently has shifted to describe animus between myriad parenting philosophies and practices" (Abetz & Moore, 2018: p.265). By saying "I fully support any man or woman who dedicates his or her life to raising the next generation. It is important and demanding and joyful work", Sandberg demonstrates that she does not want be part of the 'mommy wars' and does not want to be perceived as someone

who judges other people's parenting 'choices' and values paid labour more than unpaid labour. She seems to be making a conscious effort to avoid appearing as a 'career woman' that is dismissive of women who choose to leave the workforce in order to raise their children. Furthermore, by including men in this narrative she is normalising the idea of fathers being the primary caregivers. Sandberg, although demonstrating an awareness of factors outside of the individual's control, such as health, again uses the rhetoric of choice when talking about why parents stay at home. This can be seen when she frames "[b]eing a stay-at-home parent [as] a wonderful, and often necessary, choice" or a "highly personal decision […]". She thus even goes so far as to frame parents (read women) having to stay at home out of necessity as a choice. The way in which Sandberg uses rhetoric referring to freedom of choice as an empowering message clearly illustrates the neoliberal values her book is based on as it is implied that individuality, rational decision making and taking control over one's own life are all valuable qualities. Furthermore, she considers being a stay-at-home parent to be work and stresses the demands and benefits of this kind of work and in doing so tries to elevate the status of stay-at-home parents. This rhetoric, on the one hand, seems to be rooted in neoliberal ideology in which the value of an individual is often dependent on their perceived productivity: Hard work and effort are seen as virtuous as they are regarded as pathways to success in terms of 'personal fulfilment' and/or financial independence from the welfare state. Hard work, as opposed to 'laziness', is what constitutes the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject (Scharff, 2016b; McRobbie, 2013). There is, however, also overlaps with the feminist argument that domestic chores, the building and maintaining of close personal relationships and the raising of children should be recognised as (unpaid) work (Warren, 2011; Hochschild, 1990). This overlap nicely demonstrates why Sandberg's book is often categorised as neoliberal feminism.

Overall, within this theme silences could be found when it came to Sandberg's definition of family as it seemed to mainly encompass heterosexual married couples with children. In Sandberg's book single mothers, women who choose not have children, or lesbian couples with, for example, adopted children remained widely absent. The COO also both challenges and reproduces gender stereotypes by painting a picture of passive women who let their male partners 'get away with' not pulling their weight when it comes to childrearing and household chores. Her arguments both come from a feminist and a neoliberal angle. On the one hand, she is producing 'feminist lifestyle templates' by encouraging heterosexual women to seek out equal romantic relationships and by asking mothers to demand a fair split of

childrearing responsibilities from their male partners. She further encourages women to rethink their attitudes towards certain masculinities or displays of masculinity and showcases the hard work and emotional labour that goes into parenting which is often undervalued. On the other hand, Sandberg reproduces neoliberal ideas and values by focusing on women (read mothers and future mothers) having to make the right *choices* and working hard (e.g. by taking on the "battle" with their husbands over childrearing responsibilities) in order to achieve their own personal success story of gender equality.

Gender Roles and Biases

This code was used to collect all assumptions regarding gender either made by Sandberg herself or, according to the author, society in general. I only coded explicit mentions of gender roles and biases as opposed to underlying assumptions that influenced some of the writing. According to Sandberg, gender roles have changed a great deal over the last century. She highlights how much education for women has gained in value and how women are now often outperforming men academically. Sandberg concludes that this is partly because educational institutions mostly reward compliant, well-behaved students, who often are female. The labour market, however, according to Sandberg, often favours a bolder, risk-taking personality type, more commonly displayed by men. The COO also notes how women are still encouraged to prioritise finding a suitable partner (i.e. husband) and having a family over work related goals and points to a higher number of women than men dropping out of the workforce, usually after having a child. Interestingly, Sandberg speculates that these different priorities for men and women might be partly due to nature but have been heavily influenced by society and can be overcome with willpower. It does not always become apparent if Sandberg attributes gender differences to nurture or nature. She does, however, question the significance of gender differences and their connection to people's career or parenting choices. She therefore takes issue with the way toys are marketed differently to girls and boys, the way that girls get called 'bossy' for being loud and ambitious, and the way that women are still expected to be the primary caregivers for children and carers for elderly people in families. Her issue with these points is mostly that she fears that the next generation will learn and repeat the same gendered behaviours and will not be able to make '*free'* career decision. She therefore advocates for gender roles in the home to change even more so than in the workplace as she argues that there has already been a significant change in the latter. Sandberg notes that family and children remain primarily women's responsibilities, which can be seen in the way work-life balance and the question of having it all are usually

addressed at women. According to Sandberg, fathers who drop out of the workforce to look after their children sometimes face hostility from stay-at-home mothers or are made to feel to out of place due to the lack of institutions catering to fathers as well as mothers. According to the COO, this *culture* needs to change for women to become more successful in the workplace. At the same time, Sandberg maintains that the often negative portrayals of female leaders in popular culture and the dearth of women in power in general also contribute to women holding *themselves* back from achieving successful careers. She wants the reader to be aware of their own gender biases as she argues that people who overlook their biases are more prone to act on them and discriminate against others without being aware of it. Sandberg maintains that people often believe a woman's opinion about another women to be without gender bias. The COO therefore asks women to reflect on their own biases.

I will now examine two of Sandberg's arguments that I coded as 'gender roles and biases'. In the first quote the author muses over the influence of nurture and nature on gender:

> There may be an evolutionary basis for one parent knowing better what to put in a child's lunch. Women who breastfeed are arguably baby's first lunch box. But even if mothers are more naturally inclined toward nurturing, fathers can match that skill with knowledge and effort. If women want to succeed more at work and if men want to succeed more at home, these expectations have to be challenged. As Gloria Steinem once observed, 'It's not about biology, but about consciousness.' We overcome biology with consciousness in other areas. For example, storing large amounts of fat was necessary to survive when food was scarce, so we evolved to crave it and consume it when it's available. But in this era of plenty, we no longer need large amounts of fuel in reserve, so instead of simply giving in to this inclination, we exercise and limit caloric intake. We use willpower to combat biology, or at least we try. So even if 'mother knows best' is rooted in biology, it need not be written in stone. A willing mother and a willing father are all it requires. […] As women must be more empowered at work, men must be more empowered at home (Sandberg, 2013: p.108).

This is an excerpt from chapter 8 'Make Your Partner a Real Partner' in which Sandberg problematises the essentialist idea of women being inherently more nurturing than men while simultaneously reinforcing it. Her use of language indicates that the author is not fully convinced of a biological predisposition for women to be better carers than men as she says "[t]here *may* be an evolutionary basis" and "*even if* mothers are more naturally inclined toward nurturing" [my emphasis]. Sandberg nevertheless refrains from fully taking a side in the debate over nurture vs nature, which could be seen as evidence in support of the criticism that Sandberg's feminism is overall too 'tame' and "accommodating" (McRobbie, 2013). Sandberg decides to base her arguments on the assumption that men and women could have inherently

different abilities when it comes to raising and caring for children. She uses this essentialist assumption to argue that men can could overcome a potentially inherent lack of nurturing skills "with knowledge and effort". Her line of reasoning that men can "overcome biology with consciousness" and can "use willpower to combat biology", however, also plays into the idea that men represent civilisation, rationality and culture whereas women embody nature, emotions and intuition. The latter simply *are naturally* more nurturing whereas men can *learn* and *acquire* this skill. Her comparison between controlling one's diet and controlling or 'correcting' gender dispositions contributes further to the essentialisation of gender differences in this paragraph. The COO frames the craving of food as an evolutionary necessity which she then links to the influence the biological sex might have on men and women. She concludes that both biological 'imperatives' can and should be regulated and contained by the individual. Sandberg thus argues, although cautiously, from a perspective that assumes biological differences between men and women, but if this were to be the case the individual could still take control over them. Sandberg's advocacy for taking control or *combating* and *overcoming* bodily impulses and mustering up willpower to exercise and train the body can again be linked to neoliberal discourses in which not only hard work but also competition with the self is highly encouraged (Scharff, 2016a). The literature on neoliberal discourses suggests that they produce entrepreneurial subjects who are focused on self-regulation and self-improvement (Scharff, 2016a; 2016b; Prügl, 2015). I argue that this perfectly describes the above paragraph and the way it interpellates the reader and asks them to combat seemingly or potentially inherent traits. Interestingly, Sandberg's scepticism towards inherent differences between men and women also seems to be based on neoliberal logic rather than feminist thought or theory. She appears to be sceptical of the idea of biological imperatives as they would clash with the neoliberal notion of the individual being free to choose, self-regulate and overcome obstacles with hard work.

In the second quote I chose to illustrate the theme of 'gender roles and biases', Sandberg discusses the need to disguise displays of femininity in the workplace.

> Within traditional institutions, success has often been contingent upon a woman not speaking out but fitting in, or more colloquially, being 'one of the guys.' The first women to enter corporate America dressed in manly suits with button-down shirts. […] While styles have relaxed, women still worry about sticking out too much. I know an engineer at a tech start-up who removes her earrings before going to work so coworkers won't be reminded that she is—shhh!—not a man. Early in my career, my gender was rarely noted (except for the occasional client who wanted to fix me up with his son). Manly suits were no longer in fashion, and I neither hid nor emphasized femininity. […] We were fitting in, and there was no reason to call attention to ourselves. But while gender was not openly

acknowledged, it was still lurking below the surface. I started to see differences in attitudes toward women. I started noticing how often employees were judged not by their objective performance, but by the subjective standard of how well they fit in. Given that the summer outing at McKinsey was a deep-sea fishing trip and most company dinners ended with whiskey sipping and cigar smoking, I sometimes struggled to pass the 'fitting in' test. (Sandberg, 2013: p.143f).

This is a paragraph from chapter 10 'Let's Start Talking About It' which problematises women in the workplace having to 'hide their gender' or feeling the need to display more stereotypical male characteristics. In her description, Sandberg mostly talks about the past without giving the reader a concrete time reference, however, her depiction is also meant to illustrate how these ideas and standards have not been thrown overboard completely. The way in which Sandberg illustrates the problem of women "worry[ing] about sticking out too much" in the workplace presents the conundrum surrounding displays of femininity particularly in male-dominated workplaces quite vividly (see also Kanter, 1977; Wajcman, 1998; Wolkowitz, 2006). Sandberg's depiction of women having to fit in with men in the context of US-American corporate environments, however, seems to be based on fixed notions of femininity and masculinity since there is no clear distinction between the past and the present. Although she provides the reader with examples, she also expects them to know what "being 'one of the guys'" entailed in the past when "[t]he first women […] enter[ed] corporate America" and what it entails in the present day. The gender dichotomy she bases her arguments on is thus presented as common-sense and seemingly timeless. The author also assumes that the reader will know that "deep-sea fishing", "whiskey sipping" and "cigar smoking" are typically enjoyed by men. While this a fair expectation, Sandberg does not call these assumptions into question and thereby reproduces them. The way Sandberg builds her argument on the basis of a rather strict gender dichotomy is arguably indicative of the type of feminism she is advocating. She seems to primarily promote the idea that women should not have to act or dress like men in order to be taken seriously at work. While this certainly is a point of view many feminists would agree with, Sandberg shies away from more 'radical' suggestions that would call into question the foundation of the gender dichotomy she is referring to. There are, for example, silences when it comes to people who do not conform and do not wish to conform to gender norms in the way they dress and act. Whereas the quote I analysed prior to this one, challenged the notion of inherent gender differences, this passage from *Lean In* demonstrates a much less critical engagement with idea of gender being a social construct. This can be inferred from the way Sandberg presupposes a distinct gender dichotomy but also from the way she talks about her own displays of femininity and how they were

perceived by others. Sandberg stating that her "gender was rarely noted" sounds naïve in the context of a book that lists and focuses on the way gender can determine one's chances for a successful career. Statements such as this render the role gender plays miniscule by making it appear as if it only becomes relevant in certain, select moments. Her disclaimer that her gender was only noted when clients wanted to her to date their sons is further rooted in a seemingly heteronormative understanding of gender. Sandberg maintaining that she "neither hid nor emphasized femininity" further seems to suggest a range of things. Firstly, it assumes that there is certain way to express femininity (singular), an assumption that ignores that there are a range of femininities often correlating with class, race and other marker of social identity. Secondly, it makes displays of gender appear like conscious decisions or acts and thus masks a lot of the complexities involved. From a post-structuralist feminist perspective, gender has a performative function in the sense that social constructions of gender are not just internalised and acted out but also partially constitute the individual (Butler 1988). Displays of masculinities and femininities are therefore much more ubiquitous and not always consciously performed.

Overall, *Lean In* is full of ambiguity regarding gender and gender roles. Sandberg recognises the influence traditional gender roles can have on limiting people's perception of themselves and others, which can impact their career choices, successes and failures. She does, however, swing back and forth in terms of challenging gender norms and reinforcing them. On the one hand, she does not want gender roles to hold anyone back from achieving their goals, as this would, arguably, not align with her neoliberal approach in which most things can be achieved through hard work and determination. On the other hand, she reproduces certain ideas and perhaps stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. While Sandberg often explores how gendered expectations and norms shape people's lives, their preferences and how they are perceived, she shies away from positioning herself clearly in the debate over biological or social influences on gender.

Neoliberalism

The third most prominent theme in terms of number of coded text passages was 'neoliberalism'. It could, however, arguably be seen as the most prominent one given that it appeared in every chapter. I will briefly summarise what this theme included before analysing two quotes that best illustrate the theme's key components in greater detail.

'Neoliberalism' as a theme never openly emerged in the sense that Sandberg directly addressed it as a discourse or talked about its implications. Given the prominence of neoliberal discourses and their therefore often unquestioned status, this is perhaps not surprising. Neoliberal values and rhetoric seemed to underlie all of the book's chapters and most of its ideas and anecdotes. These values, as discussed in the literature review, commonly revolve around self-governance, confidence, resilience, entrepreneurialism, freedom and choice (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Brown, 2003; Scharff, 2016a). They are often understood as an expression of market logic percolating into everyday life (Foucault, 2008). Neoliberal capitalism calls for self-sufficient individuals who are able to provide for themselves through successfully competing in a 'meritocracy''. Productivity and efficiency become the measuring stick not just for businesses but also for people. Sandberg thus often finds herself advocating for more women in leadership position based on the fact that it would benefit society as a whole as "our collective performance would improve" (2013: p.7). She uses business terms such as 'performance' or 'trade-off' to emphasise the need for more gender equality in the workplace as well as in the home. Angela McRobbie, in her discussion of *Lean In*, notes that

> [t]he simple use of a vocabulary drawn from the world of business and then applied not just to how women can do better in the world of work but also in home life, suggests the extent to which corporate values have achieved a fundamental centrality and seemingly incontestable as well as uncontroversial status (2013: p.133).

While it is hard to estimate how "incontestable" "corporate values" have truly become, they certainly are at the very core of Sandberg's book. I used the code 'neoliberalism' whenever Sandberg advocated for women to take more risks, make smart decisions regarding both work and private life, and to grab, or better even, create opportunities for themselves. I also coded as 'neoliberalism' paragraphs on how women can be goal-oriented yet flexible, why they should pursue jobs at companies that offer fast growth and fast progress, and whenever Sandberg illustrated the usefulness of constant learning as well as improving and challenging oneself. The code also included data and anecdotes on how women are expected and socialised to be team players which, as Sandberg argues, despite being an outdated gender stereotype, can benefit any organisation as strong teams often have the best output and highest productivity. Sandberg also advocates that women should somehow put both the company's and their own needs first. She wants women to work hard and think about what they can offer to an organisation while simultaneously setting strict boundaries to protect time for their families. The COO makes the reader aware of various gender

biases but asks them not to be discouraged by them. Sandberg's way of arguing is very much based on meritocratic ideals. She dreams of a society where people, no matter what gender, can pursue any career they want if they work hard and can prove to be the most suitable candidate for a job. She does, however, acknowledge that 'merit' is a subjective category and often moulded to fit male job applicants. Sandberg thus demonstrates an awareness of the false hope that discourses of meritocracy create (see also Littler, 2018), yet holds on to the idea in hope for its eventual realisation. She envisions a society where these biases no longer distort people's judgments of others and of themselves, which would benefit society as a whole as the most talented people would contribute to their chosen lines of work.

Sandberg mostly frames the question of how to get more women into top positions as a matter of choices. Although Sandberg is aware of the role social norms and to a much smaller extent organisational structures and cultures play, she uses her book to discuss what the individual can do even with these obstacles in place. Sandberg, throughout the book, walks a fine line between showing an awareness of the hurdles that keep women from achieving the same success in the workplace as men do and ignoring these barriers. This sometimes results in contradictory advice where she presents solutions to particular problems while simultaneously showing structural barriers that would potentially prevent these solutions from working. To give an example, Sandberg recalls how her sister-in-law Amy after the birth of her first child reported that she had "'worked twelve-hour days while trying to pump at work'" but was, according to Sandberg, essentially unnecessarily "'torturing'"(Sandberg, 2013: p.130) herself. Amy then learned from her 'mistakes' and took more time off from work after having a second child and concluded that "'despite what [she] had previously feared, [her] reputation and productivity weren't hurt a bit'" (ibid.). Sandberg reports Amy's experience as a success story where a woman corrects her perception that she will be judged for not working hard enough if she takes time off to be with her child. She then, however, ends this anecdote by saying that this "is not just a perception problem. Employees who make use of flexible work policies are often penalized and seen as less committed than their peers. And those penalties can be greater for mothers in professional jobs" (Sandberg, 2013: p.131). Sandberg's contradicting narratives, while perhaps leaving the reader without an actual solution to their problems, could be understood as reflecting the contradictions all members of society are confronted with on a daily basis. They are being interpellated as individuals that are free and autonomous and who can overcome most hurdles by simply working hard enough, yet they find themselves restricted by unequal social

structures that are often made invisible. Sandberg makes some of these structures more visible and highlights their influence on the individual, yet refuses to let go of the idea that the subject is autonomous and able to conquer most structural obstacles on their own. Furthermore, while Sandberg does not intent to speak for all women, she rarely factors in aspects such as poverty, education, health or race which place people in very different places within society. While Sandberg openly points to gender inequalities by citing several studies and introducing concepts from the social sciences such the "stereotype threat"[6] (2013: p.22) and "maternal gatekeeping"[7] (2013: p.108), she simultaneously masks inequalities. This becomes most apparent in the fact, that Sandberg opts to use inclusive language such as *employees* or *parents* as much as possible, when she is actually referring to either women or men. While this could be seen as an effort to not further contribute to gender stereotypes it also disguises very real gendered issues that have not been overcome yet. Using gender neutral language in these instances can make sexist structures and gender biases harder to see and therefore also harder to challenge.

The first text passage I want to analyse within the discussion of this theme stems from chapter 9, titled 'The Myth of Doing It All', and contains Sandberg's recollection of her first maternity leave.

> During my first four years at Google, I was in the office from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. every day at a minimum. […] **No one ever demanded that I work this schedule**; typical of Silicon Valley, Google was not the type of place to set hours for anyone. Still, the culture in those early days promoted working around the clock. When my son arrived, I wanted to take the three months of maternity leave Google offered, but I worried that my job would not be there when I returned. Events leading up to his birth did not put my mind at ease. Google was growing quickly and reorganizing frequently […] and coworkers often suggested ways to restructure, which usually meant that they would do more and I would do less. In the months before my leave, several colleagues, all men, ramped up these efforts, volunteering to 'help run things' while I was gone. Some of them even mentioned to my boss that I might not return, so it made sense to start sharing my responsibilities immediately. [….] I was back on e-mail from my hospital room the day after giving birth. Over the next three months, I was unable to unplug much at all. […] Three months later, my non-leave maternity leave ended. […] I started arriving at work around 9:00 a.m. and leaving at 5:30 p.m. This schedule allowed me to nurse my son before I left and get home in time to nurse again before putting him to sleep. I was scared that I would lose credibility, or even my entire job, if anyone knew that these were my new in-the-office hours. To compensate, I started checking e-mails around 5:00 a.m. […] **Looking back, I**

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[6] Sandberg here refers to the idea that if a people are made aware of a stereotype concerning a social group they belong to, they are more likely to fulfil that stereotype (e.g. girls underperforming in maths). She cites, among others, Kelly Danaher and Christian S. Crandall, "Stereotype Threat in Applied Settings Re-Examined," Journal of Applied Social Psychology 38, no. 6 (2008): 1639– 55 and Catherine Good, Joshua Aronson, and Jayne Ann Harder, "Problems in the Pipeline: Stereotype Threat and Women's Achievement in High-Level Math Courses," Journal of Applied and Developmental Psychology 29, no. 1 (2008): 17– 28.

[7] The author uses this concept to refer to mothers who heavily regulate how and how much fathers are involved in in the rearing of a child.

realize that my concern over my new hours stemmed from my own insecurity. Google was hard charging and hypercompetitive, but it also supported combining work and parenthood […]. Slowly, it began to dawn on me that my job did not really require that I spend twelve full hours a day in the office. I became much more efficient – […] more determined to maximize my output during every minute I spent away from home (2013: pp.127–130, my emphasis).

In this paragraph, Sandberg remembers sensing a highly competitive environment at Google which led her to believe that taking her maternity leave would pose a threat to her reputation at work and career in general. Interestingly, as a result Sandberg did exactly what her sister in-law did, which was to overcompensate at work for the time she needed to spent with her new born. Sandberg emphasises that she felt the need to work 12-hour shifts on a daily basis before realising that these demands were imposed on her by herself and not the company. The author thereby highlights how an individual can be their own worst enemy and that it is not necessarily the organisational or social structures and expectations that are to blame. She focuses on her own "insecurity" and choices and presents them to the reader as the source of the problems. Sandberg frames her dilemma from a neoliberal perspective by emphasising her personal responsibility in it and by painting Google employees as 'free' to determine how much time and effort they will invest in their careers. Her account, however, seems to contradict this notion of 'freedom'. Several parts of her story point to Sandberg's work ethic not being a result of her misinterpreting the company's expectations but a consequence of a tangible threat posed by Google's work culture in general, and her male co-workers in particular. Sandberg's experience is not an isolated incident, as Cynthia Cockburn's (1991) study on four different British organisations shows: here, men often actively resisted or ignored gender equality measures that their organisations were trying to establish. This is similar to Sandberg's male co-workers trying to use her maternity leave against her. Sandberg, although being full of praise, describes Google as a volatile employer where structures and potentially also its employees change at rapid speed. Sandberg despite blaming herself for long working hours, also is aware of the company's "hypercompetitive" culture. She also gives a detailed description of how much her male colleagues seemed eager to take over some of her responsibilities or even her whole position as soon as she was going to take her maternity leave, some of them counting on her to not come back at all. Given those circumstances it seems debatable whether Sandberg's "insecurity" was not actually rooted in the position she found herself in. A study on IT professional by Legault and Chasserio suggests that

many aspects of [IT] culture militate against balancing work and private life. When women call them into question, for example, by asking to cut back their working hours (not necessarily to balance work and family, but often) the overriding

importance of commitment, a criterion eminently tied to the culture, will block their promotion (2003: p.122).

It could thus be questioned whether Sandberg really did not need to be present in her office from 7am to 7pm to get to and stay in the position she held. Maybe it was this particular work ethic in the first place that helped her become as successful as she is and that earned her this particular position at Google. Sandberg problematises her seemingly self-imposed work-schedule while simultaneously downplaying organisational and external factors that contributed to it such as "the culture in those early days promot[ing] working around the clock", "Google [being] hard charging and hypercompetitive", or "coworkers often suggest[ing] ways to restructure, which usually meant that they would do more and I would do less". She hence constructs the individual as the one responsible to figure out and defend their 'optimal' working hours, both for the company and themselves, in a work environment where there are "not set hours for anyone". Sandberg also feels the need to 'defend' her new working hours which meant that she was present in her office from 9am to 5:30pm but would then continue to work from home after the kids had gone to bed and before they got up. She justifies them by saying that she "became much more efficient" and "more determined to maximize [her] output during every minute [she] spent away from home". Her justification demonstrates how much corporate, capitalist logic has shaped her view of how much of her time and energy she feels she owes the company she works for. Although she problematises her overly-long working hours, Sandberg nevertheless sets the bar rather high for demonstrating one's work commitment and thus makes average or 'regular' working hours appear insignificant in comparison. She thus reproduces the significance of long-hours and presenteeism. Presenteeism, i.e. being at work or working when it is not required, is often found in competitive work environments where employees feel the need to emphasise their commitment to their job and company to their managers (Dennehy, 2012). Presenteeism is heavily gendered (Simpson, 1998) given that it disadvantages employees with caring responsibilities, the majority of them being women. Overall, the quote above demonstrates that even when Sandberg presents evidence for organisational structures or cultures working against women, or in this case working mothers, Sandberg still sides with the corporations and looks for 'faults' in her own or, more generally speaking, women's perception of them and the resulting actions.

The next quotation from the book I am going to analyse is an anecdote that is part of chapter 7 'Don't Leave Before You Leave'. In the quote, Sandberg introduces a woman called Caroline O'Conner who "was offered the chance to start a company at

the same time that she learned she was pregnant". Caroline initially thought that she could not combine the two:

> But then she decided to question this assumption. 'I began thinking of my dilemma as I would a design challenge,' O'Connor wrote. 'Rather than accepting that launching a successful start-up and having a baby are utterly incompatible, I framed it as a question and then set about using tools I've developed as a designer to begin forming an answer.' O'Connor gathered data from dozens of mothers about their experiences and coping mechanisms. She did field work on sleep deprivation by taking a night shift with foster infants. She concluded that with a team culture that drew support from her husband and friends, it would be possible to proceed with both. O'Connor now refers to herself as 'a career-loving parent,' a nice alternative to 'working mom' (Sandberg, 2013: pp.96–97).

Sandberg's retelling of Caroline's story who discovered that she did not have to pass on an important career opportunity despite her pregnancy at that time, aims to demystify the common assumption that women cannot combine having children with having a career. It does so in demonstrating that the latter is mostly a question of the right attitude, planning skills and "support from her [a woman's] husband and friends". The way this anecdote is written seems very emblematic of 'enlightened' Western thinking and its importance in neoliberal societies where everything can be objectively measured and quantified. With enough "data", "field work" and evidence people can understand the world how it 'really' is and use this knowledge to their advantage and navigate their lives successfully. It portrays the woman in the anecdote as far from naïve and instead rational and willing take matters into their own hands. She sees the structural obstacles as an individual challenge that can be won not by dismantling the obstacles themselves but by finding "coping mechanisms" to learn to live with them. The almost mechanical approach O'Connor takes, and Sandberg seems to recommend to her readers, is perhaps most obvious when the COO describes how O'Connor "did field work on sleep deprivation by taking a night shift with foster infants". The phrasing of this sentence makes this potentially charitable act sound like a rather calculating endeavour where the infants become a means to an end. In her typical business speak, Sandberg then writes that "with a team culture that drew support from her husband and friends, it would be possible to proceed with both". Although Sandberg spends a lot of time advocating for a 50-50 partnership, this particular sentence makes the husband's/father's role in raising his and O'Connor's child seem like a mere supporting role on par with those of family friends. This might simply be due to Sandberg summarising O'Connor's words, but given the anecdote's endorsing tone, the wording nevertheless matters. The underlying assumption in this paragraph, yet again, seems to be that problems women in the workplace face can be overcome by the individual if they only apply themselves. In this particular case, this means to

accept sleep deprivation and other inconveniences that will simply have to be coped with just like other working mothers have done before. However, despite the you-can-do-it-if-you-really-want-to message, the actual success of the endeavour seems to be dependent on the willingness of other people to support O'Connor. This leaves many questions unanswered: What if her husband and friends choose not to support her or cannot provide enough support? What exactly would that support need to consist of? The whole anecdote itself remains rather vague about the actual struggles working mothers face, except for a lack of sleep, none of the obstacles, or coping mechanisms for that matter, O'Connor is worried about are actually named.

In summary, Sandberg's neoliberal perspective puts career obstacles in a light that makes them appear surmountable. She argues that oftentimes these obstacles are either only in a woman's head or can be solved by readjusting her mindset. Sandberg advocates for women to make smart, rational decisions and to reflect critically on their own interpretations of work expectations. The COO does not call into question the competitiveness of the work environments she describes, nor does she suggest any changes to work cultures that foster presenteeism or demand long work hours. Her overall tone is thus sometimes friendlier towards corporations than it is towards women. Most of Sandberg's advice revolves around women becoming more self-sufficient and taking matters into their own hands, this advice, however, is then contradicted by Sandberg's descriptions of gender biases, work cultures and structures, and women, particularly mothers, needing support from friends, family and/or mentors.

Mistakes Women Make

The code 'mistakes women make' was applied whenever Sandberg suggested that women actively, but not necessarily knowingly, contribute to the (re)production of gender inequality. The text passages coded under this theme often included sentences with the word "too" in it: The average woman, according to Sandberg, has a tendency to be too self-critical, too afraid of risks, too timid and passive, too worried what others (e.g. co-workers, bosses, other mothers) might think of her, is too pushy when it comes to finding a mentor, and leaves the workforce too quickly. Sandberg's analysis and advice are occasionally contradictory or leave very little room for women to act upon. This can, for example be seen, when she notes how women are too worried about openly addressing gender inequality in the workplace and at the same time warns the reader not to push too hard when speaking up about it. Sandberg also identifies a range of things were women just are not doing "enough": Women in

general, according to the author, are not as ambitious as men, are not proactive enough and do not sufficiently believe in their own success and capabilities. They also do not ask for enough support from their partners and employers. The COO also notes how women do not always support other women enough, or worse openly criticise each other (particularly working mothers and stay-at-home mothers).

Sandberg seems to believe that all these behaviours and patterns function as self-fulfilling prophecies for women that prevent them from achieving the careers they aspire to, lead them to drop out of the workforce more often than their male counterparts, and "teach institutions and mentors to invest more in men" (2013: p.14). Sandberg also diagnoses that women have a tendency to silence themselves, set the wrong priorities (e.g. by putting marital above career related success), not directly sit at meeting tables, feel like imposters, and aim to have it all, which will lead to frustration. According to the author, women are also discouraged by negative images of female leaders in popular culture and fear that being in a powerful job position might equal being a 'bad mother'. Finally, Sandberg takes issue with the way women fail to establish an equal relationship with their romantic partners (i.e. men) by falling into traditional gender roles from the start and by discouraging their partners from taking over traditionally female responsibilities in the home, particularly regarding childrearing.

Sandberg's book is, for the most part, written in a friendly, positive tone and her arguments and ideas always seem to be presented in the least controversial and most inoffensive way. The bluntest Sandberg gets in her writing, is when she addresses the mistakes I listed above. Her fifth chapter 'Are You My Mentor?', for example, has a rather high density in 'tough messages'. Here, she criticises how some women look for mentors and wait for them to appear like "Prince Charming" (Sandberg, 2013: p.66) and how, on the other hand, women actively pursuing a mentor can easily come across as "awkward"(Sandberg, 2013: p.65).

Bearing this different tone in mind, I now want to move on to the analysis of two text passages, which I found to be representative of the theme 'mistakes women make'. The first quote is taken from chapter 7 'Don't Leave Before You Leave' and perhaps encapsulates the most pivotal argument of Sandberg's book.

> Of all the ways women hold themselves back, perhaps the most pervasive is that they leave before they leave. The classic scenario unfolds like this. An ambitious and successful woman heads down a challenging career path with the thought of having children in the back of her mind. At some point, this thought moves to the front of her mind, typically once she finds a partner. The woman considers how hard she is working and reasons that to make room for a child she will have to

scale back. […] Often without even realizing it, the woman stops reaching for new opportunities. If any are presented to her, she is likely to decline or offer the kind of hesitant "yes" that gets the project assigned to someone else. The problem is that even if she were to get pregnant immediately, she still has nine months before she has to care for an actual child. And since women usually start this mental preparation well before trying to conceive, several years often pass between the thought and conception, let alone birth. […] By the time the baby arrives, the woman is likely to be in a drastically different place in her career than she would have been had she not leaned back. Before, she was a top performer, on par with her peers in responsibility, opportunity, and pay. By not finding ways to stretch herself in the years leading up to motherhood, she has fallen behind. When she returns to the workplace after her child is born, she is likely to feel less fulfilled, underutilized, or unappreciated. She […] may wonder why she does not have the exciting new project or the corner office […] So the irony—and, to me, the tragedy—is that women wind up leaving the workforce precisely because of things they did to stay in the workforce. With the best of intentions, they end up in a job that is less fulfilling and less engaging. When they finally have a child, the choice—for those who have one—is between becoming a stay-at home mother or returning to a less-than-appealing professional situation" (Sandberg, 2013: pp.93–94).

The quote describes in detail the, according to Sandberg, most common way in which women *lean back* when they should be *leaning in*. This quote encapsulates a blue print for how not to be a successful female leader and produces a subject position that women should ideally not assume – someone who is timid, scared of taking risks and thus holding back. It simultaneously, however, sets up a contrasting subject position that promises success, financial security and fulfilment as a leader, a position that women can achieve if they follow her advice.

Because of its story-like writing style, this passage is full of underlying assumptions: it presupposes that all/most women will start considering having a child once they meet the right partner and that they will then start to hold back in their careers. They will, according to Sandberg, also start thinking about this before it is even necessary to plan for a child. Sandberg's criticism of this, however, ignores that women might have legitimate reasons for planning ahead and considering how a child might affect their career as they are more likely than men to be expected to be the primary caregiver in a heterosexual relationship. This could be because it might make financial sense as their (male) partner earns a bigger salary or because women are simply seen as more capable and nurturing. Sandberg's narrative also ignores the prevalence of discourses that tell women that children and careers are difficult to balance or that reinforce feelings of guilt for women prioritising or working hard on their careers, just to name a few. Sandberg's story further implies that a higher-ranking job position will lead to a more fulfilled life, whereas staying in the same, lower-ranking job role would be a "less-than-appealing professional situation"

reinforcing, often classed, hierarchies. When Sandberg says that a woman returning from maternity leave "may wonder why she does not have the exciting new project or the corner office", the reader is supposed to have learned and fill in the blank that it was because the woman held herself back and did not lean in. To get this point across Sandberg heavily oversimplifies the issue and leaves silences regarding external factors, such as pregnant women or women who might potentially become pregnant not being offered any bigger projects or chances to "stretch herself". Sandberg, at least in this paragraph, assigns all blame to the women, which can be seen in the way she describes how women might say "yes" to taking on a new project so hesitantly that it gets taken for an 'no'. Instead of questioning why her "yes" was not heard or taking seriously by her managers/co-workers, Sandberg finds the problem in the way the woman has handled this (fictional) situation.

By identifying the prospect of becoming a mother as the main hurdle keeping women from reaching their career goals and "perhaps the most pervasive" way in which women hold themselves back, Sandberg unavoidably reinforces the notion that being a mother is what stands in the way of women achieving the same career goals as men. Yet, Sandberg puts this commonly shared believe in a different light: it is not the fact that *having and raising* a child will prove to be difficult for women who pursue higher career goals, but women *believing* that it will be difficult or even impossible to have both a career and children is the issue. The COO throughout her book mentions again and again the effects of self-fulfilling prophecies. This particular one seems to be the most impactful one to her. While Sandberg's message makes sense in the context of her book where she urges women to find romantic partners who are willing to strive for an equal relationship and there is no limit to what someone can achieve once they have put their mind to it, it ignores the complexities of women's lives. Sandberg's vision might work under very ideal circumstances, but once certain factors are not in place it will be much harder to realise. How much can single mothers, women with health issues, or caring commitments simply "stretch" themselves? What if the gender biases Sandberg talks about in other parts of her book – and the other biases she does not talk about, such as racial or class biases – prevent that "[b]y the time the baby arrives, the woman is likely to be in a drastically different place in her career than she would have been had she not leaned back?" Sandberg is very likely to be aware of the amount of privilege a woman needs to have before she can simply lean in, and she does hint at this fact from time to time, but more often than not there is a silence surrounding the privileges her vision requires. This is problematic since her book contributes to the idea that it is very much up to the individual woman how

much they can achieve. However, what if, in the long run, this does not prove to be true for some or most of its readers? Chances are they will feel responsible for their lack of success as they were promised, not only by Sandberg but society as a whole, that they, too, could succeed if only they worked hard enough.

The last text passages I want to analyse are two paragraphs from chapter 10 'Let's Start Talking About It'.

> Women, especially those at junior levels, worry that raising gender issues makes them appear unprofessional or as if they are blaming others. I have listened to women vent frustration over being undervalued and even demeaned on a daily basis at work. When I ask if they have aired any of these complaints to their superiors, they've responded, 'Oh no! I couldn't.' There is so much fear that speaking up will make the situation worse or even result in being penalized or fired (Sandberg, 2013: p.149)

> At the same time, we must be careful not to inject gender into every discussion. I know a male CEO who is enormously dedicated to hiring and promoting women. When a female employee kicked off a negotiation by insisting that she should have a higher title and was underleveled because she was a woman, it immediately put him on the defense. She was speaking her truth, but in this case, her truth was an accusation with legal ramifications. As soon as she framed the issue in those terms, the CEO had no choice but to put their friendly talks on hold and call in HR. It might have served her better to explain how she was contributing to the company and ask for the promotion first (Sandberg, 2013: p.151).

These two excerpts from the book follow each other quite closely, but Sandberg problematises two very different almost contradictory things 'women do'. One the one hand, she argues that women do not address gender discrimination in the workplace with people who could help resolving the issue. On the other hand, she is worried that women fight against gender inequality too aggressively for their own good and see it in places where it is seemingly absent. Sandberg thus produces and asks her female readers to assume subject positions that are assertive yet pleasant and never threatening the status quo. Her solution to the presented dilemma seems to be to have a 'friendly chat' with a superior instead of complaining to colleagues or immediately taking legal actions. While Sandberg acknowledges women's "fear that speaking up will make the situation worse or even result in being penalized or fired", she seems to imply that this fear might not necessarily be justified. It seems to be a recurring theme in Sandberg's writing that a lot of problems are framed as being mostly in a woman's, and this includes Sandberg's, head. The first paragraph also assumes a rather friendly work environment and culture where people are sensitive to issues concerning gender discrimination. It ignores the reasons why women do not feel comfortable addressing these issues, such as experiences of complaints not

being taken seriously; women working as freelancers being dependent on a good, easy-to-work-with reputation; or women finding themselves in an organisational culture where employees are regarded as easily replaceable. In her second paragraph, Sandberg sides with the CEO, the more powerful person in her anecdote. This is rather conspicuous, even for Sandberg who is never critical of any of the corporations she has worked for or of corporate structures in general. The notion that the woman's words could have potential "legal ramifications" and that it was necessary to "call in HR" seems shameful to Sandberg. Sandberg's therefore communicates how far women should go in their fight for equality – which is not so far as to cause any problems for the company or its high-ranking managers. Instead, and without giving much thought to the difficulty of this endeavour, Sandberg is advising women to be vocal yet pleasant about the issues that concern them. For Sandberg's advice to work she, however, must assume a woman in a rather privileged position with the necessary cultural capital, social skills, confidence and experience.

To conclude, the code 'mistakes women make' illustrated that Sandberg framed gender inequalities as something women partly contributed to by not being the ideal neoliberal employee who demonstrates continuous commitment to their job, is full of energy and confidence, eager to take risks, without challenging authority or the status quo. If women plan to have children, and according to Sandberg most if not all seemingly women do, then they need to adjust her mindsets so it will not become a problem for them. Sandberg's advice is, however, full of contradictions and seems to leave women in position where they could lose either way: if they ask for a mentor or if they leave it; if they decline projects or accept them – but do it too timidly; if they do not speak up about gender discrimination or if they do –but do it too loudly.

Conclusion

The analysis of the book has made a range of problematisations, assumptions, silences and effects become apparent. Sandberg often problematises women's attitudes and actions and argues that they tend to result in self-fulfilling prophecies that uphold gender inequalities. She also problematises gender biases and gendered expectations, such as women being made to feel as if they need to hide their gender in the workplace or perform masculinity. These gender biases, however, are left out and seemingly forgotten about whenever they do not fit Sandberg's neoliberal narrative and advice. In other words, when the COO tries to convey her message that women need to adjust their thinking and attitudes, she leaves silences regarding possible external obstacles such as gender norms, work cultures or organisational

structures. This might perhaps be what makes her book so contentious: it is not that Sandberg does not go into detail about gender roles and different social expectations towards men and women, as she demonstrates various ways in which men and women are socialised to display different characteristics, it is that she fails to fully accept the evidence and see its impact on the individual. To a lesser extent this is also true for the way she portrays organisations and organisational structures as factors for gender inequality. She acknowledges them to a certain degree but decides to primarily focuses on what women, and sometimes men, can do 'better' instead. Similarly, while Sandberg occasionally acknowledges the fact that not all women are in privileged enough positions to make the choices that would, according to Sandberg, be best for their careers, these questions of privilege are often left out of the picture. Sandberg therefore leaves silences when it comes to the circumstances that enable women to make the 'choices' she suggests. In other words, by painting a rather homogenous picture of women she does not factor in differences in economic and cultural capital, and the ways in which race, age, sexuality or able-bodiedness intersect with gender. This homogenous picture of women is also tied in with Sandberg's overall heteronormative perspective and the assumption that most women want to get married (to a man) and have children. While Sandberg often tries to dismantle gender stereotypes, her musings on mother- and fatherhood in particular, and gender roles more generally, often have the discursive effect of reproducing the gender dichotomy and homogenous notions of femininity and masculinity. This reproduction of gender stereotypes perhaps becomes most obvious in her problematisation of women's passivity and Sandberg's overarching argument that women are holding themselves back. *Lean In*'s messages are rooted in the assumption that the individual is free, autonomous and only loosely held back and constrained by social structures and norms. Perhaps this is why Sandberg directs very little criticism at organisational structures and work cultures and, in fact, reproduces neoliberal ideas of meritocracy, competitiveness and self-sufficiency. Her message is far from encouraging women to challenge the status quo or question authority. Instead, she upholds the idea that a smart, rational-decision making and risk-taking individual can thrive and successfully compete in work cultures based on long work hours, presenteeism and productivity. It is therefore clear that Sandberg adopts a very neoliberal position in her attempt at fighting gender inequality in the workplace. Given that she tries to reconcile her neoliberal perspective with an analysis of gender biases and discrimination, her book is nevertheless filled with contradictions. These contradictions could explain the polarised media reactions it received in the media and which I explore further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: *Lean In*'s Reception in the Media

This chapter focuses on the media reviews and commentaries *Lean In* received in 27 British and US-American newspapers, magazines and news websites, which, as I demonstrate, did not so much review the content of the book and the ideas behind it but the author herself. An overview of the different articles can be found in table 1 on pages 47-49. The media coverage was overall largely polarised ranging from critics likening Sandberg to feminist icons and praising her book for being revolutionary, to journalists arguing that her approach was tone-deaf or not radical enough to offer anything new to feminism. The reviewers were thus often indirectly commenting on each other which contributed to a lively, intertextual debate about the parameters of feminism and whether *Lean In* falls into these parameters. Some of the commentators had not read the book prior to stating their opinions and seemed to base their reviews on Sandberg's TED talk and her interviews. The COO's focus on getting women into leadership positions was often neglected by the journalists who instead discussed issues the 'average' working woman supposedly faces. They also often shifted the conversation more generally towards motherhood and Sandberg as a mother and COO celebrity. I explore these and other findings in this chapter by illustrating how the positive, negative and mixed reviewers framed their arguments along three different themes feminism, motherhood and personality. I first explore each theme individually focusing on the differences between the positive, negative and mixed reviews. I then conclude each exploration of the themes with an analysis of the silences the journalists left, their presuppositions and the discursive effects their reviews might produce. I found the themes of feminism, motherhood and personality to be the most prevalent during the coding of the 27 articles for my thematic analysis. With the exception of motherhood, the themes that dominated the media reviews were different from the themes that featured most prominently in Sandberg's book. This observation further highlights how little the reviews were actually focused on the content of the book.

Feminism

Highly Critical Reviews

A large number of reviews and commentaries on *Lean In* demonstrated that the debate about women and work and women in leadership positions was not only seen as a 'women's issue' but also a feminist one. Sandberg's book was used as a reference point from which the journalists mapped out the current state of feminism,

with some arguing that *Lean In* lies at the more radical end of the feminist spectrum, while others would place it at the non-feminist end.

My analysis found that some of the highly critical reviews problematise a "loss of selfhood" (Garcia, 2013) for women when trying to behave more like men in a corporate culture that was created and is still influenced and run by men (Mills, 2013). This type of argument frames the debate on women and work/leadership in the light of gender difference feminism which aims to "give value to women's group identity as women, and [tries] to avoid using men/'the masculine' as the standard of comparison" (Beasley, 2005: p.46). Journalists that approach their reviews from this angle implicitly or explicitly state that women have different needs and desires compared to men, which some articles spell out more clearly than others. Eleanor Mills (2013), for example, writes in *The Sunday Times* that "[t]o many women now, success is not a fat salary, 80-hour weeks and legions quivering at their command" and Yvonne Roberts (2013) from *The Observer* argues that Sandberg is pushing women to "mutat[e] into mini-males".

While some of the highly critical reviewers did not necessarily question whether or not Sandberg is a feminist, they did disagree with her solutions. Other critical reviewers challenged the type of feminism they see in Sandberg's approach or question its legitimacy altogether. Journalists arguing the latter often attribute names to *Lean In*'s feminism that mark it as different from 'real' feminism and that point to its perceived inauthenticity. Melissa Gira Grant (2013) in her *Washington Post* article, for example, places *Lean In* and its marketing campaign within a "post-post-feminist social movement", whereas Elizabeth Bruenig (2015) in *The New Republic* simply names Sandberg's approach "corporate feminism". These types of reviews most closely resemble the academic literature on *Lean In* in the sense that they point out Sandberg's neoliberal spin on feminism. Like some of the scholars writing about the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism (e.g. Eisenstein, 2005; Fraser, 2013), a few of the critical journalists, such as *The Guardian*'s Zoe Williams and *The Observer*'s Yvonne Roberts, contrast *Lean In* with second-wave feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement.

> More than 40 years ago, when a handful of us decided to set up a women's liberation group in Northampton and were unable to agree on exactly how we would storm the ramparts of male oppression and under what banner (socialist-feminist? Marxist-feminist? Separatist-feminist required the sacrifice of a couple of spouses, so that was ruled out early), what we did agree upon is that feminism, for all its contradictions and confusions, is not about 'adding in' women's rights. Instead, it has the modest aim of transforming society for the sake of women and men (Roberts, 2013).

Here, feminism is constituted as something that involves radically changing the political and social landscape from the bottom-up rather than the top-down, which places *Lean In* outside of this definition. Roberts's memories and understanding of second-wave feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement, unlike Fraser's (2013), do not equate the latter with liberal feminism or paint it as a homogenous movement. While Roberts appreciates that feminism cannot be seen as a uniform discourse, she nevertheless argues "that feminism […] is not about 'adding in' women's rights" (2013) which questions the validity of liberal and neoliberal feminism. I argue that highly-critical reviews that, for one reason or another, try to distinguish between 'real' feminism and (Sandberg's) neoliberal feminism, demonstrate the ambiguity towards the Lean In phenomenon rather than its often-argued all-around popularity (Gill & Orgad, 2018). They also show that neoliberal feminism and postfeminism have not become fully hegemonic yet, as argued by some scholars (Gill et al., 2017).

Several of the highly critical articles that challenge the feminist value of *Lean In* also do so by pointing to the book's and the marketing campaign's perceived 'absurdity'. This 'absurdity' is never fully explained but often implied when journalists argue how odd it is for Sandberg, the Facebook COO, to have written a "feminist manifesto" (Sandberg, 2013: p.10). This kind of argument is sometimes given weight by pointing to evidence, e.g. by referring to Sandberg's writing and drawing attention to its flaws. In most instances, however, the journalists do not provide much evidence or clear arguments against Sandberg's ideas or admit to not even having read the book before writing their review. Oftentimes, the 'absurdity' of *Lean In* is expressed through the journalists deploying a mocking tone. Maureen Dowd (2013), for example, labels Sandberg in her *New York Times* review as a "pompom girl for feminism" or "the PowerPoint Pied Piper in Prada ankle boots reigniting the women's revolution — Betty Friedan for the digital age". Similarly, *The Guardian*'s Zoe Williams (2013) portrays the Facebook COO as someone who appears to be mentally stuck in her high school days because Sandberg argues that women need to be assertive yet friendly to get ahead in their careers: "[w]e're back at the prom. Zip it, smart-arse, or you won't get laid". A certain type of femininity is attributed to Sandberg when she is being described by Williams as someone who cannot stand up for herself and cares too much about other people's (particularly men's) opinions of her. Sandberg suddenly resembles the popular girl in a coming-of-age film who is constantly worried about male attention and for whom engagement for social causes are mere "vanity project[s]" (Dowd, 2013). In criticising and mocking Sandberg for being a "pompom girl" who is only

worried about impressing men, Williams and Dowd, make clear that this kind of femininity is diametrically opposed to a feminist identity. Without giving any evidence that their character evaluation of Sandberg has actual substance, they also overlook that even if they were right about Sandberg, her 'cheerleader' attitude would be the result of an upbringing in a highly gendered environment. The journalists focus so much on Sandberg's perceived persona, that there is little room for nuance and an actual discussion of Sandberg's book. I will discuss this focus on the COO's personality more in-depth when I examine the personality theme. It can be argued, however, that journalists pointing to the 'absurdity' of Sandberg's book being a feminist contribution because of who she is, attempt to police what constitutes feminism or a feminist. This attempt at policing might offer and allow for a very narrow definition of feminism, but nevertheless revitalises the debate about the state and use of contemporary feminism in mainstream media in the US and the UK.

Some of the more conservative newspapers, such as the *Daily Mail* or *U.S. News*, on the other hand, refrained from framing *Lean In* and the question of women and work/leadership as a feminist issue. The British tabloid *Daily Mail* (*Mail Online*), for example, focused mostly on the class difference between the so-called 'average' woman and Sandberg, who is out of touch with the reality of the former. Tom Leonard (2013), a *Daily Mail* contributor, compares the Facebook COO to Marie Antoinette who is quoted to allegedly have said "let them eat cake" in response to receiving the news that the French people did not have enough bread. He portrays Sandberg and her attempt to give advice to the 'average', i.e. not comfortably middle-class, woman as tone-deaf and absurd. Mary Kate Cary (2013) of *U.S. News*, is puzzled by the intensity of Sandberg's seemingly unnecessary focus on gender: "[o]verall, Sandberg sees everything in terms of gender, or more accurately, gender inequality. She sees it everywhere: in conference rooms, in marriages, in schools, in child-care arrangements, even in the number of women who drown". She argues that the book is weakened by the number of people who contributed to it and the number of studies it cites and concludes that it is "[n]o wonder it reads like a gender studies textbook; the gender studies professors at Stanford had a huge hand in it" (Cary, 2013). While Cary argues that the book's main issue are the many contradictions it entails as a result of all the people involved in the writing and researching, it is also apparent that Sandberg's approach, in her eyes, is too 'gender-focused', or arguably too feminist, which feels "forced" and "doesn't seem authentic" (ibid.) to her. Reviewers like Leonard and Cary acknowledge that Sandberg might pursue a "very admirable aim" (Leonard, 2013), but that *Lean In* and "Sandberg's 'bullying' of other working women"

(ibid.), is taking things too far. This rather conservative view starkly contrasts with those of the more liberal journalists who argue that Sandberg's approach is not radical enough. Yet, arguments can be found on both sides that frame *Lean In* as 'inauthentic' and 'absurd', albeit for different reasons.

Highly Favourable Reviews

Journalists who penned positive reviews were often reacting to the criticism the book had received. Since a large chunk of this criticism was directed at the lack of authenticity behind Sandberg's feminism, they brought in a range of different arguments for why Sandberg should be considered a 'real' feminist.

Anna Holmes (2013), for example, in her *New Yorker* article points to the fact that feminism can come from all kinds of social standings and is even more authentic when it does not try to speak for others. In fact, one of the counterarguments brought up frequently by positive reviewers was that when "a powerful woman, dares to pen a book, it is almost always read from the point of view that she must be representing ALL WOMEN EVERYWHERE" (Barnett, 2013). The favourable reviewers thereby call out Sandberg's critics for judging her more harshly for being a woman while simultaneously implicitly claiming to review her book from a feminist perspective.

> One of the ironies of the ferocious reaction to Ms. Sandberg's book is that much of it confirms her core thesis. The chief criticism of her is that she is offering a path to success for privileged women at the very top. Her book, the prosecution argues, speaks only for these she-wolves. What the critics are really saying is that Ms. Sandberg is behaving too much like a man, and speaking too much for other women who do the same thing (Freeland, 2013).

In her review for *The New York Times's* Chrystia Freeland (2013) argues that Sandberg's "core thesis" is that women's success in the workplace is negatively correlated to their likeability. In the quoted passage above, she maintains that the media reactions to Sandberg's book prove exactly that point as some of the backlash Sandberg received seemed to be rooted in her being a highly successful business woman and thus being perceived as unlikeable. Some of the positive reviewers further argue that while Sandberg's ideas might not appear revolutionary to more seasoned feminists, they are, however, still far from mainstream. Janet Maslin (2013) from *The New York Times*, for example, believes that *Lean In* "will open the eyes of women who grew up thinking that feminism was ancient history, who recoil at the word but walk heedlessly through the doors it opened". Maslin thus presents Sandberg's book as an antidote to the postfeminist notion that feminism was once useful but is now passé. The favourable reviewers also commonly argue that Sandberg is well aware

of the external barriers that women in workplace face and that she does, in contrast to what her critics argue, address them, but that "women are also hindered by barriers that exist within [themselves]. […] That's as feminist a message as any, which is why the Lean In backlash from feminists has been so depressing" (Filipovic, 2013).

Positive reviewers focus their articles on trying to repair Sandberg's feminist image by calling her brave and her message more radical than some journalists give her credit for. With negative reviewers claiming that Sandberg is too conservative and replicating the status-quo because she lives and works in a privileged bubble, the positive reviewers come up with plenty of arguments to turn this idea on its head. Freeland (2013), for example, argues that *Lean In* "is radical because Ms. Sandberg is not decrying the vile misogyny that oppresses women in some distant and impoverished land" and instead shines a light on "places like Harvard Yard or Silicon Valley" which are often portrayed "as beacons of enlightenment". Freeland thereby argues that the privileged bubble Sandberg inhabits, which critics argue reduces her authenticity, is not free from sexism which tends to get overlooked when the focus is directed at other cultures. Instead of questioning Sandberg's feminism, Freeland goes so far as to say that Sandberg is being an exemplary feminist by only addressing what she knows (an argument made by many positive reviewers) and tackling issues that are commonly overlooked.

Mixed Reviews

The mixed reviews were less characterised by discussions about whether or not Sandberg should be considered a feminist. Instead, the journalists would often only include a sentence or two that stated or implied that Sandberg was a feminist and then focus their discussion on other aspects. The reviewers did, however, sometimes stress the notion that Sandberg's approach should be filed under *corporate feminism*.

Kathleen Geier (2013) from the *Washington Monthly*, for example, does not see *Lean In* as a book on feminist theory per se but on management and argues that it is "a game-changer is to see one of these books written by an out-and-proud feminist". Similarly, Maureen Corrigan (2013) maintains that *Lean In* might be a "feminist manifesto" albeit not "the most impassioned or entertaining" one, but that "Sandberg is somewhat […] inhibited by corporate caution". Corrigan (ibid.) concludes that it is important for powerful women such as Sandberg to "speak up about sexism", but that "[i]f Mary Wollstonecraft had written this tepidly, the first women's movement might have wilted before it ever took root". The journalist here uses a technique almost all mixed reviewers employ: juxtaposing Sandberg with white, arguably middle-class

first- and second-wave feminists and pioneers: Mary Wollstonecraft, Gloria Steinem and particularly Betty Friedan. This juxtaposition signals to the reader that Sandberg is in fact a 'legitimate' feminist. The journalists therefore do not question or stress Sandberg's authenticity as a feminist as much as the positive and negative reviewers do. Her feminist status appears rather established and a lot more taken for granted. It is from this perspective, that the reviewers then dissect the weak spots of Sandberg's approach.

The two main arguments brought up by the reviewers are that Sandberg focuses too much on the individual and not enough on the structural barriers (e.g. Geier, 2013; Kantor, 2013; Slaughter, 2013) and that she overlooks the role intersectionalities play in terms of equality in the workplace (Geier, 2013; Schultz, 2013). Anne-Marie Slaughter (2013), for example, whose article 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' was contrasted with *Lean In* by many critics, wrote her own review of Sandberg's book and concludes that it is unfortunate that Sandberg "concentrate[s] only on the 'internal obstacles,' the ways in which women hold themselves back". Schultz (Schultz, 2013) finds that Sandberg "could have included a story or two about successful women who are more likely to have been born to nannies than to hire them". The question of intersectionality, and this is true not only for the mixed reviews but for *most* of the reviews, is often brought up under the banner of whether Sandberg can and should speak for all women. Some reviewers, such as Schultz in the above quotation, point directly at the groups of women excluded from Sandberg's narrative. While Schultz wonders why Sandberg mostly focuses on women with plenty of economic and cultural capital, Katherine Geier (2013) from the *Washington Monthly* asks if it "would […] have killed her [Sandberg] to include some sections on how her advice might differentially apply to women of color, single moms, older women, or the nonstraight?".

The other mixed-reviewers, however, did not list any particular groups of women who appeared to be excluded from the book's narrative. They would instead simply point to Sandberg's 'privilege' as something that set her apart from other women. This was sometimes done without spelling out said privilege and making clear whether they were referring to Sandberg's class background, race, sexuality, etc. or simply her economic capital. A third group of mixed-reviewers described Sandberg's alleged focus on women who are similar to her as a smart political move by "following the first axiom of political organizing: Start where you live" (Corrigan, 2013). These reviewers would argue that talking about one's personal experience is more authentic and useful for feminism as a movement than speaking for and thereby potentially silencing women from different, perhaps less privileged backgrounds.

Silences, Presuppositions, Effects

After having laid out how Sandberg's feminist approach was problematised by the different reviewers, I want to move on to discussing the things they left unsaid, took for granted and (re-)produced.

Many of the negative reviewers have approached their discussions of the book with their own definition of feminism in mind. These definitions, however, usually remain implicit and unsaid. Sandberg's approach thus often gets compared to feminism in 'general' even though the reviewers seem to be comparing it to a specific feminist perspective. This style of reviewing and critiquing overlooks the vast differences within feminism and ends the conversation about what constitutes feminism prematurely by simply dismissing Sandberg's book and thus leaving little space for debate between the different camps. Reviewers from more left-leaning media outlets, such as *The Guardian* or *The Observer*, approach their reviews from more left-leaning feminist perspectives, e.g. more closely resembling Marxist feminism, and thus argue that feminism is characterised by a bottom-up rather than top-down approach and structure, and that Sandberg's economic capital and financial power are opposed to these goals. They take their definition of feminism for granted and seem to assume a reader who has at least been exposed to some feminist theory and thought and will thus find little merit in Sandberg's book. Negative reviewers who published in more conservative media outlets, on the other hand, seemed to assume a reader for whom Sandberg's feminism was a step too far. When Eleanor Mills in *The Sunday Times* argues that not all women "want to push the boys aside" (Mills, 2013), she seems to presuppose a reader who is either sceptical towards feminism in general or would rather support a different type of feminism, perhaps one more closely resembling gender difference feminism. The latter challenges the assumption that "ways of life associated with men and masculinity are desirable for all" as it

> amounts to yet another denigration of women and the feminine as less worthy, as something to escape from or overcome. They [gender difference feminists] argue that the goal of universal equality (whether in the form of Liberal pro-capitalism or Marxist anti-capitalism) counters discrimination at the cost of presuming that women would be better off being like men, would want to be like men and would want to throw off the identity of womanhood (Beasley, 2005: p.45).

Negative reviewers from conservative newspapers and magazines, while not necessarily arguing from a feminist position, use logic borrowed from gender difference feminism to discourage readers from picking up Sandberg's book. These reviewers encourage women to not simply follow men's paths to success but rather

to be critical of these paths and explore new directions independent from them. In their reviews, they assume fundamental differences between men and women and hint at the idea that men are more power-driven than women, who, in contrast, are more family-oriented.

Reviewers seemed to base their articles not only on their understanding of feminism but also on their ideas of what characteristics a feminist should embody. These characteristics were often presented as common sense, as seemingly universally agreed on indicators of what makes or does not make someone a feminist. For some left-leaning British reviewers, for example, Sandberg is too much of a conservative, US-American 'cheerleader type' to be an authentic activist/feminist. More commonly, journalists implied that her economic capital disqualified her from claiming a feminist identity or from aiding other women in their quest for greater gender equality. This marks certain displays of femininity, such as the wealthy or ultra-feminine type, as incompatible with feminism and polices them. Furthermore, this type of discourse narrows the definition of what a feminist can be and arguably creates a hierarchy for different displays of femininity in relation to feminism. Some reviewers also criticised Sandberg for not speaking for all women, which the COO, albeit briefly, mentions she never set out to do, and which points to the often-unattainable standard she is held to. It seemed commonplace for reviewers to automatically see Sandberg a representative of her gender, a spokesperson that must keep everyone in mind, which, as a few reviewers pointed out, is an expectation most men would not be required to meet. This is not to say, however, that a debate about Sandberg's lack of focus on women from different paths of life is not warranted.

Despite reviewers often arguing that Sandberg's privilege diminished the merit of her book's contribution to the debate on gender equality in the workplace, journalists seldomly discussed the implications of said privilege in depth. In other words, by simply pointing out that Sandberg was privileged alone, the reviewers did not define what they considered as privilege and did not unpack the different ways in which a person might be advantaged or disadvantaged in society. The importance of looking at inequality issues from an intersectional perspective was thus raised but often only implicitly and in the broadest sense. This was particularly true for reviewers who argued that Sandberg's book was not relevant to the 'average' woman. Much like the term 'privilege', the word 'average' was used without explanation. Both terms, however, most likely referred to class-related advantages and disadvantage since, in terms of intersectional differences, class was the most commonly discussed factor as many journalists hinted at Sandberg's enormous economic capital separating her

from the reader. Writers would occasionally discuss the implications of other types of intersectionalities with gender such as race and sexuality. I never encountered reviews addressing the social inequalities that older, disabled or, for example, transgender women encounter. When race and sexuality were mentioned, they were mostly addressed in nothing more than a sentence or two. While some reviews thus briefly point to the a few intersections with gender, the heterogeneity of women as a group remains largely overlooked and factors such as race or sexuality often seem added or like an afterthought. At least in the mainstream media outlets I analysed, they were never addressed as a key issue. It could be argued that the reviews also reproduce hierarchies of inequality regimes related to characteristics such as gender, race, class, age or sexuality by including and excluding certain groups of women as readers who might not find Sandberg's book helpful.

Motherhood

The fact that Sheryl Sandberg is a mother of two was mentioned in most reviews, which is why I decided to focus part of the analysis on the theme of motherhood. I specifically looked at passages that mentioned Sandberg and her children as well as the way journalists wrote about working mothers in general. There was a very noticeable difference in the amount of coverage the topic 'motherhood' received in the various articles. While some journalists barely alluded to the fact that the book was written by a business executive with children, others included various kids-related anecdotes from *Lean In* or statistics on working mothers and a few articles would even focus almost exclusively on what it means to be a working mother.

Highly Critical Reviews

Among the critical reviews two articles stood out regarding their coverage of motherhood-related issues, albeit for very different reasons. In her *Washington Post* review, Melissa Gira Grant (2013) points out that Sandberg's goal behind her book and the accompanying circles is to teach women "how they can rise to the top of their careers without forsaking 'self-fulfillment' — Sandberg-speak for marriage and childbearing". Grant sees multiple issues with Sandberg's focus on motherhood and marriage: she questions, as hinted at in the quote, if having children is a necessary part of 'having it all' or "self-fulfillment" (Grant, 2013) and asks "Where, in Sandberg's feminism, are the women who do not want children, or who can't have them? Women who do not want to get married, or women who legally are not allowed to marry?". Grant concludes that Sandberg's implicit assumption that most women will eventually choose to get married and bear children excludes a large group of women who choose

to or simply have to pursue different lifestyles. According to Grant, Sandberg's rather conservative view is, however, not only excluding certain women but contributing to sexist discourses and ideas that "men have been telling us for years" (Grant, 2013). These discourse leave out women's own desires and needs by focusing only on the "demands of a woman's employer and the demands of her children" (Grant, 2013) and also repeats the, according to Grant, male argument that "the biggest threat to our ability to occupy a position of leadership is a woman's desire to have a child" (ibid.). This argument feeds into the persistent discourse on how women's main role and priority in life is to become a mother. The *Washington Post* contributor also takes issue with the fact that Sandberg overlooks problems concerning working-class women, especially since "Sandberg employs a staff to help keep house, raise her children and throw her women's leadership dinners" and "93 percent of whom [domestic workers] are women" (Grant, 2013). Grant thereby criticises that Sandberg ignores that women in her position often pass on the responsibilities that hinder them from climbing up the career ladder to other, more marginalised groups of women and thereby contribute to racialised and classed gender inequalities – an argument that can also be found in the academic literature on *Lean In* (for example Rottenberg 2017).

Tom Leonard, writer for the *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, is not questioning whether women actually want to become mothers, but whether mothers want to work as much as Sheryl Sandberg would like them to. Leonard (2013) describes how Sandberg is known to leave the office at 5.30pm and then continue to work after her children have gone to bed and that she mostly worked through her maternity leave. He goes on to state that "this is the blueprint that Sandberg, worth £350 million, believes other working mothers should strive to achieve" (Leonard, 2013). Leonard frames Sandberg's advice as an instruction for women to copy her and as advice that is first and foremost targeted at working mothers as opposed to working women more generally. He states that Sandberg, ever since her TED talk, has "controversially urged women to put their career first and let the rest of life sort itself out" and argued that "if a woman plans to have children, she must keep working and striving for promotion to the bitter end" (Leonard, 2013). This implies that Sandberg is asking women to neglect their life outside their careers, particularly family related, i.e. domestic and child rearing, responsibilities, and focus on their paid labour instead. Leonard implies that women do not have the time to further their career because they are busy attending to their children's needs, which in turn means that demanding high-power job positions can more easily be filled by men, who are not as responsible for

unpaid domestic labour. This echoes functionalist thought expressed by scholars such as Talcott Parsons. Parsons (1964) argued for men to take on the *instrumental* role of the breadwinner and for women to fulfil the *expressive* role of the carer as this would help stabilise their families and societies as a whole . Leonard further implies that even child-free women would, according to the unreferenced studies Leonard is referring to, still prefer careers outside of the often highly time-consuming and inflexible upper-management positions because men and women define success differently. The *Daily Mail* author criticises Sandberg harshly throughout the entire article by not-so subtly portraying her as a woman who is out of touch with the reality of most working mothers, who "is only 43, but is already on her second marriage", has a large team of domestic staff and who potentially hardly ever sees her own children.

> Many mothers will be curious to know how much this woman, who 'has it all', gets to see her own family. […] In the open-plan office where she sits across from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, the wall next to her desk has been painted by her children with the message 'I love you Mom' in large letters. The image of a devoted mother is hammered home with equal lack of subtlety by the use of a soft-focus portrait photo in the latest issue of Vanity Fair taken by Annie Leibovitz, showing Sandberg cuddling her daughter, five, and son, seven, at their vast home in California (Leonard, 2013).

In this paragraph, Leonard maintains that Sandberg is relentlessly trying to convey the image of a caring, present and beloved mother, an image the author clearly calls into question. His review is mostly centred around the argument that Sandberg is not the type of mother most women would and should strive to be.

Highly Favourable Reviews

The more favourable reviewers hardly ever criticised Sandberg for having the financial means and staff to help her with domestic and child rearing responsibilities. Instead, they pointed out that Sandberg is aware of the structural improvements that need to be made "by citing economic inequalities, discrimination, and the lack of paid maternity leave and affordable child care as problems that need to be addressed" (Valenti, 2013), but they did not see these as her key issues.

Some of the favourable reviewers make the case that there is indeed too much of a focus on the question of combining careers with motherhood, often summarised by the term work-life balance. Sarah Vine (2013), who is married to then Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove of the Conservative Party, notes in her *The Times* article that "the debate surrounding equality in the workplace has repeatedly been derailed by in-fighting between different factions. It's stay-at-home mums v working mums, the have-it-alls versus the not-have-it-alls, and so on." Filipovic (2013)

wonders why only women are constantly confronted with the question of how to balance family and work responsibilities when she argues that as soon as women "enter the professional world [they are] treated to endless female-centric panels on 'work-life balance' – as if balancing work and life is solely a women's issue".

This questioning of why work-life balance seems to be an exclusively female topic does, however, not make its way into all the reviews. In fact, Filipovic is one of the few writers who mostly chose the term "working parents" instead of exclusively talking about working mothers. Some reviewers, interestingly, also almost completely avoided touching upon any of Sandberg's anecdotes or statistics related to childrearing. Others, on the other hand, placed a lot of emphasis on Sheryl Sandberg, the mother, or on Sandberg's book as a primarily "valuable contribution to the endless debate over gender, motherhood and work" (Marcus, 2013). Positive reviewers that framed Sandberg primarily as a working mother instead of a working woman or more generally a business person, often chose to write about Sandberg's struggles with motherhood and present them as something that humanised her. Ruth Marcus (2013), contributor to *The Washington Post*, for example, started her article by saying

> Sheryl Sandberg has burst into tears in the office, more than once. She has failed at such crucial Mommy Tasks as remembering to dress her son in a green shirt for St. Patrick's Day - inwardly seething at the officious super-mommy who chided her sartorial shortcomings and worrying, I'm a bad mom. […] In short, the chief operating officer of Facebook is human in a - watch me get into trouble here - distinctively female way: emotional, guilt-ridden and plagued by a chronic, if low-grade, case of impostor syndrome. She is also fabulously smart, successful and wealthy.

Instead of presenting Sandberg as a superwoman, who has it all, and who has an army of staff to take care of everything outside of work, Marcus decides to frame Sandberg as a 'typical' mother. For Marcus, this seems to encompass feelings of guilt for 'letting her children down'; other more organised mothers witnessing her 'failures'; getting upset and doubting her own capabilities under the stress that work and family commitments bring with them. Marcus, being aware of the stereotypes she evokes, declares certain responsibilities "Mommy Tasks" – as opposed to parents' tasks, portrays a sense of competitiveness and rivalry between mothers and adds self-doubt and tearfulness to the mixture. By portraying Sandberg this way, she arguably makes her seem more sympathetic and seemingly closer to the 'average' working mother than her critics would argue and which in turn serves to attribute a certain amount of credibility, authenticity and perhaps likeability to her.

Mixed reviews often included portrayals of Sandberg both as a privileged mother with plenty of help and as someone who does not shy away from sharing the struggles she faced during her pregnancy and the early years of motherhood. *The Washington Post*'s Connie Schultz (2013), for example, points out that "some of her [Sandberg's] most poignant passages" are when "she describes the pangs of guilt as a mother working outside the home", yet Schultz admits to not being able to "forget that she [Sandberg], like many of the female friends she quotes, is a wealthy, white, married woman with a 'vast support system'". The *Washington Monthly*'s Kathleen Geier (2013) makes a similar argument when she maintains that "Sandberg is infinitely more interesting and relatable" when talking about her struggles, e.g. her first marriage or problems with morning sickness, than when she talks about her successes and "her fab billionaire and/or CEO buddies". This states an interesting preference in the context of a book on management and leadership, as the reviewers seem to be more intrigued by stories about personal obstacles than business-related accomplishments. *NPR*'s Maureen Corrigan, however, finds Sandberg's anecdotes on morning sickness rather trivial and, in contrast to Geier and Schultz, prefers the second half of the book. Corrigan argues that:

> The final two chapters of the book are more hard-hitting, riskier, less worried about alienating those readers, like stay-at-home moms, who may not share Sandberg's vision. Sandberg kicks off her final chapter by saying: 'For decades, we have focused on giving women the choice to work inside or outside the home. ... But we have to ask ourselves if we have become so focused on supporting personal choices that we're failing to encourage women to aspire to leadership' (2013).

Corrigan seems less interested in Sandberg anecdotes on being a working *mother* and prefers when the COO moves the conversation away from whether women should work outside the home to what happens when they do and what is standing in their way.

Silences, Presuppositions, Effects

The way in which the journalists incorporated the topic of motherhood ranged from the reviewers arguing that Sandberg is putting too much emphasis on motherhood both as a key event in women's lives and as a key obstacle to their careers to journalists portraying Sandberg's musings on the struggles of motherhood to be the most compelling parts of her book. The fact that some of the journalists seemed most interested in Sheryl Sandberg, the mother, perhaps demonstrates the popularity of

personal interest stories in the media, but equally how female authors are often put in a specific niche. As Dale Spender (1985) in her book *Man Made Language* argues, women authors, using the example of Elizabeth Gaskell, seem to be perceived as experts in writing about the personal and emotional aspects of life, much less so in writing about abstract concepts and matters concerning the public realm. Hence, when journalists focus on Sandberg as a (struggling) mother they highlight the most 'feminine' parts of her writing, i.e. when she focuses on 'private' matters. The praise Sandberg received from some journalists for revealing her struggles with motherhood in a book on work and leadership reproduces the strong focus that is often directed at motherhood when talking about women and work. As my analysis of *Lean In* in the previous chapter has shown, however, this focus also partially comes from Sandberg herself.

Some journalists problematised the homogeneity implied in Sandberg's book regarding the idea that most women want a heterosexual relationship, marriage and children. They pointed to the silences left by the book regarding single, non-heterosexual or childfree women. Most of the times, however, these groups of women were not explicitly mentioned by the reviewers, which only reproduced the book's silences. Most journalists who addressed issues of working mothers referred to the 'traditional' family model of a married heterosexual couple with a working husband/father and a working wife/mother, the latter however being the 'issue'. This reproduced a rather limited view of what constitutes a family. A small number of reviews also perpetuated the assumption that women seemingly enjoy being a caregiver more than men and that they would, if necessary or possible, choose family over work. Reviewers such as Leonard seemed to argue that working mother's lives are filled with tasks such school runs, cooking and cleaning, which leads them to choose careers that leave enough time for these commitments, especially since most women do not necessarily strive for high-power/high-salary jobs. As this was never framed as a working parents' issue, his account seems to heavily imply that women have different priorities when it comes to work/family then men. Plenty of Leonard's article, in fact, echoes Catherine Hakim's (2016) preference theory which argues that differences in men's and women's employment is mainly accounted for by their own lifestyle choices with the majority of women being the 'adaptive' type. According to Hakim (2016: p.33), adaptive women, especially those working in part-time positions, "seek to devote as much time and effort to their family work as to their jobs". Hakim furthermore argues that "women have genuine choices to make regarding employment versus home-making" (2002: p.432). She thereby marks the decision

over whether to stay at home, work part- or full-time as a predominately female one. Critics of preference theory, however, point out that Hakim's work "is built upon a remarkably (for a sociological theory) restricted view of potential and real social structural constraints and their impacts on individual action" (McRae, 2003: p.334). Hakim, like Leonard, thereby essentialises women's decisions not to strive for positions of high-power/responsibility and fails to take social expectations and other external factors into account.

I suggest that this line of argument was closely connected to discourses about guilt. Guilt was a frequently presented as being part and parcel of being a working mother. This can be seen, for example, in the way reviewers presented stories of Sandberg feeling guilty in order to make her appear more like the 'average' working mother, implying that a 'normal' woman feels guilty for not seeing her children as much as she would if she was not pursuing a full-time career. The journalists do, however, never mention the guilt associated with not being completely devoted to one's job – something that Sandberg brings up as well as feeling guilt over occasionally 'failing' her parental duties. The journalists not addressing working mothers' feelings of guilt over not being fully committed to their work is noteworthy as today's ideal or disembodied worker (Acker, 1990) is not supposed to be distracted by family or private commitments. The reviews thus demonstrate a stronger expectation for women to be 'perfect mothers' than there is for them to be 'perfect workers'. Reviewers that painted mothers as 'naturally' less invested in full-time and/or high-ranking jobs because of their devotion to their children also actively upheld the link between guilt and being a working mother. These reviews implied that mothers who prioritised or simply invested in their careers, were going against traditional gender roles, performing what is commonly associated with masculinity, and were leaving the position of the devoted mother seemingly unoccupied.

Personality

Quite often the reviewers did not focus on *Lean In* itself, but first and foremost on Sheryl Sandberg as a person, who was often likened to "Superwoman" (e.g. Mills, 2013; Swartz, 2013) or called "overachieving" (Swartz, 2013) highlighting the fact that she is not an 'average' woman. Journalists would often point to Sandberg's 'character' as a means to measure whether her advice was useful or not.

Highly Critical Reviews

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the critical reviews were often phrased in a way that put the Facebook COO in a negative light and that raised questions about her 'character'. In its range, this type of judgement encompassed anything from a few subtle remarks to several paragraphs of critical comments on Sandberg and her lifestyle.

A very popular way of framing Sandberg in a negative way was for the journalists to mockingly focus on her COO 'celebrity status' (see Ketchen et al., 2008 on CEO celebrity status). Maureen Dowd (2013), for example, begins her *New York Times* review with the words "Sheryl Sandberg is not one to settle for being the It Girl of Silicon Valley" followed by her referencing a Vogue article in which a friend of Sandberg's described as her having an "'infectious insistence'", which Dowd mockingly comments on by saying that "[s]he would have to, having founded Harvard's aerobics program in the '80s, wearing blue eye shadow and leg warmers". Dowd (2013) goes on to describe Sandberg with the words "[t]he petite corporate star is larger than life". *The Observe*r's Yvonne Roberts (2013) ascribes a certain arrogance to Sandberg when pointing out that the COO's "ego is exceedingly plump" and that her "book is full of little [ego] strokes, such as mentioning that her family gets a lift in the private jet of eBay's chief executive". Reviews written from this particular angle often emphasise Sandberg's net worth, her famous and rich friends and acquaintances and conclude that for someone as seemingly carefree as Sandberg, *Lean In* can only be a "vanity project" (Dowd, 2013) with little or no merit. Tom Leonard (2013) from the *Daily Mail* cites an unspecified source that comments on *Lean In* with the words "'[i]t's like taking 'basic' fashion advice from Gwyneth Paltrow,' said one woman critic, referring to the actress's style website in which she describes a £315 Stella McCartney dress as a budget-conscious option". Leonard (2013) further describes Sandberg as an "alpha female" with a "feather-bedded existence of private jets, servants and an office where she can do what she wants". Many of the reviewers juxtapose or compare Sandberg to other famous women; the negative reviewers who paint Sandberg as a COO celebrity mostly use women from the entertainment industry for their juxtapositions, such as Gwyneth Paltrow in the above example, or Oprah Winfrey (Dowd, 2013). This not only reminds the reader of how different Sandberg's life is to their own, seemingly free of the worries 'average' women deal with but also serves the purpose of making the book seem irrelevant to them and their career paths.

I would further like to draw attention to a paragraph by Maureen Dowd on Sandberg's drive behind her *Lean In* project:

> Sandberg may have caught the fever to change the world from Mark Zuckerberg, or come by it genetically. She writes that her mother, at age 11, responded to a rabbi's sermon on tikkun olam, the Jewish concept of repairing the world, by 'grabbing a tin can and knocking on doors to support civil rights workers in the South' (2013).

In this section of her article, Dowd wonders where Sandberg's passion for advocating for change comes from and identifies her boss, Mark Zuckerberg, or her Jewish heritage as two possible sources. Both explanations seem rather arbitrary and belittling, as it is not clear why Sandberg's genes or her Jewishness would play a role in her writing of *Lean In* or why she would need to imitate Zuckerberg, i.e. a man, for this.

Highly Favourable Reviews

The positive reviewers often accredit a certain CEO celebrity status to Sandberg as well, but do not necessarily use it against her and see it as a potential asset for her being able to bring about change. Sandberg's wealth, and to an extent fame, is therefore more often framed as enabling instead of blinding or hindering her, as Jessica Valenti argues in her *Washington Post* review:

> The truth is, feminism could use a powerful ally. Here's a nationally known woman calling herself a feminist, writing what will be a wildly popular book with feminist ideas, encouraging other women to be feminists. And we're worried she has too much influence? That she's too . . . ambitious? (2013).

Valenti maintains that feminism can only benefit from having people in power support the cause and making it become more popular. Other positive reviewers, who also see Sandberg as a powerful feminist figure, often try to bring that point across by juxtaposing Sandberg with feminist icons or, alternatively, contrast her with people the journalists would not classify as feminists. In her *The Guardian* article Jill Filipovic (2013), for example, finds that "the real strength of *Lean In* is in its Rosie the Riveter 2.0 message", referring to the slogan "We Can Do It!" associated with the iconic poster and US-American marketing campaign to encourage women to join the war industry workforce. Chrystia Freeland (2013) of *The New York Times* sees parallels to Simone de Beauvoir:

> 'Man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as a female. Whenever she tries to behave as a human being she is accused of trying to emulate the male.' That observation by Simone de Beauvoir helped to inspire the feminist revolution after World War II. Two generations later, Sheryl K. Sandberg has written a book, 'Lean In,' arguing that is still the case today (2013).

Whenever journalists decide to include references to other women it affects the way Sandberg as a person comes to life for the reader, linked to feminist icons or

intellectuals she appears to be spearheading a new wave of feminism; connected to celebrities in the entertainment industry, Sandberg seems less radical or daring and more interested in building a brand and accumulating more wealth. She either becomes a woman with a message, a woman on a mission, so to speak, or someone who is only scratching the surface of complicated issues and who is lacking the necessary 'depth' and is only interested in personal and financial gains.

Journalists who wrote positive reviews often dedicated a noticeable amount of space to 'defending' Sandberg: she is privileged but aware of her privilege, she appears to be Superwoman but often struggles with the same problems that other women face, she is playing the 'corporate game', but only up to a point as "[p]enning a feminist manifesto is not exactly the way to win friends on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley" (Filipovic, 2013). This defensive style of writing can also be seen when Sandberg is compared to other, seemingly less feminist, big corporate names. Ruth Marcus (2013) in her *Washington Post* article, for example, contrasts Sandberg with former Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer, who, according to Marcus, does not call herself a feminist, stopped allowing her employees to work from home, and "proclaims that her new baby has 'been way easier than everyone made it out to be'". Mayer is often brought up in reviews and articles on *Lean In*. Although journalists often refrain from directly pitting Mayer against Sandberg, it is perhaps still noteworthy that Mayer gets mentioned so many times when comparisons with male business celebrities hardly make their way into any of the reviews. Compared to Marissa Mayer, Sandberg appears genuinely concerned about gender issues, which the positive reviewers often use to prove their point. When Sandberg defends Mayer, the journalists frame it in a way that makes her look supportive of one of her few female colleagues in the upper echelons of the technology sector.

In addition to comparisons and juxtapositions, the journalists also find ways to describe Sandberg and her personality more directly. *The Times'*s Sarah Vine sums up what especially negative reviewers commonly judge Sandberg for, while simultaneously agreeing with this judgment, in the following paragraph:

> Yes, she's annoying. Yes, she earns lots of money. Yes, she's a bossy boots.
> Yes, she flies around the world in private jets and lives a very privileged lifestyle.
> Yes, she's annoyingly thin and pretty. But her fundamental point is a good one
> (2013).

The idea that Sandberg is "annoying", rich and "bossy" is presented by Vine as a given, something most people know and can agree on, but she also argues that once they see past her character, they will find that Sandberg's approach in *Lean In* is

valuable. Vine (2013), instead of simply defending Sandberg like many positive reviewers, acknowledges the COO's 'imperfections' and focuses on her message instead, a "message [framed] in a uniquely female way, one that other women can understand and appreciate". According to the journalists, Sandberg's imperfections and her 'feminine' message (Vine does not explain any further what makes Sandberg's message particularly feminine) all seem to contribute to the COO's likeability. Sandberg's likeability generally appears to be a key factor in the reviews and comments written on *Lean In*. The main argument in Anna Holmes' *The New Yorker* article is that critics often have not even read the book, nor have they met Sandberg, unlike Holmes herself:

> I ended up seated directly next to Sandberg, where, in the course of three intense hours, I was able to observe her interactions with the rest of the group. I found her extremely impressive: smart, curious, sincere, funny, and warm. It was clear that she'd done her homework on every single woman in attendance, and she was frighteningly well-informed about the structural issues and challenges that working women are up against (2013).

In this passage Holmes highlights Sandberg's likeability by emphasising how "funny, and warm" she was when the author met her. Holmes also emphasises how "sincere" and "well-informed" Sandberg was regarding gender issues in the workplace, tackling one of the most common criticisms towards Sandberg: her lack of attention to, and perhaps knowledge of, structural issues causing gender inequalities at work.

Mixed Reviews

The mixed reviews were quite similar to the positive reviews in the sense that they often compared Sandberg to feminist 'icons' and emphasised her wealth and status. However, this group of reviews included a very noticeable number of comments on Sandberg's personality and looks, which ranged from remarks on her "painted toenails" (Hesse, 2103) to reviewers describing her as "not just tough," but also "compassionate, funny, honest and likable" (Slaughter, 2013). Her likeability was in fact highlighted in many mixed reviews and was quite often linked to Sandberg herself arguing that women need to be assertive yet likeable in order to get ahead in their careers.

The perhaps most personality-focused review of all the 27 articles I analysed, comes from *The Sunday Times* and was written by an unknown contributor. It is, however, not just a review of the book, but also, and perhaps more prominently, a profile article on Sandberg. The author dedicates several paragraphs to describing Sandberg's life, giving details about her family, childhood, time at university and her career trajectory.

They also repeatedly include comments on Sandberg's appearance and 'attitude', describing her as "'[b]ossy' and always the top of her class" (Anon, 2013a) and as:

> [p]etite, dark-eyed and with a staccato delivery, Sandberg puts across a mixture of warmth and steeliness that partly explains her meteoric rise […] Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of the social network site, is the company's public face, but his stylish No 2 is credited with instilling its sense of drive (Anon, 2013a).

The descriptions used in the first paragraph combine attributes stereotypically associated with femininity (i.e. 'petite', 'stylish', 'warmth'), on the one hand, and masculinity (i.e. 'steeliness', 'drive'), on the other. This reflects Muhr's finding that female leaders have to display "both excessively masculine and excessively feminine" (2011: p.337) qualities in order to be successful. They might thus need to exhibit 'masculine' traits such as assertiveness and rationality whilst also performing their 'femininity', e.g. by dressing a certain way. In accordance with Muhr's finding, the author of the review views this combination of 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities as part of the reason for Sandberg's "meteoric rise" (Anon, 2013a). According to the article, it appears that Sandberg's 'masculine' traits, however, have also led her to be labelled "bossy". This is a particularly interesting choice of words, as the Lean In Foundation took part in a campaign called 'Ban Bossy' that pointed out that labelling young girls as bossy could discourage them from seeking out leadership positions later in life.

Silences, Presuppositions, Effects

The arguably biggest silence within this theme is the lack of focus on the words written by Sandberg. Instead, journalists reflected on Sandberg's character in order to review the book and in doing so oftentimes created a straw-person as a stand-in for the COO. In order to create this straw-person, journalists had to highlight characteristics that could be easily decoded by the reader as a positive or negative trait. Before exploring the assumptions that underpin these characteristics, I want to examine the silences, i.e. what was not included in the portrayal of Sandberg. There was a noticeable lack of complexity and evidence in the journalists' depictions of the COO suggesting that people can be easily and neatly categorised as either 'good' or 'bad'. The reader often learned very little about Sandberg's job and the work that she does, which is quite remarkable considering the topic of the book the journalists were reviewing. The journalists often framed Sandberg in a way that left out her development over the years or ambiguities in biography. Whoever Sandberg was portrayed to be at the time of *Lean In*'s publication, e.g. a woman who 'has it all', seemed to be who she always had been. To help characterise Sandberg, the journalists would often compare her to

other women but never to men, suggesting that Sandberg has very little in common with the latter. Her competence as a business executive was also hardly ever demonstrated or debated. It was at most implied but did not feature heavily in the depiction of Sandberg as a person. The unwritten writer's rule of 'show, don't tell' was followed by very few journalists. Many reviewers relied on adjectives and comparisons to illustrate Sandberg's 'character' instead of providing the reader with concrete examples or stories about the COO. The focus on Sandberg's personality and likeability also avoided the question of why these factors are relevant to the review of the book. Few of the reviewers had met Sandberg in person, and those who had arguably still had a rather limited insight into Sheryl Sandberg's personality and her 'real' motivation behind the book. Making Sandberg appear as a likeable and trustworthy source, made it easier to convince readers of her good intentions and the usefulness of *Lean In*, and vice versa. The stylistic techniques the journalists used to create an image of Sandberg give insight into who is generally seen as a reliable source of information or, in this case specifically, a feminist. The more journalists juxtaposed the Facebook COO with names of celebrities from the entertainment industry, the less trustworthy and serious she appeared to be regarding feminist issues. The same effect was created when journalists repeatedly emphasised her ties to the '1%' of the world's wealthiest people. Fame and money therefore seemed to be negatively correlated to how much a person is perceived as a 'sincere' feminist. Being a 'COO celebrity' seemed to be the embodiment of both fame and money and therefore creates a subject position from which it is comparatively easy to be heard, but relatively hard to be trusted. However, this distrust did not necessarily translate into a complete scepticism towards the 'elite'. White, (upper-)middle class and educated feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem were frequently brought up by the journalists in juxtaposition with Sandberg's name in order to give her 'feminist credentials' and an aura of trustworthiness and pioneer spirit. This is likely to be the case because these women are mostly known for their intellectual output and contributions to politics and knowledge, i.e. their cultural rather than their economic capital. Sandberg's cultural capital (e.g. her Harvard education), for many of the reviewers, seems to pale in comparison to her financial background. The journalists thus seemingly wanted to compensate for it by linking her to a handful of widely-known 'intellectual spearheads' of feminism.

The fact that the theme 'personality' ended up being one of the most dominant ones within the data set, says a lot about how many of the journalists approached their

reviews of and commentaries on *Lean In*. Instead of reviewing Sandberg's book and dissecting her arguments, the journalists focused on Sandberg as a person, or better, their idea of Sandberg as a person. Plenty of the reviewers hinted at how likeable or unlikeable the COO was and then used this as ammunition against her or in her defence. Either way, this strategy highlights what Sandberg herself points out in her book: that there is greater need for women than for men to be perceived as nice and pleasant, especially when they are aiming for high-power positions. However, from analysing the reviews it seemed that Sandberg was commonly viewed as a generally 'nice' person as there were no stories or anecdotes brought up that suggest otherwise. This did, nevertheless, not prevent critics from finding other ways of reducing her likeability. A very popular way of achieving this was by indirectly or explicitly claiming that the COO was spoiled, vain, narcissistic or greedy – yet the reader was given little evidence for this other than the fact that Sandberg is wealthy. This disproportionally harsh criticism and judgement of Sandberg seemed to be directed at her success with the potential goal of chipping away at it and perhaps even silencing her. In her think piece on *Lean In*, bell hooks (2013), who is overall rather critical of the book, described the reactions from critics as "a rage bordering on envy", especially since "very few folks attacking the work had actually read the book". This adds to my argument that some of the reviewers almost exclusively focused on Sandberg's alleged personality flaws, instead of reviewing the content of the book and her ideas, and therefore judged her unfairly. This phenomenon is not entirely new, however, as Spender (1985) points out in her analysis on Victorian women writers: as soon as readers realised a book had been written by a women they judged it, or better her, more harshly and found less depth and credibility in her words.

The discourses surrounding Sandberg's character further reveal that appearance and displays of femininity and masculinity still play an important role when talking about a woman in the public eye. Although her looks were not brought up very frequently, Sandberg did here and there receive praise and comments regarding her body and sense of dress. Similarly, it was highlighted how even someone in her position can often feel emotional and vulnerable, which was then often framed as something feminine, something other women (i.e. not men) could relate to. While these types of descriptions were not part of every review, they still illustrate how Sandberg was primarily seen as a *female* business leader and how her actions were interpreted through this gendered lens. This, of course, only refers to a certain kind of femininity – a western, middle-class white version of feminine appearance and behaviour. This kind femininity is partly focused on fragility, which became apparent whenever

journalists highlighted how "petite" and "emotional" or in other word non-threatening Sandberg is. This 'fragility' was then presented as a disadvantage by asking how someone as "petite" and "emotional" can cope with such a stressful, 'testosterone-filled' work environment, but was also implied to be a strength as it made her appear more sympathetic and likeable. This contributes to discourses that conceptualise the corporate world as male and in which women do not quite belong unless changes to that world are made or unless women like Sandberg, who are 'exceptional' women possessing 'superhuman'/'Superwoman' abilities, want to join the men's club.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the three most salient themes that emerged in my analysis of 27 reviews and commentaries on *Lean In* in various US-American and British media outlets. I divided each discussion of the three themes, i.e. feminism, motherhood, and personality, into what negative, positive and mixed reviewers had to say about Sandberg's book. The reviews of and commentaries on *Lean In* can overwhelmingly be understood as comments on Sheryl Sandberg, with some journalists not even having bothered to read her book in the first place. The debate surrounding *Lean In* was used for a range of purposes, one of them being to (re-)define feminism. For this purpose, journalists tried to establish what constitutes a 'real' feminist and whether feminism should promote change on an individual or structural level or both. The reviewers were noticeably split regarding their take on Sandberg's feminism. Reviewers writing for left-leaning newspapers or magazines tended to contrast Sandberg's corporation-friendly feminism with the Women's Liberation Movement and second-wave feminisms that focused on bringing about structural changes. As a result of this contrast they concluded that Sandberg could only be viewed as spokesperson for a very accommodating feminism or, in some cases, not even pass as a 'real' feminist in the first place. Reviews containing arguments that Sandberg was too focused on gender inequality or arguably too feminist and pestering the 'average' woman with her solutions for it, were more commonly found in conservative newspapers. These reviews were sometimes written from a perspective resembling gender difference or preference theory which attribute different careers drives and preferences to men and women. Overall, the reviews were filled with a noticeable amount of policing regarding what constitutes feminism or a feminist. Sandberg's enormous financial capital, her affinity for traditional family values and displays of white, US- American, middle-class femininity seemed to disqualify the COO from positioning herself as a feminist to some of the left-leaning (British) journalists. Positive reviewers thus often used their reviews mostly as a defence of Sandberg's

status as a feminist and of her book as feminist contribution. *Lean In*'s reviews thus if not reignited, then heavily contributed to the debate in mainstream media about the status quo of feminism and where to place Sandberg's focus on the individual woman on a feminist spectrum.

Another theme that featured quite prominently in the reviews was motherhood. While some reviewers barely mentioned the topic at all, others focused almost exclusively on it. The latter often ended up reinforcing a range of stereotypes and expectations mothers are held to. They often portrayed mothers as being primarily concerned with their children rather than their career and often alluded to the guilt felt by (full-time) working mothers. Little was said about ambitious mothers who enjoy having a career. Some reviewers, on the other hand, were critical of Sandberg's own focus on motherhood as a career obstacle as they found her to be implying that most women will become mothers and will do so in the context of a heterosexual marriage. Sandberg's own stories about her personal experiences as a working mother, although not mentioned by every journalist and even boring to some, were often seen as putting the COO in a more sympathetic light. Talking about pregnancies and being a mother thus made Sandberg appear more likeable to some reviewers. The focus on Sandberg, the mother and the person, was quite noticeable in a range of different reviews, and combined with the lack of an actual discussion of Sandberg's book, seemed to indicate an ongoing preference for women speaking about the private rather than the public sphere (Spender, 1985).

My analysis of the personality theme revealed that reviewers across the board tended to make inferences about who Sandberg is a person. Some reviewers relied quite heavily on using an either positive or negative portrayal of Sandberg as way to convince readers of the *Lean In*'s merit or lack thereof. Oftentimes these portrayals were not backed up by much evidence and mainly relied on using Sandberg's success as a selling point or, more commonly, as a reason to distrust her. Her financial capital often seemed to work against her, and reviewers often appeared to be under the impression that she was lacking in cultural capital, despite her Ivy League education. This seeming lack of cultural capital was then emphasised by comparing Sandberg to celebrities from the entertainment industry or attempted to be compensated for by juxtaposing her with other white, (upper)middle class feminist who were largely seen as intellectual figures. Sandberg's appearance was occasionally commented on in the reviews but was never the main focus. Some journalists, however, pointed to a range of personality and appearance related aspect that suggested that Sandberg exhibits both 'feminine' and 'masculine' traits. This combination of characteristics as well as

Sandberg being regarded as 'exceptional' and almost superhuman, seemed to be the explanation for the COO's success to some of the reviewers, which only further highlighted and perpetuated the notion that women are seen as outsiders to the corporate world and particularly its upper echelons.

Chapter 7: The Lean In phenomenon from the perspective of LIC members

In this chapter I will lay out my analysis of the interview material I collected. I want to connect the women's accounts with what has been discussed in the previous chapters in order to add their voices and interpretations to my exploration of the Lean In phenomenon. I will do this by first exploring the types of gender discrimination in the workplace experienced by my interviewees which contributed to them reading the book and/or joining a circle. The circle members all had experienced a vast range of different gender-related obstacles which were nevertheless often similar in their nature. In the second part of this chapter I will examine how the group members engaged with the book and the criticisms it received. I bring in their perspectives because, in my view, the debate about *Lean In*'s merit or its potential negative impact on women and/or feminism cannot be held without including the voices of women who are dealing with gender inequality in the workplace and have found Sandberg's intervention to be helpful. This part of the chapter thus intends to add their opinions to the voices of scholars and journalists whose opinions were laid out in the literature review and my chapter on *Lean In*'s critical reception. I will demonstrate that *Lean In,* for some of the interviewees, provided an introduction to the obstacles women in the workplace are presented with and increased their awareness of gender biases and discrimination. Further, I will show that book was often perceived as a useful tool that seemed applicable to the issues the circle members faced at work. I will use this chapter to link *Lean In*'s perceived relevance for the circle members to what Gill and Orgad (2018) describe as an increase in discourses surrounding resilience and confidence, often interpellating women in particular. The final part of this chapter will explore the women's views on the circle meetings and what they hoped to achieve through their participation. This part will add to my classification of the different circle approaches introduced in chapter 4 and highlight the circle members' perspectives on the utility of the meetings. I will show, how compared to the book, the support and advice the interviewees received from the circles, often had more tangible effects on the circle members' success at work and their general well-being.

Why lean in?

I want to use the first part of this chapter to discuss what my interviewees told me about their struggles at work and to what extent the circles or the book helped them dealing with these struggles. Their accounts should illustrate how diverse the different circle members' experiences with gender discrimination in the workplace were but

that they also shared similarities. These experiences were often the reasons for them to read the book and join a circle in the first place. Most of my interviewees when asked about obstacles at work in general, immediately mentioned gender related issues. A very common problem the circle members reported was that they felt like they were not being listened to, particularly by their male colleagues. This often also coincided with them almost exclusively being asked to take the minutes of the meeting, being left responsible for organising trips and events or just generally being seen as the 'admin'. The interviewees varied, however, in terms of how bothered they were by these occurrences and whether they categorised them as sexism or not. Some interviewees would report that these incidents had happened to them more frequently in the past when they were younger and did not have the courage to stand up for themselves. Mary was one of these interviewees. She was the founder of circle Denim, one of the self-focused circles. At work, she was managing a team of digital product designers after having been a designer herself. Mary was in her early 30s, white, from an English-speaking country outside the UK, and was in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend with whom she planned to have children one day.

> So I haven't had any really big dramatic like specific diversity things that have like struck me other than some of the normal things that happened like one, something that has happened, I don't even know how many times I was in a new meeting and because I look young and I am a woman and I'm often the only woman in a meeting, someone says 'Oh, who's gonna take notes?' and like looks at me and maybe I am a little bit less senior than the other people in the room and like, bad me in the past, I have done, I have like 'Okay, I'll do it', you know I, 'I'll be the admin'. Yay. You know, I'll serve that role because you think I'm that stereotype or just definitely had equal - like had men talk over me in sessions and sometimes, you know, not felt comfortable to like fight that. But I think that may have been a couple of years ago.

Mary described being perceived as the "admin" which she put down to her gender and age and saw as "normal". She categorised it as minor incident that is almost to be expected to happen to women, especially young women, in the workplace. Her saying "bad me" implies that she thought it was, at least partly, her fault that she ended up taking the notes for the meeting because she had agreed to it and played along with her colleagues' expectations and perception of her. Her framing of the gender biases she encountered is thus very similar to Sandberg's as both put a lot of emphasis on a woman's agency in moments of gender stereotyping and discrimination.

Like Sandberg, she does, however, also recognise the importance of co-operation, support and mentoring to tackle gender issues in the workplace. Mary explained that she had been lucky in this regard:

> [W]hen I first got hired by [name of company she works for], they before I'd even started, one of my colleagues, who was a senior lady in the organisation, did like an introduction email and set the context for who I was and what I was supposed to do when I joined and like sold me in at like the right level and gave me a lot of credibility. And so like, when I came in, the level of expectation was right versus like joining an organisation where you're fighting for your right and your seniority level, especially as a young woman in a meeting.

Mary explained that she had support from a senior woman in her organisation who helped her gain "a lot of credibility" from the beginning by properly introducing her to the team. This corroborates previous research findings on the importance of mentoring for women in the workplace (Carbajal, 2018; Settles et al., 2007). Mary also reported having "tactical one-to-ones" with co-workers to gain 'allies' before a meeting in case her ideas were going to being ignored or people talked over her again. Her awareness of gender biases and discrimination and her own experience with them also influenced the way she led her own team: "so now I actually facilitate a lot of conversations myself, so I'll try and set some kind of parameters for how to discuss. So, (let's say) if someone's talking, no-one's allowed to interrupt". In creating a respectful work atmosphere and etiquette that is based on co-operation and an attentiveness to others and their opinions, Mary actively tried to change the organisational culture in her workplace. This shows that even though Mary was a founder of a self-focused circle on top of being a vocal advocate of Sandberg's book (she bought several copies for her friends and co-workers), her efforts to combat gender inequality were not solely based on a focus on the individual and thus also 'deviated' from *Lean In*'s neoliberal focus on personal responsibility.

As I have briefly mentioned before, gender inequalities were not always perceived by my interviewees as rooted in sexist structures or beliefs. Some of my participants, mostly the younger women in their mid- 20s to early 30s, told me about situations where they had been treated differently because of their gender but would simultaneously emphasise that they had not experienced any 'intentional' sexism at work. Irene was one of these interviewees and was part of circle Blue, a consciousness-raising circle. She identified as white, middle-class and, at the time of the interview, had worked in IT for almost 10 years after having studied maths at university. She had changed her job and the companies she worked for a few times. Irene told me that she did not believe "anyone's ever been consciously sexist or tried to hold [her] back because of [her] gender […] knowingly". She then, however, proceeded to describe how, in her first job, people were surprised to see how capable she was. Shortly after she had started said job, she was, however, "strongly encouraged" to take on "a more client-facing role", which she eventually agreed to, but did not enjoy and which she believed "really held [her] back" in her career. When

I asked whether she thought she had been encouraged to take the customer-oriented role because of her gender she said:

> Yeah, because I think people sort of did the whole stereotyping thing. So, when I talked to clients they would go 'Wow, she can talk to clients', which, actually, I probably wasn't that much better than the guys. They just, I don't know, it's just what people noticed. I think it's what they chose to notice.

Irene's experience demonstrates tangible gender discrimination in her workplace, which, as research has shown, is a rather common phenomenon particularly in the information technology sector (Losse, 2012; Koput & Gutek, 2010; Shevinsky, 2012). In Irene's case this meant that despite her doing 'surprisingly' well and exceeding expectations, she was still asked to abandon her more technological role for a position based on administrative and social or 'female' skills. Given that Irene stated that she "hated it" and that she "wasn't that much better than the guys", it is safe to assume that Irene was right in saying that it was not her outstanding talent to work with people that put her in this client-facing role but her gender and other people's perception of it. Irene, as well as some of the other, younger interviewees, was, however, rather reluctant to draw a direct connection between sexism and her negative work experiences. It seems, she did not to want to categorise them as a 'gender problem', yet, judging from her account, they very much seemed to be. The younger interviewees' reluctance to attribute their problems at work to sexism even in the broadest sense could perhaps be understood as them seeing sexism as 'outdated' and something that had been overcome. They appeared to be looking at it from a postfeminist perspective where equality has been achieved and the need for discussions about sexism seems antiquated and a thing of the past (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Framing sexism as a relict of the past, however, underestimates its ubiquity. In Irene's case it also meant perceiving gender discrimination as a conscious choice rather than as the result of subconscious biases and the omnipresence of gendered discourses. Not being able to or being reluctant to identify gender biases or discrimination as such can as a consequence make it harder to actively challenge them. It should be added, that most of the slightly older interviewees, while not using the word sexism either, never pointed out that the discrimination that they had experienced was done unintentionally – this aspect simply did not seem relevant to them.

Irene also reported that, particularly during the first years of her career, she felt intimidated by the male co-workers on her level because of their 'laddish' behaviour and because they seemed suspicious of her, as woman, in their field: Irene remembers that even though she was the only woman in her team and therefore in

the minority, her male colleagues still believed that she had an unfair advantage because of her gender and thought that she had received "some sort of special treatment" because a senior woman in their company had taken her out for lunch. Irene also reported how her male co-workers made sexual remarks in her presence.

> They weren't very nice sometimes [laughs]. And they told me the whole time I've been away they were talking about boobs [laughs]. It was just awful. And at 21 I didn't really have any sort of life experience or skills to know what to say back to them. So, I would just shut up and take it, which I would never do now. I'd tell them to go fuck themselves. Excuse my language.

While their overt performances of heterosexual masculinity made Irene feel very uncomfortable, Irene does not label her experience as sexual harassment or bullying and instead opts for simply describing it as them not being "very nice". By not naming it harassment, however, this type of behaviour is more easily excused and harder to combat. Irene also partly blamed herself and her age for not handling the situation better, e.g. by being more assertive and establishing boundaries. In blaming her age and inexperience at that point in time, however, Irene also overlooks that she was outnumbered by her male co-workers in a male-dominated sector. Her colleagues' laddish behaviour can, to use the words of Alison Phipps (2018), be described as "as an enactment of power and privilege" (2018: p.178), which was seemingly used to signal to Irene that she did not fit in. Irene's experience is similar to what Faulkner (2009) reported in her study on women engineers who had to demonstrate acceptance towards (but not participate in) their co-workers' laddish behaviour to show that they belonged in their line of work. The way Irene describes her experience at her old workplace draws on neoliberal and postfeminist discourses as she refrains from describing it as sexist or discriminating and because she focuses on what she could have done or would do differently now. When Irene explains how she would not "shut up and take it […] now", she arguably portrays herself as neoliberal subject that is "empowered and self-managing" rather than "vulnerable, powerless, [and] passive" (Scharff, 2016a: p.272).

Tina provided another, yet rather different example of women's sexualisation in the workplace. Tina was the founder of the outward-oriented circle Coral, a mother, married, identified as middle-class and worked in a legal profession. She explained how it was relatively common in her line of work to ask people if they wanted to meet over coffee. When this was done between two men it was simply "taken as a genuine business development approach", whereas if a woman approached a man in the same way they often ran the risk of it being perceived as asking someone out on a

date. Tina also reported how not only asking someone to meet over coffee, but also being assertive and opinionated was being perceived through a gendered lens:

> I actually can be quite loud if I have to be, but it does get a bit tiring to always be the person sticking your head above the parapet and you end up the risk of being seen as a troublemaker for doing no more than simply being as assertive as a man. But I've got other female colleagues who are quite quietly-spoken and extremely intelligent and when they say something it's actually worth listening to but they don't shout. And their view's constantly getting dismissed or just not seen as important because they are not being all shouty and aggressive about it.

Tina noted when she acted as "assertive as a man" she was perceived as a "troublemaker". Her statement also demonstrates that Irene's assumption that older age and assertiveness will somehow limit experiences of gender discrimination is probably built on shaky grounds. Simply by going against the gender stereotype, Tina was punished for behaviour that is commonplace for men. Tina also recognised a tendency for the men in her workplace to be more "shouty and aggressive" and ignoring the more soft-spoken women. Interestingly, however, Tina does not seem to argue that women should simply follow her lead and be more outspoken, but she implies that it is men who need to change and be more attentive to others. Most interviewees, however, particularly the ones who did struggle to get their voices heard, embraced the idea of having to become more assertive and tried to use the circle meetings to learn techniques to acquire these and other 'skills'.

Other common problems the circle members expressed were often related to maternity leave and having children. These kinds of problems appeared in large variations: Tina, for example, reported having been given fewer or smaller projects to work on after the birth of her child. Victoria, another interviewee, had a similar experience, only in her case the change in workload happened purely based on the assumption that she was going to be pregnant soon (see also Faulkner, 2009). Victoria was in her mid-30s, white, and, at the time of the interview, worked for a media company where most of her colleagues were men but also had experience with working as a freelancer in the media sector. She reported that she had directly addressed the HR department of her company to discuss their maternity leave policy which dictated that a woman would be paid "90% of [her] wages for the first six weeks" to then be given "£140 a week" onwards. Victoria believed that this policy was implemented based on the assumption that the expecting mother would have a male partner whose (higher) income she could fall back on during her maternity leave.

> I did address this with HR in my current role and I said 'Do you understand that you're assuming that a man would earn more and be able to cover the entire household bills? Why doesn't that work for a woman? Why don't you assume that I could earn more and be able to cover the household bills […]?'. They said 'Oh,

it's a very traditional company', […] it's not traditional, it's, it's 5 years old. […] That was one of the things that actually, *Lean In* has really made me realise, is that, and that's the reason I went to HR, is that I have responsibility as the senior woman in the company to change things that aren't right.

Victoria reported that that she had decided to talk to HR because *Lean In* had made her think that it is was her "responsibility as the senior woman in the company to change things that aren't right". This is noteworthy given the popular criticism of the book's focus on how the individual woman can increase her success in the workplace. While Victoria still took on the fight individually, she attempted to change the organisational structures (rather than herself) so that other women would benefit from the change as well. As her conversation with HR did not have the outcome she had hoped for, she eventually decided to leave the company. This decision was partly a result of her interactions with other women in her consciousness-raising circle Amber. Talking to other members in her circle had made her realise that not every company treats their female employees as badly as her company did.

So, meeting other women who are of similar age to me and manage their positions and that don't face those kinds of challenges. Yeah, this made me think that, I'll try, so I've tried to change, in the last year or so, and changed the company slightly, and called out things that weren't going right, like the pregnancy thing, and it hasn't worked. So, I just thought, well, if I can't change it, then I can't be part of it anymore. [….] Whereas, I think if I'd, if the Lean In Circle had been full of women who were all experiencing the same things, it would have been kind of cathartic, but I probably wouldn't be leaving, because I would have been convinced that 'Well, this is just how it is'.

Victoria's account demonstrates how the book had encouraged her to ask for change in her company, but it also shows how her attempt was met with resistance and rigid organisational structures. Victoria's experience thus paints a less optimistic picture than Sandberg's book, in which the COO often suggests that it is not necessarily external factors, such as organisational structures, that hinder women's career progress but women's perception of them. The organisational policies in Victoria's company had quite tangible negative consequences for her, which did not change despite Victoria arguably 'leaning in'. In the end, it was the circle meetings that made Victoria quit her job as talking to the other women helped her realise that she was caught in particularly inflexible organisational structures and that changing her work environment was her best, if not only, option. The circle thus provided a different perspective than the book for Victoria and helped her see that her problems at work were mostly caused by structural issues.

Like Victoria, Dana had also experienced wage related discrimination and little success in trying to address and challenge it, which ultimately led her to leaving her previous position. Dana was the founder of the consciousness-raising circle Blue, in

her 40s, from a South Asian family, had a degree in computer science, a husband and two children.

> [M]y husband and I, we're both programme managers, […] he was getting paid more than I was, right. And I couldn't understand, I had five years more experience than him in the same company and as, I had more skills […]. And yet, he was still getting ahead. He was still able to negotiate a rate, which was better. And the other thing was, when I did even try to negotiate the rate for myself, it was seen as 'How dare you sort of asked for a raise', […] but every year when it came to him agreeing, negotiating his rate, it was kind of almost a given. […] I was not only the lead, I was running three time more projects. I was also a programme manager there, I was doing all of the resourcing, the PMO side of thing activity that needed to be done […]. And […] there's my husband who's just done one role, just doing one role.

Dana's account provides a vivid example of the gender pay gap and illustrates the very tangible consequences gender discrimination can have. It also shows that even if there is evidence for gender discrimination, it does not necessarily make it easier for women to ask for it to be corrected. Adding to this that not every woman has a partner or friend working in the same position with whom they can easily compare their positions and salaries, it becomes apparent how hard it is to challenge and close the pay gap. Dana's quote also demonstrates, that although she followed Sandberg's advice and tried to negotiate her salary, simply leaning in did not achieve the promised outcome. This yet again points to the persistence and robustness of gender biases and discrimination as well as gendered organisational structures and cultures and underlines that they cannot always be overcome through sheer willpower.

I want to finish my exploration of the women's struggles in the workplace with an experience one of the circle members described to me during a circle meeting. As I have explained in my methodology chapter, I will not link this to a specific interviewee as this story was not shared during an interview but during a circle meeting. A topic frequently discussed in the circle this woman was a member of, was that the women were often under the impression that men got away with doing the bare minimum at work or taking much longer time than needed for the projects they were given. This topic came up again when I was talking to this particular woman on her own. She told me that she was in charge of a large project at that time and that her team was making very little progress. She was worried about them not meeting their deadline and was frustrated with her mostly male team taking too long. She told me she felt like she was not getting through to them which left her so frustrated that it led to her injuring herself. Her story combined with the frustrations that other women in this circle had voiced, seemed to suggest that the members noted a clear difference between their work ethic and the work ethic of some of their male co-workers, which often influenced what

the women were able to do or how much extra work they needed to get done. In this particular woman's case, this led to great mental distress and even physical harm.

I have shown that when it came to their struggles at work, the interviewees reported a broad range of gender related issues. While some of the younger women were reluctant to link their negative experiences to 'explicit' gender discrimination, others demonstrated an awareness of the role gendered organisational structures and cultures played in their struggles. They also provided examples of how they actively tried to challenge them even though the rigidity of the structures and cultures in place meant that their attempts were not always successful. Many of the problems the interviewees faced were also connected to the way they were perceived at work, particularly by their male co-workers or superiors. The women reported not being taken seriously, bullied, sexualised or seen as too aggressive for speaking up. Pregnancy, the sheer possibility of pregnancy, and maternity leave provided further 'pitfalls' for them, such as an unwanted reduction in their workload or financial issues.

Critically engaging with *Lean In*

I want to use the following passages to explore how the circle members engaged with the criticism that was directed at *Lean In*, particularly regarding the author's privileged socio-economic position and the book's strong focus on asking women to change and adapt their behaviour rather than demanding change on an organisational or even societal level. I will demonstrate that the interviewees, regardless of the circle type they belonged to, were often aware of the criticism and engaged with it in similar ways. This part of the chapter will highlight how even members of self-focused circles showed an awareness of structural problems and emphasised the need for change on an organisational level.

Most of my interviewees had read or at least heard of the book before joining the circle. The interviewees differed, however, in terms of how they had learned about it. About half of them reported being introduced to it through media exposure – either by having read a review, a related media article or a book that included a reference to *Lean In*. The other half of the interviewees had been recommended the book by a family member, partner, friend or co-worker. One only participant, Irene, reported not having read the book because they never "got round to it".

Some of the women even owned more than one copy and/or had recommended it or lent it to other women they knew as they perceived it as a valuable educational resource on gender discrimination in the workplace and how to counteract it. One of

these interviewees was Mary who was the founder of the self-focused circle Denim, and who I introduced in the previous passage. *Lean In* had been recommended to Mary by a co-worker, and despite Mary's usual aversion towards what she would classify as "motivational self-help stuff", she found the book to be extremely useful.

> I came back from the holiday and I bought like ten copies of the book. I'd just hand them out to friends at work. (I: Really?) Yeah, cause I was, I mean like a lot of, some of the messages, it did feel a bit preachy and maybe a bit too intense, so I can see why people have formed like either a hate or a love relationship with it, but I just got so much out of the book.

This quote demonstrates not only Mary's enthusiasm about the book but also what she assumes to be the reason for its polarised reception. On the one hand, she found it to be "a bit preachy" and "a bit too intense", by which she meant that the book put too much emphasis on women's agency and potential to change things for the better. I will get back to and elaborate upon this interpretation later. On the other hand, she found it to be quite educational as it increased her awareness of gender biases. In the interview she said that she "had never […] read such a thorough collection of research about how much of an issue [gender bias] actually was", which suggests that she had not previously engaged with similar literature or discourses. *Lean In* thus presented a pathway into a discussion of gender issues in the workplace for her and increased her awareness of them. Based on my analysis, I would argue that the book also provided an introduction to feminist perspectives and offered a new lens to the interviewees through which to see themselves and their environment. This new lens helped the women recognise patterns linked to gender inequalities which they had not noticed before or could not quite 'put their finger on'. It did, however, also offer a seductive narrative closely aligned with neoliberal and postfeminist messages that promised agency and choice. *Lean In* seemed to make them believe that they could achieve much greater success in the workplace, now that they could more easily identify gender biases and had been shown techniques to allegedly counteract them. Mary's and other circle members' enthusiasm for strategies and advice on how to handle not only sexism but other difficulties in the workplace demonstrates what Gill and Orgad (2018) identify as a "psychological turn in neoliberalism". The authors point to an abundance of discourses surrounding "resilience […] confidence, creativity, and entrepreneurialism" being promoted as "key qualities and dispositions […] necessary to survive and thrive in neoliberal societies" (ibid: p.478). Gill and Orgad argue and critique that *Lean In* as well as Sandberg's second book *Option B*, which she wrote following the death of her husband, promote the 'power of a positive attitude' and notions of growing stronger through facing adversities. The authors suggest that this type of discourse mutes discussions about structural inequalities as the focus on the

individual increases. They also demonstrate how acts of resilience often require a large amount of labour that is not recognised as such. My findings support the latter argument as the LIC members invested a lot of unpaid time and effort into building up their confidence, entrepreneurialism and resilience *after* having already worked an 8-hour or even longer shift. Thus, participating in the LICs, which was also my experience, involved plenty of emotional labour due to the amount of sharing of personal stories and offering emotional support. I would, however, suggest that Sandberg's book itself did not necessarily lead to the circle members ignoring or downplaying structural inequalities. There needs to be more a nuanced understanding of readers' engagement with the book as women will pick up *Lean In*'s messages differently depending on their circumstances. The LIC members I talked to never attempted to follow the book's advice step by step. They often only remembered one or two passages that they had found helpful. Mary, for example, found the book's key message – to be more pro-active in pursuing one's career goals – highly motivating and useful given the position she had found herself in when she was reading the book.

> I just found [Lean In] like very tailored to me and like so much of it spoke to me about what I want in life. […] [W]hen I read it, I was on a tipping point in my career […].I got a lot of motivation from it and I went to my old manager's new manager on the first day […] and just introduced myself, said 'Can I have fifteen minutes of your time? This is what I'm doing now. This role's about to become available and I think I deserve that job", and I got the job. And that was like formal management, my first experience, and changed my entire career I think'.

For Mary, the advice to lean in gave her a motivational push to ask for a promotion and led to her eventually receiving it. At first glance, her story thus seems to confirm Sandberg's narrative that women have more and better options than they think, they just need to seize them or, if necessary, create them themselves. It also seems to confirm what many scholars (Rottenberg, 2014a; 2014b; McRobbie, 2013; Gill & Orgad, 2018) have argued: that the book leaves change and success in the hands of the individual woman. Mary, however, did not necessarily believe that her own success was an indicator of Sandberg's advice being helpful or applicable to every woman. She noted that Sandberg's approach was in fact "very tailored" to her which she explained was due to the fact that she is "super extroverted", has a "family who work in technology" (which she believes might have helped her access the sector she works in) and because she self-identified as "white, [and] middle-class". Despite her praise for *Lean In*, she was aware of the criticism connected to it and emphasised the role organisations play when it comes to gender (in)equality:

> I'm sure people will say that [Lean In]'s too radical in its assumption in what women can control themselves in a corporate environment […] I'm super extroverted so it was possible to step up or stand up and ask for things, but I can

> definitely see that it could be a whole, another book that I hope she is writing, which is just about how can corporations create a safe, diverse space to actually counteract a lot of the things that you know cause inequalities in the workplace, because, yes, a woman can stand up and fight for herself, but there needs to be, in some cases, more structure around it. So yeah, I think you could easily extend the book and have more focus on radical corporate change, a case study on a successful diversity initiative, like what companies changed to actually have an impact and doesn't force a woman, you know, adopt a (new) personality to actually have change be effected.

Mary's understanding of the question of structural change versus change on an individual level is that both can result in greater equality for women in the workplace, but that it takes a rather extroverted woman to follow Sandberg's advice. The COO's ideas suited Mary but might have its limitations for women with a different kind personality. In other words, women who are better at performing certain displays usually attributed to masculinity, such as being assertive and extroverted, will have it easier to fit into the workplace, i.e. gendered organisations, particularly if they are aiming for a career in a male-dominated sector or a managerial position. In order to combat this bias, Mary would like to see "corporations […] support women who are more introverted and support them to have a seat at the table rather than them having to fight for it". Her use of the word "fight" in this context also indicates, as Gill and Orgad (2018) have demonstrated, how much labour goes into women trying to achieve the careers they are aiming for and the constant need to be resourceful, competitive, creative and resilient – even more so than their male counterparts.

Mary's interview revealed a much deeper understanding of gender inequality in the workplace than the literature on *Lean In*'s would suggest: Mary was aware of the role organisations and their work culture play regarding gender inequality 'despite' her praise for book. Even as a founder of a self-focused circle, i.e. the circle type that focuses on individual change the most, she recognised organisational structures and cultures as a large part of the problem particularly for women who do not perform the necessary displays of masculinity. Displays of femininity and masculinity in the workplace often pose a dilemma for women as they might have to avoid displays of the former (Faulkner, 2009) or overemphasise both kinds (Muhr, 2011). They also run the risk of others interpreting their performances of masculinity differently, i.e. less favourably, than those of men (Wajcman, 1998).

Mary, like all my other interviewees, did not oppose the idea of change on an organisational or even political level and often acknowledged its importance. They saw Sandberg's approach as a stopgap solution that would potentially get them and other women into more powerful positions. Like Sandberg, they believed that both

structural changes and an increase in women in leadership positions would have positive effects for other working women.

> [I]f you want to effect any kind of change you've got to make some immediate changes while you work towards bigger goals. So, I think it's entirely fair to say that there are some bigger changes we should be demanding and we should be asking for everyone to commit to those changes. But those changes will take time, so I don't think it's harmful in the meantime for women to be maximising their opportunities to succeed. […] I don't see that as endorsing the patriarchy, if I can put it that way [laughs]. I see it as just having a bit of a reality check on the situation" (Tina).

> But I still agree that it takes women getting to the top to change things. […] Like I don't see, I don't actually see any other way around it. Other than changing the law, but again that would take someone who cared to like get to the top and change it (Erin).

Tina and Erin were members of two very different types of circles: Erin was part of a self-focused circle while Tina was the founder of an outward-oriented group. They, nevertheless, both agreed on Sandberg's advice being helpful for women in a society that does not have the necessary structures and policies in place to guarantee gender equality in the workplace. Sandberg's book was often criticised for promoting trickle-down feminism (Rottenberg, 2017; Foster, 2016), which overlooks that the COO believes that getting more women into leadership positions would in effect also change the way organisations work. This was picked up by the LIC members hence Erin's quote "I still agree that it takes women getting to the top to change things". Sandberg does not just promote the (neoliberal) idea of successful women functioning as role models at the top for other women to simply follow their lead. She also expects them to become mentors to other women and to point out and change policies and structures that hinder other women from getting into high-ranking positions.

Erin also demonstrated awareness of the privileged angle Sandberg was writing from. I want to use the following passage to demonstrate how she engaged with this frequently brought up criticism problematised by many scholars and journalists. Erin was in her 20s, white, middle-class, worked in marketing and had originally been sceptical of Sandberg's book given the author's privileged position. She told me that the people she had spoken to before reading the book had told her that *Lean In* was "this white woman from America […] telling us all what to do". She had been critical of Sandberg's racial and economic privilege and sceptical how much of her advice would be relevant to her. After reading *Lean In*, however, Erin changed her mind about the book and the importance of Sandberg's privilege:

> [I]t's relatable if you're someone who's like a woman working in like a corporate environment basically. And it, - like I did know some of the criticism before I read it. […] Cause like before I probably would have been like 'Oh no, that's really

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> outrageous', like, you know, it's too biased towards like privileged people, but I actually, when I read it, I was like 'You know what, this is like genuinely useful'.

> You're like 'Well, I'm not as privileged as she is, but I still get'. So, I kind of think it's irrelevant. I think that like it does give her a certain amount of authority in that she's made it. Plus, like what she says is true, I think. So, I, yeah. I think it's a bit harsh to criticise her just on that because like, yeah, cause that's basically saying that because of WHO she is WHAT she's saying is less valid, when it's not.

Erin explained how she eventually perceived Sandberg's privileged position primarily as a positive factor in the sense that it gave "her a certain amount of authority" because her success seemed to prove her right and was seen as an indicator that her advice was valuable and valid. Erin also emphasised that whether the book was relevant to the reader or not could not simply be understood as a question of privilege as she perceived herself as far less privileged than Sandberg despite being well-educated and self-identifying as white and middle-class. From her perspective, Sandberg's advice rang "true", implying that there was something 'factual' about it that applied to a larger group of women, particularly to those who work in a corporate environment. Erin's perception of the book being full of 'true' observations, however, needs to be put in the context of her arguably resembling the book's target audience. Further, as hooks (2013) and Freeman (2015), have pointed out, the seductiveness of the book lies in the fact that it is full of 'truisms' (but lacking the necessary analytical and critical depth). Erin, however, also emphasised that some of the criticism directed at Sandberg and her book was too focused on the author and her economic and social capital rather than the actual content of the book, which is something I also found in my analysis of the book reviews. Overall, Erin was happy to take Sandberg's advice on board and work on herself and her confidence, which was what she reportedly struggled with the most. She was a rather active member in her self-focused circle and very keen on discovering new 'truths' about herself that she could then use to become a better employee at her company. Given Erin's young age and the fact that she was still in the early stages of her career, it would be interesting to see the development of her career trajectory and whether she will find Sandberg's advice to be helpful in the long-run; or if she will encounter structural obstacles that cannot be fought with confidence and strategic entrepreneurial thinking. While critics often regarded the book's focus on women having to build up confidence, resilience and assertiveness as an, at best, imperfect feminist solution to gender inequality in the workplace, it was nevertheless often appreciated by the circle members like Erin:

> [I]t did make me feel more empowered to like go into meetings and speak up etc. You know? Because like, it's nice for someone to give you permission to do that when there are, like the general culture is, doesn't give you permission to do that.

This quote demonstrates how reading the book was "genuinely useful" to Erin because it gave her "permission" to "speak up". Erin was not the only interviewee who brought up the notion of the book giving the reader permission to be more assertive and demanding, i.e. to deviate from more traditional 'feminine' behaviour. Her account demonstrates that the book despite its often questioned 'feminist merit' filled a void expressed by my interviewees regarding women's encouragement to be outspoken and confident. While critics often take issue with this kind of discourse of 'individual empowerment' and point to its omnipresence (Gill & Orgad, 2015), the interviewees did not perceive it as ubiquitous. Instead, they pointed to a lack of 'empowering' or 'feminist' messages in the workplace and daily life that *Lean In* seemingly filled.

Dana, who we have already met, at the time of the interview was a project manager at a large company and, given the technical nature of her career, had mostly been working in male-dominated jobs and offices. She thus often found herself in situations where she was one of the few female employees and would often struggle to get her voice heard or to be taken seriously. When I asked her about *Lean In*, she mostly expressed enthusiasm about the book and stated that "from any background, race, religion that you are, you know, you benefit from it as a woman, you benefit from reading it because there's a great deal of amazing information in there that really helps empower women". Like Mary, Dana thus praised the educational value of the book and like Erin, she did not believe that the book was only relevant to privileged women. She herself was in a rather privileged position at the time of the interview but had not always been.

> I came from a background where I was almost forced into marriage, I was then forced into marriage. I had education. I wasn't allowed to be educated as a woman. I - Bangladeshi society was just so against that, you know, women should be at home, women should get married and be at home and look after their children.

In her interview, Dana described how she, against all odds and the pressure from her family, had managed to get a degree in computer science, leave her abusive husband, have a successful career, remarry and have two children. She had a spiritual outlook on her life and the obstacles she had encountered and successfully overcome. She believed in destiny and that strong intentions would eventually manifest themselves: "You gotta really want it and intend it to happen. Gotta really intend it to happen. It'll work. It's weird, it's magic". Dana's spiritual perspective arguably overlapped with *Lean In*'s neoliberal anything-is-possible message. When I asked her about *Lean In*'s focus on the individual woman to change she seemed to embrace the idea of constant self-development:

> When you wake up, from the start, from the minute you start up in the morning, you gotta think, you know, "How can I be the best person, best example of myself today? And what can I do, if I'm not, if I can't be, what can I do to get to that?". It's a constant, it's a constant - and it's the only way we can move forward. So, is it worth it? Yes. Absolutely worth it. And is it challenging? Yes. Absolutely challenging. But bring it on, because I'm not moving until I have changed, until it's become, I'm, I've become a better person.

While Dana acknowledged how "challenging" it was to continuously 'self-improve', she found the reward of achieving her goals to be ultimately "worth" the sacrifice. She also did not see an alternative to this and saw it as the "only way we can move forward". Interestingly, at another point during the interview, she also expressed the belief that women have been focusing on self-improvement in order to fit into society "for centuries" which implies that, to her, self-governance was not a recent (neoliberal) trend. Dana was grateful that *Lean In* provided her with more ideas for how to become "a better person" which echoed what many other interviewees had said. Many praised the book for offering solutions and tools for working women in their everyday lives. This understanding on the book among the interviewees again underlines Gill and Orgad's (2018) observation that discourses offering psychological tools that promise increased resilience, confidence and an optimistic attitude towards life have become increasingly popular. Similarly, Rottenberg (2014a) sees Sandberg's book as well as Slaughter's article 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' as examples of discourses that focus on women's happiness and balance. While the interviewees appreciated the book's focus on what the individual woman could do to become more successful, confident and, as I will demonstrate in the next paragraph, happier, I suggest that there is an often-overlooked element of active engagement with this focus. LIC members who had read (and liked) the book did not become 'blinded' by its emphasis on self-improvement. They were aware of the need for organisational and social change, perhaps even more so after reading the book given the praise some of the interviewees had for the book's educational value regarding gender inequalities in the workplace. The interviewees also usually acknowledged Sandberg's privilege. While some thought the book was relevant to them despite them feeling less privileged than Sandberg, in some cases overlooking their own privileges in terms of their class or race, many interviewees recognised that it was particularly relevant to them because they were as privileged as Sandberg regarding their level of education, class background and/or race.

Different LIC Approaches

This part of the chapter will examine the different circle approaches I laid out in chapter 1 more closely, by exploring what Dana, Erin, Tina and Mary, as

representatives of the different circle approaches, disclosed about their understanding of the circles and their purposes.

For Dana, who ran the consciousness-raising circle Blue, one of the key benefits of her circle was that it provided her and the other circle members with a sense of contentment because it gave them platform to express their views. Talking about frustrating moments at work reenergised Dana and seemed to increase her overall well-being:

> The way I see it is, the circle meetings, every agenda for me is a life-enhancing experience in my opinion. So, you - and should always go away, even if you feel like you haven't learnt something that day. You should always go away with that feeling that you'd been talking to people, you'd been expressing your views and your values about things, you'd been able to articulate your thoughts. And you've gone away feeling good.

The circle's contribution to Dana's sense of happiness, at first glance, points in a similar direction as Catherine Rottenberg's interpretation of *Lean In* and Anne-Marie Slaughter's article *Why Women Still Can't Have It All*. Rottenberg (2014a: p.147) argues that "[t]here is [...] a reorienting of the liberal feminist discursive field away from notions of freedom, equal rights, and social justice and toward the importance of well-roundedness and well-being". This observation can, to an extent, be applied to Dana's circle approach and what she hoped to gain from the meetings. Dana understood the circle meet-ups not only as a chance to discuss gender related obstacles in the workplace and to share her thoughts with other people but to also "enhance[e]" her life and "feel[] good". Reducing Dana's group to solely being focused on well-being would, however, not reflect its full purpose since Dana's sense of happiness increased *because* she got to express her opinions on gender equality issues. Rottenberg's interpretation of *Lean In* as a text, as a reorientation "away from notions of freedom, equal rights, and social justice" (ibid.), thus cannot be fully applied to Lean In as a phenomenon. This illustrates how the text and its meanings get transformed through the interactions of LIC members with it.

Dana's circle was characterised by its focus on the Lean In website material on the one hand, and members sharing stories about their, albeit not exclusively, workplace experiences, on the other hand. For Dana, the circle constituted a safe environment where members could discuss work-related issues they would not want to raise with their co-workers or even friends or family members.

> It's a really a community [...] It's a circle of women that can come together every month, feel comfortable, that it's safe, it's a safe environment for them to discuss things. And talk, talk openly about, doesn't have to be about the agenda, [...] we tend to go off on a tangent about something, you know, because somebody wants

to talk about something. And this is all brilliant stuff. Because then that way, you know, when they start talking about things, they'll notice that 'Oh, well, yeah that's true. I can relate to that, too', 'And I can relate to that', 'Yeah, did you have the same experience?' 'Yeah, I had that, too', and that's what I want people to feel that 'Look, you're not alone. You're not alone in any of this'. […] It's things like that that come out in these meetings that you wouldn't necessarily discuss with your colleague at work or even your friend or a family friend, because you're just frightened that people will perceive you as weak or, I don't know, a whole raft of reasons why people don't talk about a thing, but hopefully this a place where you're sort of, nobody really knows you, and, but yet you can be comfortable enough to talk about things without necessarily being perceived wrong or right in any case.

Dana perceives the circle as a friendly, yet rather anonymous space where members can be themselves and do not have to worry about judgment from others, particularly people they are close to. She proposes the fear of being seen as "weak" as one of the reasons for why members might prefer talking about certain issues with other circle members rather than colleagues, friends or family. This points towards potential pressure members might feel to be perceived as (neoliberal) self-sufficient subjects who are fully in control of their own life. The circles, however, provide a safe space where this performance of being in completely in control could be put on hold – at least to a certain degree – and for women to openly share their insecurities and negative experiences at work. Dana's quote illustrates the parallels between her circle (Blue) and the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s. What Dana describes as her circle members realising that they are "not alone in this" echoes realisations of the personal being political in the 1960s and 1970s or, as Rowbotham puts it, understanding that "[d]issatisfaction was not a personal inadequacy" (1989: p.5). The circle providing a 'safe space' for Dana highlights how the criticism directed at *Lean In* for being too focused on the individual cannot be held up when taking the circles into account. For Dana, knowing that others encountered similar issues, reduced her worries and insecurities which points to the support as well as the wellbeing aspect of the circle meetings discussed in the previous paragraph. Her statement highlights the importance of expressing and experiencing solidarity with other women who are in similar positions. It demonstrates that some circle members used the circles to move beyond *Lean In*'s individualistic approach by adding an element of mutual support amongst women to it. This support can take various shapes and forms, but in Dana's consciousness-raising circle most commonly comprised of listening to each other's stories and providing each other with advice and potential strategies to combat sexist attitude in the workplace.

In her interview, Dana referred to the circles as a collective where women "can share knowledge" and "inspire" and support each other in reaching their goals. For Dana the circle was both about the collective as well as the individual and "that search for

[one's] own identity". She also placed a lot of emphasis on the circle helping her 'grow' as a person. For Dana, as well as other interviewees, the idea of growth in the sense of self-improvement played a crucial part in what made the members participate in the circles. Dana talked about the self in a way that implied certain inherent, but individual qualities, that needed to be discovered and then nurtured to bring to their full potential. The circle meetings for her thus provided an ideal space to achieve, as Dana put it, a "constant evolution" of the self. This noticeably aligns with neoliberal notions of the self as an entrepreneur and an ongoing project that needs to be constantly improved. Notions of solidarity, sisterhood and working together were thus mixed with neoliberal ideology in what I have called consciousness-raising circles such as Dana's. Her account shows that although her circle followed an approach focused on sisterhood and solidarity, there were still elements of Sandberg's neoliberal, individualised feminism present. This further highlights the complexity of the Lean In phenomenon and that the criticism directed at elements of it often fails to capture its heterogeneity.

Tina's circle experience differed quite prominently from Dana's as she and her circle members concentrated more on addressing issues on an organisational/structural level. Her circle (Coral) was outward-oriented, very tailored to women in her specific profession and only accepted members from said profession. Tina, like Dana, was in a rather senior position in her career, married and a mother. Unlike Dana, however, she portrayed her family as having been very supportive and described herself as the "daughter of two feminists". For Tina, the circle functioned as semi-professional space. Its meetings being somewhere between formal and an informal, where she could discuss work-related issues with professional acquaintances she was friendly with. Much like other interviewees, her use of language to talk about her circle experiences often included business terms: She reported, for example, that most of the circle members in her group "want to look at work-life balance issues and also how to do business development activities or networking". Like Dana she saw the meetings as a chance for development, albeit primarily work-related. When asked about the circle format, she described it as:

> [A] more formalised version of what men have done for a long time which is, we might not always have time to go to the pub for a drink or to catch up on stuff over the golf course or stuff like that, but it's kind of like, it's almost an alternative to that. It's a hybrid between social and formal, if I could put it that way.

In this quote, Tina compares her circle to men's networks and them bonding over their stereotypically 'masculine' hobbies while often excluding women. Her circle thus helped women catch up on this networking gap in creating their own space to interact

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with other women in a semi-professional context. In Tina's circle, this involved exchanging work-related information while also getting to know other women "who [they] might have just seen in the corridor" on a more personal level and thereby creating a stronger network. Tina, who reported that the circle members' workplaces were "very secretive about their policies and what they do", described "the information sharing aspect" of her circle as "brilliant". This exchange of information even led to some actual organisational changes regarding the maternity leave policies in some of the women's workplaces as demonstrated in chapter 4. This was perhaps the most tangible change reported to me in the interviews. It seems to suggest that the LIC format might work particularly well for women from the same professional background or community. Based on what Tina told me in her interview, it seemed that she was less eager to encourage women to 'self-improve' or become more confident, although this still remained part of the agenda, but to look at the bigger picture and change discriminating policies and organisational structures wherever possible. Tina's circle was the most outward-oriented and as the circle organiser, she set the tone and brought in a lot of focus on organisational policies and structures as well as creating a supportive environment and some 'development' opportunities for the other members.

Erin was part of a self-focused circle (Emerald) and argued that its focus on working on the self was necessary because "to be successful at work, you kind of […] have to be a slightly different person". What she meant by this was that employees are required to be polite and in control of their emotions, referring to the emotional labour connected to many jobs. Moreover, they are also meant to display certain character traits, such as self-confidence, enthusiasm and entrepreneurialism. For her, the circles were therefore primarily useful to learn how to embody these characteristics in order to become more successful in her career. When asked what she had learnt and implemented into her own life from the circle sessions, Erin remembered the workshop on emotional intelligence. I have briefly discussed how Erin felt about this particular workshop on the day in chapter 4, but here is how she describes it during the interview:

> My favourite one was the metaprogrammes one. You know we did that thing where it was about like whether you were goal-orientated or not. And I just like had this sort of thing, I was like 'I'm so not goal-orientated'. So, then I could go back to work and say to my manager like this is the goal we need to work on and the like, my objectives, which is really like helpful, like fundamentally really helpful. And also, there was, so we did have a confidence coach. Oh, there's loads of things! So, we did, we had a confidence coach come in and she was really good about breaking things down. So, if you think you've got like this goal and you think you can't achieve it then just like make a really small goal. That sort

of thing. And we did one at New Year which was about goal setting again, where it was you split all your life into like different sections and then rate how good each one's going and then that just helps you like, if you think that everything's going badly for example, you can say like 'Actually, no. It's like this one thing that I need to work on'. So, yeah, they've been, they've all been really helpful. Yeah.

This quote provides a good insight into the workings of Erin's circle and how it assisted the members with 'self-improvement'. Erin reported how this particular session had made her aware of her 'shortcomings' as an employee, i.e. not being goal-oriented enough. She then shared this insight with her manager at work so that they could generate a plan to help Erin overcome this 'shortcoming'. Her account demonstrates how the workshops sessions were built around self-governance and understanding the self as an ongoing project. This is reminiscent of Foucault's (1995) notion of disciplinary power, which, broadly speaking, refers to how social norms are internalised and operate from within the individual: circle members like Erin search for truths about themselves and their environment, they try to make sense of the world by putting themselves and others into normative categories (such as being goal-oriented) and attempt to align themselves with hegemonic norms (regarding what constitutes a good employee) as closely as possible. Erin's account also demonstrated how the workshops were not purely focused on a work context alone as they were asked to examine their lives as a whole and were provided with tools that could be applied to different aspects of them. The focus on work almost seemed secondary, incidental or simply the result of paid employment making up a large percentage of everyday life. This can be inferred from Erin expressing that "for me, the most important thing in life is happiness, right? And […] a big part of that is work, cause you spend so much time there". For Erin, much like Dana, happiness, well-being and constant self-improvement seemed to be key factors regarding their interest in their circles. The underlying assumption seemed to be that self-improvement and development would lead to more success at work and in life more generally and thus increase well-being and happiness.

Overall, the tension between focusing on the self, working together as a collective and channelling the members' energy to bring about organisational/structural change was something each member experienced differently. I want to conclude this part of the chapter by demonstrating how Mary, who ran a self-focused circle, and who we have already heard from, dealt with this tension. Mary was part of and organised two different circles: the one I attended, which was rather large and had external speakers presenting at every workshop, and a private one with just two other women. The latter circle was comparatively intimate and exclusively about its three members and their career and "life development". Mary described this format as the "normal Lean In

Circle stuff" which followed "the original mantra". It seemed that she assumed that the circles, at their core, were about women forming a strong bond and supporting each other to achieve their personal, work-related or non-work-related, objectives. Mary's private circle allowed her to discuss her aspirations and struggles in depth with other women she knew closely while simultaneously offering the same support to them. She had originally hoped to achieve this from what later became her other, bigger circle, but as the latter grew too large, she decided to form a separate circle with two of its original members/founders. Interestingly, she ascribed a sense of selfishness to her founding of the bigger circle. She explained that she often chose the topics covered in the sessions based on her own interests and needs, which she described as a little "self-indulgent". She also explained that "diversity" is "a big selling thing in technology" and implied that organising a circle that tackles diversity or gender related issues gave Mary an advantage in competing with other people in her sector. While Mary addressed her self-interest in the circle openly, she also pointed to the ways in which she tried to help and support other women. She saw organising the bigger circle as a way of "giving back a bit to the community". Running the larger circle thus created an opportunity for Mary to improve her CV and organisation skills while simultaneously supporting other women in the technological industry by providing them with sessions on how to develop the necessary soft skills[8] for their careers.

Conclusion

The interviews with the circle members have demonstrated that many of the women faced similar issues at work ranging from gendered assumptions being made about them and not being taken seriously to wage discrimination, problems with maternity leave policies and sexual harassment. The younger circle members, however, were more reluctant to describe their experiences as rooted in sexism and partly linked them to their young age and lack of confidence. While some circle members, to some extent, normalised gender discrimination, others, usually the slightly older members, directly put it at the root of the problems they faced at work and the effects this had on their mental and sometimes even physical well-being. The circle members' negative experiences in the workplace, whether they saw them primarily as a result of their age, lack confidence or gender discrimination, had led them to read the book and/or join the circles. The circle members were mostly aware of the book's lack of organisational and political critique, its strong focus the individual woman, and the

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[8] With the term soft skills, I am referring to abilities such as being assertive, negotiating one's salary or public speaking.

author's privileged position but saw its advice as a stopgap solution. They believed in Sandberg's suggestion that getting more women into powerful positions will eventually result in greater gender equality. The interviewees were in no way opposed to structural and political, i.e. more radical, changes, but saw Sandberg's ideas as solutions for women to become more successful in the meantime. The author's privilege was understood in two different ways: some believed that even though Sandberg was more privileged than most women, her advice was still applicable to women in general. These interviewees saw themselves as less privileged than Sandberg, which often meant that they overlooked their own class, race or other privileges and how they gave them advantages over other women. Other interviewees, however, acknowledged that Sandberg's advice was relevant to them because, like Sandberg, they came from a middle-class background and were highly educated.

The interviewees' thoughts on *Lean In* (the book) overall indicated that the women had engaged with the criticisms directed at it but ultimately found the book informative and, most importantly, relevant to their lives. They actively engaged with it and picked out the parts that were helpful to them. The participants appreciated the circles for different reasons than the book and, depending on the type of circle they belonged to, they seemed to appreciate different aspects of them. The consciousness-raising circle members reported that the sharing of experiences and the support they received from other members increased their overall well-being as they recognised they were not alone with their problems. Realising the systemic nature of their problems in the workplace and talking about them, however, not only increased their sense of well-being but also helped them find possible to solutions to their problems, even if the best solution meant terminating their current job. Members of self-focused groups were much more eager to concentrate on how they could develop on an individual level to achieve their work and non-work-related goals. They framed (a lack of) success in the workplace not primarily as a question of experienced or potential gender discrimination but as a result of a lack of skills that could, however, be developed with the help of the meetings. The founder of the outward-oriented group described her circle as filling a networking gap for women and having a clear business focus. She did, however, not want to concentrate on changing women's demeanour and instead was proud of the organisational changes her circle members had achieved regarding maternity leave policies in some of the circle members' workplaces. The approaches I identified in chapter 4 were thus also reflected in the interviewees' accounts and showed how some LIC members prioritised self-

improvement over tackling organisational policies and structures and how others favoured the community and support aspect of their circle over self-improvement.

Chapter 8: Final Reflections on the Lean In Phenomenon

With this last chapter I want to summarise the key points and main findings of my research. I will reiterate the debate on neoliberalism's appropriation of feminist language and ideas and show how my findings contribute to it. I will demonstrate what new perspectives they add to the debate and how they constitute an original contribution to knowledge. This research project examined four different aspects of the Lean In phenomenon: the book and the context it developed in, the media reviews it received, as well as the Lean In Circles and their members. Exploring all four aspects and thus moving beyond a purely text-bases analysis and including the voices of women who were part of the Lean In phenomenon, had read the book and/or participated in the circles, is what enabled me to develop new and original insights into the entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism. I will use this chapter to reflect on my analysis and how the different parts of it shed light on each other. This reflection will then conclude in my discussion of the research questions I set out to answer and what this thesis can contribute to knowledge, particularly to the academic debate surrounding *Lean In* and the 'neoliberalisation of feminism'.

Research Design and Theoretical Background

I approached this research project from a post-structural feminist perspective, i.e. from a perspective that acknowledges that the production of knowledge often inevitably reproduces hegemonic discourses and power structures, but also has the potential to challenge them. Post-structural feminists thus try to conduct their research in a way that enables them to question the status quo by, for example, challenging the notion of 'objective' research, focusing on marginalised groups, including different voices and appreciating contradictory findings or the 'messiness' of the data (Pereira, 2012). I followed this epistemological approach by examining the Lean In phenomenon from a range of angles. Firstly, I used thematic analysis and Carol Bacchi's (2009) WPR ("What's the problem represented to be?") approach to understand the things Sandberg problematises, assumes, overlooks, and reproduces in *Lean In*. Secondly, I employed the same combination of thematic analysis and Bacchi's WPR approach to analyse how US-American and British media outlets discussed the book. From a pre-selection of 197 articles that commented on *Lean In*, I selected 27 positive, mixed and negative reviews that seemed to be particularly influential (e.g. referenced by other journalists) or reflected commonly presented arguments in the debate. Thirdly,

I gathered and analysed fieldnotes from a year-long participant observation in five different LICs in England. Lastly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine of their members, which I analysed using thematic analysis. This triangulation of methods helped me study the Lean In phenomenon in a comprehensive way and understand how Sandberg's neoliberal feminist messages and her intervention as a whole were not only presented, but also picked up, engaged with and transformed.

I situated the Lean In phenomenon in the context of what can broadly be summarised as neoliberal feminism as the latter was a label commonly given to Sandberg's approach to tackling gender inequalities in the workplace (see for example Gill & Orgad, 2015; McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014b). Scholars have approached feminism's entanglement with neoliberalism from various angles and using different terminology. I found the literature on postfeminism to often closely resemble the debate about the neoliberalisation of feminism. This is, however, only true for a certain conceptualisation of postfeminism in which it is understood as a type of discourse that interpellates women with promises of freedom, choice, affluence, sexual freedoms, and a perfect work-life balance that allows for both children and a career in return for self-monitoring, self-governance and a constant focus on self-improvement (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2013; Tasker & Negra, 2007; Repo & Yrjölä, 2015; Lewis et al., 2017). This particular understanding of postfeminism mirrored and overlapped with what was written on the neoliberalisation of feminism in general and *Lean In* in particular. The entanglement of neoliberalism and feminism can, according to Elisabeth Prügl (Prügl, 2015), take different forms and describe a) the way feminist language is used to promote neoliberal political aims such as decreasing state regulations in favour of a self-regulating market; b) the presentation of gender equality in the workplace as a way of increasing productivity and economic growth; or c) a depoliticisation of feminism through discourses that encourage self-regulation. The latter understanding was of particular interest to me as it partially reflects Sandberg's approach to gender equality in her book and how her approach is framed by feminist writers, i.e. as part of a wider neoliberal discourse that depoliticises feminism by directing attention away from structural and political inequalities and toward the individual woman. In addition, feminist scholars also criticise Sandberg's book for almost exclusively being relevant to the most privileged, i.e. white, middle-class, and highly-educated, women who might benefit from her advice but at the expense of women with less economic, cultural and social capital (McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2017). Academic and feminist writers are overall doubtful that Sandberg's approach to feminism will have any positive impact on less privileged women in the long-run

(Foster, 2016; hooks, 2013) and argue that Sandberg's appeal to women to pursue "the 'good life'" (McRobbie, 2015: p.7) is potentially doing more harm than good. Most of what was written on the Lean In phenomenon focused exclusively on the book; the media reactions to it (hooks, 2013) and the LICs (McRobbie, 2015) are usually left out or discussed very briefly.

Summary of Key Themes and Findings

In my first analysis chapter, I characterised *Lean In* as part of a wider debate on whether women can 'have it all' – an expression usually used as shorthand for having children and a successful career. Sandberg's contribution to this debate is a cautious 'yes, women can have it all', given the right circumstances and tools, which Sandberg wants to provide with her book. Other contributors to this debate, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, place slightly more emphasis on changing the circumstances, i.e. the organisational and political structures, before spreading the hopeful message that women can 'have it all'. The differences between these two prominent figures of the 'having it all' debate were nevertheless heavily exaggerated by journalists who engaged with it. I argued that critics often sided with Slaughter given her emphasis on structural change. I also demonstrated, however, that Slaughter's cultural capital as a tenured professor at Princeton university ultimately trumped Sandberg's economic capital as a billionaire COO and made Slaughter appear more trustworthy.

While the book is an integral part of this debate, it cannot be examined in isolation and is better understood as an intervention, which developed from Sandberg's TED talk to a book and includes a website/non-profit organisation as well as the LICs. The circles distinguish Sandberg's book from other self-help publications and autobiographies and have contributed to the longevity of the Lean In phenomenon. While the LICs are scattered across the globe, they biggest density of circles can be found in cities within the US. The circles I observed in England followed different approaches but were often united by their interest in preferably 'science-based' tools to boost confidence, and advice for general 'self-improvement' (Amy Cuddy's power-posing being the single most referenced tool here, as shown on page 69). Overall, however, the circles differed in terms of how much they focused on the individual and 'self-improvement'. Based on my findings, I developed a typology that maps out three different types of circle approaches: the self-focused, the consciousness-raising and the outward-oriented approach.

In the circles that I found to be the most self-focused, members seemed to think of themselves as entrepreneurial subjects and projects that needed optimising in order

to achieve greater success in the workplace and to lead happier and more fulfilled lives in general. These circles focused their energy less on criticising the demands and obstacles they encountered in their workplaces and more on how to align themselves with notions of the ideal, "disembodied worker" (Acker, 1990). This type of circle usually followed either a workshop format and/or relied on external speakers to provide the majority of the content. The circles that followed a self-focused approach arguably resembled not only *Lean In*'s key messages most closely but also heavily overlapped with postfeminist discourses or a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007). Gill argues that this sensibility is characterised by "an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; [and] the dominance of a makeover paradigm" (2007: p.147), which quite accurately describes the dominant characteristics of this type of circle. Members of this circle type put themselves under a microscope to study their cognition and behaviours to ultimately adjust them and create a better fit not only with the individual woman's job requirements but also with notions of an aspirational lifestyle. This circle approach in particular seemed to cater to the needs of women who, according to McRobbie, are commonly referred to as "strivers" (2013: p.120) who are self-sufficient, highly organised, often dutiful mothers as well as worker and who do not rely on benefits.

Consciousness-raising circles were also characterised by a focus on 'self-improvement' and its members, like in fact most LIC members, typically resembled 'strivers', too. Members of this type of circle, however, were less strategic about and concerned with 'optimising' the self. They often had less of a workshop character and instead resembled women's consciousness-raising groups from the 1960s and 1970s in the sense that the circles helped these women understand that their negative experiences in the workplace were not isolated incidents. The debates the members had during their circle meetings enabled them to see the systemic nature of their problems and thus that the personal was in fact political (Rowbotham, 1989). The conversations often flowed freely even when the members decided to follow some of the workshop materials from leanin.org. Members were actively listening to and supporting each other and were eager to give advice. These circles enabled their members to address issues they did not always feel comfortable addressing elsewhere. The third, outward-oriented LIC approach, while displaying elements of the other two types of circles, was further characterised by an emphasis on organisational change. Members of this circle type focused on comparing workplace

cultures and policies and actively changing them when they were negatively affecting female employees.

The LICs members as 'strivers' made sense as an audience for Sandberg's ideas, but the different circle approaches also showed varying degrees of closeness to the advice presented in her book. They, depending on the circle type, engaged with it in different ways and often transformed Sandberg's neoliberal feminist approach in their meetings.

In my analysis of *Lean In*, the book, I found the following three themes to be the most prevalent: motherhood/parenthood, gender roles and biases, and mistakes women make. Interestingly, these themes characterised the different circle approaches to an extent: The self-focused circles arguably focused quite closely on what can be described as 'mistakes women make', whereas the other two approaches were leaning closer towards a focus on gender roles and biases. Motherhood, interestingly, did not feature as a particularly prominent theme in any of the circle meetings. In my analysis of the book, I discussed how the three themes are presented, what underlying assumptions they are based on as well as the silences and effects they (re-)produce. I have shown how Sandberg's use of gender-neutral language, although well-intentioned, often draws attention away from how gendered the scenarios are that she describes. Thus, instead of analysing gender inequalities and power imbalances, she partially glosses over them. While Sandberg acknowledges more structural issues in *Lean In* than most critics give her credit for, the author's overall message seems to revolve around the notion that if women do not allow external hurdles to become a problem, they will not be one. The key question she seemingly wants the reader to ask herself is what it is that she can do to counterbalance sexist attitudes and structures. I will summarise *Lean In*'s key messages and underlying assumptions more thoroughly in the next part of this chapter when I discuss my research questions.

My analysis of the book in chapter 6 highlighted what was often missing from *Lean In*'s media reviews: an examination of Sandberg's arguments and ideas. In my discussion of the reviews, I demonstrated how polarised the media reception of *Lean In* was and how journalists often used their reviews to comment on Sandberg as a person. A noticeable amount of the 27 reviews from the US-American and British media outlets I analysed debated whether Sandberg's ideas made her a business-savvy feminist or an avaricious capitalist using feminism as a selling point. The media reception of *Lean In* thus contributed to the debate about what constitutes feminism

and what could be classified as a feminist contribution to gender equality in the workplace. This debate was, however, rarely based on a thorough dissection of Sandberg's publication and her arguments, and more commonly based on the journalists' impression of the COO. Much like Sandberg herself, some journalists also put great emphasis on motherhood and the question of how women can combine having children with having a career. The two most commonly addressed criticisms by the journalists were Sandberg's lack of attention to structural obstacles and her blindness towards her own economic, cultural and social capital when passing on her advice to less privileged women. While the question of privilege featured heavily in many reviews, it was not always spelled out and clear what exactly the journalists were referring to. While most reviewers focused on Sandberg's class related privileges, other indicators of privilege, e.g. her being white and heterosexual, were rarely brought up. The mixed and often harsh reviews of *Lean In* are generally overlooked in the academic debate about neoliberal feminist discourses in general or Sandberg's book in particular. The critical reactions from popular culture challenging *Lean In*'s neoliberal feminism, however, are important as they complicate the picture of *Lean In*'s immense popularity (Kumra, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015) and the seemingly hegemonic – albeit dynamic and changing – status of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses (Gill et al,. 2017).

In my final analysis chapter, I introduced my interview participants and discussed my findings from my conversations with them. Most of the circle members reported issues that have been well documented in the literature on women and work. Their accounts, for example, underline Acker's observation that organisations are still highly gendered and characterised by various inequality regimes (Acker, 2006; 1990). This can be seen in the way my interviewees struggled to receive adequate pay or promotions, particularly in comparison to their male colleagues. They had further encountered situations where they had predominantly been perceived as representatives of their gender which led to them being stereotyped, underestimated, talked over, seen as the 'office admin' as well as sexualised or sexually harassed. The younger interviewees were, however, often reluctant to label their experiences as gender discrimination and instead interpreted it as a consequence of their own lack of confidence and young age. While the slightly older women did not use sexism as an explanation for their negative experiences in the workplace, they did not explicitly reject the idea either like their younger counterparts did. While my interviews have shown that *Lean In* often functioned as an introduction to gender inequality issues in the workplace or even feminism, the reluctance of some interviewee's to classify their

experiences as a result of sexism or gender discrimination underlines the argument made against *Lean In* that it directs all attention to the self and distracts from acknowledging and challenging external and structural issues. My findings, however, also suggest that the interviewees were aware of the criticism directed at *Lean In*. They recognised that it was written from a privileged position and acknowledged the importance of structural and political change but believed that Sandberg's advice was nevertheless useful and insightful to them and provided them with a stopgap measure. *Lean In*'s message was motivating to them because of its promise that there is something women can actively do apart from and even without having to tackle structural problems that seem too far away and out of reach. It did, however, not necessarily prevent the LIC members from taking action and actively challenging the organisational structures and cultures in their workplaces. Through their circle meetings the women explored their own ways and definitions of 'leaning in'. They took Sandberg's initiative as a starting point and created something that was rather independent from the book and often abandoned its neoliberal feminist messages. This can be seen in the way in which the consciousness-raising groups dissected the systemic role gender played in their negative experiences in the workplace or the way in which the outward-oriented circle cooperated with their profession's equivalent of a trade union and actively changed one organisation's maternity leave policy. The focus on the self was therefore often combined with or even replaced by a focus on mutual support and/or external, organisational factors that needed changing.

Answering my Research Questions

Having summarised my thesis, I want to use the following section to illustrate how my findings relate to the research questions. I will go over each question individually in order to answer them.

What are Lean In*'s Key Messages and Underlying Assumptions?*

- How are they linked to neoliberalism and feminism?
- What is problematised about women and leadership and which solutions are presented?

Sandberg unsurprisingly focuses on what the individual woman can do to have a more successful career and potentially get into leadership positions. My analysis, however, also found that this message was usually embedded in a description of structural hurdles and gender biases. Sandberg therefore does not outright ignore external factors hindering women's success in the workplace but chooses to focus on changing

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women's attitudes towards them. The COO wants women to become more aware of the risk of self-fulfilling prophecies and thus wants to challenge women's perception of potential obstacles to their careers. One of the big underlying assumptions in her book is the notion that 'women' equal 'mothers'. Large parts of the book read in a way that suggests that women as a group are synonymous with heterosexual (future) mothers and wives. This seemingly inevitable destiny for women, makes Sandberg point to the many pitfalls connected to it. Women have to make smart *choices* in their private lives in order to provide the basis for their success in the workplace. They need to pick 'sensitive' men, which, for Sandberg, is shorthand for involved fathers, and not shy away from demanding equal division of household chores and childrearing responsibilities. While Sandberg's message is undoubtedly feminist, it is ultimately framed in a neoliberal perspective. Her neoliberal approach to feminism manifests itself in many different ways one of them being her emphasis on *choice*. Highly gendered scenarios, such as whether mothers stay in full-time employment or become stay-at-home mothers, are usually painted as the outcome of individual decisions. While Sandberg shows an awareness that poverty, health problems and other factors influence and limit these 'decisions', the COO always returns to and can never quite let go of the idea of freedom of choice. Her demand for gender equality is further often justified through its positive influence on companies and an increase in productivity. Paired with her advice for women not to see gender discrimination everywhere and not to 'overreact' (e.g. by threatening legal actions), critics of Sandberg's book will thus have no problem finding evidence for *Lean In* being too corporation-friendly and catering to capitalism (Foster, 2016; hooks, 2013; McRobbie, 2013).

The literature on women and work demonstrates that long hours and presenteeism have a negative effect on women with children as they often take the role of and are expected to be the primary caregiver (Legault & Chasserio, 2003). Sandberg's accounts of her own work experience seem to confirm this, yet the COO argues that it was not the work culture which was to blame for her own struggles but her perception of it. Sandberg thus even applies her key message that obstacles for women in the workplace are, to some extent, in women's heads, to herself. Unsurprisingly, one of the most salient themes I encountered was to do with and what I coded as 'mistakes women make'. Sandberg's book is in a way strangely reminiscent of women's magazine as it is filled with statements about women being or doing *too* much or *too* little of something. These kinds of statements, which are scattered throughout the book, encourage women to critically self-examine and compare

themselves to the 'ideal' empowered, feminist (?) worker, and more often than not, the 'ideal' working mother. The normalising power Foucault ascribed to discourses arguably becomes particularly apparent in these parts of *Lean In* as the text suggests that women are not getting into the leadership positions they aspire to because they have not yet perfectly aligned themselves with the ideal disembodied worker (Acker, 1990). Sandberg's advice can be linked even further to Foucault's theory on discourse and normative power as she encourages women to examine, measure and quantify their lives in order to gather 'objective' data that will help them to successfully manage their lives and careers. Knowledge thus, in every sense of the word, is power. From Sandberg's perspective gathering this knowledge will help women compete against others as well as themselves (Scharff, 2016b) and overcome external hurdles. From Foucault's perspective the power of this knowledge lies in the way it interpellates the individual and moulds the mind and body into what is considered the norm. While Sandberg interpellates the reader as an autonomous individual with more control over their lives than they are aware of, she still stresses the importance of change on a macro level, and most importantly, balances, to some extent, her individualised approach with the addition of the LICs to her intervention.

Sandberg's key messages to the reader revolve around building confidence; risk-taking; continuous hard work and self-improvement; demanding equality in romantic relationships and parenthood; as well as establishing a good work-life balance. Her messages are embedded in an optimistic 'American dream' attitude that assumes most things can be achieved through effort and determination. The link between feminism and neoliberalism is thus based on her pairing of feminist goals, such as gender equality in the workplace and in the home, with a neoliberal appeal to self-regulation. Organisational structures and cultures might not make it easy for women to achieve their career goals, but, according to Sandberg, the individual is still left with the power to adjust their mindset accordingly and make the right 'choices'. In her "sort of […] feminist manifesto" (2013, p.10), Sandberg never clarifies what kind of feminism she is advocating, except for when she highlights she wants her approach to be palatable to both women and men, and, it appears, corporations. Sandberg delivers her key messages most of the time in a seemingly 'neutral' and 'inoffensive' way. She does so by refraining from taking a side when it comes the question of whether gender differences are a result of either nurture or nature, and by using gender-neutral or broad terms such as parents, partners or gender when, in fact, a particular group of people is meant. This style of writing not only hides the gender inequalities she wants to address but also masks that most of her advice is tailored to

women who, like her, are affluent, heterosexual, often married women with children or who plan to have children at some point. While Sandberg never claims to have written a book that is relevant to all women, she nevertheless reproduces a very homogenous and thus one-sided image of a working woman in the US. The problems she thus presents as keeping women from reaching their career goals in general and leadership positions in particular are problems even the most privileged women face. She leaves silences when it comes solutions for women who are confronted with further obstacles stemming from racism, ableism, classism or ageism. While it would be unreasonable to expect Sandberg to provide the answer to all these problems, it is not unreasonable to question her solution on these grounds as her neoliberal answer to gender inequality in the workplace leaves the black box of potential problems resting on the shoulders of the individual woman.

To sum up, even though Sandberg addresses a range of problems related to work cultures and structures, such as long working hours, presenteeism, gender biases or women's lack of mentors and support, she reverts to ultimately framing them as a perception problem, as something that the enlightened and rational neoliberal individual can solve by coming up with a strategy and putting in the necessary work. Her goals are of feminist nature but the means she suggests for reaching them are based on neoliberal values and ideas such freedom of choice and self-regulation. Her feminism is aimed at seemingly everyone: women, men and corporations, but at the same time, does not fully take the heterogeneity of her main target audience, women, into account.

How do Lean In Circle Members Engage with the Lean In Phenomenon?

How do they engage with the book and the criticisms directed at it?
What purposes do they use LIC spaces for and how do they structure their meetings?

The results of my participant observation and interviews revealed that LIC members varied in terms of how deeply they engaged with Sandberg's book. While one interviewee had never read the book, another had bought several copies of it to give out to family and friends. For many of my interviewees, however, the book provided a meaningful introduction to gender inequalities in the workplace. It is important to understand that the circle members actively engaged with the book by picking out the most relevant messages to them without following its advice too closely. The book further fulfilled a need to make sense of the struggles the circle members encountered

in the workplace, which they mostly attributed to their gender. Most of my interviewees were quite aware of the criticisms *Lean In* had received and often referred to either its lack of tackling structural issues or to Sandberg writing from a highly privileged position, or both. This further demonstrates that in order to have a meaningful debate about neoliberal (feminist) discourses and their social effects, it is important to take into account how their messages are decoded and engaged with. The circle members' engagement with the book did not exist in a cultural vacuum as they had informed themselves about the book's reception in the media and had discussed it with other people. Despite the circle members' awareness of the criticisms the book had received, they nevertheless perceived *Lean In* as useful and relevant to them. The book's relevance to the circle members can perhaps partly be explained by the women's homogeneity in terms of class, as they were all university-educated women who identified as middle-class. This homogeneity in terms of cultural and economic capital mirrors the critical argument frequently brought up against Lean In, that it only caters to privileged women. The circle members' diversity in terms of race and, in part, age, however, also complicates the picture of Lean In only addressing a homogenous, already privileged group as the book's and circles' appeal did not seem to be limited to (young) white women. The circle members' exclusive focus on gender, however, suggests that the circles, much like the book, often turned a blind eye towards other factors potentially negatively impacting women's careers. At the very least, the circles did not seem to provide a safe or the right space to discuss experiences of racial or other types of discrimination.

Critics, particularly feminist academics, also called Sandberg's neoliberal rhetoric into question, but the circle members' active engagement with *Lean In* suggests a limited impact of the book's neoliberal messages. The circle members engaged with the book by picking out the parts that resonated with them the most and seemed helpful at that point in time in their lives. This indicates that *Lean In*'s messages can be picked up selectively, which can lead to a range of different outcomes that cannot be determined through sheer text analysis. Interestingly, the interviewees differed in terms of whether they thought the book was useful to them *despite* Sandberg's privileged viewpoint or *because of* it. Some interviewees thus saw similarities between themselves and Sandberg as a highly-educated, (white), heterosexual woman from a middle-class background. Others perceived her as different primarily because of her extreme wealth and success. Unlike many negative reviewers, the circle members I interviewed rarely saw Sandberg's enormous economic capital as problematic but

acknowledged that it might limit the book's reach and relevance to women in less privileged positions.

The importance of structural changes within organisations or political change for gender equality was often recognised, but Sandberg's focus on the individual made sense to most of my interviewees as it provided them with tools and ideas they could apply 'here and now'. Sandberg's approach was thus often perceived as practical and as something the circle members could follow without having to wait or campaign for bigger structural or political changes. This perception was upheld even by interviewees who had tried following some of Sandberg's advice and had not achieved the 'promised' outcome. The criticism directed at *Lean In* and other neoliberal or postfeminist discourses that a strong focus on the self depoliticises feminism (McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2017; Foster, 2016) therefore partially reflects and characterises the Lean In phenomenon. It does, however, paint a one-sided picture as some of the women I interviewed, while appreciating Sandberg's book and intervention as a whole, moved beyond an individualistic approach towards tackling gender inequality. The collective experience of talking to other women about gender issues in the workplace in the circles and the increased awareness towards gender inequality fostered both by the circles and Sandberg's book, led to some of the circle members taking steps towards changing organisational cultures. These changes were not only effected by outward-oriented circle members, but also by members of consciousness-raising groups such as Mary, who set rules for how her meetings were run in order to minimise the possibility of women being talked over or not heard. The outward-oriented circle diverged from Sandberg's corporation-friendly, neoliberal approach by shifting the focus from what the individual woman can do to what the organisations can do for women. They cooperated with various regulatory bodies linked to their profession and challenged discriminatory organisational policies.

The findings based on my participant observation further suggest that the women's engagement with the neoliberal messages in Sandberg's intervention is more complex than a depoliticised focus on the self. The circles differed in terms of how closely they followed Sandberg's neoliberal feminist focus on the self, which can be seen in the three different types of circles I encountered, namely, the self-focused, consciousness-raising and outward-oriented type. While the consciousness-raising circles often used the LIC material from leanin.org as the basis for their meetings and discussions, the other circle types relied mostly on their own ideas for their workshops or get-togethers. As I have demonstrated in my analysis of the different circle approaches, LICs are highly flexible group formations. They provide women from the

same geographical regions, ages, industries and/or professions with a platform that helps them organise themselves and get together, but it ultimately depends on the circle members, particularly the founders, to define the aims, values and purposes of their groups. They can thus become 'neoliberal workshops' on how to more closely resemble the ideal worker; 'support groups' for women, similar to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, where women can reflect collectively on their negative work experiences, realise their systemic nature and discuss potential solutions; or they can become groups focused on how to strategically challenge and change work place policies and cultures that negatively affect women. Since it is highly likely that many more circle approaches exist, it would be inaccurate to describe the Lean In phenomenon and Sandberg's intervention as a merely accommodating and de-politicised version of feminism. This description does not reflect the phenomenon's full implications and potential as the book and particularly the circles, can be interpreted and used in a myriad of ways as demonstrated in this thesis.

In conclusion, the LIC members saw Sandberg's book as a useful introduction to gender equality issues in the workplace. The women actively engaged with *Lean In* not only by reading up on its reception and the criticisms it had received but also by selecting the pieces of advice from book that were particularly relevant to them. They themselves shaped and contributed to the Lean In phenomenon by participating in the circles and thereby creating something entirely different from the book, and, in some cases, its messages. While some women opted for a more cooperation-friendly and less critical 'self-focused' circle approach, others used the circles as safes spaces where they could share their negative experiences in the workplace and offer and receive support ('consciousness-raising' approach), whereas a third type of circle ('outward-oriented' approach) saw them as opportunities to not only network but to also strategically plan fighting gender discrimination on an organisational level.

What Were the Media Reactions to the Publication of the Book?

> Which aspects were highlighted or criticised and why?
> What were the underlying assumptions and implications that structured the reviews?

The US and UK media's reaction to the book was overall quite polarised and heavily focused on Sandberg as a person, motherhood and feminism. Few journalists actually engaged with Sandberg's arguments, some had not even read the book in the first place. The reviews were often based on the journalists' implicit understanding of what

constitutes feminism. Often times, and particularly for negative reviewers, Sandberg's economic capital seemed to disqualify her from a feminist status. This perspective seemed to be based on the assumption that money and power were irreconcilable with feminism. Positive reviewers, on the other hand, argued that Sandberg's success and wealth made her an important feminist ally and applauded her for focusing on the seemingly overlooked gender inequalities in the upper echelons in Western corporations and organisations. Positive reviewers were usually writing in Sandberg's 'defence' and tried to increase her perceived lack of cultural capital and status as a feminist by comparing her to Gloria Steinem or Betty Friedan. Mixed reviewers seldomly questioned Sandberg's status as a feminist but often highlighted or questioned her corporation-friendly approach. The debate about *Lean In* was thus quite often focused on whether or not Sandberg could be classified as a feminist and often seemed like a negotiation over feminism and feminist values: Can feminists/Sandberg speak for all women? Should they be expected to? Can someone who is part of the 'elite' and benefitting from wealth and power imbalances truly be interested in and contribute to greater (gender) equality? Is there space for corporate feminism? How does Sandberg's approach compare to second-wave feminism? Is her approach too radical or not radical enough? Can the COO be likened to Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan or Simone de Beauvoir or is she lacking in 'authentic' cultural capital for this comparison?

Sandberg's authenticity, however, was not only debated in terms of her feminist credentials but also regarding her role as a mother. Some journalists saw Sandberg being a working mother as a marker of authenticity since she has experienced and understands the guilt of occasionally having to prioritise her job over her children. Others were doubtful about her involvement in her children's lives compared to most women who cannot afford professional help or, while not doubting her involvement, concluded that Sandberg must be superhuman to be able to have two children and the kind of career that she has. While the points raised by journalists regarding Sandberg's privilege, personal life and personality can be useful to their readers and help them get a better impression of *Lean In*'s author and the context the book was written in, they are ultimately based on the journalists' impressions of Sandberg. More often than not, they were based on speculation rather than 'facts' and most importantly only loosely related to the arguments in *Lean In* itself. Many reviewers were eager to prove other journalists and their impressions of Sandberg wrong and thus used their articles to point out how likeable or unlikeable Sandberg and her agenda truly was. Likeability and sympathy were thus deeply connected to whether Sandberg's book

was endorsed by the journalists or not. The reviews and commentaries thereby often proved Sandberg's point that successful women are seen as less likeable than successful men. Negative reviewers tried to discourage their audience from reading Sandberg's book, by, amongst other strategies, using her success, and economic, social and cultural capital to paint her in a negative light. Depending on the media outlet, they did so by comparing her to other famous women who, because of their celebrity status, were portrayed as out of touch with the struggles the 'average' woman faces. Although it was never quite clear what the journalists defined as the 'average' woman, Sandberg was most commonly painted as deviating from the average in terms of her success and wealth. Few journalists spelled Sandberg's privilege out or pointed to her tendency to paint women as a homogenous group, i.e. heterosexual, middle-class mothers, and to thus ignore the importance of intersectionalities. The dismissive tone of many of the reviews and the lack of actual engagement with the book, combined with the focus on Sandberg's perceived flaws, seem to suggest that not much has changed since the Victorian period. It is reminiscent of Dale Spender's (1985) findings regarding the reception of women writers in this era, which demonstrated that they were criticised more harshly and perceived as shallow in comparison to male authors and their writing.

Overall the media reactions to *Lean In* suggest that Sandberg struck a nerve with her publication. On the one hand, it was received with open arms by journalists who were thankful for such a prominent figure of the business world to emphasise the importance of feminism and gender equality in the workplace. They were hopeful that Sandberg's approach to feminism could potentially make a difference. This type of review portrayed *Lean In* as filled with good intentions and as a feminist contribution even if it did not offer the perfect solution to gender inequality. On the other hand, the book was rejected for being too demanding of women. Reviews in politically conservative media outlets would sometimes frame Sandberg as harassing the 'average' woman with her feminist, 'preachy' and, most importantly, privileged agenda. These negative and often conservative reviews were often based on a rather strict gender dichotomy that implied that men and women had different priorities and preferences in terms of their career goals. The 'average' woman was portrayed as not being interested in Sandberg's message as she prioritised childrearing over money and 'power'. These reviewers also arguably framed workplace-related obstacles more as a question of class rather than gender, and thus, like Sandberg, overlooked the importance of intersectionalities. While conservative media outlets therefore framed *Lean In* as too focused on gender, or, arguably, as too feminist, more liberal

journalists, on the other hand, detected very little feminism and mostly conservative and corporation-friendly advice in Sandberg's book.

In summary, the *Lean In* reviews were often characterised by a strong focus on the author herself and very little debate about the arguments found in the text. Journalists painted different pictures of Sandberg depending on whether they were endorsing her book or criticising it. As a result, the COO was either a new feminist role model and a woman who can deeply relate to the struggles of working mothers or a capitalist exploiting feminism who, because of her economic capital, could never understand the lives of 'average' working mothers. Feminism and motherhood were thus the most prominently covered topics in the reviews. I have shown that, overall, Sandberg's book and her neoliberal feminist approach spawned a lively discussion that tried to map out the borders of feminism. Within this discussion, the COO's privileged position and her focus on the individual woman as opposed to structural issues featured as the most contentious aspects of her brand of feminism.

Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis's contribution to knowledge stems from its triangulation of methods which explore the different aspects of the Lean In phenomenon. The latter has previously been studied as a mere text and academics have primarily focused on the book itself (Kapasi et al., 2016), its incompatibility with women's negative experiences in the workplace (Shevinsky, 2015; Foster, 2016) and its place in neoliberal feminist discourses (Rottenberg, 2014b; Gill & Orgad, 2015; 2018; McRobbie, 2013; 2015). This thesis goes beyond a textual analysis and examines how Sandberg's book and intervention were debated and challenged in the British US-American mainstream media, and how Sandberg's ideas were implemented and transformed by women who participate in LICs. My analysis of the media reviews demonstrated that Sandberg's book needs to be placed in the context of competing discourses which seek to define the 'best' ways to achieve gender equality in the workplace and which attempt to set boundaries for what constitutes feminism. *Lean In*'s critical reception highlighted the limitations of Sandberg's approach and challenged her neoliberal focus on the self and white, middle-class women. Given these critical reactions and the LIC members' awareness of them and the book's limitations, it seems that neoliberal feminist discourses are not hegemonic as they remain, at least to some extent, contested. Even *Lean In* itself, while certainly being heavily influenced and reliant on neoliberal discourses, values, and ideas, is not entirely built on or defined by them. As pointed out by many academic writers, Sandberg does frame her feminist solution to gender

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discrimination at work from a neoliberal angle by focusing on choice, 'rational' decision making and self-regulation. She does, however, at the same time, also pay attention to structural obstacles and demonstrates an awareness that not every woman will be in a position to make the choices she suggests. This awareness is, nevertheless, very subdued and the structural obstacles she mentions are often framed as surmountable with the 'right' mindset.

Feminist academics often describe Sandberg's book as being popular which overlooks the very mixed and often outright hostile media reactions *Lean In* received. Sandberg as a successful and powerful woman in a leadership position was often demonised by the media for her publication, particularly by feminist writers. Journalists attacked (but also praised) her based on what they assumed to be her character and tried to convince the readers of their own image of Sandberg. In comparison to writers with more cultural capital, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, journalists did not accredit the Facebook COO with enough authenticity to write about gender equality issues, and her abundance of economic capital only seemed to further prove this point. My thesis, however, illustrates that this portrayal of Sandberg ignores that her overall contribution, including the LICs, was meaningful and useful to many, albeit primarily middle-class and highly-educated, women. The women I talked to all felt like they had benefitted from reading her book and joining the circles. *Lean In* was seen as a useful introduction to gender equality issues in the workplace and while the LIC members were selective regarding what advice they deemed helpful, they often remembered certain parts of the book that particularly resonated with them. This demonstrates their active engagement with the book and its wider reception in the media which further illustrates that the Lean In phenomenon and its implications cannot simply be understood through text analysis alone. The women actively contributed to the Lean In phenomenon by bringing the circles to life and shaping them into something that was new and different from the book and suited their own needs and perspectives.

Most of the literature on *Lean In* overlooks the LICs entirely and is thus limited in studying the social effects of Sandberg's intervention. In this thesis, I studied the book in a different way by putting it into a wider pop-cultural context and demonstrating the purposes and different structures of the LICs I observed, and how the members negotiated their meaning. In this thesis, I presented three different types of circle approaches: the self-focused, the consciousness-raising and the outward-oriented approach. My findings demonstrate that the perception of *Lean In* promoting "a radically de-politicised and accommodating feminism" (McRobbie, 2013: p. 135) does

not reflect the phenomenon in its entirety. The LICs in particular, as I hope my analysis has shown, need to be seen as different from Sandberg's book and cannot simply be characterised as "a ghostly version of its more overtly feminist predecessor the consciousness-raising group of the 1970s" (McRobbie, 2013: p. 133). While the self-focused circles can be seen as an empirical example of postfeminist discourses producing neoliberal subjects who are being interpellated to constantly self-monitor and self-regulate to embody 'perfection' or "some idea of the 'good life'" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 9), the other two circle approaches complicate this picture. Although the latter still contain elements of self-monitoring, their members move beyond a focus on the self and the 'ideal' worker or work-life balance. Consciousness-raising circles enable their members to see that their experiences in the workplace are not isolated incidents. They help them understand the influence their gender has on their daily work lives more clearly and function as a safe space to discuss issues they would not normally address amongst co-worker or even friends and family. The outward-oriented circle I observed framed their goals along what structural changes they would have to achieve in order to level the playing field at work and managed to bring about policy changes in their organisations.

This thesis thus provides empirical evidence for the complexity of the Lean In phenomenon. I have shown that its effects depend hugely on the way it is engaged with by both a journalistic audience and by women in LICs. *Lean In*'s messages can primarily, but not entirely, be characterised as neoliberal feminist since Sandberg despite her relentless emphasis on 'freedom of choice', at least partially, acknowledges the importance of structural issues concerning gender equality in the workplace. With the launch of her LIC website, Sandberg also staged an intervention that allowed for a very dynamic engagement with *Lean In*'s ideas. Circle members reproduced but also, and more commonly, transformed Sandberg's ideas through their ways of running and organising their meetings. I have shown that these transformations alongside the rather critical engagement in British and US media outlets all challenged the neoliberal feminist discourse presented in Sandberg's book.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Research Participants Information Sheet

Research Project Title

The Figured Worlds of Women in Power. A Case Study of Lean In, its Messages, Reception and Practices

Introduction

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project, which is concerned with Sheryl Sandberg's book 'Lean In' and the Lean In Circles it generated. The project is part of my PhD research at the University of Warwick and aims to examine what the 'Lean In' phenomenon reveals about the various expectations and obstacles women in the business world are confronted with.

What does participating in this project involve?

You will be invited to an interview, in a public place of your convenience, and asked open questions regarding your experiences with and opinions on 'Lean In' and Lean In Circles. The interview will be recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The transcript will be used for the purpose of this research project only.

Will your participation in the project remain confidential?

If you agree to take part your name, the name of your circle or any information which could potentially reveal your identity or the identity of your circle, will not be disclosed to other parties and will not be mentioned in the dissertation or any potential publications. You can be assured that if you take part in the project you will remain anonymous, unless you prefer your name to be stated.

What are the advantages of taking part?

You may find the project interesting and may benefit from airing your views and submitting them to a study dedicated to bringing attention to issues women in the business world face. You may also wish to receive a summary of the findings, which I will be more than happy to send you.

Do you have to take part in the study?

No, your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. And if you agree to participate you are free to withdraw at any time during the project if you change your mind without giving a reason.

Researcher:	Supervisor:
Kristin Hübner	*Professor Nickie Charles*: Nickie.Charles@warwick.ac.uk

Email: K.Hubner@warwick.ac.uk

Mobile phone number: 07759176282

CONSENT FORM

-

Copy I (Participant)

PROJECT: The Figured Worlds of Women in Power. A Case Study of Lean In, its Messages, Reception and Practices

RESEARCHER: Kristin Hübner – PhD candidate at the University of Warwick, K.Hubner@warwick.ac.uk

	Yes	**No**

I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated confidentially.

I agree to take part in the research project.

NAME _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

CONSENT FORM

-

Copy II (Researcher)

PROJECT: The Figured Worlds of Women in Power. A Case Study of Lean In, its Messages, Reception and Practices

RESEARCHER: Kristin Hübner – PhD candidate at The University of Warwick (K.Hubner@warwick.ac.uk)

                                                        Yes   **No**

I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated confidentially.

I agree to take part in the research project.

NAME _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Circle motivation

Can you tell me a little bit about you and how you came to join this circle?

What would you say is the purpose of this Lean In Circle?/The purpose of Lean In Circles in general?

What do you hope to get out of these meetings?

What did you expect from the circle meetings before you joined?

What kind of people did you expect to meet?

How long do you think you're going to be part of this circle?

Have you tried other circles before or are you part of any other circle? What were your impressions?

Are you part of any other 'support groups' such as this?

Have you recommended or would you recommend the circle to other women/friends? Why/why not?

Do you meet outside of these meetings/have you made friends?

Do you know why some people have left the circle or don't come to the meetings anymore?

Careers

Can you tell me a little bit about your job and the work you do?

Where are you hoping to go in your career?

Have you experienced any obstacles and if so what did they look like?

→ Do you think any of the obstacles you experienced were related to your gender?

Has this circle made a difference regarding how you approach your career? In what way?

→ (Colleagues/bosses/work-life balance?)

Where would you like to be in 5 years time?

What does a good work-life balance look like for you? Is this important to you? Why/why not?

What characterises a successful professional woman for you?

Book

Have you read the book and what did you think of it?

How did you find out about the book?

What do you think of Sheryl Sandberg?

What parts of the book do you agree with/disagree with?

How do you think it was perceived by the press and the general public?

There are two arguments often brought up by critics:

1) The book does not focus enough on women who are not white, middle-class, and heterosexual.

2) It isn't critical enough of organisational structures that discriminate women and is instead simply asking women to adapt to them.

What do you think of this criticism?

Women in leadership positions

What type of person do you think of when you think of a leader?

What do you associate with women in leadership positions?

Do you think there are certain issues women aiming for leadership positions face that their male counterparts don't and if so, what do they look like?

How do you think the media represent powerful female CEOs and business women?

One of the questions that often gets asked by the media is 'Can women have it all?'. What do you think of this?

Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked you about?

Appendix D: *Lean In* – Chapter Summaries

The book opens with an introduction titled 'Internalising the Revolution' in which Sandberg tells the reader an anecdote about her first pregnancy and how it made her realise that there was a complete lack of pregnancy parking spaces at her Google office. "To this day", she writes, "I'm embarrassed that I didn't realize that pregnant women needed reserved parking until I experienced my own aching feet. As one of Google's most senior women, didn't I have a special responsibility to think of this" (Sandberg, 2013: p.4). She concludes that having women in senior roles can make a positive difference for all women in their respective companies as they are not only aware of 'women's needs', but also powerful enough to ask for and implement the necessary changes. Sandberg moves on to point out various ways in which "men still run the world" (2013: p.5) and how women, particularly in the global south, are still denied "basic civil rights" (ibid.). Sandberg sees the addition of more women in positions of power as part of the solution to gender inequalities and wants to use this book to focus on what women themselves can do to bring about this change. She anticipates what critics might have to say to her approach – that she is too privileged to give useful advice and that she is putting the onus solely on women – and clarifies that she wants other women to benefit from what she has learned throughout the years and would have preferred to know when she was just starting her career.

> This book is not a memoir, although I have included stories about my life. It is not a self-help book, although I truly hope it helps. It is not a book on career management, although I offer advice in that area. It is not a feminist manifesto— okay, it is sort of a feminist manifesto, but one that I hope inspires men as much as it inspires women. Whatever this book is, I am writing it for any woman who wants to increase her chances of making it to the top of her field or pursue any goal vigorously (Sandberg, 2013: pp.9-10).

This paragraph perhaps best sums up *Lean In* and its message: It offers a little bit of everything to the reader as it includes anecdotes from Sandberg's life as well as advice on how to best navigate one's career, particularly as a woman – making it "sort of a feminist manifesto". The key message to women is to pro-actively pursue their career aspirations and to not hold back.

Lean In's first chapter 'The Leadership Ambition Gap: What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?' takes the reader on a journey from a time when Sandberg's business-savvy grandmother was still discouraged from entering Higher Education or pursuing a career to a time when the author's mother had more but still rather limited access to education and paid employment and finally Sandberg herself growing up in a time where she and her peers thought that true gender equality was within reach. Looking back, the COO believes that women nowadays, while having plenty of options

regarding their education and careers, are disheartened by their realism, as opposed to Sandberg's generation's optimism, regarding gender equality in the workplace. She believes that women are thus, to an extent, holding themselves back and have lower aspirations than their male counterparts who are still more likely to aim for leadership positions. These lowered expectations combined with women's fear of failure, for Sandberg, translate to a leadership ambition gap. Sandberg, nevertheless, points to both the self-fulfilling stories that women tell themselves and their cultural and social origins as culprits for the alleged ambition gap.

Sandberg's second chapter, 'Sit at the Table', mostly focuses on women feeling like imposters and as though they are not worthy of their success or more success. She urges women to recognise this kind of self-sabotaging thinking and behaviour and to be critical of inner voices telling them that their successes have mainly been a result of luck. This chapter opens with an anecdote from Sandberg's TED talk about two women who, even after they had been encouraged to join others at a meeting table, did not feel comfortable enough to do so and thus remained in the background. According to Sandberg, men tend to be more successful at work because they believe, more so than women, that they rightfully belong where they are or where they would like to be because they attribute their success to their skills and shrug off negative feedback more easily. The COO therefore encourages women to emulate this behaviour, to take pride in their achievements and to more boldly reach for opportunities in order to get ahead in their careers.

In 'Success and Likeability', Sandberg's third chapter, the author acknowledges that simply being more ambitious and willing to sit at the table will not automatically make a woman become more successful as she is likely to be perceived as less likeable. Women, according to Sandberg, have to choose between being seen as competent but unlikeable or likeable but less competent. Perceptions of competence and likeability, however, both heavily influence the hiring process and can determine who will get the job. For Sandberg, the fact that women have to choose between one or the other constitutes the main reason for "why women are held back" and for "why women hold themselves back" (2013: p.40). The COO's advice for women is thus to keep promoting themselves but in a 'likeable' way, which means to present their achievements and goals as beneficial to others, to present themselves as team players. The chapter, however, ends on a slightly different note with Sandberg endorsing Mark Zuckerberg's advice to her, which was to care less about her likeability as it was hindering her progression at Facebook.

In her succeeding chapter, 'It's a Jungle Gym, Not a Ladder', Sandberg gives the reader an overview of her career trajectory. The message accompanying this rather autobiographical chapter is that women need to change the way they think about career progression. Sandberg assumes that most people envision progress to be steady and linear, only ever going in one direction and that is up. According to the author this understanding, however, is rather outdated and does not align with modern career paths anymore. She therefore wants women to not be afraid of taking risks that involve changing industries and/or losing levels of seniority if it means that they might obtain a more fulfilling career in the long run: "[t]here's only one way to get to the top of a ladder, but there are many ways to get to the top of a jungle gym" (Sandberg, 2013: p.53).

Lean In's fifth chapter 'Are You My Mentor?' is filled with advice to women on what to avoid when trying to get a mentor. With its rather critical tone, this chapter points out the various ways in which women approach getting a mentor in the 'wrong' way: asking strangers for mentorship, wasting a (potential) mentor's time, expecting too much of them, not putting in the necessary work or not demonstrating one's talent to a (potential) mentor. Sandberg, however, also points to the fact that men have it easier finding a mentor because of the high number of men in top-level positions who are, like most people, prone to support others who are similar to them. She also highlights that people tend to distrust the professionalism in a male mentor/female mentee relationship and are more likely to assume a romantic and or sexual connection.

Chapter six, 'Seek and Speak Your Truth', focuses on honest communication in the workplace and why it is important. Sandberg argues that it is essential to create a work culture in which people feel free to give and receive honest feedback. She advocates the use of humour to communicate negative feedback and not hiding one's personality, weaknesses or emotions, such as sadness, from other people at work.

'Don't Leave Before You Leave', chapter seven, starts with the same anecdote that was presented by Sandberg in her TED talk and mostly focuses on how women make several decisions, often starting in the early stages of their careers, that will eventually hold them back. The main reason for this, according to Sandberg, is that in the back of their minds they are planning to, one day, have a family. This, however, will only increase the likelihood of a woman leaving her full-time job or feeling dissatisfied with it, as she will end up in a less rewarding position, with a smaller salary and fewer childcare benefits than she would have had, had she not been holding back. Sandberg advocates for more openness within workplaces regarding women's family plans and

criticises social conventions that deem women more suited to be primary caregivers than men. She also points to a variety of reason for why it is often the women who opt out of their careers once a child is born, instead of their male partners.

The following chapter, 'Make Your Partner a Real Partner', picks up where its predecessor ends: Sandberg advises women, or, to be more precise, heterosexual women who want to have children, to choose partners who are willing to split housework and childrearing responsibilities equally. She points to statistics that show that women are still in charge of most of these tasks and reveals how easily she and her late husband fell into the 'classic' gender roles after the birth of their first child. Sandberg's key message in this chapter is that "as women must be more empowered at work, men must be more empowered at home", which also means that women must relinquish some of their 'power' at home. The author also stresses that a woman's partner needs to be fully committed to supporting his wife's/girlfriend's career, otherwise the COO sees little chance in her succeeding. Sandberg believes that equal partnerships are happier partnerships which will help positively shape future generations in terms of gender equality.

In her ninth chapter, 'The Myth of Doing It All', Sandberg advises women to give up on the idea that they constantly need to manage their homes and careers perfectly. She talks about working parents, particularly mothers, feeling increasingly pressured to be both permanently available at work and highly involved in their children's lives. The author, however, believes that this pressure is, to an extent, coming from the individual woman herself and that it is partly her responsibility to set clear boundaries at work and remind herself that feelings of guilt for being a working mother are irrational.

In her tenth chapter, 'Let's Start Talking About It', Sandberg admits that it took her many years to call herself a feminist, but that she is now an open advocate for the cause and urges other women (and men) to follow her lead. Her final piece of advice is thus to speak up more about gender issues at work even if it might be met with hostility in some cases. She wants to see more people address gender issues at work on a macro-level as well as more women addressing concrete issues directly with their superiors. Too often, Sandberg argues, women make unnecessary sacrifices simply because they never asked if they needed to make them in the first place. In Sandberg's opinion, talking about gender issues at work will cause employers and employees to make "small interventions that encourage people to behave in slightly

different ways at critical moments" (2013: p 149) which will eventually result in more gender equality in the workplace overall.

In *Lean In*'s final chapter, 'Working Together Toward Equality', Sandberg argues that there is a lack of support amongst women in the workplace and that women can be biased against other women. She goes on to say that women would achieve more if they worked together, supported each other and focused on keeping debates about feminism and feminist issues constructive. The COO further stresses the importance of men supporting women in the workplace and of implementing measures that will encourage and enable women to pursue their career aspirations. Sandberg demonstrates that women in the workplace (as well as generally) are expected to be kinder than their male counterparts, which might partly explain why, if they fail to live up to this expectation, female leaders are often perceived as unlikeable. In this last chapter, Sandberg also addresses the 'mommy wars' referring to how women have to justify their decisions, mostly to other women, to stay at home with the children, work part- or full-time. She argues for work in the home to be recognised as work and gives biographical insights into her own mothers' decision to prioritise caring for her children and later for her ill parents. The chapter concludes with Sandberg arguing that having more women in leadership positions will lead to greater gender equality in the workplace and will, beyond that, benefit organisations as well as people. She thus urges women to express their dissatisfaction with that status quo and to "push hard now, [so] this next wave [of feminism] can be the last wave" (Sandberg, 2013: pp.172-173).