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Having a top-class mindset? Post-feminism and the co-construction of class and mindset among young Finnish women

Abstract

Young white women are presented as winners in neoliberal governmental discourses, but despite the assumption that they are in a privileged position, not all young women reach the top. This paradox, elaborated here from different angles in research inspired by post-feminism and neoliberalism, calls for a focus on class-based differences among young women and their mindsets. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Finnish women aged 18–28, this article contributes empirically to theoretical debates on the psychic lives of young women who are making educational choices and entering the labour market. The article shows how, even in egalitarian Finland, class still adds to the gender harms done to young women, contributing to their feelings of mistrust and hopelessness. The article also suggests that a privileged background makes it possible to consider atypical choices, such as individual, well-managed time out that prepares young women to make achievements in the future.

Keywords: gender, social class, post-feminism, neoliberalism, qualitative research

Introduction

In neoliberal discourse, young women are presented as winners – as ‘top girls’ (McRobbie 2007). ‘Successful girls’ and ‘failing boys’ are wide-ranging governmental and educational discourses that are supported by post-feminist claims about individual empowerment. However, despite these discourses’ assumption that young women are in a privileged position, it is not simple for all individuals to be such high-achieving subjects. Instead, ethnic background, social class and place of residence, among other factors, still affect the opportunities and aspirations of young women. This article focuses on neoliberal post-feminism, the mindsets it might be producing, and variations within those mindsets that might be related to social class among young white Finnish women. In this context, ‘mindset’ refers to the formation of subjectivity, and to how it is both consciously and unconsciously (self-)governed to help people occupy the positions they either inhabit or aim for. This is aligned with Scharff (2016; see also Baker and Kelan 2018), who refers to roughly the same idea with the term ‘psychic lives’. Thus, this study conceives of mindset not only as a psychological state, but also as something to which the contours of neoliberal society contribute. Mindset is psychosocial (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001) in character, always bearing the traces of a person’s past and present positions in society.

Hence, mindsets are related to the post-feminist top-girl discourse. Talk about top girls is the result of an era where gender inequality is constructed as a topic of the past. This view of girls as laden with promise has also been referred to as the post-feminist narrative of ‘girl power’ and ‘successful girls’ (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013). For Angela McRobbie (2007), the top-girl discourse is anything but an expression of gender equality: it is a new sexual contract. This sexual contract is embedded within the fields of education and employment, where young women – the top girls – are understood as exemplars of the new competitive meritocracy. However, addressing young women as possessors of a particular potential and capacity, and encouraging young women to become

successful, wage-earning subjects, are complex strategies of governmentality and economic rationality. Young women must endlessly work on a perfectible self, which has mindset-related consequences and leaves no space for feminist politics.

These top-girl discourses are evident internationally, including in Finland, which is the context for this study. Finland is considered to be egalitarian: for example, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality's gender equality index, Finland scores third among the EU-28 (EIGE 2015). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Finnish women aged 18–28, this article aims to contribute empirically to theoretical debates about the psychic lives of young white women from different social classes who are making educational choices and entering the labour market in a neoliberal economy where competitiveness, corporate interests and individual initiative are highlighted. Related to this, the article reflects on scholarly discussions of post-feminism that reveal its apparent fit with neoliberal, entrepreneurial, corporate cultures. In alignment with other researchers (Allen 2016; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2007; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017; Scharff 2016), I argue that discussions of post-feminist, enterprising top girls strongly reflect the 'mood' that neoliberalism has already created and is constantly reproducing – the mood that fuels the maintenance of post-feminist ideology.

My distinctive contribution to critical evaluations of neoliberal top-girl subjectivities is that I evaluate the class backgrounds and current class positions of a sample of young Finnish women, and I analyse the co-construction of class and mindset. It is my contention that even if we start from the idea that neoliberal post-feminism sees young women as ideal figures who are free to choose whatever they want, the expectations built into this ideal figure must be deconstructed if we are to avoid ignoring women who do not easily fit into it because of their backgrounds. By 'class', I refer to the interviewed women's social positions: their own and their parents' educations and occupations. Besides these attributes, to better interpret the interviewees' life contexts, I consider lifestyles, values and hobbies

– i.e. taste-related characteristics that they mention from their childhood homes and that become visible *in their relationships* with others.

According to the OECD (2017), in one dimension of class difference, namely income inequality, Finland is among the most egalitarian countries. However, income inequality between generations has increased in Finland, indicating that younger generations are facing lower earnings and harder labour market conditions than their parents. Immigrants, and even the children of immigrants, tend to face greater inequality in many dimensions than native-born Finns (OECD 2017, 8–9). Because Finland is not considered a strict class society in comparison with other nations such as the UK (although see Reay [2017] on the increasing confusion about social class in contemporary British society), class mobility is highly possible. Nevertheless, according to some studies, Finnish children most often follow the class pathways of their parents (Erola, Jalonen, and Lehti 2016; Kivinen, Hedman, and Kaipainen 2007). To evaluate possible class mobility, Bourdieusian notions of class-based tastes and capitals (see Grenfell 2012; Pomeroy 2017) are helpful for examining the class practices with which the interviewees currently live. However, my main point is not to determine and define class exclusively. It is to articulate the differences in mindset among the interviewed young women.

By explicitly examining class issues in the context of top-girl discourses and the different mindsets that the young women demonstrate, I provide a much-needed qualitative empirical contribution to research on young women in the time of neoliberal post-feminism. In line with Thomson et al. (2002, 351), I assume that ‘a “can do” approach to life [...] is unlikely to be sufficient in the face of structural constraints’. I also build on work by Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001, 112), who assert that an exclusive focus on high-achieving girls in high-achieving schools obscures the ways in which achievement is a class-related phenomenon. Furthermore, I follow the way paved by Allen (2016), who states that although they face shared labour market conditions of uncertainty and risk in austere times, social class shapes how different young women respond to and make sense of the situation.

Theoretical background: women's possibilities in the neoliberal economy

Finland's simultaneously egalitarian and neoliberal ethos provides a fertile ground for post-feminist thinking. Post-feminism selectively combines feminist and anti-feminist viewpoints. It recognises the significance of women's rights and equal opportunities; importantly, however, it also asserts that gender equality has already been achieved. Hence, women are free to concentrate on other, individually more important issues, such as personal success. Popular media tell 'rags to riches' stories in which a strong will and individual self-improvement are highlighted. Because everything is regarded as up to the individual, shared feminist efforts are unnecessary (McRobbie 2009, 11–12). What was once political is now *only* personal (Gill 2007, 153).

These forms of post-feminism have little in common with what Gill (2016) labels activist feminism, which aims for change by (for example) protesting against the deportation of migrants or budget cuts to women's services. There are reasons to maintain political feminism, which critiques discrimination based on gender and does not consider the anger caused by experiences of inequality to be a problem that an individual must work on psychologically. For example, in Finland, the view of equality as already achieved is a widely shared discourse, and the country has been said to practise 'state feminism'. However, the right-wing coalition of 2015–2019 laconically stated that women and men were equal in Finland, and it executed highly gendered austerity measures in response to the economic crisis (Elomäki and Kantola 2017). These measures give a reason for researchers to look at post-feminism, and the related conception of free choice, through a critical lens. This also raises questions about the common view of inequalities that happen elsewhere, such as in other countries or workplaces (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017, 237–238).

Post-feminism is a highly contested topic, both as a phenomenon and as a concept. It has been understood as a backlash against feminism and as a temporal shift – as following after second-wave

feminism, as related to other ‘post-movements’ (such as postcolonialism), and as connected to feminism’s third wave (Gill 2016, 612–613; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017, 228–229). Gill (2016, 621) draws a crucial distinction between those who understand post-feminism as a way of practising feminism differently from its past version, and those who perceive it as a critical and analytical term with which to capture empirical regularities and contradictions in the world. Together with Kelan and Scharff, she conceptualises post-feminism as an object of study, and she wants to interrogate the ideas and discourses that comprise the features, or common sense, of post-feminism – such as its focus on empowerment, choice and individualism (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017, 230). I take this view and also draw on several conceptions of post-feminism that place it in close contact with neoliberalism (Allen 2016; Baker 2010; Gill 2016, 2017; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 2017; Gill and Orgad 2015; Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2007; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Scharff 2016).

The ways in which young women have become defined in neoliberal discourse as emblems of a new meritocracy (Allen 2016) and as categorically privileged subjects (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; McRobbie 2007) include the view that they possess enterprising attributes¹ (Gill and Scharff 2011; Pomerantz and Raby 2011; Ringrose 2007; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Scharff 2016). Since young women are portrayed as entrepreneurial, agentic and individualised subjects, they are used as central figures in the neoliberal hope for upward social mobility (Walkerdine 2003). This top-girl discourse is intensified in and by media stories (Ringrose 2007). The problem with cherishing the bright and unrestricted futures of young women, and the related ‘can-do’ culture, is that doing so hides structural inequalities such as class, and the processes through which those inequalities

¹ Indeed, ‘entrepreneurial’ is the buzzword of neoliberal capitalism, although it is less clear what is really meant by it. Sometimes, innovativeness and the creative elements of entrepreneurship are muted, and the entrepreneurship discourse mainly serves managerial purposes to produce latently governed, obedient entrepreneurs – ‘manopreneurs’ (Hjorth 2005, 390).

intersect. Success among the supposed top girls is unequally distributed, and evidence suggests that class and gender play significant roles (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). Neoliberalism itself is constitutively exclusionary (Scharff 2016). For Scharff (2016, 118–119), this exclusionary nature of neoliberalism entails a disdain for laziness and a rejection of characteristics that one does not have oneself (see also Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Tyler 2013), in addition to a lack of empathy for those who do not work hard and achieve.

Neoliberal subjectification includes internalised self-responsibility and self-governance (Rose 1990). Combined with the public discourse that young women win while boys suffer and fail (Griffin 2000; Phipps 2017; Pomerantz and Raby 2011; Ringrose 2007), this may result in exhausted and anxious subjectivities among women (Baker and Kelan 2018, 70). Indeed, the current period has seen the rise of health hazards that are different from industrial workplace accidents: today's injuries are mental (Gill and Pratt 2008; Silva 2013). This situation certainly results in the need to engineer one's own affective states. The required psychological register includes aspiration, confidence, resilience and happiness, and excludes anger, insecurity and anxiety (Gill 2017, 610; see also Ikonen & Nikunen 2018).

Gill (2017) proposes that future post-feminist discussions should engage precisely with the affective and psychic life of post-feminism. She also suggests that class and other, more intersectional perspectives on post-feminism are needed. However, class analyses using a post-feminist framework are scarce (for an important exception, see Allen 2016). Here, I aim to develop an empirical analysis of class dynamics and how they are lived out in a historically specific context, as suggested by Brah and Phoenix (2004, 76) and called for by Gill (2017, 612–613).

Research questions, data and context

It is with this view of neoliberal post-feminism that I approach the dynamics of young white Finnish women's class positions and mindsets as they are expressed in interviews. The idea of concentrating on their performances and mindsets originated from theoretical debates (reviewed above) in which young women appear as ideal subjects of neoliberal societies, related post-feminist discussions, and existing critiques of the notion that this positioning of young women is exclusively advantageous. A further (and related) reason for my interest arose from my reading of interview transcripts (which I will present shortly) and from my rough initial analysis, in which I categorised the interviews according to their expressions of mindsets and actions related to the prevailing neoliberal discourse of entrepreneurship. I discovered that the young adults who demonstrated the most entrepreneurial mindsets – in the sense of purposefully taking the initiative, being self-responsible, planning their career steps, developing useful skills, and building themselves into marketable packages – were almost exclusively women. It also seemed that there might be differences that followed classed paths. Taken together, these findings called for me to dig deeper. In order to make an empirical input into the topic of the neoliberal top-girl discourse, I constructed a detailed analysis of the mindsets and class positions of female interviewees. I asked whether and how their class backgrounds had shaped their current positions, and how the (dis)continuities between their childhood and current class positions intertwined with their reflections on their own mindsets during this period of post-feminist neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

I used the interviews from our research project 'Division into two? Work and future of young adults'. In this project, we conducted qualitative interviews with 40 young adults (aged 18–30) from Tampere, Finland. In this article, I use the women's interviews only. Thus, the data consists of 28 interviews with women aged 18–28. All the women interviewed were white and had been born in Finland. In the Tampere region, the share of persons born abroad was 5.2 per cent in 2016 (Statistics Finland 2018), the year when we conducted our interviews. These foreign-born individuals were mainly white people from Russia and Estonia. Although the share of foreign-born persons is increasing, the low

numbers may explain why no foreign-born women responded to our call for interviews, even though we distributed it widely. Our data included a few men who had been born abroad or who had one or two foreign-born parents, but no women. Obviously, being white is a privileged position that can offer some protection to an individual despite her class position.

We aimed to reach participants from various social backgrounds, as the research programme of which our project was part sought to understand Finnish society's perhaps increasing social polarisation. Thus, we aimed to reach diverse participants, ranging from those who were under threat of social exclusion to those who might become future stars according to the logic of Finnish and EU youth policies (see Nikunen [2017] for a textual analysis of classed and gendered subjects in youth policy documents). We found our participants by using networks and email lists from universities (where we interviewed social sciences, humanities and management students) and polytechnics/colleges (where we interviewed nursing students), as well as contacts in educational and employment services for unemployed people who might or might not have vocational-college degrees. To reach young people with an enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, we also contacted entrepreneurship events and support agencies. We used our research group's personal networks to find participants who were employed (in working-class or middle-class jobs) and thus would not be on the lists of any educational or employment institutions. Consequently, the purposefully selected sample included people who were active in the labour market, in entrepreneurship, or as university/college students. However, we also interviewed people who were unemployed and had no education beyond compulsory schooling. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative, but rather theoretically appropriate. My aim was to study whether well-educated, high-achieving girls are best positioned to meet the challenges of the neoliberal economy, or whether this discourse would become more nuanced if we were to listen to a more diverse group of young women tell stories about their own possibilities ². To

² Elizabeth Blair (2017) took a slightly different course: she purposefully chose only 'top girls', to evaluate how the discourse of successful girls was translated and transformed in everyday life.

understand the dynamics, my smaller number of selected interviews, relatively open structure and smooth interactions produced rich data, enabling a careful analysis of individuals' paths and thoughts (e.g., Baker and Edwards 2012).

The interview themes included the interviewees' life histories; their work situations, education and intimate relationships at the time of the interview; future plans, hopes and fears; their conceptualisations of a good life, success and failure; and expectations set for young people in working life. The semi-structured, Finnish-language interviews lasted 20–90 minutes each. They were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim by a trustworthy commercial firm. I have translated in English the parts I quote here. For the purposes of this article, the women's interviews were analysed first by categorisation according to class, as previously explained, and then through a close interpretative reading of the categories in terms of how the women in each category reflected the interview themes, from which the analytical codes were drawn (e.g., Boyatzis 1998). As this study takes the view that meanings are constructed through language and within a particular context, a discursive approach was adopted, and the meanings constructed around these themes were analysed (e.g., Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001).

The national context

There are two educational routes in Finland: the prolonged academic route via general upper-secondary education to higher education; and the practical route from comprehensive school and vocational training to early labour market entry. Importantly, these routes are not mutually exclusive (Aapola-Kari 2012). Free, high-level, highly inclusive education has been the key to Finland's success. Even university-level studies are provided without tuition fees for students from EU countries. However, qualitative research shows that class, as a social and cultural issue, is still manifested in the experiences of working-class female university students (Käyhkö 2015). In

addition, there is a threat of increasing inequalities in a time of neoliberal austerity with measures such as restricting student allowance to 48 months for those who are enrolled in a 300-credit programme leading to a Master's level degree. This is a reduction of 5–10 months compared to those who have started their studies some years earlier. (Kela 2018.) These restrictions on state support include the risk that one's origins and the resources of one's childhood home will continue to have an impact in later life. In addition, the abolition of entrance exams of many university faculties – a measure to encourage young people to enter university sooner after their baccalaureate – have highlighted the significance of college success. One more measure to reduce the gap years and other periods of 'drift' is the legislation according to which certain amount of study places must be allocated to those who apply for secondary education for the first time. Students with cultural capital – such as a stable home life, and well-educated parents who can guide their children towards 'correct and useful' choices – have an advantage compared with young people with less cultural capital. Social (im)mobility is created through politics and policy interventions, including in Finland (see e.g., Berisha et al. 2017; Tolonen 2008).

Class (dis)continuities and post-feminist mindsets?

As described earlier, I evaluated the interviewed women's class backgrounds according to their own and their parents' educations and occupations. In the few cases of hybrid backgrounds – such as where one parent had a university education and a corresponding job, while the other did blue-collar work – I looked at the lifestyles, values and hobbies (i.e. taste-related characteristics) that the interviewees mentioned from their childhood homes. For example, one interviewee spoke about the cultural leisure time activities in which she had participated with her middle-class mother, while she had not participated in her working-class father's hobbies and values to the same degree. Thus, how the interviewee interpreted her childhood home, often in relation to her peers, was important for my research goals. However, class was an interpretational issue in these cases.

To begin teasing out class, I formulated a two-by-two class matrix. Out of 28 women interviewees, nine showed class continuity within the middle class. Similarly, nine showed working-class continuity. Upward mobility from a working-class background to the middle class, in terms of chosen education, was seen in six cases; conversely, four interviewees were currently in positions that resembled the working class, despite having middle-class backgrounds. It is important to keep in mind that the categorisation should not be understood as stable, and these numbers are just one way to portray what the data includes. In what follows, I analyse these categories to examine whether we can find some of the dynamics through which neoliberal post-feminism is lived out.

Middle-class girls living out post-feminist subjectivities

In this data, the young women who had followed the middle-class track into which they had been born were university students. Most often they had a history of international mobility and had not had several gap years after secondary school. They had learnt which attributes and experiences might be useful for future employability, and they had also been provided with valuable alternatives from which to choose. They expressed confident mindsets, but also an anxiety that was sometimes rather deep, despite their seemingly bright futures.

Worries

Anxieties about getting employment were discussed: as humanities, social science or management students, they would not be graduating into predetermined occupations, but would be forced to market their skills. They also experienced pressures from society to find employment effectively, and they recognised the pressures faced by successful female figures in neoliberal capitalism. For example, Sophia, an upper-middle-class university student, pondered the pressures she felt as a young woman:

Even the media and such bring many types of pressures, concerning looks in particular, that you should always be groomed to perfection, and somehow it seems to be ok to critically surveil women's appearance. So, you have pressures concerning appearance, and what is also appreciated is your intelligence and education. But then again, it sometimes feels like things that are expected and wished from you, they are used as a weapon against you, that these highly educated young women are too choosy and they are this and that. So, for me, the issues those pressures raise are very controversial. There is not one clear ideal of a perfect young woman. (Sophia, 21-year-old university student)

These young women must constantly balance success and the maintenance of their mental well-being. Even those who have previously considered themselves well balanced seem to learn to feel stress as they progress with their studies and their views of the future. It may be that, for some, it is stressful to understand that their secure background does not guarantee a secure position in the future. They must give up their careless, confident attitudes.

Being confident about their assets

Despite their unknown futures, middle-class interviewees described their situations and views of the future in positive terms that were in alignment with the top-girl discourse. They were self-responsible, hard-working and determined; they had self-confidence, and thus they had the courage to be hopeful, throw themselves into novel opportunities, keep their minds open to several options, and actively look for innovative paths.

A few young women expressed their desire not to get stuck in just any job, but to proactively seek new challenges. This mindset, demonstrated below by Lisa, makes it considerably easier to live with an insecure future, and it also perfectly reflects the entrepreneurial mindset expected from future workers.

I wish I had a career and was able to get ahead and not get stuck. [...] I wouldn't care about temporary jobs if only they were meaningful and helped me forwards. (Lisa, 21-year-old university student)

The entrepreneurial mindset also gets rewritten, or tuned (see Ikonen & Nikunen 2018), in the sense that although women with secure backgrounds are obviously active and forward-looking, importantly it is not mere riches they are striving for; rather, they want some kind of spiritual meaning in their work, which will give rise to well-being.

I think it's best not to take school or anything too seriously. [...] What means more for me is mental well-being. [...] But it may be because I have never had a situation in my life where I needed to think in a grocery shop, for example, what I can and cannot buy. I have never lacked anything. (Emily, 21-year-old university student)

As Emily recognises above, a privileged background helps one to trust oneself even in insecure times (see also Allen 2016). However, Emily was a rather rare example, since most showed unease about such 'light-hearted readiness to not take the self too seriously' (Gill and Kanai 2018, 318).

Middle-class visits to the working class

The women who came from middle-class families but were currently in working-class positions in terms of work or education – which is not to say that they now had a working-class identity – seemed to have been able to take that route because of their backgrounds. Their backgrounds had allowed them to gather economic and cultural capital that made it relatively easy to believe in themselves, their skills and their potential for whatever they might enter in the future. Therefore, a step downwards in their current position in the class hierarchy was firstly seen not as a failure, but as a well-managed and individual choice, and secondly was not seen as a final destination, but as time out to prepare for something else.

Deciding the route by which to become successful

Here Betty, an interviewee from the upper middle class, talks about her route after secondary school. She is currently completing a degree that she knows will not be her ultimate focus – but what that ultimate focus will be remains unclear.

After secondary school, I didn't want to be a person who just starts studying something because you have to, because at that point I didn't know, although I am interested in studying, but I didn't know. [...] Then my [riding] coach started a riding school and asked if I wanted to train young horses there. [...] She asked whether I would like to get an education in that sector and offered me apprenticeship training. (Betty, 22-year-old apprentice)

Emma, for her part, gave up on her university application, despite her upper-middle-class parents, because she felt too stressed. However, college studies are easy for her, and she therefore aims to apply for demanding jobs in her sector.

I got into nursing school very easily. [...] There are many different job possibilities. [...] There are always more specific positions in university hospitals, so I'm more interested in working in them. [...] It was a tough decision, to only go to a college. In secondary school, I studied a lot of maths, chemistry, physics, all that. And first I aimed to become a medical doctor, but I had to admit that physics and chemistry simply were not for me, and I wouldn't take the stress of the entrance exams. (Emma, 21-year-old nursing student)

Even though women with middle-class backgrounds have good reason to believe that they can become successful in their work, which may differ radically from that of their parents, there are also worries over lengthy 'drifting' periods and getting stuck in a job that was meant to be temporary. They know that they have assets but they do not know how to use them, and choosing a subject area may cause anxiety. Laura says:

I'm maybe a bit stuck there [her job in a café], but I will, I'm waiting for the motivation to study. [...] This spring I will apply somewhere; I've just not decided where yet. I've always been interested in psychology, but it is so hard to get in there, and when you're working, the problem is how to find time to read [for the entrance exam]. I've not decided 100 per cent if I will apply properly this year. It will be psychology or business economics or something like that, but anyway, now I've thought about starting my

studies. [...] I want to be successful in the sector I choose; I just don't know yet which sector I will choose. [...] I feel like I want to get ahead in my life, and of course I could influence that myself, but because I have a good workplace, it's somehow hard to leave.

(Laura, 21-year-old service sector worker)

Looking outside the box

Women from middle-class families who have not immediately followed their parents' paths show a rather special mindset among the participants. Although they currently are in working-class positions in terms of their job or education, they show a willingness to 'look outside the box' to understand the world and exceptional decisions, even different decisions from their own. This is especially well described by Betty:

Academically, I have never done anything reasonable. [...] But I don't think there's anything I couldn't fix later in life; the doors are not closed. They are open as long as you have a strong will for something. [...] Maybe my foremost dream would be to do work that has meaning. I'd rather, like, clean oil off rocks somewhere than be a riding teacher, because it is more important. [...] At school they should speak more about social problems, and not just parrot 'study now and then get a good position and money', because it will not necessarily continue forever, the system. (Betty, 22-year-old apprentice)

Interestingly, their middle-class background had provided these women with the classed, confident mindset that is taken for granted in post-feminist discourse (see Gill and Orgad 2015), and it also had

given them support to deviate from the standard route – partly because their parents had accepted their choices. They even seemed to be able to ignore gendered expectations and performances. While middle-class young women recognised gendered expectations (as shown in the quote from Sophia), these women did not speak much about the meaning of gender. One possible interpretation of this comes from the post-feminist framework. As young women, they face no constraints, whether caused by gender or by other attributes, and they are free to choose anything, even exceptional alternatives.

Working-class youth learning to become middle-class top girls

Those who were rising from a working-class background into middle-class positions talked about having supportive parents, or parents who did not intrude unhelpfully. Their parents had given them no special reasons to rebel against them in terms of education or career choices. Women with working-class backgrounds mentioned several reasons for choosing education. Norma tells an illustrative story:

I grew up on a farm, and we don't have any academic background, but for me, university was somehow sufficiently far away to aim for and desire, so it was very clear that I wanted to go to university. And at that time, I was very active in the association for Finnish secondary-school students, so I made friends from wide circles, and everybody from there was academically oriented and so on. And it was exactly what I wanted. [...] I knew that the farm was not enough for me. [...] I have parents who support me, and it comes very powerfully from them that you can do whatever you want. You just have to find out what you want most. And my time in the association for Finnish secondary-school students made me, it kind of opened a new world to me, so that I understood I

can aim for more and higher and so on. Thus, I took on that culture and everything.

(Norma, 22-year-old university student)

With a certain attitude and a favourable environment, there are no obstacles to prevent one from going from a childhood on a farm to a university and becoming a high-achieving girl in Finland, a country where EU citizens do not need to pay university fees and where the university network is regionally comprehensive (Käyhkö 2015). There are differences in students' needs to take out student loans, however, and there is an assumed hierarchy among the universities and the subjects studied (medicine, law, economics and certain technical subjects at the Helsinki universities are the most highly ranked). Therefore, leaning on Käyhkö (2015), my argument here is that class background makes some difference in how the interviewees think about their university studies and their futures. For those from the working class, starting university studies is already an achievement. In line with the post-feminist top-girl discourse, some of these women eagerly embrace all the opportunities they can make use of during their studies. For example, they consider international mobility a useful opportunity if used wisely, as Leanne describes:

I thought that it is an excellent opportunity to go abroad now, through the studies. The core reason for me to go there [her exchange university] is the university, and that I'm going to study there. [...] So I'm not just travelling to a foreign country without doing anything there. The school is a good reason [to go abroad]. But of course, I expect it to be very useful in a sense, you can distinguish yourself when you have visited a slightly more special place. (Leanne, 22-year-old university student)

Self-doubt as a toxic state

Besides the storyline of aspirational agents who make good use of the opportunities they are given – i.e. who learn the top-girl mindset – there is a story about problems related to low self-esteem and tiredness because of working hard on one's studies, i.e. difficulties in living out the expected mindset.

Well of course there is the fact that I have experienced two burnouts. [...] I had four months during which I sought a job [to work alongside her studies, which is very typical in Finland], and I noticed that I got really anxious because I couldn't get a job, and very rapidly there came the feeling that I'm such a piece of shit and nobody is hiring me because I'm a total loser. Especially if you got those 'unfortunately you were not our choice' messages, it felt so very personal, why am I not good enough? So, if it happens that I graduate and become unemployed, I'm nervous, and I hope that I'll not take it too hard, that I'll not get really anxious. (Jodie, 26-year-old university student)

Jodie dreads unemployment already, before it has even happened. It is not only worklessness she is afraid of, but also her psychical reactions to it. Her fears are not unfounded, as she has already learnt how her mind may react to pressure, despite her young age. Indeed, sick leave due to mental-health problems, particularly among young women, has been increasing in Finland since 2005 (YLE 2018). The solution today is mainly to invite women to reinvent themselves, supported by psychological counselling and therapy (Walkerdine 2003, 240–241), and not to put any effort into changing the conditions of working life that make people ill. Of course, I cannot say for certain that Jodie's story is a result of her class background, because very different women also suffered from stress and mental-health problems. I can only make assumptions from the fact that she states several times that she comes from a totally different background, and she ponders whether she can perform as well as

others (see also Käyhkö 2015). At any rate, she is a perfect example of how young women are not doing well in every respect (see Baker [2010], who also writes about the new burdens and anxieties faced by ‘successful girls’).

There are moments in the interviews when these women from working-class backgrounds consider alternative careers. For example, one woman explains that she sometimes yearns for more concrete and craft-like work. She may feel pulled in multiple directions by different fields, in a Bourdieusian sense (Ingram 2011), as if she ‘could not go back, but she could also not go fully forward’ (Walkerline 2003, 243). Thus, social mobility is not only a question of gaining access to certain studies or occupations. Generally, however, these are also the women who produce stories in the interviews about living up to the neoliberal post-feminist figure, which they do not question. They make themselves responsible for their own success. They ponder whether they are the type of person, in character or appearance, who will handle the challenges of the neoliberal labour market – and they mostly believe that they are – but they also imply that everybody should do the same. If they can manage to become successful university students who aim high, then anybody can. This group of women use the discourse of condemning other people who are not like them, a strategy Baker and Kelan (2018) found in their study of neoliberal executive women. For example, they say ‘personally I do not see that an unemployed person could be successful’ (Leanne, 22-year-old university student), or that everybody should ‘bring in some value, whether monetary or arts, sciences, this type of value’ (Norma, 22-year-old university student).

Working-class lives: being unsuccessful in working on the self and developing aspirations?

If working-class children stayed in the working class as young adults, they often ended up in vocational school. Some were still unemployed (e.g., ‘I graduated as a carpenter last Christmas but haven’t found a job’ [Jessica, unemployed 27-year-old]; ‘I have graduated as a baker but have not

found a job' [Megan, unemployed 20-year-old]). Their paths also include unsuccessful or insecure upward mobility, such as not finding employment that corresponds with their training after university or college (e.g., 'I'm a history teacher. [...] I have done two gigs as a teacher, that's all' [Amy, 28-year-old in subsidised employment]). 'Success', even stability, remains elusive, as Allen states (2016, 817) in her study of the biographical transition accounts of participants in different class locations. Walkerdine (2003, 241) argues that the project of constructing a successful subjectivity leads to inevitable failure in an era when traditional working-class womanhood is dispersed. Trouble with describing a future mindset for oneself, top-class or otherwise, is reflected in several accounts, where the working-class women have unclear plans concerning what they want to do in the next five years. 'Hopefully I'm in work', 'I might be studying or working' or 'I'm perhaps living abroad and doing some work in order to earn my living' are examples of how they phrased their future plans.

In my data, many working-class women had experienced mental-health problems. In the absence of proper resources for care, such as wealthy parents who could guide their offspring towards a private psychiatrist, these problems had led the women to quit their studies, drift, and have only vague future plans. Sara says:

A: I'm not able to differentiate what is just a kind of teen angst and what is depression; I don't know when [she got depressed]. It just went downwards step by step. [...] Of course, even without thinking about some others' expectations or society's, I guess it would be nicer to have some meaning in life and such.

Q: What would bring you that meaning?

A: I don't know. (Sara, 27-year-old university dropout)

Sara not only talks about personal concerns, but also expresses her understanding that she is lacking compared with the ideal of an effective, productive citizen, stating 'I'm that old already and I ought not to be in this situation any more' when she refers to her lack of a degree or employment due to her depression. In congruence with most of the interviewees, these women feel pressures from society to find work and education effectively. They know that their lack of aspiration is considered a problem in society.

There were also young women who had found a highly satisfying vocational-education track or job. In these cases, there was evident pride at having achieved their current situation, and an enterprising (neoliberal, post-feminist) 'no pain, no gain' way of thinking. For example, Tara, a woman with dyslexia who had managed to enter nursing studies, stressed the lessons she had learnt from the hard times she had experienced: 'Then I got the feeling that [...] all the doors will open if only I try. I believe that if only you read and try, you can go anywhere'. This interview excerpt again shows how post-feminism, as a sensibility, seems to be so deeply internalised that almost everyone's mindset can be partly explained by post-feminist discourse, as post-feminist sensibility can obviously operate alongside other, even contradictory discourses, as Gill (2016) has argued.

Concluding discussion

By taking class and young women's experiences as an analytical lens and focusing on the specific context of Finland, this article has contributed to the examination of post-feminist sensibility and neoliberalism in a particular geographical and social context. My aim has been to show how social class shapes the way a sample of young white women make sense of the pressures and predicaments they encounter. In Finland, it is possible to occupy class positions different from one's origins. However, despite both continuities and mobilities in their class positions, it is important to note that these are young people who have not yet found their (classed) place; in addition, it may be that they

will never ‘find their place’ in the way their parents and older generations did, because stable occupational positions and guaranteed jobs are said to have diminished. General uncertainty and weakened markers of adulthood force young people to narrate their paths in a new way (Allen 2016; Silva 2012) – even those from more privileged backgrounds. This makes individual work on one’s own mindset a necessary task.

Thus, in neoliberal discourse, which is clearly in line with post-feminist sensibility, it seems that everybody should develop aspirations and actively modify their own mindsets. Jennifer Silva (2013) writes that young people learn over and over again that happiness will be theirs if they only work hard enough to control their negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours. They must learn that the biggest obstacle to success is the self, not any material inequalities. This is further supported by the ‘successful girl’ discourse, according to which women in particular flourish. My interview data too demonstrates a turn away from the structural towards a depoliticised, workable mindset – and self-blame if that mindset is lacking. This is evident across classes. Young women from different backgrounds and in different positions talk emotionally about their fears of disengagement from the working world and their profound lack of direction. Nevertheless, all of them can also make use of a discourse in which they – albeit only occasionally, in some cases – are capable of working on their own minds to make things happen in their lives.

This article has sought answer the call for the contextual analysis of the experiences of young women whom post-feminist media and political discourses present unproblematically as winners. The article has taken seriously mental disorders in young adulthood and research results that warn of the increasing inequalities that current right-wing politics may cause in Finland. It has examined young women’s mindsets and studied whether their previous or current class positions might help us to understand those mindsets.

Based on these interview analyses, the article suggests that classed capacities play a role in what kind of mindset is expressed and how. However, as has been stated (e.g., Gill 2017), the neoliberal post-

feminist discourse of 'top girls' is so complex, contradictory and hegemonic that it does not offer a coherent framework for analysing how different young women feel about their own possibilities, both now and in the future. The psychological register of post-feminism is so pervasive that almost everybody is able to use it, which also means denying or ignoring how anything other than personal virtue might affect individuals' situations.

The post-feminist discourse of young women as the subjects of success and the new competitive meritocracy seems to be particularly well adopted in the accounts of women who are rising to the middle class from a working-class background. Their accounts show that they are proud to have proved their capacities by entering university. They seem to have taken on the idea that, as girls, they are powerful, brave, and free to accomplish a choice biography and do-it-yourself subjectivity, as Harris (2004, 8) puts it. They sometimes feel that they do not quite fit in, but they are clever at using what Abrahams and Ingram (2013, 5.1) call a chameleon identity to cover their intermittent feelings of inadequacy.

Most of what I could call resistance can be found among the young women who come from educated, established middle-class families, but who currently are in working-class positions. Based on the capital gained from their background, they have been able to understand how they are governed as a group towards certain choices, looks and forms of agency. By making a different choice after secondary or compulsory schooling, they have refused to be governed. However, their reason for choosing an alternative route has partly been because they have not quite known where to invest their potential, or because they have been afraid of the pressures that would follow from choosing the expected route – not because they intentionally aimed to stand out from their peers. The route is also meant to be temporary.

Working-class women who are still in the working class do not widely show that they possess the post-feminist 'winner' attitude. They do not know what to dream about or how to achieve it. In some cases this is because their attempts to climb upwards have met a dead end, as has also been noted by

Silva (2012, 512) of American working-class youth. Their hopelessness and difficulty in integrating themselves into the labour market are striking and sad. Neoliberal post-feminism seems to offer fewer elements for constructing a confident mindset to working-class young women than to those from the middle class. Here it is important to stress, however, that the way the working-class women speak in the interviews may reflect the discomfort they feel in the interview situation. They are not necessarily used to formulating their thoughts in the manner they still understand that educated middle-class adults – and the interviewers as their representatives – expect them to do. It is a middle-class thing to make oneself worth talking about (Skeggs 2004, 119–126). In addition, some working-class women find no reason to dream of more than they already have. It seems as if they lack aspiration and are drifting towards an undefined future; but importantly, they themselves do not necessarily consider this a failure. Their learnt ideas about competent adulthood do not include aiming for the top in all regards (see Silva 2012), and so some working-class women live their ordinary lives within a completely different discourse from that of the neoliberal, post-feminist ‘top girl’. There remains a grave need to study more deeply how the top-girl discourse is lived out, not only within but also between classes, in various national contexts. This would help to challenge the discourse of neoliberal post-feminism and its effects on subjectivities.

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