Friends tell it like it is: Therapy culture, postfeminism and friendships between women

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For over two decades, feminist cultural studies researchers have produced a rich body of work showing how postfeminism and therapy cultures pervade a range of media, including self-help books, television programming and women's magazines. However, questions of exactly how the neoliberal technologies of self implicated in these two cultural persuasions 'land' and are practiced in everyday life, receive less attention. In this paper, we forward an identity practices approach to understand the interrelated cultures of therapy and postfeminism using data from a qualitative investigation of women's friendships in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are interested in how the cultural resources concerning postfeminism and the 'psy complex' are used flexibly within friendship interactions in concert with other identities, such as national identity and parenting identity. Overall, aligning with previous feminist analyses of media artefacts, we find that as postfeminist and therapeutic subjectivity-making entwine with the moral orders of women's friendships, so that women carry out their self-surveillance and self-transformation work collaboratively. Yet, remaining attentive to how women tailor cultural resources in their creative identity work leads us to a more hopeful reading. We suggest that the confidence gained by women through their therapised friendships should also be acknowledged for its nourishing qualities.

Keywords: Women's friendships, psy technologies, therapeutic cultures, postfeminism, Aotearoa New Zealand, affective-discursive practices

Introduction

In this article, we focus on how women make sense of their friendships, how they narrate 'good friends' and 'bad friends', and the relating practices seen as normative, presented as an unexceptional backdrop to everyday life. We examine in particular the place given to emotional self-disclosure and to the positioning of friends as therapists

and counsellors. Our data come from a broader qualitative investigation of women's friendships conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand (Martinussen and Wetherell, 2019; Martinussen, Wetherell and Braun, 2020). We argue that the patterns evident in this data-set around emotion and self-disclosure demonstrate varied 'pushes' from three dominant cultural behometh: first, the psy complex, analogous with what can be termed therapeutic cultures (Swan, 2010), second, postfeminist sensibilities and the new femininities these valorise and, third, Australasian national self-imaginings of 'no-nonsense' pragmatism. Depth of engagement, emotional support and empathy have long been associated with women's friendships (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; Cancian, 1986), and our aim here is to explore how these relational practices take shape in new cultural contexts.

An identity practice approach for therapised friendships

Nikolas Rose's (1985, 1996, 1998, 1999) specifications of the psy complex date from the 1980s, but continue to offer highly relevant, generative means for understanding the contemporary patterning of self-making. The core thesis was that subjectivity-making in neoliberal times has been characterised by a fundamental shift in the way that we relate to ourselves. Extending Foucault's interest in governmentality (Foucault, 1988), Rose (1996b) argued that contemporary self-making occurs under the rubric of wellbeing. Minds and bodies are managed through the apparatus of therapeutics, such as via the advice of medics, clinics and counsellors, operating at school, in the home and work (Rose, 1996). Regardless of whether one defines oneself as well or unwell, psychologised knowledges are acted upon as forms of truth. Through the psy ethic, the inner person becomes legitimised as authentic through exposure to the outer world via psychologised talk. Judgments of conduct are of an 'internal' variety, but an audience is encouraged for this self-

making and a set of psychological vocabularies made available for self-definition and self-assessment. It seems probable then, that these changing psychologised relations with ourselves will also necessitate a re-articulation of the forms and functions of our bonds with others, including friends. There have been few studies, however, of the impacts of the normalisation of psy knowledges for friendships between women. Some research has focused on how psy vocabularies can be used to make sense of experiences of inequities (e.g. McLeod and Wright 2009; Wright 2018). However, the extent of women's reliance on therapeutic knowledges in managing their personal relationships has also been questioned (e.g. Jamieson, 1998; Brownlie, 2014). Part of our aim then in our research was to trace the outlines of the psy ethic in our data set and further assess its potential impact.

More broadly, in studies of personal life, there is a longstanding body of work which suggests, first, the importance of friendship between women as a site of intimate practice, and, second, that this is a site where gender and sexuality get made and (re)made as an essential component in wider flows of relations, encompassing colleagues, family, kin, neighbours, flatmates or long-term sexual partners (e.g. Chambers 2006; Roseneil 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Roseneil and Ketokivi 2015; Cronin 2015b; 2015a). Our primary line of questioning is to ask what gendered formations are im/possible, un/likely or un/intelligible in this socio-historic moment, recognising that people are simultaneously the products and producers of discourse (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Congruent with practice-oriented approaches to the gendering of personal life (Morgan, 1996), we articulate how the multifarious cultural resources concerning gender and the psy complex are used by women in their identity making on the topic of their friendships, in concert with other identities (perhaps (non)mother, employee, pragmatic, good listener etc.). The advantage of this strategy

is that attention is drawn to the mingling and assembling of everyday knowledges from different social domains, and the possibilities of new combinations of meanings that come with it. In our methodological impetus, there is semblance with calls for 'bottom-up' approaches (Alftberg and Hansson, 2012), where efforts are made to concretise manifestations of neoliberal governance, grounding abstract political-economic theories.

As such, in addition to our main aim in this paper—to elucidate the forms and affects of therapeutic culture and postfeminism in the lives of women in Aotearoa—our second aim is methodological. We wish to show how understanding the ongoing process of socialisation into therapeutic at the micro and meso levels can supplement macro accounts, such as Rose's. We use a form of discourse analysis commonplace in critical social psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998), recently extended to the affective-discursive (Wetherell, 2012; Martinussen and Wetherell, 2019). Through our analysis we trace out how participants create, and invest in, socially sanctioned images of ideal selves, 'imagined positions' (Wetherell and Edley, 1999), which reflect broader patterns in collective sense making, but are tailored for local contexts.

Can-do girls and postfeminist friendships

The need to be attentive to multiplicity has proved to be essential for exploring postfeminism—a second cultural push likely to be relevant for women's friendships today. We follow Rosalind Gill's (2007, 2017) definition and analysis of postfeminist sensibilities and the course she charts through this contested field. In particular, we are interested in exploring the 'psychic life' of postfeminism (e.g. Dobson & Kanai, 2018; Gill & Kanai, 2018; Scharff, 2016), the means through which cultural ideals

become internalised as they intermix with gendered forms of neoliberal self-making, so that women are called into place in new affective economies.

Another, related feature of the postfeminist sensibility considered here is self-improvement orientations, overlaps with studies of self-help literature (e.g. Blackman, 2004; Lee, 2007; Illouz, 2009; Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015; Rutherford, 2018). The postfeminist imperatives urging women to 'live their best lives', empower themselves as individuals and assert their own pleasures, can be traced back to self-help literatures (Riley *et al.*, 2019). In a contradictory fashion, as Gill (2007) argues, this autonomy for heterosexual women is to be practiced without alienating men and with the goal of achieving greater success in an uncertain sexual market-place. Equally, in the workplace and in everyday life women are encouraged to valorise and enact a 'can do' attitude (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2015). Forms of affect such as 'grit', positivity and resilience become essential (Gill and Orgad, 2015, 2018), and a feisty spirit is advocated to mask the disappointments and pressures accompanying economic austerity and patriarchy (Negra and Tasker, 2014).

What impacts might these new femininities and postfeminist sensibilities have on women's friendships and on the role of emotional support within them? Will female friendship reduce to coaching practices as women educate each other in bouncing back from difficulties, and to forms of individual redress that dominate over collective solutions (Gill and Orgad, 2018)?

Straight-up mates

The third cultural push we explore in our data set is the national imaginary of ideal characters and personality traits of Aotearoa New Zealand. As our analysis

progressed, rather unexpectedly, we became interested not just in how psychologised self-making and postfeminism might be organising women's accounts of emotional support in friendship but also in hints that Australasian national cultural contexts might be relevant also, particularly postcolonial formations of Pākehā (European) New Zealand. The colonial history ensures that masculine homosociality dominates Pākehā New Zealand cultural identity (Bannister, 2005), to the extent that Aotearoa New Zealand femaleness is coded as a misperformed masculinity (Brady, 2012). How might the strength of the regular 'Kiwi bloke' character, and his mates, influence women's accounts of good friendship? In this context, how might therapy technology or postfeminism intersect with localised, national self-understandings?

Data and procedures

The data we analyse are drawn from a research project investigating practices of intimacy between women friends, in 'early mid-life', late twenties to late forties, in Aotearoa New Zealand. All participants gave written, informed consent, and the study received ethics approval from University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. The broad aim of the research project was to investigate the landscape of women's friendship against the background of social change, such as changing gender roles in family life and popularised claims of 'friends are the new family' (Martinussen, 2019; Martinussen and Wetherell, 2019; Martinussen, Wetherell and Braun, 2020).

The recruitment method was designed to reach women of diverse backgrounds in terms of class, sexuality and ethnicity and parent/caregiver and relationship status, reflecting the broad nature of the research topic. In 2016, sixteen individual interviews, two dyad interviews and four small group discussions were conducted by the first author, with a total of thirty-three participants (running 60-90 mins). Two

participants opted not to provide demographic information. Of the remainder, eight participants identified as a sexual identity other than heterosexual. All were able bodied. The median age was thirty-eight. Most identified as 'Pākehā' or European descent, but five participants identified as mixed ethnicity, including Māori, Fijian, Cook Islands Māori and Indian. The majority of participants (twenty-five) self-identified as middle-class on the participant demographics form.

The individual interviews were guided by a loose schedule, covering topics such as good or difficult experiences of friendships and different ways of defining intimacy. These were designed to elicit longer uninterrupted accounts of experiences of friendship, to examine how the culture of women's intimacy are done at the individual-psychological level. Conversely, the small group discussions (two of which became dyad interviews when participants could not attend) were designed to capture interactional sense-making.

The audio data, transcribed by a third-party, was reviewed multiple times by the first author before detailed analysis and coding was undertaken. The aim was to provide 'thick' description of the entanglements between broad cultural factors and personal histories, and to re-sort the material into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This paper presents what became of the sets of themes in the overall data analysis. Detailed orthographic detail have been removed from the excerpts for clarity.

Analysis

We firstly examine two subject positions participants commonly set up in their descriptions of typical friendship interactions—of therapist and patient. Although the therapist-patient pairing illustrates how exercising deep disclosure is an unquestioned feature of contemporary understandings of intimacy in female friendship, in the

second part of the analysis we go on to illustrate also how the normative status of psy-made intimacies is not guaranteed, creating trouble for friendship identities. Finally, we consider how therapeutic culture is customised through an Australasian-inflected 'telling it straight' position. Throughout, we reflect on claims that postfeminism 'has tightened its hold upon contemporary life and become hegemonic' (Gill, 2017: 606). Specifically, we ask how this hegemony occurs as it is mobilised in complex assemblages.

Pseudonyms have been provided for participants. Details of participant age and the research activity engaged in are provided in parentheses. Where words or sentences have been omitted from quotes, it is indicated as '[...]'.

Patient and therapist friends

Across the data set, regardless of class, age and ethnicity, participants rehearsed the assumption that good friendship requires emotional self-disclosures. The naturalisation of the ideal for women friends to self-disclose is not surprising; as mentioned earlier, depth of engagement and the provision of emotional support have long been features of women's friendships (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; Cancian, 1986). However, Rose (1998) proposes that the impetus behind today's self-disclosing is unique to this era. A perceived need of self-fulfilment through authenticity is espoused through the therapeutic. The data in this section seem to corroborate these claims, particularly if psychologised subjectivities are viewed also as a means for postfeminist ideals of self-improvement to circulate (Riley, Evans and Robson, 2018; Riley *et al.*, 2019).

The first extract comes from a dyadic interview conducted with two Pākehā women, Harriet (45) and Leeann (38), and was preceded by Harriet talking about her

interactions with her close male friend, which she claimed were distinctly unemotional. The particular imagined positions constructed here bear resemblance to the version of therapists that Rose depicts, who aid individuals' in building their self-management techniques (Rose, 1999), paired with a self-disclosing 'client'.

Harriet: Whereas my bestie I would ring her up and go 'oh you won't believe what my son did today', 'you won't believe what happened today', all of the details, and she just sits and listens but she knows him and she knows me and she knows just to let me go and that's it. Whereas with [him] I am like 'oh I'm not going to burden him with that'.
Leeann: Or something- it could be that gender, females tend to just listen and give empathy and sympathise whereas males want to solve it.
Harriet: Yes, I know yeah. And he is very much like that. Sometimes you just need to sound off don't you?
Leeann: Yeah, you just need to get it out of your mouth so it's not in there anymore.

Harriet constructs herself as unable to stem the flow of talk detailing the stressors in her life, whilst her 'bestie' is positioned as patiently enduring these outbursts. This listener-teller event is treated as typical by Leeann, who agrees that sometimes friends need to "get it out of [their] mouth". While the listening friend's role is to "give empathy", it is suggested that men deviate from this expectation, and tend towards problem solving, stymieing emotional outpouring. How might the sensemaking made use of in this excerpt relate to the operations of postfeminism, if at all? This example does not seem to reflect the claims that women are increasingly (self)coached into performing resilience in upbeat terms. While Leeann's regular emotional decanting speaks to a resilience, the technologies of self associated with bouncing back gracefully (Gill and Orgad, 2018), such as gratefulness or mindfulness, do not appear to be commanding the affective terrain. Where there is a strong semblance, is in the construction of daily life as a battle zone, where friends are needed in order to manage mundane frustrations and stressors, while not necessarily changing structural conditions that induce stress (Kanai, 2019).

The construction of life as a high-pressure environment is also evident in the next excerpt. Rebecca (28, interview) came from a relatively privileged background, setting the scene for the normalisation of high achievement and pressure. Unlike most of the participants whose main stressors were linked with relationships and caring responsibilities, Rebecca talked about friendship being a relief from demanding but insecure creative work; she also mentioned that the friend who features in the excerpt below works in a corporate environment in an industry that is hostile to women.

> I've got this one friend who, we go on these walks together […] We will rant on about something that is annoying us […] This particular friend gets quite wound up, like she sort of holds a lot of things inside and gets quite cranky about people and doesn't sort of express it, like I used to. And I've gotten to the point now where I can feel it in her before she lets me know. So all I really need to do is say 'what's going on?' like 'why are you angry?' and then she will sort of stop and be like 'oh yeah' and then just bursts into tears or deal with it straight away. But I have to be there to prompt her because she can't feel it herself.

Contra to the scenario above where Harriet and Leeann discuss an unstoppable flow of emotions, as Rebecca describes coaxing her friend into self-disclosures, to find relief from being "wound up". Friends can remind us, it seems, that our levels of resilience have limits, as we work through pressures, in solidarity. As in the previous example however, popular psychological interpretations of daily life are reinforced through depth notions, such as repression versus expression and the value of emotional catharsis. At the same time, emphasis remains on enabling the process of getting the problems out of the body of the individual, rather than fixing their root cause. While the therapist-patient friendship interactions acknowledge and validate 'annoyances', it remains a temporary relief. In the process, women are brought together in this mutual management, helping each other learn their limits, and how to be better psy subjects. Although these excepts are brief, they are indicative of the complex identity work that occur as people make sense of cultural pushes offered up through therapy cultures.

How do these contingent findings sit alongside warnings that therapy cultures are not as prevalent as they are sometimes presented (Jamieson, 1998; Brownlie, 2014)? What are the effects of doing identity work in friendships that clash with the imperatives to wield psychological diagnostic story-lines in convincing ways? We explore these questions via the next set of quotes.

Troubled identities

One way of establishing what is perceived as normative in any given context is to identify ruptures and discordance (Wetherell, 2008), or to bring attention to what is often left unsaid (Billig, 1998). Although dealing with these moments of trouble is a routine part of social interaction, evidenced in moments of hesitation, overemphasis, misunderstandings or self-corrections that pepper our everyday talk, they are indicative of cultural and social psychological trouble (Wetherell, 2008). The categories we identity with (such as caring friend, intuitive listener, confident communicator etc.) come with sets of emotional routines and dispositions that we do through routine narration of self. Interactional trouble signals that there has been a breaching of these associated qualities, thus implicating cultures and psychologies. We provide examples of non-conformity to a psy ethic to demonstrate how the cultural resources of psy are both normalised, and can be used flexibly and inconsistently.

The quote below is also from Rebecca, where she contrasts her friendship described above with that of another friend.

> And then another one of my really good friends is, she's completely the opposite. She is very unemotional and never tells me anything that is really going on in a deeper level, but we're still really, really, close. And I just think that for her like she doesn't need that in a friend. She doesn't need to really like overly discuss her emotions […] And so I don't really tell her all my sort of deep, dark emotions because I know I am not going to get that back from her.

When Maree asks “so what is [the friendship] instead do you think?”, Rebecca replies:

> It’s more of an activities-based kind of thing […] we just do a lot of things and we talk and we tell each other what’s going on in our lives and everything but it’s just not, it’s not so heavily emotional, which is nice sometimes. Like sometimes you don’t want to go into all that stuff, you just want it to be easy. Yeah and I still consider her to be like one of my really close friends […] She doesn’t do it with any of her friends and I just kind of choose to respect that and go with it.

Rebecca maintains that a friendship without emotional self-disclosure can be good, but there is a counter-argument is running in the discursive background. The claim “we’re still… close” points to their closeness *despite* a lack of self-disclosing, without which, they cannot achieve “deeper level” talk. Although Rebecca in the earlier quote aligned herself with a position of emotional talk as essential, her reference to keeping silent about her own “deep, dark emotions” for reciprocity’s sake justifies *not* discussing her emotions, and the friendship is “activities based”. Although non-disclosures are treated as an insufficiency Rebecca must contend with (“I… choose to respect that”), what we draw attention to is the incompleteness of the hegemony of therapised intimacies. Rebecca finds ways to account for her friend’s unemotional style.

Naomi (44, interview), similarly engages in strategies to make sense of her failures to disclose, below. Her response below relates to a question about what characterises her style of friendship.

> Naomi: I think I’m probably a really loyal friend, like I’ll always be there. I’m quite, and I’m straight up with, I’ll tell them the truth if they want it. Um, oh and like I’m probably, like with [my close friends from high school] I’m good at keeping in touch and you know […] Yeah, um, so I don’t know if I’m like, when other people are going through bad times I don’t know how helpful I am really. You know, I try but I don’t know, you know, we all get so caught up in our lives, it’s, I don’t know, I don’t, sometimes you don’t always tell the people that you think you would, you know.
>
> Maree: Sorry, do- say again?

> Naomi: You sometimes, you don't always turn to the people that you think you would which means that they don't necessarily always turn to me when I thought they might. It depends, you know, and I think too, the older I've got the more I've kind of really kept things to myself until I, I'll choose the way I'll reach out to people. Don't need everyone either.

Naomi confidently begins by asserting that she is a "really loyal friend" listing the things that make her so. She is good at bringing her friends together, keeping in touch, and she will be "straight up" with them (we will return to the latter sentiment). Then, her account becomes more hesitant and troubled as she wonders whether she is all that helpful. Hesitatingly, laced with the phrase "I don't know", a sequence describing reciprocal non-disclosure follows—"you don't always tell the people that you think you would". However, another shift occurs, where the affective register changes from apologetic and regretful to defiant: "I'll choose the way I'll reach out to people. [I don't] need everyone either". Although the haunting presence of the therapist friend figure remains, a more stoic character enters the fray. In contrast to the more even pictures painted in discussions of the historical shifts fuelling the rise of therapeutic cultures, such as Rose's accounts (1985, 1998, 1999), we can see the creativity and messiness involved as people inhabit a cultural agenda, puzzle over it, personalise it, and use it as an ethical basis for evaluating self and other.

In this paper, we have built up a rather complex picture, which has included demonstration of how friendship interactions are guided by psychologised ways of being, possible intersections with postfeminism and challenges to normative therapeutic discourse. Yet, in the following section we suggest that another cultural push is evident that deserves attention. We pick up on a sentiment alluded to in Naomi's understanding that she is 'straight up' with her friends. Although our participants were recruited from diverse backgrounds, we did not identify any discernible differences in their attentiveness to psy injunctions that could be related to

sexuality, social class, parenting status or ethnicity. Further, as is usual in qualitative research, the overall sample size inhibits confidence in generalising. Nevertheless, there is an intriguing and distinctive pattern that we speculate could be attributed to the ways in which psy imperatives intersect with the identities on offer in national culture.

Pragmatic therapy and women who are 'too nice'

The 'Kiwi bloke' archetype is a powerful influence in Aotearoa New Zealand culture (McLeod, 2016). Informing this aspect of national identity are forms of homosociality linked to *mateship.* These forms of relationality emerged from settler men's team work in dangerous jobs, such as in whaling and mining (Towns and Terry, 2014). Although contested, mateship engenders 'a model of tough, rural, "pioneering" white masculinity whose presence is naturalised by association with the landscape and a "frontier" model of pragmatic, physical industry' (Bannister, 2005: unpaginated). In this final part of the analysis, through the collection of statements below, we introduce a straight-talking, no-nonsense imagined position, whose pragmatic disposition resembles that of the good Kiwi bloke.

Cathy (45, group discussion):

> And I guess they are the [friends] that if I walked in and said you know 'how are you?' and I go 'fine', people are 'bullshit, what's really going on?' [...] We are the ones that can see through. And I guess those are the ones who have become family at that deeper level.

Leah (31, interview):

> You've got to have a certain level of empathy but you've also got to be able to have that ability to go 'you know what? You're just being stupid now'. So I guess there's that balance of being able to recognise what hat to wear when […] Yeah the best friend is probably someone who's got that balance of empathy but that certain amount of black and whiteness there as well, that's gunna tell it to you straight.

Kristen (39, group discussion):

> We can say 'hey look, think about doing this' or 'hey went and had this one night stand' and they are going to say 'duh' or whatever, but it is about that trusting. That we trust them to be honest with us because they would expect nothing less from us. If you don't want to know, don't ask, but if you are going to ask, then I will tell you. You need friends like that because your family generally won't. They will only tell you what you want to hear, 'it's okay we still love you dear'. But your friend is going to go 'What the? Still love you but are going to slap you too'.

Nancy (38):

> I have a good friend and we're both interested in emotional intelligence and that sort of stuff and so we like to pick things apart but also, we don't, and I'm not the kind of person that would be like 'oh there, there, that sounds terrible', I am more like [[bangs table]] 'how are we going to fix this problem?' […]. We're also supportive but we are very sort of problem-solving orientated.

The topics covered in these excepts are wide ranging, but they have in common an idealisation of friends who are caring in tough ways. Cathy's retelling of therapised care entails friends calling each other out on their "bullshit" non-disclosing behaviour, and *demanding* that upset friends put down any façades of reticence to tell their problems. Leah's descriptions of telling the hard truth are similar to Naomi's earlier account, where "tell[ing] it to ya straight" becomes the sign of a loyal friend. In the third example, from Kristen, there is a tacit assumption that contemporary life takes a lot of navigating and sorting out how to act for the best, but the idea that friends bear the responsibility of passing judgment stays in the picture—"[y]ou need friends like that". Finally, echoing the construction of men-friends as problem solvers we saw earlier, Nancy positions herself as a co-analyst-friend who is driven by the need to find solutions. This is lent authority by mobilising the psy vocabulary of emotional intelligence. Through these tough love sentiments, participants manage a complex set of gendered imperatives. Contrasting the obligations to expel emotions provided by therapy culture, postfeminist feeling rules are in play, whereby vulnerability is positioned as oppositional to confidence (Gill and Orgad, 2015),

Behind these ardent descriptions of friends who 'tell it to you straight', we propose, is an ideological dilemma (Billig *et al.*, 1988). Discursive formations such as therapy culture, postfeminism or mateship do not have tidy boundaries and are characterised by instability, ambiguity and contradiction. Dilemmas emerge as people try to juggle and make sense of fragments of ideologies that contradict. In this case, we suspect that, through psy culture, women are encouraged to self-disclose, but they do so while ideas about women self-disclosing too much are also in circulation. It has been demonstrated that, historically, emotional self-disclosing in women's friendships has typically been denounced, represented as the neurotic gossiping of those who easily become overwrought (Raymond, 1986; O'Connor, 1992). This is why, despite the increasing idealisation of psychologised understandings, there is a prevalence of cultural anxieties about the imagined feminisation of society (Swan, 2008). Thus, while women are expected to find an 'authentic' self through emotional self-disclosing, they must find ways to do so while avoiding claims that they are being over-dramatic. The flip-side of this double standard has also been explored. Adkins (2002), illustrates how men are praised for engaging with therapeutic cultures, and displaying concomitant vulnerabilities, but assertive behaviour is also treated as acceptable. In contrast, women are often expected to remain non-assertive all times. In this Australasian sample, we propose, the 'straight-up' friend position is a strategy to navigate this dilemma, where a valorised template for non-disclosures already exist, in mateship. Participants access assertiveness in their friendships, without being deemed domineering, but also accrue the authenticity that emotional self-disclosing is thought to bring (Rose, 1998). We finish our analysis with a final quote from Elaine (44, group discussion), who also constructs worthy friends as arbiters that aid by passing judgment.

> The other thing I found with female friendships is that […] the ones who are actually a little bit too nice to you in a way and say 'oh no you look great' and actually it really would help you know [if they instead said] 'you would probably benefit from doing a little bit more exercise' and not necessarily challenge you in a way […] they don't ever tell you actually 'no that is not, everything you do is always fine' […] If that is what I want I'll ring mum but if I want somebody who is actually like 'oh hang on a minute Elaine, what did you say in this situation?' I would probably talk to my partner or my dad. Or some of my friends, you know, because some of them will actually go 'mmm you could look at it in such in such a way' and I am like 'okay yeah'.

While Elaine's mother represents women who are "too nice", friends provide even-handed perspectives through their capacities to analyse (as can a male partner or relative). The straight-up friend may not resemble the distanced professional typically associated with therapists, but she will still ask you to consider your past actions, with a view to improving future performances. Neither might the straight-up friend resemble the passionate care of intimate friendships of the past (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975), but, to quote Cathy (see above), "those are the ones who have become family at that deeper level".

Without comparative data, we cannot make a definitive argument that the formulations we have just unpacked indicate the intersection of Australasian cultural concerns with therapeutic culture, but the notion of the no-nonsense woman friend is an interesting construction. It would be intriguing to investigate whether the straight-up friend is a character mobilised in similar ways by other social groups. The feeling rules guiding the no-nonsense friend correlate with postfeminism—a toughness and concomitant disavowal of weakness (Negra and Tasker, 2014; Thompson and Donaghue, 2014), and an orientation to self-monitoring in the name of improvement (Gill, 2017; Riley *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, as we witness emerging patterns of responsibilisation, resilience and gender norms about niceness, weakness and passing judgments, it is evident also how a postfeminist sensibility becomes entangled with

other cultural commonplaces in women's friendship relating influenced by therapeutic culture.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article we have detailed some ways in which women discuss and make meaning around their experiences of friendships, and their construction of ideal and non-ideal friends. The advantage of this kind of qualitative research is that a relatively granular analysis is produced that delivers a sense of the lived texture of mundane life. Entirely unremarkable, taken-for-granted discourse, is rendered as momentarily strange, opening up critical questions about origins, impacts and alternatives. While fine-grain work is unlikely in itself to confirm or refute more macro-sociological analyses of long-term shifts in the constitution of subjectivity and social relations, we have tried to show women's discourses of friendship and associated practices take shape in and with larger-scale cultural resources.

We explored three likely shaping formations – psy technologies, postfeminist sensibilities and national norms around appropriate behaviour. The evidence for the psychologisation of women's friendship practices is compelling in our data, indicated not just in the use of psychological vocabularies to make sense of self and other, in the emphasis on 'getting emotion out', on health and self-disclosure, but also in the take-up of more institutional slots such as therapist and client to organise friendship sharing. We suggested that a reading of our data through the lens of valorised Australasian 'no-nonsense' pragmatism is also plausible.

The impact of the postfeminist sensibilities described by Gill and across the postfeminist literature is less immediately visible however, and perhaps even more complex and multi-directional in its effects. Compared to the workplace or

heterosexual marketplaces, the arena studied here, friendship, demands a differently inflected performance of self. Nonetheless, there does seem to be indications in the data of a particular kind of postfeminist gendering of readily available psy technologies. There are hints, for instance, of the self-surveillance technologies of the industrious, capable and confident 'can-do' girl (McRobbie, 2015). Self-improvement imperatives and helping each other to be 'your best self' dominate the discursive-affective sense-making. The kind of 'coaching' and educating of each other in the arts of resilience which Gill and Orgad (2018) anticipate is very evident. There is acquiescence with relentless neoliberal pressures to individualise and privatise, so that the only remedy for difficulties becomes rueful sharing, a temporary mend, rather than seeking out structural origins of problems.

It is important to note too, the operations of a psy ethic in regulating femininities. In this sample of women in early mid-life, many of the topics taken up by friends in therapy modes related the juggling of the needs of partners, children and households. The self-responsibilisation of caring for others, and its central motif in friendships between women, echoes both long-standing (Gullestad, 1984; Oliker, 1989) and recent (Cronin, 2015b) investigations of friendships between women. It is suggestive of what Lauren Berlant (2008) describes as the pleasures of neoliberal forms of belonging for women, and, their apolitical nature. Women, Berlant (2008: 1) writes, 'live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking'. Facilitated by therapy talk, women are brought together through an imagined community; there is a pleasurably intimacy to be found in sharing distress about the pressures to care for others, particularly men and children. Women's friendship intimacies in these dynamics rely on the negotiation of belonging within and to a world, *without changing it* (see also Kanai 2019). From this perspective, women's disadvantages are

made sense of within friendships, and accepted, as they are refracted through apolitical, individualising logics, which also maintain heteronormativity, and the sanctity of the 'conventional' family (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004).

While agreeing with the thrust of Berlant's adroit analysis, the present paper differs, reflected in our identities practice approach. By applying micro and meso lenses more than is typical in cultural studies and sociological work, there is a stronger emphasis on asking what women do with the hegemonic formations provided by cultures of women's belonging, including therapised knowledges. Drawing attention to the localised specificities involved in a range of postfeminist and neoliberal sense-making (Gill, 2017) allows for an analysis of intersecting moral orders, and better accounts for active negotiation of the practical knowledges involved in relational life, and their affective and emotional character. For instance, what also apparent in this dataset, is the care women offer to each other, and the power of this nourishment. This is a care formulated through psy technologies and postfeminist sensibilities, buffeted also by demands to be not 'too nice', but it is care all the same. While there remains a need to continually question neoliberal practices, it is critical to track resistances, and the grey or ambivalent areas between (Martinussen and Wetherell, 2019). If our only interpretative lenses lead us to see the shifting workings of neoliberalism, or a narrow, apolitical women's culture, how are we going to know what constructive, genuine or nourishing forms of confidence and resilience look like?

Research in this direction is growing. For example Akane Kanai and Amy Dobson (2020: 530) argue that televised performances of female friends' 'high energy striving', as they endure hardships together, should be recognised as a form of care, pointing out the necessity of doing so 'in a context in which women's work is

continuingly trivialised'. While Jessica Ringrose elucidates the impacts of intensifying pressures of competitive heterosexualised aggression within girls' friendships, she emphasises the need to seek out traces and residues of anti-oppression discourses (Ringrose, 2008, 54). Marsha Pearse (2014) argues that the use of fashion in the Caribbean, specifically, the aesthetic practices from a Trinidadian clothing designer, is a reworking of therapeutic discourses. Clothing practices 'literally and figuratively re-dress body and self-perceptions informed by the past', providing a break from histories of enslavement (Pearce, 2014: 860). Pearce leaves ambiguity around whether the therapeutic effects last beyond the temporality of these aesthetic practices of wearing particular garments.

In a similar vein, we have shown how pragmatic resilience between friends can help ameliorate difficulties involved in the endless cycles of women's work, and we would not like to assume in advance what women will do with the nourishment gained from them. Neither can we discern in advance what women will do with the confidence they find in being competent doers of intimacy in their friendships. Our participants seemed to gain a sense of control from their therapised friendships (see also McLeod & Wright, 2009). In line with other literature on neoliberalising feminine subjectivities (Gill, 2017), we can see for sure the ways participants favour *transforming* self over simply *knowing* self. Yet, we appreciate the multidirectional, flexible and unpredictable meanings and uses of confession, support, self-transformation and self-surveillance. Psy-inflected technologies of self, mutually developed between friends, simultaneously normalise neoliberal feeling rules (Gill and Kanai, 2019) and represent a practical way to do problem solving through enduring cultures of sexism and in times of precarity.

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