The *Make-it-work woman*

A qualitative investigation of young professional women's accounts of emotional struggles and depression in gendered, neoliberal workplaces

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology, the University of Auckland, 2019.

Abstract

Within public discourse and the media, young middle-class women are increasingly positioned as part of the vanguard of social change and as 'ideal neoliberal subjects.' At the same time, studies all over the Western world report rising rates of emotional distress among girls and young women; depression statistics consistently designate women as twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression as men. While the recent popularisation of postfeminist sense-making suggests that gendered barriers to career success and structural sexism are things of the past and that women merely need to work hard and 'lean in', critical feminist scholars claim that the contemporary work organisation continues to systematically marginalise and devalue women. The research I present in this thesis explores young professional women's affective and discursive negotiations of this contradictory landscape. Located in Aotearoa New Zealand, it aims to elucidate whether and how idealised femininities such as the cultural slot of the 'top girl' inflect participants' identity work and traces its potential impact on women's experiences of emotional struggles and depression.

In order to map out the affective contours and discursive underpinnings of contemporary high-performing femininities, I conducted two studies: The first included focus group discussions around work-related pressures and challenges, and the second, individual interviews on the experience and 'management' of depression with a total sample of twenty-five young professional women between March and July 2017. Embedded within a feminist social constructionist framework, my analyses outline a range of normative self-constitutive practices, such as 'putting on a brave face', 'ploughing through', 'working towards becoming more positive' or practising self-care, which I have termed the *Make-it-work woman*.

Undergirded by neoliberal, postfeminist logic, this identity space is all about keeping the adverse effects of patriarchal capitalism, and particularly workplace sexism, in check.

The implications are twofold. Firstly, by 'making it work', young professional women implicitly contribute to the maintenance of gendered social relations. Secondly, the inherent individualisation of emotional struggles and distress severely curtails depressed women's chances of feeling better – or at least differently. Produced at the intersection of 'toxic' organisational cultures and socially sanctioned resources for self-making, the *Make-it-work woman* functions psychologically as a kind of survival strategy: it is the ongoing effort to 'prove one's worth'. The development of alternative practices must consist of both an organisational effort, through holding men accountable, and an intrapsychic process, notably a becoming aware of and emotional distancing from the demands of the *Make-it-work woman*.

In memory of Nilima Chowdhury, senior, and June Melser.

Thank you for paving the way.

Acknowledgements

I would first of all like to acknowledge and thank the twenty-five women who volunteered their time to participate in this research in spite of busy work schedules and other commitments. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and insights, your experiences and stories, but also your pain. I deeply appreciate your generosity and willingness to become part of my project. I am grateful for the help I received with recruitment from [professional services firm, Auckland] and others, in particular Ivan Moss who has continued to take an interest in and tirelessly 'promotes' my research. Thank you, June and Mama, for the financial support without which this thesis would not have seen the light of day.

In the past four years I was initiated into the world of feminist, critical constructionist research with the support and guidance of two amazing women who are not only wonderful role models but have become friends. Thank you, Kerry Gibson and Margaret Wetherell, for having been the best 'Doktormütter' one could wish for! Kerry, thank you for your always sound advice and your humour, for knowing exactly when to 'push' and when to slow me down, and for always having a sympathetic ear. I love that we have held supervisory meetings in the park, on the beach and over lunch in Devonport. You're probably the only supervisor in the world who is happy to look after her PhD student's baby so that she can have an afternoon off! Margie, after all this time I am still amazed by and in awe of your brilliance. I am immensely grateful for having had the opportunity to study with you and learn from you – it is a true honour to be your last PhD student. Thank you both for so many stimulating and enjoyable discussions, for sharing parenting advice with me and for giving me a sense of belonging here in Aotearoa.

In the course my PhD, I have had the good fortune to meet and become friends with several fellow doctorands and women academics, notably through my participation in the

Psychology of Social Issues research group. This ongoing peer support and exchange has been immensely valuable throughout the research process, both intellectually and emotionally. Thank you, Maree Martinussen, for always being up for discussing ideas, giving feedback on drafts and conference presentations, looking after Julian (even changing his nappies!) and for making Auckland feel a bit more like home. Octavia Calder-Dawe, thank you for countless engaging conversations and for sharing your PhD wisdom with me – I look forward to writing that 'F*** Positivity" paper with you! Helen van der Merwe, I think you were the first of our 'crew' I told about my pregnancy; thanks for letting Julian sleep on you and for offering support and advice on 'how to juggle studying and parenting'. Thank you, Maria João Faustino, for your boundless energy and enthusiasm and for sharing and thereby alleviating my homesickness. Madhavi (Maddy) Manchi, I'm glad our paths crossed at the AUT symposium; thank you for your friendship and the delicious daal. Aida Dekhoda, it's a pity we are not handing in together after all, but this also means we can celebrate twice! Thank you for your hospitality and our corridor chats that always cheered me up. Asleigh Baker, my fellow mum-and-PhD-student friend, thank you for being the warm and kind-hearted person that you are.

Numerous colleagues in the School of Psychology (and at the University) have been part of this journey. I would like to thank Gina Broom, Aurelio Castro, Kris Taylor, Lucy Cowie, Emily Cross, Jade Farley, Erica March, Tamsin Dehar, Ginny Braun, Nicola Gavey, Sue Cowie, Jade Le Grice, Sam Manuela, Bruce Cohen and Niki Harré. I also want to acknowledge Odette Groom and Kamalini Gnaniah for helping me with the admin side of things. Thank you, Suzanne Purdy, for being such a thoughtful Head of School. I thank all the students I have taught in the past few years for forcing me away from the desk!

Last, but certainly not least, I want to acknowledge and thank my friends and family for their unwavering support, encouragement and love. Sam Melser, thank you for always

believing in and finding inspiring words for describing the importance and meaningfulness of this work. Your never-failing enthusiasm and endless energy supplies have carried me through these four years and countless nights of broken sleep. Thank you for being there in moments of struggle and pain and thank you for keeping the artist in me alive. I can't wait to begin the next chapter! Julian Melser, my little scientist, you aren't able to read this yet but maybe you will, one day, want to find out what your mother was doing when she was going to her 'Arbeit'. While you were playing in the sand pit or with your beloved cars, I was hanging out with the *Make-it-work woman*. Thank you for being so full of life and curiosity and for all the cuddles. Christine and Arun Chowdhury, thank you for sharing this adventure with me twenty-thousand kilometres away, for always believing in me and supporting me, and for being the best skype-grandparents ever. Helen and Derek Melser, thank you for all the help and encouragement and for driving us to the airport countless times. Geeta Reddy and Guillaume Barbalat, thank you for three years of engaged conversations-whilst-chasing-after-our-children. Thanks to all my new and old friends, near and far, for your love and for being part of my life. And thank you, Debbie, for helping me 'tame' the top girl in me.

Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction 5

PART I: Scholarly context, theoretical and methodological framework 18

Chapter 1: Contemporary idealised femininities and women at work 19

Chapter 2: Depression as discourse 33

Chapter 3 – Practising the self: a theoretical framework for psychosocial research on women's emotional distress 51

Chapter 4 – Research design, data collection, ethics and analytic procedures 64

PART II: Empirical Analyses 91

Chapter 5: This is (still) a man's world: Young professional women's identity struggles in gendered workplaces 92

Chapter 6: 'Just plough through': how young professional women practise negative affect in accounts of work-related difficulties 117

Chapter 7: Polyphonies of depression: the relationship between voices-of-the-self in young professional women aka 'top girls' 141

Chapter 8: 'Putting on a brave face': young professional women's accounts of managing depression 166

Concluding discussion: Assembling the 'Make-it-work' woman 191

Appendices 220

References 242

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Nature of contribution by PhD candidate	Devising methodology, implementing methodology (focus group discussions), transcript coding, analysis, manuscript preparation and submission.
Extent of contribution by PhD candidate (%)	80

CO-AUTHORS

Name	Nature of Contribution
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Certification by Co-Authors

The undersigned hereby certify that:

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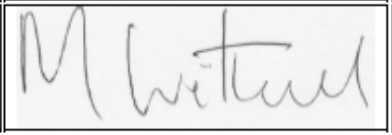
Margaret Wetherell		10/07/2019

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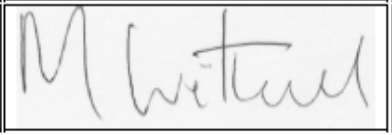
Margaret Wetherell		10/07/2019

Last updated: 28 November 2017

Introduction

Can women today really 'have it all': a fulfilling career, equal relationships, sexual freedom, and a family? Are sex-based marginalisation and gendered career barriers a thing of the past? The research I present in this thesis emerged from a puzzling paradox. Young middle-class women are increasingly positioned as in the vanguard of social change within the media and public discourse. This narrative of girls' and young women's stellar educational achievements (Skelton, 2010) and career successes (Bolton & Muzio, 2008) suggests that first and second wave feminism's central demands, namely ending women's oppression and the institution of not only equal rights but also equal opportunities for both sexes, have been just about rendered obsolete and that girls and women merely need to work hard and learn how to 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013).

This discourse seems to be particularly pertinent in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the research is located, a country which prides itself on being one of the first democracies in the world that granted women the right to vote (in 1893) and regularly features in the press as a prime example of gender equality. It also embraced a neoliberal mode of governance earlier and more thoroughly as almost any other Western nation (Kelsey, 1997). At the same time, news reports speak of a 'mental health crisis' (Campbell, 2017) and growing rates of self-harm, anxiety and depression among girls and young women in the western world. Is this merely the price of success? How is being a young, high-performing woman working in competitive, often still male-dominated work environments where women are regularly exposed to 'harmful workplace experiences' (Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016) linked to emotional distress? What might we learn from studying the experiences of these 'top girls' (McRobbie, 2007) about the relevance of feminism for women today?

In order to investigate how young women navigate this contradictory discursive landscape, I conducted an in-depth qualitative study. The project consisted of focus group discussions about 'what it is like to be a young professional woman in Aotearoa New Zealand' with a focus on workplace difficulties, and individual interviews about the experience and 'management' of depression, particularly at work, with a total sample of twenty-five young professional women. Fuelled by my own long-standing experience of depression, I wanted to explore whether women's experiences of emotional distress are shaped by a 'high achiever' identity and how they intersect with organisational cultures. Embedded within a feminist framework, my aim in this research was, furthermore, to critically sound out the socio-political implications of participants' meaning-making activities.

Reflexive Note 1: How I came to this research

When I first encountered 'scientific' models of depression as a Master's student of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy at Humboldt-University, Berlin, they were presented to me within a positivist framework, that is to say, not as models or discourses but as truths. The question was not, whether depression 'really' existed or how and why it had become such an influential (social) construct, but which of the various competing theories most accurately described and explained this 'reality'. It was around that time that I decided to seek help from a psychotherapist myself as I had been struggling with emotional distress since my late teens. Together, we identified and attempted to modify my 'negative thought patterns' and analysed the impact of early childhood experiences and familial relations on the development of my 'personality'. We discussed the relationship between my high achiever

identity and what my therapist labelled ‘depression’ (based on the results of a self-report questionnaire), but we never interrogated the wider socio-cultural context of my distress.

While I certainly did experience aspects of this process as emotionally and intellectually beneficial, there remained a growing sense of dissatisfaction with this individualistic approach to understanding and ‘treating’ my distress. In the years to come, the mismatch between my own experience – which, to me, was clearly linked to the material and socio-cultural contexts of my life – and the dominant narrative of (women’s) emotional distress eventually led me to critical and feminist theory.

Six months into my doctorate, my son Julian was born. Struggling with sleep deprivation, loneliness and the enormous geographical distance between my new family and my family and friends in Europe, I saw myself ‘slipping’ into what conventional clinical psychology terms postnatal depression. When a colleague at the School of Psychology, Sue Cowie, told me that she had just finished a critical qualitative research project on postnatal depression, I asked her to email me her thesis. Upon receipt, I immediately started reading it. Her analysis (Cowie, 2015) of the ‘good mother’ discourse and its implications for thinking about and ‘treating’ postnatal depression resonated deeply with my own experience – and ultimately helped me develop alternative practices of mothering to counter the anxieties and despair arising from the societal burden placed on mothers. This critical reflection on how I was being positioned by and positioning myself within dominant discourses of femininity and motherhood acted as a powerful ‘antidepressant’. My hope was and is that my own research would be equally beneficial to other young women in similar positions.

Feminism and idealised femininities

My investigation of young professional women's accounts of workplace difficulties and depression takes place at a particular moment in the history of feminism and patriarchal capitalism. Fifty-five years have passed since the publication of one of the foundational texts of second-wave feminism, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. With her investigation of the 'problem that has no name', Friedan contributed to sparking the women's liberation movement in the United States and beyond. Since then, a variety of multi-faceted, dynamic feminisms has developed, brought about considerable social and political change and arguably became part of the 'mainstream' – for better and for worse. My focus in this thesis lies on a specific thread within this feminist fabric which has been analysed by feminist scholars under the labels of "postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019).

While the 'failing boys' crisis features prominently in the media and regularly produces calls for targeted educational policies (Griffin, 2000), white (and some non-white) middle-class girls and young women are now positioned as the guarantors of a bright and prosperous future (Harris, 2004) and offered a new emergent cultural slot, the 'top girl' identity (McRobbie, 2007). They are encouraged to aim high and told that there will be no barriers to success and happiness if they work hard and stay positive. A recent article in *The Telegraph* titled 'Womenomics: why women are the future of our economy' optimistically predicted that "by 2020 women's pay will overtake men's". It illustrates the rise of a particular kind of postfeminist rhetoric within public discourse in the Western world, characterised by "positively draw[ing] on and invok[ing] feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12). Women's supposed advantage is often linked to a 'feminisation' of culture associated with a heightened

valorisation of traditionally feminine qualities and attributes (i.e., 'soft skills'); however, critical feminist scholars have questioned the extent to which there is a 'real' increase in gender equality (Adkins, 2001; Burman, 2005).

Women, work and emotional distress

The ambivalence and 'brittleness' of these supposed accomplishments is reflected in a sombre and sobering tale of persistent gender inequality which emerges from the academic literature and media representations alike. It draws attention to the fact that the top rungs of private and public institutions are still, for the most part, 'a man's world'. Women's access to it is barred by what Mary Loden, then a mid-level manager at New York Telephone Company, in 1978 called the 'glass ceiling' (Vargas, 2018). Often in the form of debates about women's quotas for company boards or the 'gender pay gap', this issue regularly makes the headlines. While some theorists and pundits explain the lack of women in leading positions with the so-called 'pipeline effect' – in other words, as merely a matter of not enough time having passed – feminist scholars attribute it to the persistence of structural and socio-cultural causes such as restrictive gender norms (Pringle, Harris, Ravenswood, Giddings, Ryan, & Jaeger, 2017). How might this be linked to women's emotional distress?

Public health and epidemiological studies consistently report that women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression as men (Yu, 2018; WHO, n.d.). Dominant explanatory models often locate the causes for this disparity in women's and men's differently sexed bodies and attribute women's distress to dysfunctional hormonal cycles or genetic vulnerabilities (Ussher, 2010), whereas critical feminist scholars insist that an analysis of women's experiences of depression must incorporate the socio-cultural and material conditions of women's lives (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2013; Lafrance, 2007; Stoppard &

McMullen, 2003; Stoppard, 1998). Given the importance of work in terms of socialisation and the 'doing' of (gendered) identities, a focus on professional women at early career stages seemed to be an especially fruitful approach for contextualising young women's meaning-making activities around negative affect and depression. Stories of women's career success are often touted as proof for women's advancement into areas which historically had been reserved for men and thus as a sign of achieved gender equality – more so than, for instance, men's involvement in household and child rearing work. Furthermore, virtually no qualitative research on women's work-related emotional struggles has been done (for one of the few quantitative studies on occupational stress and depression in professional-managerial women in the USA, see Snapp, 1992).

I decided to focus my research on the identity negotiations of young professional women, who are likely to be positioned within the 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2007) narrative due to their educational achievements and presumed career trajectories, as this approach would allow me to explore not only the "psychic life of neoliberalism" (Scharff, 2016) but the gendered affective dimension of contemporary capitalism.

Research context: neoliberal New Zealand?

New Zealand is a particularly interesting research site for this project considering the radical neoliberal shift which took place between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, "the speed and scope of which was unprecedented in Western economies" (Nairn & Higgins, 2007, p. 261).

> Since 1984 people had been forced to operate within a paradigm whose values most of them did not share. The citizen became a customer, buying a range of services from

> a public or private provider which were once their entitlements under the … social contract with the state. Responsibility for social well-being was individualised, privatised, neutralised. (Kelsey, 1997, p. 294)

One of neoliberalism's core features is an extreme and competitive form of individualism (Teghtsoonian, 2009), closely tied to the ideal of a meritocratic society (Miller & McNamee, 2014), that is, the idea that individual effort determines life chances. On a psychological level, neoliberal discourse often manifests in an emphasis on individual choice and the production of an 'entrepreneurial subject' (Nairn & Higgins, 2007; Scharff, 2016). In the New Zealand context, the notion of meritocracy must be seen in relation to the nation's historical self-understanding as an egalitarian society with its "emphasis on equality of opportunity" (Skilling, 2013, p. 20), alongside the assumption that the social categories of class, race and gender do not structure and stratify its social reality (Grainger, Falcous, & Newman, 2012; Nolan, 2007).

New Zealand's education system, which, in the 1990s, "underwent a thoroughgoing transformation … in order to align it to the norms of the market" (Nairn & Higgins, 2007, p. 263), seems to confirm this belief. The latest Global Gender Gap report by the World Economic Forum (2018) ranks New Zealand first in terms of educational attainment which means that there is no gender disparity in terms of access to educational resources and opportunities. While ethnic and class differences in educational achievement remain deeply entrenched (Nakhid, 2003; Nash, 2003), it appears that the neoliberalisation of educational institutions has indeed had a significant effect on gender inequality. Similarly, the number of women entering professions like law and architecture is now equal to or higher than that of men (Pringle et al., 2017; Scott, 2009).

While the situation in New Zealand mirrors a global trend towards greater gender parity in terms of education (The World Economic Forum, 2018), given the country's history and current state, it seemed an especially fruitful site for exploring the discursive tensions which fuelled my research project. This was confirmed in the wake of the Me Too movement which exploded onto the social media stage in October 2017 and quickly entered and dominated public debate. A few months later, Russell McVeagh, a leading New Zealand law firm, was embroiled in a first-rate scandal around allegations of sexual misconduct by senior lawyers towards female summer internship clerks (Hunt & Macandrew, 2018). A subsequent nationwide survey conducted by the New Zealand Law Society revealed that about a third of the country's women lawyers had experienced sexual harassment at work (Colmar Brunton, 2018). This series of events forcefully challenged the neoliberal presumption of women's freedom and equality by re-focussing attention on the ways in which women continue to be assaulted, harassed and undermined.

Introducing the research: aims, methodological approach and contributions

I opted for a qualitative methodology with a focus on discourse, narrative and meaning making. My aim was to conduct an in-depth analysis of participants' accounts and the different voices which are mobilised in their identity work. This approach was in line with my dual focus on individual psychologies and self-making on the one hand and a socio-political change agenda on the other hand. Drawing on Wetherell's (2006, 2008, 2012, 2013) work on identity, affect and discourse, I employed a practice-based approach to analysing participants' talk. A focus on practice, and thus consistency and contingency at the same time, allowed me to explore both the individual and societal implications of how young professional women make sense of work-related negative affect and depression.

Embedded within a social constructionist and critical feminist epistemology, this research explores how gender 'works' within the context of work, that is, how individual meaning-making activities contribute to the production of gendered social relations in work organisations. It does this by asking how feminine identities are affectively and discursively practised in young professional women's accounts of workplace difficulties and depression.

A second focus lies on gaining an understanding of how the available cultural resources for making sense of emotional struggles and depression impact how young professional women 'manage' their emotion/distress at work. My analyses are guided by the question whether participants orient to the 'top girl' narrative in their accounts and interrogate the discursive underpinnings of this contemporary ideal of femininity. My research aims were thus two-fold:

1. I wanted to explore whether and how participants' accounts are inflected by the 'top girl' ideal and what kind of self-constitutive practices are produced as a result to gain a better understanding of young professional women's work-related *habitus*.
2. A second objective was to investigate the implications of how young professional women make sense of negative affect and depression in a work context. What can we learn about gendered power relations from an analysis of young professional women's talk-in-interaction which is attentive to how affect is patterned together with discourse? What are the potentially damaging effects of such normative practices, both on an individual and on an organisational level and what does this mean for thinking about individual and social change?

In order to pursue these questions, I designed a two-part research project consisting of focus group discussions about work-related pressures and challenges, which twelve young professional women participated in, and individual interviews with thirteen young professional women about their experience of depression. Participants' ages ranged between

early twenties and late thirties. Data collection took place between March and July 2017 and thus before the arrival of Me Too. The sample was drawn from women working in both private sector organisations and government agencies from the two largest cities in New Zealand, Auckland and Wellington.

Whether the Me Too movement will have a lasting impact on what is 'sayable' for women remains to be seen. Maybe Betty Friedan's most important contribution was that she dared to link women's unhappiness to restrictive gender norms. While feminist vocabularies undeniably have entered the mainstream, they arguably have done so with a neoliberal 'coating' (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014). As I will be arguing, studies on contemporary femininities that explore the affective grounding of women's self-making practices, as the current research does, not only illuminate the psychological 'workings' of postfeminist and neoliberal discourses but also provide explanations for the (re)production of gendered social relations. My discussion of the analyses presented in this thesis thus aims to advance our understanding of how the status quo in work organisations is reinforced and maintained through women's ongoing identity work. Furthermore, I will be reasoning that young professional women's emotional ill/well-being must be understood and addressed within the wider discursive and material contexts of their lives.

Reflexive Note 2: 'Insider' and 'critic' – a delicate balance

Throughout the data collection process, I found myself moving back and forth between the position of the 'insider' (a 'top girl' struggling with emotional distress) and the 'critic' (a feminist, social constructionist scientist). While participants' accounts of their difficulties, often loaded with strong affect, made me feel with (and sometimes like) them, I attempted to maintain a critical 'meta-dialogue', questioning the discursive framings these

women employed to make sense of their experiences. I was very much aware that I needed to find a balance between, on the one hand, generating trust by being 'one of them' and, on the other hand, challenging and 'disrupting' normative practices to expose their taken-for-granted foundations.

This became especially difficult in the second study, when I conducted individual interviews with women who had experienced depression. Almost half of my sample reported experiences of domestic or sexual violence. I felt the overwhelming urge to abandon my position of professional 'neutrality' to be able to empathise more deeply and to make my interviewees aware of the gendered prison we construct for ourselves day after day, (seemingly) voluntarily. Reflecting on these impulses with my supervisors enabled me to identify and 'stick to' a middle ground of affective engagement and to realise that the aim of this research was not (and could not be) to change *these* women's lives. Instead, I would focus on producing and, later on, disseminating knowledges that might allow and encourage (ideally) a large number of women to 'try on' alternative narratives. It was this political motivation that sustained and propelled me forward throughout the research project, especially when 'the going got tough'.

Overview of the thesis

This is a thesis with publications; it includes lightly edited versions of four journal articles (one single-authored and three co-authored), two of which are published (Chapters 5 and 7) and two of which are currently under review (Chapters 6 and 8). Following this Introduction, there are two main parts, each made up of four separate chapters, and a Concluding Discussion. Part I (Chapters 1 to 4) outlines the key literatures I have drawn on to contextualise this research and gives an overview of the theoretical framework as well as the

methodology and methods used. Part II (Chapters 5 to 8) contains the four analytic pieces which were written in the form of journal articles. In the Concluding Discussion, I introduce the concept of the *Make-it-work woman* and discuss the implications and significance of the research as a whole. As a result of the with-publications format, a certain amount of repetition across chapters is unavoidable, particularly in regard to the presentation of the 'top girl' lens and the methods sections.

The puzzle I set out to 'solve' by undertaking this research is made up of several distinct pieces. In Chapter 1, I outline two of them. First, there is the claim made by feminist cultural and media scholars concerning the emergence of a new idealised femininity. Do young, ambitious women identify with this narrative of the woman who 'can have it all', if only she works hard and manages herself efficiently? The second piece of the puzzle is the contemporary workplace. How do workplace norms and practices in gendered organisations interrelate with and constitute feminine subjectivities and what kind of practices are produced at this intersection? In Chapter 2, I then add a third piece to the puzzle – depression. In order to understand how women make sense of experiences of emotional distress, I present a brief discussion of the two main contemporary discourses of depression, the psychiatric and the psychological model. I close the chapter by investigating dominant ideas on women and depression. Chapter 3 sets up the theoretical framework and methodological apparatus for the research, in particular my understanding of identity, affect and emotional distress, and presents a practice-based approach to theorising and analysing contemporary subjectivities. Completing Part I, Chapter 4 lays out the research design and methods, describes the sample and analytic procedures used and concludes with reflections on researcher subjectivity.

Part II contains the centrepiece of this thesis: my empirical analyses. Chapters 5 and 6 are based on data from the focus group study, Chapters 7 and 8 detail my analyses of the interview data. In Chapter 5, I explore four 'survival lessons' for the workplace which were

derived from a narrative analysis of participants' accounts of workplace difficulties, with a particular focus on negative affect. Chapter 6 continues this investigation of young professional women's affective *habitus* and presents a range of *affective-discursive practices* (Wetherell, 2012, 2013) participants engaged in when making sense of 'toxic' workplace conditions such as sexism. In Chapter 7, I use the notion of the *dialogical self* (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992) to discuss two sets of voices through which participants' depression narratives were spoken: 'top girl'-based demanding voices and more marginalised resistant voices. Lastly, Chapter 8 identifies five normative identity practices which constitute participants' construction of an 'ideal depressed self' and lay out how young professional women should 'manage' themselves in the workplace.

In the Concluding Discussion of this thesis, I reflect on the wider import of this research, in particular for understanding the persistence of gendered social relations and for thinking about women's emotional distress through the lens of the *make-it-work woman*. Discussing the 'unholy alliance' of patriarchy and neoliberalism, I sketch possible answers to the question 'where to from here?' and conclude on a hopeful note by positing that critical feminist research like this not only opens up the possibility for social change but provides the discursive tools for women to *feel* differently.

PART I: Scholarly context, theoretical and methodological framework

Chapter 1: Contemporary idealised femininities and women at work

I begin this review of relevant literature by reporting on work from feminist culture and media studies which claims that young women today are offered a new and glamorous identity promising them both career success and fulfilling personal relationships. I then examine different facets of this emergent mode of femininity, contemporary notions of girlhood, the rise of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism and the significance and impact of work and work 'stress' on young high-achieving women. My aim is to present a sketch of the 'top girl' *habitus* and *habitat* and to thus outline the scholarly context of my research. Throughout this thesis I ask whether, and how, these concepts allow us to make sense of young professional women's experiences of work-related difficulties and emotional distress.

The 'top/can-do girl' – a new emergent identity for young women today?

> In the post-feminist guise of equality, as though it is already achieved, young women are attributed with capacity … young women (top girls) are now understood to be ideal subjects of female success, exemplars of the new competitive meritocracy. (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718)

> Young women have taken on a special role in the production of the late modern social order and its values. They have become a focus for the struction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient and flexible. (Harris, 2004, p. 6)

Feminist cultural and media scholars interested in contemporary femininities claim that girls and young women today are encouraged to take on a new way of being, a brand-new

subjectivity, associated with the promise that 'women can have it all' – a successful career, a loving home, equal relationships and a consumer lifestyle. Theorists like Angela McRobbie and Anita Harris argue that this emerging idealised femininity is a response to changing socio-economic conditions characterised by labour market volatility and crumbling community ties. Government policy documents and media representations alike position young women as ideal neoliberal subjects and as best equipped for dealing with the brave new world of flexible capitalism (McRobbie, 2000).

The emergence of the 'girlpower' discourse in the 1990s links to the establishment of government-funded girl empowerment organisations such as the NYC Girls program (Banet-Weiser, 2015) as well as pop culture phenomena like the Spice Girls or Lara Croft (Harris, 2004). However, the discursive veneer of equal opportunity adhering to the 'top girl' tale quickly peels off when we take a closer look at social identity categories other than gender, notably, race and class. Juxtaposing the 'career girl' with the "'global girl' factory worker" from the developing world (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) and the 'at-risk girl', embodied in the working-class teenage mother (Harris, 2004), brings to the fore who exactly is marked out for this "new kind of self-made subjectivity" (Harris, 2004, p. 6): white, middle-class girls and young women, "specifically, those from economically prosperous families with the range of resources and capital to make this trajectory possible, meaningful, and successful to their daughters" (Harris, 2004, p. 46).

As Harris (2004, p. 8-9) points out in her detailed study of current representations of young women, focusing on "the proliferation of sites" such as education, citizenship and work "where their biographical projects can be observed", these middle-class daughters and their educational and professional achievements are the contemporary mechanism for reproducing middle-class privilege. The possibility of actually living a 'top girl' life thus

appears to be enabled by particular structural conditions, yet this material reality is masked by the prevailing discourse of 'personal choice' and individual responsibility.

Growing up to be a 'top girl'

Research on gender socialisation investigates how girls learn to 'do' or practise particular modes of femininity. In their influential study on girls' psychosocial development, Brown and Gilligan (1992) described the transition from girlhood to womanhood as just such a process of gender socialisation, the ideal of femininity conveyed by parents, teachers and society at large being 'the nice and quiet girl'. They argued that, initially, girls are both highly aware of and expressive about the conflicts, pains and injustices of their relationships, but increasingly grow silent. Feelings of anger and disappointment are more and more kept inside to create or maintain relational harmony. As a consequence, girls begin to avoid conflicts and to adjust their behaviour to the expectations of others. What begins as the disciplining of self by others becomes self-positioning and is thus incorporated into the girls' identity practices.

Recent youth research (i.e., Aaopola, Gonick, & Harris, 2004; Skelton, Francis & Read, 2010) suggests that while girls are still encouraged to define themselves in terms of traditional attributes of femininity, e.g., to aim for 'perfect bodies', some are also urged to deliver 'perfect achievements' (Renold & Allan, 2006, p. 459). Yet, academic and professional success and traditional notions of femininity, in a lot of ways, seem to cancel each other out. Struggling to reconcile these contradictory demands, girls devise strategies to downplay or feminise their success, for instance by attributing it to hard work and diligence rather than cleverness. Furthermore, the emotional work inherent in the formation of 'top girl' subjectivities involves the transformation of "powerful inner feelings into apparently

rational positions" (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001, p. 176). For Gonick (2004, p. 205), this kind of ambivalence is a "structural feature of femininity" in late modernity. It seems, then, that engaging in such self-regulatory modes provides middle-class girls in particular with the possibility to juggle both the 'good learner' and the 'good girl' identity. However, the persistent pull traditional femininities still exert on girls might "bolster boys' power at the expense of their own" (Reay, 2001, p. 153), in the classroom and elsewhere. Moreover, "the pressure of being a supergirl" (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 558) is associated with a considerable emotional burden, notably, the ever-present fear of not being 'good enough' (Walkerdine et al., 2001).

The seductive powers of contemporary, neoliberal modes of feminism

Considering recent history, it is not surprising that girls more so than boys report feeling pressured to 'make use of' the opportunities their mothers and grandmothers never had. Despite the seemingly firm entrenchment of postfeminist rhetoric associated with the denial of a continued need for feminism (Gill, 2007), girls are very much aware of gender inequality and the harmful effects of gender norms (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2017). However, the lack of collective, political solutions within the contemporary social and discursive 'imaginary' encourages girls to position themselves within the dominant individualising discourse and to view the "problems that arise" as "personal ones that must be solved at the individual level" (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 561), usually by working harder. What makes the 'supergirl' narrative so seductive and powerful is the promised trajectory linking hard work and educational achievements to future career success.

Harris (2004, p. 44) claims that it is precisely at this point, when young women transition into the world of work and "the idea that 'girls can do anything' meets the reality of

not enough good jobs to go around", that this promise begins to sound increasingly hollow. Women are urged to uphold this fantasy, however, by transforming themselves into more desirable employees through self-management and emotional labour – what Gill and Kanai (2018) interpret "as a psychological turn in neoliberalism and postfeminism" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 4). Banet-Weiser et al. (2019) claim that some contemporary modes of feminism 'safely' incorporate and thereby silence structural critiques of gender inequality by focusing exclusively on individual bodies and minds. This is the familiar demand for more women in powerful positions or the exhortation to become more self-confident. They go on to argue that these feminisms are enabled by and at the same time endorse neoliberal capitalism with its emphasis on entrepreneurialism, individual empowerment and consumption, and an affirmative, happiness-oriented and markedly depoliticised tone. What differentiates postfeminism, as defined by Gill (2007, 2017), from 'neoliberal feminism' (Rottenberg, 2014), and 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018), is its refusal to acknowledge the continued persistence of gender inequality. As Butler (2013, p. 44) puts it, "it appears that the only thing postfeminism requires is that women "be who they want to be"—just as long as it is not a feminist." While all of these discursive formations or 'sensibilities' (Gill, 2007) appear to have distinct characteristics, they are unified in offering a feminine identity "that allows women to be independent, strong, smart, and sexy all at once" (Butler, 2013, p. 42).

Postfeminism and emotional distress

More recently, feminist scholars have turned their attention to postfeminist framings of health and psychological distress and investigated the identities on offer for girls and young women within this affective-discursive space. Drawing on Crawford's (1980) work,

Riley, Evans and Robson (2018) suggest the term ‘postfeminist healthism’ to describe “a set of diverse discourses and practices” (p. 161) which are seemingly normative for women. According to the authors, postfeminist healthism is characterised by the desire for being normal and for a better life, the need for control (either exerted by the self or by experts), the importance of technology and its link to practices of self-surveillance, and the notion that good health can be achieved via consumption. Like Dubriwny (2012) who speaks about the ‘vulnerable but empowered woman’ in health discourse, Riley et al. claim that a postfeminist understanding is premised on the assumption that women are an at-risk group and inherently flawed. Thus, so they argue, femininity is perceived and performed as essentially problematic and pathological. Hence, women are empowered through practices of self-monitoring and risk-management and urged to take on the responsibility for their own and their families’ health by making the right lifestyle choices (i.e., diet and exercise). In her analysis of public discourse on postpartum depression, Dubriwny (2012) outlines how constructions of ‘acceptably bad’ versus ‘unacceptably bad’ behaviours delineate postfeminist risky mothers from ‘monstrous’ (psychotic) mothers and thereby reinforce traditional gender norms. In a similar vein, Dobson (2015, p. 151) posits that “the “girl in pain” figure … legitimates femininity as a painful but desirable embodied state.” It seems, then, that while postfeminism allows for the acknowledgement of women’s suffering and distress, it only does so on condition that women actively and continuously work on themselves and towards the goal of ‘good health’. At the same time, postfeminism links health and traditional femininities centered on appearance/beauty and caring for others.

Work careers as 'ideal' vehicles for individual identity?

According to Harris (2004, pp 17-18), the lives of 'top girls' do not revolve around finding a husband or caring for their family (anymore), but around managing their careers: "They seize the opportunities made available within the new economy and make projects of their work selves from an early age." Proponents of the 'individualisation thesis' (Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) argue that the central import of work and career is a hallmark of post-modern subjectivities. This idea refers not only to the central role paid work plays in contemporary identity narratives and practices but just as much to the process of conceiving of both one's life and one's self as lifelong developmental projects endlessly to be worked upon. Critics point out that individualisation is a classed phenomenon (Atkinson, 2007) where "the cultural resources for self-making and the techniques for self-production are class processes and making the self makes class" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 75). Thus, the 'pressure' to individualise is said to simultaneously manifest and to serve middle-class privilege because individualisation rests on the notion of individual choice.

The significance of the idea of choice for women's liberation can be traced back to second-wave feminism and its central demand for more choice as an antidote to gender inequality (Budgeon, 2015). Budgeon (2003) argues that the 'work career' as an enticing alternative to the traditional role of housewife and mother continues to shape young women's self-narratives and desires today. Historically, the concept of career is associated with the ideal of a meritocratic system:

> In essence, the word 'career' speaks of a promise, the vow that an organization makes to the individual that merit, diligence and self-discipline would be rewarded by steady progress through a pyramid of grades. (McKinlay, 2002, p. 596)

Though McKinlay claims that this connection traces back to changes in the Scottish banking system in the nineteenth century, Castilla (2008, p. 1481) maintains that the traditional employment model, in which pay raises and promotions were granted based on seniority, has only quite recently "been replaced by market-driven employment strategies, including merit-based reward systems." This new organisational model entailed a new conception of career as 'boundaryless' (Arthur, 1994) and as aspiring towards organisational excellence (Fournier, 1998). In the course of this transformation it has become a dominant discourse in our thinking and talking about work (Coupland, 2002). Grey (1994, p. 481) states that "within the new project of self-management, (occupational) careers play a particular role since they offer a relatively well-defined scenario within which individuals may develop, express and create themselves".

Critical scholars like Fournier (1998) claim that the notion of career is deployed by organisations as a disciplinary technique. In order to advance, employees are expected to comply with the written and unwritten rules of the organisation and to subject both their professional and personal selves to constant monitoring and control so that one day they might reap the rewards of a successful career. However, the fact that the top levels of organisations are sparsely populated means that the promise of 'going up the ladder' is bound to remain an empty one for many, thus carrying "enormous potential for dissatisfaction" (McKinlay, 2002, p. 596). The discrepancy between the meritocratic ideal, which may or may not be explicitly endorsed by an organisation, and actual organisational practices, i.e., supposedly performance-based decisions on salary increases which show a clear bias against minorities (Castilla, 2008), is likely to be another source of resentment for women employees.

Fournier (1998, p. 62) claims that career discourse not only compels individuals but also 'seduces' them through "play(ing) on the fantasy of becoming 'more', 'better', 'other'."

This focus on self-improvement forms an inherent part of 'enterprise culture' (Du Gay, 1991) and one of its more recent outgrowths: the discourse of *personal branding* (Wee & Brooks, 2010). Drawing on a textual analysis of popular business literature, Vallas and Cummins (2015) contend that these books provide their audience with 'behavioural scripts' to guide them in manipulating their facial gestures, body posture, tone of voice, etc., in order to perform impeccable professional identities. The rhetorical functions and ethical implications of personal branding discourse are discussed by Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005, p. 318) in relation to recent changes in organisational communication and employment climates:

> Against (a) backdrop of destabilized work conditions, personal branding emphasizes control over one's work identity as the primary solution to structural uncertainties in the work economy.

The authors argue that individuals who fail in the marketplace are thus positioned in a way that they only have themselves to blame – their not having worked hard enough to build a successful personal brand. They further draw attention to the fact that in most of the popular business press, there is no reference to class, race or gender and posit that this omission implicitly (re)instates an elitist, white male normativity.

> (P)ersonal branding promotes a feminine surface identity and a masculine internal identity, all the while perpetuating the work/home dualism. Personal branding encourages women to get ahead at work, work as hard or harder than their male counterparts, and reach for the top but also to look womanly, take care of their external appearance, be there for their children and husbands (if a woman has them—

> but recognize that if she does, she may not be viewed as a 100% company woman), and routinely act in the caretaker role at work. (Lair et al., 2005, p. 328).

In an interview study with accounting trainees in Australia, Grey (1994) reports that his participants felt obliged to keep up an appearance of enthusiasm and engagement, no matter how dull their assigned task was. Happiness, or at least the display thereof, thus could be seen as a form of capital as well as an obligation (Ahmed, 2010). Such a reading would be in line with recent critiques of positive thinking discourses which frame feelings of sadness, hopelessness and inertia as unreasonable and inappropriate and thus promote constant emotion and self-management (Ehrenreich, 2010; Favaro & Gill, 2018). Bestselling books written for a female readership such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean in* (2013) meanwhile seemingly confirm the popular adage 'think manager, think male' (Schein & Davidson, 1993) by encouraging, even urging, women to be more assertive and self-confident (Rottenberg, 2014) and to thus enact the unspoken 'white, male norm' which still structures most workplaces (Bowleg, Brooks, & Ritz, 2008).

Work clearly is an important site for exploring contemporary femininities. Not only do women (and men) spend a major part of their time in the workplace, a focus on contemporary work organisation also throws the persistence of patriarchal structures into sharp relief. Part of what motivated me in pursuing this research was to trace how individual identities intersect with and are produced by organisational norms and wider socio-cultural contexts.

Women and work 'stress'

Various empirical studies, often using a quantitative research design, suggest that difficult work conditions impact both men and women adversely. For instance, the authors of the New Zealand-based Dunedin longitudinal study claim that "work stress precipitates depression and anxiety in young working women and men" (Melchior, Caspi, Milne, Danese, Poulton, & Moffitt, 2007). General factors such as high job demands, low support and interpersonal conflicts are reported to be gender-independent causes of work-related distress (Mazzola, Schonfeld & Spector, 2011; Tennant, 2001). Not surprisingly, then, the APA's (n.d.) recommendations for 'creating healthy workplaces' include bolstering employee involvement and recognition and increasing work-life-balance.

In addition to these general factors, women often face gender-related difficulties, i.e., sexual harassment and discrimination at work (Friborg et al., 2017; Sojo et al., 2016). This is borne out by the fact that studies and surveys consistently report that women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression as men; this presumed heightened vulnerability to emotional distress has been linked to gender inequality (Yu, 2018). Acker (1990) claims that discrimination is built into work organisations due to them being *inherently gendered*. Essential elements of successful careers within organisations, such as crafting and maintaining a professional identity and possessing leadership skills, are construed in the language of masculinity so that the only option for women seemingly is "to become an honorary man" (McDowell, 1997, p. 153). However, in her interview study on the experiences of women working in the British banking sector, McDowell also stresses the importance attributed to outward appearance by her participants, including appropriate attire, make-up, body postures and tone of voice, and the amount of time and energy they customarily invest in maintaining this appearance. It seems, then, that to build convincing

professional identities, women must perform elements of both genders, namely a combination of masculine rationality and an impeccable feminine exterior (Muhr, 2011). This 'strategy' is said to require a constant balancing effort. On the one hand, "(w)omen who attempt to behave like men are often distressed to find not acceptance but distrust from their male peers" (McDowall, 1997, p. 154). On the other hand, an excessive display of femininity, be it strikingly coloured or eccentric clothes or 'inappropriate' emotionality, is reported to be perceived as negative by both male and female colleagues and subordinates (Muhr, 2011; Nadesan & Tretheway, 2000).

In addition to the limitations imposed by the need to perform appropriate work identities, research suggests that women regularly have to deal with sexism in the form of offensive office lingo, jokes and behaviour, often verging on sexual harassment (Pringle et al., 2017; Watts, 2007). McDowell (1997, pp. 143-144) claims that many choose to "adopt … a strategy of passive resistance, trying in most circumstances to ignore rather than to challenge sexist language and behaviour" and to see it as "a professional hazard". The misogynist evaluations underlying these kinds of workplace interactions are likely to play an important, if unspoken, part in forming career barriers for women, together with their lack of access to networks of power or 'men's clubs':

> Men seem to be less willing to mentor and sponsor women than other men, partially because climates of sexual tension or appearances of sexual harassment may make cross-gender mentorship and sponsorship seem dangerous or uncomfortable for both men and women. In the business world … women have been denied equal access to male-dominated "inner sanctums": many deals are cut on the golf course, on the racquetball court, over drinks at the men's club, "at the game", or at sites not fully open to women. (McNamee & Miller, 2014, p. 181)

Fournier and Smith (2006) criticise what they call the 'masculinity genre' (p. 140) – i.e., a research framework which assumes that organisations are built around masculine norms – for maintaining that gender identity is fluid and ambiguous and for using an essentialist understanding of masculinity and femininity. They claim that gender inequality does not result from "fluid masculinities oppressing fluid femininities but men dominating women" (p. 158). A recent interview study which investigates the identity work of women managers (Billing, 2011) indeed suggests that women draw on discourses of both masculinity and femininity when talking about their own management style. What is more, Billing reports that her participants feel comfortable doing so. She concludes that "(t)he modern, professional, career-oriented woman is a legitimate social identity — even a norm" (p. 300).

Gender inequality, most notably "the gap between women's and men's pay and the sex segregation of jobs" (Acker, 2012, p. 215), is an undeniable fact; sexual harassment at work seems to remain a 'systemic' problem (Duhart, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2017), and women still only hold a small percentage of top level positions in both the public and the private sector (Halford & Leonard, 2001). Whether or not this situation is brought about, or at least in part upheld, by the fact that organisations (still) practise gendering is a contentious issue. Feminine characteristics and leadership styles such as cooperation, participatory decision-making and flat hierarchies have been identified by organisational researchers as becoming more prominent (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Fletcher, 2004). This does not, however, necessarily mean that women are the (only) beneficiaries from this development (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Some scholars writing about 'cultural feminisation' (Adkins, 2001) posit that it is, in fact, men who are able to turn performances of femininity into a form of capital at work, while the 'doing' of femininity by women is essentialised and therefore devalued.

The picture which emerges from this brief literature review is contradictory. On one hand, young professional women are faced with the ever more glamorous depictions of 'top

girls' and career women in the media and popular culture. Firmly rooted in neoliberal and postfeminist rhetoric, these enticing representations create an atmosphere of present and future possibilities. On the other hand, empirical research suggests that neoliberal capitalism continues to embrace its patriarchal foundations and that the contemporary work organisation still marginalises and devalues women. It gets further complicated when women are struggling with severe forms of emotional distress such as depression.

Chapter 2: Depression as discourse

In this chapter, I want to take a closer look at the discourses of depression currently available to us and to examine the mostly unacknowledged assumptions about normal/abnormal psychology and mental phenomena which form the foundation of these narratives. I report on work which is predominantly based on Foucault's (1977) definition of discourses as *regimes of truth*:

> [D]iscourses impose frameworks which limit what can be experienced or the meaning that experience can encompass, and thereby influence what can be said and done. (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 485)

I begin by presenting a brief overview of the history of melancholia and depression. My aim is to demonstrate that the experience and interpretation of emotional distress as *depression* is the outcome of particular socio-cultural developments and therefore must be understood within this context. I then outline the two most influential contemporary discourses of depression, the psychiatric and the psychological models. As part of the 'psy-complex', which normalises particular practices of self-making (Rose, 1996), these frameworks form the backdrop of the meaning-making activities that participants in my study engaged in. In the final section of this chapter, I explore dominant understandings of women and depression.

A brief history of melancholia and depression

Within psychiatric discourse, the definition of 'depression' as a form of mental illness appears clear and unequivocal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Popular

representations, especially in the media, usually construct similar narratives (Rowe, Tilbury, Rapley, & O'Ferrall, 2003), often emphasising individual responsibility (Gattuso, Fullagar, & Young, 2005). While there are alternative views that flow from a large number of hugely varied sources, both in academia (Blazer, 2005; Cvetkovich, 2012) and in popular culture (Kellaway, 2015), they are generally less widely known and accepted. However, a genealogy of depression reveals a complicated social history of formation. As recently as a hundred years ago, depression had just about replaced melancholia as psychiatry's preferred term for describing a phenomenon that, ostensibly, had been part of human experience for at least 2500 years. Jadhav (1996, p. 276) proposes that the "cultural association of Guilt with Melancholia survived as a 'complex' to become symptoms of 'Depression'". Recent empirical research has indeed identified a strong moral discourse within accounts of depression (Bennett, Coggan & Adams, 2003; McCullen, 2003). Bennett et al. report that their interviewees habitually described their own depression in terms of moral evaluations: 'personal failure', 'being deficient in character', 'being flawed as a person'.

Some authors (Jurk, 2005; Misbach & Stam, 2006; Rousseau, 2000) argue that the term depression was introduced or rather came to the fore as a result of the medicalisation of melancholia in the nineteenth century – a time of great social upheavals in Europe. Industrialisation, the declining power of the church and the flourishing of new political ideas that threatened the old order – Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto was published in 1848 – made up the context for this transition. Lawlor (2012, p. 106) posits that the Industrial Revolution demanded "a new evangelical spirit of personal self-discipline, a work ethic" and that in this new social order there was no room for irrationality or unproductive sadness. In the course of this shift, melancholia is said to have lost its formerly 'demonic' face and became increasingly tied to medical terminology (Ehrenberg, 2010).

By 1860, the term ‘depression’ had found its way into medical dictionaries as a symptom, namely ‘lowness of spirits’ (Mayne, 1860, as cited in Berrios, 1988, p. 264). Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926), often termed ‘the father of modern psychiatry’ (Lawlor, 2012), eventually, in the fifth edition of his highly influential 1896 textbook “Psychiatrie”, elevated ‘depression’ to the status of a distinct disease category replacing melancholia. At the beginning of the twentieth century, depression had emerged as melancholia’s ‘successor’. Berrios and Porter (1995, p. 386) speculate that physicians “preferred the word depression to melancholia … perhaps because it evoked a ‘physiological’ explanation” due to its origin within physics and its subsequent usage in relation to describing physiological states within medicine. Nevertheless, it was still considered merely one of many ‘mental disorders’ – Freud’s theory of psychopathology, for instance, primarily revolved around anxiety and guilt – whereas it is now being described as “the leading cause of disability worldwide” (WHO, 2018). How did this shift occur, and why?

In his historical analysis *The weariness of the self*, French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg (2010) explores the conceptual heritage of two of depression’s forerunners, also ‘fashionable illness[es]’ (p. 4), which dominated both academic and lay discourse at the end of the nineteenth century: neurasthenia and hysteria. He argues that while drawing on the emerging biomedical framework of psychopathology, these historical disease concepts postulated and popularised sociogenic and psychogenic processes of causation. As such, they functioned as a vehicle for expressing the frustrations, predominantly of the (upper) middle-classes, resulting from the economic, social and political upheavals of the time. Ehrenberg (2010, p. 3) claims that, in a similar way, depression today serves as the epitome of “the different facets of our unhappiness”.

A recurrent refrain identified by historians of melancholia and depression is the assumption that women are particularly prone to suffering from this ‘affliction’. For instance,

a popular theme found in Renaissance literature was love melancholy (Lawlor, 2012). The protagonist, usually a woman, would be said to go through a 'manic-depressive cycle'. The raptures of sudden infatuation were followed by a steep decline into the despair and loneliness of unrequited love. Lawlor (2012, pp. 56-57) points out that a more positively connoted version, a kind of heroic melancholy, was reserved for men:

> Humanists understood that the heroic labours of the scholar might involve ... a Promethean or Herculean melancholy ..., suffering in order to achieve the goals of civil society.

While a few women of noble descent are said to have successfully employed this fashionable, even prestigious, idea of having a melancholic temperament – to fend off (male) criticism of their own intellectual and artistic endeavours (Lawlor, 2012) – Rousseau (2000, p. 83) maintains that, for the majority of women, feigning (mental) illness was "a last resort to escape from miserable socio-economic situations".

First-wave feminism appears to have incited the reiteration of ideas about women's intellectual capacities and mental (in)stability that had been propagated by physicians and philosophers for thousands of years (Porter, 2003). In 1900, Paul Möbius (1854-1907) published a volume titled *The Physiological Feeble-Mindedness of Women* in which he stated that "instinct makes the female animal-like" (as cited in Porter, 2003, p. 151) and that women's mental illness is rooted within (the dysfunction of) their bodies. As I will attempt to demonstrate in the last section of this chapter, this presumed association still underlies a lot of current theorising of women and depression.

The psychiatric discourse and its critics

> *Critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility for different modes of living.* (Butler, 2004, p. 4)

The importance of interrogating the mostly implicit assumptions about what psychiatry is and should do derives from the enormous influence psychiatric discourse exerts, not only on researchers and practitioners, but also on public opinion and popular culture, and thereby, ultimately, on how depressed persons see themselves.

Miller and Rose (1986) claim that the history of the critique of psychiatry reaches almost as far back as psychiatry itself and that it has been fuelled by a variety of motivations such as demanding (more) rights for minority groups (a case in point being the struggle to depathologise homosexuality) or more general social criticism. However, it attained a wider public visibility in the 1960s and 1970s in the so-called Antipsychiatry movement, which mainly focused on exposing the negative effects of institutionalised psychiatry. While critics like Szasz (1960) and Goffman (1961) argued that mental illness is a construct or label which serves particular political functions, others (i.e., Laing, 1960, Foucault, 1961) did not deny the existence of mental illness per se, but emphasised the adverse effects of power, particularly capitalism, on knowledge production and institutional practices.

In order to evaluate how psychiatry currently defines and theorises depression, there is no better place to start than the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the principal classificatory system used by researchers and clinical practitioners alike, worldwide. According to the latest edition of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), a major depressive episode is characterised by "five (or more) of the following symptoms" with a duration of two weeks which "represent a change from previous functioning" with at

least one of the symptoms being either 'depressed mood' or 'loss of interest or pleasure': (1) depressed mood, (2) markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities, (3) significant weight loss or decrease or increase in appetite, (4) insomnia or hypersomnia, (5) psychomotor agitation or retardation, (6) fatigue or loss of energy, (7) feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, (8) diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, (9) recurrent thoughts of death. In addition to the above listed criteria, the symptoms "cause clinically significant distress" and "are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance … or a general medical condition". Interestingly, the clause "the symptoms are not better accounted for by bereavement" (DSM-IV) disappeared in the transition from DSM-IV to DSM-5. Thus, intense sadness as a reaction to the loss of a loved one can now be classified as a mental disorder. Similarly, the introduction of *Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder* (PMDD) into DSM-IV can be read as an indicator for the growing tendency within psychiatry to medicalise and pathologise (women's) unhappiness (Ussher, 2004).

The fact that the number of disorders listed in the DSM has tripled since its first edition was published has been defended by its developers on the grounds that these changes ensure higher reliability (Regier, Narrow, Kuhl & Kupfer, 2009). However, this claim has been arduously contested, notably from within psychiatry, and has spurred wide-reaching critiques of the value of diagnosis as such (Pickersgill, 2013). As Bracken and Thomas (2005, p. 110) point out, defining mental illnesses as clinical syndromes, that is, as lists of symptoms, implies that "our lived psychological realities can be described and ordered in the same way that our physical symptoms and bodily processes can." But what exactly makes a behaviour or experience a symptom? Roth (1986, p. 73) claims that "(p)sychiatric concern begins when distress goes beyond the ordinary problems both in severity and in duration." When there is no *qualitative* difference between those behaviours and feelings that

presumably constitute a mental disorder and the ones that we would consider as 'normal', what marks them out as indicators of pathology is the assumption that they are manifestations of an underlying *dysfunction* which can be "'discovered' by scientific methods" (Kirk & Kutchins, 1997, p. 15). Critical scholars claim, however, that political motives played a more important role in carving out new categories of mental disorders than new research evidence (Kirk & Kutchins, 1997). For instance, this argument has been put forth in relation to the genesis of guidelines for psychiatric practice such as those published by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Evidence (NICE) in the UK in 2009:

> NICE guidelines are not unbiased, value-free accounts that arise unaided from the data. They represent a particular position rooted in a technological understanding of the problems concerned, a position that guided and shaped the selection and interpretation of evidence and excluded or ignored evidence that was contradictory. When the Guidelines are published, their influence and authority further entrench the biomedical framework, legitimising the treatment of behavioural and emotional disorders with psychotropic drugs, and eclipsing other accounts of these problems (Moncrieff & Timimi, 2013, p. 68).

Whether or not the identification of underlying dysfunctions (biological or otherwise) is possible in principle remains a contentious issue within the critical literature: some authors believe that mental disorders can be demarcated even in the absence of clear biological markers (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007), others question the validity of such an approach (Bradley, 2005; Cromby, 2013). Cross-cultural research suggests that the notion of 'natural' functions is at the very least problematic: behaviour and experience cannot be separated from their sociocultural and historical context and need to be interpreted accordingly (Kleinman,

2004). Karp (1996) maintains that meaning, which includes the attribution of function, always arises as the result of a collective social process. However, this constructive process remains unacknowledged in standard psychiatry textbooks and classificatory systems such as the DSM, creating a semblance of neutrality and scientific objectivity. As a consequence, diagnosis becomes a decontextualised process: symptoms are 'collected' checklist-style and the wider context in which they occur, including the personal value and meanings attached to it, receive very little, often no attention at all (Bracken & Thomas, 2005). Boyle (2011, pp. 36-37) attributes this absence to the fact that to take context into account would "threaten[s] to make emotional and behavioural problems intelligible", thereby challenging the disease status of mental illnesses.

Horwitz (2002, p. 57) posits that the recent revival of the biomedical model of psychopathology arose due to a "crisis in psychiatry", brought about by cultural and organisational changes in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. The introduction of new medical research methods based on "disease entities that can be precisely defined" (Horwitz, 2002, p. 57), a process of deinstitutionalisation of mental patients and the political and cultural force of the anti-psychiatry movement threatened to delegitimise the psychiatric profession. The 'rediscovery' of the biomedical model can thus be seen as a survival strategy initially adopted by a small but influential group of research-oriented psychiatrists (Kirk & Kutchins, 1997), which eventually led to a reorientation toward diagnostic classification in the form of the DSM-III. Consequently, today, "most university-based psychiatrists are involved in some form of biological research (particularly genetic or biochemical)" (Bracken & Thomas, 2005, p. 4).

Another often-named factor is the pharmaceutical industry (Healy, 2000), particularly their generous sponsorship of the development of the latest editions of the DSM (Cosgrove & Krismky, 2012). Kirk and Kutchins (1997) argue that the symptom-based approach directly

leads to more potential consumers as even physicians with very little psychiatric training can quickly and easily 'identify' depressives. Recent decades have seen an even more worrisome extension of Big Pharma's reach, Direct-to-Consumer advertising (DTCA). Apart from the United States, New Zealand is one of the few Western countries which allow pharmaceutical companies to market their drugs not only to doctors and hospitals, but to everyone. "Unlike most other new drugs, the public were made aware of fluoxetine (Prozac), not by their doctors or pharmacists, but by new magazines" (Bracken & Thomas, 2005, p. 173). Bracken and Thomas (2005, p. 172) claim that Prozac owes its phenomenal success to a large part to several popular publications – often in the form of depression memoirs such as Kramer's *Listening to Prozac* (1997) – because they helped change "our background cultural assumptions about states of pain and suffering and what we can do about them".

Paradoxically, the wide-spread use of antidepressants as a treatment for various forms of psychological distress (such as anxiety disorders) actually contradicts the disease model of depression because "(t)hese drugs do not treat specific psychiatric conditions but help alleviate many forms of human unhappiness without regard to diagnoses" (Horwitz, 2002, p. 227). Borch-Jacobsen (2009, p. 192) posits that it was the introduction of randomized placebo-controlled trials (RCTs) as the new gold standard for measuring therapeutic efficacy which "wipe(d) out psychotherapy with the vigor of a weedkiller". According to him, the fact that RCTs commonly attribute the effects of psychotherapeutic interventions to 'unspecific factors', that is, placebo, represents a systematic bias against psychotherapy. Moncrieff (2008, p. 137) points to an even more fundamental problem when it comes to evaluating existing studies into the biological foundations of depression:

> The sorts of problems that are diagnosed as depression can vary considerably depending on the use of different diagnostic criteria, the interpretation of those

criteria, and public and professional attitudes. Therefore, the first problem with the research is that it is difficult to know what sorts of problems are encompassed under the rubric of 'depression'.

It is therefore not surprising that research on putative causal mechanisms, be they genetic, neuro-anatomic or chemical, overwhelmingly finds risk factors, tendencies and vulnerabilities rather than clear demarcations between the normal and the pathological. Findings are at best inconsistent (Kingdon & Young, 2007; Moncrieff, 2008; Ruhe, Mason & Schene, 2007). This is in line with Nightingale and Cromby's (1999) contention that mental phenomena always are *enabled*, but rarely, if ever, *caused* by biology.

Psychological discourses of depression

The two most influential clinical psychological theories of the twentieth century are the psychodynamic and the cognitive-behavioural model. While the dynamic perspective dominated (American) psychiatry until the 1970s (Horwitz, 2002) and continues to be influential within popular culture and therapeutic discourse (Parker, 1997), cognitivism is said to have become clinical psychology's 'poster child', particularly its application in therapy (Boyle, 2011). This is not the place to undertake a comprehensive critique of the particularities of Freud's and Beck's models of psychopathology. Instead, I want to map out the discursive space created by these frameworks and flesh out some of the implications for how we think about 'treating' depression.

As laid out in my historical overview, the medicalisation of melancholia entailed that objects formerly located in the outside world, i.e., demonic forces, were turned into internal attributes (Ehrenberg, 2010). Within psychology, these attributes are often described as

intrapsychic structures and processes. Boyle (2011) argues that this shift enabled a particular kind of reasoning, namely attributing the status of causal factors to these 'entities' – for instance, low self-worth 'generating' depression. Geertz (1979, as quoted in Cromby & Nightingale, 1999, p. 229) writes:

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action, organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

From this perspective, the social and cultural environment appears merely as a backdrop against which the drama of individual psychopathology is played out. In his critique of "cognitive psychology as ideology", Sampson (1981) points out that this process of "psychological reification" magically transforms social structures into individual psychological characteristics. Not only does this approach deny, or at least minimise, the significance of particular historical circumstances, it purports to formulate universal laws of psychological functioning. While psychodynamic approaches recognise the mutability of both content and form of psychopathology (i.e., the emergence and disappearance of 'hysteria'), they nevertheless postulate the existence of an enduring self-as-structure (i.e., Frosh, 1991).

Boyle (2011, p. 37) attributes the ahistoricity that characterises much of conventional psychological discourse to psychology's "insecurity about its academic and social acceptance as a science". The core metaphors of psychodynamic and cognitivist models of the self construct the mind as an energy system and as an information processing system respectively.

In both theories, early learning experiences are postulated to shape the individual's psychological make-up and thus elicit later psychological dysfunctions. This focus on discoverable psychic realities and presumed causal mechanisms explaining the present by reference to the past bestows psychology with an appearance of scientificity and denies its philosophical roots (Bradley, 2005; Teo, 2005).

Freud's model of psychopathology is based on the assumption that negative affect, particularly anxiety, arises when a libidinal desire is in conflict with societal norms as represented by the super-ego. These ego-threatening impulses are then relegated to the unconscious by means of defence mechanisms such as *repression*, thereby producing symptoms without apparent cause. In the case of depression, or rather melancholia, anger or disappointment felt towards a formerly beloved person is turned against the afflicted person's own ego via "identification … with the abandoned object" (Freud, 1957, p. 249). While Freud's model focuses on intrapsychic processes, the significance of social context for the development of melancholic states is implied by proposing a relational conflict as the source of the melancholic symptoms, and by explicitly incorporating the forbidding influence of societal norms.

However, while psychoanalytic ideas remain influential as part of the 'psy-complex' (Parker, 1997), the currently dominant approach within psychotherapy is cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). Critical scholars have linked this shift to the rise of neoliberalism and its core ideals of "individualization, responsibilization and self-management" (Teghtsoonian, 2009, p. 31).

> Today's imperial power no longer looks like Rome (or Bonhoeffer's Nazi Germany). ... It prefers to control through persuasion and "common sense" rather than direct police or military coercion, though it often resorts to such action if "free markets" or

> the power of economic elites are threatened. It works not primarily through the direct imposition of one nation on other nations, but through the routine activities of international corporations and financial institutions. Otherwise, neoliberalism imposes precisely the same conditions that Carter describes as the typical effects of Roman imperialism. (Rogers-Vaughn, 2014, p. 506)

Psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on depth, complex concepts and time-consuming therapeutic interventions, does not match the needs and values of this new social and economic order. The cognitivist model, by contrast, frames depression as the result of negative thought patterns (Beck, 1976) and proposes a highly standardised, mechanistic treatment approach. This aligns well with the "increasing social and political emphasis on the … individual as consumer" (Boyle, 2011, p. 38). In a similar vein, Ehrenberg (2010) argues that neoliberalism's reign was preceded by an *erosion* of common norms in the 1960s and 70s. As a consequence, Freud's model of melancholia as the expression of an unconscious conflict was gradually replaced by a model postulating *emptiness and weariness* as the core features of melancholia/depression. This emptiness or lack of a defined identity appears to stand in direct opposition to contemporary (neoliberal) ideals of self-realisation, purposefulness, and initiative.

The psychological discourses of depression form part of what social commentators have termed 'therapeutic culture', the ascendancy of which in the second half of the twentieth century appears to represent a clear rupture with earlier explanatory frameworks based on religious and moral reasoning (Bullard, 2002). Sociologist Nikolas Rose (1990) claims that this is partly due to the psychotherapeutic having invaded previously 'unpsychologised' areas of our lives, thereby turning them into aspects of personal identity and subjectivity. Work is now seen as a "matter … of personal fulfilment", mundane experiences such as marriage or

childbirth become “problems of coping and adjustment”, normal experiences of loss (the death of a loved one, the ending of a romantic relationship or friendship) need to be processed within a therapeutic setting, and social life is discovered as a “key functional element … in … our personal happiness” (Rose, 1990, pp. 244-245). What Ehrenberg interprets as a decline of common norms is seen as a new form of normativity by Foucauldian-inspired critics of therapeutic culture such as Rose. From this perspective, contemporary practices of subjectivity are characterised by relentless, never-ending self-examination and self-discipline. However, Wright (2008) claims that this shift towards interiority also harbours the potentiality of giving a voice to those that have hitherto been marginalised and ignored by acknowledging their private suffering.

The aim of this brief critical discussion was to develop a critical, socio-historical account of the discursive boundaries constraining the sense-making activities of my research participants. The main themes I have identified as potentially relevant for understanding how young, high-performing women interpret and deal with experiences of emotional distress are the increasing medicalisation of unhappiness and the growing individualisation and neoliberalisation of depression and mental health discourses. In the last section of this literature review, I explore the gendering of contemporary discourses of depression.

Depression – the female malady?

Earlier, I argued that the notion of inherent sex differences has informed theories of melancholia (and later depression) since Antiquity. In what follows, I attempt to demonstrate that this notion continues to act as a discursive device in contemporary writings on women and depression, in both scientific and popular texts.

The likelihood of women being diagnosed with depression is commonly reported to be twice that of men (WHO, n.d.). From the biomedical perspective that dominates current psychiatric explanatory frameworks, women's heightened vulnerability to depression results from hormonal imbalances "linked to premenstrual, post-natal and menopausal stages of the reproductive lifecycle" (Ussher, 2010, p. 12). Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz' work, Hurt (2007, p. 286) claims that "the maintenance of the sexed-body-as-natural notion", that she identifies in her analysis of contemporary media discourses around women and depression, is beneficial to men, who are positioned as 'the mind' and thus superior to women, 'the body'. Depression in men is commonly not linked to hormonal deficits, whereas the female body, particularly during pregnancy, "invokes a sense of danger" (Hurt, 2007, p. 299) due to its assumed proneness to developing depression. Like Hurt, other critical feminist researchers (Ussher, 2010; Lafrance & Stoppard, 2006) maintain that the perceived connection between depression and 'natural' characteristics of the female body mainly serves a disciplinary function with the objective of producing compliant consumer subjects who "self-regulate with antidepressants" (Lafrance, 2007, p. 128). At the same time, self-positionings within a biomedical frame can provide relief and a sense of personal agency for women who have been diagnosed with depression by countering the still-prevalent perception of its being a character flaw (Cartwright, Gibson & Read, 2018; Fullagar & O'Brien, 2014).

Another influential theory of female depression locates its origins within women's minds, more precisely, their 'cognitive style'. In a widely-cited review of research on sex differences in unipolar depression, Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) proposes that women's 'ruminative tendency', i.e., to dwell on negative events and experiences of failure, functions as both a causal and precipitating factor for depression. Similar to the biomedical model, this perspective constructs women as inherently deficient, a perspective echoed by popular media texts urging women to "follow in the footsteps of emotionally-sound men, by exercising more

and chatting about their feelings so they can just "get over it"" (Hurt, 2007, p. 298). For Stoppard (2000, p. 60), this type of explanation exemplifies what she calls *susceptibility approaches*. These theorise women's depression in terms of feminine (personality) traits such as "excessive needs for approval and support from other people". *Specificity approaches*, by contrast, attribute women's depression to early psychological development, more specifically "the mother-child relationship during infancy" (Stoppard, 2000, p. 67). In Dana Jack's 'self-silencing theory' (Jack & Ali, 2010; Jack & Dill, 1992), for instance, women become depressed due to unfulfilled or blocked needs for relational intimacy. Stoppard (2000) criticises both types of theories for being essentialist and therefore complicit in obscuring the role of gender norms in depression.

In conventional psychological models of women's depression, the social context is either not considered at all or theorised in terms of difficult life events or lack of social support. Thus, "the 'social' is treated as an object … capable of exerting causal influences as an aetiological factor in depression" (Stoppard, 1998, p. 81). Gender norms and expectations, often termed the 'good woman' discourse by feminist scholars, are linked to depression in multiple ways. Within this discourse, women are positioned as having a natural propensity for caring and nurturing activities, such as raising children and looking after the needs of others. Thus, feeling and expressing frustration about the gendered division of labour – especially when women's work is tedious and unappreciated – can produce guilt and 'unauthorised' suffering (Stoppard, 1998). Ussher (2010, p. 13) points out that gender norms also shape the way healthcare professionals diagnose depression, through their labelling of "normative aspects of feminine behaviour (such as crying or loss of interest in sex) as 'symptoms'". Another facet is feminine beauty ideals as propagated by the mass media and popular culture. These often negatively influence the body image of young girls and lead to

significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction reported by female teenagers, as compared to their male peers (Kostanski & Gullone, 1998).

Gender not only produces cultural norms and identity practices, but also structures women's material lives. Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and inequality (Yu, 2018), which are in turn often associated with experiences of discrimination (Belle & Doucet, 2003, p. 106):

> Discrimination exposes individuals to the undeserved contempt of others and to repeated negative experiences over which they have little or no control. Discrimination can lead to lowered economic or social status and losses … which are particularly frustrating and anger-producing "in a culture which promotes the expectation of achievement in proportion to merit" (Fernando, 1984, p. 45). Such experiences … can lead to diminished self-esteem and feelings of helplessness, inducing depression.

Furthermore, female victimisation, especially sexual abuse before the age of eighteen, is a well-researched risk factor for developing depression in later life (Cutler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Kendler, Kuhn, & Prescott, 2004; Roosa, Reinholtz, & Angelini, 1999; Weiss, Longhurst, & Mazure, 1999).

The aim of this two-part literature review has been, firstly, to establish why it is worthwhile to study emotional struggles and distress as discursively constructed at the intersection of contemporary female identity practices and workplace norms. I have attempted to show that young professional women, aka 'top girls', represent a particularly 'rich' demographic as various dominant discourses, in particular neoliberal and postfeminist vocabularies, likely inform their meaning-making activities. Secondly, by tracing the

discursive formation of depression, with a particular focus on how these accounts were and are gendered, I have marked out the investigation of experiences of emotional distress as an especially fruitful site for understanding and critiquing current gender relations. I have argued that the discursive resources available to young high-performing women tend to render the contextual and structural determinants of their emotional distress invisible.

Chapter 3 – Practising the self: a theoretical framework for psychosocial research on women's emotional distress

My doctoral research project is embedded within a critical, feminist, social constructionist, epistemology and methodology. Drawing on the tenets of critical discursive psychology, it

> attempts to describe the configurations of identity and subjectivity which result at particular moments and which might be maintained for shorter and longer durations. It also attempts to describe the cultural resources, struggles, interactions and relations that the person is working with and how these have been mobilised, temporarily stabilised and turned into their own personal order. (Wetherell, 2007, p. 672)

A feminist perspective becomes articulated within the 'liberatory' aim (Grasswick, 2011) of the analyses I undertook of participants' talk-in-interaction, namely to identify and challenge the potentially harmful discursive underpinnings of contemporary practices of femininity. Employing a practice-based approach to theorising subjectivity, which I develop in this chapter, allows me to conceive of women's experiences of emotional distress as produced at the intersection of individual identity and embodiment (the psychological) with particular environments such as the workplace (the social). Working with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1977, 1990), my analyses flow from the assumption that the social and material contexts in which individuals operate become 'sedimented' in the form of bodily and discursive practices (Wetherell, 2006). In other words, I am interested in how dominant discourses and meaning-frameworks, such as the ones I outlined in the previous chapter, are

reworked as internal, psychological processes by participants and how these sense-making activities are intertwined with the feeling body.

In what follows, I outline my theoretical toolkit: a careful selection of analytic concepts that appear useful for understanding the phenomenon at hand and that inform the empirical analyses presented in Part II of this thesis. I begin with an account of identity, a central element of subjectivity, theorised as a set of key practices. I follow this with an exploration of the affective investments that ground and psychologically 'enable' these practices. I conclude the chapter with reflections on theorising emotional distress and on the relationship between experience and discourse.

The practice of identity

The 'discursive turn' in the social sciences, which owes a lot to Foucault's writing on power and subjectification, dramatically changed the theorisation of identity. Rather than understanding identity, personal or social, as the essential, unchanging core of our being, scholars working from within a poststructuralist or social constructionist framework view identity as "actively, ongoingly, dynamically constructed" as well as "contingent, plural, fragmented and sometimes contradictory" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010, p. 83). As a result, the analytical focus shifts from the individual and her internal processes to the social and thus to intersubjectivity. Wetherell (2008) insists that a focus on subjectivity (as opposed to identity) may lead to an over-emphasis on the private, introspective aspect of experience and may neglect or even completely ignore the role of discourse in the process of subjectification. The solution she suggests is a focus on practice which 'collapses' the often-used difference between social and personal identity (Wetherell, 2006). Gender identity is a case in point. Within feminist epistemology, "gender is understood not as an attribute of individuals but

rather as an axis of social relations" (Grasswick, 2011, p. xiv). At the same time, gender forms part of our private, embodied experience; for instance, in the way we hold our bodies while walking or sitting, in our affective vocabularies or in the way we relate to others. Thus gender must be thought of simultaneously as a situated performance (Butler, 1990) *and* a social institution (Martin, 2004). Practice theory does precisely this: a thinking-together of individual experience and social relations. The analytical focus lies on identifying patterned activities which are socially shared and distributed but carried out by individual social actors in particular contexts. Key identity practices are *relationality* (Chodorow, 1999; Prandini, 2015), *consistency* or recognisability (Bourdieu, 1990), *accountability* (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and *positioning* (Davies & Harre, 1990; Weedon, 1987). When social actors construct (situation-specific) identity narratives they do so by *positioning themselves* within the available cultural narratives:

> 'Positioning' refers to the process through which speakers adopt, resist and offer 'subject positions' (identities) that are made available in 'master narratives' or 'discourses'. For example, speakers can position themselves (and others) as victims or perpetrators, active or passive, powerful or powerless, and so on. The narrative of 'heterosexual romance' makes positions such as heroic prince/passive princess, or husband/wife available, and tells us what sorts of events do and do not belong to that narrative." (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010, p. 86)

Another feature which characterises identity work is *narrative* (Williams, 2000). Some theorists argue that telling stories about and to ourselves and others is what creates the self in the first place (e.g. Sarbin, 1986):

> (A) concern with narrative encourages us to think of identity as a construction rather than either a discovery or an attribution…. [and] may allow more space for the inclusion of social dimensions in an understanding of identity formation by both making reference to the availability of common stories in a culture, and to the shared use of such stories by groups of individual actors. The relationship between identity and morality may also be understood to be predicated on … issues of narrative, character and plot, since stories themselves can be constructed … with implicit or explicit reference to virtues, consequences and rules of conduct." (Williams, 2000, p. 82)

Identity practices, which are characterised by both flexibility and mutability as well as by a certain degree of consistency over time, form a central part of subjective experience. Another important angle for the analysis of social practices is the question of power. Who is 'allowed' or enabled to use certain discursive positions, narratives and interactional patterns and who is marginalised and excluded (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013)? Taking into account the way power structures social conduct allows an analysis of the forms of agency that particular groups and individuals have access to (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004).

A social justice agenda also gave rise to *intersectionality* thinking within identity studies. The black feminist and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality in order to "theorise[d] the multiple, simultaneous and intersecting oppressions faced by black women" (Chadwick, 2017, p. 6). Propagating an emic intersectional approach to studying diversity in the workplace, Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) caution against the assumption that the disadvantages associated with devalued social positions such as being a woman or being disabled simply can be 'added up'. Instead, they advocate a careful analysis of what types of difference generate privilege in specific,

circumscribed contexts. Similarly, Staunaes (2003) argues that intersectionality must be viewed as a 'process of doing' which produces different experiences at different intersections. A case in point is Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) work on the entanglement of gender and social class which suggests that middle-class and working-class girls growing up in Britain face very different pressures and constraints.

An analytic focus on practices produced in specific contexts, at particular intersections enabled me to pay detailed attention to subjective experience and meaning-making activities, while at the same time linking these to wider discursive fields and socio-cultural contexts. However, the fact that an individual has access to, or is 'hailed' by, a particular discursive identity does not automatically lead to her taking it on and inhabiting it. In the next section, I explore the affective and bodily foundations of identity practices, that is, the question of engagement.

Habitus, the body and affective investment

Habitus, one of the central concepts in Bourdieu's philosophy of practice, is shaped by the individual's unique history of social interactions and provides her with a "unitary lifestyle" (Bourdieu, 1998) consisting of "a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices" (Bourdieu as cited in Maton, 2012, p. 50). As "an object of study and an analytic" (Probyn, 2004, p. 229), habitus affords a way to explain how "such factors as class, gender and race enter subjectivity and discourse as experiential (rather than mere categorical or indexical) influences", namely, "through personal-social histories" (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 11). The role of 'the feeling body' in infusing the present with the past is crucial:

> The body … enacts the past, bringing it back to life. What is "learned by the body" is not something that one has … but something that one is. (Bourdieu as cited in Probyn, 2004, pp. 231-232)

Like Crossley (2005) in his work on reflexive body techniques, Probyn (2004, p. 234) draws upon Marcel Mauss' notion of habitus and his aim to analyse "the total man" which warrants an "integration of the physiological-psychological-sociological". In contrast to work based on the Bourdieusian definition which often emphasises "that it is the social that rules" (Probyn, 2004, p. 236), Mauss' model places more emphasis on embodiment (Crossley, 2005). Both Crossley and Probyn point out that certain types of knowledge are not only embodied, but *in and of the body*. This knowledge resides in practices, in *how* something is done, and often cannot be communicated or imparted without using the body (i.e. in the form of demonstrations); it does not possess a cognitive correlate. Examples of these kinds of 'body techniques' (Mauss, 1979) are sitting in feminine ways or 'mansprawling', extending one's hand for a greeting, or "throwing like a girl" (Young, 1980).

Crossley (2001, pp. 128-129) claims that "[i]n contrast to the fixed instincts which appear well suited to fitting other animals to their environments, our adaptive advantage is our capacity for habituation". Similarly, Wetherell (2012) criticises the still influential 'basic emotion' paradigm for equating emotions with innate neurophysiological templates and instead proposes the concept of *affective practice* that amalgamates the embodied, material aspects of emotion with its socio-cultural components. She further states that "analyses of feeling practices" help us "better understand people's allegiances and investments" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 10) and thus provide a way into the study of identities. The incorporation of affect and emotion thus not only enriches identity theory, it also bridges the gap between individual experience and the social world. Individuals partake in social games by developing

a ‘feel’ for them (Crossley, 2001) – “[h]abitus as a sense of the game is the social game incarnate, become nature” (Lamaison, 1986, p. 113). This affective investment, that Bourdieu terms *illusio* (1990), in turn imbues the game with reality. Affect ‘ties’ the body into its social and material contexts, thereby creating and simultaneously ‘pinning down’ particular relational dynamics and identities. The analysis of affect and emotion thus helps illuminate the production and maintenance of identities *as well as* of social structures and is therefore especially valuable for research with a cultural critique agenda.

What, then, is the relationship between habitus and the practice(s) of identity discussed in the previous section?

> [Bourdieu] suggests that practice is the result of various habitual schemas and dispositions (habitus), combined with resources (capital), being activated by certain structured social conditions (field) which they, in turn, belong to and variously reproduce and modify. (Crossley, 2001, p. 84)

Practices are thus developed and carried out when habitus meets field, this ‘encounter’ being mediated by the availability of different, i.e. social, economic, cultural, and affective, capitals. Put differently, the self is practised in particular ways at any given moment as a result of a meshing of the individual’s past (embodied and carried into the present in the form of habitus) with her present context (in the form of available capitals and the emergent characteristics of fields). As Lahire (2011, p. 78) points out, consequently

> [t]he differences in observable behaviour between one context and another are then seen simply as the product of a refraction of the same habitus (the same system of dispositions) in different contexts.

Lahire (2011) contends that the assumption of a singular habitus cannot be upheld within the context of highly differentiated, heterogeneous societies where the early and continuous "experience of a plurality of worlds" (p. 28) is bound to generate a wide range of "social repertoires … that are distinct from another, but interconnected and certainly containing common elements" (p. 32). This view is compatible with an intersectional approach to theorising and studying identity. By conceiving of gender, class, ethnicity and other salient social categories as being tied to, or produced by, particular social repertoires sedimented in the body/mind through socialisation, it is possible to analyse the identity practices of young professional women with different identity 'profiles', i.e. middle-class Pakeha professional women versus working-class ethnic minority professional women. The guiding question for my research could thus be formulated as follows: is it possible to identify common elements within the social repertoires or identity practices of young professional women that are 'activated' by particular work environments?

Anthias (1998, p. 510) proposes the notion of "a relational ontological space … for investigating the social relations of difference and inequality." Writing about her own multiple and differentially distributed identities (Greek Cypriot, woman, British, sociologist), she states that,

> these labels are not exactly like different coloured cloaks that we can don and then discard … [but] more like different layers which can be worn in a different order. (Anthias, 1998, p. 507)

My interest in the intersection of gender, ethnicity and class in the social position of young professional woman (in Aotearoa New Zealand) focuses on subjective, experiential aspects rather than on how particular identities produce material or cultural (dis)advantages. In

contrast to macro-sociological approaches which often use the strategy of 'counting bodies' for measuring and analysing inequalities, this research investigates whether and how a contemporary cultural ideal of femininity, namely the 'top girl' fantasy, inflects participants' accounts in regular, recognisable ways. Put differently, I want to explore the shape and contours of this particular 'ontological space'. More specifically, my aim is to flesh out the fissures, contradictions and conflicts inherent in being a young professional woman, where privilege and considerable socio-economic capital clash with gender oppression, workplace sexism and the 'myth of meritocracy'. How are these contradictory notions negotiated and embodied? How do young professional women orient to the 'women can have it all' promise that characterises the 'top girl' narrative?

Fantasies and idealised identities exert a strong affective pull – they motivate and entice by promising those who manage to live (up to) them the reward of 'feeling good':

> Attributions of happiness might be how social norms and ideals become *affective*, as if relative proximity to those norms and ideals creates happiness. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 11, emphasis added)

Affective investment in current identity practices is thus shaped both by the individual's embodied past – and 'the promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010) which inheres in positioning herself close to idealized forms of femininity – as well as by the immediate social context.

The universality and particularity of emotional distress

While the notion of affective-discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012) appears productive for analysing the everyday, contextualised 'doing' of emotions and the social

functions that these different types of emoting serve, it is less clear whether a practice-based approach can usefully be employed in regard to studying and understanding emotional distress. Current scientific models of mental 'illness' suggest that dysfunctional biological processes are the primary cause of different forms of emotional distress such as depression. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, the evidence for such a view is far from conclusive. Medical anthropologists Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1991) attempt to think together the biological and the socio-cultural by proposing a definition of suffering which is rooted in the notion of the *human condition* and its 'shared forms of resistance':

> Human beings find their plans and actions resisted by *forms of resistance in the life course, in social relations, in biophysical processes*. Out of these forms of resistance emerge what is shared in our human condition: loss, deprivation, oppression, pain. … Suffering is constituted out of these shared forms of resistance and by our greatly different ways of reacting to inevitable misfortune. (p. 294, emphasis added)

From a social constructionist perspective, our "different ways of reacting" arise, at least in part, due to the various ways in which emotional distress is constructed or narrated (and embodied) in different historical eras, geographical regions and socio-cultural settings. It is these practices of meaning-making which seem to offer the most readily accessible pathway into (interpreting) subjective experience. Rudberg and Nielsen (2005, p. 127) ask the pertinent question of how the available cultural resources and discursive positions "are … made subjectively meaningful to the persons involved". For them, like most psychoanalytically-inspired psychosocial scholars, the answer is provided by the individual's history of intimate relationships and how this history provides her with "an inner

psychological readiness for certain discourses and not for others" (Rudberg & Nielsen, 2005, p. 128). Feminist and psychoanalyst Lynne Layton (1998, p. 16) claims that

> (c)onflict arises not from the collision of subject positions, nor from the fact that some of these subject positions are more pleasurable than others …, but rather from the fact that internalizations are products of numerous conflicting relationships, relationships with different degrees of power to approve or disapprove, to give or withhold love.

This focus on relationality as a primary driver of or motivation for human action that is rooted in the 'desire for recognition' (Crossley, 2001, p. 7), potentially provides a common ground for otherwise distinct, and sometimes opposed, approaches to psychosocial research on subjectivity and emotional distress – such as those drawing on psychoanalytic ideas and social constructionist projects. While Layton's view stresses the importance of affective dynamics within intimate relationships for theorising emotional conflicts, other scholars place more emphasis on socio-material constraints or social marginalisation and thus on the harmful effects of unequal power relations (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Belle & Doucet, 2003; Yu, 2018). How might this relational lens contribute to contemporary understandings of depression?

Employing a phenomenological approach to the analysis of depression narratives, philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe (2005, 2012) posits that depressive moods arise due to a distortion of what he terms 'existential feelings'. According to Ratcliffe (2009), this background sense of being ensures that individuals perceive themselves as belonging to the world, which in turn is experienced as real and providing possibilities for action, perception etc. Depression, by contrast, is characterised by a distorted version of existential feelings, namely, by a sense of the world as unreal and of the self as disconnected from reality and

other people (Ratcliffe, 2014). One could say that the depressive's world is no longer "imbued with personal meaning" (Rudberg & Nielsen, 2005, p. 134). A critical discursive reading of Ratcliffe's concept brings to the fore the relational meaning conveyed by the affective practices he describes: the feeling of not-belonging and of disconnection from the world. Being affectively 'unplugged' from the customary social games appears to be at the core of experiences narrated as depression. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, one of the problems with the individualising and medicalising lens applied to the experience of emotional distress within dominant depression discourses is that the transformation of "misery … into major depressive disorder" entails an invalidation of "suffering as moral commentary and political performance" (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991, pp 275-276). The communicative potential of emotional distress/depression is lost.

Another useful concept for theorising emotional distress in relation to identity is Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of 'unliveable identities'. Butler claims that certain (gender) identities are normative and therefore intelligible and that the act of claiming and performing these identities produces particular subjects. These *legitimate* bodies and performances are juxtaposed with 'the abject', that is, identities, and ways of being and embodying which are routinely marginalised and devalued. While Butler focuses on the effects of heteronormativity in her work, her notion of the abject "relates to all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be "lives" and whose materiality is understood not to "matter"" (Meijer & Prins, 1998, p. 281). Questions that arise in connection with this research include: What are the norms of intelligibility that characterise and frame the identity negotiations of young professional women? Into what kinds of affective and discursive practices are women who position themselves within the 'top girl' narrative interpellated? And what are the social and political consequences of these processes of subjectification?

In his historical analysis of 'cultures of subjectivity' in the west, Andreas Reckwitz (2006) employs a somewhat similar notion when he speaks about positive and negative 'subject models' which could be said to refer to idealised and abject subjectivities respectively, as contained within discursive practices. Given that, historically, psychopathology has been constructed as deviant and non-normative, I was interested in exploring what kind of identity work ensues when the subject positions 'depressed person' and 'top girl' are claimed simultaneously. What kind of 'trouble' emerges at this intersection?

The relationship between narrative/discourse and experience

The question of how much of our subjective experience is constituted via meaning-making, i.e., through discursive practices, is a vexed one and has haunted social constructionist and poststructuralist researchers from the first. I am no exception. While I certainly agree with critical mental health scholars who point to the socio-political origin of the criteria used for differentiating between what are presumed to be healthy versus pathological mental or emotional states (Brown, 1995; Cohen, 2008; Eisenberg, 1988), I also want to acknowledge the reality of the suffering experienced by depressed women (Cosgrove, 2000; Ussher, 2004, 2008a,b). Whatever depression might 'be' – a genetic vulnerability 'set off' by traumatic experiences and/or exclusionary practices, or a medicalisation of 'normal' unhappiness – it *feels* debilitating. My primary motivation for undertaking this research, therefore, is to *create possibilities for women to feel differently* by analysing the affective-discursive and identity practices that young professional women habitually engage in.

Chapter 4 – Research design, data collection, ethics and analytic procedures

In this last chapter of Part I of this thesis I outline the design and implementation of my doctoral research, engage in ethical reflections on conducting critical qualitative investigations, and describe the analytic procedures I chose for making sense of the data. It builds on the epistemological and methodological framework established in Chapter 3 and provides a succinct overview of the methods used. The four publications contained in this thesis make up Part II which presents my empirical analyses. Therefore, in addition to the contents of this chapter, more detailed discussions of the methodological rationale and the steps involved in each analysis can be found in Chapters 5 to 8.

Planning and designing the research

Who and where are the 'top girls'?

As detailed in the Introduction and Chapter 1, my decision to focus this research on 'top girls' arose both from my own experience of juggling recurring emotional distress ('depression') and a high achiever identity and my desire to explore and critique the rise of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses in relation to contemporary modes of femininity. In terms of designing the research, the question was: how could I identify women who position themselves within the 'top girl' narrative? After discussing this issue with my supervisors, I quickly discarded the idea of trying to recruit women who self-identify as successful due to the prevalence of the 'tall-poppy syndrome' (TPS) in New Zealand culture (Kirkwood, 2007). TPS is the social norm or practice of 'cutting high achievers down to size', as a consequence of which public self-positionings as 'successful' are generally frowned upon (Deverson,

2010). Instead, I decided to recruit young professional women who work in professional services such as law and accounting, which are typically characterised as "high pressure environments" (Forstenlechner & Lettice, 2008; Pringle et al., 2017) and historically and persistently gendered (Anderson-Gough, Grey & Robson, 2005; Haynes, 2012).

My interest in investigating, on the one hand, the identity practices associated with the 'top girl' ideal, and, on the other hand, meaning-making activities related to negative affectivity and emotional distress/depression, led me to design a two-part project. The aim of Study One, which consisted of focus group discussions with young professional women, was to draw out participants' work-related habitus, with a particular focus on conflicts, pressures and frictions. For Study Two, I conducted individual interviews with young professional women to collect their 'depression stories', with a particular focus on how the self is narrated in relation to this experience of emotional distress.

Focus groups

Focus group discussions provide "access to a piece of social interaction which draws on shared understandings" (Callaghan, 2005, p. 2). Furthermore, by placing participants in a *peer* group context, I hoped to elicit meaning-making activities associated with these women's professional identities and thereby a particular 'field' (Bourdieu, 1990), namely, the workplace. Allan (2005) argues that focus group conversations are constitutive of gendered subjectivities which are fashioned or performed through various social actions. Paying attention to the *process* of co-constructing – i.e., agreeing on, contesting or 'troubling' (Edley & Wetherell, 1995) – particular meanings maps out the affective-discursive terrain participants traverse to do the work of identity. My task was to facilitate the establishment of common ground for the group members' contributions to the discussion (Hydén & Bülow,

2003) by ‘evoking’ subject positions related to gender, professionalism, and work. At the same time, I needed to select prompts that would “stimulate participants to respond and to agree and disagree *with each other*, rather than just answering the moderator” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 117, emphasis in the original).

In order to prepare for the facilitation of these small group discussions, I conducted an extensive literature review (which provided the basis for Chapter 1). In the process, I identified a range of topics that would be useful for generating discussion and illuminating frictions within participants’ habitus. Subsequently, I developed a semi-structured focus group guide which I intended to fulfil two functions. Firstly, it would ensure that areas relevant to my research questions would be covered while allowing enough space for other relevant topics to emerge. Secondly, it would allow me to create a context that would likely draw out conflictual self-positionings by introducing affectively loaded and contested themes. Part of this guide was a range of carefully selected prompts such as newspaper headlines or celebrity images and quotes (see Appendix G). As I was new to qualitative research, I decided to run two pilots, with other female psychology doctoral students, to test the questions and hone my facilitation skills.

Interviews

In line with the overarching research aim of better understanding the connections between young professional women’s working lives, identity negotiations and emotional distress, I intended to use insights from a preliminary analysis of the focus group data to inform the individual interviews I would conduct for Study Two. I therefore planned to conduct and complete data collection for Study One and to identify key themes and struggles before beginning interviews for Study Two.

I chose a narrative interview format (Riessman, 1993, 2008) for investigating how young professional women make sense of their experience of depression. Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the topic, it was paramount to employ a method of data collection that would enable me to build trust and ensure that feelings of distress, which might arise as a result of the interview process, would be dealt with appropriately:

> Participation in research involving sensitive topics can stimulate powerful emotional responses on the part of the subjects both during and after the data collection activities. (Cowles, 1988, p. 167)

Existing research indicates that carefully conducted, ethically guided unstructured interviews on sensitive topics are unlikely to cause lasting emotional distress and that participants, in fact, often benefit from the experience (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Using an open-ended format encourages the production of rich data and orients the interview to the participants' terms and preferences. Narrative interviews are well-suited for investigating 'disruptive' life events (Riessman, 2012) such as depression, as these experiences threaten the logic and coherence of previously constructed and endorsed self-narratives (Kangas, 2001, Karp, 1996). While "narratives about the self, are culturally and discursively "situated"" (Freeman, 2001, p. 287), they are also characterised by a certain repetitiveness. Severe emotional distress calls into question a person's habitual ways of being: "the self is a constant recursive process in which the harrowing experience of the disease prompts the patient toward reviewing his or her own self-image" (Westerbeek & Mutsaers, 2008, p. 28). A narrative interview format was intended to give participants the opportunity to engage in such a process of 'reviewing', with minimal interruptions by the interviewer, and thus seemed best suited to my research aims.

Based on my readings of the critical mental health literature, I prepared a few set interview questions to incorporate into the natural flow of the conversation. These questions were meant to gauge particular aspects of the meaning-making process such as participants' own theories of depression. In order to encourage interviewees to stay close to their lived experience, I decided to integrate the use of images and metaphors into the interviewing process by asking participants to bring or think of an image they associate with their experience of depression (see Appendix K). Initially, I intended to provide participants with a selection of images associated with alternative, more marginalised conceptions of depression (i.e., depression as political resistance, Rogers-Vaughn, 2014) as I felt strongly about incorporating a critical perspective into the research process. However, when I discussed the feasibility of this approach with both my supervisors and members of a critical research group I am part of, the consensus that emerged was that, before engaging in a process that might challenge participants' 'beliefs', I would need to build rapport with them. My colleagues further cautioned me that this might not be possible in the course of one interview. Thus, I eventually decided to merely explore participants' chosen depression image or metaphor at the beginning of the interview and to attempt to engage critically with their narratives in the form of 'disruptive' questions where and if appropriate.

Recruitment and data collection

In September 2016, I was granted approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (ref 016677) for a period of three years. After initial discussions with my supervisors on how to best go about recruiting, the idea came up to approach current women students in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme at the Business School. However, it turned out that there were very few women

who fulfilled both the age criterion and the educational requirements. My contact person at the Business School instead proposed to introduce me to the head of Human Resources (HR) of one of the 'big four' accounting firms in Auckland as, according to this contact person, many of the top Business School students were 'scooped up' by these organisations upon graduation. After a personal meeting, in the course of which I 'pitched' my project, they agreed to circulate advertising material for both studies to their women employees (in the form of posters and emails). As the uptake was slow, I also used snowballing through my personal networks, attended and disseminated flyers at a networking event for young professionals at the Business School, wrote to several professional services firms and other relevant organisations (such as the New Zealand Law Society), and posted information about the project on the social media platform Reddit. The fact that response rates were low across the various platforms used seemed to indicate that it is difficult for young professional women to find time for activities that do not form part of their normal schedules and/or that the research topic elicited conflictual feelings, due to its implication that experiencing stress and depression might be 'the price of success'.

Focus groups

Of the fifteen women who contacted me to participate in the focus group study, twelve took part. All of them had learned about the research through the ads disseminated by the accounting firm or via my personal networks. The other three women could not participate because of time constraints/work commitments. For instance, I exchanged around 50 emails with a young woman lawyer in order to organise for her to take part in one of the focus groups. Despite her obvious interest in participating, we eventually gave up after several work-related last-minute cancellations on her part. This seemed to reflect a strong

commitment to work, as well as the 'clients always come first' – motto characteristic of the professional services environment (Kornberger, Carter & Ross-Smith, 2010).

Initially, I intended to conduct three or four group discussions with a total sample of between fifteen and twenty women. However, after having run five groups with two or three participants each and twelve participants in total, I decided that data saturation was reached, and that no additional data collection was needed. Bowen (2008) points out that the concept of saturation is at best slippery and is rarely discussed explicitly in qualitative research reports. In his analysis of sample size and saturation in qualitative PhD research in the UK, Mason (2010) found that the majority of studies had twenty or thirty participants. The main criterion I used was what Francis et al. (2010) call the "stopping criterion", namely, having reached a point where no new ideas or angles are emerging in the data (see also Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In contrast to a fully exploratory approach, my study was guided by a specific research question: whether and how the 'top girl' ideal sketched by media and cultural scholars is taken up and practised by young professional women. It therefore made sense to stop collecting data once a range of 'typical' subject positions, discursive dilemmas and affective practices had been elicited and noted. Given that participants worked in various industries and roles, were at different career stages and represented a mix of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, I was struck by the similarity and comparative narrowness of the sense-making frameworks they employed. In line with other critical qualitative research with a focus on investigating feminine identities in New Zealand (Calder-Dawe, 2017; Martinussen, 2019), this finding seems to speak to the homogenising effect of hegemonic discourses such as neoliberalism.

Data collection took place in March and April 2017. After the initial contact with potential participants was made via email, I replied by sending the participant information

sheet and then, if no other questions needed to be addressed, proceeded to arranging a time and place for the discussion. I conducted all five focus groups (two groups of three and three dyads) at a meeting room at the University of Auckland, which is located centrally and seemed to be the most convenient option for participants. I offered (non-alcoholic) drinks and snacks to create a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere. Group discussions were held after 5pm so that participants could come straight after work. I decided not to offer any *koha* (compensation/reward) for participation in the research as this seemed to be inappropriate for this demographic of women, who likely earned good salaries. I did, however, offer participants free parking at the university parking garage and reimbursement for transport costs.

I carried out the same briefing process in both the focus group and the interview study. Discussions always began with my asking whether there were any questions regarding the participant information sheet (PIS – see Appendices B and D) to ensure that participants understood what the research was about and that participation was voluntary. I then handed out the consent form (see Appendices C and E) which informed participants about measures taken to ensure confidentiality, in particular, the anonymising of data excerpts that would be used as part of my thesis and journal publications, the fact that the discussions would be audio-taped and the data kept "until such time as the researcher is no longer working in this area of research, after which time they will be destroyed", and participants' right to withdraw from the focus group at any time without giving any reasons. The form also asked participants whether they would like to receive a copy of findings and stated that the researcher might contact respondents to clarify details related to protecting confidentiality (which they had the option to decline). Once written consent was given, participants were asked to fill out the demographics form (see Appendix F) and told that providing me with these data was optional but would be helpful for data analysis.

I then explained the ground rules – be respectful in discussion, feel free to leave or ask for a break at any time, do not disclose anything said in the focus groups – and turned on the audio recording device. To set the context, I proceeded by outlining the research and its aim to better understand the stresses and challenges associated with being a young professional woman in Aotearoa New Zealand and to understand how these stresses and challenges might contribute to the experience of depression. As a warm-up, I asked group members to tell me and the others why they had decided to participate in the study. As I wanted the discussion to develop organically, I attempted to 'insert' the other discussion topics I had prepared when appropriate. The discussion themes were: (i) participants' definitions of success, (ii) the question whether 'women can have it all', (iii) participants' stance towards feminism, (iv) typical workplace difficulties and demands, (v) gender-related issues such as experiences of sexism and behavioural norms, and (vi) participants' ideas around what might cause depression in young professional women. I closed the discussion by asking whether participants felt that all the relevant topics had been covered and thanked them for volunteering for this research.

Interviews

I conducted a preliminary data analysis of the focus group transcripts to identify key themes to possibly incorporate into the interview guide, and subsequently began recruitment for Study Two. In total, sixteen women contacted me to express their interest in the study; thirteen participated. One of the three women who emailed me after the initial call-out for volunteers in February 2017 withdrew because she was let go. As a further dissemination of advertising materials via email and posters by the already mentioned accounting firm in May 2017 yielded only a few more volunteers, I decided to use the social media platform Reddit.

This led to the recruitment of two additional participants in Auckland and five participants in Wellington. Two other women who responded to the ad did not end up participating a) due to not fulfilling all selection criteria, or b) as a result of scheduling issues. As most government services are located in Wellington, I was not surprised to find that the participants I interviewed there worked in both public and private sector roles. (In contrast, all participants in Study One reported being employed by private sector organisations.)

Again, the recruiting process was slow despite my effort to reach out to various organisations and to communicate the planned research through diverse channels, both online and offline. As I had decided to get interviews transcribed immediately after having conducted them, I was able to begin data analysis concurrently with the data collection process. While I did not use a grounded theory approach, I found the process of coding and reviewing the data *whilst* collecting them to be useful for assessing data saturation. After having conducted thirteen interviews, I felt that pursuing my initial goal of interviewing fifteen to twenty women would not add any new insights but merely generate more data. As with the focus group study, the range of discursive resources and practices found in the data-set seemed surprisingly narrow and homogenous, despite the diversity of roles/professions in this sample. As I intended to perform a fine-grained, in-depth critical discursive analysis by hand, as opposed to, for instance, using qualitative research software like NVivo, I decided that a total sample size of twenty-five participants for both studies would yield the desired analytic breadth.

The interviews were conducted in June and July 2017 and scheduled at times and locations convenient for participants. Locations included the university and participants' workplaces or homes. To reduce the risk of psychological harm for the women volunteering to take part in my study, I incorporated several safeguards into the data collection process. First, I assembled a list of resources with contact details of mental health and crisis support

services to give to study participants following the interview (see Appendix J). Second, I arranged for my primary supervisor, who is a trained and certified clinical psychologist, to be available on the phone during and after interviews in the case of participants experiencing acute distress. Fortunately, this did not eventuate. Lastly, I sent out follow-up emails one or two days after the interview to enquire whether participants had been negatively affected by the process.

The interview schedule essentially followed the same structure as the focus group discussions. I would first offer to clarify any remaining questions about the research and ask whether there were any other concerns. I then got written consent from the participants for their participation in the study and had them fill out the demographics form. After briefly summarising the aims of the research, and reiterating that we could pause or break off the interview at any point, I turned on the audio recording device. I began the interview by asking participants whether they had an image or metaphor they associated with their depression. Only two women presented me with a physical image (see Appendix K); two participants showed me photos on their smart phones (one woman had chosen an artwork, the other woman pictures of herself). The remaining interviewees described metaphors or a specific memory which represented the experience of depression for them. In some of the interviews, this exploration of what depression feels and looks like directly led to lengthy, almost uninterrupted accounts of the events and circumstances preceding and surrounding participants' initial realisation that they were struggling emotionally. In others, I needed to employ a more active interviewing style, frequently asking questions and probing the participant for details and elaborations.

As discussed in the Introduction, one of the main difficulties for me was to choose when to introduce a critical perspective, for instance, by directly or indirectly questioning the medical model of depression. At times, my 'prodding' of the discursive framing that

participants had put forward elicited a defensive reaction; at other times, we were able to laugh together about a hitherto unexamined assumption. (This happened with Shelly, a 36-year old management consultant, who said that she considered depression to be a purely physical illness resulting from a 'chemical imbalance'. When I suggested that the mind and the body were connected, she replied by saying, "no, they're not!" in an almost petulant tone – which made us both laugh.) The topics covered were participants' personal understanding of depression, whether they felt that gender played a role (only if they had not brought up this topic themselves), and what positively and negatively affected their mood.

Participants

In order to be eligible for participation in the research, volunteers would need to (i) be currently pursuing a professional career, (ii) be aged between 25 and 35 years old, (iii) hold a tertiary qualification, and (iv) have been New Zealand residents for at least five years. The last criterion was to ensure that participants had comparable experiences of New Zealand workplace cultures. For Study Two, participants also had to self-identify as having experienced depression within the last five years. Due to the difficulties I had in recruiting participants, I decided to slightly soften the age criterion; the resulting age range was 23 to 39 years.

In the following sections, I provide details on sample composition to complement and expand the demographic information presented in Part II of this thesis. To preserve readability and coherence, a certain amount of repetition is unavoidable.

Focus groups

I reproduce here a table which forms part of the first publication-based empirical analysis (Chapter 5) summarising the most important demographic information on the focus group participants. 'New Zealand (NZ) European' is a self-identification commonly used by New Zealanders of European descent and corresponds to 'white'/'Caucasian'. Designations chosen by respondents themselves are reported.

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Profession**	**Family Status**
Focus Group 1				
Maria	35	European	Data Analyst	Partnered
Sara	25	Samoan	HR Advisor	Partnered
Focus Group 2				
Grace	25	Taiwanese	Solicitor	Single
Amy	27	Malaysian	Senior Product Designer	Civil Union
Rebecca	38	Samoan-Chinese	HR Manager	Married
Focus Group 3				
Anna	27	White	Senior Financial Accountant	Married
Mira	28	Malaysian	Financial Accountant	Partnered
Focus Group 4				
Kamala	34	Indian	Financial Advisor/ Accountant	Married
Andrea	28	NZ European	In-House Legal Counsel	Married

Julia	34	NZ European	Finance Manager	Partnered
Focus Group 5				
Tara	28	NZ European	Agency Director	Single
Sophie	23	NZ European	HR Advisor	Single

Six of the twelve women who participated in the group discussions were born in New Zealand. Four participants had moved to New Zealand as adults and had spent between five and ten years living here at the time of data collection. Two women had emigrated with their families in their childhood or teenage years. Eleven women described their gender identity as 'female', one used the term 'cis female'. All women identified as being able-bodied and 'heterosexual'/'straight'. One woman was a mother. Eleven participants had received tertiary education. I decided to include the one woman without a university degree as she was a successful business owner and therefore seemed to fit the 'top girl' category. I also expanded my initial focus on women working in professional services firms, as I was not able to recruit enough participants who fitted this criterion.

I did not gather information on social class for two reasons. First, due to the prevalence of the 'myth of egalitarianism' (Nolan, 2007; Skilling, 2013) in New Zealand, a question about class might elicit incomprehension or even irritation (see, for instance, Martinussen, 2019). Second, I was interested in exploring a high-achiever identity, namely the 'top girl' ideal, which, due to its emphasis on personal choice and empowerment, likely appeals to girls and young women across class and ethnic boundaries. Comments made by participants during the discussions (for instance, referring to a private school education or discussing their parents' occupations) indicated that the majority had a middle-class upbringing.

Interviews

I have summarised the most important demographic information on the interview participants in the table below. Note that I mostly reproduce the terms and designations respondents themselves used, unless doing this would compromise anonymity.

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Profession**	**Family Status**
Jenny	29	NZ European	Solicitor	Married
Amrita	24	Indian	Advisory role/ government service	Single
Sandy	36	NZ European	HR Manager	Married
Paiseley	29	NZ European	Consultant	Partnered
Charlotte	39	NZ European	Barrister	Married
Shelly	35	NZ European	Consultant/Associate Director	Married
Lara	26	NZ European, Maori	Bank employee	Partnered
Taylor	25	NZ European	Research analyst	Partnered
Mel	26	Caucasian	Advisory role/ government service	Single
Catherine	26	NZ European	Policy advisor/ government service	Partnered
Carol	27	NZ European	Web content advisor	Partnered
Lisa	25	NZ European	Management Trainee	Partnered
Lucy	30	White	Creative Industries Professional	Partnered

Eleven of the thirteen women identified as ‘female’, two as ‘cis-female’. Nine participants were born in New Zealand, the other four had spent between eight and a half and twenty-one years here. Compared to Study One, this sample was less ethnically diverse with only two women not identifying as (NZ) European/white. Quantitative, usually self-report, measures of ethnic group differences in psychological distress and ‘mental disorders’ in New Zealand generally report higher scores for non-European population groups (Baxter, Kokaua, Wells, McGee, & Oakley Browne, 2006; Krynen, Osborne, Houkamau, & Sibley, 2013). At the same time, ethnicity-based discrimination and entry hurdles seem to be particularly pronounced for professions such as accounting (Huang, Fowler, & Baskerville, 2016) where the current ethnic composition does not correspond to the make-up of the wider New Zealand population. However, this was not reflected in the sample composition of the focus group study. One possible explanation for this difference is that constructions of and ways of dealing with depression tend to differ, in some respects considerably, between different cultures. Studies often report that distressed ethnic minority individuals are less likely to seek professional help (i.e., Karasz, 2005). It is therefore conceivable that professional women of non-European origin did not volunteer to take part in the research because they do not, or they to a lesser degree, interpret their distress as ‘depression’.

Another potentially relevant factor is the recruitment method. Several participants in Study One were found via snowballing through my personal networks, whereas all participants in Study Two were recruited via the accounting firm and Reddit. Identifying as a mixed-race woman myself may have contributed to the higher percentage of ethnic minority individuals in the targeted group in Study One.

Data analysis

In the previous chapter, I outlined the epistemological and methodological framework for this research. In-depth discussions of the procedures undertaken for each of the analyses can be found in the four publication-based chapters which make up Part II of this thesis. In the present section, I explain the rationale for choosing a different analytic method for each of the four analytic pieces and provide additional information on the steps involved, which could not be included in the articles for reasons of space.

Transcription, pseudonyms and confidentiality

Four of the five focus group discussions and all thirteen interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix I). I transcribed the first focus group discussion myself, to develop a 'feel' for my data-set through deep immersion. While this was a useful and productive way of familiarising myself with the discursive field I would have to traverse iteratively over the ensuing months, I decided to discontinue this practice for lack of time. Furthermore, as my analytic approach is focused on identity-constitutive discursive resources – as opposed to, say, the 'mechanics' of conversational turn-taking – a fine-grained transcription including a detailed representation of all nonverbal content was not necessary. The process I engaged in thus consisted of the following steps. Having received a new transcript, I read it through while listening to the audio recording, checking for errors and omissions. I then assigned pseudonyms consistent with participants' own naming practice. This resulted in some pseudonyms being more revealing of ethnicity than others.

The decision to use pseudonyms as opposed to completely anonymised participant handles such as P1, P2, etc. (see, for instance, Taylor, 2010) flowed from several considerations. While I was keenly aware that the fact that I was working with a small and narrowly defined sample meant that I had to be particularly careful to ensure confidentiality, I felt that it was important to use names which evoke the presence of 'real' people and unique individuals. Thinking of and discussing participants' utterances by referring to, for example, 'Taylor's interview' or 'Maria's words' kept me affectively and relationally 'tied' to the women I had spoken to. The task of identifying recurrent patterns and regularities within discourse always comes with a risk of overlooking or downplaying participants' idiosyncrasies. Using carefully chosen names reminded me of the women's embodied presence and *their particular stories*. In addition, I found that research reports that use names with culturally attached meanings instead of numbered descriptors present a more engaging read.

Qualitative analysis, particularly when it is concerned with people's lived experience, is in itself a form of storytelling (Riessman, 1993). As critical social scientists, we want our readers to affectively resonate with participants' words and self-positionings and with our own narratives woven from these accounts. Doing this kind of research is, after all, a fundamentally ethical and political endeavour. I considered the idea of letting participants choose their own pseudonyms, mainly due to the assumed reduction of power differentials between the researcher and the researched (Allen & Wiles, 2016). However, my experiences in the beginning of the data collection process – i.e., the slow recruitment and the fact that most participants had not even read the participant information sheet prior to the discussion/interview session – made me decide against it. I felt that asking participants to choose their own pseudonyms would merely add another chore to their already extremely busy schedules.

An important part of qualitative analysis is the selecting of data excerpts to illustrate or represent a pattern the researcher has identified. This process, like transcribing, "is an interpretive practice" (Riessman, 1993, p. 13) enabling the writer to tell a particular story. At the same time, extracts from transcripts need to be presented in such a way as to maintain confidentiality, by making it impossible or at least very unlikely for participants to be identified based on their utterances. This meant that every time I wanted to use a verbatim quote, I had to carefully think through which information I could safely include 'as is' and which information needed to be omitted or changed to produce 'clean data' (Kaiser, 2009). For instance, should I report participants' occupations in their own words, as described in the demographic form? This is the preferred practice in a lot of critical qualitative work. As organisations often use specific terms to define and label the different roles members hold, reporting participants' own words might enable another individual working at the same firm to identify the employing organisation or even the participant herself. Because my study is not concerned with investigating a particular profession or industry but with identity practices of 'top girls' generally, I was confident that substituting participants' self-descriptions with more general terms would not "alter or destroy the original meaning of the data" (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1635).

For the same reason, I felt, while agreeing with Baez (2002, p. 36) that critical qualitative research ideally should "serve emancipatory efforts to resist oppression" and that the concept of confidentiality needs to be critically examined in order to find ways of balancing researchers' "conflicting responsibilities as researchers/protectors and activists/exposers", that exposing the harmful practices of a particular workplace or individual would not contribute to a transformative agenda. Similarly, the rich autobiographical detail shared by some participants in Study Two helped inform and

contextualise my analysis but does not need to form part of data dissemination for my report to be relevant.

Analytic process and rationale – focus groups

After having revised and anonymised the focus group transcripts, I proceeded to the next step of the analytic process: the identification in the data of broad themes or patterns, such as interpretative repertoires (Edley & Wetherell, 1995) and subject positions (Davies & Harre, 1990). Whilst adopting a theory-driven approach, I attempted what Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 206) term 'complete coding', aiming to "identify *anything* and *everything* of interest or relevance to answering [the] research question". Guided by the overarching research question as to the connections between habitus, identity practices, organisational culture and emotional distress, I was particularly interested in constructions of gender and workplace norms within participants' talk and in the sense-making activities relating to conflictual and dilemmatic situations and affects.

By this time, I had decided to write a thesis with publications. This had immediate implications for my analytic approach, in that I needed to find an original topic or angle for each analysis that would make a relevant contribution to a particular body of literature. Discussions of initial ideas with my supervisors led to my decision to write the first analytic piece based on participants' talk about 'toxic' workplaces. While I was able to identify a range of workplace characteristics or themes such as 'very few women at the top/lack of (good) role models', 'culture created by middle-aged white men', 'omnipresence of sexism and gender stereotyping', and 'it's all about who you know', I felt that presenting this research in the form of a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017), which had at first seemed fitting, would not do justice to or adequately capture what was

going on in the data. Instead, I settled on a somewhat unorthodox form of narrative analysis based on the identification of a series of 'lessons' contained in participants' accounts of workplace difficulties. Focusing my analysis on the formulation of these 'guidelines' for young professional women allowed me to simultaneously pursue several agendas. First, I was able to uphold a link to Study Two by concentrating on narrative moments which elicited *negative affect*. Second, placing the analytic emphasis on the identity work that participants did to incorporate these lessons enabled me to map out an important part of these women's work-related *habitus*. Lastly, investigating participants' *narrativisation* of workplace difficulties seemed to yield a promising angle for explaining the persistence and reproduction of particular, i.e. gender-unequal, organisational structures.

Building on these insights, I decided to delve further into participants' affective habitus in the second analytic article (Chapter 6), the basis for which was a Word file containing all data excerpts I had identified as accounts of work-related, negative affect. Already during data collection, I had noticed the absence of strong expressions of anger, in relation to workplace sexism for instance, despite participants' frequent self-positionings within feminist discourse. I was interested in exploring how such instances of emoting might be stitching these women into particular gendered identities, such as the 'top girl' ideal, and thus be contributing to creating particular social relations. In order to address this question, I used Margaret Wetherell's (2012, 201) concept of affective-discursive practice. This analytic lens proved to be fruitful for tracing the interrelation of affect and power in the workplace.

Analytic process and rationale – interviews

I began coding for Study Two by identifying broad themes across the data-set such as 'depression and stigma', '(loss of) control', 'perfectionism' and 'legitimacy of distress.' I

then wrote a short summary of every depression narrative to get a sense of the stories as a whole. At this stage, I thought I would use a form of critical narrative analysis and explore, for example, the *types* of stories participants were telling (i.e., McAdams, 1993). Expanding on the idea of using an image-based analysis to stay closer to the lived experience of depression (see, for instance, McMullen & Conway, 2002), I compiled a list of metaphors for each interview. The theme of self-management provided an early 'anchor' into the data and later translated into the second analytic piece (Chapter 8). However, I first applied a different analytic lens, which I hoped would provide a link to Study One: an exploration of how the 'top girl' ideal shapes these women's accounts of depression. After several in-depth discussions with my supervisors as to possible approaches and potentially suitable methods, I settled on the concept of 'the dialogical self'. This allowed me to capture the multitude of 'voices' through which participants spoke their narratives. In this way I was able to weave the 'top girl' lens like a red thread throughout the analysis, while also pursuing a nuanced investigation of the *variability* which characterised participants' accounts, in the form of marginalised voices.

I developed the fourth and last analytic piece as a kind of mirror image to the second focus group article on affective-discursive practices. Building on the work on voices-of-the-self, I singled out a particular recurring construction in participants' accounts and compiled all data extracts that described what I have called the 'ideal depressed self'. Again employing a practice-based approach, I focused on talk of ways in which a depressed professional woman should ideally 'manage' herself, especially in the workplace. Similar to Wetherell's (2006) notion of 'psycho-discursive practices', I developed a focus on self-constitutive practices that draw on idealised femininities and at the same time are shaped by workplace norms.

Reflecting on rigour and revisiting researcher subjectivity

I want to close this chapter by looking back at the process of conducting and writing up the research, to reflect on quality assurance, ethical issues and potential limitations. The most commonly used criteria for ensuring that research is conducted rigorously within a qualitative framework are 'authenticity of the data' and 'trustworthiness of data analysis' (Sargeant, 2012). The former refers to steps taken during data collection, such as selecting an adequate sample, using appropriate methods (e.g., interviews for sensitive topics), minimizing researcher interference (e.g., using open-ended questions), and acknowledging and reflecting on the role of researcher subjectivity. Trustworthiness of data interpretation within a constructionist paradigm involves 'staying close to the data', that is, trying to understand and faithfully convey participants' constructions. This process requires "contextual grounding" (Morrow, 2005, p. 253), which I understand as referring to both the macro-level, i.e., participants' cultural background, as well as the immediate situation, e.g., awareness of how the wording of a question might have elicited or influenced a particular response.

Further important markers of trustworthiness are: inclusion of a detailed report of how data were collected and analysed, data immersion, the use of a reflexive research journal, providing "thick descriptions", and making use of peer discussions and reviewing processes (Morrow, 2005). I found regular exchanges and data sessions with my supervisors, as well as discussions with members of a departmental critical research group, particularly fruitful in this last respect. Engaging with and being receptive to other researchers' interpretations of and perspectives on the data helped me to become and/or stay aware of my own positionality and at times provided me with valuable insider knowledge in regard to New Zealand culture.

At other times, my outsider status alerted me to the 'kiwi'-ness (New Zealanders refer to themselves as 'kiwis') of certain practices of meaning-making or emoting.

Using a different interpretative approach for each of the four analytic pieces in this thesis meant that I had to repeatedly re-immerse myself in the data, each time parsing them according to a different analytic strategy. This approach ensured that my analysis ventured beyond simplistic interpretations and fleshed out some of the unique characteristics of the demographic I had chosen.

One of the most frequent criticisms of conventional psychological research by critical scholars is the privileging of the privileged: most study participants are European and middle-class. While I consider my research to be feminist and thus to serve liberatory aims, I also chose to study a privileged group – women in favourable socio-economic positions, mostly middle-class and of European descent. I was 'forced' to justify my decision early on in the research process when I shared a call-out for volunteers on Facebook in the hope that this would lead to the recruitment of participants from my wider social network (which it did). Another Facebook user, someone I did not know, commented on my post in a harshly critical and reproachful manner, questioning the validity and ethics of my project. I found myself drawn into a lengthy written exchange with him, propelled by my wish to prove that the research *does* contribute to a social justice agenda.

My main argument was that, if I want those in positions of power to start questioning neoliberal discourse, I need to investigate the potentially adverse effects it might have on *them*. I pointed out that almost every day, the media publish stories on widening economic inequality, and the suffering of the poor and disadvantaged due to globalisation and neoliberal market logic – without these effecting any noticeable change. I also argued that suffering and emotional distress are not exclusive to those in socio-economically difficult positions. However, my reasoning fell on deaf ears and merely elicited further vitriolic

attacks. The fact that this conversation had such a strong emotional impact on me, made me realise the fragility of my self-understanding as a critical social scientist – and depressed 'top girl'. Interestingly, this reaction was mirrored by some of the women who participated in the research and explicitly expressed feeling guilty about struggling despite their privilege. Hearing this brought back memories of my own experience of being in psychotherapy when I was an undergraduate student, of the intense feelings of guilt and of my questioning of the 'legitimacy' of my distress. How could I dare to claim the position of the sufferer and reconcile this with my privilege (mainly in terms of social class)?

This undercurrent of guilt perhaps explains why, when designing the project and preparing the ethics application, I was concerned only with putting in place measures for minimising the likelihood of psychological harm to participants, and ignored the potentially adverse effects the process might engender for me. However, once I began data collection for Study Two, I realised the profound emotional impact participants' accounts of distress had on me. It often felt as if the pain caused by the telling of their stories palpably entered my own body and mind. This process of "merging of boundaries between researcher and participant" (Dickson-Smith, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006, p. 856) was heightened by our shared identification as 'high achievers'. While some women expressed a sense of relief after the interview, sometimes even describing the effect as 'therapeutic', others left my follow-up email the next day unanswered. This triggered a flurry of anxiety and a sense of powerlessness. Around this time, the critical psychology research group I am part of came together for a discussion of exactly these issues. Hearing that other postgraduate students, as well as experienced researchers, had gone through similar experiences, and being given the opportunity to share my own, was helpful. I also turned to a practice I consider core to who I am, but that I had neglected due to being a full-time student and the mother of a small child: song-writing. Engaging in this creative practice enabled me to enter a deeply personal, albeit

imaginary, dialogue and communion with the women I had interviewed and others like them, something precluded by my role as a researcher.

Looking back on the analytic process, I realise that this personal connection associated with my insider position did affectively guide my analyses. However, this kind of intuitive or 'embodied knowledge' (Ellingson, 2006), which is often subsumed under the notion of unconscious processing in psychoanalytic accounts (Meek, 2003), rarely if ever features in qualitative research reports.

> Because the production of knowledge has traditionally been defined as the province of men, bodily knowledge has been systemically denied as oxymoronic … (Ellingson, 2006, p. 300)

Ellingson (1998, p. 494) maintains that 'contamination' of her research findings from the ethnographic study of an oncology ward by her 'own lived experiences' of being a cancer survivor "result[ed] in a rich, complex understanding of the staff and patients of the clinic." But how does this kind of understanding come about? In what ways did my personal experience of the research topic – identifying as a 'top girl' and as 'depressed' – colour my analysis? Conceiving knowledge as 'embodied practice', Hanrahan (2003) argues that intellectual activities such as qualitative analysis build on tacit, often non-communicable, processes of the body-mind.

As a songwriter, I am very familiar with these kinds of intuitive or body-based insights where I choose a particular note or word because it 'feels right'. One might, of course, say that artistic practices follow *aesthetic* criteria, whereas the process of interpreting discursive data is (or should be) guided by reason and logic. Cultural theorist and praxeologist Andreas Reckwitz (2012, p. 250) points out that this presumed dualism, which

has characterised and dominated social theory for the better part of the twentieth century, is misleading and unproductive:

> The aesthetic dimension in the broad sense of the ancient Greek word ‘aisthesis’ refers to the routine ways in which things are bodily and mentally sensed and perceived and to the pleasant or unpleasant ways in which these sensations and perceptions affect the respective bodies and minds.

These bodily *resonances*, often referred to as ‘gut feelings’ in common usage, form part of a person’s habitus and, in fact, enable her to navigate the fields she belongs to unthinkingly, seemingly instinctively. As an insider researcher, my lived experience and my regular *practising* of being a ‘top girl’ and of being 'depressed’ generate implicit (embodied) knowledges providing an affective foundation for my interpretive activities. Thus, my body served as a kind of sounding board, in the sense that it resonated more strongly with some interpretations than with others. However, due to the continued marginalisation of the role of the body in social science research (Hanrahan, 2003), I found it difficult to claim these processes as a legitimate source of knowledge. At times, this led to the ‘withdrawal’ of a particular reading – usually in response to a more experienced researcher saying, “I don’t see what you see in these data” – despite the fact that my reading felt ‘true’.

PART II: Empirical Analyses

Chapter 5: This is (still) a man's world: Young professional women's identity struggles in gendered workplaces

Introduction

The last few decades have seen young women take advantage of reduced educational and career barriers; indeed, girls and young women are now frequently positioned as the most likely winners in an increasingly competitive world and thus have become a ‘‘metaphor for neoliberal discourse of personal performance, choice and freedom’’ (Ringrose, 2007, p. 481). Yet, despite this apparent success, women remain twice as likely to experience depression as men (Yu, 2018). This article investigates how young professional women negotiate and navigate the contradiction between ‘‘this . . . glamor-worker mode of feminine subjectivity’’ (Harris, 2004, p. 19) and the actuality of the contemporary work organisation as a place of both implicit and explicit sexism and gender-stereotyping where the ‘‘white male norm’’ and the possession of various types of mostly inherited capitals still reign supreme (Acker, 2006; Burt, 1998; Haynes, 2012).

We were interested in exploring whether an in-depth investigation of this kind of affectively laden identity work can contribute to our understanding of women's experiences of emotional distress. Our approach to the study was informed by the emergent cultural slot of the 'top girl' identified by McRobbie (2007), which is associated with holding down well-paid jobs, standing on equal footing with male peers, leaving behind the traditional female role of caring for and nurturing others, and indulging in refined consumption habits. According to Harris (2004, p. 46), ‘‘[t]he picture . . . of the high-achieving schoolgirl who goes on to a well-paid, successful, professional career is indeed a reality’’, which appears to be backed up by ever new statistics of female success within tertiary education and evidence

of women's greater participation at junior levels of formerly male-dominated professions like accounting and law. It seems, then, that all over the Western world, young, well-educated, middle-class women today have left behind traditional notions of female success associated with the role of mother and housewife (Nielsen & Rudberg, 2000). Instead, they expect to be able to provide for themselves, to have fulfilling careers and love relationships characterised by mutual support and equality (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007).

In this article, we analyse narratives of workplace difficulties provided by young professional women who took part in focus group discussions. Following Wetherell (2012), we contend that identity and affect are intimately intertwined. As narrativisation can be seen as indicating perceived breaches between real and ideal or self and society (Bruner, 1990), analysing these accounts might reveal 'construction sites' of identity, associated with heightened vulnerability and uncertainty. Furthermore, we are interested in the discursive resources underpinning the 'top girl' identity and how these might relate to upholding the status quo.

Recent research has documented the rise of a 'postfeminist sensibility' within young women's sense-making and accounting activities in Western countries, characterised by ''the prominence accorded to 'choice' and 'agency', the emphasis upon individualism, the retreat from structural accounts of inequality and the repudiation of sexism and (thus) of the need for feminism'' (Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017, p. 227). A core feature of this discursive mode is the incorporation of neoliberal ideas (Baker, 2010; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Several empirical studies found that these notions – i.e., around the importance of hard work and entrepreneurialism – are indeed taken up by young women (and men), for instance when making sense of their educational choices and imagined life trajectories (Nairn & Higgins, 2007) or in accounts about their working lives (Scharff, 2016). Neoliberalism's inherent assumption of meritocracy, that is, ''the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably

provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project'' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3), fits well with a postfeminist view that there are no gendered impediments to women's success. Therefore, in line with other recent critiques of postfeminism (Dobson & Kanai, 2019), our study explores the *gendered affective* dimensions of neoliberalism.

The gendered workplace

Gendering and gender-stereotyping are ongoing processes; a large body of research supports Acker's (1990) claim of the 'gendered organization' (Britton, 2000; Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar, & De Groot, 2011; Muhr, 2011):

> [O]rganizations reflect masculine values and power, permeating all aspects of the workplace in ways often taken for granted. Not only the formal structures of institutions, their recruitment, promotion and appraisal mechanisms and their working hours, but also informal structures of everyday interactions reinforce women's inferiority. (McDowell, 1997, p. 29)

Supposedly gender-neutral definitions and terms used by personnel and management theorists alike, such as 'job' or 'employee', are imbued with gendered associations and presuppose ''a particular gendered organization of domestic life and social production'' (Acker, 1990, p. 149). The ideal worker is a white, middle-class man who dedicates most of his waking hours to paid work, unencumbered by family or other obligations. Similarly, ''the dominant construction of professionalism'' is ''linked to traditional male working hours'' (Smithson, 2005, p. 288). In a recent study on women lawyers' career progression, Pringle et al. (2017)

found, for instance, distinctive gendering processes at work in large law firms in New Zealand resulting in what one participant described as ‘‘masculine-competitive’’ (p. 442) organisational cultures that are to a large extent determined by the mostly white male senior partners. What is more, the majority of the 52 female interviewees were accepting of this status quo, including accepting the persistence of ‘old boys’ networks, sexist practices in male-female interaction and long working hours. Taylor (2011) points out that women’s professional identities, in this case as creative workers, form part of gendered subjectivities which are linked to particular practices such as the women lawyers’ non-resistant attitude described by Pringle et al. (2017). In a study on professional women’s relationship with alcohol, Watts, Linke, Murray and Barker (2015) found that participants view drinking as ‘‘a masculine ability demonstrating stamina’’ (p. 219) and as a prerequisite for conforming to workplace norms ‘‘set by male bosses’’ (p. 227).

However, Holmes and Schnurr’s (2006) analysis of data from the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (LWP), one of the largest studies of this kind worldwide, suggests that normative pressures to ‘do masculinity’ may be contingent in part on the type of workplace. In workplaces perceived as feminine, notably organisations which are ‘‘people-oriented’’ (p. 34), they found that the use of discursive styles traditionally associated with femininity by both women and men is regarded as unremarkable. While these findings seem to suggest the increasing valorisation of performances of femininity and their use as ‘‘workplace resources’’ (Adkins, 2001, p. 669) at least in some industries, other studies show that women continue to face harsh social and career-related penalties for engaging in masculine-typed behaviour (Laadegard, 2011; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007). Nadesan and Trethewey (2000, p. 228) analysed the advice given to women on how to build effective professional identities:

> The popular success literature contends that there are two paths to success and both must be pursued for its realization. First, women must rid themselves of specific psychological barriers acquired during childhood gender socialization. Second, women must learn to comport their bodies in a manner that minimizes their sexuality while, simultaneously, avoids the dangers of hyper-masculinization.

The image that emerges is that of women being expected to walk an extremely fine line as they try to build a convincing professional identity, navigating both organisational norms of masculinity and societal norms of femininity. Despite the wide dissemination and institutionalisation of feminist ideas (Illouz, 2007), the attribute which is still most commonly ascribed to women is being oriented towards others and their needs (Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007), thus essentially equating womanhood with motherhood. Studies regularly identify motherhood as a significant career barrier and source of discrimination in organisations; at the same time societal perceptions around what it means to be a good mother make the prospect of successfully juggling career and childcare responsibilities even more unlikely for women.

The individualising discourse at play here turns the question of whether or not professional women need to choose between career and family into a matter of personal adequacy, resourcefulness and resilience (Wood & Newton, 2006). The central assumption that it is women's responsibility to plan and manage motherhood efficiently (Sevón, 2005) miraculously transforms structural and material constraints both within the organisation and in society at large into individual deficits (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Pringle et al., 2017).

Both such largely invisible as well as more explicit forms of sexism and gender discrimination are common experiences for professional women (Elvira & Graham,

2002; Pringle et al., 2017; King, Botsford, Hebl, Kazama, Dawson, & Perkins, 2012; Leskinen & Cortina, 2014), which emphasises their precarious and inferior position within work organisations. Although gender discrimination is such a widespread phenomenon, very few studies have investigated its impact on women's mental and emotional well-being (Belle & Doucet, 2003; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995; Ussher, 2011). Even less attention has been paid to the interaction between particular social identities such as the 'top girl' mode, experiences of gender discrimination and emotional distress. By focusing on the affective dimension of young professional women's identity work, this article aims to contribute towards closing this gap in the literature.

Methodology and methods

As part of a larger study on the socio-cultural context of experiences of depression in young high-achieving women (Chowdhury, Gibson, & Wetherell, 2019), the first author ran focus group discussions around work-related pressures and challenges with young professional women in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The aim of this study was to conduct in-depth qualitative research with a small sample which would allow us to focus in detail on emotionally conflictual aspects of participants' identity negotiation. We were interested in talking to women who would be deemed 'top girls' – that is high achievers who are successful in their careers. In order to avoid the difficulties connected with a self-definition of 'being successful', we recruited young professional women working in contexts and with potential career paths that would place them in this category.

After ethics approval was granted, participants were recruited through the dissemination of advertisements by a large professional services firm in Auckland,

New Zealand, to their female employees, as well as snowballing through the first author's personal networks. The purpose of the study was described to participants as ''trying to better understand what it is like to be a young professional woman in New Zealand'', both in terms of difficulties and stresses as well as motivations and successes.

This article is based on data from five semi-structured focus group discussions with a total sample of twelve young professional women recruited from seven different firms. We attempted to create groups of strangers; however, we achieved this end in only three of the groups due to the considerable time constraints and ensuing scheduling difficulties, which also affected group size. We initially aimed for groups of four or five women, but this turned out not to be feasible (several times participants withdrew at the last moment because of unforeseen work-related commitments). The average age of the sample was 29 years; three-quarters were either partnered or married at the time of the interview; only one woman had children. The median annual income of the sample was $85,000 (NZ dollars) and thus considerably higher than the median income in New Zealand, which was $48,800 in 2016 (''Who earns what?'', 2017). All except one participant held either bachelor's degrees or postgraduate qualifications.

According to the 2013 census (Stats NZ) of major ethnic groups in Auckland, 59.3 per cent of the population identify with at least one European ethnicity, 10.7 per cent as Maori, 23.1 per cent as Asian and 14.6 per cent as Pacific peoples. In comparison with the general population, the sample slightly over-represented ethnic minority individuals: half the sample were of European descent, while the remaining half had Pacific Island or Asian origins. This selection bias could have been due to the fact that individuals with a double minority status – gender and race/ethnicity – are often exposed to higher rates of discrimination (Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, & Locke, 2011) and therefore more open to participating in relevant research. All participants identified as heterosexual and had been New Zealand residents for

at least five years at the time of the interview. Table 1 lists pseudonyms, age, ethnicity, profession and family status for all focus group participants.

Table 1: Demographic information on focus group participants

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Profession**	**Family Status**
Focus Group 1				
Maria	35	European	Data Analyst	Partnered
Sara	25	Samoan	HR Advisor	Partnered
Focus Group 2				
Grace	25	Taiwanese	Solicitor	Single
Amy	27	Malaysian	Senior Product Designer	Civil Union
Rebecca	38	Samoan-Chinese	HR Manager	Married
Focus Group 3				
Anna	27	White	Senior Financial Accountant	Married
Mira	28	Malaysian	Financial Accountant	Partnered
Focus Group 4				
Kamala	34	Indian	Financial Advisor/ Accountant	Married
Andrea	28	NZ European	In-House Legal Counsel	Married
Julia	34	NZ European	Finance Manager	Partnered
Focus Group 5				
Tara	28	NZ European	Agency Director	Single
Sophie	23	NZ European	HR Advisor	Single

Note that the designations respondents themselves chose are reported. ‘NZ European’ is a self-identification commonly used by New Zealanders of European descent and corresponds to ‘white’/‘Caucasian’. Six of the women were not born in New Zealand, and four of these had emigrated as adults.

We hoped that placing participants in a peer group context would activate the social norms and practices which characterise their workplaces. Furthermore, the group format allows for participants’ terms and views to take priority over those of the facilitator in shaping the course of the discussion (Kitzinger, 1994). Our aim was to explore emotional conflicts, for instance arising from the irreconcilability of the ‘women can have it all’ discourse and experiences of sexism, and to thereby bring to the fore potential links between available identities, such as the ‘top girl’ position, and negative affective reactions, such as worry, anxiety and frustration.

Group discussions always began with asking participants to comment on the idea of ‘widening gender gap’ in reference to a recent (NZ) newspaper article which reported girls’ and young women’s increasing educational and career success. The groups were conducted by the first author and did not follow a set interview schedule to allow for as much detail and exploration as possible, but all covered the following topics: participants’ definition of success, a question around whether ‘women can have it all’ and the relevance of feminism for young women today, workplace difficulties and experiences of discrimination, and their thoughts on why young professional women might get depressed. One of the topics that emerged unprompted was (planning) motherhood and its potential career impacts. Discussions lasted between one and two hours and were audio-taped (with permission) and transcribed.

As a first step after completion of data collection, the first author listened to the recordings while reading the transcripts, removed identifying information and assigned

pseudonyms. Initially the transcripts were coded thematically to gain familiarity with broad patterns and trends in the data; examples of early codes are '(career) success requires acting white and male', 'women and men are (naturally) different', 'women bring women down', 'women have to constantly prove their worth'. We noticed that the discussions contained numerous emotionally charged stories and short anecdotes about workplace difficulties, often describing their own or a female co-worker's behaviour or emotional response. What these stories seemed to 'do' was to formulate rules or lessons participants had learnt about 'how to be a professional woman'. Narrating these experiences did, however, generate considerable negative affect in participants. This was reflected in the words participants chose but also in their tone, which could be described as exasperation or frustration. Additionally, topics and issues which generated a lot of (heated) discussion were considered affectively loaded.

According to Wetherell (2013, p. 360), affect and discourse cannot be neatly separated – ''entangling has always/already occurred as participants' current actions usually orient to past familiar practice''. From this perspective, emotional struggles take the form of particular affective-discursive practices, as part of situated and therefore relational activities, shaped by the social identities in play. It seemed to us that participants expressed these struggles through the 'lessons' contained in their accounts. The next step in the analysis thus consisted of collating all the data extracts containing stories and anecdotes on workplace difficulties. This approach was guided by the assumption that an important motivation for storytelling is to impart life lessons to others (Merrill & Fivush, 2016). This meant exploring what kinds of experiences warranted account-giving activities rather than investigating the story process per se.

Narrating activity helps people cope with ambiguity. At the same time, particularly when accompanied by the expression of strong negative affect, it can be seen as an indicator of friction, of ruptures in participants' professional identities. The analysis is structured

around the main themes distilled from participants' accounts of workplace difficulties organised in the form of survival lessons and explores the affective dimension of these instances of identity negotiation.

Analysis

Lesson One: Act like a man but don't be a bitch

> I have never once felt disadvantaged for being a female. And then I started working at [accounting firm], which is a fairly heavily male dominated firm, so I am in HR but I support [. . .] the corporate finance team. So it's really Wall Street, lads, lads, lads. It's really been since I started working there that the gender differences have really hit me. (Sophie, 23, HR advisor)

In the excerpt above, Sophie not only talks about the uneven gender ratio at her workplace, that is, its material properties, but also refers to organisational culture. Her use of the words 'Wall Street' and 'lads' carries a host of connotations of masculinity. Later in the interview, she elaborated on this by telling a story about a woman who was refused a promotion ''even though technically she was meeting all the criteria'' because ''she was quite introverted and shy'' and her male managers were worried that ''she wouldn't be able to get on with clients''. It was thus not the woman's competence which was questioned but the suitability of her personality. Not being a typical 'Wall Street lad' – loud, brash, aggressive – she was deemed to be less effective with her presumably mostly male clients.

In a kind of reverse case scenario, Grace and Rebecca emphasised how advantageous it was for their careers to have 'white man hobbies'.

> [I]t's easy for a law firm to interview me and be like okay well you qualify on paper but you fit because, you know [. . .] I can basically talk about any sports code, but that's just like part of my personality. (Grace, 25, solicitor)

> My last role I did, I was the recruiter for a bank [. . .] and my portfolio that I had was done with the commercial bankers, so my stakeholders were 95% male. Banking is very relationship based so to build relationships and get recruitment done, I was going out for drinks with all the males, hanging out with them. And I got to a stage where I realised that the best way to get them on board and to influence them was to almost become like a male. But funnily enough, fortunately my hobbies are quite male [. . .] if I hadn't had that passion, would I have gotten to where I am now? (Rebecca, 38, HR manager)

However, women who perform a ''masculine masquerade'' (McDowell, 1997, p. 197) at work and divest themselves of all feminine attributes are likely to be perceived pejoratively.

> The girl that used to work there [. . .] we'll talk about her as being a bitch because she liked things done in a certain way, so that made her a bitch. So it's a way of do I then just not be nice to people at work because my personality is generally quite bubbly and quite friendly. Can I not be like that and do I just have to be one way all the time because then when I turn around and say 'okay no, enough, we need to do it like this' and I am more direct, people turn around 'oh you've had a bad day', 'oh are things not good at home, is Peter not doing the dishes'. That is the sort of response you get. (Andrea, 28, in-house legal counsel)

Andrea had prefaced her remarks with the words ‘‘I am told I am bossy all the time still now’’ to which Julia (34, finance manager) replied: ‘‘And why is that negative? [. . .] If you were a man you would be decisive and that would be amazing’’. Andrea’s difficulties illustrate the dilemmatic nature of the identity work that young professional women have to do on a daily basis. Being professional requires women to display masculine behaviours such as assertiveness and a direct communication style without violating traditional norms of femininity – an almost impossible balancing act.

Lesson One stands in sharp contrast to the ‘top girl’ ideal of carefree self-confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2015) where the imitation of ‘male’ behaviour functions ‘‘as a post-feminist gesture’’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 733); instead young professional women are exhorted to stay within the extremely narrowly defined ‘acceptable’ bounds of both masculinity and femininity.

Lesson Two: Women (at the top) bring other women down

> [W]omen bring other women down and then some women get to the top by you know all sorts of ways and I think that is a really negative thing? We don’t have females at the top we wanna aspire to because either they’re just an awful person and they’re bringing other women down or they’re really lonely and have nothing but work and we don’t have those people that we want to aspire to be. (Sara, 25, HR advisor)

One of the most striking images that emerged in the discussions was that of the female villain, of the woman – often in a senior position – who has a ‘‘chip on her shoulder’’ (Andrea) and therefore treats her female subordinates poorly. Julia (34, finance manager) described the negative effects of having such a female boss:

> She was very all over the show in terms of her like how she would present herself to her team. Some days it was ‘morning, how are you’, all happy and then the next day it would just be like never make eye contact with you or acknowledge you. So that was really hard actually in that it literally had an effect on me every day because I never knew what she was going to be like, and whether you had to prepare to be shot down or whether it was like happy days and fine.

The explanation for this phenomenon proposed by Grace and Andrea was that these women ‘‘had it hard coming up’’ and ‘‘had to fight to get where they are’’. Amy’s (26, web designer) account of why women bring women down was in line with the Queen Bee theory of female competition (Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974):

> I think they call it the Smurfette effect. So in Smurfs there is only that blond Smurf. In so many cartoons as you are growing up there is only that one hot chick or that one beautiful character that is a female among everyone else. So already sort of like starts injecting the sense of right, I need, if I am going to be that person, what do I have to do. I have to weed out my competition. I have to be faster, stronger. I have to fight harder. And so everyone else who are supposed to be on your side suddenly you are fighting against.

As Sheppard and Aquino noted in a recent article on female same-sex conflict at work, ‘‘the notion that women have troublesome same-sex workplace relationships has spilled over into the management literature and underlies investigations into the *queen bee syndrome*’’ (2017, p. 692, emphasis in original) without there being any empirical basis for it. When our participants talked about other women in the workplace, more often than not there was an

almost accusatory undertone to their descriptions. Rebecca stated it explicitly: ‘‘we all need to back each other. Women don’t tend to do a lot of that.’’

At the core of the Queen Bee narrative lies the assumption that success and femininity do not go together well, which acts as a strong deterrent for women when it comes to articulating their career ambitions, especially in a female peer group context. None of the focus group participants defined success in terms of ‘going to the top’; instead ideas like ‘‘being able to do what I enjoy’’ (Amy), ‘‘contribut[ing] in some way’’ (Mira) and ‘‘being happy in your life’’ (Kamala) dominated. The two definitions differing from this type of discourse that were offered – ‘‘to be financially independent’’ (Andrea) and ‘‘earning a certain amount and having a certain job title’’ (Anna) – needed to be hedged with self-descriptions of being superficial. The fact that even in such a small sample there was very little variation in interviewees’ descriptions of success illustrates how powerful age-old notions of femininity, like modesty and other-centredness, still are.

The anecdotes participants recounted about women who bring other women down can be viewed as cautionary tales that conjure up an anti-ideal of femininity, the cold-hearted woman at the top. Yet, the environments these young women operate in on a daily basis are built on the principles of competitiveness and entrepreneurialism.

> I found that with the male team that I was on there is always proving against each other, well you have to prove yourself, and I hate that type of you know you’ve got to constant... that really made me hate my life, hate myself, hate everything. I needed to be in bed all day on Saturday because I feel so sad. (Kamala, 34, financial advisor)

Disavowing ambition, the way participants had done in the interview context, is not an option at work:

Maria: Another thing is if you hear people saying that somebody does not want to go [in]to management, from conversations you can deduct that they find that person to be weird? Like why wouldn't he want to?

Sara: Or that person isn't committed [. . .] I mean you don't ever tell anybody that you don't wanna move up you're happy where you are then they think 'oh you're complacent'.

There is a split between what is sayable for women about their ambitions and what is expected of them in the workplace. A noticeable consequence of the pathologisation of female success was the lack of pride expressed by participants in their achievements. Instead, self-doubt and feelings of anxiety and insecurity were recurrent themes in the discussions. The tension between the demands of neoliberal, competitive workplaces and what Negra (2009) has identified within popular culture as the image of the ''bad' female professional'' (p. 88) associated with a backlash against women's greater participation (and success) in the workforce is experienced by young professional women like Maria (35, data analyst) as ''an inner struggle''.

Lesson Three: Motherhood (still) is a career barrier

In this part of the analysis, we ask how the pressures and difficulties that young women face in balancing career and motherhood (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; McIntosh, McQuaid, Munro, & Dabir-Alai, 2012) were dealt with by our sample. Of the twelve women interviewed for this study, only one was a mother. Nevertheless, motherhood became a dominant topic in the focus group discussions.

> I was scared when I went for this [job] interview because I thought to myself, and I know I am qualified, I know I have really good experience. I am confident in what I do in my ability. But I remember thinking 'oh maybe because they look at my age, they see the ring on my finger, they think oh well that's what's next for her. Perhaps we shouldn't take her in this role.' [. . .] But they tell me 'you were the best candidate'. So then I felt better. But then I think I don't know if three females applied. But it does leave a little you know like a confidence thing on you. (Kamala, 34, financial advisor)

Kamala's words link sexist and discriminatory organisational practices to experiencing low self-confidence and thus show how encountering social and structural barriers can lead to the very private and individualised experience of feeling less worthy. In this case, it was not a concrete negative outcome, i.e., not getting the job, but the threat inherent in the situation that had an adverse emotional impact on Kamala.

A more direct experience of discrimination that featured in participant's talk was the scrutiny of women's (potentially pregnant) bodies.

> So the only senior management person at our work that is female, she is the HR manager, she was leading a conversation at the lunch room because apparently somebody said that somebody is pregnant. And she was leading the gossip and going around quizzing people. 'Oh, are you pregnant?' And like it's completely normal. And everyone was like 'this is terrible'. [. . .] It's like 'that was really personal'. That is not something that you go around pointing at like, 'you are an HR person, you should be leading by example'. You are not going to start going 'are you pregnant?'. Or you walk down the hall and one of the older ladies will say to me 'oh you're next,

> you're going to have the next baby'. And I am just like 'no, don't talk to me about that because it's none of your business'. (Andrea, 28, in-house legal counsel)

Andrea's story is yet another salient example of gendering that is completely unrelated to women's behaviour. Young women in organisations are constantly reminded that they are of child-bearing age and that this might disadvantage them and stall their careers. Andrea's strong emotional reaction to the transgressive behaviour of the HR manager and her older female colleague, which appears to have had no negative consequences, can be seen in what she would have liked to say to them (''you are an HR person, you should be leading by example'', ''it's none of your business''). While her account clearly conveys frustration with this intrusion into her privacy, it also speaks of powerlessness in the face of such persistent discrimination.

The most influential factor in these young professional women's socialisation into organisational norms and practices was witnessing what was happening to their female co-workers as a result of motherhood.

> [I]n our auditing department we actually had quite a lot of managers [. . .] that were women but they were all at that age and then they started having kids [. . .] Audit is really, really hectic. They do midnight hours. It's definitely very strenuous. And like a lot of them actually moved to kind of lower positions, even though they were on track to become partner, just so they could get a bit more of a work-life balance. It was kind of sad in that respect that the company couldn't actually recognise they were losing talents [. . .] because they wouldn't be more flexible. (Anna, 27, financial accountant)

Anna's narrative spells out the career costs associated with starting a family. Even though she was ''sad . . . that the company couldn't actually recognise they were losing talents'', she did not feel impelled to push for more equitable organisational policies. Instead, the solution she suggested when asked what might make things better for young mothers was ''advocating women that actually are making it work, you know, that have a family that are still advancing in their career''. Earlier in the discussion, Mira had talked about her own experience with working mothers who ''did what they had to do and then went home and they made sure they could fit it into that time''. The lesson learned is that it is the individual woman's responsibility to fit motherhood around work, something that can lead to a considerable amount of negative affect: ''makes me panic to think about it'' (Mira). However, participants not only felt worried and anxious about the future prospect of needing to balance career and motherhood, they also felt the need to prepare for this step, i.e. maternity leave, carefully.

> **Andrea**: [Y]ou have a responsibility of okay if I am going to have a year off work then what can I learn now and what can I do now and what can I fit in now to try and compensate for that. So that is a stress that I have now. I am not planning on having children in the next few years but that is something that I have already started thinking about, is how can I make this work to like maintain my career and have children because I need to try and learn as much as I can now [. . .]
>
> **Julia**: It's like you've got to put the groundwork in like be somewhere for a few years so they know you are totally committed and you've put all the effort.
>
> **Andrea**: [B]efore somebody then says 'oh you're a mum' or whatever and I can be like' but I've got all this experience', I can offer something.

Julia's use of the vague metaphor of ''put[ting the groundwork in'' is representative of all the gender-related lessons discussed so far. What 'ought to' be done – young professional women's prescribed best practices, if you will – remain blurred and hard to grasp objectives and elicit insecurity and self-doubt. This feeling of never being (good) enough almost seems to be a direct consequence of the neoliberal lens so clearly applied in the data extracts discussed here. Anna's suggested solution for improving the situation of young working mothers succinctly sums up the 'top girl' perspective on how to battle structural inequality – work harder.

Lesson Four: Accept it – sexism is part of the game

> I'm part of this mentoring group and we had this catch-up last week and one of the girls said something that absolutely shocked me [. . .] She gets on really well with her boss who's a male and she was at a client meeting and he was saying 'oh you know this meeting is really, really important, so like maybe you could try to be a little bit flirty with the client' and she was just like 'Excuse me? You want me to go in there and flirt with clients because I'm the junior young girl in the team?' And she was absolutely mortified and so she just she shrugged it off and she went into the meeting [. . .] I mean it's almost no surprise coming from a law firm that sort of thing happens but she said she doesn't think her boss meant it in that way. She thinks he just used the wrong word but she said 'I just had to talk to him about it because it made me feel so awkward' and just it was really demeaning for her that that's why she was there to wear the short dresses and the high heels [. . .] (Sara, 25, HR advisor)

At first glance, the narrative quoted above seems to be a furious feminist manifesto.

It is brimming with indignation and outrage, yet a decisive element is missing – the condemnation of its male villain. When the interviewer asked Sara if her friend had raised the incident with her boss, she told the group that ‘‘she’d thought about thought about thought about it’’ for weeks and had only mustered the courage to approach him after having been urged to do so by the other women in her mentoring group. There are two things to learn from this story for other young professional women. Ideally, they should be able to ‘shrug off’ sexist comments from their male boss (or co-worker); it certainly should not affect their work performance. If they cannot do so and must raise the issue, they should avoid an accusatory stance and instead adopt a sympathetic and understanding attitude towards the male perpetrator. Consequently, it is the women who are expected to carry the emotional burden of sexist interactions and to swallow their anger and disappointment.

Popular culture and media discourse are saturated with feminist ideas (Gill, 2007) and participants’ talk shows that they have integrated these ideas into their self-narratives. As a result, they experience the irreconcilability of workplace demands and their feminist identities as conflictual and distressing. The next story is not only about the emotional labour that women perform at work but also about the increased amount of actual work associated with sexist practices:

> We have issues that come up all the time at work which we will raise to the general counsel, he makes the decisions [. . .]. He’ll leave us to go back and speak to whoever in the company we need to speak to, saying ‘unfortunately we can’t do this because of this, this and this’. Then they will often go above our head to their manager who will then talk to my boss who will then say no. [. . .] And I think it’s partly being legal, people see us as a hindrance rather than just trying to do stuff properly. [. . .] But I think there is also that, those girls, because we get referred to as the girls, ‘those girls

> don’t know what they are talking about. I’ll just go up to the manager who is a male and their boss and he’ll do it.’ [. . .] They cherry-pick. So they will ask one person. If they don’t like the answer they go to the next person. We talk in the team so we are like ‘oh he asked me about that and we had a 40 minute discussion yesterday about this and now you’ve gone and asked this person the exact same question’. But there is that worry that if there was a male there, we would have that as well, the men going to talk to the men just because they don’t like the response, the perceived response from the women. (Andrea, 28, in-house legal counsel)

Andrea works in an all-women legal team at a big firm in a male-dominated industry. She and her female colleagues have to deal with the men in their company routinely going behind their backs using unofficial communication channels, questioning their authority and forcing them to re-open cases that have already been decided. Only the word of her male boss, who is also the director of the firm, has enough weight to put an end to such behaviour. Later in the interview, Andrea said that she often works late because she wants ‘‘to get on top of it’’ and ‘‘prove to people that I am doing a good job’’. It immediately suggests itself to make a connection between her experience of continuously being undermined and the extra effort she feels obliged to put in. Even so, she still feels ‘‘anxiety on Saturday night worrying about going back to work on Monday’’. This association of work and self-doubt goes back to her first three years at a law firm when she was ‘‘almost broken down’’ and needed to get ‘‘over that feeling that I am just really bad at everything that I do’’. The combination of the ‘high-performance culture’ typical of law firms (Pringle et al., 2017) and gender discrimination puts a large amount of emotional strain on women like Andrea. While the narratives discussed here do not subscribe to what McRobbie describes as postfeminism’s ‘‘distaste for feminism’’ (2007, p. 733), they do seem to propagate a certain tough-

mindedness, namely the ability to not be negatively affected by sexism, associated with the 'top girl' ideal.

Discussion and conclusion

In our analysis, we explored four gender-related 'survival lessons' that young professional women learn in order to navigate gendered workplaces, namely that they are expected to find the right balance between feminine and masculine qualities, that they cannot count on same-sex solidarity, that motherhood (still) is a career barrier (if it is not 'managed' adequately), and that they should tacitly accept that sexism is an inextricable part of being a professional woman. The irreconcilability of the assumption of equality inherent in both neoliberal and postfeminist discourse with the persistence of gendered and gendering practices within work organisations leads to potentially severe and disabling identity conflicts for young professional women. The richness of participants' accounts suggests that coming to terms with these demands is an ongoing affect-laden process of re-writing and re-positioning themselves, a seemingly never-ending work of identity as the space set out for professional women is almost impossible to inhabit. Yet, coming to terms with and living with a hostile organisational reality is exactly what a 'top girl' is expected to do.

Within a conventional organisational psychology framework, this affective-discursive struggle would likely be read as a manifestation of work stress; commonly, the onus for change would be placed on the individual woman (Newton & Fineman, 1995). Frequently invoked organisational ideals of individual resilience and stress-fitness brand negative emotional reactions to workplace conditions as dysfunctional and individual deficits. At first glance, it therefore seems to be encouraging that participants were very vocal about experiences of gender discrimination and sexism in the focus group discussions. However,

their shock and frustration intertwined with what Gill et al. have termed '*c'est la vie* accounting' (2017, p. 227), a kind of resigned acceptance of the status quo which imbued their talk with a sense of inevitability despite the frequently expressed conviction or at least hope that things are getting better. This kind of affect hinges on both postfeminist and neoliberal discourse with their focus on individual empowerment and self-management.

For Couldry (2010), a distinct feature of neoliberalism is an acceptance of economic and social reality as a ''matter of necessity'' (p. 14) – the market demands it and so it has to be. Neoliberalism 'works' as long as it makes good on the promise of providing opportunities and rewarding effort with (financial or career) success because its individualist logic can be incredibly seductive and even empowering, particularly for girls and young women who identify with the 'top girl' ideal. It is only when this equation does not add up anymore, when ''apparently emancipatory discourses (and invocations of female voice) are combined with deeply retrogressive models of what counts as success for a woman'' (Couldry, 2010, p. 120) that the cracks begin to show. The survival strategies on offer for young professional women are either to assimilate and therefore to self-silence or to leave their organisation in the hope that they might find a less adverse environment elsewhere.

While our analytic focus lay on gender, in particular, the emergent 'top girl' ideal, future studies with an explicitly intersectional approach that take into account race, class and sexuality are needed to better understand the connection between marginalised social identities in the workplace and emotional distress. The fact that half of our study participants had a 'double minority status' potentially shaped their accounts in particular ways, i.e. by heightening their awareness of being 'othered' or by making the 'top girl' identity especially attractive as a survival strategy. However, as these self-positionings (i.e. being a Samoan or Asian woman) did not feature prominently in participants' talk, we did not have adequate data for applying an intersectional lens in the analysis.

Our analysis has highlighted young women's emotional struggles associated with building inherently fraught and contradictory professional identities within gendered organisations. Identification with the 'top girl' ideal not only fails to equip young women with the right meaning-making 'tools' for navigating sexist or 'toxic' environments; it also encourages them to accept this status quo as if it were a fact of nature. In particular, we have attempted to show that the irreconcilability of contemporary female subjectivities, which construct young women as capable, in charge and efficient self-managers, and sexist work environments is a potentially heavy emotional burden young high-achieving women are expected to carry.

Chapter 6: 'Just plough through': how young professional women practise negative affect in accounts of work-related difficulties

Introduction

The claim that emotion is "a central feature of organizations" (Sturdy, 2003, p. 82) builds on a well-established tradition of research on 'emotional labour', a concept developed by Hochschild (1983) as a result of her ground-breaking investigation of gendered identities, emotions and 'feeling rules' at work. The recognition that we cannot adequately understand or theorise social and organisational relations without incorporating the embodied dimensions of working lives has spawned a wide range of empirical studies and theoretical elaborations on the management and performance aspects of emotional expression and communication (i.e., Blackmore, 1996; Enander, 2011; Grandey, 2000; Syed, 2008; Toerien & Kitzinger, 2007; Ussher & Perz, 2008). The aim of this article is to contribute to and extend this body of work, exploring new theoretical approaches to the study of affect and emotion, and to examine their role in creating and maintaining particular gender identities and relations and, thus, gendered organisations.

The data for our analysis consist of young professional women's accounts in focus groups of the ways in which they are negatively affected by work-related pressures and challenges. We suggest that the patterns we find in these accounts are best described as *affective-discursive practices* (Wetherell, 2012). As the research participants describe negative work situations and their emotional responses to these, we explore the affect routines which are canonical or normative for young professional women and ask which emotional registers are silenced or made more difficult to articulate. Power operates through social inclusion and exclusion. What types of affect can be expressed by who and how tells

us something about mechanisms of "affiliation and detachment" (Wetherell, McCreanor, McConville, Barnes & Le Grice, 2015, p. 58). We posit that the ways in which young professional women make sense of being negatively affected at work aligns their feeling bodies with workplace norms and thus enables them to 'carry on'.

Critical feminist scholars have investigated how gendering processes and gender norms maintain patriarchal structures in contemporary work organisations (i.e. Pringle et al., 2017). In this study, we focus on the intersection between gender and class and are interested in a particular identity currently on offer for young women, namely the emerging cultural slot of the 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2007) or 'can-do girl' (Dobson & Kanai, 2019; Harris, 2004). This enticing narrative promises girls and young women that they can indeed 'have it all' as long as they agree to become good neoliberal subjects who tirelessly work on and manage themselves efficiently. Drawing on a distinctly postfeminist vocabulary (Gill, 2016), for example the 'girlpower' discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2015), this kind of idealised femininity is all about individual empowerment and success. As a result, the persistence and damaging effects of structural inequality are obscured and unproblematised. How, though, might exhortations of this kind be bolstered by young professional women's affective-discursive practices? In the remainder of this Introduction we develop a practice-based approach to investigations of gender and working lives.

A practice-based approach to gender and affect at work

Martin (2003) differentiates between 'gendering practices' and 'practicing gender', the latter being defined as "the repertoire of actions or behaviour — speech, bodily, and interpretive — that society makes available to its members for doing gender" (Martin, 2006, p. 257). This practising of gender is often done unreflexively and affect and emotion form an

integral part of the intricate relational web that links gender performance to power (Ragins & Winkel, 2011). The study of how femininity is affectively and discursively practised can therefore help illuminate how "inequality regimes, defined as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings" (Acker, 2006, p. 443) are reproduced and upheld. Affect scholars of the relational school claim that emotions communicate a person's relationship with her environment (Burkitt, 2014; van Scheve, 2017) – they *do* things. Burkitt (2014) gives the example of aggression as an act of moral evaluation and points out how the notion of an 'aggressive victim' does not make sense because an aggressor is defined as someone who acts unreasonably and immorally. Calling an act 'aggressive' thus creates a particular relationship between the involved actors by assigning them particular identities and social positions, i.e. that of aggressor and victim.

For young professional women, learning how to practise and perform 'appropriate' femininities at work, including affective meaning-making, likely forms part of organisational socialisation. In Bourdieu's (1990) words, they learn how to 'play the game' of being a professional woman in a particular social and cultural milieu. Although affect and emotion have a physiological basis – we experience them, more so than other aspects of experience, as clearly and necessarily embodied – they are organised and made socially effective through a process of meaning-making (Wetherell, 2012, 2013; Wetherell et al., 2015). A praxeological approach overcomes the still wide-spread, problematic dualism of body versus mind:

> In affective practice, bits of the body (e.g. facial muscles, thalamic-amygdala pathways in the brain, heart rate, regions of the prefrontal cortex, sweat glands, etc.) get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, narratives and interpretative repertoires, social relations, personal histories, and ways of life. (Wetherell, 2012, pp. 13-14)

Conceiving of emotions as ‘a kind of practice’ (Scheer, 2012) thus not only allows us to investigate the various activities involved (i.e. blushing, speaking in a high-pitched voice, gesticulating, using specific vocabularies etc.) but directs attention to their connection to social identities and cultural norms. Social practices always contain a knowledge-aspect, that is, “a particular way of ‘understanding the world’” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 253). In the case of affect an obvious example, for instance, is the repetitive construings of sensitive and emotionally expressive women versus emotionally reticent, ‘thick-skinned’ men found in popular discourse.

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, a person’s ‘feel’ for knowing how to play particular social games which make up her lifeworld, has proven to be particularly useful for thinking the affected and affecting body together with social structure (Probyn, 2004; Scheer, 2012; Skeggs, 2004). One could say that affective practices, defined as routinised ways of ‘doing’ emotion in particular social contexts or fields, build a person’s affective habitus. Habitus and field are interrelated; they constitute one another. Wetherell (2012) posits that “social relationships arrive with the affective slots for actors already sketched” (p. 125), which is why emotional exchanges often “unfold relatively automatically” (p. 129). It is this unreflective quality of affective practice which so often obscures the underlying norms and evaluative processes.

A host of empirical research has investigated how gender enters the workplace (Hatmaker, 2013; Haynes, 2012; Kelan, 2009; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010). For instance, we found that professional women working in male-dominated environments feel pressured to find the ‘right balance’ between masculine and feminine attributes, where straying too far to either side is associated with negative repercussions (Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019). In a study on how male and female managers ‘do power’, Ladegaard (2011) reports that employees interpret and respond differently to men and women engaging in similar

leadership styles, as a consequence of which women in leadership positions struggle with establishing and maintaining authority. Similarly, the role of affect/emotion in workplace organisations is receiving growing attention (Bolton, 2005; Kenny & Fotaki, 2014; Mann, 1999; Schweingruber & Berns, 2005). Ragins and Winkel (2011, p. 380) claim that "emotion and power interact in cyclical ways that can build or deplete power in work relationships" and that this relationship is, in turn, mediated by gender.

Scholarship on gendered emotional labour in organisations explores the influence of (gendered) occupational demands on the expression and management of emotions at work and their commodification (i.e., Cain, 2017; Sloan, 2012). The notion of emotional labour emphasises and presupposes workers' (conscious) suppression of genuine but 'inappropriate' feelings in the form of 'deep acting' or 'surface acting' (Hochschild, 1983). We contend that the notion of affective-discursive practices is better able to capture the nuanced interplay between gendered identities, emotion and power at work. By asking about the discursive resources which are mobilised by young professional women concerning workplace-related affect, we can draw links between dominant meaning-making frameworks such as gender and neoliberalism, the subjective experience of work, and power relations. Our analytic focus is on how discursive performance or young professional women's accounting for negative affect flows from and at the same time is implicated in the formulation of particular kinds of subjectivities and social relations.

Methodology and Methods

This study is based on data from semi-structured focus group discussions on the pressures, stresses and challenges of being a young professional woman in Aotearoa/New Zealand and forms part of a larger research project investigating how the 'top girl' identity

intersects with affective meaning-making and experiences of emotional distress and depression (Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019; Chowdhury, Gibson, & Wetherell, 2019). In order to interview participants for whom 'top girl' narratives might be relevant, we decided to focus on young professional women working in contexts and with potential career paths that would place them in this category. Working with a small, narrowly defined sample allowed us to pay detailed attention to how negative affect is discursively 'practised' as an essential element of identity construction.

After having obtained ethics approval, the first author began the recruitment process by distributing advertisement materials to the female employees of a large professional services firm in Auckland; a few women were also found via snowballing through the first author's personal networks. The study aim was described as wanting to explore "what it is like to be a young professional woman in New Zealand", including conflicts, stresses, challenges, motivations and successes. Several women who had initially signed up for the study could not be included due to scheduling constraints and unforeseen work engagements, which could be read as indicative of high workloads and the central role work/career plays in their lives.

The total sample size was twelve; participants were on average 29 years old and all identified as heterosexual and (cis) female. The majority of the women were either partnered or married at the time of data collection, only one woman was a mother. All except one participant held either bachelor's degrees or postgraduate qualifications. The ethnic composition of the sample was broadly characteristic of Auckland's population with half of the women identifying as (NZ) European/white and the other half reporting Asian and Pacific Island origins. Ethnic minority individuals were slightly over-represented; this might be linked to the fact that individuals with a double minority status – gender and race/ethnicity – are more likely to experience discrimination (Hayes et al., 2011) and might thus be more

motivated to volunteer for research studies. The occupational fields participants located themselves in were law, human relations and management, consulting, financial services and IT; one woman was a business owner. The selection criterion of a minimum of five years' residency in New Zealand ensured that participants had similar or at least sufficiently comparable experiences in terms of workplace culture and organisational socialisation. We are confident that we were successful in recruiting women for whom the 'top girl' identity is salient; several participants explicitly referenced the pressure to be a 'superwoman'.

A total of five focus group discussions (three dyads and two groups of three) were conducted by the first author. They lasted between one and two hours and were audio-recorded (with permission). While there was no set schedule, prompts were used such as newspaper headlines ('Gender gap widens among university graduates', 'Women – like men, only cheaper') to initiate discussion. The topics covered were (i) participants' definitions of success, (ii) the question whether 'women can have it all', (iii) participants' stance towards feminism, (iv) typical workplace difficulties and demands, (v) gender-related issues such as experiences of sexism and behavioural norms and (vi) participants' ideas around what might cause depression in young professional women. By using a semi-structured format and allowing for the discussions to take shape organically, participants were encouraged to broach themes that were important to *them* (Kitzinger, 1994).

The group discussions were fully transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms assigned following the participant's own naming practice (for example, some Asian New Zealanders prefer to adopt anglicised names). The aim of our in-depth analysis of participants' affective-discursive activities was to map a kind of *affect canon* (Wetherell et al. 2015) for young high-achieving women. The analysis was conducted by the first author. The first step involved listening to and reading the transcripts and identifying all instances in which participants talked about affect connected with the workplace, for example in relation to experiences of

sexism. Once a file of instances had been developed, a detailed analysis of the discursive resources participants drew upon was conducted, focused on the more pervasive patterns across the sample, and asking how affect was being formulated, and in particular the kinds of identity positions being mobilised. This process was guided by the question which potential formulations were absent or missing, and thus what ways of communicating feelings were 'allowed'.

Analysis

When participants talked about negative emotions relating to the workplace, they often were engaged in the very affective-discursive practices that 'make up' these emotions. In describing how they feel as women working in male-dominated contexts, the women often visibly and audibly *practised* and *embodied* affect. Paying attention to the discursive construction and the regular combinations of these accounting patterns, that is, how affect is organised in everyday emotional life, allowed us to trace the gendered and neoliberal basis of these practices. In what follows, we present three types of accounts that recurred most often in the data. These worked through a range of important, seemingly normative affective-discursive practices for young professional women.

Impostor syndrome and 'stressing'

In the following extract, Andrea (28, in-house legal counsel) and Julia (34, finance manager) describe self-doubt in relation to, or one might say as part of, their professional role:

Andrea: […] especially days where we have been big on stress, [there is] that impostor syndrome that we don't feel either like we should be involved or that we are capable of being involved. I don't know where that comes from. I mean I know I feel it and I feel it because I have less experience and I am lucky, the general counsel he gives me quite a lot of responsibility. So obviously he has faith in me about things but I don't have. I'll do something which is relatively easy but then I'll go home and stress all night that I've done it wrong. And I'll just stress and stress and stress. And then nothing, I don't know if it's what it is, but there is just, I wouldn't have done it wrong, but I just wind myself up that I have done something really simple wrong and then everyone is going to think that 'you are no good, you don't have any experience, you shouldn't be given responsibility', and it's that mind-set I think which is really hard to break and I don't know why I have it. I don't know if it's something that hopefully will get better with experience but it's just one of those things which is really hard to break out of a habit of doing.

Julia: Maybe it's a confidence thing. I remember early on in my career I was just so nervous about anything. It was like 'oh my God am I doing it right, am I doing it wrong, will they tell me off, am I taking too long?' Like, you just kind of question everything that you are doing. I don't know if guys just have by default more confidence in themselves.

Andrea's words clearly convey distress – "he has faith in me … but I don't", "stress all night" – and also uncertainty about its origins ("I don't know where that comes from"). She describes these negative feelings as being tied to repetitive and intrusive ruminations about her competency as a legal counsel, whereas Julia reports that she used to be "nervous about anything" at the beginning of her career. In this account, the descriptions of negative affect

are understood through particular discursive resources or meaning-frameworks. By making reference to 'impostor syndrome', Andrea attributes her distress to a way of making sense that is frequently gendered.

The term 'impostor phenomenon', now usually referred to as 'impostor syndrome', was coined by psychotherapists Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne A. Imes in 1978 to describe high-achieving women who believe that "they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise" (p. 241) and has found its way into common usage. Julia similarly explains her insecurity as a "confidence thing". Andrea furthermore draws on a 'stress' discourse to make sense of her feelings. What seems to puzzle her is the mismatch between the difficulty of the tasks she is dealing with and the extent of her self-doubt and worry ("I just wind myself up that I have done something really simple wrong") which implies that her feelings are *unreasonable*. The direct speech quoted by Andrea ('you are no good', 'you don't have any experience', 'you shouldn't be given responsibility') reflects decades of (male) prejudice against women working (in the professions). However, by choosing the words 'mind-set' and 'habit' to describe her experience, Andrea implicitly makes *herself*, her faulty personality, the source of the problem. Julia, too, constructs women's lack of confidence as an individual deficit; the question why men seem to have more of it 'by default' remains unanswered. However, later on she asked, "Is it the way that we are kind of still brought up maybe?" which ignited a lively discussion among the three focus group participants that ended with Kamala (34, financial advisor) stating that "women aren't given a voice, it's really taboo if you do speak".

In the next extract, Rebecca (38, HR Manager), replies to the interviewer's question, "what is most stressful about being a young professional women?":

> I think for me, especially earlier in my career, what was most stressful was my confidence I think and just my self-belief. So I always felt like I had to, I have always been quite a perfectionist. I always felt like ... it's almost like I couldn't even take compliments. I was always ... it was just my self-confidence growing up. But funnily enough now that I am a bit older I definitely feel a lot more confident and consequently probably, now that I talk about it, God I just hit the nail on the head, like I've got to the career I want to now, but I am feeling quite relaxed about it now. I don't feel like there is as much anxiety. So I think for me yeah it would have been just my self-esteem, confidence in my ability to do my job. That was my biggest stress point.

Again, self-doubt and stress are patterned together and again, the problem is said to originate in the individual; for Rebecca, the culprit is her perfectionism. As opposed to Andrea who describes herself as still struggling with "breaking this habit" (of not believing in herself), Rebecca tells a story of personal growth, of having reached a point where she is "feeling quite relaxed about it [work] now". While this kind of development narrative allows her to practise or 'perform' self-doubt, if only as something she has overcome, it also, seemingly, reinforces the common assumption that success fosters confidence. However, when probed further by the interviewer about the source of her anxieties, she ascribes these to her double minority status – being a woman and belonging to an ethnic minority – and her increased self-confidence to the fact that she has "made peace" with it. While she thereby creates a link between marginalisation and self-doubt, the solution she then suggests consists of decreasing career ambitions – "I suppose my focus is now thinking more towards family now" – and more self-realisation: "it [her job] is paying for my hobbies and actually what I really want to

get out of life and aspire to". By implication, the only 'way out' of feeling like an impostor is for women to lower their career ambitions.

Making light of distress, 'growing' and 'keeping busy'

The affective-discursive practices we discuss in this section transform negative affect into something (more) positive. When reading through the transcripts and listening to the recordings, we noticed that participants' stories were often 'making light' of their experiences of conflict and distress. In the following two extracts, Anna (28, accountant) and Mira (27, accountant) talk about feeling pressure(d) in relation to social media:

> One thing that I feel like kind of makes the pressure feel like it's continuous and like the whole time there is quite a bit of social media, so you can easily see what other people are doing. […] I think you see what other people are achieving and doing and you are like 'oh I should also be taking work out photos with the baby on my hip, with my laptop in the other hand' (*laughs*).

> You definitely are exposed to it every day. All you have to do is just open your phone up and you will see other people doing something better than what you are doing right now. It's just whether you want to pay attention to it or not. And that is kind of what I said, earlier I was saying if I thought about it every day I would definitely get stressed. But my trick is to just not think about it (*others laugh*). You cannot worry about it. When I did worry about it I used to think 'oh my God, I am not going to be able to do everything at once'. And now it's like 'well I'm just going to do what I can and if it happens and if I make it work great'. I mean I definitely lose that very

> enlightened perspective from time to time (*others laugh*), but it's good to try and remind yourself I think. But yeah I think it is, and I think the pressure to do all of that, and there is pressure from all sides, yeah it's definitely hard.

What is striking about Anna's and Mira's discursive performance is that while they clearly express (strong) negative affect ("makes the pressure feel like it's continuous", "I would definitely get stressed"), they immediately downplay and defuse it through "comedic, self-effacing" (Gill & Kanai, 2018) self-presentations. In their accounts, reading social media posts takes on a potential disciplinary function by constantly reminding them of "what other people are achieving" and that "other people [are] doing something better than what you are doing right now", and this seems to be linked to the perfectionist aspirations of the 'top girl'. The distress this causes is only alluded to briefly ("it's definitely hard") and then minimised by the humorous depiction of the career mum (Anna) and the enlightened person (Mira). 'Doing' negative affect this way sends the inherently contradictory message "I'm distressed but I'm not distressed". Consequently, women are seemingly given a voice, a space for expressing negative affect, only to be deprived of it immediately afterwards.

The next affective-discursive practice we analyse most obviously showcases its neoliberal imprint – it is all about reframing distress as something positive and productive, namely as an opportunity for growth and development. In the extract we have chosen, Julia (34, finance manager) replies to the interviewer's question about what might lead to professional women getting (di)stressed:

> For me I think I got really stressed out because I kind of didn't allow myself to have a learning curve. […] So I think for me I didn't really kind of have confidence in myself and didn't go into it thinking 'well you know this is an amazing opportunity',

> ‘I am going to learn so much’ and ‘of course I am going to make mistakes and it doesn’t matter’. That’s how I grow and develop.

The most salient feature of Julia’s account is the emphasis on having a positive attitude towards adversity. By attributing her distress to the inability to see her transition into the world of work as ”an amazing opportunity”, she takes full responsibility for her negative feelings. In the same vein, Amy (26, web designer) stated that “I have inflicted this stress on myself”. The solution practised by Julia consists of transforming negative affect into a learning opportunity, which not only renders these feelings invisible but also *inappropriate*. The underlying assumption that emotional distress is a sign of personal inadequacy is fuelled by the recent “happiness turn” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 3) according to which “unhappy people” are “deprived … unsociable and neurotic” (p. 9).

Traces of this sense-making mode could be found across the data-set, for instance when Tara (28, business owner) hypothesised that “some people … maybe aren’t mentally strong enough … where if they do too much it will affect them, and then there are some people that can just plough through”. Besides suggesting that emotional distress is self-inflicted – “I think you really need to know your limits and how far you can go so that you don’t sort of get to that breaking point” (Sara, 25, HR advisor) – Tara’s words also refer to the ideal of resilience which, again, is linked to the ‘top girl’ identity. Again, the focus lies on the deficient individual alone. Julia’s words (“I got stressed out because *I* didn’t allow myself…”) indicate that ‘women stand in their own way’, which is a familiar trope (i.e. Horner, 1972) but with a contemporary twist, namely through the emphasis on positive thinking.

The last affective-discursive practice we discuss in this section draws on a ‘busy-ness’ discourse. It simultaneously describes a strategy for *dealing with* negative feelings and

reframes “high stress work” (Sophie, 23, HR advisor) as that which enables a positively connoted state of being and staying busy:

> I’m also a big fan of extracurricular activities when things go bad. When my life starts falling to pieces I usually try to pick up something new because [when] you get busy you have less time for thinking about what things are not going well and you’re too tired to be stressed. (Maria, 35, data manager)

In the extract above, Maria talks about the therapeutic effect of busy-ness. On the one hand, “pick[ing] up something new” is a way of distracting herself “when things go bad”. On the other hand, and one could say that this aligns with discourses promoting exercise to build well-being, she emphasises the physiological benefit that ‘getting busy’ has – “you’re too tired to be stressed”. Again, negative affect is turned into something of value, in this case, productivity.

In Sophie’s (23, HR advisor) account, happiness and mental well-being are even more clearly linked to the ideal of the always productive self:

> I have had a couple of down periods of not much work […] and that is so much worse for my mental health than being overly-busy […] Yeah interesting that I have almost thrived on real high volume, high stress work but then when there is not much […] it’s really unsatisfying and kind of makes you lose that will to want to come to work every day because you don’t feel the value that you are adding.

Here, Sophie does not (only) present busy-ness as a strategy for dealing with distress but purports that a lack thereof *causes* it (“it’s really unsatisfying”). Positioning herself as

someone who relishes stressful work conditions likely forms part of her professional identity and clearly marks her as a good, even desirable, employee. Looking at the overall picture which emerges from the self-descriptive statements Sophie makes throughout the focus group discussion – striving for authenticity ("you can tell people that are themselves in the workplace and like it's almost magnetic") and a balanced or well-rounded life ("work for me is such a small part of life") – it also firmly places her within the 'top girl' narrative of someone trying to 'have (and be) it all'. At the same time, the affective-discursive practice of busy-ness is a *response* to the demands and expectations directed at young middle-class women in contemporary society where being busy functions as an antidote to the vague feelings of failure ("I still feel like I could be more successful" – Kamala, 34, financial advisor) and inadequacy ("you don't feel like you are doing enough at work" – Mira, 27, accountant).

Moving between traditional femininity and feminist indignation

The focus group discussions were rife with descriptions and stories of workplace sexism. What interested us was how participants affectively (and effectively) managed their adverse emotional reactions whilst discussing their experiences. In the following extract, Maria (35, data manager) and Sara (25, HR advisor) talk about a difficult workplace situation Maria is currently struggling with:

> **Maria**: We should talk about it more and I think things like those small jokes like saying 'you should flirt' I don't think they mean to be mean but these kinds of things maybe they should be more spoken about? Cause maybe they don't realise they do it?
> **Sara**: I think even saying 'I think that's the wrong word', 'no you shouldn't say that'

Interviewer: And have you ever done that with a male colleague or maybe even a superior […]?

Maria: I do actually have a current dilemma with one of my co-workers I like him very much but he invented a new nick name for me?

Sara: No

Maria: and I don't really appreciate it I know he doesn't mean anything by it but I don't know if I should tell him?

Sara: you should

Maria: I should but I don't want him to feel bad about it

Sara: I know that's the emotional side you don't want him to feel bad but you feel bad now

Maria: Yes I do feel bad but

Interviewer: That's interesting isn't it that it's sort of you've taken the burden of feeling bad

Maria: He's such a nice person

Interviewer: You're a nice person (*others laugh*)

Sara: He probably doesn't feel he has absolutely no clue and you'd mention it he'd probably be like 'OMG I really didn't mean it at all' and you're like 'I know you didn't mean it'. You could try and be really casual about it and say 'hey I really didn't like that' […] If it was a female calling you that would you

Maria: I would have told her a long time ago

Sara: Yeah

Maria: Ya

Sara: tricky

Maria: I think I should tell him ya I think it's just hard to do

Sara: I think if you've been thinking about it for this long it's worth saying something because then it releases that weight off you? Yes you're putting a little bit of weight on him but then you can move forward together

Maria: True

Sara: But I know it's hard

Maria: Yeah it's just that we should call men out on these things but it's very hard to do

Sara: Mm-hm

Maria: I wonder why cause if it was a female colleague I would have I would have

Sara: Ya

Maria: Why is it different?

The dilemma Maria describes here consists in being torn between two contradictory demands or self-positionings. On the one hand, she feels that "we should call men out on these things" (i.e. sexist jokes) while on the other hand, she is loath to do something that could hurt her male co-worker's feelings because she "like[s] him very much". It appears, then, that the conflict arises because the feminist position Maria takes on clashes with, or rather is trumped by, a relational norm (sparing other people's feelings). In this exchange, Sara provides an almost continuous commentary on Maria's account, thereby engaging her in a kind of Socratic dialogue, carefully nudging her towards taking action. What is interesting is that she does this mostly by drawing on a relational register using the language of therapeutic discourse – "that's the emotional side", "then it releases that weight off you", "you can move forward together" – instead of feminist rhetoric. The emphasis lies on the relational benefits Maria would supposedly reap, were she to confront her co-worker, a perspective often linked to more traditional forms of femininity. It is only when Sara asks Maria whether she would

have acted differently if it had been a woman giving her a derogatory nick name that a kind of interpretative shift or reframing takes place. Maria's response, "I would have told her a long time ago", draws attention to the gendered dynamic of her interpersonal dilemma. Her hesitation in making her male colleague aware of her discomfort, which previously could have been read as being motivated by her wish to preserve relational harmony, now appears in a different light. Although the repeated, monosyllabic affirmation of Maria's words indicates that this comes as no surprise, neither of them offers an explanation for this gender difference and both women merely reiterate how hard it is to call men out on sexist behaviours. Maria's question – 'why is it different?' – remains unanswered.

In the following extract, Mira (27, accountant) gives an account of an incident that happened at a former workplace:

> I was in government and we had an older boss and he was a team leader and he must be like 60, 65 and he is generally known to be quite difficult to deal with as a boss, as a manager, but anyway beside the point. One of my team mates went up to him one day and she was so upset because she had had a performance review and it was bad and he would sometimes do things like give you a bad rating even though he had never given you a warning, so he was that kind of manager. Anyway, so she goes up to him and she said 'you gave me this bad rating and I've been under you for like six years and you have never advanced me. What do I have to do to make this work?' And in front of everybody kind of thing that she went and said this, which was probably a bad call, but he goes and responds to her, like just because she had gone and agitated him and he responded, and he said something like 'how many of those years have you been on maternity leave'. And I was like 'oh, you can't say that, 2014, you can't say that'. I was pretty shocked to hear that. I was like 'wow this guy is

> going to be in so much trouble' […] She got to move teams […] but he didn't really get into too much trouble because of that. And I actually mentioned it to someone else […] and she turned to me and was like 'well how many years has she been on maternity leave'. I was like 'it doesn't matter, it shouldn't matter', but it does I guess. […] It is time off and you do have to come back and relearn stuff.

Similar to the previously discussed exchange between Maria and Sara, Mira moves back and forth between an affective-discursive practice of feminist indignation ("I was pretty shocked to hear that") and a perspective associated with more traditional forms of femininity. From this point of view, her colleague's decision to call out their boss on his sexist behaviour in front of everyone "was probably a bad call" because "she had gone and agitated him", implying that women would do better to quietly present their complaints and not show up their male bosses. She then further justifies this stance by describing the consequences of the incident, namely her colleague "moving teams" (instead of getting a promotion) and the fact that her boss "didn't really get into too much trouble". Her closing remarks go even further by questioning the *reasonableness* of her colleague's (feminist) outrage.

Drawing on a neoliberal discourse of equality in the sense of 'women shouldn't be treated differently just because they are women' and thereby distancing herself from feminist notions of equity, Mira concedes that maternity leave "is time off and you do have to come back and relearn stuff". This discursive move essentially positions her as in agreement with her former boss who chose not to advance her female co-worker because of extended periods of maternity leave.

The analysis of these two extracts suggests that there is no straightforward link between experiencing sexism and an affective-discursive practice of 'feminist outrage', where anger might fuel the act of calling men out on their harmful behaviour. Instead, it

seems, ‘critical’ emoting must be done in a very careful, muted manner, in recognition of the power dynamics of the workplace, which leaves enough room for doubt, so as not to implicate the men involved too strongly. The noticeable absence of talk about men’s accountability in discussions of workplace sexism, often nipped in the bud by formulations such as “he didn’t mean it”, shifts the focus onto women’s own behaviour. Both Maria’s and Mira’s accounts (“I don’t know if I should tell him?”, “it shouldn’t matter but I guess it does”) highlight the tension between the two affective-discursive practices young professional women move between, namely feminist outrage and a more traditional, relationally aware femininity. As a result, the affective response to troubled male-female relations in the workplace becomes caught in ‘on the one hand’, ‘on the other hand’ dilemmas.

Discussion and conclusion

In the preceding analysis, we have described three pervasive topics in participants’ discourse: (i) impostor syndrome and ‘stressing’, (ii) making light of distress, ‘growing’ and ‘keeping busy’, and (iii) negotiating traditional feminine relational norms and feminist indignation. A range of affective discursive practices were evident as participants puzzled over each of these topics such as being positive, making light and making fun of unrealistic demands, shock, not making waves, keeping busy, stressing, and ploughing through. The marked absence of strong negative emotions such as anger or outrage, particularly in response to experiences of sexism, indicates that feminist sense-making is still marginalised, if not ‘taboo’, in contemporary work organisations. Instead, young women learn to disconnect their distressing emotions from the environment and the web of social relations they are embedded in by using individualising language based on the assumption that

negative affect results from individual shortcomings such as low self-confidence, perfectionism or lack of positivity.

The question is – what do these affective-discursive practices *do*? From a critical feminist perspective, the practice of constructing negative affect as or around self-doubt is linked to restrictive gender norms; at the same time, it can be seen as a consequence of working in gendered organisations which requires women to constantly prove their worth due to being routinely challenged and undermined. The use of the conventional discursive forms 'feeling like an impostor' and 'stressing/being stressed' enables young professional women to toe the line between being perceived as *un*feminine (i.e. by being too assertive), and *too* feminine (as in 'incompetent'). As Gill and Kanai (2018, p. 322) aptly point out,

> What we see is the injunction for women to not show too much confidence; or rather, to only show confidence within limited parameters where to not do so would take up the emotional resources of others.

By staying within the 'limited parameters' of low-key affective registers, young professional women do not pose a threat to men and male privilege. They perform the required emotional labour (hiding, individualising or transforming negative emotions) so that men do not have to question their privilege. This could be read simply as a continuation of historical gender relations where women prioritise the needs of others at the cost of their own interest and emotional well-being. How could this reading be reconciled with the concomitant finding of participants' repeated self-positionings within feminist discourse? Here, Illouz' (2007) Bourdieu-derived concept of 'emotional capital' might provide an explanation. While young professional women are in a socially devalued position with regards to their gender, they also hold considerable privilege, mainly in terms of class and economic capital (a fact that was

explicitly acknowledged by several participants). The afore-described affective-discursive practices, which young professional women likely were 'socialised into' at work, function as a form of emotional capital (i.e. through opening up career paths) and thereby maintain said privilege. At the same time, 'doing' perfectionism and 'stressing' imply high aspirations which, in turn, are associated with the 'top girl' ideal. The affective pull of this identity is associated with the idea that 'women can have it all'.

However, this seemingly empowering and intoxicating new femininity is more akin to a *toxic* cocktail of postfeminist, neoliberal discourse mixed with old gender norms thus upholding the status quo. Demanding of young women to be 'upbeat', resilient and always busy to overcome adversity (Dobson & Kanai, 2019) undermines the relational and communicative function of negative affect and emotion. Instead of linking negative affect experienced in the workplace to characteristics of this workplace, young professional women are expected to manage it appropriately. The resulting normative affective practices thereby become a commodity by forming an integral part of successful professional identities. In other words, by interpreting and expressing their own *negatively affected* bodies (and selves) as dysfunctional, lacking or 'not really affected', young professional women are deprived of voice. Conversely,

> [G]iving voice to young women as "suffering actors" (Harris and Dobson 2015) may open space for dissonant affective positions that connect to feminist aims of social transformation (Hemmings 2012) …. (Dobson & Kanai, 2019, p. 1-2)

Another one of neoliberalism's bulwarks is its emphasis on positivity and positive thinking (Binkley, 2011). The influence of this new cultural norm most clearly shows itself in the affective-discursive practices described in the second half of the analysis section: making

light of distress, ‘growing’ and ‘keeping busy’. Based on her study of young women’s self-presentations on social media sites, Kanai (2017) claims that emotional difficulties can only be publicly acknowledged in a humorous and self-deprecating form, which ensures that women, despite their ‘complaints’, are perceived as pleasing and non-threatening. Critical scholars have variously pointed out how this type of affective practice contributes to turning structural and economic insecurity into an individual deficit, as a consequence of which the individual’s failure to thrive within such conditions can be attributed to her negative attitude (Ehrenreich, 2010; Grey, 1994) or lack of ‘stress-fitness’ (Newton, Handy & Fineman, 1995). Viewed from this perspective, young professional women’s attempts at narrating their distress as ‘opportunities for learning and growth’ are directly linked to power relations in the organisation. Our study participants were predominantly in the earlier stages of their career and therefore in a vulnerable position in terms of job security and career prospects, which presumably heightened the pressure to perform ‘adequate’ affects.

In this article, we analysed the affective habitus of young professional women aka ‘top girls’ and demonstrated that the discursive resources our participants drew upon in various instances of emoting displayed a decisively neoliberal imprint. By illuminating the inherent relational dynamics, we aim to contribute to our understanding of how emergent forms of femininity such as the ‘top girl’ identity help maintain gendered organisations.

Chapter 7: Polyphonies of depression: the relationship between voices-of-the-self in young professional women aka 'top girls'

Introduction

> [T]he self is performed as a kind of contrapuntal dialogue of *voices* between which the locus of subjectivity (and hence the nature of identity) continually shifts. (Gregg, 1991, p. xiv)

The voices which compose the experience of depression can be loud and demanding or hesitant and halting. In this article, we investigate the voices through which a group of young professional women narrate their experience of depression. Our analytic focus lies on the discursive underpinnings of what has been called the 'top girl' identity (McRobbie, 2007), an emergent cultural slot for young high-achieving women, as well as more marginalised counter-voices. We conclude by discussing the potentially harmful consequences of the dominance of the 'top girl' perspective, both for thinking about recovery from depression and the possibility for social change.

Increasingly within popular discourse, young (middle-class) women have been positioned as in the vanguard of social change (Harris, 2004). As part of a broader cultural shift towards a 'feminisation of success' (Adkins, 2001), notably in education (Renold & Alan, 2006) with the media lamenting a crisis of systematically 'underachieving' boys (Titus, 2004), girls and young women are being offered a new, beguiling, postfeminist identity as a 'top girl'. They are told that if they agree to become productive, enterprising citizens who stay positive, even in the face of adversity (Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2018), that is, to enact ideal neoliberal subjectivities, there will be no impediments to success and happiness. According to

McRobbie (2007, p. 721), this process aims at "re-shap[ing] notions of womanhood to fit with new or emerging (neo-liberalised) social and economic arrangements" and centres on attributing women with "capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation."

Certainly, new, more active notions of femininity and female striving have advantages over older ideologies of feminine passivity and fear of success. Critical feminist scholars have challenged this 'progress narrative' (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007), however, arguing that such postfeminist rhetoric conceals the 'new gender regime' which impels "the new female subject … to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12). They suggest that, in effect, this neoliberal, postfeminist regime does little to re-work structural inequalities based on gender by rendering invisible any explanation for failure except personal incapacity and poor choices. As a consequence of unachievable expectations, girls and young women are encouraged to habitually engage in perfectionist self-monitoring activities for fear of not being 'good enough' and often report high levels of emotional distress (Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Numerous, mostly quantitative, studies have explored the links between perfectionism and emotional distress or depression (i.e., Flett et al., 2007; McRobbie, 2015; O'Connor, Rasmussen, & Hawton, 2010) and there exists a wide range of research on women and depression (i.e., Fullagar & O'Brien, 2014; Lafrance, 2007; Stoppard, 1998; Ussher, 2010). However, to our knowledge a nuanced and in-depth investigation of how young, high performing women negotiate depression and whether they engage in discursive practices associated with the 'top girl' identity has not been undertaken up until now.

Analysing 'illness' narratives has become increasingly common practice within critical research on mental health (i.e., Cohen, 2008; Fullagar & O'Brien, 2013; Galasinski,

2008). This focus on the accounts of those affected by psychological distress is rooted in political concerns, such as giving a voice to the marginalised, but also in the growing recognition that the in-depth investigation of the narration of experience is essential to understanding complex phenomena like depression. How people position themselves within available discourses reveals something about desired and desirable identities as well as troubled and problematic identities and captures some of the meaning-making processes involved, both of which have implications for recovery. Self-narratives imbue ongoing life with past constructions, carrying them forward, by 'presencing' the history of the agent. The repeated and (often) habitual performance of these narratives means that they build and, to a certain extent, can reify identities.

Descriptions of the lived experience of depression, particularly those of a phenomenological orientation, have yielded rich and layered accounts of what psychological suffering feels like (Ratcliffe, 2014; Woodgate, 2006), or rather of the narrative forms and practices through which it can be 'spoken'. Our primary interest pertains to how the speaking subject 'orchestrates' (Gregg, 1991) the different voices-of-the-self as they enter into dialogue in accounts of depression. We situate our work within a social constructionist epistemology and explore what particular discursive 'framings' of depression 'do', both on an individual and a socio-political level.

Negotiating identity and depression

There exists a growing body of research on how women's depression narratives draw upon and are constituted by gender norms, neoliberal discourse and the rise of bio-politics (Nikelly, 1995; Stoppard, 1998; Scattolon & Stoppard, 1999; Brown, Brody, & Stoneman, 2000; Belle & Doucet, 2003; Blum & Stracuzzi, 2004; Fullagar & O'Brien, 2014). Fullagar's

(2009, p. 402) work on the 'neurochemical self', for instance, powerfully demonstrates the social contexts operating when women draw on a biological understanding of depression and selfhood, namely the "pressure to perform an idealized feminine, superwoman or self-sacrificing identity", where antidepressant use ensures the continued functionality expected of women in contemporary society. Lafrance (2007) is similarly interested in the effects of medicalising depression, but mainly focuses on women's use of the biomedical discourse as a strategy of legitimisation and de-stigmatisation.

Other studies have explored the 'disciplinary' effect of popular and expert discourse on women and depression through linking depression to 'natural' characteristics of the female body and mind thereby constructing women as inherently vulnerable or inferior (Hurt, 2007; Ussher, 2010). McKay and Rutherford's (2012) investigation of feminist women's accounts of depression is one of the few studies that explores the impact of a particular political identification on the gendered experience and narration of depression. Even though participants' identification with a feminist worldview made it more likely for them to draw on social or contextual models of depression, the women nevertheless also positioned themselves within the biomedical discourse. Overall, this body of work sheds light on what depression 'feels like' and reveals the socio-cultural frameworks available to women for making sense of their distress, but more work is needed on the relation between gendered identity intersections and women's accounts of depression. Focusing on 'top girls' (defined by age, achievement and social class) should allow more insight into the lived texture of professionalism, gender and depression.

The dialogical self and depression

The term 'dialogical self' was coined by Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon (1992) and is based on the notion of dialogism developed by the Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. In the past two decades, Bakhtin's ideas, particularly his writings on the polyphonic novel and the dialogical nature of language (use), have been picked up and reworked by various social scientists as a tool for theorising and researching subjectivity (i.e., Buitelaar, 2006; Burkitt, 2010; Leiman, 2011; Richardson, Rogers, & McCarroll, 1998). At the heart of the dialogical approach lies the assumption that the self is made up of multiple 'voices' or 'I-positions' representing different perspectives. These arise as a result of the "interiorization" (Richardson et al., 1998, p. 509) of speech events – that is, dialogues with others. Akin to the notion of subject positions developed by Davies and Harré (1990), the focus lies on dynamic, context-dependent multiplicity which stands in sharp contrast to the modernist self, which is assumed to be coherent and singular. Hermans et al. (1992, p. 29) stress the importance of embodiment with the self being "always tied to a particular position in space and time (either physically or mentally)" and to sociality. It is these central features of selfhood that lead to the self being "permeated with otherness" (Richardson et al. 1998, p. 510). Hermans et al. (1992, pp. 28-29) further claim that,

> [t]he *I* has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The *I* has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story.

Smith and Sparkes (2008, p. 20) contend that in dialogical accounts of subjectivity "relatedness and collective voices in the main precede individuality and personal voices" and in this way the self can be understood as a sociocultural construction. However, Blackman (2005, p. 189) points out that there is a risk here of a new form of essentialism and universalism when "multivoicedness is viewed as desirable, adaptive and normative", arguing that dialogicality "naturalises flexibility". This essentialising becomes apparent in the study of the 'pathological' self where inherent differences between healthy and 'ill' versions of dialogicality are presupposed and dysfunctionality is linked to the inability of "the I … to move flexibly from one part of the self to another" (Hermans, 2008, p. 189).

What, then, does the study of depression through the lens of the dialogical self have to offer? And how can we avoid the trap of universalism? Expanding on George H. Mead's notion of the 'generalised other' and Bakhtin's 'social languages', Hermans (2001) proposes the exploration of collective voices. This idea was taken up by Buitelaar (2006) in her research on the narration of intersectionality by a well-known daughter of Moroccan migrant workers in the Netherlands. Her juxtaposition of the voice of Islam with the female voice and the voice of the politician in her interviewee's account reveals central identity conflicts and dynamics of the intersectional or multi-voiced self. As Hermans (2001, p. 57) points out, "the voices of some groups have more opportunity to be heard than others". This link between external social relations, in particular the dominance of neoliberal and postfeminist modes of sense-making, and intrapsychic voices is what makes the analysis of the dialogical self a potentially powerful tool for understanding the socio-cultural context of depression in young professional women.

Methodology and Methods

As part of a larger critical qualitative study on the socio-cultural context of emotional distress and depression in young professional women in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Chowdhury, 2018a, 2018b; Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019), thirteen women were interviewed about their experience of depression. We were interested in talking to women who could be placed in the social category of high achiever, in those exemplifying McRobbie's (2007) description of 'top girls'. Recruiting, therefore, focused on young professional women working in contexts and roles characteristic of high achievers (for example, law, management and accounting). After ethics approval had been obtained, a call for volunteers was circulated to the female employees in a large professional services firm in Auckland. In addition, the social media platform Reddit was used to ask for volunteers to participate in "a study on young professional women and depression". Despite the wide dissemination of information about the project, the recruitment process was slow and difficult. We interpreted this as possibly due to the conflictual identity work involved in, and the stigma attached to, being a depressed, high-performing young woman. Furthermore, the enormous time pressures experienced by many young professional women negotiating the demands of their careers mean that there is little time left for 'extracurricular' activities such as volunteering for research.

The age range of the participants was 24 to 39 years; the median age of the sample was 27 years. Eleven of the women were married or partnered, four women had children and five women described their sexuality in other than heterosexual terms. All participants had received tertiary education; nine worked in the private sector (i.e., as solicitor, HR manager and management consultant), four in the public sector (mostly in advisory roles). The sample predominantly identified as New Zealand European or Caucasian/white (one woman

identified as part Maori, one woman as Indian) and most women were born in New Zealand. Even though a medical diagnosis of depression was not required of participants, all interviewees reported having been diagnosed and prescribed antidepressant medication. Eight women were still using antidepressant medication at the time of the interview, but only two of the women who had stopped using medication described themselves as not currently depressed. The majority of participants talked about experiencing or having experienced other forms of emotional distress in addition to depression, mostly anxiety. All participants made references to a high-achiever identity at some point during the interview, for example describing themselves as "competitive", "one of the top pupils", or wanting to be "exceptional in all the areas".

The interviews were conducted by the first author – a female social scientist similar in age to the participants and likely to be seen as familiar with the pressures experienced by 'top girls'. They took place in Auckland and Wellington (two major cities in New Zealand) at a location of mutual convenience such as the university or the participant's home or workplace. They lasted on average for about an hour and were audio-recorded (with permission). The interviewing format chosen was the narrative interview (Riessman, 1993, 2008); overall participants were encouraged to tell their story in their own words, i.e. to decide which experiences and life events to elaborate on and how many and which details to include in the narrative.

Interviews always began by asking about an image the participant associated with her depression to encourage her to talk about aspects of her lived experience beyond the dominant medical framings. This often segued into the telling of a particular memory or aspect of the depression experience, for example one interviewee brought in a picture of a girl alone on a swing which prompted her to talk about the need to hide her depression at work, and the conversation flowed organically from there. If this did not happen, the interviewer

usually asked the interviewee to talk about "how it all began" or "the circumstances around when she first felt depressed". Further questions posed in all interviews (usually towards the end) explored participants' personal understanding of depression, whether they felt that gender played a role (only if they had not brought up this topic themselves) and about what positively and negatively affected their mood. The question related to gender was meant to gauge participants' familiarity and identification with feminist readings of depression.

The interviews were fully transcribed. Pseudonyms consistent with participants' ethnicity were assigned to the interview transcripts. After having listened to and read the interviews several times to gain a sense of the stories as a whole, the first author then analysed participants' accounts with a particular focus on the dialogical relations between different I-positions. This process consisted of marking out and collating all the data excerpts which contained positively and negatively connoted self-positionings, e.g., talk about work and "how to be professional" or more general self-characterisations ("I am a very curious person"), to get a sense of the range of voices present in the data-set. The first author then located all the data excerpts where participants were taking on various perspectives in relation to their depression and where these different voices seemed to dialogue, asking "what is happening to the voices of depression here?", which led to the identification of the two main patterns – 'demanding' and 'resistant' voices.

Our analysis is premised on a psychosocial approach to theorising and researching subjectivity derived from critical discursive psychology (Wetherell 2003, 2008), where

> the subject is assumed to be socially constituted, positioned within multiple (and unequal) relations. Because these relations and the situatedness are fluid, the subject is fragmented and unfinalised in its identifications and sense of self, shaped by ongoing activities and interactions. (Taylor, 2017, p. 227)

Accordingly, we do not view the described voices or their relationships as fixed internal structures of the individual but as social positions or cultural slots taken up by the narrator in a particular context and for particular ends. However, the subject positions and 'local resources' (Taylor, 2010) that a person has employed in the past to tell – and construct – herself, constrain the ways in which her experience of depression can be told in the present, both to herself and to others. The dialogical relations between different voices-of-the-self which we identified in participants' accounts therefore likely form part of habitual identity practices where particular social positions are being customised and reworked as internal.

Analysis

In what follows, we first introduce the voices of depression before moving on to describe what we have termed demanding voices associated with the 'top girl' position and, lastly, what we label as resistant voices. Our aim is not to explore the particular patterning of voices and positions for each participant in depth but rather to identify the most pervasive I-positions across the sample and discuss the implications of repetitive inter-relations between voices.

'Everything becomes harder' – depressed voices

In the first extract, Taylor (26, research analyst) draws on the language of physics to convey what depression feels like for her ([…] means omission):

> I don't know if it is exactly an image but it sort of feels like when you are walking through water at the beach and it is like waist height so everything is harder, like the

> extra [...] It's just like everything seems to take more energy, even just walking. It almost feels like the world has got more resistant and gravity is stronger. You sort of want to go lie down and not move. That just everything feels so hard to do, even really simple things like getting up off the couch, it feels like gravity is just holding you there.

At the core of her account is a metaphor of gravity, external force and stasis which articulates the voice of depression for Taylor. The 'I' is held down, slowed almost to the point of complete immobility – "you sort of want to go lie down and not move". Similar imagery was also used by other participants, e.g., "it's Golden Syrup or molasses" (Paiseley, 29, consultant) or being "trapped under a wave [with no] power or energy to fight it" (Lisa, 26, management trainee). As McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011, p. 59) point out, using a gravity metaphor allows the speaker to take on an "agent-patient subject position" constructing herself simultaneously as at the mercy of an external force (depression) and endowed with the capacity to 'pull herself out' (of depression).

Another prevalent voice formulated depression as a kind of abnormal emotionality. In the following extract, Sandy (36, HR manager) describes her experience of depression as "a game of two halves":

> And sometimes when day to day little things come up, when you are depressed, I don't know, almost it gets a bit water off a duck's back, I just don't care about anything (*laughs*), you know, if that makes sense. But then sometimes little things can also on the contrary be a trigger to push you to extreme emotion. So it's kind of a game of two halves I find.

The depressed 'I' evoked here oscillates back and forth between being overly emotional and completely indifferent. Contrary to the above described images of slowness and apathy, this formulation is focused on a tendency towards extremes. For Jenny (29, solicitor), this consisted of her "burst[ing] into tears all the time" although she is "not a crier", whereas Catherine (26, policy advisor) described her depressed self as "the crazy brain" which thinks, feels and acts in opposition to "the logical brain".

The depressed 'I' most clearly articulated her pain in talk of suicidality:

> I took two trains in the morning and two trains on the way back and every morning it would be more and more like 'you can jump in front of the train and you wouldn't be so miserable' […] so after about four weeks I contacted a psychiatrist because I was really scared that I was actually going to do something quite drastic and got some, I got prescribed Mirtazapine and yeah that kind of stopped the suicidal urges […] (Lisa, 26, management trainee)

In contrast to the previous accounts which articulated depression as a mute, predominantly bodily self, in this extract the depressed voice not only verbally expresses its despair but also asks Lisa to take, albeit destructive, action, to which she responds by seeking help from a psychiatrist. We found several instances of this narrative across the data-set, in which suicidal thoughts mark a kind of tipping point 'triggering' medical treatment.

In these accounts, depression becomes formulated variously as a slowness, a kind of abnormal emotionality, and as a great despair and longing for death, which stands in sharp contrast to the image of the empowered, upbeat and always in control 'top girl'. In the following two sections, we explore other voices-of-the-self and how they relate to this depressed self.

'Get on with it' – demanding voices

The most prevalent relational pattern in regard to the different I-positions we observed in the narratives consisted of a privileging of the voices we read as associated with the 'top girl' identity. Typically, at some point in the majority of the interviews, these subdued and admonished the voices articulating suffering and distress despite the fact that several interviewees speculated on a link between depression and "having high standards" or "being perfectionist". In the following extract, for example, Jenny (29, solicitor) describes what living with depression feels like for her:

> I think depression dealing with depression for me is a lot, particularly at work, is a lot about trying to convince myself and others that I'm fine because you need to be operating at the required level. You've got clients that pay you megabucks to do, you know, for the work you do, so you have to be on your game all the time and whether you feel like crawling into a hole and dying or not (*laughs*), you just have to get on with it. And at times when I am not feeling that great it is a real battle and you get to the end of the week and you just feel shattered from spending so much mental energy trying to be okay for everyone else's benefit.

Jenny's account sets up a conflict between voices associated with the 'top girl' position and depressed I-positions. The 'top girl' voice, which is clearly linked to her professional identity as a solicitor here, formulates a string of demands – 'you need to be operating at the required level', 'you've got clients that pay you megabucks', 'you have to be on your game all the time'. The shift to the second person perspective creates a recognisable form of dialogue *within* her talk, where the professional voice speaks *to* the voices of depression. Using 'you'

instead of 'I' not only makes this voice sound somewhat admonishing – as in "this is what you should be/act like" – but also suggests a certain (emotional) distance from it. The fact that Jenny frames the relationship between her depressed self and Jenny-as-professional as "a real war" emphasises how much they are at odds and turns her depression into a kind of oppositional force, something she needs to fight against and overcome. As a consequence, the depressed self that feels like "crawling into a hole and dying" and is "shattered from spending so much mental energy" is subdued in order to "convince myself and others that I'm fine".

Like Jenny, Shelly, a 36-year old management consultant, talks about the relationship between depression and her work performance:

> It's a pretty hard environment and you don't want to show any sign of weakness. […] And I know that they would be good about it but I didn't want to be the person with depression or treated any differently or anything. It's already really difficult from a male-female thing. […] Probably at an analyst level we've got more females than males but definitely to go up is harder as a female or seems to be. […] But I guess now that I have established a bit of a reputation, and they know who I am and what I do, then actually I would quite happily put that into the mix because I am sure I am not the only one […] so actually I wouldn't have a problem with it being out on the table. I am capable and I am dealing with things and I am producing good results. I've just been promoted. So you can't tell me that depression is holding me back.

In this account, the 'top girl' voice is strongly mobilised to counter and manage the I-positions of depression. In Shelly's response to the interviewer's question why she has not been open about her depression at work, we first hear a work-based 'top girl' voice which attributes her reticence to working in "a hard environment" where "you don't want to show

any sign of weakness". This explanation, namely not wanting to be treated differently whether as a woman or a depressed person, is then challenged by another voice stating that she would actually "quite happily put that into the mix", that is, tell her work colleagues about her depression. That this is the 'top girl' voice speaking becomes clear when we look at the necessary preconditions for this step Shelly is formulating here, namely being someone who "has established a reputation", is "capable", "dealing with things" and "producing good results". Her almost defiant and at the same time triumphal statement "you can't tell me that depression is holding me back" seems to be addressed not only to the interviewer but to other ghost audiences such as her co-workers, indicating that her depression presents an ongoing threat to her professional identity that needs to be managed by the 'top girl'.

We gain further insight into the interplay between voices of depression and the 'top girl'-position when the interviewer goes on to ask, "what if depression was holding you back?" to which Shelly replies:

> That's the thing because my doctor, every time I talk to him, he's like 'so I've got patients who, they were working in a shop and they were doing it really well and so they got promoted to the shop manager, but when they were manager the depression just got really bad and so they spiralled out and they had to leave. And then they got better and well enough so they got a job in another shop and then they would do so well and get promoted to manager and then they would spiral out, until they worked out that actually they can't be manager. They just have to work in a shop and be good at it.' And when I was thinking about that I was like 'nah, nah, I am far too competitive and I know what I want and ambitious to let this hold me back'. So that's not an option. And I know I'm really hard on myself, but yeah it's not an excuse. So no (*laughs*), it was never an option. And yeah I guess if I hadn't been able to deal with

> it so moving to [subsection of big firm] I worked out that 'yeah I can still perform and I can still do a hard job', because they threw some pretty tricky stuff at me there and be successful even though I've still got depression, so it worked. If I had got there and I had found that I just fell apart again then that would have been different probably and I probably would have had to seriously rethink what I was doing, but fortunately I haven't had to because I enjoy what I do and I don't want to give it up and I am ambitious.

This lengthy narrative about depressed people who *are* held back in their careers by depression was an identity or life trajectory offered to Shelly by her GP but gets immediately repudiated by a voice associated with the 'top girl' position – "I am far too competitive … and ambitious to let this hold me back". The unspoken assumption is that depression *can* be 'conquered' by ambition and willpower. Positioning her distress as an antagonist also functions as a counter to the accusation of malingering, a view with a long history (Szasz, 1962) which is echoed in Shelly's words "it's not an excuse". As a consequence, the voices of depression are muted as 'depression' becomes an almost abstract object, something she *has*, a hindrance with the potential to "hold her back". The world Shelly narrates is one where failure is defined as not being able to hold depression at bay and where the most important objective is to be a success in spite of depression.

'We shouldn't have to be happy all the time' – resistant voices

We noted that the dominant pattern in participants' talk set up a conflict between what we described as 'top girl' voices and 'depressed' voices and then resolved this through the subjugating and dismissing of the voices of depression. In this final analytic section we note a

minority pattern articulated much less frequently by participants which helps us understand further some of the effects of the more pervasive privileging of the 'top girl' voices. This pattern is characterised by I-positions that validate and amplify the voices of depression; their 'attitude' towards the voices of depression is one of understanding and empathy. In the following extract, Mel (26, government service advisor) talks about the connections between depression and professional identity:

> That was an issue raised by my boss earlier this year where I was having a particularly bad day and I was really not keeping it together all that well and she commented on that, saying that you know the way I was holding myself that day basically was not very reflective of how we should be in a professional corporate environment. It's like 'I know this, but I've got a lot of stuff going on'. Sometimes it's tricky to maintain that, especially as you want to be at work because it's a good distraction, but also taking time off can potentially reflect negatively because you are taking time off and you don't want to do that. It's a bit of a tricky balance sometimes. […] It's slightly strange having to always maintain that corporate professional image 100% of the time, even more so being female than a guy cause females we have to work so much harder to prove ourselves whereas guys can basically just turn up and not have to worry about it. So you have to be perfect all the time but nobody's perfect 100% of the time. You wouldn't be human and it's a bit of that expectation that you should be so I think is not delusional but you know we shouldn't have to be happy and excited all the time.

As opposed to the extracts analysed in the previous section, the dominant voice in Mel's account, while expressing familiar tropes around professionalism ("you are taking time off

and you don't want to do that") does not seem to be tied to the 'top girl' identity. Instead, this new position acknowledges Mel's distress ("I've got a lot of stuff going on") and constructs work not as the main source of self-worth, but as "a good distraction" for the depressed self. Critical of the demand "to be perfect all the time" as this "wouldn't be human", this voice stitches together the I-positions of work and the I-positions of depression. Its statement, "we shouldn't have to be happy and excited all the time" not only questions the organisational norm of being positive for the sake of others (which was also formulated by Jenny) but also implies that experiencing emotional distress is normal and should be responded to with empathy, that it has the right to 'be'. This critical view associated with questioning societal norms is backed up by a feminist voice which links such experiences to gender inequality ("we have to work so much harder to prove ourselves") thereby confirming their *reasonableness*.

A more personal version of the feminist voice, which draws on punk imagery, can be heard in Taylor's (26, research analyst) answer to a question about the importance of career success the interviewer posed earlier in the interview:

> I guess a big part of me would define success as being perfect at everything which is obviously really impossible, but I feel like even if I was successful, like wildly successful in my job, if my hair is not going right or I am not really fit and look really good then I am not successful. Like everything has to be all perfect all at once to be considered success. I guess for a while I did have this sort of ... so this was when I was first year of Uni with my ex, almost this rebellious phase where I shaved the sides of my head and wore some really outlandish stuff almost to sort of opt out of trying to fit into that model of success and that was probably when I felt most comfortable with my appearance was just completely opting out of that and wearing the weirdest stuff,

> like literally. I had a skirt I made out of old net curtains and was wearing men's ties and obviously Doc Martens and yeah. I find that that actually had a better effect for my self-esteem, just to completely opt out than to trying now to wear stuff that I fit into a sort of corporate dress code but it's not too corporate-y because we are not a suits kind of environment, we are a business casual, but not too casual and then still not look like everybody else, like just to express your personality somehow, I find that really hard.

In the beginning of the extract we clearly hear the demanding 'top girl' voice which equates success with "being perfect at everything". Next Taylor describes another kind of possible self from what she calls "this rebellious phase" in her student years: this self "opts out" of conforming to feminine beauty ideals by wearing "outlandish stuff". The dilemma between the two I-positions of the rebellious self and the perfectionist self is not resolved, however, and at the end of her response she articulates a self that tries to negotiate both the corporate dress code and the demand to express her distinctive personality: a task she describes as "really hard".

Given the fact that perfectionism was a commonly evoked self-ideal by the 'top girl' voice across the data-set, feminist counter-values such as being "body positive" (Carol, 27, web content advisor) might reinforce and validate I-positions struggling with impossible demands and expectations associated with the 'top girl' identity. Importantly, Taylor's narrative calls attention to the connection between voice and embodiment. It is *practice*s *of resistance*, in this case clothing the body in a transgressive fashion, which challenge the omnipresence of stifling corporate and gender norms that make the feminist voice – at least potentially – 'therapeutic'.

The third and last counter-voice we want to look at more closely is what we have termed the 'ethical' voice, which is built around discourses of meaning. The following account is Paiseley's (29, consultant) reply to the interviewer's question as to whether her work environment is a source of stress:

> There can be pretty extreme hours. It's not actually that so much that gets to me because I think I am okay at a) being realistic, no one is going to die in the work that we do and the urgency is often dialled up unnecessarily and sometimes you just have to do the big hard slog and other times you can push back and manage it. So it is not that that I think gets to me. I think a lot of the work can feel a bit meaningless and that is probably the thing I struggle with most and so I try to find that within the work I do, even if it's selling more stuff and I don't believe in selling more stuff. So I try to think, 'how can I still find a positive balance in this to be doing what I am doing'. But if something gets to me over a long period of time I think it is probably where that gets too far out of equilibrium. I get to work on public sector engagements and I get to work on things that I am really happy to be a part of and then there is the other side in making more money for companies that make a lot of money.

The extract begins with a voice, which could be read as being associated with the 'top girl' position, repudiating the assumption that work conditions, such as a high workload, cause her distress – "it's not actually that so much that gets to me". However, in contrast to the 'demanding' voice we heard in Jenny's account which stated that "you have to be on your game all the time", Paiseley constructs a pragmatic I-position, a self with a certain emotional distance from such injunctions ("urgency is often dialled up unnecessarily") that can resist on those grounds: "other times you can push back". The potential cause she points to instead,

namely working in a well-paid and secure, but meaningless job, was identified by several other participants, including Jenny, who stated that "lot of the time you are just helping companies where the only thing that really is at issue is the dollars […] you don't get that sense of helping individuals". Similar to the feminist position, the 'ethical' voice imbues experiences of depression with meaning and makes them intelligible as a reaction to work situations.

Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis focused on how different voices-of-the-self 'interact with' and position depression/the depressed self, which was formulated by participants as an external force and stasis, a tendency towards emotional extremes and a longing for death. Two recurrent sets of interacting voices were identified in the data-set. The dominant relational pattern consisted of what we have termed 'demanding voices' which subdue and admonish the voices of distress, and give preference to the 'top girl' perspective, while the more marginal set of what we call 'resistant voices' recognised depression and the voices of depression as a valid and reasonable reaction to difficult life circumstances. The depression narratives analysed in this paper were produced in a very specific context, namely as part of a research interview conducted by a young female social scientist who likely was perceived as a fellow 'top girl' by the study participants. In combination with the way the project was framed (the working title in the recruiting materials read *The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand*), this circumstance might have contributed to eliciting the demanding 'top girl' voices so evident in the data-set. Furthermore, asking participants as part of the interview why they think they became depressed implied that their depression, in fact, *should* make sense. Participants' accounts therefore were, at least in part, a response to

an accounting challenge. Nonetheless, we believe that our analysis sheds light on some of the identity positions available to and habitually taken up by young professional women trying to make sense of their depression.

As Shelly's story about the shop assistant whose ascent to a manager position is stalled by depression demonstrates, the 'top girl' position is 'troubled' by depression and therefore needs 'repair' (Edley & Wetherell, 1995). Young high achieving women 'should not' get depressed. In other words, if the voices of depression were acknowledged as reasonable, if they were given a platform, so to speak, they might challenge the very foundations of what it means to be a ''top girl'.' Gill and Orgad's (2018, p. 6) notion of 'the bounce-backable woman' brilliantly captures the injunction to self-alienate which could be said to fuel the dialogical relation between the 'top girl' position and the voices of depression described above:

> Echoing the neoliberal construction of the survivor, which emphasises the individual's emergence from suffering rather than the cause of her pain (Orgad, 2009), the emphasis in the bouncing back metaphor is on the *return* journey: overcoming and springing off from crisis, rather than understanding and challenging its social and structural sources.

Psychological pain is thus relegated to the margins and reframed as a lack of resilience which, as the 'top girl' voice urges, must be battled and overcome. Feminist voices, on the other hand, encourage a critical reading of the popular 'women can have it all' discourse associated with the 'top girl' position and point to the impossibility of this in patriarchal capitalism (Gill & Orgad, 2015). According to this view, women's "constant awareness that you have to prove yourself" (Charlotte, 39, barrister) arises from persistent gender inequality

and might, ultimately, lead to depression, which is thereby re-located in its social and cultural contexts. By dismantling the ideological basis of the 'top girl' ideal, namely seeing it is a reaction to new modes of patriarchal capitalism and not as a sign of their eradication, feminist research makes women's emotional distress intelligible and validates it. At the same time, feminist perspectives can open up various possibilities for both collective and individual action with the potential to turn the private voice of distress into a public voice of anger which challenges the progress narrative propounded by the 'top girl' voice.

This kind of potentiality is described by Lafrance (2014, p. 150) in her analysis of depressed women's voiced resistance to the biomedical model, where counter-stories can lead to "anger as catalyst for resistant action". Resistance here might mean the refusal of viewing antidepressants as the only viable treatment, for instance because, as Paiseley (29, consultant) put it, they take away "the ability to see difficult things about our world and engage with that", and because the promotion of a purely biomedical model often glosses over or minimises the considerable negative effects antidepressant medication has for a large proportion of users (Gibson, Cartwright, & Read, 2016). Furthermore, while medical treatment can contribute to feelings of personal agency in women's recovery by providing (short-term) relief, long-term use is often associated with a sense of dependency (Cartwright, Gibson, & Read, 2018). Resistance might also mean "go[ing] to work expecting that I get the support and resources I need" (Mel, 26, government service advisor). First and foremost, it means an acknowledgment of women's emotional pain as something more (complex) than a failing body/brain.

Tying in with such an act of recognition is the questioning or even repudiation of the recent rise of positive psychology (Cabanas, 2018) and what Ahmed (2010) has termed the 'happiness imperative.' This new 'smile or die' (Ehrenreich, 2010) mantra suggests that a positive mental attitude is something that can be chosen – an idea which is starkly at odds

with the experience of depression. As Lucy (30, creative industries professional) aptly phrased it, “I didn’t have a button to turn on happiness”. Drawing on post-feminist discourse (Gill, 2017), the ‘top girl’ narrative glorifies (and crassly overestimates) individual capacity and power and consequently produces innumerable ‘failed’ or ‘failing’ women.

Finally, even though, at first glance, the ‘ethical’ counter-voice seems to draw on an individualist discourse of self-realisation, it also has the potential to de-individualise participants’ emotional distress by infusing the question of individual happiness with a relational understanding of ‘the good life.’ If the ‘top girl’ identity is all about individual control and achievement, with emotional distress as yet another problem to be solved or managed, these more marginal voices stress the importance of relationality. Neoliberal discourse ‘others’ and excludes those in society who lack resilience and ‘the will to succeed’; similarly, the ‘top girl’ voice ‘others’ young women’s emotional pain by monopolising the conversation. On an intrapsychic level, its view of depression as a weakness prevents young women from developing and exploring practices of recovery that go beyond medication and positive thinking, whereas the feminist and the ethical voice identified in our data-set emphasise relationality and a (re)connection with meaningful values and therefore seem to be productive for individual recovery.

The insights from this analysis could be fruitfully applied in psychotherapy, for instance by encouraging women to explore the connections between unrealistically high standards, gender-related pressures and depression and to reflect on and implement recovery strategies outside of the ‘top girl’ mode. However, while these counter-voices draw attention to systemic and structural causes of women’s emotional distress and encourage a more understanding view of depression, they stop short of proposing alternative *collective* practices with the power to resist or even dismantle patriarchal capitalism. The development of such practices cannot be the responsibility of depressed ‘top girls’ alone; managers and business

leaders must step up to the task by recognising how organisational cultures might contribute to women's distress (for example, in the form of structural sexism) and by questioning taken-for-granted workplace 'logics' such as promoting competition and relentless positivity.

Chapter 8: 'Putting on a brave face': young professional women's accounts of managing depression

Introduction

In this article, I explore how young professional women's experiences of depression are shaped by an emergent identity, namely the 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2007) ideal. According to McRobbie and other critical feminist scholars, this new cultural slot on offer for girls and young women combines postfeminist and neoliberal discourse, with the aim of "creating docile good girls who can uncomplainingly participate in meeting the needs of the marketplace" (Harris, 2004, p. 19). Its seductive individualising rhetoric seemingly empowers girls and young women to take control of their own lives, (career) success and happiness. However, this independence comes at a price:

> [A]s the old structures of social class fade away … individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life-plan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. (McRobbie, 2008, p. 19)

The pervasiveness of self-management discourse and its effects on how individuals conceive of and cope with depression has been the subject of several empirical investigations (Brijnath & Antoniades, 2016; Gattuso, Fullagar & Young, 2005). However, while self-management certainly presents a useful conceptual tool for thinking about and researching contemporary (female) subjectivities, paying attention to particular identity practices produces a more

nuanced, fine-grained analysis of the 'top girl' *habitus* encompassing a variety of attributes such as perfectionism (McRobbie, 2015), confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2015) and resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2018). The emergent picture of the ever-smiling, enterprising and self-reliant (super)woman (Favaro & Gill, 2018) is mainly derived from media and cultural studies; empirical work on how this ideal is taken up and performed by young women in everyday life today is needed, particularly in relation to the emotional struggles it entails. The present article contributes to furthering our understanding of this identity work. My aim was to explore whether participants actually inhabit this new female subjectivity and what kind of self-practices in relation to their depression emerge as a result. The focus of my analysis is how participants construct a kind of 'ideal depressed self' in their talk; I then investigate the wider discursive field giving rise to these self-practices and discuss its implications for recovery.

Within conventional mental health literature, the term 'recovery' is often associated with the responsibilisation of the individual through efficient self-management (Scott & Wilson, 2011). As Rose (2014, p. 217) points out, "what began as a liberatory discourse" within the mental health consumer movement "has become … aligned perfectly with our neoliberal present". By contrast, in this study I understand recovery as an ongoing process of expanding available identity practices and discursive resources, thereby enabling different forms of individual and collective agency. Reflecting on possible ways forward, my hope is that this critical analysis of depressed young professional women's meaning-making activities might stimulate new ways of thinking about and dealing with depression in 'top girls'.

Neoliberalism, postfeminism and women's emotional distress

The biomedicalisation of distress appears to be perfectly aligned with the neoliberal project and its emphasis on consumption as the means to a happy, fulfilled life (Moncrieff, 2008). Depression in particular "has come to be widely considered a brain disorder" (Lafrance, 2007, p. 128) which, in turn, has produced "the subject position of the biomedical consumer who invests her hope for recovery in pharmacological solutions" (Fullagar, 2009, p. 391). One of the reasons why this discursive construction, which frames depression as a physical illness, dominates contemporary accounts despite the fact that the 'chemical malfunction' explanation lacks solid scientific evidence (Lacasse & Leo, 2005) is its purported destigmatising effect (Schreiber & Hartrick, 2002). However, conceiving of depression as an illness "invokes a responsibility that requires women to 'dutifully' treat themselves as part of the recovery process that would return them to productive roles at home and work" (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2014, p. 12).

The incitement to work on and optimise the self, in turn, ties in with another facet of neoliberalism: relentless positivity (Favaro & Gill, 2018). The belief that positive thinking produces happiness and acts as a buffer against distress has been linked to an overestimation of individual agency and autonomy (Cabanas, 2018). Consequently, the socio-cultural and material contexts individuals operate in are invisibilised or reduced to mental objects they have (positive or negative) attitudes towards.

A strong individualist ideology is also at the core of postfeminist discourses which seemingly embrace feminist ideas, but actually undermine feminist aims by locating the problem *within* women, thus upholding patriarchal structures (Gill, 2016). Rottenberg (2014) suggests that bestselling book and self-styled 'feminist manifesto' *Lean in* (Sandberg, 2013) is best understood as pertaining to and propelling a new kind of 'neoliberal feminism'. While

gender inequality is acknowledged, it is simultaneously attributed to women's 'internal barriers'. Thus, the proposed solutions evoke a "subject who is compelled and encouraged to conform to the norms of the market while assuming responsibility for her own well-being" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 426). Neoliberal feminism constructs personal happiness and the creation of a "felicitous work-family balance" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 428) as the ultimate feminist goal, yet disavows the significance and damaging effects of oppressive structures, practices and social norms for women's lives.

In their study on the effects of sexism on emotional well-being, Klonoff, Landrine and Campbell (2000) found that women who have experienced sexist treatment report higher levels of psychiatric symptoms than men as well as women without experiences of sexist discrimination. Critical feminist scholars have long pointed out the connection between gender inequality and women's emotional distress (Belle & Doucet, 2003; Stoppard, 1998; Ussher, 2010), particularly amongst those working in 'gendered organizations' (Acker, 1990). Yet, contemporary discourses encourage women to think of themselves as 'survivors' instead of victims (Orgad, 2009) and to overcome work-related problems by becoming more self-confident and resilient (Gill & Orgad, 2017). As my colleagues and I have demonstrated elsewhere (Chowdhury, Gibson, & Wetherell, 2019), by drawing heavily on such postfeminist rhetoric, the 'top girl' narrative encourages depressed women to locate the causes of their distress primarily within themselves. This individualisation of emotional distress prevents women from exploring meaning-making frameworks that connect depression to wider socio-cultural and structural issues such as sexism or restrictive gender norms and thus promotes a very narrow conception of what it means to recover.

‘Recovering’ from depression

How individuals cope with depression is shaped by their socio-cultural location, which in turn directly feeds into their chances of feeling better by encouraging certain behaviours and constraining others (such as seeking help from mental health professionals or reducing work commitments). The literature I discuss in this section serves as a point of comparison by contextualising my sample and data analysis. Various qualitative studies have explored how individuals make sense of and narrate recovering from depression. An often-cited ‘recovery’ process in critical feminist work is the transformation or re-definition of the self as a result of depression (Lafrance & Stoppard, 2006; Schreiber, 1996). For women, this process might involve a distancing from gendered expectations or ‘good woman’ practices and thus resistance to particular (dominant) feminine identities (Fullagar & O’Brien, 2013; Lafrance & Stoppard, 2006). Alternative practices might consist of taking time out from work and family obligations (Fullagar & O’Brien, 2014), where leisure activities can act as “a site through which “emotion play” enable[s] the performance of different relations to self and with others” (Fullagar, 2008, p. 37). At the core of these self-care practices is the rediscovery of pleasure and enjoyment in life, for instance by reconnecting with former enjoyable pastimes.

Intimately linked to the emergence of a ‘new’ self after depression are discourses around developing self-awareness and self-knowledge in the course of recovery (Fullagar & O’Brien, 2013; Ridge & Ziebland, 2006). This process is frequently described by participants as resulting in a more authentic or meaningful life, brought about by a “shift from the medical language of cure to the spiritual language of transformation” (Karp, 1996, p. 127). The common thread running through these various formulations seems to be that moving out of depression for women entails some form of resistance to dominant discourses; namely the

biomedical model of depression on the one hand, with its language of illness, and on the other hand the 'good woman' ideal. As previously mentioned, it is important to note that the language of recovery is firmly rooted within therapeutic discourses, such as the humanist ethos of self-realisation, and thus framed as an individual endeavor which rarely involves explicit demands for social and structural changes or community-based interventions. However, I posit that it might be fruitful to attempt a recovery of the term 'recovery' by infusing it with a more critical understanding of women's experiences of moving out of depression.

Methodology and Methods

Data were collected as part of a larger critical qualitative interview study on the socio-cultural context of emotional distress and depression in young professional women in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019; Chowdhury, Gibson & Wetherell, 2019). The sample consisted of thirteen women working in contexts and roles characteristic of high achievers (such as law, finance and advisory roles in both corporate and government organisations) who have experienced depression, women who would be deemed 'top girls' (McRobbie, 2007). Subsequent to obtaining ethics approval, a call for volunteers was disseminated by a large professional services firm in Auckland to their female employees as well as shared on the social media platform Reddit. I interpreted the fact that recruitment proceeded very slowly despite wide circulation of advertising materials as possibly resulting from the identity conflicts and considerable time pressures experienced by potential participants.

Participants

Following written, informed consent, interviews were conducted by the author in Auckland and Wellington, at a location of mutual convenience such as the university or the participant's home or workplace, and lasted on average for about an hour. Participants were predominantly 'millennials', i.e. born between 1981 and 1996, with an age range from 24 to 39 years and a median age of 27 years; eleven women were married or partnered at the time of the interview, four women had children. The majority of participants identified as New Zealand European or white (one woman identified as part Maori, one woman as Indian) and all women had received tertiary education. As this research is located within a social constructionist framework, I was interested in talking to women who self-identify as 'depressed', therefore an official diagnosis was not required. Nevertheless, all thirteen interviewees reported having received a depression diagnosis as well as antidepressant prescriptions from a health care professional; eight women were still taking medication at the time of the interview.

Data collection

Following a narrative interview format (Riessman, 1993, 2008), participants were asked to tell their depression story 'in their own words'. The interview guide did, however, allow for participants to be prompted with a set of semi-structured questions, namely about participants' personal theory of depression, "what helps and what makes it worse", the role of gender, preferred ways of dealing/coping with depression, and how depression affects them at work. Pseudonyms consistent with participants' ethnicity were assigned to the professionally transcribed audio-recordings (with permission).

Data analysis

My analysis is premised on a praxeological approach to theorising and researching identity (Reckwitz, 2002; Wetherell, 1998) assuming that "experience and psychic life are built up from multiple, and often contradictory, practices" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 125). Practices result from "individuals' (or collectivities') interpretations of and interactions with the conditions within which they find themselves" (Willig, in Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 40). This approach takes into consideration both the discursive and the affective dimensions of selfhood while at the same time maintaining an intersubjective perspective and a focus on materiality. Identity practices are "about becoming intelligible to oneself and to others", which means they are *relational*, and involve "repetition over time" (Wetherell, 2009, p. 3), ergo exhibit some degree of *consistency* or recognisability.

My focus lies on the identification of self-constitutive discursive practices which participants use to construct an 'ideal depressed self'. After extensive familiarisation with the data through an iterative process of reading and broad-brush coding, I proceeded to a more fine-grained analysis of the coping strategies and everyday practices described by participants in terms of 'managing' their depression, particularly in the workplace. I aimed to investigate self-practices which form part of the 'top girl' *habitus* associated with depression 'management'. Implications for young professional women's chances of recovery from depression and its potential ramifications in terms of upholding a depressogenic status quo are discussed in the concluding section of this article.

Analysis

The analysis explores five identity-practices associated with the subject position of the 'depressed professional woman'. They make up young professional women's 'common sense' in relation to how one should manage depression. The 'ideal' depressed professional woman consistently delivers despite her distress, puts on a 'brave face' to hide her distress from others, consumes antidepressants, looks after herself, and works towards becoming more positive.

Delivering no matter what

This 'top girl' practice which was recurrent throughout the data-set conjures up associations of exceptional willpower and discipline and requires young professional women, as Shelly (36, management consultant) put it, to be "really hard on [themselves]". In the first extract, Charlotte (39, barrister) describes her attitude towards individuals who are "too unwell to work" because of their depression ([…] indicates omissions):

> At the time […] I worked in insurance law among others but the sort of insurance was income continuance insurance which if you are too unwell to work you get paid out. And one of the obviously very common reasons why people are unable to work for a period of time is because they have depression. And I remember being really angry, I don't know that angry is the right word, angry and superior because these things would come through with people who were off work for depression, and I would just think, 'oh for God's sake, if I can buck myself up, and drag myself into work and get

> through every day I don't see why you are still lingering after 18 months' (*laughs*), which I think is maybe unkind.

By setting up a contrast between depression being "one of the obviously very common reasons why people are unable to work" and her own ability to keep performing, Charlotte positions herself as someone superior (to most other people), someone who can take pride in her coping skills. While her closing remark acknowledges that her stance may appear "unkind", she does not retract or mitigate the underlying assumption that it is not only desirable but possible to "drag oneself into work" depressed. Sandy (36, HR manager) presented herself in similar terms when talking about a recent bout of depression:

> This was only February-March this year. I just felt like I couldn't cope with everything. I just couldn't cope. […] That is an example where if someone was fretting about something not being done on a given, you know? I'd just think 'gosh' you know? But at the same time I would continually push I wouldn't allow myself to go to bed unless I had delivered on what I needed to deliver on for work.

Aligning herself with an intense and unrelenting work ethic as she does here, in fact, belies her introductory statement that she "couldn't cope", which now appears to be mainly an indicator of the severity of her distress. Echoing Charlotte's above-described feelings, several participants' expressed reluctance to take time off work. For instance, Paiseley (29, consultant) reported that "maybe once a year I will just call in sick and just say, you know, 'I am feeling unwell'". While several participants proposed a link between depression and "having high standards" or "being perfectionist", reducing their work commitments or accepting lower achievement standards were not formulated as a necessary or sensible action.

Instead, the self-practice ‘delivering no matter what’ is based on the assumption that high levels of productivity can (and should) be upheld despite experiencing severe emotional distress through rigorous self-management.

Putting on a brave face

Another pervasive identity practice found throughout the data-set is what I have termed ‘putting on a brave face’, because this image captures the effort young professional women (are required to) put into hiding their depression at work. Catherine (26, policy advisor), for example, talks about the need to be in control of her (negative) emotions:

> **Nilima:** Do you feel like you have to manage your anxiety or low mood around people a lot?
> **Catherine:** Yeah absolutely. And most like you feel like there should be an appropriate time for you to go to pieces but if it’s not the appropriate time then you definitely should not. And there is that sense of embarrassment again as well of if I go to pieces now what are people going to think of me. Like, I hate crying at work. I hate crying in front of people in general because I feel like it almost shows weakness and it’s that perfectionist thing coming back as well. But so almost like there is a time and a place to feel this way and work is not that place, regardless of whether I feel that way or not. So yeah people are normally very understanding, at least outwardly, but you can totally tell when people are thinking it, intentionally or unintentionally, which I have always found interesting. It’s frustrating.

In this extract, Catherine posits two reasons for her attempts at concealing her distress from others. Firstly, she does not want to "show weakness"; secondly, "it's that perfectionist thing" – a clear link to the 'top girl' identity. Together, these two injunctions, on the one hand an expectation associated with workplace culture ("there should be an appropriate time for you to go to pieces"), on the other hand her own high standards, place enormous pressure on her to 'keep it together'. Similar sentiments were expressed by Paiseley (29, consultant) who responded to the interviewer's question as to whether she feels she can be open about her depression at work by saying, "I wouldn't even say like I am struggling or I am a bit stressed today or whatever, I would just kind of try and soldier on." Taylor (26, research analyst) referred to the limited usefulness of the idea of "mental health days":

> I've had days where I am so depressed that I can hardly focus but you really can't call into work depressed, like you want to sort of have to make up an excuse like 'I've got a stomach bug' or something. I don't feel like it's something you can call into work sick for, even the whole like people taking a "mental health day", it's really perceived as more of a 'oh I am just going to have a day to relax' as a mental health day, and not 'my mental health is so bad that I can't function' day.

The extract highlights a central feature of this facet of the 'depressed professional woman', namely the downplaying or minimising of the severity of their distress expected of young professional women. Taylor's comments suggest that the idea of the 'mental health day' is associated with slacking off rather than a willingness on the part of employers to accommodate their employees' emotional well-being.

Treating it medically

While the first two 'top girl' practices I identified are primarily an answer to the question "how does depression affect young professional women's work (and professional identity)?", the remaining three self-practices I will discuss lay out a 'recovery' strategy. The first of the three consists of applying a biological lens to depression and of treating it with antidepressants. Formulations such as "the wiring that is kind of misfiring", "chemical malfunction" and "there is something in my brain" construct depression as the result of dysfunctional brain chemistry. Several women also talked about a genetic vulnerability, for example Paiseley (29, consultant) who said "I don't know the literature on the genetic component to it but if there is there is probably quite a bit of evidence in my family history". Social factors such as traumatic experiences or work-related difficulties mostly featured as secondary causes in participants' accounts despite the fact that six of the thirteen women reported experiences of sexual and domestic violence.

A majority of interviewees, nine of thirteen, explicitly positioned themselves within this discourse. This discursive move enabled participants to construct inappropriate feelings and behaviours associated with their depression as outside of their responsibility. Moreover, it is associated with a clear recovery strategy – as Jenny (29, solicitor) put it, "it makes perfect sense to me, you know, chemical screw up, take medication, balance fixed" – so that the experience of depression can be narrated as a temporary 'deficit' and as unrelated to life history, a 'faulty' personality or a 'bad' social position. In the following extract, Carol (27, web content advisor) describes her positive stance towards medication:

> I guess I haven't experienced bad side effects or any side effects really that I have noticed. And so yeah I don't care what I take. I don't care that I am taking something.

> I care that it makes me able to function on a daily basis and just brings my baseline up. And I know that I can't rely on it as the only thing and it's not a magic fix and it's not going to make me happy but it makes my baseline higher so that I have the capacity to make other choices like going to the gym or reducing the amount of things that I take on or seeing people more or whatever that I can use to raise myself that bit higher, yeah.

Here Carol presents herself as someone who takes responsibility for her emotional well-being by consuming antidepressants. She says that the medication "brings her baseline up" and allows her "to make other choices like going to the gym". The image of 'raising the baseline' was used by several other participants and suggests that the main function of medical treatment is to reinstate functionality and the ability to act independently. In the next extract, Taylor (26, research analyst) explicitly links depression to (potentially) being unable to work:

> **Nilima:** All in all, what would you say about your experience with antidepressants?
> **Taylor:** I don't really like being on them. I don't like the side effects. If you miss a dose it feels really horrible. There is that brain zap feeling. It's almost like an electric shock in the base of your skull […] But every time I have tried to come off them I have gone downhill again and I have been told recently that sort of the only time you would want to look at coming off them is after a year of being completely stable, so no major life events like starting a new job or having something bad happen. The countdown time has just reset with starting this new job. But on the whole I would rather take them and be functioning than not take them and be lying around doing nothing all day because I think if the depression ever got bad enough I probably wouldn't be able to work and I really don't want to be in that situation. I have been

working since I was 15 basically with the most time in-between jobs was about two weeks.

In contrast to Carol, Taylor experiences considerable side effects from antidepressant medication and is therefore much more ambiguous about taking them than Carol ("I don't like being on them"). Nevertheless, she persists with the treatment because otherwise she would "be lying around doing nothing all day". Both extracts exemplify the central role of work for the 'top girl' position. By making an effort to get "wired correctly again", as Sandy (36, HR manager) put it, these women abide by the neoliberal notion of individual responsibility which permeates contemporary workplaces.

Looking after myself

The importance of looking after oneself by regularly practising self-care was expressed by the majority of participants. In the following extract, Lara (28, bank employee) describes dealing with depression as a difficult "balancing act":

Lara: I guess just that it is extremely hard and everything is like a balancing, it's definitely like a balancing act.

Nilima: Dealing with depression?

Lara: With the depression and then just life, like with children and then a job and whatever. And so I keep being told from my friends you can't pour from an empty cup so you just have to keep looking after yourself and just balancing everything […]

Nilima: And looking after yourself, is that something that…?

> **Lara:** I need to do that better. At the moment it's not very well but I am still like I only started my job two months ago and I am still adjusting to that. I need to focus on a lot more self-care and everything but I am more aware of my triggers […]

What Lara is describing here is her failure to be a good self-care practitioner, something she presents as an 'ought', a kind of duty ("I need to do that better", "I need to focus on a lot more self-care"). She arrives at this negative self-evaluation by looking at herself from the perspective of her friends who keep telling her that "you can't pour from an empty cup". These words suggest that it is not only Lara's responsibility but also in fact in her power to replenish her (physical and emotional) resources; at the same time, the injunction is incredibly vague – how much self-care is enough?

Catherine (26, policy analyst) even more explicitly links a recent bout of depression to her failure to maintain a regular self-care routine:

> **Nilima:** Do you have any ideas why it got bad recently?
> **Catherine:** I stopped a lot of the self-care stuff. I sort of went 'things are going okay so I'll just ease off'. And I suppose even though it was stressful and I burnt myself out, as a probation officer I always took the time for myself because I had to, whereas now that I am not in such a jam packed stressful situation I almost have let it slip and I noticed it starting to creep back and just getting random thoughts and going 'that's weird, I haven't thought that in a while'. So a couple of weeks ago I suppose it came to a head and sort of waking up and not really wanting to get up.

The image of her depression "starting to creep back" sets up practising self-care as a kind of guardian force able to ward off emotional distress. From this perspective, depression *can* be

held under control if the self is managed appropriately. Consequently, Catherine places the blame for getting depressed again entirely on herself – a completely decontextualised explanation. Charlotte (39, barrister) described the situation of the depressed professional woman as "you have balls that you are juggling" and hypothesised that "women end up in depression […] if they haven't put their strong foundations around them". What is striking about participants' self-care discourse is its strong moralising tone. Describing their efforts to uphold a self-care routine allows women to counter the accusation of letting their depression 'take over' without resistance, so to speak, but the focus is on establishing themselves as efficient self-managers, *not* on self-care as an act of enjoyment and self-*acceptance*.

'Choosing' positivity and happiness

Already during the interview process, I noticed that participants' self-presentations were often accompanied by laughter, especially when they talked about difficult experiences. This laughter appears to have a dual function. First, it mitigates the adverse effect talk about distressing topics might have on the interlocutor. Second, while it could be read as a sign of discomfort, it also demonstrates that the speaker has 'kept her sense of humour' or her positive attitude despite struggling with depression. In the following extract, Carol (27, web content advisor) explicitly links negativity to depression and, by implication, positivity to being healthy and normal:

> I used to be a very negative person and would be like 'I'm a bitch, that is part of me' when really it was my depression I think. But I kind of grasped onto that as part of my identity for a while which would have probably been when my depression was quite bad and quite kind of unrestrained I guess, but I have managed to be like 'actually that

is not a very nice way to exist' and stopped doing that which I guess is a CBT thing, but I came to it on my own. […] I think I definitely […] tend more towards the positive now.

Carol's account details her transition from being a "negative person" to being someone who "tend[s] more towards the positive". Notably, she does not present this change as a result of improved life circumstances or her depression getting better but flowing from her realisation that this "is not a very nice way to exist". She locates this insight within the cognitive-behavioural model of depression ("a CBT thing"), which assumes that depression is a consequence of habituated negative thought patterns, but emphasises that she "came to it on [her] own". Positivity, thus, becomes a value in itself instead of being viewed as an outcome, tied to particular contexts.

In a related, yet slightly different vein, several participants talked about the idea of "choosing happiness". In the following extract, Lucy (30, creative industries professional) describes an exchange she had with a friend and how this made her feel:

Nilima: Have you talked to friends or other people at all about how you were feeling?

Lucy: I had a friend at the time who is one of those people who just seems to be happy no matter what. And I talked to her about it and I was like 'can you give me advice', like 'is this something that you do or is it just who you are'. And she basically just said what sounded like clichés to me. It must work for her and that's great, but choosing to be happy.

Nilima: Is that what she said?

Lucy: It wasn't really a choice for me. I didn't have a button to turn on happiness and so I found that quite ... I guess in a way actually it was comforting. 'Oh well maybe

> that's her experience but it's not mine so I am not necessarily doing something wrong.' It's out of my control a bit, which is a bit comforting. Once you've seen a therapist and you are taking steps and trying medication if that works then you've done what you can do and so you can tell yourself, you just tell yourself that and say 'I'm doing my best, I'm doing something'. It's not like a personality flaw. It's just messed up hormones or whatever it is and I can't hold myself responsible for that.

The fact that Lucy sought her friend's advice on how to become happier suggests that happiness is indeed something that can be attained through work on the self. Her friend's proposed solution implies that Lucy could be happy if she changed her mind-set, a possibility she immediately refutes ("I didn't have a button to turn on happiness"). Contrary to Carol, Lucy is struggling with this 'happiness imperative' (Ahmed, 2010). In order to attenuate the extent of her failure, she refers to two self-practices already discussed in previous sections, namely practising self-care and consuming antidepressants. Emphasising both the effort she puts into battling depression ("I'm doing my best") and that it is caused by a dysfunctional body/brain ("it's just messed up hormones") allows her to mitigate the negative evaluation her deviance from the happiness/positivity ideal might engender, in this case on the part of the interviewer, while, presumably, also reducing her own feelings of guilt. Catherine (26, policy advisor) even explicitly positioned herself in opposition to said expectation – "it always frustrates me when people say 'can't you just be happy'".

My analysis of these five identity practices shows that the 'ideal depressed professional woman' is above all an efficient and disciplined self-manager, while depression is framed mainly as a weakness, dysfunction or lack (i.e. of positivity). As a result, all of the proposed 'solutions' for dealing with emotional distress (in the workplace) are focused on

individual responsibility. Thus, recovery is narrated as a kind of reward for those who do the necessary work on their selves.

Discussion

In her article on the role of leisure practices in women's narratives of recovery from depression, Fullagar (2008, p. 35) precedes her analysis with a quote from Judith Butler stating that "the critique of gender norms … must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life." Do the 'top girl'-dictated practices of the 'ideal depressed self' described in the preceding section constitute a 'liveable life'? Is this kind of self likely to 'recover' from depression, or might its performance in fact contribute to the emotional distress experienced by young high-achieving women? The discursive field which fuels participants' construction of the normal could be described as a form of 'neoliberal governmentality', which is closely allied to one of positive psychology's core tenets, namely that "unhappiness is synonymous with the inability to act on one's own" (Binkley, 2011, p. 385). While positive psychology originally emerged as a science for optimising the lives and emotional well-being of the well-adjusted, it also markedly shapes the depression accounts analysed here. As a consequence, the 'illness' model propagated by depression literacy campaigns aimed at reducing the stigma attached to mental health struggles (Gattuso et al., 2005) is usurped by this cyclical logic which equates relapse (into depression) with inefficient self-management. The resulting "constantly failing subject" (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 229) is thus not only struggling with her depression but with her own inadequacy in keeping it at bay.

In contrast to the recovery literature discussed in the beginning of this article, which equates recovery with an increase in meaning and self-awareness or the rediscovery of

pleasure and enjoyment, participants' accounts revolved around *managing* depression, that is, making sure that it does not interfere with their 'top girl' identity. The performance of this particular kind of new feminine subjectivity seems to involve "intensified dynamics of self-policing practices" (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 238) aimed at producing a successful neoliberal subject. Far from the self-realising, authentic individual of humanist discourse and the emotionally expressive (ideal) patient propagated by therapeutic discourse, the 'ideal depressed self' associated with the 'top girl' position 'keeps it together' and 'soldiers on'. Instead of talk about rediscovering a more joyful way of being, the discursive repertoires presented in my analysis focus on the successful implementation of self-management skills, e.g., adhering to treatment regimes and keeping up a cheerful appearance at work. While participants described the adverse effects of these self-practices on numerous occasions, for instance the loneliness associated with having to 'put on a brave face' or the feelings of anxiety and overwhelm resulting from high performance expectations, there was very little questioning of the underlying norms. This almost certainly has to do with the individualising lens which dominates both academic and lay discourses of depression. The concomitant obfuscation of the material and socio-cultural contexts of (women's) emotional distress squarely places the responsibility for recovery on the shoulders of the affected individual.

I posit that there is another discursive pull at play here, however, namely the peculiar gender dynamic which characterises contemporary femininities, exhorting women "to unproblematically inhabit both a masculine, rational, productive, worker self, and a (hetero)sexualized feminine, (appropriately) reproductive identity" (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 231; see also Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019). Hiding one's distress from others, for instance, could be read as being associated with masculinity and the image of the lone warrior suffering in silence, whereas traditional femininities and some versions of cultural feminism construct emotionality or sensitivity as a positive attribute of women. However, being a 'top

girl' requires emotional restraint. Women who are in a position to compete with men for career opportunities are faced with the fact that most work organisations still follow a male norm (Acker, 1990) and thus modernist values of rationality and self-control. This discourse assumes that not only actions but also emotions should be measured and appropriate; depression and psychiatric conditions in general, however, are often construed as "meaningless distress" (Boyle, 2011, p. 36), that is, as unreasonable. As professional women with depression are especially likely to be positioned as weak or incompetent, for instance by co-workers or superiors, practising self-control becomes an essential 'survival strategy'.

Distressed high-achieving women are thus caught in a seemingly inescapable dilemma. In order to maintain their professional identity and social position in the workplace, they need to keep performing on a high level and hide their depression from work colleagues. The only recovery strategies formulated by participants that are compatible with this approach are taking medication, practising self-care (outside of work) and working towards a more positive attitude. This triad of 'coping' practices is problematic for several reasons. As numerous critical scholars have pointed out, a focus on managing or remedying individual deficits – be they a presumed chemical imbalance in the brain or a negative thinking bias – usually is associated with ignoring contextual causative factors such as gender inequality and restrictive gender roles (Belle & Doucet, 2003; MacKay & Rutherford, 2012; Stoppard & McMullen, 2003; Ussher, 2010). While self-care practices could be 'used' to challenge the toxic aspects of the 'top girl' identity, for example by refusing traditionally feminine 'care' duties (Lafrance & Stoppard, 2006) or by reducing work commitments, the practices participants described as 'looking after myself' are more likely to strengthen dominant gender and neoliberal norms. Following a kind of mechanistic 'tick-box' format ("three kinds of self-care a week"), they become a form of work, an additional duty that professional women are required to fit into their busy schedules.

Furthermore, the described self-care routines of exercising, practising mindfulness or taking a bath are highly individualistic and thus might even increase social isolation. The fact that only three of my participants viewed making changes to their life situation (e.g., reducing workloads, breaking off an abusive relationship) as appropriate, if secondary, coping strategies for recovering from depression demonstrates how limiting this sense-making mode is.

In their in-depth qualitative study of depressed women's problematic experiences with antidepressant medication, Fullagar and O'Brien (2013) describe participants' process of re-constituting the self-in-recovery as involving a changed relationship to and thus practice or performance of the self. Yet this type of self-transformative account is almost completely absent from my data-set. One possible explanation for this finding is the age range of my sample; the questioning of and distancing from the 'illness' model of depression typically happens after many failed attempts at getting better (see for example Karp, 1996). Another, and in my view more compelling, explanation emerges when we ask, why is it so difficult for these women to challenge the 'top girl' narrative? My colleagues and I have argued elsewhere (Chowdhury, Gibson, & Wetherell, 2019) that this new social identity must be viewed as a *response* to new forms of patriarchal capitalism, as a set of practices holding the promise to *protect* young women from the adverse effects of increasing economic insecurity and the persistence of sexist workplaces. The illusion of invulnerability that goes hand in hand with performing this constantly self-optimising subjectivity does, however, mask its potentially harmful consequences.

Conclusions

From a critical, feminist perspective, the 'top girl' ideal is unsustainable. By producing innumerable failing women, it not only causes or at least contributes to women's emotional distress, it also produces a very limited and limiting recovery model. In fact, its focus lies on maintaining professionalism as opposed to feeling better. Furthermore, by combining highly individualising neoliberal and postfeminist discourse, it makes socio-cultural and structural causes of women's depression, such as gender-based discrimination and the neoliberal imperative to be 'constantly active' (Scharff, 2016), unspeakable. What, then, might an alternative 'ideal depressed self' look like, one that expands women's conceptions of recovery? A necessary first step would be to "move beyond deficit models of depression" (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2014) and to explore alternative meaning-frameworks which tie women's emotional distress back into its socio-cultural and material contexts. Re-contextualising it would also go some way towards a more *relational* understanding of depression locating it within intersubjective practices and power dynamics.

Numerous authors posit a connection between the rise of neoliberalism or 'flexible capitalism' and various forms of emotional distress, including depression, anxiety and burnout (Han, 2015; Fisher, 2009; Neckel, Schaffner & Wagner, 2017; Rogers-Vaughn, 2014; Salecl, 2003; Schmiede, 2011). In his book *The weariness of the self*, Ehrenberg (2010) claims that depression, which he describes as an excessive feeling of emptiness, results from an erosion of (common) norms and the contemporary injunction to 'be yourself' at all times. The study presented here, however, points to the opposite extreme, namely an intensification and narrowing of norms and the idealisation of an 'unliveable' self, particularly for (young) women. A first step towards the re(dis)covery of more sustainable self-practices might be to

encourage young high-achieving women to become aware of and challenge the ‘top girl’ ideal.

Concluding discussion: Assembling the 'Make-it-work' woman

In this final chapter, I firstly want to draw together the arguments developed in the four preceding chapters by entering into dialogue with and expanding on the literatures and theoretical concepts I presented in Part I of this thesis, notably work on contemporary idealised femininities and the gendering of work identities. As a result of my exploration of whether and how far these analytic and theoretical 'tools' are useful for making sense of young professional women's accounts, I have come to understand contemporary ideals of womanhood at work as an assemblage I term *make-it-work woman.* This contemporary ideal of womanhood, which emerges from the preceding analytic chapters, describes the 'best practices' or discursive habitus of workplace-based/professional femininities in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and contributes to creating a particular set of gendered social relations. Furthermore, I contend that the *make-it-work woman* is likely to exacerbate, if not cause, emotional distress. I conclude the chapter by delineating the contributions this research makes to several bodies of work both within and beyond psychology and by reflecting on implications, limitations and the potential for future research.

The main question I set out to answer in this research project was: what are the discursive underpinnings of young professional women's accounts of negative affectivity and emotional distress in contemporary workplaces? I wanted to investigate what kind of identity work young professional women engage in when three forms of 'trouble' inducing contexts intersect, namely, sexist, neoliberal workplaces, emotional distress, and the 'top girl' narrative. Throughout my analyses, I have used the 'top girl' lens as a conceptual device for trying to make sense of participants' talk and identity practices.

In the first of the two analyses of the focus group study (Chapter 5), I presented four 'survival lessons' or imperatives bound up in young professional women's accounts of work-

related difficulties which seem to enable women to navigate gendered workplaces. These shared narratives of individual responsibility suggest that coming to terms with sexist, gender unequal workplaces within a discursive context characterised by neoliberal and postfeminist rhetoric places a considerable emotional burden on young professional women. Chapter 6 described a range of normative 'affective-discursive practices' (Wetherell, 2012) participants engaged in when making sense of negative emotions associated with workplace pressures and challenges. Again, the individualising logic underlying the promise that 'hard work will foster (career) success', which makes the 'top girl' narrative so seductive for young women, runs through participants' account like a red thread. In line with other critical, feminist work, I argued that these ways of emoting are circumscribed by traditional modes of femininity and the persistent marginalisation of feminist sense-making within work organisations, which maintains male privilege. Another noteworthy facet of contemporary femininities fleshed out in this analysis is the emphasis on 'positivity' (Favaro & Gill, 2018; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011), which showcases a clear neoliberal imprint. While these two chapters drew on data from focus group discussions with twelve young professional women working in Auckland, the next two chapters presented analyses of data from individual interviews I conducted with thirteen young professional women who have experienced depression in the past five years.

In the first of these two analytic pieces (Chapter 7), the demand to be positive or 'happiness imperative' (Ahmed, 2010) features in the incitement for women to 'bounce back' (Gill & Orgad, 2018) and to build up their resilience. What I have termed 'demanding voices' within participants' depression stories, is the 'top girl'-inflected injunction to view depression as a hindrance and a weakness which needs to be carefully managed, particularly at work. In contrast to 'resistant voices', which contextualise and thereby validate women's emotional distress, this perspective 'others' those without the will (and capacity) to succeed. Building and expanding on this exploration of voices-of-the-self, in Chapter 8 I outlined five identity

practices evident in the data which construct a kind of 'ideal depressed self'. The focus on productivity and efficient self-management associated with this subject position forms a contrast to other recovery narratives found in the literature which revolve around positive self-transformation and feeling better.

The 'ontological space' (Anthias, 1998) which emerges can, to a certain degree, usefully be traced by drawing on work done by cultural and media studies scholars who analyse various aspects of contemporary (idealised) femininities. McRobbie posits that young high-achieving women feel pressured to perform a "post-feminist masquerade" (2007, p. 722), that is, displays of pleasing behaviour and feminine beauty, so that men do not perceive their career success as threatening. She further argues that her more recent observation of young women's striving towards perfectionism in the form of an "inner-directed self-competition" (2015, p. 15) results from a disavowal of continued gender inequality. Similarly, Gill and Kanai claim that the exhortation for young women to "show confidence within limited parameters" (2018, p. 322) is a core element of the affective dimension of postfeminist neoliberalism. Other identity practices described are flexibility, life and career planning and the delaying of motherhood (Harris, 2004), a consumer lifestyle situated within the fashion-beauty complex (McRobbie, 2007), humorous, self-deprecating self-presentations (Kanai, 2017), positive thinking (Gill & Orgad, 2015), and self-branding and authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012). What makes these modes of femininity *psychologically appealing* for young women despite the inherent incitement to continuously self-improve and self-monitor are the supposed advantages of this "new sexual contract" (McRobbie, 2007), namely sexual freedom and a glamorous consumer lifestyle. The promise resonating throughout this space of subjectivity is to live not only a 'good life' (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011) but a well-rounded, fulfilling life, where neither career nor motherhood need to be sacrificed and women can 'have it all'.

In my analyses, I found that many of these norms and practices are indeed taken up and made psychologically meaningful within the identity negotiations of young, high-achieving women working in public and private sector occupations in Aotearoa New Zealand. These include the perceived pressure to conform to traditional ideals of femininity, the acceptance of sexism and individual responsibility for success, positivity, perfectionism, and constant self-monitoring and self-management. At the same time, my exploration of how such demands are lived out in everyday interactions and practices produced a more nuanced and contradictory account of these women's subjective experiences. While participants' narratives show a clear neoliberal, postfeminist imprint, they are also riddled with frictions, hesitations and instances of resistance. For example, to exclusively interpret participants' endorsement of feminist discourse as indicative of the production of a particular, neoliberal feminist subject (Rottenberg, 2014) would fall short of fleshing out all the complexities involved in this subject position. As one of the focus group participants, Grace, a 25 year old solicitor, put it: "I have heard white dudes go like 'yeah but I don't want life to be worse, I am enjoying these privileges.' Equality means they are going to have to step down." Her words clearly convey an awareness of the fact that it will take more than women 'leaning in', namely men's active in- or rather devolvement, for gender equality to become a reality. Similarly, some of the distinctly political, 'resistant' voices I encountered in the depression narratives speak to the fact that contemporary feminisms at the least harbour the potential for collective action.

Pulls and pushes such as these are indicative of the ongoing work of the production and maintenance of gendered power relations. In the following section, I discuss the implications of my research for thinking about women's professional identities in a context of plural, contradictory discursive dynamics.

Gender at work

What are we to make of the fact that the identity practices, which make up the affective habitus of young professional women, cannot easily be categorised as feminine or masculine understood in a traditional sense (i.e., "act like a man but don't be a bitch", "delivering no matter what")? Is this increasing fluidity of gender identity an indicator of positive social transformation? My analyses demonstrate that women's performances of aspects of traditional masculinity are more than mere "post-feminist gesture[s]" (McRobbie, 2007, p. 733) – they are experienced as being as 'essential' to these women's identities as their 'feminine' behaviours. This is in line with some of the empirical studies I drew upon earlier, i.e., Holmes and Schnurr's (2006) claim that both men and women comfortably employ a mix of masculine and feminine linguistic styles in the workplace or Billing's (2011, p. 300) assertion that "[t]he modern, professional, career-oriented woman is a legitimate social identity — even a norm." We might conclude that professionalism within contemporary work organisations consists of both masculine and feminine repertoires.

More than twenty years ago, Fondas (1997) analysed the introduction of new vocabularies into management writings and interpreted these changes, namely the fact that "authors invoke feminine qualities" (p. 257) to describe new best practices, as a process of feminisation. Yet, despite the observation that the performance or practice of gendered identities has become more fluid in the past few decades and that certain areas of social and cultural life presumably have undergone a process of 'feminisation' (Adkins, 2001), gender inequality and sexism persist. 'Radical' feminists attribute this to the fact that women are oppressed because they are perceived as inferior due to their reproductive capacity: "we often think of biological sex as a fundamental force in development that creates not just two kinds of reproductive system, but two kinds of people" (Fine, 2017, p. 12).

Gender, one might say, defines these 'two kinds of people' and refers to "the social organization of the relationship between the sexes" (Unger & Crawford, 1993, p. 123); it thus denotes access to power *based on sex*. The gender system operates on the basis of a binary value system which attributes either an inferior ('female') or a superior ('male') social position to every individual based on biological sex. While cultural feminists in the 1970s and 1980s argued and fought for the valorisation of 'feminine' attributes, such as emotionality or nurturance, post-structural feminists called for the complete eradication of the dualisms of gender (Alcoff, 1988). The observation that men's performances of femininity at work, i.e. a caring management style, are valued positively, whereas women's performances of masculinity often entail social punishments or 'backlash', indeed suggests that the cultural feminist project failed to achieve the desired outcome. Sexual asymmetry persists despite the fact that ideals of womanhood (and manhood) have radically changed in the past few decades. How can this be explained? As Alcoff (1988, p. 407, emphasis added) wrote more than thirty years ago:

> Replacing woman-as-housewife with woman-as-supermom (or earth mother or super professional) is no advance … because we are in fundamental ways duplicating misogynist strategies when we try to define women, characterize women, or speak for women…. The politics of gender or sexual difference must be replaced with a plurality of difference *where gender loses its position of significance*.

Delphy (1993) goes even further and claims that gender *precedes* sex and is a result of the fact that societies are organised and structured *hierarchically*. She argues that "recognising that hierarchy forms the foundation for differences" (1993, p. 6) is tantamount to the recognition that the sexual division of labour as well as the values assigned to 'femininity'

and ‘masculinity’ are arbitrary and emerged, like other social categories of difference, in correspondence to the hierarchical organisation of social life.

The lively discussion between Julia, Andrea and Kamala in one of the focus group discussion of how the same kind of behaviour is perceived as ‘bossy’ in women and as ‘decisive’ in men (Chapter 5, p. 102) is a case in point. On one level, the existence of such a double standard simply reflects the persistence of the old gender order, of what early feminists called ‘sex roles.’ However, such a reading does not ask the question, what would happen if women’s displays of assertiveness were valorised?

> If we define men within a gender framework, they are *first and foremost dominants* with characteristics which enable them to remain dominants. To be like them would also to be dominants, but this is a contradiction in terms. … One can no more conceive of a society where everyone is ‘dominant’ than one where everyone is ‘richer.’ (Delphy, 1993, p. 8, emphasis added)

Any gender analysis thus needs to include an analysis of power relations and the concrete social functions performances of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ fulfil. What Delphy draws attention to here is that our binary gender system ‘works’ because masculinity is complemented by femininity. (The same binary logic applies to other social categories, in particular class and race/ethnicity.) From this it follows that gender is necessarily and inherently hierarchical. To reiterate Fournier and Smith’s (2006, p. 158) words: it is not “fluid masculinities oppressing fluid femininities but men dominating women.”

In recent decades, a process of occupational feminisation has taken place in various industries, for instance law, human resources and healthcare; this increase in women’s employment rates is systematically linked to a decline in wages (Mandel, 2013; Murphy &

Oesch, 2016). Huppatz and Goodwin (2013, p. 295) used the notion of 'gendered capital' to study occupational segregation in Australia:

> [T]here is a distinction between the advantages that flow from being hailed as female – usually through recognition of bodily difference – and the advantages that flow from femininity, so that in making use of the concept 'gender capital', femaleness and femininity should not be conflated. In short, female capital and male capital relate to the gender advantage that is derived from being perceived to have a female or male body, whereas feminine capital and masculine capital relate to the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition or skill set, or from simply being hailed as feminine or masculine.

The distinction between male/female and masculine/feminine capital is useful for understanding why the same behaviour often is 'read' differently depending on whether it is employed by a man or a woman (Ladegaard, 2011). It goes some way towards explaining why descriptions of the ways femininities and masculinities are mobilised by men and women are insufficient for understanding the persistence of sexual asymmetry. It is often the sexed (or classed, or racialised, or disabled) body itself which produces or is associated with disadvantage, because of attributes ascribed to it (i.e. the ability to get pregnant or being overemotional) "regardless of whether ['femininity'] is embodied by an individual" (Huppatz & Goodwin, 2013, p. 300). In short, women can be and often are perceived as overemotional, 'soft', sexual objects, hormonal, technically un-versed etc., *independent of their behaviour*, whereas men are attributed with capacity *by default*.

The identity practices I outlined in Part II are, at least in part, a response to exactly this kind of female disadvantage or sexual asymmetry. In the next section, I develop the

notion of the *make-it-work woman* as an analytic tool for understanding how and why women contribute to maintaining the gendered organisation and for illuminating the emotional cost this often entails.

Making gender work

Writing about the identity negotiations of 'smart girls', Pomerantz and Raby (2011, p. 562) emphasise the impact social environment has on how girls feel about their academic success, and suggest that "a school culture that is not just accepting of, but also actively fostering difference" is needed to normalise the identity of the high performing girl. Their study highlights the considerable emotion and self-management girls perform in order to produce desirable and socially valued identities.

> [T]here was a general consensus that boys did not need to care as much about being smart because they could 'get by' regardless … all things being equal, a girl would need more on her college application than a boy in order to guard against gender discrimination. (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 559)

What the girls seem to describe here is the need to actively work against persistent discourses and deeply rooted assumptions about girls' and women's intellectual inferiority. This facet of contemporary (middle-class) femininities – 'going the extra mile' – also featured prominently in my participants' accounts. While we are all exposed to gender stereotypes and sexism to some degree, for example through the media, the immediate social environments we operate in (such as schools or workplaces), can act as conduits or filters and thereby produce different experiences as in Pomerantz' and Raby's study. Thus, young professional women's identity

narratives and performances hinge upon gendered, neoliberal organisational cultures and structures. At the same time, they reproduce them. Practices such as 'impostor syndrome' or perfectionism are both a reaction to and reproduce hierarchical gender relations by reinforcing and emphasising women's inferior status. The fact that some women nevertheless 'make it to the top' does not contravene this view. One might argue, for instance, that the women who do 'break through the glass ceiling' in male-dominated professions successfully capitalise on masculinity and/or manage to 'make up for' the fact that their bodies are female, e.g., by remaining childless (Wood & Newton, 2006). One might further speculate that a certain percentage of women in leadership positions, the approximately one in five ratio that seems to apply to most male-dominated spheres such as academia, accounting or company boards, is small enough not to actually threaten the gender order. At the same time, their existence can be wielded (by men) as 'proof' for the continuous movement towards full gender equality, notwithstanding the fact that the number of women in top positions remains stagnant (Haveman & Beresford, 2012).

What Amy described as the 'Smurfette effect' (Chapter 5, p. 103), that is, participants' sense of needing to compete with other women for the handful of top positions 'reserved' for women, does not only put pressure on young ambitious women but also offers those who prevail in a man's world the positive identity position of being 'special'. Similar to the 'American dream' discourse, this kind of self-narrative purports to be available to everyone; at the same time it derives its distinctiveness and emotional appeal exactly from the fact of only becoming a reality for a chosen few.

The 'make-it-work' woman – a synthesis

I noted earlier that the 'top girl' narrative is said to derive its allure from the promise of career success and a glamourous lifestyle. This suggests that it is the imagined trajectory into a propitious future, the forward momentum sitting at the core of this ideal of femininity which exerts an affective pull on girls and young women. Yet, pleasure, enjoyment, and pride only featured marginally in my participants' self and work narratives. In part, this was certainly due to the fact that the interview and discussion questions and prompts focused on experiences of difficulty and distress. However, I believe that this is not the whole story.
A few months ago, I facilitated a series of well-being workshops for other women PhD students in the Faculty of Science at my university. One of the topics we discussed was whether gender stereotypes and sexism negatively impacted their work and doctoral experience. I devised a small 'feel good' exercise which consisted of writing down three recent achievements/successes and to then listen to them being read out by another workshop participant. When I asked these highly competent young women how hearing about their successes had made them feel, most of them said: "anxious" or "uncomfortable".
Just as in my participants' accounts, what this seems to indicate is that the feeling of 'never being good enough' acts as another important affective motor of young high-achieving women's identity work in addition to the striving towards an idealised future of 'having it all'. It provides the emotional and motivational fuel for the *make-it-work woman*.

I coined this term in the attempt to map the identity space which emerged through my analyses. The kind of femininity participants constructed in their accounts certainly is not a carefree, sexually liberated, glamorous mode of being, as the 'top girl' narrative suggests, but one that requires constant and intensive emotion and self-management. While young high-achieving women very likely at times experience the positive 'buzz' of being a 'top girl', the

make-it-work woman captures the day-to-day affective-discursive work required to inhabit this identity slot. Because the 'top girl' narrative disappears social and structural causes of women's distress, trying to live up to this ideal indeed *is* work: a constant balancing act with the aim of 'holding it all together'.

After having written up the four analytic pieces, I took a step back, 'zoomed' out so to speak, and tried to weave together the different threads into a coherent fabric. The term 'make/making it work' is my attempt to synthesize the insights derived from four separate analytic processes, to find their 'common denominator'. The double-edged meaning – to keep something going and to turn something into labour – captures two central elements of young professional women's accounts of workplace difficulties and depression. Firstly, the psycho-discursive practices young professional women engage in to navigate gendered workplaces also keep in place the existing power relations. The second aspect relates to the fact that being a young high-performing woman requires a lot of mental and emotional effort, notably the mobilisation of distinctly neoliberal vocabularies such as positivity or individual responsibility. In the following, I want to flesh out three distinct facets or characteristics of the *make-it-work woman* in more detail.

One of the features which cuts across my analyses is participants' application of an individualising lens. Understood through this logic, organisational discrimination against (potentially) pregnant women and mothers becomes the demand to 'put in the necessary groundwork' (Chapter 5), women's ongoing devaluation in male-dominated, gendered organisations becomes personalised as 'impostor syndrome' (Chapter 6), depression becomes a hindrance and weakness (Chapter 7) which needs to be treated as an individual (sometimes physiological) pathology that might best be dealt with bio-medically (Chapter 8). This act of narrating structural dysfunction as individual deficits comes at a high cost. The loss of collective and political voice not only severely curtails women's agency but also creates a

heavy burden of responsibility and self-blame. By taking on this burden, young professional women make sexist, neoliberal organisations work. As a result, these organisations can continue to extract women's labour but are not, in return, obliged to implement equity strategies, be it for working mothers or employees struggling with severe emotional distress.

A second and related facet of the *make-it-work woman* is how she interprets and deals with negative affect and emotional distress. Again, there is a strong individualising discourse at play; again, responsibility is shifted from the community to the individual. Whether it is her willingness to accept the lessons learned in the process of organisational socialisation despite the negative emotions they elicit, what Gill et al. (2017) term '*c'est la vie* accounting' (Chapter 5), her ability to positively reframe work-related struggles and stick to 'low-key' affective registers when talking about workplace sexism (Chapter 6), her practice of self-alienation and the interpretation of depression as a lack of resilience (Chapter 7), or her aptitude for self-policing and for 'delivering no matter what' (Chapter 8) – the *make-it-work woman* decontextualises negative affect and distress and thereby deprives it of its relational, communicative function. Instead, she attempts to 'bounce back' (Gill & Orgad, 2018), become or stay positive and 'soldier on'. While these practices are clearly underpinned by neoliberal logic, they also seem to draw on what gender scholars call 'toxic masculinities' (i.e., Ging, 2017; Haider, 2016; Kupers, 2005). Particularly the suppression or externalisation of vulnerability and negative emotions like sadness, which forms part of boys' and men's gender socialisation, also characterises the affective habitus of young professional women, perhaps particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, while for men this demand for emotional restraint comes with the licence to engage in liberating, boundary-marking (and arguably also destructive) expressions of anger as well as risk-taking behaviours, women are not permitted this 'outlet'. Instead, they are expected to toe the line between 'don't let your

emotions get the better of you' and traditionally feminine attributes such as empathy and conflict-avoidance.

The third and last facet of the *make-it-work woman* is their need to engage in ongoing work on their 'self', as well as the continuous (self-) evaluations that such (self-) improvement demands. In line with the literature on individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Rose, 1990, 1996) and the 'entrepreneurial subject' (Du Gay, 1991), this contemporary feminine identity entails the internal management and outward concealment of frustration about sexist treatment at work (Chapter 5), 'stressing' as a form of quality control ('have I done enough?') and busy-ness as a psychological strategy (Chapter 6), mobilising the 'top girl' voice to keep emotional distress in check (Chapter 7), and practising self-care to prevent a relapse into depression (Chapter 8). Importantly, this labour remains invisible; not only to co-workers and superiors at work but often to the women themselves because it is taken for granted.

These invisible labours, and the investments in them, were encapsulated well in the comments of a highly successful professional woman who I recently discussed some of the findings from my research with. As I walked her and another senior woman in their firm through my analyses, she kept saying: "I do all of this on a daily basis – I never hold a meeting without carefully thinking through and managing how I present myself and my requests." What struck me was the tone these words were spoken in: as if being a *make-it-work woman* was a badge of honour.

Why do women 'make it work'?

This brings me to the question as to why women (and other subordinated groups) become complicit in their own oppression and marginalisation, which is a vexed and loaded

issue for feminist researchers. Trying to untangle the workings of gender and other socio-cultural forces can only ever be a partial, incomplete, and fragmented endeavour. In the process of analysing textual data, social scientists necessarily reduce the complexity and 'messiness' of people's accounts in order to emphasise and highlight a few relevant strands or threads woven through the discursive fabric. These distillations, in some ways, are not unlike what novelists might describe as poetic truths where certain facets of people's psychologies are heightened to make them (more) visible. Due to the 'liberatory aim' of my research and my interest in how women's identity practices might contribute to emotional distress, my account focused on how young professional women make the 'top girl' work rather than, for instance, on narratives of empowerment.

Keeping this caveat in mind, I want to ask: why do women feel compelled to make gendered, neoliberal organisations work despite the ostensibly high cost to their emotional well-being? I am going to venture several possible answers to this question by picking up and extending arguments I put forth in the discussion sections of the analytic chapters. Firstly, the *make-it-work woman* ideal needs to be understood within the relational context it is tied to and generated by. The women who participated in this research are largely at an early to mid-career stage and therefore, in the workplace, relatively powerless. The punitive consequences of women's transgressions of an organisation's 'unwritten code' were conveyed by participants in the form of anecdotes and cautionary tales such as Mira's story about her former female colleague who had confronted their male boss about his discriminatory promotion policy (Chapter 6, pp. 133-134) or Catherine's assertion that "you feel like there should be an appropriate time for you to go to pieces" (Chapter 8, p. 174).

Secondly, the social position the *make-it-work woman* flows from, and upholds, is one of simultaneous privilege and disadvantage. Calás, Smircich and Holvino (2014) suggest that Anthias' concept of 'translocational positionality' (2002, 2008) can be usefully employed to

understand and illuminate this contradictory subjectivity. Expanding on the notion of intersectionality, it theorises domination and subordination as "context, meaning and time related" (2008, p. 5) processes. In other words, young professional women are never only or purely in a position of inferiority but also have access to considerable advantages, i.e., economic and social capital.

Lastly, the *make-it-work woman* fulfils an important psychological function. As one of my participants put it: "women are always on the back foot". Trying to 'make it work' thus can be seen as a form of self-protection, as the attempt to become less vulnerable to the adverse effects of gender inequality, and as a continuous effort to prove one's worth.

The make-it-work woman and emotional distress/depression

Critical feminist health scholars like Michelle Lafrance, Jane Ussher and Simone Fullagar have long been arguing that women's emotional distress is directly linked to restrictive gender norms, patriarchal social structures and sexism. Furthermore, empirical research has demonstrated that experiences of sexual abuse and gender-based violence are risk factors for developing various forms of psychological suffering such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. However, the impact of regular, cumulative micro-marginalisations on women's emotional well-being remains under-theorised and under-researched. As my research is located within a social constructionist epistemology, my aim was not and could not be to establish – provide 'proof' for – a causal link between the experience of gendered marginalisation and depression in the sense of 'a led to b'. What I *have* shown in my analyses of the focus group discussions is that participants' accounts of workplace difficulties are characterised by tensions between their feminist self, the experience of everyday sexism and the neoliberal injunction to resolve this problem via

individual effort, that is, self-management, and that these discursive contradictions elicit considerable negative affect.

The activities of discounting, pathologising and minimising negative affect and emotional distress I identified across both data-sets form a central element of the *make-it-work woman*. By decontextualising their experience of depression, participants were cut off from exploring its relational meaning and, thus, relational recovery practices. The act of subduing the voices of depression, so prevalent in participants' depression narratives, can be read as a form of self-othering and thus as an internal re-working of neoliberal market logic which only recognises those who possess 'bounce-backability' (Gill & Orgad, 2018) as worthy of success, maybe even survival. This fear of being left behind by a relentlessly competitive labour market and of being replaced by someone more willing and/or more able very likely affectively fuels women's efforts to 'make it work'.

The experience of depression was described by participants as a kind of stasis but also as a form of extreme emotionality and a longing for death. While conventional discourses frame depression as something wholly undesirable, other commentators claim it can be a form of political resistance (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991; Rogers-Vaughn, 2014). Indeed, one might ask what would happen if those whose psychological pain is 'othered' by neoliberal, patriarchal capitalism resisted the resulting demand to 'get it under control and keep producing', that is, to 'make it work', and instead formulated demands of their own? Would the capitalist machinery still work without the lubricants of antidepressant medication and positive thinking?

Scholarly contributions, implications, limitations and concluding reflections

This research is situated at the intersection of several fields, notably identity studies, critical health studies and scholarship around gendered organisations. This is reflected in the range of academic journals I chose to submit my empirical articles to, namely *Feminism & Psychology*, *Gender, Work & Organization*, *Health: an interdisciplinary journal for the social study of health, illness and medicine*, and *Qualitative Health Research*. Drawing on an interdisciplinary body of work, including cultural and media studies, sociology, organisation studies and feminist research from various disciplines, the most important contribution of this thesis consists of thinking together a macro or structural issue, the persistence of gender inequality, and a micro or individual issue, namely feminine subjectivities and women's emotional distress.

My research advances this topic in two respects. Firstly, it presents an in-depth investigation of young professional women's identity practices in relation to workplace difficulties and emotional struggles/depression and the discursive resources mobilised as they make sense of their situations. The four analytic pieces I wrote outline a range of facets of contemporary work-based femininities with a focus on conflictual self-positionings and negative affectivity. This work contributes to research on women's professional identities in the context of gendered organisations as well as to scholarship on the 'management' of depression. It also furthers our understanding of how women navigate sexist, gendered workplaces and adds to the literature on the 'psychic life' (Butler, 1997) of postfeminist, neoliberal societies.

Secondly, I make a conceptual and methodological contribution by developing a practice-based approach to theorising women's 'involvement' in sustaining gendered organisations. Based on the notion that identities are produced, performed and maintained

through *practices* (i.e., Wetherell, 2012, 2013), I showed in Chapters 6 and 8 how participants' mobilisations of postfeminist, neoliberal vocabularies can be understood as a form of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) and continuous work on the self (Rose, 1990) which reinforces the status quo and thus keeps patriarchal capitalism going. Similarly, my investigation of participants' shared narratives of how to 'survive' toxic workplaces (Chapter 5) and the different voices of the 'dialogical self' (Hermans et al., 1992) identified in women's accounts of depression (Chapter 7) illuminated this process of turning structural conditions into individual deficits.

In addition to providing an explanatory framework for women's role in the maintenance of the gendered organisation, I posit that young professional women's identification with the 'top girl' ideal also has implications for thinking about and understanding women's distress. My argument was that participants' identification with the 'top girl' ideal not only hinders individual recovery but likely feeds into experiences of emotional distress by way of the *make-it-work woman*. I further highlighted the potentially damaging impact of positive psychology on contemporary subjectivities (Cabanas, 2018; Ehrenreich, 2010; Favaro & Gill, 2018), particularly in relation to depression. Finally, my analyses of the interview data advances the literature on 'illness' narratives and phenomenological accounts of emotional distress by focusing on a particular social identity and demographic: young high-achieving women. The advantage of studying a relatively homogenous sample in terms of gender, age, social class and work environment was that I was able to draw out and describe a range of group-specific challenges and conflicts whilst also taking into account the features of particular workplace cultures. Building on the insights from intersectionality thinking, this research thus illuminates how young professional women practise their depressed work selves, which likely differs from, say, unemployed working class mothers' identity work.

Next, I want to reflect on the political consequences as well as practical implications of the *make-it-work woman*, particularly for work organisations and mental health practitioners.

Patriarchy and neoliberalism: an unholy alliance?

> [N]eoliberalism, from the moment of its inception, advocates a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens, ultimately arguing for the management of populations with the aim of cultivating the type of individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour which the liberal tradition has historically assumed to be the natural condition of civilised humanity, undistorted by government intervention. (Gilbert, 2013, p. 9)

Postfeminist and neoliberal vocabularies and sense-making frameworks were regularly mobilised in and frequently dominated participants' talk. The fact that neoliberal discourse with its emphasis on meritocracy and individual freedom complements and sustains patriarchy so well seems surprising at first. In this section, I want to think through the reasons for and implications of this 'unholy alliance', both on a broad, political level and in terms of individual psychologies, particularly for the experience of emotional distress.

Numerous authors have argued that gender inequality comes at a steep economic cost (e.g., Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004) and thus supposedly stands in the way of the primary objective espoused by neoliberal ideology, namely the optimal functioning of a (pure) market economy. As discussed earlier, Rottenberg (2014) claims that the postfeminist denial of persisting gender disparities is not the only contemporary mode of feminism and proposes

that there is another, distinctly neoliberal form of feminism, one that emphasises the responsibility of the individual woman to overcome this state of affairs by working on herself. The imprint of this logic markedly shaped participants' accounts, for instance their self-positionings within the discourse of perfectionism, their described attempts to uphold a productive and 'cheerful' appearance and the dominance of an individualistic reading of depression, often based on a biomedical model of emotional distress. It seems that, due to its thoroughly individualistic lens, it is difficult, if not impossible, to mobilise neoliberal values to challenge patriarchy. Ortner (2014, p. 533) argues that patriarchy is primarily a 'system of power' and that "the global macro-structure, the overarching system of states, corporations, and military organizations, remains a massive patriarchal system". She elaborates:

> Patriarchy is a "structure" in the technical sense; it is a set of relations between relations. It is organized around three dyads and their many kinds of interaction: (1) the relationship between a patriarchal figure of some sort and other men; (2) the many homosocial but heterosexual relationships among the men themselves; and (3) the relationships between men and women. (Ortner, 2014, p. 535)

If we add to this the norms surrounding the relationship between mothers and their children and the sexual division of household labour in general, the juxtaposition of this stringently hierarchical system, where a few men at the top dominate everyone else, with the discourse of freedom and choice which underpins neoliberal philosophy reveals, at best, a profound mismatch.

Harvey (2007) posits that neoliberalism emerged as the ideological weapon of choice for the ruling classes in the context of the economic downturn of the 1970s to defend their dominant social position. This reading points to the ideological function of neoliberal rhetoric

and posits that it creates a *semblance* of freedom and choice rather than advocating the actual implementation of these values. Other critical scholars like Couldry (2010) or Springer (2012) have similarly been concerned with the question of power in relation to neoliberalism, that is, the political, ideological and social functions it fulfils for particular social groups or classes. Seen as a discursive device for restoring or maintaining a hierarchical social order, neoliberalism, in fact, bodes well for the system of patriarchy. The most powerful social group arguably are white, upper/middle-class men. Neoliberalism and its cousin postfeminism are discursive formations which work for the interests of this dominant demographic by denying structural inequality, thus enabling the retrenchment of patriarchy.

This reading is disheartening. Following the feeling of disempowerment it elicits to the end might take us to the dark vision Naomi Alderman develops in her novel *The Power* where women's only chance to cast off the shackles of patriarchy is to plunge the whole world into a pre-institutional chaos that eradicates not only all social order but also human history. Only when all memories of humanity's patriarchal past are erased, in the form of buildings, books and other 'documents', does matriarchy take root and become the 'new normal'. In Alderman's tale, sexual asymmetry is caused by men's in-built superior physical strength and can thus only be reversed by equipping women with a newly discovered 'super power' (releasing electrical jolts with the capacity to kill) which enables them to break the vicious cycle of male violence and female subordination. She draws on a familiar discourse employed by evolutionary psychologists and (some) feminists alike, amplifies it and teases out a pessimistic lesson: power corrupts – everyone. With Delphy (1993) one might conclude that as long as society is organised hierarchically, there will be those who are dominant and those who are oppressed.

Sedgwick (1997) would probably deem such an interpretation 'paranoid'. Indeed, as Martinussen and Wetherell (2019, p. 113, emphasis added) contend, focusing on the "middle

ranges of agency" enables the critical discursive psychologist to "maintain[ing] a dual standpoint – a critical focus on ideology *and* on reparative creativity." Anthias' concept of 'translocational positionality' (2002, 2008) serves similar ends by emphasising the contingency and relationality of social positions and power dynamics. What is more, while the pursuit of radical solutions certainly can be affectively satisfying, revolutions rarely, if ever, succeed at dismantling existing systems and replacing them with something else, something *better*, immediately. Instead, social change is more akin to the slow process of evolution. Of course, there are no guarantees that things will evolve in a progressive manner. Progress is, after all, not a necessary outcome of the passing of time; one might even say that it is just another discourse (Everingham et al., 2007).

In *The hybrid self*, Reckwitz (2006) claims that 'cultures of subjectivity' are never homogenous; at any given time there are undercurrents and enclaves of resistance, a plurality of meanings and the co-existence of various ways of practising the self where past, present and potential futures mingle and intertwine. To my mind, one of the most important tasks of critical feminist research is to make visible the fact that our ways of being are just that: cultural modes or habits linked to socially ordered power relations. To reiterate what I said in Chapter 3: my hope is that this research *creates possibilities for women to feel differently* by laying bare the discursive logic and social origins of their everyday identity work.

The world-wide 'success' of the Me Too movement is evidence for the enormous potential for change which inheres in small affective-discursive shifts. Simply by women saying 'me too', everyday sexism, sexual harassment and abuse are revealed to be a structural issue rather than isolated incidents perpetrated by pathological individuals. Me Too has already led to a considerable amount of public scrutiny of organisational practices, particularly women's workplace-related experiences of sexual harassment, as in the case of the law firm Russell McVeagh in New Zealand, and thus speaks to the possibility of a

renewed feminist consciousness and politics (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018).

My analyses of the *make-it-work woman* emphasise the ongoing relevance of the old feminist rallying slogan 'the personal is political'. The methods through which young professional women affectively navigate and make sense of the workplace is not merely a matter of 'personality' but an emergent and constitutive quality of the web of social relations they are embedded in. This means that the self can be practised differently; there is always scope for questioning, challenging, and modifying normative modes.

I have sensed this potentiality in the reactions and resonances various public presentations of my research have elicited in women in the past two years. Apart from it being gratifying and validating that my analyses seem to 'speak to' women's experiences, it also fills me with hope that making these connections does not (only) lead to resistance but can indeed empower (some) women to think about their experiences differently. This brings me to the practical implications of my analyses, both for workplaces as well as for women who are struggling with emotional distress. While social constructionist psychologists have long been claiming that the self is 'social through and through', this insight has had very little impact on how work organisations think about and address the issue of their employees' emotional well-being. Similar to conventional measures taken to improve gender equity, which generally focus on 'empowering' individual women by teaching them leadership skills, organisations usually approach emotional distress as an individual problem which must be solved individually, for instance by increasing employees' resistance to stress via resilience trainings or through offering yoga and mindfulness classes.

My analyses indicate, however, that young professional women's emotional distress must be understood and is embedded within the context of their workplace relations and everyday identity practices. If the *make-it-work woman* is a response to sexist, neoliberal

workplaces and if it exacerbates, if not causes, women's emotional struggles, as I have argued, then organisations which take seriously the responsibility for their employees' well-being must tackle these toxic conditions. Such an approach would entail bringing men into the picture and holding them accountable. This might include the introduction of reflexive processes into work routines with the objective to create awareness of how women are marginalised and devalued by interactional practices, for instance. It might further consist of men (and women) in leadership positions explicitly embracing and role-modelling more sustainable ways of being, e.g., by acknowledging vulnerability.

Apart from their usefulness in an organisational context, my analyses would also be beneficial to young high-achieving women by acting as an alternative framework for understanding women's emotional distress which is, in turn, associated with a different 'recovery' path. This kind of knowledge could be incorporated by mental health practitioners working with young high-performing women, i.e., by using the *make-it-work woman* as a psycho-educational tool and starting point for developing more sustainable self-practices. Ultimately, however, such interventions must be embedded within a larger political and cultural change project which involves the imagining and building of new forms of sociality, organising and relating.

Concluding reflections

The neoliberal and postfeminist discourses underpinning the 'top girl' ideal produce subjects who are only 'intelligible' (Butler, 1990, 1993) if they individualise their emotional struggles and distress. This idealised femininity thus renders invisible not only gender, but also class, ethnicity and race. Consequently, becoming a 'top girl' appears to be an outcome available to all young women who work hard and make good choices. This contradiction is

lived out in the form of the *make-it-work woman* who is engaged in a continuous process of 'fending off' various kinds of trouble such as structural sexism in the workplace. From the 'top girl' perspective, the experience of severe emotional distress like depression is just another form of trouble – ''top girl's are able to overcome any adverse situation due to their resilience and positive mental attitude' – which needs to be managed. My brief analysis of the voices of depression in Chapter 7, which construct depression as stasis, as a form of abnormal emotionality and as great despair, indicates that this mode of being stands in stark contrast to the busy-ness, positivity and controlled self-management of the *make-it-work woman*. The fact that it cannot be easily overcome despite the continued effort to 'keep it in check' opens up the possibility for a different perspective, namely to view it as a *consequence* of always trying to 'make it work', as a form of resisting the demands of the 'top girl'. This kind of potentiality was formulated by the resistant voices I identified in participants' depression accounts (Chapter 7) but also manifested in the ambivalences participants expressed, for example in regard to antidepressant medication or the happiness imperative (Chapter 8).

Like any investigation of socio-psychological reality-making, this research is limited by the particularities of its cultural, geographical and historical location, the sample characteristics and researcher positionality and subjectivity. As the study did not include a comparative element, I am unable to assess exactly to what extent the *make-it-work woman* is a New Zealand-specific phenomenon. There certainly seem to be resonances of particularly 'kiwi' ways of practising the self, i.e. the injunction to 'be hard' which ostensibly hails from New Zealand's pioneer past or the tendency to downplay or joke away emotional pain ("she'll be right"). Similarly, some of the identity practices I described might not be particular to women; for instance, the emphasis on individual responsibility and self-management in regards to 'overcoming' depression (see, for example, Brijnath & Antoniades, 2016). Furthermore, the women who volunteered to participate in this research may have

been motivated by their existing feminist inclinations or particular psycho-biographies, e.g., by having experienced male violence in the past as half of the women I interviewed for the second study reported. Lastly, my own 'insider' status necessarily impacted what stood out for me in the data and thus, to a certain degree, shaped my understanding of my participants' sense-making activities.

Owing to the specificity of my research question and because this would have gone beyond the scope of this thesis, I was not able to exhaustively analyse the focus group and interview material but had to select the most pertinent patterns and analytic angles. In the future, I intend to further explore the range of positively and negatively connoted femininities in relation to which participants positioned themselves. Another fruitful approach would be to apply an intersectional lens to the utterances of the six focus group participants who identified as ethnic minority women and to trace the different kinds of more or less 'troublesome' doings of this social identity (Staunaes, 2003), for instance Grace's self-positioning as needing to fulfil the "Asian success quota". As Harris (2004, p. 81) points out, young migrant women who aspire to the lifestyle of the dominant culture have come to "symbolize appropriate 'acculturation'", thereby muting fears of a violent, globalised world. The interview data, too, contain untapped analytic potential, for example, the images and metaphors used by participants when speaking about their experience of depression which might serve as a starting point for developing vocabularies of resistance, particularly in relation to the neoliberal capitalist norm of productivity. Furthermore, the *make-it-work woman* opens up new theoretical perspectives on women's emotional distress and the potential to re-conceptualise depression as a socio-cultural, relational phenomenon.

I want to conclude by reflecting on the context-boundedness of subjective experience and meaning-making. I began this research from a position of radical critique. Caught up in the unmitigated enthusiasm of having only just discovered critical constructionist analysis,

the liberatory potential of identifying and understanding the cultural resources we use for self-making seemed to me almost unlimited. Since then my trajectory, both as a researcher and in my personal life, has taken a somewhat more 'reparative' (Sedgwick, 1997) course. Put simply, I came to understand that a radically abolitionist project is unsustainable and potentially even 'depressogenic'. I still believe that it is paramount to, as Paiseley puts it, foster our "ability to see difficult things about our world and engage with that"; that is, to engage in critical reflexivity as an ongoing ethical practice. However, this critical constructionist gaze must be coupled with the active attempt to view change as something that is always already happening. One of the strengths of a practice-based, critical discursive psychology is that it acknowledges the messiness, incompleteness, 'could be otherwise' quality and therefore inherent ambivalence and polyvalence of human behaviour and experience. Words, gestures and cultural symbols take on a different significance when transplanted into another context; social positions, identities and power relations are not fixed entities but processes, open to interpretation and change.

My own experience with depression is a case in point. Wrestling with the 'top girl' ideal is an ongoing struggle for me. I do often experience its demanding voices as constraining and exploitative; at other times it can become a powerful motivating force that enables me to affectively harness my physical and mental capacities. Similarly, applying an individualising lens to my emotional distress can be simultaneously crippling and liberating.

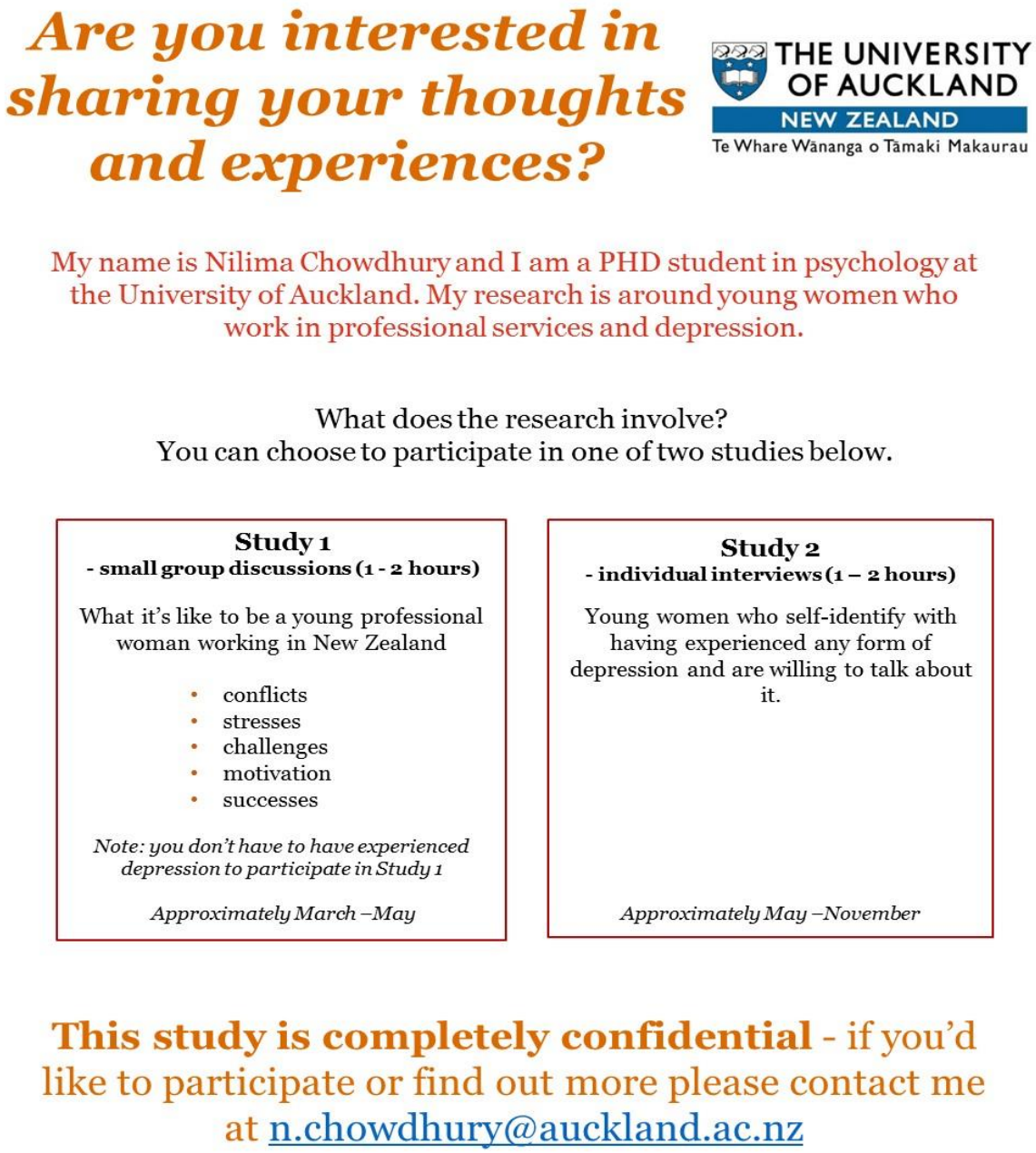
My aim in this thesis was to explore the potentially harmful effects of the 'top girl' identity, both in terms of thinking about 'recovery' from depression and in terms of its contribution to maintaining the gendered organisation, and to construct a *counter-narrative* with the potential to disrupt the dominant neoliberal, postfeminist framing of women's emotional struggles. My hope is that the *make-it-work woman* can serve as a kind of discursive 'expansion' of the available meaning-making resources for understanding young

professional women's experiences of depression and emotional struggles in gendered neoliberal workplaces at the intersection of social and personal change.

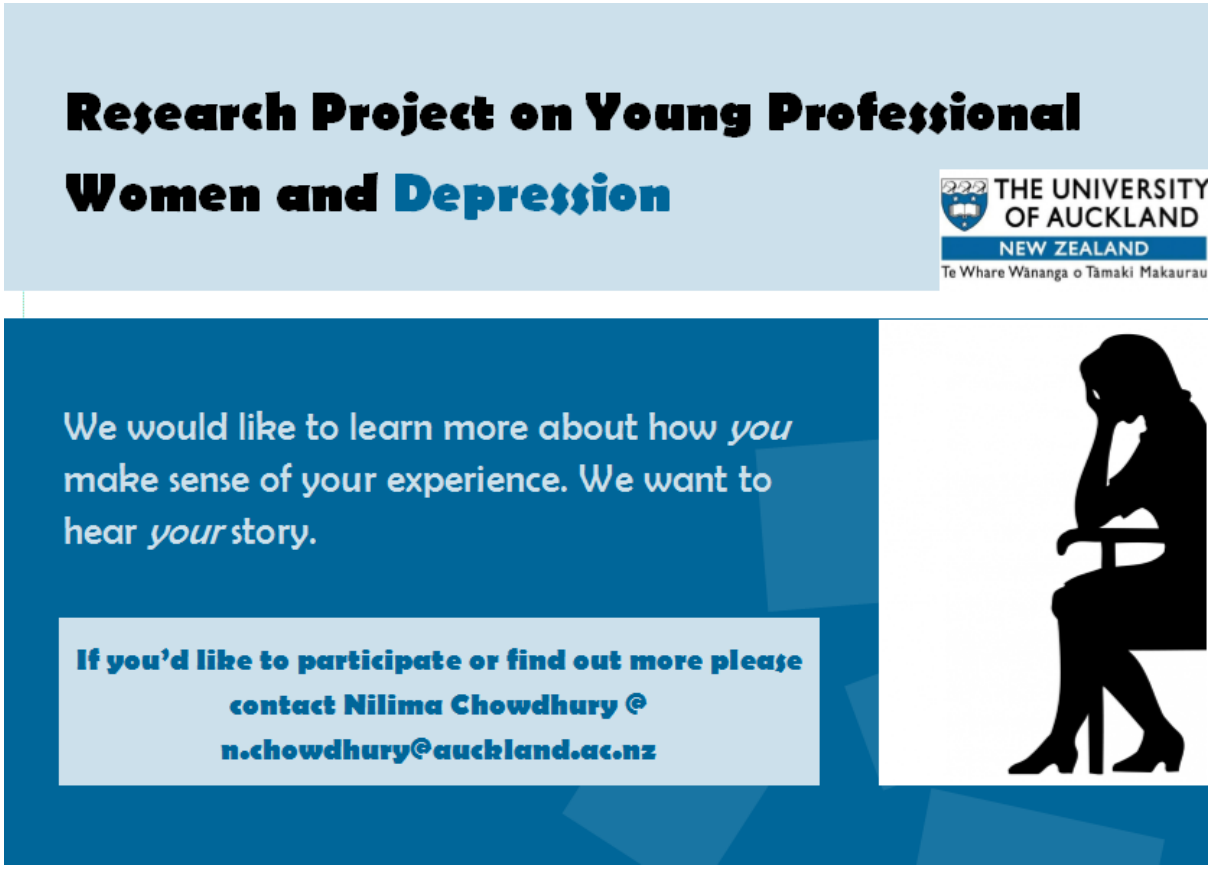
Appendices

Appendix A: Material used for recruitment

1. Poster/research advertisement disseminated by professional services firm



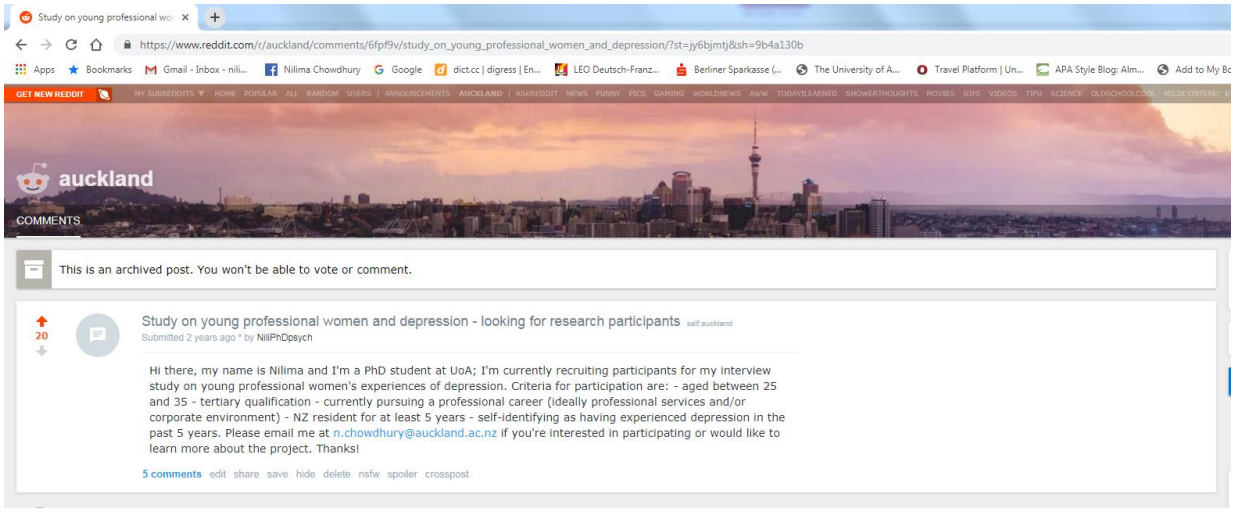
2. Flyers used for distribution at events



3. Research blurb shared via email

Nilima's PhD research project aims to elucidate the stress and pressures associated with being a successful young woman in New Zealand and how these might contribute to depression. The project will consist of two studies: focus group interviews (Study 1) with three to five women in each group and individual narrative interviews (Study 2) with women who self-identify as having experienced depression in the past. The objective of Study 1 is to explore the general social and cultural context of the participants' lives with a special focus on their working environment. In Study 2, individual depression stories will be collected to gain insight into how participants make sense of their depression experiences. Participants should be between 25 and 35 years old, hold a tertiary qualification, currently pursue a professional career and have been NZ residents for at least five years. (Note: volunteers younger than 25 who have at least one year of work experience can participate.) It is anticipated that 15-20 women will be needed for each study; participation in both studies is not possible.

4. Screenshot of research ad on Reddit.com



Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet Study One (Focus Groups)

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

School of Psychology
Human Sciences Building
Floor 6, 10 Symonds Street
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7450
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand
Researcher: Nilima Chowdhury
Supervisors: Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell

My name is Nilima Chowdhury, and I am a student in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, enrolled in the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I really appreciate that you have volunteered to take part in this study. I'd like to learn more about what kind of stressors you encounter in your everyday life and how these might be related to experiences of depression in some women. In the past few decades, young women increasingly have been given opportunities to succeed, but they are also twice as likely to experience depression as men. As this is a relatively recent development, not a lot of research has been done on this apparent paradox. I hope that this project will shed some light on the matter. For this purpose, I will be conducting focus group interviews with approximately 20 young professional women aged between 25 and 35 years, who have been residing in New Zealand for at least five years. You do not need to have experienced depression yourself to take part in this study, but if you have this does not exclude you from participating.
We are hoping that this study will be helpful for understanding the working lives of young professional women and the links with depression.

Structure of the study

This study will consist of focus group discussions with 4 to 5 participants each.
We will explore the relationship between success and stress more generally and discuss topics such as your definition of success and failure, work-life-balance, differences between men and women, general expectations and pressures etc. as well as your view on depression. This discussion will take between one and two hours.

Where and when

I will be arranging, conducting and analysing the focus group interview. The focus group session will take place in a room at the university. It is expected to run for approximately one to two hours. You will be asked to allow two hours in total to ensure there is time for introductions and set up.

Right to withdraw

Participation is voluntary and you will not need to answer any questions that you don't want to. You may withdraw from the focus group interview at any time without giving a reason. Given the group nature of the focus group, you will not have the option to withdraw focus group data after the

discussion was held, but I would do my utmost to remove any sensitive comments that could be traced to individual participants.

Data collection and storage

I would like to audio record the focus group interview, which would then be transcribed into a written record. The transcription may be done by a person who is employed to do this job, and this person will sign a confidentiality agreement. Audio files and written transcripts will be stored without your name on them, in a secure place within the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, and treated as confidential documents. My supervisors, Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell, will have access to the data for the purposes of assisting me with my research. The recorded data will be owned by the researchers and used for this research. It will be kept indefinitely until such time that we are no longer working in this field of research, when they will be destroyed. Digital data will be deleted, and hard copies shredded.

Privacy

Given there will be others participating in the focus group with you, I expect you will only share views and stories you are comfortable with them knowing. Please note that I can't ensure the privacy of anything disclosed in the presence of someone who is not a member of the research team. I encourage all participants to be sensitive to and respect the privacy of material shared in the focus groups.

What will happen to the results?

Findings will be published as part of my Doctor in Philosophy in Psychology and may be published in an international or domestic journal and presented at conferences. In any case, nothing that identifies you would be included. Quotes or descriptions from some of the focus groups interviews will be used, however, I will be careful to maintain confidentiality. Should there be any concern regarding confidentiality of any aspect of the focus group interview that I would like to report on, I will seek your permission to contact you in the future to ensure I don't inadvertently identify any person. If you would like to receive a copy of the findings, please let me know and provide me with an email address.

Thank you

I would like to thank you very much for your time and help in making this study possible. If you are still keen to participate please let me know by email: n.chowdhury@auckland.ac.nz. I hope that taking part in this research will be interesting and thought-provoking for you.

If you have any further questions about this project, please contact:

Nilima Chowdhury, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Email: n.chowdhury@auckland.ac.nz
Dr Kerry Gibson, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Ph: 373 7599 ext. 88556, Email: kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz
Professor Margaret Wetherell, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Ph: 373 7599 ext. 82933, Email: m.wetherell@auckland.ac.nz
Head of Department, Dr William Hayward, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Ph: 373 7599 ext. 88516, Email: w.hayward@auckland.ac.nz.

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz .
APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 20 September 2016 for 3 years, Reference Number 016677

Appendix C: Consent Form for Study One (Focus Groups)

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

School of Psychology
Human Sciences Building
Floor 6, 10 Symonds Street
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7450
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand
Name of Researcher: Nilima Chowdhury
Supervisors: Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, understood the nature of the research and why I have been invited to participate. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and had them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary.

- I agree to take part in this research, involving my participation in a focus group session which will take approximately one to two hours.
- I can withdraw from the focus group at any time without giving a reason. I understand I will be unable to withdraw data from the focus group in which I participate.
- I agree not to disclose anything discussed in the focus group.
- I understand that the focus group will be audiotaped.
- Findings will be published as part of the researcher's Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology and may be published in an international or domestic journal and presented at conferences. I understand that parts of what I say may be quoted in research publications and presentations, but that these quotations will be anonymous with any identifying contextual information removed.
- I agree to be contacted by the researcher after the focus group if she would like to clarify details of what I've said or to discuss issues related to protecting confidentiality. *[Please cross out if you do not agree]*
- I understand that the audio file record of the focus group may be transcribed by a third party, who has signed a confidentiality agreement.
- I understand that electronic and hardcopy data will be kept until such time as the researcher is no longer working in this area of research, after which time they will be destroyed.
- I would / would not like to receive a copy of findings. *[Please indicate one]*
- I understand that I am welcome to contact the researcher for an update on the research.
- I understand that this form will be kept for a period of six years.

Name _____

Contact details (not required) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 20 September 2016 for 3 years, Reference Number 016677

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet for Study Two (Interviews)

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

School of Psychology
Human Sciences Building
Floor 6, 10 Symonds Street
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7450
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand
Researcher: Nilima Chowdhury
Supervisors: Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell

My name is Nilima Chowdhury, and I am a student in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, enrolled in the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I really appreciate that you have volunteered to take part in this study. Having gone through bouts of depression myself, I'd like to learn more about how *you* make sense of your experiences of depression. In the past few decades, young women increasingly have been given opportunities to succeed, but they are also twice as likely to experience depression as men. As this is a relatively recent development, not a lot of research has been done on this apparent paradox. I hope that this project will shed some light on the matter. For this purpose, I will be interviewing approximately 20 young professional women aged between 25 and 35 years, who have been residing in New Zealand for at least five years and who have experienced depression in the past.
We are hoping that this research will be helpful for other young women in a similar situation.

Structure of the study

In this study I will be interviewing you individually using a narrative approach which means that I am interested in hearing your story in your own words. This means you will decide which experiences you want to elaborate on, which life events you regard as crucial, and how many and which details you want to include in your narrative. You will thereby contribute to a better understanding of what it is like to be a young professional woman having experienced depression.

Where and when

I will be arranging, conducting and analysing the interview. It will be held at a place convenient for you, such as your workplace, home, a community venue, or the university. The length of the interview will likely vary due to its unstructured nature; I want to make sure that you have enough time to explore all the different aspects you consider relevant for understanding your story. However, I expect that it won't take more than two hours.

Right to withdraw

Participation is voluntary and you will not need to answer any questions that you don't want to. You may withdraw from the interview at any time without giving a reason. You may also request that your contribution in relation to the interview be withdrawn from the database up to one month after the interview.

Data collection and storage

I would like to audio record the interview, which would then be transcribed into a written record. If you agree to the interview being recorded, you may choose to have the recorder turned off at any time during the interview. The interview may be transcribed by a person who is employed to do this job, and this person will sign a confidentiality agreement. Audio files and written transcripts will be stored without your name on them, in a secure place within the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, and treated as confidential documents. My supervisors, Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell, will have access to the data for the purposes of assisting me with my research. The recorded data will be owned by the researchers and used for this research. It will be kept indefinitely until such time that we are no longer working in this field of research, when they will be destroyed. Digital data will be deleted, and hard copies shredded.

What will happen to the results?

Findings will be published as part of my Doctor in Philosophy in Psychology and may be published in an international or domestic journal and presented at conferences. In any case, nothing that identifies you would be included. Quotes or descriptions from some of the interviews will be used, however, I will be careful to maintain confidentiality. Should there be any concern regarding confidentiality of any aspect of the interview that I would like to report on, I will seek your permission to contact you in the future to ensure I don't inadvertently identify any person. If you would like to receive a copy of the findings, please let me know and provide me with an email address.

Thank you

I would like to thank you very much for your time and help in making this study possible. If you are still keen to participate please let me know by email: n.chowdhury@auckland.ac.nz. I hope that taking part in this research will be interesting and thought-provoking for you.

If you have any further questions about this project, please contact:

Nilima Chowdhury, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Email: n.chowdhury@auckland.ac.nz
Dr Kerry Gibson, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Ph: 373 7599 ext. 88556, Email: kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz
Professor Margaret Wetherell, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Ph: 373 7599 ext. 82933, Email: m.wetherell@auckland.ac.nz
Head of Department, Dr William Hayward, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Ph: 373 7599 ext. 88516, Email: w.hayward@auckland.ac.nz.

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz .
APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 20 September 2016 for 3 years, Reference Number 016677

Appendix E: Consent Form for Study Two (Interviews)

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

School of Psychology
Science Centre
Level 2, Building 302
23 Symonds Street
Telephone +64 9 373 7599 ext 88413 or 88557
Email psych@auckland.ac.nz
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand
Name of Researcher: Nilima Chowdhury
Supervisors: Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, understood the nature of the research and why I have been invited to participate. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and had them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary.

- I agree to take part in this research, involving my participation in an interview which will take approximately one to two hours.
- I can withdraw from the interview at any time without giving a reason, and I can withdraw my contribution to the interview up to one month after the interview.
- I understand that the interview will be audiotaped.
- Findings will be published as part of the researcher's Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology and may be published in an international or domestic journal and presented at conferences. I understand that parts of what I say may be quoted in research publications and presentations, but that these quotations will be anonymous with any identifying contextual information removed.
- I agree to be contacted by the researcher after the interview if she would like to clarify details of what I've said or to discuss issues related to protecting confidentiality. *[Please cross out if you do not agree]*
- I understand that the audio file record of the interview may be transcribed by a third party, who has signed a confidentiality agreement.
- I understand that electronic and hardcopy data will be kept until such time as the researcher is no longer working in this area of research, after which time they will be destroyed.
- I would / would not like to receive a copy of findings. *[Please indicate one]*
- I understand that I am welcome to contact the researcher for an update on the research.
- I understand that this form will be kept for a period of six years.

Name _____

Contact details (not required) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON for 3 years, Reference Number 016677

Appendix F: Participant Demographics Form for Study One and Two

Participant Demographics Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Research Project "The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand"

How old are you?		
How long have you lived in New Zealand?		
What is your highest educational qualification?		
What is your current occupation and role?		
What is your annual income?		
How would you describe your race/cultural background/ethnicity? Please feel free to identify your iwi, hapū, or any other ties you consider important to your identity, if you wish.		
Do you consider yourself to be differently-abled/disabled?	Yes	No
If so, how would you describe your disability?		
How would you describe your gender identity?		
Have you previously defined your gender in other ways? If so, how?		
How would you describe your sexuality?		
Have you previously defined your sexuality in other ways? If so, how?		
How would you describe your relationship status? (please circle)		
Single Partnered/Married/Civil Union Separated/Divorced/Civil Union Dissolved Other: _____		

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on

20 September 2016 for three years: Reference Number 016677

Appendix G: Semi-structured guide and prompts for Study One

Focus Group Guide

1. Paperwork: Participant Information Sheet (questions?), Consent Form, Demographics

Form

2. *Pre-Discussion Intro*: time frame, ground rules, audio-recording

TURN ON RECORDER

3. *Research summary*

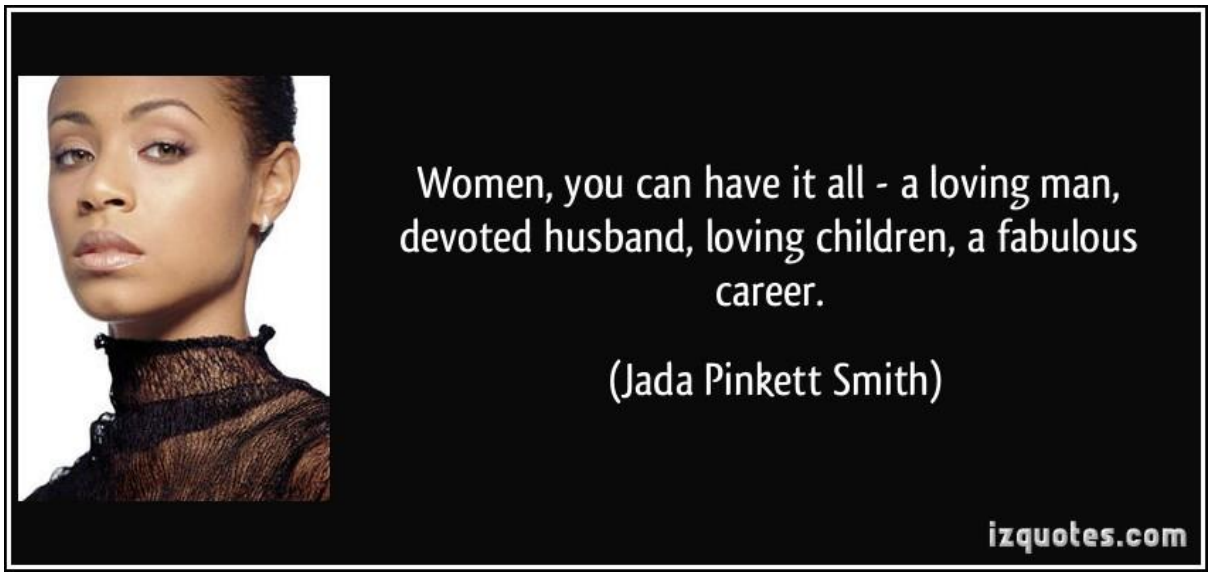
- understanding the stresses and challenges associated with being a young successful woman in NZ
- link to study 2 – socio-cultural context of depression

4. *Warm-up*: what do you do and what brings you here?

5. *Discussion Themes*:

- '**Top Girls'** – recent increased interest in girls' educational and women's career success: what is important to you, what motivates you? – *use prompts*
- **Success** – how do you define it, personal experiences of (what's fulfilling about your job), role models (who do you look up to), "feminine version" (moral standards)? What does it take to be successful?
- **Equality/Feminism** – Jada Pinkett quote: can women have it all?; do men and women have the same opportunities, "Lean in", do we still need feminism?
- **Difficulties/role of gender**: Experiences of sexism? What is difficult/conflictual about your job? Interactions with co-workers/superiors?
- **Women and depression** – what do you know/think about depression? If a colleague/friend asked you for advice, what would you recommend them to do? Why would successful young women get depressed?

6. *Wrap-up*: How was this experience for you? Any more questions? Thank you!



Why Women Still Can't Have It All

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. If we truly believe in equal opportunity for all women, here's what has to change.

By ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER

+1 1.1k Recommend 172k

LEAN IN

WOMEN, WORK, AND THE WILL TO LEAD

SHERYL SANDBERG

COO of FACEBOOK

"The business manual of the year" *The Times*

Gender gap widens among university graduates

By Isaac Davison

4:00 AM Thursday Nov 5, 2009

Australasia Career Education Ministry of Education ...

SHARE:

Two-thirds of bachelor degrees last year went to women, the highest figure on record in New Zealand.

Women have outnumbered men in the tertiary sector for more than a decade, but a new Ministry of Education report shows the number of men who finish bachelor degrees is falling.

Education experts warned that if the trend continued, it would have far-reaching social and

Women have outnumbered men in the tertiary sector for over a decade. Photo / Mark Mitchell

Even the best female graduates don't believe they can have it all

Female students at the UK's top universities are already concerned about being women in the workplace, a new study shows

60 0 0 60 Email

Appendix H: Interview Guide

Warm-up/Intro

Thanks very much for participating.
Participant Information Sheet, demographic questionnaire & Consent Form – any questions?
Summary of research project.
Before we start: If at any point you'd like to take a break or even discontinue the interview, that's perfectly fine.

Use their image/object as a conversation starter:

"What does this image mean to you, why have you chosen it?"
Further questions to elicit narrative:
When did it all start? When did you first notice you were feeling low?
What age/where were you? What circumstances were you in?

Bring in context (work context):

Were there times when you felt better or worse? Did you notice any specific triggers, in relation to work or your relationship for example?
How did you manage your depression at work (with friends/at home etc.)?

Bringing in a critical perspective:

Something as complex as depression very likely involves multiple factors and an interplay between (the body/genes/brain) and the environment (work/biography). Did you feel like there were/are contextual factors that alleviated or exacerbated your depression?

Asking about recovery:

What has your experience been in terms of 'getting out of depression'? Were there things that you did or changes of circumstance which helped you feel better?

<u>General tips</u>:

Bring a box of tissues!
Hold back on empathising/interrupting comments and let the narrative take its course.
Ask for clarification/examples when participants says things like 'you know what I mean' ("for the recorder").
Offer a glass of water/break if they're very distressed.

Appendix I: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

School of Psychology
Human Sciences Building
Floor 6, 10 Symonds Street
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7450
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Project Title: The price of success: stress and depression in young professional women in New Zealand
Researcher: Nilima Chowdhury
Supervisors: Dr Kerry Gibson and Professor Margaret Wetherell

I agree to assist with this research project by transcribing the audiotapes. I understand that the information about participants and the interview data is confidential and must not be disclosed to, or discussed with, anyone other than the researchers. I agree to delete any copies stored on my own hard devices after I have transcribed and handed all the relevant information to the researchers.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee for 3 Years until, Reference Number

Appendix J: Participant Information on support services (Auckland version)

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau
School of Psychology
Science Centre
Level 2, Building 302
23 Symonds Street
Telephone 64 9 373 7599 ext 88413 or 88557
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Where can I get help and support?

Crisis Helplines

If you are feeling acutely unwell or in crisis, phone your local DHB Mental Health Crisis Team (CATT Team) – operating 24/7: Auckland Central - 0800 800 717

Or call:

Depression Helpline (free 24 hr line): 0800 111 757

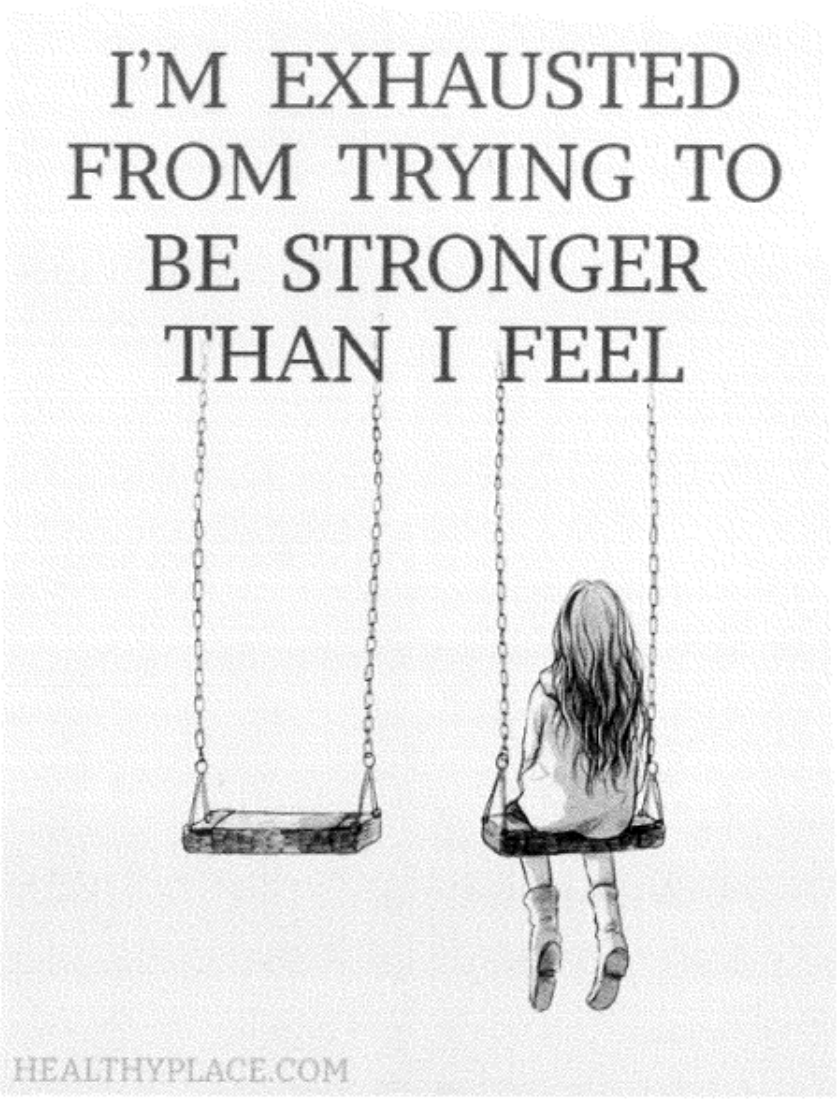
Lifeline Aotearoa (24 hr Line): 09 522 2999

Community Mental Health Teams: 09 487 1400; after hours 09 486 1491

Other support services

If you would like to receive or inquire about professional support/counselling services, talk to your GP or contact your organisation's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

Appendix K: Physical Depression Images – participants Study Two (Interviews)


I'M EXHAUSTED
FROM TRYING TO
BE STRONGER
THAN I FEEL
HEALTHYPLACE.COM

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