The amazing bounce-backable woman: Resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing prominence accorded to the idea of 'resilience' as a regulatory ideal, locating it in the context of a 'turn to character' in contemporary culture which we see as part of a wider psychological turn within neoliberalism. Building from discussions of 'resilience' as a quality demanded and promoted by public policy in the context of austerity and worsening inequality, we argue that resilience has also emerged as a central term in popular culture in genres such as self-help literature, lifestyle magazines and reality television as well as in a burgeoning social media culture focussed on positive thinking, affirmations and gratitude. It calls on people to be adaptable and positive, bouncing back from adversity and embracing a mindset in which negative experiences can – and must - be reframed in upbeat terms.

The paper examines three case studies – women's magazines, self-help books, and smartphone apps – to explore how resilience is constituted, how it operates and how it materialises across different sites. We extend existing work by highlighting the classed and gendered dimensions of injunctions to resilience, pointing to the ways that middle class women are hailed as emblematic 'bounce-backable' subjects. We explore how notions of elasticity, inspiration and affirmation are deployed in ways that systematically outlaw critique or any need for social transformation, while inciting a vast range of physical, social and, above all, psychological labours on the part of 'resilient' subjects.

Keywords

Introduction

In the last decade, following the financial crisis, and the introduction of punitive austerity measures in the UK and elsewhere, the notion of resilience has come to remarkable prominence. It is seen across many domains of public policy including welfare, employment and health (Allen & Bull, this issue; Burman, this issue); it has been adapted in schools (Morrin, this issue) and workplaces as a means to train people to cope with stress, bullying, overwork and precariousness; and it has also emerged as a central term in popular culture in genres such as advertising, lifestyle magazines and reality television, as well as in a burgeoning industry for smartphone apps focused on self-transformation, positive thinking, gratitude, and affirmations. At the heart of these very different iterations of resilience discourse is the promotion of the capacity to 'bounce back' from difficulties and shocks, whether this is getting divorced, being made redundant, or having one's benefits cut. The resilient subject may not be able to avoid tough life situations, but she 'springs through' hard times via a combination of intensive self-management strategies and positive mental attitude, which together shape the ability to adapt and recover from difficulties.

A number of scholars have argued that the success of resilience discourse in colonising so many different spheres owes much to its flexibility and elasticity as a concept. The notion was initially formulated to understand ecological systems, but is 'abstract and malleable enough to encompass the worlds of high finance, defence and urban infrastructure within a single analytic' (Walker & Cooper 2011:144). Its prominence and 'stickiness' (Ahmed 2004) are also a consequence of its 'ideological fit' with neoliberalism (Walker and Cooper 2011; MacKinnon & Derickson 2012), emphasising 'the imperative of ongoing adaptation to the challenges of an increasingly turbulent environment' (Forkert 2014: 7-8).

In this paper we seek to contribute to critical discussions of resilience by locating it as part of a broader 'turn to character' (Bull & Allen, this issue) in contemporary capitalism, that has been especially evident in policy discourses. We will argue that resilience sits alongside other notions such as confidence, creativity and entrepreneurialism, as being among the key qualities and dispositions highlighted as necessary to survive and thrive in neoliberal societies. We see the promotion of resilience as part of an increasingly *psychological turn* within neoliberalism, intensified by austerity, in which new ways of being, relating, and apprehending the self are produced. The paper aims to contribute to understandings of how resilience is put to work in contemporary capitalism - that is, to examine how it operates,

what it makes visible or occludes, how it materialises across different sites, and what it does ideologically or performatively - and to locate this in a broader understanding of the psychic life of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2015) and moves towards 'affective governance' (Jupp et al, 2016; Isin, 2014). In this framing there is a move on from conventional understandings of neoliberalism as a political and economic rationality to examining how neoliberal ideas become activated and sedimented into common-sense, insinuating themselves into 'the nooks and crannies of everyday life' (Littler, 2017: xx), with a growing appreciation of the need for attention to neoliberalism as a psychological project, and also a project built around 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983; Gill & Kanai, 2018)

Substantively much of the recent interest in resilience has been focused on policy, showing how the promotion of resilience is intimately related to the cutting back, closure and privatization of public services, working as part of an individualizing and blaming strategy in which people are made responsible for their own wellbeing, always-already at risk of being recast as 'failing' or 'non-resilient' (Bottrell, 2013; Evans & Reid 2014). Not surprisingly, the targets of resilience discourse have mostly been identified as the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society (Harrison, 2013; Jensen 2016), whose struggles become framed as 'personal crises or accomplishments decoupled from economic and social circuits of accumulation and dispossession' (Bottrell, 2013: np). Building from this body of scholarship, in what follows we seek to extend beyond the focus on policy to consider the ways resilience is also being mobilised in media and popular culture. In doing so, we seek to bring to attention the way that notions of resilience are being addressed to new audiences, exploring their increasing address to women, and considering the ways that middle class women, in particular, are interpellated as possessing the material and psychological resources to actualise resilience, and thus to become successful neoliberal subjects. As such we aim to contribute to discussions about the classed and gendered landscape of discourses of resilience, as well as the other qualities and dispositions increasingly presented as essential characteristics for life in contemporary neoliberal society.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first we look briefly at the emerging critical literature about resilience, and discuss its relationship to class and gender, particularly in the context of austerity. The second, third, and fourth sections of the paper present our empirical analysis. We look in turn at three different popular media – women's magazines,

self-help/ advice manuals, and smartphone apps – to explore how resilience is figured and materialised across these sites. We use each example to highlight a particular feature of resilience discourses: the ability to bounce back, the acknowledgement but swift re-casting of injuries as opportunities, and the foregrounding of positive affect. The paper concludes with a discussion of the issues raised.

Class, gender and resilience

A small but important literature has begun to interrogate the promotion of resilience as a regulatory ideal, part of a distinctive set of qualities and dispositions deemed essential for neoliberal life. As Mark Neocleous (2013: np) argues:

> Good subjects will "survive and thrive in any situation", they will "achieve balance" across several insecure and part-time jobs, they have "overcome life's hurdles" such as facing retirement without a pension to speak of, and just "bounce back" from whatever life throws, whether it be cut to benefits, wage freezes or global economic meltdown.

'Resilience' proves itself especially valuable for a context marked by harsh austerity measures and rising inequalities. It calls on people to be 'adaptable, able to withstand disruption, and [most] importantly, able to make do with less' (Forkert 2014: 10). In this context, as noted by Harrison (2013) and Jensen (2016), it is the poor, and especially single mothers needing welfare benefits and other forms of social support, who are cast as lacking resilience and the ability to bounce back. These authors highlight the preoccupation of UK policy in times of austerity, with how to incubate and encourage resilience among poor communities, and its emphasis that it is a lack of resilience – rather than an unjust social system - that keeps the poor in that condition (Harrison 2013; Jensen 2016). Jensen (2016: 85) shows how, in UK policy and local government organizations' agendas, the poor are cast culturally as lacking the substance that would help them to 'bounce back' from grinding poverty, precarious and poorly paid work and insecure, expensive housing (Allen & Bull, this issue). Too often, as Dorothy Bottrell (2013) shows, marginalised groups are positioned in contradictory terms. They are regarded – in what Lauren Berlant (2011) would regard as a 'cruelly optimistic' fashion – as inherently resilient – and thus able to cope with the state

absolving its responsibility for care and support. However, at the same time they are blamed for not being resilient enough 'with an individualised "can-do" notion of resilience… twinned with the privatization of responsibilities' (Bottrell 2013: np).

In contrast, as our analysis will show, *middle-class women* are addressed as ideal subjects of resilience, who possess the substance that helps them to defy the obstacles set by adversity and precarity. As other scholars have argued, neoliberal incitements to self-reinvention often imagine their subjects to be middle class (Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; Scharff 2016), with (young) women accorded a particular luminosity in this language of potential (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). The markedly gendered dimension of the embrace of negative experiences as learning opportunities – a central tenet of resilience training's inheritance from positive psychology – is demonstrated in Scharff's (2016) study of young, female, classically-trained musicians in London and Berlin. Scharff found that these (mostly middle class) young women embraced risk and framed knock-backs in their careers as positive experiences. Similarly, in their study of mothers' everyday lives and digital media use in the US, Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim (2017) show how resilience is an affective capacity for surviving and weathering the mounting insecurities of neoliberalism, which the mothers they studied cultivate, particularly in and through their engagement in the digital 'mamasphere', for example, by remaking hardships into happy stories for display. Orgad and De Benedictis (2015) highlight a similar embrace of resilience in the way the British press framed stay-at-home mothers during and after the recession. In a content analysis of this coverage, the authors found that many newspaper stories discussing women in the context of recession and the impact of UK government's policies presented this context as ultimately enabling and empowering rather than constraining or conditioning women to make the 'choice' to be a stay-at-home mother even when this was the result of being made redundant. Morality tales of women who lost their jobs during the recession discursively (re)construct the precarious job market and redundancy as 'a blessing in disguise.'

Building on and extending existing studies, in what follows we examine discourses of resilience and confidence in current exhortations to *middle-class women* in various different media. We suggest that there is a burgeoning of self-help/advice books, columns, apps, programmes and workshops offering individuals models and tools to develop resilience and self-confidence. While many of these programmes and literatures are not addressed

specifically to women, they are often packaged and marketed in highly gendered ways that *imply* that their ideal subject is the middle-class woman and her children. For example, newspaper articles on techniques for developing self-resilience may discuss them in non-gendered terms, but are often accompanied by images of women signified as middle-class[i]. Similarly, as we will show, many confidence and resilience apps, although not explicitly designed exclusively for women's use, are marketed in clearly gendered ways.[ii]

In what follows we ask: what kind of subject is being called upon by contemporary exhortations to confidence and resilience addressed to women? What kinds of labour is this subject demanded to perform? What forms of experience, thinking and feeling does this subject authenticate and idealize? And, what subjects and forms of experiences are rendered invisible and abhorrent? We look at three central cultural sites in which resilience discourses and practices are circulated and promoted, namely women's magazines, self-help/advice literature and apps. We treat the narratives, metaphors, images, exhortations and technologies in these sites as powerful pedagogical resources that teach women how to think of and feel about themselves and their relationships to others, in neoliberal times. We use three case studies corresponding to the above three cultural sites, to show how a range of experts, programmes and discourses are invested in calling forth a new kind of female subject, demanded by a distinctively neoliberal moment of capitalism (Brown, 2015). This subject is characterized by three central features: 1) the 'bounce-backable' self[iii] (*women's magazines*) – the subject who is demanded agilely to bounce back unscathed from an experience of catastrophe; 2) the injured self who repudiates her injuries and invests in resilience as a lifelong project (*self-help/advice manuals*); and 3) the positive self who disavows and self-polices negative feelings and dispositions, favouring positive affect and, specifically, self-love, self-belief, confidence optimism and living in the moment (*apps*).

The bounce-backable woman of *women's magazines*

Women's magazines are a prolific source of appeals to women to boost their confidence and build resilience in their intimate and sexual relationships, in their parenting, in relation to their bodies, and in the workplace (Chen 2016; Favaro 2017a; Gill and Orgad 2015, 2017). Although there has been an overall decline in print circulation of women's magazines, as noted by Favaro (2017b: 12) 'the women's magazine industry is […] remarkably resilient',

especially with the development of online models to catapult the reach of brands and complement print circulation. In 2015 *Elle* dedicated a special issue to the topic 'The Confidence Issue: A smart woman's guide to self-belief', *Cosmopolitan UK* promotes a 'confidence revolution' (Favaro 2017a); and *Cosmopolitan China* urges its readers to 'be your own shelter,' 'decide your own road,' 'please yourself,' and 'do what you want' because 'a woman's self-confidence is her best accessory' (Chen 2016: 2839, 2840). At the end of 2016 *Porter* magazine celebrated 'incredible women' whose 'core values' are 'conviction, resilience and excellence'.

Marie Claire is one among many women's magazines, targeted primarily at 20 to 40 years old ABC1 women (the highest demographic classification used by the National Readership Survey to classify readersin the UK)[iv], that gives prominence to resilience, with a particular emphasis upon women's careers in its *@Work* section. Here, female mentors distil their insights for women aspiring to 'make it' in a range of fields – mostly corporate, but with a growing emphasis on post-recessionary creative and entrepreneurial professions (Gill & Orgad,2017). In the last few years *Marie Claire* has systematically boosted its content about work and has also entered the field of inspirational training days and workshops about women and careers, combining an emphasis upon the psychological qualities needed to get ahead, with instruction on fashion and make up 'hacks' that will enhance one's professional success. In a typical example, entitled 'How to bounce back from career knocks,' the November 2016 *@Work* section lists numerous inspirational and aspirational injunctions typical of women's magazines and self-help literature (Chen 2016; Gill and Orgad 2015, 2017; Negra 2014): 'have self-belief,' 'give up on being perfect,' 'be adaptable to change,' 'don't be afraid of re-invention,' 'focus on the good stuff', etc. Four pages in this section focus specifically on 'how to bounce back from career knocks' and 'achieve career resilience'. The discussion is situated explicitly in growing precarity in the workforce and worsening conditions following the recession and Brexit: 'the days of a secure job for life are long gone,' the article states at the outset. 'Following the Brexit vote, the instability of the job market is unlikely to improve, but this isn't necessarily all bad' (2016: 171). The article starts from depressing statistics on the limited number of career paths open to young women compared to the past, millennial women's high rates of redundancy, and the high rates of failure of start-up businesses launched by millennials. While these figures highlight

the harsh impact of recession and asuerirty on women in particular (see Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Hall et al. 2017) and the gendering of the recessison (Negra & Tasker, 2014), they are then interspersed with cheerful quotes from women who experienced career challenges and successfully 'bounced back,' or exhortations from career coaches to do so. Women's capacities to adopt a resilient attitude, the article declares, depend on their ability 'to fully embrace a constantly shifting situation and turn it into a positive'.

Marie Claire constructs the ability to bounce back as a particularly crucial capacity for women, because 'as women, we're particularly prone to berating ourselves if we experience a setback' (2016: 173). That women share a tendency to self-deprecation and to suffer from self-doubt is presented as a fact of nature. Echoing the neoliberal construction of the survivor, which emphasizes 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. In so doing, the notions of resilience and bounce-backability reaffirm the popular notion that women suffer from the inherent defect of self-doubt and lack of confidence and are obliged to work on themselves to overcome and repudiate these problems (Gill & Orgad, 2015; 2017).

The idea of bouncing back obfuscates the enormous labour and resources required: the reader is bombarded by numerous exhortations to work on herself, 24/7: 'keep a journal', 'gain perspective', 'stay active', 're-frame negative experiences', 'ignore the self-critical voice in your head', 'say nice things to yourself', 'embrace obstacles', 'be of service', and so on – yet all this intensive affective, aesthetic and physical labour is couched as a fun act of springing back from a surface in a lively manner. Thus, resilience appears as a freely and unlimitedly replenishable resource (Harrison 2013), while, in fact, it requires substantial and ongoing work and depends on material, educational and emotional resources that are neither free nor infinite.

The metaphor also coheres with and builds on well-established discourses and constructions of the ideal female subject that relate to work, poverty and the body. Historically, in the UK men have been constructed as relatively rigid and incapable of change following an economic crisis or the masculine job losses represented by the decline of mining,

manufacturing or shipbuilding as industries. By contrast, women have been expected to adapt to new social and economic circumstances: learn new skills, practice thrift, multi-task, etc. Austerity discourses stress women's responsibility and need for adaptation and positive thinking, as exemplified by the slogan 'make do and mend', which was championed during the UK recession by television presenter Kirstie Allsop and had a strong gendered association (Negra and Tasker 2014). Targeted at women have been discourses of 'austerity chic' (Bramall, 2013), 'cupcake fascism' (Whyman, 2014) and an emphasis on the frugal self-styling of the fashionista's financially straitened younger sister, the 'recessionista' (Nathanson, 2014). More broadly, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001: 9) observe, 'women have long had to face the recognition that the unitary subject is fraud and that constant and perpetual self-invention is necessary'.

Women's bodies are another key domain associated with elasticity, flexibility and bounce-backability. Studies show that the ideal childbearing, postnatal body is constructed in popular media and health-related self-help/advice literature, as an elastic body capable of 'bouncing back'. Women are urged to strive to regain a slim, 'toned', 'pre-pregnant body' through an intense regime of exercise and effort (Chatman 2015; Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Hine, 2012; Roth, Homer and Fenwick, 2012; McRobbie 2013). Dayna Chatman (2015) shows how a rhetoric of 'bouncing back' has become prevalent within media discourses of celebrity motherhood; for instance, Beyoncé's 'getting back to business' after her first pregnancy meant not only returning to the stage, but also disciplining her body through postpartum workouts in order to return it to its pre-pregnancy form. These studies underscore how the rhetoric of bouncing back is tied closely to the notion of 'taking control', which is underpinned by postfeminist empowerment discourse (Gill, 2008; Douglas 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2018): 'Fitness becomes something to do as a gift for the self while the constant maintenance (and privilege) required to sustain it are subsumed under the realm of feminist liberation' (Dworkin and Wachs 2004: 618). In similar fashion, the emotional and psychological work women are required to perform in order to bounce back from career setbacks, of constant vigilance, self-monitoring and behavioural exercises, is cast as empowering and liberating. After listing numerous behavioural steps, strategies and tasks required to become a resilient, agile, bounce-backable self, the *Marie-Claire* section concludes what started as an indictment of worsening labour market conditions and

opportunities with the upbeat suggestion that 'now, we have the opportunity to shape our career the way we want to'.

Bounce-backability is also continuous with the association of women with flexible labour. As Melissa Gregg (2008: 287) notes, flexible labour is constructed as ideal *for women,* 'a commonsense manifestation of feminism's successful accomplishments in the public sphere of work'. However, while the emphasis in discussions on flexible labour has been on the need for government and workplaces to offer women (but not men) flexible options – albeit in a notoriously 'flexible discourse of flexibility' (Perrons, 1999) – the discourse of bounce-backability turns away from the structures of work to present individual resilience as the neoliberal solution to precarity and inequality. That is, even when the magazine acknowledges the broader economic context of inequality, the solutions promoted are indiviual. The ideal female subject emerging from such injunctions accepts the precarity of the neoliberal world order and must 'permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world' (Evans and Reid 2014: 42). The emphasis is on the harnessing of individual resources to overcome precarity, rather than on challenging the conditions that created precarity and inequality in the first place. As Gill (2014) has argued in relation to cultural work, patterns of discrimination and structures of inequality often remain unspeakable so as not to disrupt the neoliberal myth of individual achievement. Thus, one of the fundamental works that resilience discourses perform is the silencing of critique of structural inequality.

The injury-repudiating self of self-help/advice manuals

In our second case study we turn to the realm of self-help and advice literature – a booming global industry. Self-help/advice books have been studied extensively as a key site that regulates feminine subjectivities, especially in the context of neoliberalism (Adamson 2017; Adamson and Salmenniemi 2017; Blackman 2004; Brockling 2005; Gill 2007; Hochschild 1994; Illouz 2008). More than two decades ago, Arlie Hochschild (1994) argued that advice books establish regulatory ideals against which women are exhorted to understand their own conflicts and intimate relations. Hochschild described advice books' idealization of the 'no-needs modern woman': a woman 'who is the primary force in her own life and who is able to work on herself, through particular techniques of self-production, such that she can get by with relatively little support from others - particularly men' (as described by

Blackman 2004: 225). A decade later, Lisa Blackman described a development of this female subject in advice literature into the 'self-made woman', who is 'obliged to disavow any desires for emotional security and safety'. Through her hard work, effort and positivity – and hers alone – she transforms herself, a process in which failure is constituted as a temporary obstacle to be overcome (2004: 232).

Much contemporary scholarship underscores this analysis, pointing also to the 'neoliberalization' of self-help centred on themes of intensified individualism, entrepreneurship and self-management (Tyler, 2004; Lemke, 2001), as well as to the blurring, intertextuality and hybridization of self-help with other genres (Barker et al, 2018). Meg Henderson and Anthea Taylor (2018) argue that the neoliberalization of self-help is also marked by a particular emotional tone in texts – particularly those directed at women. Its emphasis is on positive thinking, optimism, boldness, the right mindset, feeling good, developing the right attitude, do(ing) what you love (DWYL), etc. They suggest that 'emotionalism' is a primary method of feminizing neoliberal ideology (Henderson & Taylor, 2018).

Sheryl Sandberhg and Adam Grant's (2017) bestseller, entitled *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy* exemplifies this trend.[v] Drawing on Sandberg's experience of grief following her husband's tragic death, the book is a combination of personal memoir and practical manual for how to withstand and grow from adversity. It jumps off from Sandberg's phenomenally popular 'feminist' self-confidence manifesto, *Lean In*, in which she called on women to assert themselves and to 'forge a path through the obstacles, and achieve their full potential' (Sandberg, 2013: 172) but moves still further into the heartlands of positive psychology in a text co-authored with motivational psychologist Adam Grant (see also Bull & Allen's discussion in this issue of the founding father of the discipline of positive psychology Martin Seligman).[vi]

Option B builds on and upgrades the no-needs modern woman of the 1990s and the self-made woman of the 2000s into a resilient, bounce-backable (and spring- forwardable, the book posits) subject whose qualities, feelings and psyche are geared towards survival in neoliberal times. We focus on one of the central aspects the book foregrounds as a

requirement for self-survival, namely *acknowledging injury and vulnerability only in order to repudiate and refute them*.

In *Lean In*, Sandberg confesses (although in a limited way) to suffering some work-related insecurities earlier in her career, showing how they were resolved quickly through a behavioural programme geared towards overcoming self-doubt and 'impostor syndrome' and building self-belief, confidence and assertiveness (Gill & Orgad,2015). In *Option B* this process seems profoundly magnified. The personal memoir part of the book is grounded in Sandberg's unique and authentic experience of grief, and discloses her vulnerability in a highly confessional fashion. However, each revelation of an intimate aspect of Sandberg's painful experience of grieving is immediately followed by anecdotes and studies from positive psychology whose function is to *rehabilitate the injury exposed* and *instrumentalize it as a 'lesson'* that re-formulates the injury as an inspirational and motivational injunction. For example, in Chapter 2, Sandberg confesses the enormous void she experienced after losing her husband and the all-encompassing grief that made both friends and colleagues and herself avoid 'real conversations' (2017: 40). This candid account is followed by a comparison between her personal intimate experience and other types of adversity: 'Anything that reminds us of the possibility of loss can leave us at a loss for words. Financial difficulties. Divorce. Unemployment. Rape. Addiction. Incarceration. Illness' (ibid.) This eclectic bundle of adversities leads, in turn, to a series of anecdotes (e.g. about a Filipino migrant in college, and a colleague diagnosed with cancer), psychological advice (e.g. 'speaking up can strengthen social bonds', 2017: 41) and recommended practical actions such as creating 'empathy cards' (2017: 42). These positive-psychology injunctions produce a universalizing 'one size fits all' kind of intervention that glosses over profound differences in experiences while transforming the exposed injury and transforming it into a positive pedagogic tool.

The subject that Sandberg and Grant's book calls forth is one that acknowledges her injury, but never for too long and always in order to bounce back and spring forward, that is, to grow, develop and become more resilient. One moment illustrative of the disavowal of injury is described in Chapter 6 'Taking Back Joy'. To cope with adversity, the authors recommend activities such as writing about joyful experiences, playing music and physical exercise. They relate a facetious comment made by comedian Patton Oswalt after the death

of his wife: 'How about someone dies, and they [the bereaved person] just get fat and angry and confused? But no, immediately, they're at the gym' (2017: 103). Oswalt's comment threatens to undermine the edifice on which the book relies: it questions the oppressive speed with which suffering and pain are whitewashed in neoliberal times. It is a 'dreaded moment' (Hochschild 1994: 10) for the resilient subject since it alludes to a desire to dwell on and acknowledge pain, not to deny it. However, Sandberg and Grant ensure that Oswalt's critique is dismissed: 'Actually, hitting the gym,' they write, 'or just the pavement for a brisk walk – can be hugely beneficial…Many doctors and therapists also point to exercise as one of the best ways to improve psychological well-being' (2017: 103).

Similarly, later in the book Sandberg recounts a Girl Leadership workshop that she attended with her daughter, which taught the all-female participants about 'fast double-sorries': 'when two people hurt each other's feelings, you both apologize *quickly* so that you forgive each other and yourselves.' (121, emphasis added). While this may be a technique suited to teaching young people how to handle conflict, in Sandberg and Grant's book it operates to bolster a more general emphasis on disavowing negative feelings, especially hurt, sadness, despair and anger, and replacing them, through 'moral elevation' (136), with positive feelings and dispositions such as confidence, resilience, happiness and optimism. *Option B* gives us what we might call *fast feeling* – a mode of experiencing emotions that seems perfectly suited to the accelerated rhythms of fast capitalism.

Sandberg shares one of the many lessons she learnt from her psychologist and co-author Adam Grant: 'resilience is not a fixed personality trait. It's a lifelong project' (2017: 111) – a notion that resonates with the idea of the entrepreneurial self as being in a constant mode of becoming (Brockling 2005; Scharff 2016). The many examples, stories, citations and personal reflections included in *Option B* establish that the fundamental disposition required for the pursuit of this 'lifelong project' is one of *constantly reframing negative experiences and feelings*. This is both an active and extremely laborious endeavour that becomes what Jensen (2016), following Evans and Reid (2014), calls a 'pedagogy of subjugation' or a method of containment; that is, a method to tolerate or indeed embrace a landscape that is *unequal and insecure by design*. This method relies on what Sandberg and Grant, describe as 'normalizing struggle' (2017: 114), a term they borrow from former Stanford Dean. It teaches us that insecurity, inequality and struggle are the 'new normal'

(Berlant, 2011), and that the best way to cope is through the systematic individualized favouring of 'positive' feelings and outlawing of 'negative' feelings and affect (see also Gill and Orgad 2017). This mode of apprehending and being in the world promotes the waning of critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007): instead of questioning the neoliberal order that created the struggle and pain borne by its subjects, it encourages the acceptance of this order as the only possible order, or the best of all possible orders, and harnesses individual resources to survive in neoliberalism with resilience.

Inspiration and resilience apps

In our case studies so far we have examined different facets of resilience discourse – the emphasis upon psychological elasticity and bouncing back, and the requirement to reframe adversity as an opportunity for growth. In this final case study we examine smartphone apps designed to promote and inculcate resilience, and consider the focus on positive thinking, happiness, self-affirmation and what has become known as PMA (Positive Mental Attitude).

Elsewhere (Gill & Orgad, 2015) we have discussed the burgeoning of confidence apps targeted at women, including *Confidence Coach*, *Confident Woman*, and *Simply Being*. These apps teach that 'a positive mindset can lead to a positive self-image' (*Huffington Post*, October 4, 2014) and offer a variety of strategies and techniques to enhance self-esteem and feel happier. Not surprisingly there is a good deal of overlap with apps facilitating resilience- and these have also proliferated in recent years, with thousands of very similar apps available free or for under a dollar or pound.

It is worth noting that not all resilience apps are targeted at women. Indeed, a significant sub-genre is directed towards promoting resilience in the armed services with a heavy bias towards men. Moreover, in as much as a focus on resilience can blur into an interest in productivity or management there are a number of other apps that seem to have a masculine subject as their imagined user. Many resilience apps are explicitly gender neutral. A popular example is *Super Better*, listed by *Psychology Today* as one of 'the best happiness apps of 2018'.[vii] The app, which to date has had more than 150,000 installs,[viii] 'helps build personal resilience, the ability to stay strong, motivated and optimistic even in the face of a

tough challenge' (*Super Better* homepage). Using rainbow coloured bubble writing as its core brand design it seems to attempt to appeal across genders, albeit with a masculinised vernacular built around 'Power Ups', 'Bad Guys to Battle' and 'Quests' to complete. Super Better is one of a number of resilience apps organised around 'living gamefully' – that is applying the skills of playing games to everyday life – creativity, courage, resourcefulness, etc.

If *Super Better*'s ostensible gender neutrality seems implicitly designed for 'guys', then there are hundreds – if not thousands – of other popular apps for which women seem to be the imagined audience or users. As with the newspaper articles about resilience discussed earlier, a formal neutrality is often undercut by other signifiers of gender, race and class – e.g. the ubiquitous images of white women gazing serenely at sunsets on beaches or at light dappling through trees. To encounter these new popular forms – almost all produced in the 2010s – is to be struck by the extraordinary gender bifurcations they encode. These might be new technologies and contemporary cultural texts, but they are shaped by decidedly old gender ideologies, trapped within a pink and blue world, even when this is mediated through carefully curated photographs of 'nature'. The stock images of raindrops on a leaf or of ferns unfurling are immediately recognisable as part of a corporate visual habitat associated with the middle class, white and feminised world of spa hotels, beauty clinics and upmarket cosmetics/cosmeceuticals. The artfully gendered visuals are reinforced by a similarly binary and essentialist language: men are exhorted to 'mind max', 'power up', and 'build strength and stamina', aided by targets and 'hero quotes'. Women, by contrast, are guided to 'empower from within', 'build self-esteem' and to 'stay positive' with inspirational aphorisms, affirmations and gratitude.

The apps also encode very particular meanings in relation to race and colonialism. As Raka Shome (2014:181) has argued of the western 'wellness' industry more generally, it 'recycle[s] earlier colonial logics of representing white women, where, in the pursuit of wellness, white women fuse with the spirit of nature'. The colonial logics at work include the appropriation and commodification of non-Western religious and cultural practices as 'soul treatments' (Shome, 2014:187) for feminised and racialized Western middle class consumers. Nature, repeatedly presented in hyperreal and 'inspirational' form in these apps, is deeply implicated in this process, connected to what Shome suggests may be a

promise of transcending corporeality. Also significant is the use of quotes in a manner that Frederic Jameson (1984) has called the 'random cannibalization' of ideas, and bell hooks (1992) describes as 'eating the Other'. In this way, a line from the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi may be juxtaposed with a quote from Gandhi's resistance against British imperialism, and both in turn placed next to a motivational slogan from US basketball player Michael Jordan or a pithy maxim from a 'difficult' celebrity chef. This might properly be expected to produce a sense of radical disjuncture but the quotes are so decontextualized and dislocated that barely any sense of jarring is produced. It works to effect a kind of 'spiritual neoliberalism' (Williams, 2014), in which western women are incited to achieve enlightenment or resilience through consuming the histories, struggles and religions of Others, stripped of any history or context. In turn, engaging with the global and 'cosmopolitan' content of the apps is offered as a strategy of distinction, representing a form of 'cosmopolitan capital' built around ideas of cultural sophistication. In this way the apps might be understood as implicated in an emerging form of white cosmopolitanism (Hage, 1998).

There seem to be at least six broad strategies at the core of resilience apps addressed to women: mindfulness and meditation; gratitude; self-esteem and positive affirmation; cognitive re-training or developing a new mindset; health and well-being; and inspiration. It is striking how closely many apps resemble each other, sharing a similar architecture (e.g. My time, Gratitude, Goals, Health, Here and now, etc (see for example *Happiness Wizard* for IoS) and iconography (photos of beautiful landscapes courtesy of a corporate image bank). Several features of these apps share continuities with the magazine articles and self-help discussed already. An emphasis upon reframing negative experiences in more positive terms is a salient characteristic, as is rendering injuries as opportunities for learning or growth. As with the examples discussed already in this paper there is an emphasis upon finding the best in the situation and moving on quickly. Apps ask their users questions like 'how many negative thoughts have been endlessly repeating in your mind?' and offer to help 'rewire our brains, build self-esteem and change negative thought patterns' (*I Am: Daily Positive Affirmations* homepage). Another similarity is to be found in the priority given to physical and mental wellbeing, with exhortations to go for a run, quit smoking, cut down on alcohol

etc. The practice of gratitude is a further similarity, with injunctions to record things we are thankful for, or to focus on finding two or three things that one appreciated during a day.

However, the (limited) interactivity offered by the apps marks a significant departure from the case –studies examined so far, encouraging the user to complete a task (whether that is drinking a glass of water or engaging in positive thoughts) in order to move on within the app – e.g. to gain access to more content or to get 'scores' or feedback for the day. Smart phone applications will also send notifications, reminders and messages of encouragement/discipline at regular intervals, which makes the experience quite different from engaging with a fixed text such as a book, magazine or TV show. While there is always an option to 'skip this', the apps work to shape behaviour and psychic life more forcefully (both intensively and extensively) and more intimately than other media. They incite extraordinary levels of intimate (self) surveillance across multiple areas of life – from checking you are eating the 'right' things and for the 'right' reasons (e.g. no 'comfort eating' or 'bingeing'), to 'cleansing' from social media in a kind of digital detox. An app called *Resilient* (by Katie Harp) is typical in offering as a premium add-on a '30 Day Negativity Detox' which promises not simply greater happiness but a 'freer, cleaner and healthier' you-with powerful resonances with the clean eating and wellbeing movements, as well as – somewhat paradoxically - notions of internet and smartphone culture as toxic. Yet it is precisely the idea of having the app with you at all times, tracking you, encouraging you, disciplining you, and offering hints and tips and affirmations that promoters 'sell' as better and more effective than accessing similar content in other media.

Perhaps the other major differences from the case studies we have looked at thus far are to be found in the distinctive visuality of the apps and the focus on 'inspirational' content. Inspirational matter forms the backbone of many resilience apps targeted at women. For example *Resilient* offers us '18 Important Quotes About Life Lessons' '23 Heart-Warming Quotes About Compassion', '19 Beautiful Quotes About Light' '18 Quotes About Staying Positive'(and so on and on). These eclectic lists and pages bring together pithy aphorisms from a variety of sources: a quote from Napoleon here, one from the Dalai Lama there. None are longer than a sentence or two, and all have an always-already familiar quality centred on building positivity. The idea is that happiness and wellbeing are choices (see also Allen & Bull, this issue): as *Resilient* puts it, 'staying positive is simply a matter of choosing

an optimistic attitude and mindset regardless of the situation… it can help to have regular reminders'. These reminders are like 'feeds' designed to inculcate a resilient self. They include 'Believe you can and you are halfway there', 'Wherever you go, no matter what the weather, always bring your own sunshine', and 'Go confidently in the direction of your dreams'. While similar to the aphorisms of self-help books, in app form these inspirational quotes become intimate companions that govern the self- as if to takeover and become the user's own voice or psyche. Resilience here is constructed as positive mental attitude and self-belief, in which women are enjoined to see themselves as survivors not victims and in which a relentlessly affirmative tone eviscerates doubt, pain or ambivalence.

We suggest that this emphasis upon 'inspiration' as a route to resilient subjectivity is both political and aesthetic, and that it is deeply gendered, classed and racialized. Inspiration becomes a kind of 'magical thinking' that is 'lifted out' of everyday life, offered up as a series of timeless and universal psychological truths. This is underscored by the visual motifs of majestic landscapes seen in resilience apps - mountains, waterfalls, sunsets – and the striking absence of anything resembling the urban spaces in which most of us live, almost as if the inspirational quote would lose its power if set against a photograph of a housing estate, busy road, or hospital ward. The inspirational messages further seem complicit with rather than critical of neoliberal capitalism. Sometimes indeed they are the ideas of celebrated entrepreneurs –Steve Jobs or Richard Branson, for example – promoting their 'have a go/take a risk' philosophies. But even when they are not direct quotes from captains of industry or politicians they are constructed in such a way as to centre individual psychological change but never social transformation. While their tonal quality is often rebellious, what they are resisting is never specified – or is simply constructed as a kind of vague negativity – producing what we call a sense of 'hollow defiance' – a sense of being a rebel without a social or political cause (only the 'cause'of Positive Mental Attitude). Inspiration discourse systematically outlaws 'negative' feelings, including (political) anger. This is central to the current turn to resilience.

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at three case studies to explore how a resilient subject is called into being in contemporary media culture targeted at women. Examining women's magazines, self-help and smartphone apps we have shown the remarkably patterned way in which resilience is mobilised as a set of dispositions, qualities and feelings designed to enable individuals to survive in neoliberal times. In particular we have shown how notions of elasticity, affirmation and inspiration are yoked together to produce an idealized contemporary neoliberal subject who can 'bounce back' from adversity with a resilient and ever-positive mindset. Our analysis has contributed to an existing literature on resilience, largely focussed on policy discourse and on marginalised working class groups, by showing how resilience discourses also materialise powerfully across *media and popular culture*, as well as by highlighting their address *to middle class female subje*cts who are seen to have the resources (economic, physical, psychological) to actualise resilience. This works to further 'other' less affluent groups and subjects such as working class single mothers or people dependent upon benefits, suggesting that they lack the psychological as well as material substance needed to overcome poverty and vulnerability. Middle class women, we suggest, have increasingly taken centre stage as the idealized bounce-backable resilient neoliberal subjects, an idealization that in turn renders 'non-resilient' women redundant and disposable; what Zygmunt Bauman (2003) called in another context 'human waste'.

Our analysis has foregrounded how resilience operates as part of an *increasingly psychological turn within neoliberalism*, with ever greater emphasis upon character and dispositions. This is both part of the affective governance of populations, and also a feature of a distinctive set of neoliberal feeling rules (Kanai,2015 ; Gill & Kanai, 2018) designed to shape not only actions and thoughts but also the intelligibility of particular 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1961). It is profoundly connected to the 'happiness industry' (Davies,2014; Binkley, 2007), the 'wellness syndrome' (Cederstrom and Spicer, 2015) and the 'state of esteem', as well as to the cult(ure) of confidence discussed by Gill and Orgad. Rather than calling forth docile subjects engaged in passive compliance it inculcates a quite phenomenal psychic *agility,* exhorting the ability to bounce back by speedily reframing negative experiences as opportunities. Injuries of various kinds are never totally disavowed, but must be rendered recoverable through PMA. We have highlighted the huge amount of

labour required to perform these everyday feats of 'building resilience'- a labour that is not acknowledged as work.

A final distinctive contribution of the paper is its emphasis upon resilience as a *voluntarily-entered-into set of practices* as well as an imposed or disciplined one. By focussing on popular magazines, self-help books and smartphone apps we have been able to highlight the way that notions of resilience are being actively taken up, particularly by women, who buy these resources in very large numbers. Their emphasis upon offering inspirational and affirmative ideas seems to be key to their popularity. Indeed, as Wilson and Chivers Yochim's study *Mothering Through Precarity* (2017: 132) demonstrates, such inspirational and affirmative messages and technologies enter through women's use of digital media into 'the nooks and crannies of what often feels like an unhappy everyday,' inculcating subjects who constantly tune their affects and capacities to the promise of precarious happiness.

While as other papers in this issue have shown, resilience can be coerced, particularly by the state (see also Friedli & Stearn, 2015), our paper highlighted that its force is also spreading out across the social formation - in the cultural sites we have examined - and it is increasingly taken up in ways that are 'freely', actively and sometimes enthusiastically embraced. In a society deeply scarred by inequality and injustice, resources to develop resilience are offered as ways to navigate and survive pain, risk, difficulties and unhappiness. Yet in promoting elasticity, affirmation and inspiration they remain trapped within an individualistic and psychological framing that we suggest is becoming more and more central to contemporary forms of neoliberal governance, and silences critique of structural inequality.

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Notes

[i] For example, a *Huffington Post* (23 August, 2016) article listing a career coach's tips on how to bounce back after one has been laid off addresses both men and women, but the image shows a young white woman in a white suit and subtle make up staring confidently at the camera and smiling. [i] In a similar fashion, a *Telegraph* article on emotional resilience (25 February, 2014)[i] discusses various self-improvement techniques in a (supposedly) gender-free manner, while the accompanying image, of a young white woman with carefully cut blonde hair, anchors the address of the text to middle-class women (see also 'How to be resilient: "self-awareness is fundamental"', *Guardian*, 9 June, 2017)[i].

[ii] http://businessofeminin.com/en/5-apps-to-boost-self-esteem/

[iii] The notion of bounce-backability is closely related to the etymology of the word resilience, the latter deriving from the Latin for 'to jump again.'

[iv] For a review of the demographic of Marie Claire's target audience see: See https://www.timeincuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Marie-Claire-Brand-Presentation-2015.pdf

[v] *Option B* is a #1 New York Times Best Seller and was named a Best Book of 2017 by Barnes & Noble and Amazon

[vi] Sandberg and Grant (2017: 16) cite Seligman's 'three P's' for stunting recovery from negative events: personalization, pervaisveness and permanence.

[vii] https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/click-here-happiness/201801/the-best-happiness-apps-2018;

[viii] https://www.appbrain.com/app/superbetter/com.superbetter.paid