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**Title:**

Neoliberal salvation through a gendered intervention: A critical analysis of vulnerable young women's talk.

**Authors:**

Ruth Cross<sup>1</sup> and Louise Warwick-Booth<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author.

Ruth Cross is Course Director for Health Promotion at Leeds Beckett University and holds a PhD in the social construction of risk and young women's health. She has been involved in research projects with the Centre for Health Promotion Research exploring 'vulnerable' young women's experiences of different service provision.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Warwick-Booth PhD is Reader and Co-Director of the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University. With a background in health and social policy, Louise's research interests include the evaluation of women-centred projects.

**Abstract:**

Within the United Kingdom (UK) in recent years, disadvantaged young women have been documented as having unmet needs and experiencing gendered inequalities. In response, UK policy-makers have funded early interventions for so-called vulnerable young women. This paper presents a feminist analysis of young women's talk about their journeys through a gendered intervention (Project X). Data were generated in focus groups during an evaluation of Project X. The focus groups were carried out using creative methods of data collection. The young women were asked to make a storyboard illustrating their journey through Project X and the impact it had had on them. They were then encouraged to reflect on, and talk about, their experiences. A secondary analysis and interpretation of the focus group data took place in addition to that required for the purposes of evaluation. This more in-depth analysis laid bare the various discourses the young women took up in order to make sense of their life experiences and their involvement in Project X. These included neoliberal discourse such as talk of self-improvement, reinvention and aspirations of self-control. These are discussed with reference to the themes of choice and control, vulnerability, governance, and resilience. The social and political implications of the analysis are discussed including a key argument that the young women's discursive practices reinforce hegemonic gendered identities, neoliberal ideology and existing structural inequalities.

**Word Count: 225**

## *Introduction and background*

This paper presents data from an evaluation which explored the impact of a gender-specific intervention designed to support young women (Project X). Project X sits within a wider agenda in UK policy that frames young women in certain ways which can be interpreted differently depending on contrasting perspectives. This paper takes a critical look at the assumptions underpinning such interventions, the policy background that supports such provision and the way that young women are positioned within policy and subsequent practice. The paper draws on a secondary analysis of qualitative data resulting from the evaluation of Project X to illustrate the critique within it. In doing so it adopts a feminist perspective and a post-structuralist critique of the neoliberal policy agenda which pervades many western health and social care systems.

In 2007 a review of vulnerable women in the UK criminal justice system was published called the Corston Report which was commissioned by the UK Home Office. The report outlined 'the need for a distinct radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach' (Corston, 2007: i). The Corston policy context focused upon early intervention as a mechanism to manage demands on the criminal justice system (Corston, 2007). Ten years on it is argued that a joined-up approach is needed to take into account the root causes of women's offending and that such an approach should include gender-specific women's community support services, such as Project X (Gillberg, 2017). Interventions Like Project X are designed to tackle early indicators of potential difficulties in young women, those that might lead to bigger problems. Such interventions shift the construction of young women's 'problems' to an earlier point in their journeys but have been criticised for failing to tackle the actual structural determinants which shape and create difficulties for young women (Hanbury and Ronan, 2013). Rather, there is an emphasis in such interventions on change at an individual level, the development of coping skills and increases in resilience in the young women themselves.

Much of current UK policy around young people, and particularly young women, places emphasis on problematic lives and this emphasis shapes practice and provision. This is not unique to the UK however. We can see similar approaches in the USA where lessons are being drawn from. Critics of this political trajectory note the pervading discourse of *vulnerability*. Writing specifically about vulnerability, Brown et al. (2017) note the increasing preoccupation with personal crisis that is evident in current social policy such that tackling what is externally defined as vulnerability has become a key concern in current policy and, therefore, practice. The focus on vulnerability is reflected in early interventions targeted at young women. Interventions like Project X reinforce crisis discourse which in turn feed into a normative behaviour change policy agenda (Ecclestone, 2016). There is an interesting tension whereby young women are simultaneously positioned as vulnerable and yet also as a threat – to themselves, to others, to social order and to wider society as a whole. The assumption is that, if early intervention does not happen, then the young women will go on to experience (and create) greater difficulties (Nicholles and Whitehead, 2012).

Young women experiencing life challenges are typically socially constructed as problematic and dependent (Hanbury and Ronan, 2013). Such young women are seen to be costly (for example, through potential imprisonment, drug and alcohol problems or children needing state care) (Nicholles and Whitehead, 2012). The term *vulnerable* is often employed to denote this. Brown et al (2017:423) note the normative use of the terms vulnerable and vulnerability and policies designed to address vulnerabilities have become 'a persuasive feature of the political landscape'. As Brown et al., (2017:489) argues, the use of vulnerability discourse supports a range of 'powerful moral and ethical projects' and Project X is no exception. It is also apparent that, as Brown (2014:2) contends, 'in the UK the concept of vulnerability is increasingly deployed in the management and classification of individual and groups'. In this case the group being managed and classified is young women who are defined, in some way, as being vulnerable. As will also be argued in the explication of the data, Project X (like others which are similar) also promotes and propagates what Critcher (2008:1140) refers to as 'the process of moral regulation'.

Project X was aimed at young women with unmet need, who fell under the thresholds for statutory support. From a critical perspective Project X is an example of a targeted project which emphasises the notion of problematic adolescent lives that shapes much of current policy around young women (Hanbury and Ronan, 2014). From a feminist perspective such approaches construct young women as *troubled* in contrast to how young men are constructed which is as *troublesome* (Green et al., 2000). We concur with Green et al.'s point however, we are also minded to note that certain groups of young women are also constructed as troublesome, if not troublesome in the present then potentially troublesome in terms of possibly entering the criminal justice system, causing social problems etc. Notably also, 'troubled' young women's responses to their life circumstances are also, at times, constructed as deviant and problematic (for example, alcohol and drug misuse, unplanned teen pregnancy, self-harming, dropping out of school) (Ben-David et al., 2016).

Sharpe (2012) points to lone teenage mothers as a site of public and political anxiety. She argues that 'as the average age at childbirth has increased, teenage mothers have become vilified as irresponsible and unacceptably dependent on state welfare' (Sharpe, 2012:148). Positive stories of teenage motherhood are relatively hard to come by in a context where teenage pregnancy is highly problematized. We argue that vulnerable young women are also constructed as a site of public and political anxiety in contemporary social policy. They are seen to be potentially dependent on the state in a number of different ways (needing physical and mental health support, for example) and at risk of falling into the criminal justice system (Nicholles and Whitehead, 2012). From a feminist perspective such concern echoes contemporary popular, public and academic preoccupation with what Jackson and Tinkler (2007) refer to as troublesome young femininities.

The data discussed in this paper resulted from an evaluation of Project X. Project X aimed to promote early intervention and resilience working with relatively disadvantaged young women in risky life circumstances using holistic, individually-focused, wrap-around support systems to engage vulnerable young women aged between 14 and 25 years in order to meet their specific needs. Project X was

embedded within a multi-team service (Organization X) which was located in the voluntary sector and provided a range of services to women. Project X was aimed at vulnerable and disadvantaged young women who are seen to be potentially more likely to be costly in terms of imprisonment, drug and alcohol problems and children needing state care (Scott et al, 2001). It used a specific approach to identify and engage with girls and young women who were slipping between existing offers of service provision and who might otherwise enter adulthood with severe and escalating levels of need ( [REDACTED] ). The provision was based on a key-worker model with an Engagement Worker at the centre of it who was supported by a multi-agency steering group facilitated by Organization X. The Engagement Worker took referrals, made assessments, provided supportive engagement, delivered case work, and linked with other agencies for signposting and referral ( [REDACTED] ). Young women could self-refer into the project or, more frequently, were referred by different agencies such as social services and school. The majority of the young women referred into the project were aged 14 – 18 years and self-identified as White British. A small minority self-identified as lesbian or bi-sexual. Once the initial referral had taken place the young women engaged with Project X entirely on their own terms.

The ensuing discussion of the data presented in this paper draws on a number of theoretical concepts that are worth outlining here. A critical perspective is taken of what is termed the 'neoliberal imperative'. Neoliberalism is a specific political and economic ideology based on the individualisation thesis which emphasises personal freedom, individual control and the positioning of the individual as an autonomous agent directing their own destiny (Rose et al, 2006). Neoliberal ideology has become more firmly embedded within so-called 'western' contexts within the past two decades and now permeates all areas of human experience resulting in what Gill and Scharff (2011:5) call a 'novel form of governance'. The gradual withdrawal of state welfare provision directs responsibility onto the individual subject within the private domain (Bell et al, 2011). As will be seen, we contend that interventions like Project X perpetuate this. Arguably, such interventions also serve as a mechanism of governance (Rose, 2006) and of encouraging young women to conform to what it means to be a good citizen or even a good woman (defined as family-focused, health-conscious and in control of one's self). This links to issues of power. Foucault critically examined a range of different sites within which power operates and through which power and knowledge are (re)produced through discursive construction (Foucault, 1982). He contended that, rather than power operating in a top-down fashion, power operates within and through individuals via the mechanisms of self-discipline and self-governance (McNay, 2009). Foucault also argued that, where there is governance, there is resistance (Lazzarato, 2009). Drawing on Foucauldian ideas the construction and (re)production of alternative discourses can be interpreted as resistance. From a feminist perspective resistance would be to dominant ideals or normative standards of what it means to be a woman i.e. constituted by a refusal to conform with notions of idealised femininity. We return to these theoretical ideas in the discussion of the data later in the paper.

## *Methods*

### *Context of the study*

The data here are drawn from a broader evaluation of Project X that sought to explore the impact of a specific gendered intervention aimed at young women in need of support. Project X was located in the voluntary sector and provided support to women between the ages of 14 and 25 years who did not meet the minimum threshold requirements for statutory intervention such as having a criminal conviction, an early unplanned pregnancy or being homeless. Project X was for women only and focused on prevention, holistic provision and delivery based on individual need. The core function of Project X was relational, built on establishing trust between an engagement worker and the young women with complex needs who accessed the project (Duffy and Hyde, 2011). As part of the broader evaluation, focus groups were carried out with young women who had engaged with the intervention. The focus groups were designed to explore the impact that the intervention had had on the young women in line with the aims of the evaluation.

### *Research approach: overview of the data collection*

Much research on women has been dominated by positivist models which decontextualize women's experience and, as Pilkington (2007) argues, do not substantially consider socio-cultural content. Therefore, our aim was to privilege the young women's experiences from their own perspectives and to enable them to have a voice in the research process. We used a qualitative, feminist approach to data collection which placed the young women at the centre of the process and aimed to recognise and attempt to address, in part, the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched (Abell and Myers, 2008). We were also conscious of Hedderman et al.'s (2011) argument about the importance of garnering service user perspectives in order to better understand outcomes from gendered interventions. We were interested in the young women's stories and their subjective experience of being involved in the project and used a co-productive approach via 'dialogic communication' (Blaikie, 2007: 201) positioning ourselves, as the researchers, as being alongside the participants in the co-production of knowledge [REDACTED]. Ethics approval was obtained from [REDACTED].

Two focus groups were carried out at different times with two different groups of young women using creative methods of data collection (one with six young women and one with eight young women; n = 14 in total). The young women were recruited by the Engagement Worker on a voluntary basis. No coercive or persuasive measures were used. The focus groups were facilitated by the two authors. The focus group schedule was flexibly designed in order to enable the young women to guide the process. There was no set interview schedule rather, during the focus group, the young women were asked to make a storyboard illustrating their journey through the project and the impact it had had on them. They were asked to reflect on where they had been before they were involved in the project (past history), where they were at the point they were talking to us (present situation) and where they hoped to be (aspirations for the future). A range of materials were made available for the young

women to use including magazines to cut up, stickers and pens/pencils to write and draw with. They were then encouraged to reflect on, and talk about, their experiences using their storyboards as a point of reference. Prompts and probes were used to draw out further information such as 'can you tell us more about that?'. This approach was designed to generate richer, deeper data and to create a more meaningful experience for the young women who took part. In keeping with our feminist-informed methodological approach we, as the researchers, also joined in with the activity alongside the young women ( [REDACTED] ). The focus groups were audio-recorded with the young women's permission so that the conversations which took place whilst the storyboards were being created could be captured. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The data was subject to a secondary analysis by the two researchers who used a discourse analytic approach to scrutinise and interpret the data. The central components of discursive approaches to analysis include attention to critique and to uncovering issues of social organisation, power and ideologies (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Specifically, we approached the secondary analysis from a feminist perspective.

### *Findings*

We now present an interpretation of the secondary analysis of the young women's perspectives through some of their talk. We observed how the young women took up various discourses and subject positions to make sense of their personal stories and to establish how they presented themselves within the focus group discussions in terms of their journey through the project. The stories included a dominant discourse relating to neoliberalism which emphasised self-improvement, reinvention and self-control which we refer to as the 'neoliberal imperative'. Dominant discourses are defined as those that are granted the status of truth (Marecek, 1999). Interestingly, there was an apparent lack of marginal discourses i.e. those that challenged the received wisdom of the dominant discourse. Four of the young women's stories are explored in detail here to illustrate the key arguments in this paper. Each story will be explicated in turn with reference to the storyboards that the young women created themselves during the focus group discussions. Where appropriate direct quotations are used from the young women's talk. These, and the storyboards, are anonymised with the use of pseudonyms.



## Emily's Story



Figure 1: Emily's Storyboard

*"Things would be going right and then all of a sudden something would go wrong, set me back again and that's what's with the downwards spiral as well [see Figure 1 – left side]. And it was a struggle, especially with my family life. And I thought with all that going on, like my GCSEs were coming up and stuff like that. I was so scared of failure...And one day it just all got too much. Locked myself in a cubicle and just cried and I didn't know what I was doing...so they referred me [into the project]...and I became a lot happier. And then I managed to get organised more with my school work and focus on that and I came out with some really good GCSEs so now that just leads me into college and I've got an equation [see Figure 1 – middle column]...but still, life has ups and downs. I've been partying a bit too much which is good but then, at the same time, I've just been diagnosed with depression, so that's the black...And I've got where I hope to be. I've got the word 'destination' because I just want to feel like I'm going to one place because I feel like I'm on a journey and I want to settle down and that's why there's a family as well. I think because I've had a dysfunctional family, I want stability, I want to settle down. And I want to get control and to be a better version of me [see Figure 1 – right side]"*

At the point at which Emily engaged with the intervention she was clearly feeling under a lot of pressure from all sides. She describes life as a '*struggle*' and positions herself as unhappy and out of control. She then contrasts this with getting '*organised*' as result of being involved with the intervention. Being organised links to the '*neoliberal imperative*' and is a requirement for independent success however,

arguably being organised and in control is a mandate that is prescribed much more for young women than for young men (McRobbie, 2009). Emily goes on to achieve her GCSEs which is framed as evidence of success. There is some evidence of resistance to the feminised construct of behaving and being in control here when Emily talks about '*partying a bit too much which is good*'. She then contrasts this with being diagnosed with depression which is represented by the blocks of black on her storyboard [see left and centre]. Emily draws on what could be termed discourse of transformation. She describes herself as being on a journey and as life as having its ups and downs. Ultimately Emily aspires to getting control - to being '*a better version of me*'. Here Emily draws on contemporary discourse around self-improvement and betterment which links with the neoliberal agenda. Interestingly Emily selects a functional and socially normative future as shown by the picture of a nuclear family [see Figure 1 – right]. The aspiration around getting married and having children links to socially prescribed ways of 'doing gender' (Moore, 2010; Ben-David et al., 2016) and was a recurring theme within the young women's stories. Emily's story illustrates Ecclestone's (2016) critique around the juxtaposing subject positions 'of the rational, autonomous subject of liberal and neoliberal governance, and the contemporary cultural privileging of its vulnerable, anxious and stressed counterpart' (p 48). Emily positions herself as both at different times and uncritically takes up these contrary constructs. She firstly presents herself as scared and upset (vulnerable, anxious and stressed) and subsequently as being organised and focused (the autonomous, neoliberal subject).

## Cat's Story



Figure 2: Cat's Storyboard

Before Cat was involved in the intervention she described herself as experiencing a range of emotions such as being angry, not caring about anything, feeling very depressed and self-harming [see Figure 2 – left]. Cat had also experienced the care system and described herself as 'cuckoo' in reference to her own unstable emotional position. She had disclosed several risk-taking behaviours such as running away, taking drugs, indiscriminate sleeping around and alcohol misuse and stated that she 'was running away lot and ended up on drugs...nearly killed someone...I was low and depressed which led to self-harming a lot more' [Cat]. This would seem to support the social construction of troubled young women discussed previously (Green et al., 2000). However, after support from the engagement worker, Cat described herself as being happy, relaxed and calm which is a very different emotional position. 'Now I've got short hair, got a new house, new people, new town and I'm full...my depression's got a lot better. It's not as bad as it was.' [Cat]. In terms of future aspirations, she (with laughter) said she wanted to marry David Beckham and become queen [see figure 2 – right]. Cat recognised that both were highly unlikely to occur but this is indicative of a shift from how she felt previously and the opportunities that she subsequently felt life had to offer her. Similar to Emily, Cat envisages a heteronormative future in traditional marriage, this despite the fact that she had identified as bi-sexual earlier in the focus group. Cat also disclosed some significant abuse which was not atypical of the young women who

took part in the evaluation. There was evidence of trauma discourse across the data relating to abuse (Marecek, 1999). Disclosure revealed various forms of abuse. Many of the young women had been through significantly distressing life events of various kinds including abuse, rape, addiction, mental health crisis and self-harm.

### Jenna's Story



Figure 3: Jenna's Storyboard

*'I was in a really horrible place, horrible school-life, self-harm, no-one to talk to, I had a, and still do horrible relationship with my mum. Now we're okay 'cause like not...things aren't great but plodding on. I'm stopping drinking. I've been drinking too much and I don't want to end up like my mum. My friends have told me to watch what I am drinking because my mum's been an alcoholic since before I was born...but it got to the point where I was just using it as a release of my problems and it's not healthy so I've decided to stop drinking for a bit until I get myself sorted. On my way to university which is where I want to be, I want to be in a stable home and I do want a decent relationship with my mum but now there is someone to talk to [Engagement Worker] which I've so...where I want to be is like got to already like university studying away, hopefully in London and just making new friends, getting independent so I could just go on forever 'cause that...path that I want to follow, yeah...'*

This extract illustrates how Jenna was supported to develop her personal relationships and felt less alone as a result of being involved in the intervention. Like Cat, Jenna discloses risky behaviour (drinking too much alcohol) although, in contrast to Emily who cites partying too much as good, Jenna constructs her alcohol use as 'bad'. This is in keeping with more normative discourse about alcohol misuse which is that it is problematic, especially so for young women as it is viewed as predisposing them to a range of risks and vulnerabilities (Szmigin et al., 2008). This



problematisation around alcohol use does not occur in the same way for young men, rather, as Holmila and Raitasalo (2005) argue, heavy drinking is more traditionally associated with displays of masculinity. Jenna also employs self-regulation which occurs via the taking up of governance discourse for example, by stopping drinking for a bit until she gets sorted. Being involved in the project had led to a number of positive outcomes for Jenna such as increased social connections, meaningful relationships, better emotional and physical health and improved self-esteem. She also draws on discourse of health supporting the view that there is more of a pressure on young women than young men to be interested in health. Health is constructed as a gendered pursuit and is tied up with ideas about hegemonic femininity (Gough, 2007). The 'neoliberal imperative' is reflected in Jenna's talk about getting herself 'sorted'. Jenna has aspirations to go to university which can be interpreted as constructing the enterprising self which feeds into a neoliberal politic that not only celebrates but also rewards independence, self-motivation and active citizenship (Brown, 2017). Jenna's story is also illustrative of how the discourse of citizenship dictates good and healthy citizens (Petersen et al, 2010) which requires the taking up of a range of normative practices and conforming to social obligations (Thompson and Kumar, 2011). Central citizenship is the civic duty to be useful and productive rather than a drain on shared resources such as the welfare state (Patrick, 2012).

### Tracy's Story

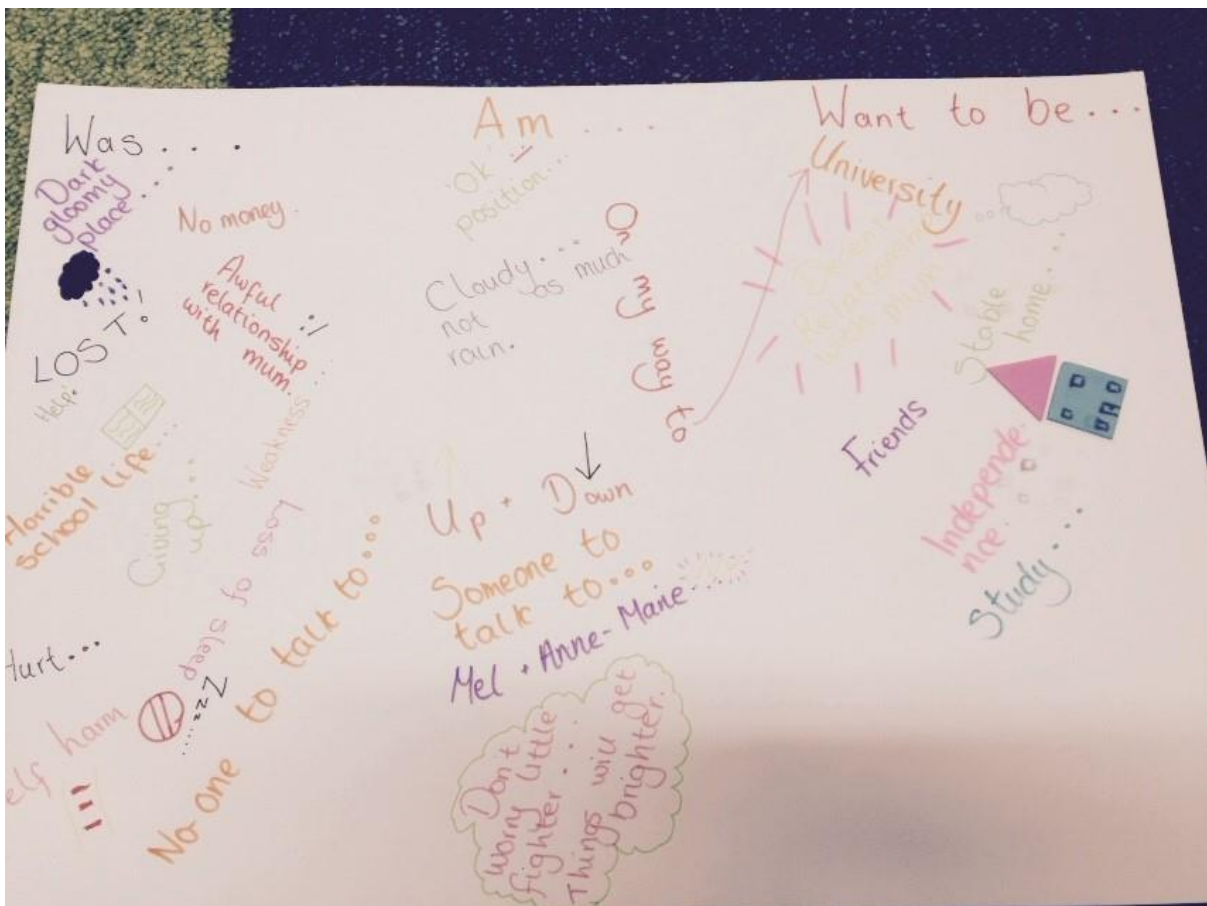


Figure 4: Tracy's Storyboard

*"I'll just say where I was. I wasn't sure how I was ever going to continue, I couldn't look to the future, I was just trapped where I was: even though I have a close family and we've always been close, I just felt alone, I couldn't talk to them, I was confused, I didn't really understand what was going on. But now I'm a lot happier and I'm planning my future and going to university. I know how to cope if I get stressed or really anxious, I have someone I can talk to and I don't feel alone any more. And what I want to do is go to university and be independent, completely stop being afraid anymore and get over my fears and just achieve my dream job and carry on to the future".*

Tracy describes how difficult she felt things were before she engaged with the intervention. She positions herself as vulnerable to the point of not knowing '*how I was ever going to continue*'. Similarly, to Jenna, Tracy then positions herself as self-enterprising, and like Emily, as in control. Tracy's talk is indicative of increased resilience - '*I know how to cope*' and '*I'm planning my future*'. On her story board Tracy wrote 'Don't worry little fighter, things will get brighter' [see Figure 4 centre bottom]. Like Emily, Tracy constructs her life as being a battle or a struggle. Tracy also has aspirations to independence which was a key theme in the stories from the young women and, again, fits within the neoliberal imperative. Data such as this provides support for Sharpe's (2012:20) argument that 'in late modern society, individuals are required to make reflexive choices regarding education, employment, marriage and so on, and there is an expectation that, in the process of creating their own, personalised biographies, individuals will self-monitor or plan and thus make the 'right' choices'.

### *Discussion*

We now discuss the findings more generally in relation to four key discursive themes – choice and control; vulnerability; governance; and resilience. Each theme is discussed in turn however, there are overlaps between them. We also briefly offer an alternative interpretation of the data.

#### *Choice and control*

A theme of personal choice and control is evident in the young women's talk. However, as Ayo (2012) points out, many choices at an individual level are constrained by social and structural factors. Numerous barriers to authentic (or real) choice exist in societal structures which limit the possibilities available to young women, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups (Sharpe, 2012). Structure and agency are therefore inextricably linked (Measham and Shiner, 2009). All the young women whose data are discussed here presented a more coherent self as a result of being involved in Project X. Pre-involvement they construct themselves as struggling, in a mess and not doing well. As a result of Project X they are now in a better place – more sorted, more in control and less of a strain on society's resources. Interestingly, prior to their involvement in Project X and to developing a relationship with the Engagement Worker, the young women were apparently resisting social norms and expectations – either deliberately (through 'risky' behaviours) or through not feeling in control of their life circumstances.

On face value the young women appear to be exercising individual power and agency by taking control over their lives and circumstances however, they also appear to be acquiescing to social requirements which, by definition, perhaps limits the extent of their agency. Good citizenship is normative, requires conform and becomes performative – that is gendered identities as constructed through certain practices (Butler, 1990). The young women are arguably performing ‘good citizenship’ within the socially bounded definitions of what it means to be female, or least, positioning themselves as doing so. Whilst performativity can be disruptive of gendered norms this is not evident in the data discussed here. Notably, normative ideas about good citizenship are closely aligned with hegemonic femininity and particularly, as Harris (2003) argues, with middle class femininity. In addition, engaging in the emotional labour of self-improvement would appear, in the case of these young women, to serve as a mechanism for achieving compliance to good citizenship.

### *Vulnerability*

Interestingly the young women’s stories resonate with qualitative findings from Sharpe’s (2012) research with offending girls, which revealed two central and recurring themes of troubled families and trouble at school. Stories of disconnection and disruption not uncommon in the criminal justice literature. However, contrary to other findings in the wider literature where young people have resisted the label vulnerable (see Brown, 2014) the young women in this study *do* position themselves as vulnerable and in need of help and/or support. Without exception, all the young women draw on discourses of vulnerability and (consciously or unconsciously) perform vulnerability as reflected in their stories. Often the implication of being labelled vulnerable is about ‘deviation from usually undefined (*yet normative*) standards of life or behaviour’ (*italics* – our addition) (Brown et al, 2017:498). Elsewhere critics have pointed to the gendered dimension of vulnerability as a concept (Brown, 2014), simply to be female is to be constructed as vulnerable which is a notion that is not new. It is well rehearsed within the wider literature and has long been criticised from feminist perspectives. The implications of vulnerability discourse therefore become ‘potentially pathological’ (Brown et al., 2017, p. 499) since it problematizes woman- and girl-hood.

The young women in this study are socially constructed as vulnerable with the attendant concern that such a label brings. The frequent talk of trauma and abuse in the young women’s stories illustrates that, as McNeish and Scott (2014) argue, young women are at greater risk of abuse due to structural inequalities and resulting violence. The deployment of vulnerability discourse in policy and practice for young women serves to problematize their experience and to justify various means of control through planned intervention/s such as Project X which links to Brown’s (2014) argument that ‘vulnerability appears as an intellectual fashion which reflects and influences certain areas of policy and practice’ (Brown, 2014:2). More importantly, ‘normative accounts of vulnerability are also used to highlight situational concerns there the term is used to demarcate or describe particular adverse experiences, transgressions or groups of people who may be in circumstances of social difficulty’ (Brown, 2015 and Mackenzie et al, 2014 cited in Brown et al, 2017: 499). This appears to be the case for the young women in this study. Women are especially prone to such labelling, socially constructed as somehow lacking and needy. Brown et al (2017: 499) argues that ‘the

concept of vulnerability is often drawn upon to emphasise (individual) biographical experiences which demand special treatment or exceptions to be made in policy and practice processes'. This is evident in early intervention aimed at young women. However, we, like others from feminist perspectives, would take this argument further and argue that the concept of vulnerability is drawn upon to emphasis and reinforce *gendered* experiences.

### *Governance*

Foucault's ideas about mechanisms of governance have relevance in the interpretation of the young women's talk here. The young women uncritically (re)produce governance discourse. Self-monitoring (and betterment) become imperative (Lyon, 2001) through the privileging of individual autonomy (Rose, 2000). Similarly, McRobbie (2009) argues that, in the post-modern era, young women are portrayed as being privileged subjects of neoliberalism; as having more agency, control and choice than ever before. However, is it evident from the stories discussed here that these young women have not generally experienced this. Having engaged with the Project X they have now ostensibly moved into a position where this is more available to them, apparently subsuming the neoliberal imperative. Individualisation and self-monitoring practices require subjects to make the right choices and to comply (McRobbie, 2009) which the young women are now reportedly doing for the most part.

The young women talked about a variety of different outcomes as a result of their journeys through Project X including being able to make decisions independently, feeling better emotionally, being more empowered, and improvement in confidence, and feeling able to cope more effectively with their problems. Some also talked about a reduction in risky behaviours. The relational support provided by the Engagement Worker enabled the young women to focus on their life chances and to develop future aspirations, important for both emotional wellbeing and the development of resilience (████████████████████). However, we also want to offer a broader critique of resilience as used for political ends and means. 'The current political imaginary defines resilience as possessing the capacity to 'bounce back' from adversity' (Harrison, 2013 cited in Hanbury and Ronan, 2014). Resilience is a concept that appears to be relatively uncritically accepted across the board and is lauded as the path to fulfilment, happiness and achievement. The central narratives in resilience closely align with a neoliberal agenda which emphasises personal responsibility and active citizenship (Brown, 2017; Harrison, 2013). The active citizen is obliged to participants in various forms of self-governance (Green et al, 2012). The young women here appear to be relatively compliant in this regard (Hanbury and Ronan, 2014). Arguably, they appear to uncritically accept the requirement to conform to social norms and expectations.

### *Resilience*

Resilience offers a narrow and generic set of markers of success in 'relation to positive psychological development' for individuals (Masten, 2009; Ungar, 2008 cited in Hanbury and Ronan, 2014). This results in the generation of individualised narratives focusing on betterment whilst ignoring the social and political environments which create distress for young women and limit the opportunities for action available



to them. As Hanbury and Ronan (2014:83) argue, 'in contemporary politics, resilience encourages acquiescence not resistance'. The young women here are true to form in this regard as, arguably, they appear to acquiesce rather than resist. In fact, behaviours that could be interpreted as resistance are generally done away with as the young women tell of transition away from, for example, drinking too much or antisocial behaviour. Given that Project X encourages the young women to develop coping skills and focus on future aspirations this may serve to (re)inscribe traditional gendered subjectivities, linked to dominant discourses of respectable femininity – for example, compliant, family-oriented and self-controlled (Sharpe and Gelsthorpe, 2009) which is also linked to issues of social control (██████████, forthcoming).

Interventions such as Project X are vital and necessary. As Hanbury and Ronan (2014:84) argue, 'it is important that young people feel sufficiently...equipped to handle their lived situations'. However, they may also re-inscribe the hegemonic conditions of young women's lives and, under the guise of empowerment, building self-esteem and increasing self-confidence, they often neglect to address the social, structural and cultural circumstances that lead to the difficulties and challenges such young women experience. This problematic construction, we argue, is especially true for young women. However, lessons from the criminal justice field suggest that the power of young women is limited by their structural disadvantage (Batchelor and Burman, 2004), their invisibility (Burman and Batchelor, 2009) and lack of choices (Worrall, 2001). Likewise, feminist critiques argue that interventions like Project X do not take into account the broader structural determinants which disadvantage young women in the first place (Goodkind, 2009).

As Hanbury and Ronan (2014) argue, interventions such Project X can 'unwittingly play into the hands of a subtle and pervasive neoliberal agenda' (p 84). The responsibility for change is put upon the young woman herself and this subject position is uncritically taken up by her becoming subscribed to in her narrative. There exists, therefore, a real discursive tension between the young women acting as active agents and the neoliberal imperative. 'Words like 'resilience', 'choice' and 'empowerment' create the appearance of feminism that simultaneously privileges individual effort and triumph and in doing so ignores structural and gendered injustice' (Hanbury and Ronan, 2014, p 84). The young women's capacity for resistance to the neoliberal imperative appeared to be non-existent. Instead they drew on discourses that emphasized resilience and so, we argue, the young women's discursive practices reinforced hegemonic gendered identities and neoliberal ideology.

We should also briefly consider an alternative interpretation of this data which can arguably be viewed in a more positive and emancipatory way. Discourses of self-improvement and individual empowerment can be revolutionary and transformatory. Notwithstanding the considerable theoretical and academic debates about the nature of empowerment and how to measure it (see ██████████) individual empowerment is widely construed as a very positive phenomenon. The young women here undoubtedly feel more empowered as a result of Project X as reflected in their stories and the changes in their life circumstances. In addition, it could be argued that the young women are being strategic and agentic in their use of

neoliberal and transformative discourse. However, it could also be argued that it is a peculiar and contradictory form of emancipation and empowerment that prescribes singularly defined conditions of performance. The young women in this study appear to construct themselves as only having access to respectable femininity (heteronormative and essentialist) in a context where, for example, marriage and childbearing is viewed almost exclusively as a positive outcome for vulnerable young women (Ben-David et al., 2016). Other manifestations of agency might be seen as threats to social order. Whilst aspirations to attend university could be viewed as counter to this, the young women here also ascribe to the traditional markers of feminine success such as marriage and child-bearing (Sharpe, 2012).

### *Concluding comments*

We concur with Hanbury and Ronan's (2014) opinion that targeted interventions such as Project X are a result of policy discourse which constructs adolescent lives as problematic. Young women who in crisis are seen not only to be troubled but also (potentially) troublesome. It is recognised that this is even more the case for working class and ethnic minority young women (Aapola et al., 2005). Anxieties surround young women and are often framed in terms of concerns about current and future detriments to the young women themselves, and sometimes, to others and wider society in general (Gill et al., 2007). 'Fascination with girls, coupled with anxiety about them, is greater now than ever' (Sharpe 2012:6). The result is a type of moral panic (Cricher, 2008; Good and Ben-Yehuda, 2009) which is reflected in contemporary policy. Discourses of risk and vulnerability are mobilised as political strategies. Social regulation, or control of population, is dependent on power exercised at the individual level, namely through subjective processes. Although this phenomenon is not peculiar to young women, self-care and self-monitoring are highly feminised constructs (Gill, 2007).

Dobson (2015:4) argues that, in relation to anti-social behaviour orders, 'regulatory social policy and welfare are understood to downplay or deny structural understandings of social problems in favour of individualizing, pathologising and moralizing responses to poor people'. We would argue that the same is true for young women. Especially we contend that responses to the challenges they face appear to be largely essentialised and individualised, that young women are pathologised through policy and interventions that are designed to help them (or at least potentially so) and that there is an underpinning moralistic (and paternalistic) stance which pervades such support systems despite the best intentions from those who intervene. This appears to be played out in the data in this study of which an interpretation could be that the young women are conforming to a relatively singular and prescribed formula for being okay, (read *acceptable* by, and within, wider society). Such interventions are designed to encourage self-confidence, self-belief and resilience but may in fact, as Hanbury and Ronan (2014) argue, 'play into the hands of a subtle and pervasive neoliberal agenda' (p. 84). Finally, we attest that interventions like Project X serve to re-inscribe the hegemonic conditions of young women's lives and neglect to address the social, economic and cultural context in which their lives are played out. In general, individualised interventions do not take into account the broader structural

determinants that disadvantage young women nor do they challenge the received wisdom of accepted societal and gendered norms.

### *Reflection on Limitations*

There are a number of limitations that need to be reflected on in relation to this piece of work, the data generated and our interpretations of it. As stated, the data presented here were collected for a specific purpose related to the evaluation of Project X. The purpose of the data collection was to evaluate the impact of Project X on the young women that had been involved in it. The design and method was influenced by that purpose. The limitations of this are therefore acknowledged however, the evaluation was underpinned from the outset by a feminist perspective given the gendered nature of the work. The authors subsequently noted, with interest, that the discursive patterns in the resulting focus group data were worth a secondary analysis outside of the formal requirements of the evaluation and in relation to the issues discussed in this paper. However, the young women were not specifically asked for their views about neoliberalism and individual responsibility during the focus groups, nor were they involved in the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data as can be done when undertaking a co-productive approach. The interpretation of the data is therefore solely our own and we are cognisant of the potentially problematic nature of this power dynamic given the perspective from which we were operating. In addition, we acknowledge that the relatively forced structure of the storyboards could produce certain types of narrative. It is, of course, entirely possible that the young women themselves would not concur with our interpretation of their stories given that we have undertaken the secondary analysis as an academic endeavour.

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