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The limits of “no limits”: Young women’s entrepreneurial performance and the gendered conquest of the self

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Abstract

Numerous programs have been set up to support women entrepreneurs on the basis that inequality results from incompatibilities between gendered emotional culture and the affective governmentality of the entrepreneurial paradigm. In the context of Spanish entrepreneurial training programs, this article identifies technologies of the self in young women’s narratives of successful entrepreneurship. Using a crossed-narrative approach, as part of three case studies, we conducted 14 interviews with program participants and 6 with program trainers. The analysis shows that, to overcome their supposed deficiencies, the participants understood that female entrepreneurialism required unlimited efforts to self-modulate their emotional dispositions. The analysis identified three broad cultural narratives that frame entrepreneurialism as an epic quest, a vocation or calling, and a ludic pursuit of pleasure. Each of these provides an interpretative frame within which the limitless efforts demanded of feminized entrepreneurialism were resemanticized into three moral values that characterized the story protagonists (heroism, sacrifice, passion). The article further explores the vulnerability of young women to the depoliticization of entrepreneurialism by analyzing emotional suffering and lack of well-being, distancing, ambivalences, and microresistances to the hegemonic paradigm.

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KEYWORDS

women entrepreneurs, emotional suffering, gender equality, affective management, subjective modulation

Resumen

Numerosos programas apoyan el emprendimiento de las mujeres partiendo de una interpretación de la desigualdad como un desajuste entre la cultura emocional generizada y la gestión de los afectos del dispositivo emprendedor. A partir de tres estudios de caso de programas de formación para mujeres emprendedoras en España, este artículo analiza los relatos cruzados de 14 mujeres participantes en estos programas y de 6 formadoras. Se constata la disposición a desplegar un esfuerzo ilimitado de automodulación afectiva para ajustarse a un modelo androcéntrico y se identifican tres registros narrativos que sitúan el emprendimiento como un viaje épico, como una vocación y como una búsqueda lúdica. Cada una de estas narraciones proporciona un marco interpretativo donde el esfuerzo sin límites solicitado es resemantizado como cualidad moral (heroísmo, sacrificio, pasión). El artículo analiza los malestares, ambivalencias y microresistencias que resultan de un esfuerzo de automodulación subjetiva que expone a las mujeres a procesos de vulnerabilidad despolitizadora.

The spread of the entrepreneurial paradigm over the last number of years has given rise to important changes in the way that we understand and regulate social problems. Of particular interest to this study are the mechanisms through which the dominant framework of entrepreneurialism transforms gender-based inequality from the sphere of political regulation to a question of individual volition. In addressing how inequality is reproduced and transformed in the entrepreneurial paradigm, this study draws on gender-based (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Amigot-Leache and Carretero-García, 2023; Bruni et al., 2005; Calás, Smircich, and Bourne, 2009; Clark Muntean and Özkazanc-Pan, 2015; Freeman, 2020; Gill, 2017; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014; Littler, 2017; Marlow, 2020; Scharff, 2016b) and Foucauldian perspectives that question its underlying narratives, rhetoric, and practices. This line of work argues that the hegemonic paradigm of entrepreneurialism is highly androcentric, positioning women and their associated emotional dispositions as deficient (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Korsgaard, 2007). These studies show that young women are particularly vulnerable to an intensification of the entrepreneurial imperative as it demands ever greater modifications to their emotional dispositions and subjectivities (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2004).

In this article, we analyze narratives of entrepreneurial success as told by young women participating in Spanish entrepreneurial training programs and the program trainers. Ostensibly key actions aimed at promoting employment and equality, these programs are also spaces where the values and practices of the entrepreneurial paradigm are constructed and negotiated. Employing Michel Foucault's (1988) concept of technologies of the self, our analysis builds on previous work (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Cardon et al., 2012; Carretero-García and Serrano-Pascual, 2022; Freeman, 2020; Gill, 2017; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2022; McRobbie, 2016) to examine how the entrepreneurial *ethos* encourages these young women to see success as an empowering emotional journey of self-transformation. In other words, the process through which therapeutic self-governance demands incessant self-improvement and self-modulation to overcome their "inherent" deficiencies.

Using a qualitative approach, our analysis provides a novel insight into the narrative construction and performance of successful female entrepreneurship. We explore how the emotion work (Hochschild,

1979) involved in therapeutic self-governance underpins self-problematization, the normalization of instability, and social isolation. The analysis shows how the participants drew on three overarching cultural narratives or interpretative frames (the epic quest, the vocation, the ludic pursuit of pleasure) to resemanticize the emotion work demanded by androcentric entrepreneurialism into three associated moral values or qualities: heroism, sacrifice, and passion. In line with other work on the neoliberal subjectivation of women (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2004; Medina-Vicent, 2018; Orgad and Gill, 2021; Scharff, 2016b), we then go on to explore the impact of the gendered entrepreneurial imperative on the health and emotional well-being of the study participants. Finally, we focus on the agential mechanisms they employ to resist, reinterpret, and distance themselves from the hegemonic paradigm. Of particular interest are the contradictions and ambivalences in the narratives and how these disrupt hegemonic conceptions and help us to reinterpret emotional suffering.

We begin with an overview of the principal strands of the literature, attending specifically to the beliefs, values, and practices of the neoliberal rationality that underpin the entrepreneurial paradigm and how its interpellation among young women entrepreneurs may make them particularly vulnerable. We then provide some background to entrepreneurial programs as the specific context of this study and outline the primary research objectives. Following a description of the methodology, we detail the analysis in three sections: trainers’ discourses; young entrepreneurs’ elaboration of the three overarching cultural narratives and moral values of successful entrepreneurship; and accounts of resistance, distancing, and lack of well-being. We finish with a discussion and draw some broad conclusions on the relationship between female entrepreneurial subjectivities and the depoliticization and individualization of gender-based inequality.

NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL PARADIGM

Self-intervention and the interpellation of the entrepreneurial paradigm

The expansion of neoliberal government continues to produce important social transformations that are reformulating the way we view and understand social questions. Although many meanings can and have been applied to the concept of “neoliberalism” (Byrne, 2017), various authors have pointed to the widespread deployment of an entrepreneurial rationality that is propagating new cultural assumptions—doxa—and a subject archetype tied to the idea of “the self as enterprise” (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Through various discourses and practices, this rationality mobilizes new ways of making sense of situated experience and social reality. Within the entrepreneurial paradigm, this implies the reconfiguration of subjects’ identities and the transformation of ideas, values, and beliefs as well as desires, aspirations, and motivations. Founded on the idea that enterprise is the only valid means of self-realization, this paradigm demands that individuals adapt their subjectivities to the values of neoliberalism through an obsessive process of self-problematization (Kelly, 2006) or self-governance (Foucault, 1988).

The recent literature identifies two main premises that sustain this process of self-modulation. On one side, the myth that willpower alone is enough for individuals to achieve whatever they wish (Hernando, 2012; Jones and Spices, 2009). On the other, the idea that ever more production leads to ever more enjoyment and self-transcendence, which Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013, 281) define as the “performance/pleasure apparatus”. This process can only be achieved by enhancing “positive” feelings and dispositions (optimism, confidence, individual resilience, and risk-taking) and inhibiting those construed as “negative” (fear, insecurity, sadness, vulnerability, dependence, and anger) (Gill and Orgad, 2017; Orgad and Gill, 2021; Scharff, 2016b). The never-ending nature of the imperative to self-improve and self-commodify condemns subjectivity to a perpetual process of “becoming” or “emerging” (Bröckling, 2016; Scharff, 2016b) as it strives to “go beyond” itself (Han, 2015; Littler, 2017). Affective governmentality (Penz and Sauer, 2020), as such, plays a fundamental role in neoliberal subjectivation.

On this basis, the imperatives of the entrepreneurial paradigm engender subjects that are both permanently lacking and narcissistic. Virginia Cano (2018) maintains that the exaltation of the self in tandem with the notion of a free and sovereign individual is symptomatic of an “egoliberal” modernity,

contextualized in a historical period of growing employment and economic precarization. While self-intervention promises self-redemption and an improvement in living conditions, the inner conflict produced by neoliberal rationality becomes manifest in stress, anxiety, and other forms of malaise (Gill, 2017; Pujal i Llobart et al., 2020; Scharff, 2016b; Zafra, 2021). In this sense, the imperative to maintain unlimited self-surveillance, effort, and accountability is exacerbated by therapeutic discourses that encourage subjects to self-problematize their lived experiences at every turn. Consequently, individuals can become isolated through the dissolution of social ties and emotional bonds (Cano, 2018), creating a situation where the individual is, to put it simply, “no longer able” (Han, 2015, 10).

Although the imperatives of self-problematization and self-intervention traverse, to varying degrees, the whole of contemporary Western society, in the following section we discuss how young women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the interpellation of the androcentric archetype of the neoliberal subject (Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2004).

Affective self-governance and emotional suffering among women

Entrepreneurialism represents one of the most relevant spaces for the analysis of (new) inequalities of gender. The incompatibilities between feminine and entrepreneurial subjectivities have been the focus of intense debate in feminist and gender-focused literature (see, for example, Bruni et al., 2005; Calás et al., 2009; Marlow, 2020; Neergaard et al., 2011; Serrano-Pascual and Carretero-García, 2022). This body of work has challenged the hegemonic interpretative framework of entrepreneurialism by revealing its underlying androcentric premises and gender biases (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Bruni et al., 2005; Korsgaard, 2007; Williams and Patterson, 2019). It has also undertaken a critical interrogation of assumptions that achieving work-life balance is a women’s problem (Budig, 2006) and the appropriateness of institutionally configured entrepreneurship as a mechanism for equality (Calás et al., 2009; Marlow, 2020; Serrano-Pascual and Carretero-García, 2022). From within the field of critical entrepreneurship studies, there has also been a critique of decontextualized, individualized, and mythical conceptions of the entrepreneurial subject as a productive and dynamic manager of the self (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2017; Jones and Spices, 2009).

Building on many of these ideas, this article draws principally on a Foucauldian and gender-based perspective that critiques the processes through which the androcentric entrepreneurial *ethos* intensifies inequalities by “othering” femininity through “technologies of gender” (de Lauretis, 1989). These gendered discourses and practices encourage women entrepreneurs to constantly self-problematize and search for recognition to compensate for supposed feminine deficiencies (Bruni et al., 2005). Thus, women experience an intense demand to adapt their dispositions, bodies, emotions, and performances to androcentric norms, which have been established as key conditions for female entrepreneurial success and are, therefore, gendered constructions of “female individualism” (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2004; Orgad and Gill, 2021).

The imperatives and expectations that govern female entrepreneurship are, however, often contradictory, producing various tensions and (internal) conflicts. For example, the ideal of self-transformation through work is conceived as entirely compatible with the unequal demands of family life and care work that heavily condition women’s working lives and career development (Calás et al., 2009; Medina-Vicent, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014). Self-employment and entrepreneurship have also been constructed as a glamorous and appropriate solution for women’s efforts to conquer work-life balance, which emphasizes individual responses while ignoring structural problems related to the inflexibility of waged work and lack of caring resources (Korsgaard, 2007; Littler, 2017). This has led to the emergence of the “mompreneur,” an archetype of woman that manages their company from home to continue caring roles. Jo Littler argues that the transfer of work from the public (masculine) sphere to the home leads to a “gendering of entrepreneurialism” (2017, 182), which reinforces social roles, and pressures women to work even harder and accept more stress as they cope, on their own, with extra demands. Consequently, the conflict produced by the impossibility of living up to gendered imperatives can result in feelings of inadequacy, which women attempt to mitigate by even more intensive self-surveillance and reliance on the judgment and recognition of others (Pujal i Llobart and García Dauder, 2010).

In this respect, the particular effect of the neoliberal paradigm among young women entrepreneurs is the production of feminine subjectivities that are excessively suspicious of the self at the same time as striving for self-confidence. The oppositional nature of this configuration produces an entrepreneurial practice that is inward-looking and psychologizing, demanding impassioned dedication and obsessive preoccupation with self-promotion or self-branding (Lewis, 2014; Littler, 2017; McRobbie, 2016; Orgad and Gill, 2021; Scharff, 2016a). At the same time that women are interpellated to make constant efforts to reach unattainable criteria, any recognition of powerlessness is inhibited. Although these general ideas are well supported in the literature, we argue that there is insufficient knowledge of the interpretative, semantic, and rhetorical resources that women access as they attempt to understand and assimilate the affective demands of entrepreneurialism. And, most importantly, there is insufficient knowledge of how such discourses of adherence may also reveal the tensions and contradictions that, as active agents, they attempt to resolve or even suppress.

It is also of little surprise that the combination of an illusion of internal power and incessant confrontation with the self has been implicated in the lack of well-being and emotional suffering among women (Pritchard et al., 2019; Pujal i Llobart et al., 2020; Zafra, 2021). Various authors suggest that such vulnerability may be exacerbated by the absence of alternative interpretative frameworks (Gill, 2017; Scharff, 2018), which inhibits the politicization of the problem and any explanation of suffering that goes beyond internal questioning (Scharff, 2016b). On this basis, self-problematizing interpretative frameworks obstruct the identification of structural inequalities at the same time as reinforcing them. In turn, the production of self-confidence and self-efficacy among women is a key—yet depoliticized—institutional component in the fight against inequality (Orgad and Gill, 2021). By inciting women to emotion work and the management of affects associated with the symbolic dominance of the feminine, they are, in effect, attempting to self-manage the very structures of social inequality (Gill, 2017; Marlow, 2020; Medina-Vicent, 2018; Scharff, 2016a; Valdés, 2018). Consequently, women’s economic success and value depend on the capacity of each individual to commodify their feminine subjectivity (Lewis, 2014). And, finally, while dispositions to ethical self-problematization would appear to signify that apparently autonomous decisions actually deepen adherence to the entrepreneurial ethos, this is not necessarily homogeneous.

Research on tensions, contradictions, and distancing is, however, relatively limited, and there is a need to build on other work that shows how commitment to the entrepreneurial paradigm can be articulated in ambivalent and nuanced ways (see, for example, Freeman, 2014, 2020). In this study we were particularly interested to address this gap and to explore the relationship between disproportionate adherence to the specific gendered imperatives of entrepreneurialism and how this may lead to diverse forms of (micro)resistance and partial resignifications of the hegemonic narrative canon.

Women entrepreneurship programs

Training programs for women entrepreneurs are one of the primary social spaces for the construction of the female entrepreneurial paradigm. The political rationality of these programs is not new, being located within a series of discourses and practices around public policy (labor activation, employability, entrepreneurship) that began in Spain about 20 years ago (Serrano-Pascual et al., 2017). The social and economic rationality of these programs has to be contextualized within the cognitive socialization processes of European institutions and the postregulatory mechanisms (open method of coordination) that have introduced psychologizing and depoliticizing discourses to social justice (Rivas, 2005; Serrano-Pascual et al., 2017). More recently, it has been argued that the further spread of these interpretative frameworks to equality policy has converted political inequality into psychological vulnerability and women’s subjectivity into an object of governmental engineering (Ahl and Marlow, 2021).

Previous research in the Spanish context has examined the ambivalences and paradoxes that characterize recent social policy in programs promoting entrepreneurship among women (Carretero-García and Serrano-Pascual, 2022). However, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the strategic processes through which female subjectivity is transformed and how the rhetoric of these programs is

TABLE 1 Interview sample by training program.

	Program A	Program B	Program C	Total
Program participants	5	7	2	14
Program trainers	2	3	1	6
Total	7	10	3	20

reinterpreted and experienced by program participants. Taking these programs as a specific context, the research sought to address various gaps in the literature—at the local and international level. Specifically, this study aimed to explore how young women live, interpret, and perhaps even resignify two key aspects of the entrepreneurial paradigm: on the one hand, how they navigate the paradoxical principle of action underpinning entrepreneurship, whereby autonomy, action, and freedom stand in counterposition to market adaptability and submission to an androcentric ethic of productive work and neoliberal values; and on the other, the discourses and practices the participants in these programs draw on to negotiate incompatibilities with the gendered imperatives of the entrepreneurial paradigm. In this respect, the primary research objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the subjectivities of young women entrepreneurs in terms of the symbolic construction of meaning, psychological impact, and agency.

METHODS

This research took an interpretative qualitative approach based on the analysis of young women's experiences of participating in three Spanish training programs designed to promote women's entrepreneurship. To select the three case study sites, we first carried out an exhaustive review of public programs for the promotion of women's entrepreneurship in Spain (Carretero-García and Serrano-Pascual, 2022). Three main types of programs were identified based on the promoting body: regional and national public employment services, universities, and private sector actors working in partnership networks. The case study programs were selected on the basis of their representativeness in terms of their design, focus, mode of implementation, and the management model of the public employment services. Program A,¹ which received European funding, was a collaboration between various universities and a national-level government office for the promotion of equality that aimed to promote entrepreneurship among women in the area of science and technology. Financed by a mix of local, regional, and European funds, Program B was an initiative developed by a municipal authority and had around 15 modules aimed at training women professionals and entrepreneurs. Program C also operated at the local level, through a municipal authority.

In total, 20 interviews were conducted, of which 14 were with program participants at the start-up phase of their businesses and 6 with program managers or trainers (see Table 1 for more details). One of the authors also conducted a participant observation at a training session on entrepreneurial skills in Program C, which helped to contextualize and interpret the interview data. All of the interviewed participants were under 35 years old and had higher education qualifications, with the exception of one participant who had an intermediate-level education. Ten of the young women entrepreneurs were Spanish nationals, and the other four were non-national residents.

In terms of the analysis, the introspective dimension of qualitative interviews, where the intersubjectivity of social relations comes to the fore, means that the interviews can be understood as one form of "rituals of recognition"—an interactive process or social practice where people present themselves to others and seek social legitimation (Sebrechts et al., 2018). As such, the interviews operated within a reflexive and negotiated dynamic. Taking a narrative approach, the analysis was particularly interested to identify the overarching cultural narratives or interpretative frames that the participants drew on to give meaning to the entrepreneurial journey and the moral and affective frameworks the young women employed to characterize themselves—the protagonists of their stories. In this respect, the participants' narratives

can be understood as “moral careers” (Goffman, 1972) and “emotional journeys” (Amigot-Leache and Carretero-García, 2023). The reconstruction of the crossed narratives of the study participants and their positions (participants or trainers) in the entrepreneurial programs permitted the identification of the key semantic axes that articulate the processes of interpellation directed at young women within the rationality of neoliberalism and the impact this had on lived experience. The analysis explores these experiences and tensions within the narratives by focusing on the rhetorical mechanisms they use to resignify meaning, conduct double-level emotion work, distance themselves from the entrepreneurial imperative, and express suffering, resistances, and agency.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results section is structured in three interrelated parts. We start by analyzing the gendered and institutional dimension of entrepreneurial rhetoric aimed at women through an analysis of the discourses in the trainers’ interviews. In the second part, the analysis focuses on young women’s accounts of the affective governance required for successful entrepreneurial journeys. In the final part, we explore distancing mechanisms, experiences of emotional suffering, and the strategies the participants employed to deal with stress and anxiety.

The emotional production of femininity and entrepreneurship in the discourses of program trainers

To start, the analysis found that the trainers’ discourses placed significant emphasis on appropriate affective governance, establishing it as a cornerstone of entrepreneurial success:

For me, self-esteem, which is where being emotionally mature comes from, I mean, good emotional management and all that, I think that’s the foundation. (CT1²)

I tell them: “In one hand you have the company plan and in the other your emotions”; ... if I’m not doing great emotionally, it’s detrimental at an entrepreneurial level. Why? ... because of those rough patches that I mentioned before—the ups and downs, [your] mood. If I’m not strong, well I can’t, in that sense, I have to stop myself. (BT1)

The subjective integration of “certain” emotional dispositions was presented by the trainers as a prerequisite (“the foundation”) for the acquisition of technical competence (“good emotional management”) in the production of entrepreneurial success—even before economic considerations. Within this rationality, nonlegitimate emotions must be inhibited and legitimate ones mobilized. In other words, the moral attributes suitable to entrepreneurship. This required a commitment to the entrepreneurial ethos and a willingness to change through self-problematization and self-reflection. In other words, a need to intervene (“I have to stop myself”) and resolve affective states that paralyze or complicate entrepreneurship.

The process of self-problematization that trainers promoted centered on incompatibilities between supposed feminine emotions and normative qualities of androcentric entrepreneurship:

[In the case of women] lack of self-knowledge, a severe lack of self-confidence, ... insecurity, fear, I definitely see that... . Basically, ... we work on ... female leadership, negotiation, communication skills, being able to sell my project, right? Motivation, self-esteem, ..., negotiation, leadership, and communication are our cornerstones. (BT1)

It is inherent in men to be brave, isn’t it? ... Unfortunately, women tend to have a different sensibility. They tend to have those fears. (BT1)

They have to do a lot of work to really value their own project, women entrepreneurs don't tend to sell themselves or believe in their project, it's like a self-devaluation of their own project, so there is work to be done on skills, in that sense, [like] on risk aversion. (BT2)

In the context of courses aimed specifically at women, entrepreneurial development is therefore hindered by qualities that are supposedly unique to women: lack of "self-esteem" and "self-confidence," "self-devaluation," "insecurity," and an aversion to "risk." This (re)produces a dyadic hierarchization of genders by differentiating between the appropriate action-oriented masculine emotional frame of being "brave" and willing to take on "risk," which contrasts with the paralyzing emotions of femininity.

By promoting particular imperatives for therapeutic self-intervention, the trainers position the program participants as needing major work and, therefore, demand the expense of enormous emotional effort to reconfigure their affective dispositions to better resemble masculine stereotypes. Even though the androcentric configuration of entrepreneurialism is recognized in these accounts, it was hardly problematized. In fact, it was eulogized as a process of self-improvement and even configured as a space where individual appraisal is less prone to gender bias:

I think, actually, that entrepreneurship is where things are changing most quickly, it hasn't been solved [yet], there's still a difference between men and women, but I think that the gap has decreased very, very quickly in recent years. (AT2)

The analysis of the discourses employed by the trainers found that imperatives to becoming a successful woman entrepreneur start with self-knowledge and self-improvement through the assimilation of the emotional norms (self-confidence, courage) of the cultural archetype of the (male) entrepreneur. In Foucauldian terms, these emotions can be thought of as "ethical substances" (Foucault, 1990, 26–27), the object of incessant interventions through affective technologies of the self. As such, conflict and problematization are displaced from the exterior, or social context, to the inner self. By transcending the economic, and any other aspect of education and training, female entrepreneurship was ultimately equated to a process or question of self-optimization. This individualizes social problems associated with gender-based inequality because economic success is mainly explained as a question of women's willingness to change and their capacity for emotional governance.

The entrepreneurial experience: Rituals of recognition and self-legitimation

Contextualized within the structural and institutional discourses of the trainers' accounts, the participants constructed narratives of success that justified, legitimized, and gave coherence to subjective entrepreneurial experience. These narratives evoked a whole framework of affects and discursive mechanisms that they used to construct and legitimize their own identities during the interviews. Through the analysis we identified three broad cultural narratives that frame entrepreneurialism as an epic quest, a vocation or calling, and a ludic pursuit of pleasure. Each of these provides an interpretative frame within which the limitless efforts demanded of feminized entrepreneurialism were resemantized into three moral values or qualities that characterized the story protagonists (heroism, sacrifice, passion).

The hero on an epic quest

One of the primary features of the use of the epic quest as a narrative framework was the complexity of underlying moral dimensions. One of the principal functions of the epic quest narrative was the study participants' characterization of themselves as singular individuals whose values were distinct from

mainstream society—the only ones capable of completing the journey. Narratively, this was achieved through “splitting” an imaginary dialogue with a generalized other (alter ego), often embodied in the voices of family or friends:

I want to stress this point, I used to work in what traditional or general society thought was best, I wasn’t of a like mind, that’s why I changed. (AP2³)

[In relation to waged workers] it’s like night and day ... the aspirations. Being an entrepreneur is being someone ... with a lot of ambition, ... [someone] that is really willing to stick it out, to fight for everything. (AP4)

There are people that don’t need this ...; they want an easy work life ...; they want a secure life, why not? ...; there are a lot of people who couldn’t cope ... with all the uncertainty. (AP4)

This splitting articulated an opposition between the hegemonic conventions of wage-earning society and those of the entrepreneurial paradigm (“I wasn’t of a like mind”). Even when constructing a neutral description of the conventional motivations of others (“they want a secure life, why not?”), this operated as a means to emphasize the exceptional qualities of enterprising individuals who are willing to “stick it out, to fight,” which was contrasted to waged workers who “couldn’t cope.”

In addition to their “ambition” and willingness to “fight,” the participants also resignified the concerns of their social milieus about the risks of entrepreneurship:

It’s all going to blow up in your faces, for sure, it’s complete craziness [said a relative on the participant’s plans]. (CP4)

At the start they [relatives] didn’t understand it... . They thought it was like committing suicide. (AP4)

By repositioning the assumption of risk (“craziness,” “like committing suicide”) as an act of heroic bravery, the narratives reconstructed the entrepreneurial adventure as rebelliousness and the entrepreneur as a singular and extraordinary subject on an epic quest. This splitting of subjects creates a dichotomous and hierarchized moral order: on one side, those who do not aspire to self-fulfillment and settle for the conventional and just getting by; and, on the other, aspiring entrepreneurs who respond to the imperative of self-improvement.

Within the context of the interviews, certain rhetorical strategies can also be understood as seeking or reinforcing recognition for career trajectories and life decisions, such as the use of subjective splitting (“everything that I, as Sandra, am doing”) in the following quotation:

Seeing everything that I am achieving, I didn’t imagine it, at a personal level, not just from the point of view of the success of my project, but everything that I, as Sandra [pseudonym], am doing. (BP3)

Within this narrative or interpretative frame, achieving recognition was further reinforced by the use of agential frames:

Doing great things, scaling them up ... I want to do something more ambitious, something that challenges me ... (AP4)

Having an idea that might be a disruptor. (AP1)

Narratively, the emphasis placed on active verbs such as “doing,” “disrupting,” “scaling up,” and “challenging” intensified the participants’ commitment and the force of action they had to deploy to overcome the difficulties of their quest.

The analysis further identified two affective frames that sustained emotional effort and strengthened adherence to the interpretative framework or narrative, but where certain ambivalence was evident in the construction of meaning. First, by drawing on pride and shame, where the judgment of others is implicit, the participants reconstructed the value of shame as a strategy to legitimize, stabilize, and mobilize the entrepreneurial performance in the face of challenges and setbacks:

Being willing to make mistakes, every day, and having the capacity to keep going. (AP4)

Here [in Spain] if you set up a company and you fail and it’s a disaster, you’re, it’s like you’re not looked on well ...; there [in the United States] if you set up a company and you fail, you set up another five and you fail and you’re a senior entrepreneur ...; that attitude they have of not failing. (AP1)

In this respect, failure and any associated shame were reconstituted by the participants as a positive and mobilizing action. The emotion work required by such intensive affective governance was evident in the way that it permeated the behavioral and political reconstruction of entrepreneurialism. This was evident in the tensions and ambivalences between *vanity* and *humility* in the narratives:

I’m a better professional because I have a more humble outlook, in the sense of, or this is what I try to say: “Why is this happening to me?” (BP6)

Humility, I think you have to be very humble to see what you are missing, what is not working. (BP6)

Strategically, humility provided a location for mistakes, buffering the ego and guaranteeing continuous learning and self-improvement (“to see what you are missing”). Most likely, this can be connected to gender norms, insofar as female subjectification often delegitimizes expressions of superiority and success.

Second, huge efforts at emotion work were evident in the participants’ use of the notions of courage and fear to resignify and redirect emotions to fit with the heroic ideal:

The word isn’t fear ... uncertainty ... responsibility. (AP4)

Yes, desire, being really enthusiastic, having desire, having security, well, being persistent and, above all, knowing how to manage your emotions, above all, the negative ones, there are more negative [emotions] than positive. (CP5)

And above all, conquering our fears. (BP3)

Throw yourself into it with all the energy you’ve got ... in spite of the fear of throwing yourself into this dream you have, that you are sure of, and that you believe in yourself. (BP2)

The emotion work undertaken by the participants to inhibit and control fear was evident in reconstructions of the meaning of fear (“the word isn’t fear ...”) to one of “uncertainty.” Fear was constructed as an inhibiting emotion that must be “conquered,” neutralized by “enthusiasm,” “energy,” “desire,” “dreams,” and “belief,” and transformed into self-improvement and self-realization.

Sacrifice and inner vocation

In the second cultural narrative or interpretative framework, the participants drew on two intertwined discourses that located sacrifice as an appropriate moral response within the narrative construction of entrepreneurialism as an inner vocation or calling, which introduced a mystical or faith-based dimension. First, concern for material compensation was positioned in opposition to the superior moral aspirations of self-realization through entrepreneurialism:

A lot of the time they [other women] work for money and to take holidays in August and I feel that I don't work for money; obviously I work for money because I have to live, but ambition is more my thing. (BP6)

Everything that you have to sacrifice, either you really like it and you're able to cope with it or you'll just suffer all the time. (AP4)

So, for them [other women], what's important is to be economically independent and to have a stable life, but me, ... I'm waiting and I'm sacrificing all that independence and all that money. (BP6)

As with the epic narrative, these ideas were constructed by contrasting the self, defined by entrepreneurial “ambition,” to a generalized other (“they”) whose mundane interests lay with material gains such as “money” and “holidays.” The realization of this “ambition” was tied to self-renunciation in the form of “sacrifice” and “suffering,” which was connected in turn to an unconditional and self-redeeming commitment to the entrepreneurial project.

Second, in the resemanticization of strenuous effort to sacrifice, we can observe how self-denial was the flip side of self-realization. Discursively, by framing the moral quality of sacrifice within concepts of vocation and faith, the narrative could coherently sustain the demand for unceasing efforts to self-improve:

It's like a test ...; little by little you see improvements. (BP2)

No one makes you, you make yourself. (BP5)

A restless person who isn't afraid to take on something difficult ... [someone] who wants to solve a real problem that society has. (AP5)

Here, the mystical dimension of the narrative is evident in the study participants' construction of a singular entrepreneurial journey as a “test” and a willingness (“you make yourself”) to go beyond one's limits to prove their worthiness. Hence, the journey toward self-discovery is a mystical, transformative, and redemptive process that comes from self-awareness and faith, if one is willing to sacrifice enough. At a somewhat broader and more outward-looking level, enterprise as a vocation was simultaneously constructed as both an inner process of self-realization and a service to society or altruistic act (“solve a real problem that society has”).

A ludic pursuit of pleasure

The third narrative or interpretative framework employed by the young entrepreneurs drew on the overarching idea of “pleasure” that locates the entrepreneurial journey within a ludic worldview, as a form of play, hedonism, or leisure that dislocates meaning from the semantic field of work and economics. Within

this narrative, pleasure is connected to the protagonists' moral quality of "passion" and associated affective governance:

In the end, ... I said: "Well, I have to do something that I'm passionate about and I want to discover what that is." (BP5)

When you find that fire inside that motivates you, well that's when everything around you starts to happen. (BP2)

To start my own thing ...; a project that's your own, to have a hobby to do and later make some money from it. (AP1)

They [the program trainers] are helping you realize your dream. (AP4)

In this respect, many of the participants constructed their entrepreneurial "ambition" as being driven by an inherent quality, an interior passion ("something natural," "instinctive," a "fire inside"), that allowed them to reconcile singular identities ("my own thing") that might otherwise have been alienated.

For me it was something natural ... something instinctive, we shouldn't fight against it. (AU1)

This passion was connected to pleasure by semanticizing entrepreneurialism in terms of excitement and discovery ("realize your dream"), leisure ("hobby"), and reward for investment in self-realization ("that's when everything around you starts to happen").

As a means to self-realization and self-fulfillment, the value of passion as a marker of identity (personal initiative, creativity, and innovation) was positioned in opposition to the mundane emotional frame of wage-earning society: routine, monotony, being comfortable, etc. Feelings of insecurity were therefore inhibited and delegitimized and even constructed as a moral offense or sign of inauthenticity. In other words, what makes one suffer makes one happy. However, as suffering is resignified as the flip side of pleasure and the price to pay for achieving self-realization, it also served as a mechanism for repressing feelings of exhaustion, lack of well-being, and tensions within the entrepreneurial paradigm:

In the sense that I'm trying to do, well, like, fulfilling a dream, I think I'm happier... . But, in the sense that I have less time to be with the people I love, I don't think I'm happier. (BP1)

Sometimes I miss those chains [the structure and normality of wage-earning society]. (AP5)

In this respect, it is also relevant that a rejection of instrumental values, such as the validity of economic performance as a criterion of success, was also a characteristic of this interpretative frame:

I wouldn't consider it to be a failure to make just over a thousand euros [a month] ... it'd be a great success. (AP2)

Obviously it's different to the security of knowing that you're going to get paid each month, but for me it's not comparable to feeling that I'm doing something that I really love. (BP2)

Within this logic, such values would corrupt the pleasure dimension ("something I really love") as an intrinsic motivation and means to achieving self-realization and recognition, which can be seen as paradoxical to the inscription of life and identity in the economic frame of neoliberal rationality. We would argue that this particular form of legitimation is probably more relevant to women entrepreneurs as it allows them to resemanticize ambition, a quality that is not normally associated with the traditional mandates of femininity.

The various forms of semantic and emotion work undertaken within the three overarching cultural narratives help us understand how young women entrepreneurs sustain entrepreneurial projects through a complex articulation between the heteronomy and autonomy that underpins neoliberal governance. In large part, this involved the catalyzation of some emotions and domestication of others. In the othering of deficient femininity to the moral norms of the androcentric entrepreneurial paradigm, critical transcendence required a willingness to self-improve and gain recognition through strenuous effort, which was resemanticized by the participants within the concepts of heroism, sacrifice, and passion. This double emotion work was achieved by technologies of affect that attempted to compensate or redirect the problematic dispositions derived from gendered socialization—the centrality of social bonds or reticence to self-affirmation (Benjamin, 1998). In this respect, the three moral attributes are an expression of symbolic operations that produce successful and self-legitimizing subjectivities, wherein the paradox between freedom and subordination to the market and androcentric logic is stabilized. Nevertheless, the narratives also contain an ambivalent dimension that is evident in the tensions required to perform the double emotion work of resignifying identity, fear, shame, suffering, and overexertion. In the final section of results, we go into detail on the underlying tensions that emerged in participants’ constructions of lived experience. In particular, we focus on the way that adjustments to the entrepreneurial model and resistances often appeared as two sides of the same coin.

Managing excess: Distancing, resistance, and emotional suffering

Within the young women’s accounts, the analysis detected various tensions between the interpellation of the entrepreneurial identity and subjective experiences of negative affect that they attempted to rechannel, domesticate, or neutralize. In this section, we examine these tensions first as distancings and challenges to the taken-for-granted meanings of the entrepreneurial doxa and subsequently in terms of expressions of emotional suffering and the strategies the study participants used to deal with these experiences.

To properly contextualize the analysis, it is important to clarify that the narrative mechanisms of distancing and resistance to the entrepreneurial doxa remained largely concealed or unnamed in the main parts of the interview. They generally only emerged in explicit form toward the end of the interviews when the participants were asked if “they had felt any stress or anxiety while developing their entrepreneurial project.” This question appeared to open up a social space where it was legitimate to talk of such experiences and was notable in a shift to a more confessional tone.

Distancing and challenges to the entrepreneurial doxa

To start, some of the participants openly challenged the imperative for unwavering dedication and effort:

Where are the limits? (CP6)

There’s an internal voice that says: “It’s still not enough, you need a safety net, just a little more.” (AP1)

The pressure that we [herself and her partner] put ourselves under. (BP1)

This was evident in the use of discursive devices such as rhetorical questions (“where are the limits?”), acknowledgment of doubts related to the logic of inner drive (“there’s an internal voice”), or the cost of self-inflicted “pressure.”

In contrast to the confidence, ambition, and dedication that were sustained by the three moral attributes, these constructions opened the door to counter discourses of uncertainty, worry, and skepticism that questioned whether the effort would be worth the cost:

I can't say what's going to become of me in a year or two or within a month ... after all these years of "heart attacks" and stress. (AP4)

In fact, everyone praises how energetic I am and my initiative and so on, and on the inside, I think: What energy, what initiative? I just feel wrecked. (AP5)

We're a bunch of losers ..., it's a super passionate journey to hell. (AP3)

They've tricked me. (CP4)

These relatively strong and elaborate challenges to the hegemonic entrepreneurial paradigm are clear in the participants' use of hyperbole ("heart attacks"), irony (appearing outwardly energetic/feeling internally exhausted), sarcasm ("super passionate journey to hell"), and cynicism (feeling "tricked").

In other instances, the narratives addressed ambivalences and contradictions in the paradigm:

I'm freer in almost every sense, but in other ways, for example, economically, I'm less free. (AP1)

It's kind of curious that I started this in order to have more time and now I'm working twice as hard. (BP1)

Experiences that were contradictory to expectations were constructed through split or opposing positions that implicitly undermined taken-for-granted meanings ("it's kind of curious"). As such, being free from the norms and values of the wage-earning labor market came at the cost of other freedoms (time and economic), due to the demands required of the pursuit of the entrepreneurial dream.

This form of distancing was also apparent in refutations of the idea of fulfillment through enterprise ("happiness ... is going to come from personal relationships") or skepticism concealed in resignation and lack of control ("I don't have any other choice"), which challenged the myth of the free and autonomous subject:

I absolutely know that happiness in my life is going to come from personal relationships and ... and I wish I had more time for it. (BP4)

I don't have any other choice than—even when everything seems really bad—to be positive, breathe, and say: "I'm going to find a solution." (AP4)

On the other hand, there was also some skepticism that entrepreneurial success only depends on inner drive.

In the end, they are people who have money and who are setting up a business. It's not the same for someone like me, from a working-class family, middle class. (BP6)

"Ah look, this *niña* [girl/child, infantilizing tone] wants to set up a business, she's so funny, so cute," ... you get the feeling that they judge us more or that we have to convince them more ... women are not as trusted as men. (AP4)

This was achieved by highlighting the relevance of social structure and the material and symbolic difficulties that some social groups experience, most notably in relation to social class and gender, and therefore

questions the meritocratic discourses of the paradigm and relocates the entrepreneurial experience to a political frame.

Emotional suffering and the experience of being at one's limits

Toward the end of the interview, while addressing experiences of stress and anxiety related to entrepreneurialism, many of the women addressed the emotional suffering that comes with the effort required to sustain their projects:

I: Have you experienced any stress or anxiety?

P: Yes, a lot, really a lot, a lot, a lot... . You're in the sea, almost drowning. (BP7)

Living with stress makes you, apart from having a bad time with it and it taking a physical and mental toll, it also means you can't work very well, so, well, I don't know if I'm going to make it. (BP3)

There are times when the effort to [self] discipline does me more harm than good, because I'm like my own boss, I feel like I'm letting myself down ... there are times when I stop to think: “Are my expectations realistic?” (AP5)

I'm taking some medication... . I have it more under control now. (AP1)

The participants spoke of the “physical and mental toll” of feeling overwhelmed (“drowning”) and their concerns about the implications of “stress” and “harm” at a personal and business level. This often existed in parallel to uncertainty about the future and doubts about their own capacities (“I don't know if I'm going to make it”) and difficult-to-resolve inner conflict (“I'm like my own boss, I feel like I'm letting myself down”).

The analysis found that the participants used various strategies to deal with emotional suffering:

That stress that, at times, doesn't seem to make any sense [but you ignore]. (BP2)

I'm young and I'm still living with my parents, so that gives me the opportunity and the privilege to try. (BP6)

Some of them tended to trivialize negative affect and reposition it as an incongruity that “doesn't seem to make any sense” or within a moral imperative of self-exploitation as a “privilege.”

In other cases, there was a tendency to frame experiences of lack of well-being and suffering as a personal weakness (“it comes from my personality”) or a sign that the participants needed to demand even more of themselves (“I work on it”):

It [stress] comes from my personality... . I'm a very practical person... . I'm a very rigid person. (AP1)

I, I recognize that the emotional part is one of my weak points ... and I work on it, but above all, I [just] work. (BP3)

Paradoxically, this form of self-blaming also appeared to sustain the illusion of control and the possibility of improvements by domesticating malaise and lack of well-being. Similar issues were also framed within

gendered discourses, where lack of well-being and a need to work harder were depoliticized and resignified as internal barriers:

Yes, we [women] have it harder because, well, ... I've had to work on my self-confidence a lot because I don't see myself as being worthy. (BP6)

Nevertheless, some participants enacted more protective, outward-looking strategies:

As your work life is your life project, it has no end, it would devour everything, so you have to set some boundaries, it's very important. (BP4)

I try to find some time for myself, every day. (AP3)

In recognizing the all-consuming demand for limitless effort (“it would devour everything”), they set “boundaries” between themselves and work. While slowing the pace of work or finding “time” for the “self” represented the participants’ agency and a tactic of self-repair, it was also a means of ensuring their commitment to the entrepreneurial journey and its continuity.

Despite all the emotion work that these young women carry out, the analysis in this section shows that lack of well-being emerged like an indomitable remnant that the participants reconstructed through self-regulating technologies of affect. Negative accounts of entrepreneurship may represent a form of “discordant concordance” (Ricoeur, 1992, 141), whereby the participants self-regulate vulnerabilities and emotional suffering so that they might continue their entrepreneurial journey. Nevertheless, the narratives also questioned, in part, the archetypal entrepreneur and the social conditions where the participants were inserted, exposing a political dimension of the critique. And, by identifying contradictions in the emphasis on individual responsibility, inherent capability, and fulfillment from work, the participants opened up partial challenges to the hegemonic discourses of entrepreneurship, voluntarism, and the self-contained subject.

CONCLUSION

Based on a Foucauldian and gender-based perspective of neoliberal subjectivation that conceives entrepreneurship as a technology of affective self-governance, this article makes a number of important contributions to the literature. Employing a qualitative approach, this study examines the neoliberal appropriation of feminist political and theoretical concepts and their resignification as women’s empowerment and gender equality in the context of Spanish entrepreneurial training programs aimed specifically at women. The representation of a deficient femininity, positioned against the idealized androcentric entrepreneurial model, shows how the women in this study were mandated to intense efforts to gain recognition and self-legitimization, which is consistent with the published literature (Calás et al., 2009; Cardon et al., 2012; Carretero-García and Serrano-Pascual, 2022; Clark Muntean and Özkazanc-Pan, 2015; Gill and Orgad, 2017; Lewis, 2014; Marlow, 2020; McRobbie, 2016; Neergaard et al., 2011; Scharff, 2016b). However, in the analysis of the narrative construction of how young women entrepreneurs sought to conquer their supposed deficiencies and internal barriers, the study develops a deeper understanding of the affective technologies that govern their attempts to push beyond their own limits. The analysis identifies that the discursive and performative production of successful entrepreneurship by the young women took place within three broad cultural narratives (the epic quest, the vocation, and the ludic pursuit of pleasure) that gave shape to three moral qualities (heroism, sacrifice, and passion). The resignification of unlimited effort to these three moral and semantic frames reinforces the recognition of singular identities and journeys, which sustains the processes of ethical self-problematization and self-modulation. And, as such, it contributes to the stability and legitimacy of the entrepreneurial paradigm.

The three affective frames can be thought of as a foundation of the psycho-political, each acting as vectors for the strenuous emotional efforts to align desire (for recognition, self-realization, intensification of lived experience) to hegemonic neoliberal rationality. This also helps us to understand the performative and discursive processes that depoliticize inequality in entrepreneurship, which occurs through its resignification and displacement to the responsibility of individual women and their ability to commodify themselves in the market. The institutional promotion of entrepreneurship as a means of achieving equality invisibilizes structural inequality in two ways. First, by reinforcing an imaginary of a deficient femininity and, second, by accentuating dispositions to ethical self-problematization. In making women individually responsible for structural (in)equality, these entrepreneurial programs reproduce the very social conditions of inequality itself, co-opting and resignifying feminist understandings of emancipation, empowerment, and collective political action into neoliberal terms (Marlow, 2020; Valdés, 2018).

Nevertheless, the analysis also shows that the internalization and stabilization of these interpretative frames are not without tension or contradiction. First, the articulations of each of the frames betrayed discursive paradoxes or semantic discord. These were evident in the double emotion work the young women attempted to sustain (rebel/subordinate, singular/normalized, autonomy/loss of control) to make sense of complex subjective experiences and the paradoxical imperatives of hegemonic entrepreneurship. Heroism required the participants to negotiate between courage/fear, pride/shame, and vanity/humility. Sacrifice implied a renunciation of materialism and economic gain as valid measures of entrepreneurial success. And underlying the demand for passion were glimpses of unhappiness, exhaustion, and a further demotion of profit as a primary concern. Second, in the articulation of stronger distancing, fractures, and partial and indirect challenges to the paradigm, we saw resistance but also more forceful expressions of agency. Tensions came to the fore when some of the study participants expressed doubts about their own limits and capacity to fulfill their quests within the terms of the institutionally defined female entrepreneurial doxa—the demand for unlimited effort and dedication to ethical self-problematization. These aspects of the narratives weaken the doxic assumptions of a self-contained subject and reveal the normally invisible social conditions that prop up the hegemonic discourses of entrepreneurialism.

The intensity of interpellation, the disposition to self-problematize, and the resultant excessive dedication and strenuous efforts observed in this study can be considered characteristics of the violence of psycho-entrepreneurialism. This is evident in the affective engineering required to sustain the three interpretative frameworks or broad cultural narratives and the inhibition of political emotions—those that are conducive to critique or subversive action such as anger or despondency. When emotional suffering is deproblematized and reconstructed as an experience for which the subject is personally responsible (Scharff, 2018), injustices become questions of individual governance. And, by locating this conflict in the interior of the self, it fosters a fantasy of power and control at the same time as it contributes to self-precarization and, most certainly, an increase in suffering.

It is in the context of these tensions and paradoxes that we can interpret lack of well-being. In spite of attempts to neutralize and resignify it, emotional suffering appeared to persist and emerge as a counterpoint to the enthusiasm of the individual's volition and the neoliberal myth of the omnipotent subject. In other words, as the study participants attempted to go beyond the self to self-realize, we find that the overexploitation of the self became somatized and experienced at an embodied and emotional level. To paraphrase Constanza Michelson (2020), a self without limits, controllable and constructed to meet an unachievable ideal, is the very lifeblood of anxiety. In this respect, various factors, referred to throughout the analysis, may be increasing women's exposure to a subjective vulnerability at the same time as they attempt to domesticate and contain it.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the way that suffering is expressed and managed allows us to identify resistance as a constitutive element of power relations. While the expression of emotional suffering questions the subject without limits, technologies of repair and management of lack of well-being also permit its legitimation. This was reflected in a tendency to trivialize problems or to self-blame and intensify self-problematization. Given the lack of very explicit critiques of emotional suffering and the fact that most of

these only emerged with direct questioning, we argue that this reflects an absence of discursive resources that the women can access to delegitimize harmful adhesion. On this basis, the depoliticized framework of the entrepreneurial paradigm made it difficult for the participants to establish explicit connections between vulnerability and unequal political relations. We propose that the distancing and emotional tensions in the narratives represent a resistant though not yet symbolized position: the subjective limit of an ontological vulnerability that refracts the fiction of the self-contained individual and that willpower alone makes the impossible possible.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The program names have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

² CT1 refers to the first trainer (T1) in training program C.

³ AP2 refers to participant number 2 (P2) in training program A.

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