The gendered nature of 'banal capitalism': The construction of gender and employment in online environments

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

In spite of advancements regarding gender equality within the past several decades, gender inequality within employment remains evident and persistent. As such, it is the topic of much discussion and debate. The present study focuses predominantly on the construction of women, or advice given to women, in relation to these three issues, with a dataset comprised of comments sourced from three online discussion threads. Analysis via discursive psychology ultimately resulted in the formation of eight interpretative repertoires, with each repertoire illustrating the notion of 'banal capitalism' in one or more ways. Banal capitalism itself stems from Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, and can be defined by the inability to conceive of an economic system other than one built upon capitalism. The capitalistic 'every man for himself' ethos commonly underpinned posters' assertions, with women themselves ultimately being held responsible for their disadvantaged position due to their apparent non-business-like behaviour. Responsibility for overcoming gender inequality was thus placed with women themselves, leaving wider capitalistic business processes untouched.

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Introduction

1.1 Women and Employment

Hiring practices, pay and career choice are three aspects of employment that are commonly linked – directly or indirectly – with the disadvantage of women. The present study will explore the online construction of women with regard to these aspects of employment, and it will be argued that the notion of 'banal capitalism' is present in such constructions and therefore contributes to the reproduction of gender inequality. The initial literature review will begin by providing real-world context for the aforementioned features of employment. It will then recount how the study of sexism has developed, and how it has been examined within the field of discursive psychology. Finally, it will review discursive psychological literature that addresses sexism via the use of online data, along with the ethical issues associated with this ever-developing approach.

Despite movements towards greater involvement of women in paid employment in recent decades, Western democracies remain characterised by stubborn gender inequalities in the world of work. One such equality concerns the continuing pay gap between men and women, with Rubery and Grimshaw (2015) referring to the aim of achieving equal pay as involving 'constantly moving goalposts'. That is, while the pay gap between men and women is slowly closing (Mandel, 2016; Woodhams, Lupton, Perkins & Cowling, 2015), it still remains evident in the United Kingdom (BBC News, 2018; Office for National Statistics, 2016), the United States (Brown & Patten, 2017), and member states of the European Union (European Commission – Directorate-General for Justice, 2014). Many different explanations are offered for this, including the contrast between hours worked by men and women (Weeden, Cha & Bucca, 2016), the extent of union presence or equal opportunity

policies within workplaces (Drolet & Mumford, 2012) and collective wage bargaining (Dawson, 2012) to name but a few.

Women's career choices on an individual level are also used to account for a lack of gender equality within employment. In the UK specifically, Chevalier (2007) asserts that upon graduation from university, male and female graduates tend to differ in their early career choices, with women opting for lower-paying sectors. This is ostensibly because 'women are more altruistic and value their job environment while men are more selfish, career-driven and financially motivated' (Chevalier, 2007, p. 22). Female stereotypes such as these tend to be automatically ascribed to women in the workplace (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005), while on the other hand men, specifically in the financial sector, tend to be unquestionably glossed as executives (Holmgreen, 2009). Women, whether they are mothers or not, are also associated with motherhood, which can be assumed to have implications for their careers and the organisations in which they work. Mothers themselves are also hit by the 'motherhood penalty', whereby mothers face discrimination on the assumption that their competence and commitment to work is lower than non-mothers (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007). This has financial ramifications, and appears to increase with higher skill and pay (England, Bearak, Budig & Hodges, 2016). On a wider scale, this has been identified as a contributing factor to the gender pay gap (e.g. see Sigle-Rushton & Waldfogel, 2007). Condescension towards female-dominated career sectors (e.g. nursing, teaching, social work etc.) also exists, to the extent that previous employment in a female-dominated sector can limit women's progression in a male-dominated sector (Torre, 2014).

The existence of sexist hiring practices is also an issue, with discrimination towards women evident from the very beginning of the hiring process (Eriksson & Lagerström, 2012; Sheltzer & Smith, 2014). This act of 'gender profiling' is a result of the hiring of female employees being seen as a 'risky investment'; one wherein employers may perceive women

as having fluctuating commitment to an organisation (Merluzzi & Dobrev, 2015), in part due to the aforementioned implications of motherhood or potential future motherhood. Therefore, the presentation of female applicants' own gender has been found to be a relevant factor in the outcome of job interviews within male-dominated careers (Wessel, Hagiwara, Ryan & Kermond, 2015). Frenkel (2008) argues that, as a result of this, women often resort to conveying stereotypical masculine qualities in order to progress in the workplace. As an aside, it is worth noting that what defines 'masculinity' in this context may be described as 'commitment, stamina and virility' (Cooper, 2000, p. 383). Furthermore, sexist hiring practices have an impact upon the number of women securing management positions, which contributes towards slowing progress in closing the gender pay gap (Fortin, Bell & Böhm, 2017). Meanwhile, management positions that *are* offered to women commonly tend to be in organisations experiencing a decline in performance or general crisis – a phenomenon termed the 'glass cliff' (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). The appointment of women executives in such organisations may arise from a perception of a female CEO being a signal of change (Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Iacoviello, Faniko & Ryan, 2015), but results in these new leaders facing an uphill struggle and greater scrutiny (Glass & Cook, 2016). However, Ryan et al. (2016) note that evidence of glass cliffs is somewhat indistinct and largely dependent on context. In addition, Ng and Sears (2017) note that not only do women encounter difficulty in securing senior level positions, but may only have a higher chance of doing so if the organisation's CEO is also female. However, the influence a female CEO has on gender diversity within her firm ostensibly diminishes over time (Kurtulus & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012).

Despite historical improvements in women's employment prospects, Cha and Weeden (2014) describe the current state of progression towards gender equality within employment as being in a period of near stagnation. That is, attitudes towards gender roles have become little more egalitarian than those in the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman, 2011).

England (2010) refers to this as the stalling of the ‘gender revolution’; a period of various changes since the 1960s relating to the gradual equality of women. England affirms that these changes have come into fruition at an unbalanced rate. More specifically, women have begun to permeate traditionally male-dominated careers whereas men have generally been hesitant to take up roles in female-dominated careers. England puts this down to female-dominated careers being comparatively badly rewarded financially; therefore, men have little motivation to embark upon such careers. Accordingly, Friedman (2015) argues that the gender revolution can only be advanced on a wider cultural level, which is more achievable if an expectation is placed on men to perform “feminine” roles along with worthwhile incentives to do so.

The stalling of progression of women’s equality within employment can be attributed to large-scale economic regulations. For example, a decline in export tariffs may cause blue-collar industries to be compelled to hire more women, and at a higher wage; a result of increased profit being used to purchase equipment that increases female employees’ productivity (Juhn, Ujhelyi, & Villegas-Sanchez, 2014). Often, however, women’s own actions are blamed for the disadvantaged position of women in employment, and as a result the onus is placed solely on women to change their behaviour to achieve gender equality. For example, differences in wage between men and women may be attributed to initial salary negotiation, which women are found to be less inclined than men to engage in (e.g. Bowles, Babcock & Lai, 2007). Solutions to this have typically focussed on the actions of women themselves, such as the implementation of goal-setting training programs (Stevens, Bavetta & Gist, 1993). Such approaches side-step the questions of whether the practice of salary negotiation is one that arises from a particularly masculine set of business values and ideologies.

This focus on the individual is mirrored in many of the classic social psychological approaches to studying sexism, which have typically adopted a framework based around the more general construct of prejudice. The next section of this review will track how the study of sexism has evolved from the study of prejudice, before examining discursive psychological literature that explores the real-world context of sexism.

1.2 Social Psychology and Prejudice

Traditionally, as discussed by Billig et al. (1988), the psychological study of prejudice placed an emphasis on the dichotomy between the prejudiced and the unprejudiced individual. Billig et al. illustrate this with reference to Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford's (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, with the prejudiced individual asserted to be psychologically unhealthy with a preference for authoritarian structures. In contrast, the unprejudiced individual is psychologically healthy and has little problem coping with modern life, with its ambiguity and relative equality. Subsequent research has, however, seen a shift away from personality-based accounts towards a focus on universal cognitive processes.

This tradition of work has drawn heavily on the general cognitive psychology literature in order to develop a social cognition account of prejudice. For example, social cognition researchers (e.g. Fiske & Taylor, 1991) have explained prejudice in terms of cognitive heuristics (e.g. Tversky & Kahneman, 1974); mental shortcuts used to estimate the probability of event, which often result in prejudiced stereotypes being reproduced. For example, the *availability* heuristic refers to a mental shortcut 'by which one estimates the likelihood of an event by how easy the instances of that event can be brought to mind' (Sun, 2011, p. 67). The media reporting on, and therefore highlighting of, incidences such as crime committed by an ethnic minority perpetrator, for example, can give the illusion that such an event may be more probable than is actually the case. Similarly, the *representative* heuristic,

refers to the classification of an event as being typically associated with a certain group of people. Therefore, future incidences of such an event will lead to this mental shortcut being taken. Ultimately, this image of the individual as 'cognitive miser' – automatically predisposed to take shortcuts when they are available – has been used to argue that prejudice is the (unfortunate) outcome of typical cognitive processes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). According to this view, cognitive resources are conserved simply by depending on mental shortcuts to identify stereotype-consistent information.

At around the same time as the transition to explanations based on cognition was the coining of the distinction between 'old' and 'new' prejudice. Virtanen and Huddy (1998) emphasise this distinction specifically in relation to racism. 'Old-fashioned racism', which comprises explicit manifestations of prejudice, has declined from the mid-20th century onwards due to the development of social taboos around conveying discourse of this type. This led to the rise of 'new racism' (e.g. see Augoustinos & Every, 2007), which is characterised as being more subtle, and is commonly accomplished via the use of stereotypes and the overt denial of racism. New racism is generally performed with reference to ingroups and outgroups; stereotypes comprising unfavourable qualities of the outgroup (in spite of possessing any redeeming features) constructed in contrast with the ordinary, moderate qualities of the ingroup (Billig et al., 1988). Figgou and Condor (2006) also comment upon the element of reasonableness, which can often accompany prejudiced discourse. In their study, Greek participants constructed their fear of danger from Albanian refugees as not unreasonable, in order to construct a consensus and therefore legitimise their negative statements about the outgroup.

In spite of a large amount of research concerning old and new racism, the use of distinct, contrasting categories for the two are, however, challenged by Leach (2005). Leach argues that while old racism has become less acceptable and thus used less frequently, new

racism has not emerged as a result of this – it has been around all along. Instead, the evolution of racism and apparent rise of new racism can be described in terms of *popularity*: 'the formal expression of racial inferiority was not especially *popular* before the achievement of *de jure* racial equality and it did not become especially *unpopular* afterwards' (p. 441, italics in original). Regardless of popularity, however, the construction of groups of people plays a pivotal role in producing discrimination of any kind. This distinction between 'old' and 'new' forms prejudice, although originally developed in relation to the study of racism, has also been applied to the study of sexism, and it is to this issue which I now turn.

1.3 The Study of Sexism

As with the construct of prejudice in general, and comparable to the emergence of new racism, sexism has also been separated into traditional and 'new' sexism (e.g. Gill, 2011) and distanced from the more general study of prejudice. 'New sexism' regularly involves the reluctance to label particular language or experiences as sexist (Dick, 2013), which may be made further ambivalent by the use of benevolent sexism; well-meaning, yet underlying condescending assertions (e.g. Becker & Swim, 2012). The overt repudiation of sexism is a major feature in the performance of new sexism, similar to the denial of racism within new racism. Sutherland et al. (2017) claim that detailed knowledge of this issue is required in order to withstand and diminish persistent sexism.

Within employment, traditional forms of sexism – as well as the previously discussed state of gender inequality – have experienced a decline in recent decades. This is due to changing attitudes towards women and a result of sexism itself being 'neither permanent [n]or inevitable' (Becker, Zawadzki & Shields, 2014, p. 611). Nevertheless, there is still a substantial amount of work that needs to be done to aid further progression in minimising sexism. Sexist language itself, as highlighted by Martinussen (2014), is commonly

performed subtly. That is, 'discourses by which sexism emerges will be fragmented, varied and used flexibly' (Martinussen, 2014, p. 72). Due to this subtlety, sexism is frequently embedded into everyday interactions and can proceed unchallenged due to its perceived lack of harm (Cundiff, Zawadzki, Danube & Shields, 2014). Closely related to this is the notion of 'internalized sexism', whereby women may in fact accept, reproduce, and circulate sexist practices themselves (Bearman, Korobov & Thorne, 2009). With regard to researching the reproduction of sexism, various issues can arise. For instance, the designation of what does and does not constitute sexism falls solely into the hands of the researcher(s). This can be further complicated by the previously discussed overt denial of sexism (Sutherland, LaMarre, Rice, Hardt & Le Couteur, 2017). Regardless of these complications, a large body of research on sexism exists. By way of illustration, discursive psychology is just one of many approaches that comprise this literature. The construction of a person's – or group of people's – gender is a key element in the reproduction of sexism, and as such has been the subject of much discursive psychological research. The following subsection will explore this in greater depth.

1.4 The Construction of Gender

As mentioned, the construction of gender forms an integral feature in the communication of sexist assertions, and is often focussed on within discourse analytic or, more specifically, discursive psychological studies (e.g. Ljungholm, 2016; Locke, 2010; Siara, 2013; Windels & Lee, 2012). Kovac & Trussell (2015) note that the construction of gender essentially accentuates the inequalities between men and women, via the reinforcement of prejudiced social norms along with their associated expectations. This results in both men and women being judged in accordance with such constructed masculine and feminine stereotypes and thus gender inequality is perpetuated. As a result of this, Kelan

(2008) observes that while women appear to be constructed as the 'new ideal' within management texts to reflect the progression of women's status in the workplace (as opposed to examples featured in these commonly being male), they continue to be associated with traditional perceptions of femininity. For example, issues such as pregnancy and childcare remain to be ascribed to female employees yet not to their male counterparts. This therefore proves problematic for the advancement of women's position within the workplace.

With regard to the construction of gender, Billig et al. note that social psychologists 'often presuppose[d] that gender categories are stable, universal, cognitive structures which can be traced to 'real differences' in the external environment' (1988, p. 124). In contrast, a constructionist approach treats gender as something that is 'done' (Stokoe, 2004). The topic of gender construction forms an extensive area of sociolinguistic literature, and as noted by Speer (2002), research on language and gender can be divided into two categories: Research on how men and women *use* language, including differences in language use and/or speech styles; and how gender is represented *in* language. The present study is situated within the latter approach. Traditionally, work concerning the representation of gender in language has focussed on the use of sexist language. This may be in the form of masculine terms used as the default title of positions, with Speer (2002) providing the examples of 'chairman' and 'spokesman' as opposed to 'chairperson' and 'spokesperson' respectively. However, Speer criticises the essentialist nature of such an approach, which appears to confine the study of sexism in language to particular key words whilst seemingly 'ignor[ing] larger stretches of talk' (Speer, 2002, p. 350).

The use of masculine terms is just one amongst many ways that patriarchal influence, whether explicit or implicit, pervades the subject matter of the present study; employment. Regarding gender inequality within employment, Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2016) find there to be a status quo in which men undisputedly prevail and women are effectively overlooked.

Thus, ‘the onus is on women to play the business game based on rules made by men and for men’ (Gill et al., 2016, p. 240). The ramifications of this sentiment are unmistakeable, to the extent that inequality in employment is commonly blamed on women for not adhering to these standards, and wholly up to women to resolve (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987). As a solution to the dilemma regarding women being treated second to men, Gill and Orgad (2015) observe that the ‘confidence cult(ure)’ arose. Again, this movement places responsibility for the disadvantaged position of women in business on women themselves. In this case it is achieved by highlighting an apparent lack of confidence in women whilst overlooking any alternative explanations for their disadvantage; most obviously the influence of patriarchal culture itself. The following section of the literature review will explore this persistent tendency to place the onus on women themselves to redress the imbalances brought about by the patriarchal shaping of wider economic systems. This will be done by considering the seemingly taken-for-granted nature of capitalism, along with the inequalities that are associated with it, via the concept of ‘banal capitalism’.

1.5 Banal Capitalism

In order to set out what is meant by the notion of banal capitalism, it is first useful to define capitalism, and the related concept of neoliberalism. Capitalism can be understood as ‘a system wherein all of the means of production ... are privately owned and run by the capitalist class for a profit’ (Zimbalist & Sherman, 1984, p. 6-7). By contrast, neoliberalism suggests that ‘human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Indeed, since the final quarter of the 20th century, the principles of neoliberalism have crept into contemporary capitalism. While the term ‘neoliberal capitalism’ has come to represent a radical avenue of

capitalism which advocates the much reduced interference of democracy to regulate global markets, the lines between neoliberalism and capitalism have become more blurred since the 1980s (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). That is, processes compatible with neoliberalism such as large-scale privatisation, deregulation and tax cuts for the rich have become embedded into – and standardised by – modern capitalism.

The focus of the present study, *banal* capitalism, can be defined as an ideology which involves taking for granted those capitalistic forms of economic organisation as inevitable and natural. It is derived from Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism. Billig argued that most studies of nationalism were concerned with what he termed 'hot' nationalism: occasional and explicit bouts of nationalism. In contrast, banal nationalism refers to the many occasions on which the nation is taken for granted as a natural and enduring feature of the world. A central motif is a process Billig refers to as 'flagging'. Flagging stems from Billig's visualisation of banal nationalism, which is accomplished by drawing attention to national flags customarily hung from government buildings. Flagging is also achieved lexically, with examples being mentions of *the* prime minister or *the* weather, with the assumption that readers will know that such entities referred to *their* nation within a world of nations. That is, the present system of nation-states – and awareness of one's own nation's place in it – goes unquestioned as a natural and inevitable fact of life. Banal nationalism has been an influential concept in studies of nationalism (e.g. Skey, 2009); the action of flagging in particular has been applied to the flagging of Turkish nationalism via the use of country-code top-level domains (i.e. .tu within Turkish-based domain names) (Szulc, 2015) and Hindu nationalism via TV soap operas known as K-serials (Chakrabarti, 2012), for example.

The principles that underpin the concept of banal nationalism put forward by Billig have also been applied to other contexts. For example, Reicher, Hopkins and Condor (1997) suggest that 'banality', in Billig's sense, can be applied to categories such as gender and race.

More recently, Gibson (2015) has extended this taken-for-granted characteristic to capitalism. In the same way that nationhood has become a taken-for-granted way of organising the world, so capitalism has gradually ceased to be seen as simply one of several competing economic systems, and has instead come to be regarded as a natural fact of the world. As a result of this, Gibson notes that 'The world of bounded states is also a world of capitalist economics' (2015, p. 300). This is certainly the case within Western culture, particularly in the United States, where capitalism has become embedded into the identity of what it is to be American. One incidence of capitalism becoming banal within Western culture is 'academic capitalism' (Billig, 2012) within contemporary academia, with the values of academia increasingly being re-modelled along market lines. Consequently, the embedding of academic research within a quasi-marketized framework dictates, to some extent, the direction of future research. That it is becoming increasingly difficult to find alternative discursive resources with which to challenge academic capitalism indicates the extent to which it is being made banal.

Looking back to some of the previously mentioned examples of women facing a disadvantage within the realm of employment (e.g. gender profiling etc.), capitalistic processes can also be seen to be behind these barriers facing gender equality as opposed to the actions of women themselves. The impact of capitalism itself on gender equality has been argued to be large, with capitalism and patriarchy linked strongly (e.g. Hartmann, 1976). In contrast, however, Stroup (2008) finds that the welfare of women is seemingly greater in societies in which economic freedom, as opposed to political freedom, is used to promote women's wellbeing. Nevertheless, regardless of the impact of capitalism on women's progression within employment, one thing is unmistakeable: individual women are often encouraged to change their behaviour in order to succeed whilst broader capitalistic processes go unnoticed, forming the 'natural' taken-for-granted background to which women are

expected to adapt. The present study aims to explore how such assumptions are manifested in online discourse concerning gender and employment.

The literature review has now covered the broad subject matter (i.e. sexism, banal capitalism etc.) that forms the backdrop of the present study. Therefore, the remaining section will focus on the context of the study, by exploring discursive psychological and sexism-related research that has previously been done within online environments.

1.6 Discursive Psychology and Online Environments

As the popularity of the internet has increased, so has the integration and ordinariness of online communication within our everyday lives. It is this, everyday interaction, which Stokoe (2004) suggests is the best source of data available to social scientists in order to unpick the complexities of language and gender. Online data itself is particularly rich; comprising discourse concerning practically every subject imaginable, and emanating from individuals of diverse backgrounds. The study of such environments is equally invaluable, and provides additional time-saving (Wright, 2005), economic and environmental (Ramsey, Thompson, McKenzie & Rosenbaum, 2016) advantages for researchers. Traditional research in online environments, particularly in online forums, tended to make a distinction between individuals' offline and online identities, due to online environments' seemingly *anonymous* nature affording users greater self-representational freedom. The rise in usage of '*nonymous*' online communication, whereby individuals' offline and online identities may share similarities (e.g. on social media websites), has led to a differing approach in more recent research. However, with regard to discursive psychology, this shift is relatively inconsequential. That is, individuals' online identities are a constructed version of reality, but then again so are individuals' offline identities.

The use of discussion forums in qualitative studies is a growing area of research, particularly in recent years. Their use is repeatedly endorsed (e.g. see Jowett, 2015) and they have been particularly useful in studies of prejudiced discourse. Indeed, discussion forums are described by Rowe and Burke (2015) as environments wherein a norm against prejudice – which is customarily established in other contexts – is flexible.

1.7 Sexism in Online Environments

Rowe and Burke's (2015) description of discussion forums as environments in which prejudice can be, broadly speaking, somewhat more acceptable directly contrasts Billig's (1988) description of offline environments. Rather, in offline environments, a norm against prejudice is said to exist, which is typically perpetuated by rhetorical techniques such as the overt denial of prejudice itself (Billig, 1988). Rowe and Goodman (2014) attribute a diminished norm against prejudice in online environments to: (a) relative anonymity and thus a minimised stake and interest dilemma, which is associated with; (b) a perceived lack of any serious repercussions for submitting controversial comments. However, as an aside, this perception may be negated (in England and Wales in particular) by updated Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) guidance regarding real-world prosecutions to combat online hate crime (BBC News, 2017). The manifestation of sexism within online environments – the primary issue explored in the present study – has previously been researched by Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson (2014). In their study, patriarchal ideology, whether explicit or implicit, was found to pervade discourse regarding women and race on Twitter. Notably, while Twitter (as well as many other social media websites and discussion forums) provides a 'discursive environment where users are essentially positioned on equivalent grounds' (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014, p. 186) in terms of discursive freedom, sexist discourse persists within these online communities.

1.8 Ethical Issues

Despite its many advantages, the study of online environments is not without its complications. As with all psychological research, ethical considerations must be considered, which involve both issues shared with offline research and exclusive to online research. Before discussing such ethical issues, it may be useful to acknowledge the distinctions between types of online research methods, which are highlighted in a seminal article by Eysenbach and Till (2001) as 'traditional', 'active' and 'passive'. 'Traditional' methods are simply the employment of traditional research methods (e.g. surveys or interviews) in an online context, and 'active' methods involve the researcher actively participating in online interactions. The third type of method, 'passive', involves data collection in which the researcher does not interact with online communities, but purely observes them. A principle ethical issue linked to research employing such an approach is the distinction between observing 'public' and 'private' online communities; a dichotomy which is reflected in the British Psychological Society's (BPS) *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (BPS, 2017) as being somewhat blurred.

Whilst attempts at detailing ethical guidance concerning the study of online data have been argued to remain somewhat ambiguous (Sugiura, Pope & Wiles, 2016), the aforementioned BPS (2017) guidelines provide a useful foundation. With regard to discussion forums, Rowe and Goodman (2014) assert that individuals interact with others typically without the expectation of observation by researchers. Nevertheless, covert observation of online forums may be necessary for the purpose of particular studies (Coulson, 2015). This can be justified by the requirement of a naturalistic context wherein researcher interference is non-existent (Sugiura et al., 2016). Qualitative, specifically discourse analytic, research surrounding forums can also be said to focus on written text rather than its author.

Therefore, Pitts (2004) remarks that such studies may not constitute the sampling of participants *per se* but the use of representations.

Grønning (2015) justifies the use of discussion forum data by comparing written text in forums to data obtained in public records. However, a distinction between types of discussion forum exists, wherein open access forums equate to public online spaces and closed, registration-required forums equate to private spaces. Eysenbach and Till (2001) supply an alternative distinction, whereby a low number of visitors and/or participants engaging in a discussion forum may render it private and a high number may cause it to become a public space by default.

Additionally, in relation to chatrooms, Hudson and Bruckman (2004) argue that authors of online text become participants if a researcher interacts with them. This issue also complicates any attempt to contact authors of online content, which in itself breaches anonymity guidelines. Roberts (2015) notes that endeavours to approach these authors can prove arduous in any case, as the original posters may no longer visit the discussion forum being studied. In terms of reproducing discussion forum posters' usernames in the analysis sections of reports, Roberts (2015) comments on the 'reputation' of individuals' pseudonyms, which may also be used on other websites and will therefore be traceable. This suggests that analysts should avoid reproducing usernames in research reports. However, Felzmann (2013) has argued that individuals may be proud to identify with their username and could feel disenfranchised if their content is not credited correctly. The reproduction of usernames is similar to the direct quoting of posts themselves, which in any case can be traceable via a search engine (Coulson, 2015). The traceability of forums and/or posters may ultimately be mitigated by the use of non-verbatim quotations in order to make it ostensibly impossible to trace the original data (and therefore poster) via a search engine. This approach to present data, however, may in fact compromise the naturalistic status of the data itself.

Authors of online content that is used as data may also react negatively to the discovery of a published report (Coulson, 2015). This can be due to studies regarding a delicate subject area citing a direct link to the discussion forum(s) used, which might be perceived as a violation of privacy and may cause psychological harm to the individuals that comprise the discussion forum's community (BPS, 2017). In contrast, Bond, Ahmed, Hind, Thomas, and Hewitt-Taylor (2013) reported that participants may regard studies undertaken on discussion forums as ultimately acceptable as their findings could provide insight into online interaction and thus potentially benefit their online community.

Due to the diversity of the internet, researchers have the ability to observe online communities built around virtually any subject matter imaginable, including sensitive topics that may be difficult to access in other contexts. With regard to the sensitivity of certain online communities, Markham and Buchanan (2012) maintain that there is a positive correlation between community vulnerability and duty of care of the researcher to protect the community. Another functional axis that could be attached to Markham and Buchanan's (2012) metaphorical graph may be the degree of personal investment in an online account, which would correspondingly increase a researcher's duty of care. A good indicator of the extent of personal investment an individual devotes to an account may be the amount of information required in the registration process of joining an online community. 'Nonymous' social media websites (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) are, for some users, examples of high investment; accounts on such websites often include users' real world identity via full name, location and picture. Although research into individuals' social media interaction provides studies with unique and invaluable data, it can also attract polarised responses from social media users. This may be related to issues concerning personal privacy (Beninger et al., 2014), which are therefore obliquely related to the notion of personal investment. With regard to personal investment, an alternative to social media websites *per se* as sources of

data are discussion forums; websites that necessitate relatively low investment. That is, users are commonly discerned simply by a username, and registering an account may not even require one's email address; such is the case with the discussion website Reddit, for example.

Ultimately, the present study will utilise an online medium due to its associated advantages for research (in terms of its naturalness, diversity, accessibility etc.). Sexism accomplished via the construction of women will be explored within this environment, with data sourced from environments wherein matters of women's employment are discussed. It will be shown how the concept of banal capitalism is illustrated in these constructions, and how this implicitly contributes to the current climate of gender inequality.

2

Method

2.1 Approach

The current study takes a discursive social psychological (DSP) approach, which is influenced by its central methodology, discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and the principles of DSP itself (Potter & Edwards, 2001). At this point it may be useful to outline the principles of discursive psychology. Discursive psychology can first be defined as:

> A theoretical and analytical approach to discourse which treats talk and text as an object of study in itself, and psychological concepts as socially managed and consequential in interaction. (Wiggins, 2017, p. 4)

With regard to the principles of discursive psychology, it is first important to note that discourse is constructed and constructive. It is construct*ed* in the way that a variety of resources are drawn upon in order to construct discourse; for example words, repertoires, and grammatical structures etc. (e.g. Potter, 2012). It is construct*ive* in the way that these resources are used to produce a version – or versions – of reality. Secondly, discourse is situated within an institutional context, a sequence of interaction, and a rhetorical framework (e.g. Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Discursive psychology is also action-oriented. That is, 'discourse is studied for how action is done rather than treating discourse as a pathway to putative mental objects' (Potter, 2012). These principles come together to form the discursive psychological approach to discourse analysis.

This approach is particularly well-aligned with the principles governing aforementioned contemporary research concerning sexism. That is, the contemporary study of sexism rejects the role of cognitivism; a feature shared by DSP, in that individuals' versions of reality are examined as opposed to their 'true' thoughts and feelings. Also, due to the social constructionist nature of DSP, the analysis in the present study was not based

around which posts constitute sexism and which do not, but rather how versions of reality – concerning women and employment – are constructed within the posts. Additionally, DSP is particularly well-suited to the analysis of online data, which can be understood as naturalistic data. The stance that DP takes with regard to multiple versions of reality is further beneficial to the study of online data, in that there is no dichotomy between individuals' constructions of an offline 'world' and an online 'world'; both such constructions are merely versions of reality.

This point provides a relevant opportunity to foreground my subjectivity as a researcher. In spite of DP's emphasis on the analysis of interactors' talk and text (as opposed to how the researcher approaches this), Edwards and Potter (1992) highlighted the necessity for discursive psychologists to, in some form or other, acknowledge their positioning as researchers with regard to the implications that this may have for their work. Their notion of addressing reflexivity, however, was scrutinised by Gill (1995). Gill argued that Edwards and Potter's way of being reflexive was too superficial and tokenistic. Edwards and Potter's approach to 'doing' reflexivity – by simply acknowledging the fact that one's text is merely a construction – involves positioning the authorial stance so as to inoculate their research against potential criticism. To increase researchers' accountability for the interpretations within their texts, Gill contends that 'discourse analysts should adopt a notion of reflexivity which stresses the need for the analysts to acknowledge their own commitments and to reflect critically upon them' (Gill, 1995, p. 182). With this considered, in the case of the present study, it is perhaps important to highlight my position as a white, working class male researching the topic of women and employment. Whilst the white and male aspects of my identity may confer privilege, another aspect of my identity – being working class – results in my position as a researcher being *relatively* marginalised. The fact that I am not a woman (of any race or social class), however, means that I do not approach the research from a position

of experiential familiarity with the challenges and issues faced by women in the workplace. My own positioning inevitably shapes how I conceptualise and analyse the data, but equally in scrutinising the gendered nature of banal capitalism I aim to build into my analysis a recognition and deconstruction of the ways in which working practices entrenching the privilege from which I benefit are constructed.

2.2 Data

Data used in the current study comprises comments within three individual threads broadly associated with the theme of women and employment on the discussion website Reddit. Because a username and associated posts are the only details linked to one's account, Reddit is a website that is arguably more anonymous than other forms of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and simply requires users to provide a username and password in order to register. As the self-proclaimed 'front page of the internet', Reddit is a popular social news website in which users can create and comment on submissions in the form of text posts or links. The website is used frequently: over 1 billion unique visitors were recorded each month between April 2017 and September 2017 (Statista, 2017). Reddit is chiefly, albeit not exclusively, visited by users in English-speaking countries, with the top five (in descending order) being the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and Germany (Alexa, 2017). Because of its non-academic nature, Reddit has been lauded as a source of valuable discourse for researchers (Ovadia, 2015) and as such has been the focus of a growing amount of academic literature, from both quantitative (e.g. Cole, Watkins & Kleine, 2016; Pappa et al., 2017) and qualitative approaches. Research employing qualitative methods has delved into the subject areas of teaching (Chang-Kredl & Colannino, 2017) and crime (Yardley, Wilson & Kennedy, 2017), for example, yet research regarding the construction of gender on Reddit has been relatively limited.

The process of selecting the threads for use in the present study began with an extensive search via Reddit's in-site search engine. In order to garner search results that related to the current study's overarching focus (i.e. women and employment), female-related nouns (e.g. 'woman', 'women', 'wife' etc.) were paired with employment-related nouns (e.g. 'career', 'job', 'pay' etc.) to create various combinations of two-word terms (e.g. 'woman career', 'woman job' and so on) that were inputted into the search engine. Standalone, non-gendered compound nouns relating to business such as 'pay gap' and 'salary negotiation' were also searched for (see Appendix A for comprehensive search strategy).

Reddit search results can be sorted in four ways; by 'relevance' (the default option), 'top' (i.e. submissions with a greater 'score'), 'new' (i.e. newness of opening post submission), or 'comments' (i.e. submissions boasting a greater number of comments). In the current study, all sorting options except 'new' (as temporal proximity of submissions was relatively unimportant) were used with each search to allow for a greater variation in the search results. Prospective threads were selected by judging the opening post on the basis of appropriateness to the study's focus and also a number of inclusion criteria. For example, to be considered for use as potential datasets, threads were required to: (a) be somewhat recent (i.e. 2014 onwards); contain a considerable number of comments (i.e. more than 150); (c) not focus on a specific career (e.g. teaching); and (d) not be posted in an explicitly ideological gender-based subreddits (e.g. 'MensRights', 'Feminism'). Such threads would have undoubtedly been worthy of study in their own right; however, the current study aimed to source threads from subreddits which did not open with a clear position in relation to gender. This also sought to yield larger datasets containing more diverse opinions. For reasons of manageability, only threads that featured in the first five pages of search results for each individual search were considered, with each prospective thread being logged in a table and categorised according to the subject matter (i.e. the aspect of women's employment that it

dealt with) of its opening post. When all combinations of search terms had been exhausted and all threads had been categorised, it was clear that three categories ('hiring practices', 'gender pay gap' and 'women's career choices') contained the most threads and therefore focus was shifted to these categories only. Within each category, the available data were further scrutinised following a cursory examination of each thread's content, following which many were excluded on the grounds of containing a considerable amount of short, one-sentence comments and/or a considerable amount of comments that digressed too far from the theme of its respective opening post.

Following this stage of elimination, one thread in each of the aforementioned three categories was ultimately chosen. The chosen thread for the 'Hiring Practices' category was titled 'This is why there are so few women in tech' (Reddit, 2015a). This submission was originally posted on 22nd March 2015 in the subreddit 'TwoXChromosomes'; 'a subreddit for both serious and silly content, and intended for women's perspectives' (Reddit, n.d.-a). The opening post of this thread consisted solely of text; an anecdote of sexist hiring practices, with the thread itself containing 544 comments. The opening post read:

> I've been out of work for a solid 9 months now. I work on computers; long story short, doesn't matter if it's a PC, POS, server, whatever. If something's wrong with it, I can likely fix it.
>
> Today, for the second time on a phone interview, the interviewer brought up my gender. The interviewer started to say, "So, um, just so you know, we can't really make any accommodations..." Then he stopped.
>
> I'm thinking I filled out the portion where they ask if you have any disabilities incorrectly or something, so I reply, "Well, I don't have any disabilities, so that's not a problem."
>
> "No, it's not that, it's just that everyone else in the division are men."

> "Oh." I was a little in shock. I really need this job, but I know this isn't kosher. "Why would that be a problem?"
>
> I think he must have realized he made an error because he hurried on to a technical line of questioning without answering. Understand, this is the second time something like this has happened. If two verbalized this to me, how many thought it?
>
> I can't help but think if there were a man's name at the top of my resume, I would have a job by now. I hate this feeling and I'm seriously considering changing careers. Any advice or encouragement would be appreciated. (Reddit, 2015a)

For 'Gender Pay Gap', the opening post was a submission titled 'When you compare salaries for men and women who are similarly qualified and working the same job, no major gender wage gap exists' (Reddit, 2015b). The thread was originally created on 23rd April 2015 and posted in the subreddit 'DataIsBeautiful'; a section of Reddit described as 'a place for visual representations of data...that effectively convey information' (Reddit, n.d.-b). The opening post of the thread simply comprised a link to an infographic produced by Payscale (n.d.), under the title 'Do Men Really Earn More Than Women?' (See Appendix B). The infographic visualises: (a) the gender difference in annual pay by gender, in which the difference in pay between men and women in six example careers was 4% or below, along with; (b) the percentage growth in pay by gender over one's working life, which charted a gender-balanced salary increase up until the age of 30, from which point men's wages become higher than women's for the remainder of their respective careers, and; (c) a comparison between three common jobs for men (software developer, project manager in construction, and computer systems administrator) and three common jobs for women (registered nurse, elementary school teacher, and human resources administrator), which

showed considerably larger median pay growths in the male-dominated jobs than in the female-dominated jobs. In total, its connected thread contained 4930 comments.

Lastly, for the 'Women's Career Choices' category, the chosen thread was titled 'How to close the wage gap' (Reddit, 2015c); posted on 26th November 2015 in the subreddit 'Libertarian', which is a self-declared 'community to discuss free markets and free societies with free minds' (Reddit, n.d.-c). The opening post contained only a screenshot of a tweet authored by Christina Hoff Sommers – a 'former philosophy professor best known for her critiques of late-twentieth-century feminism' (The New Republic, 2014) – asserting: 'Want to close [the] wage gap? Step one: Change your major from feminist dance therapy to electrical engineering' (Sommers, 2015). This was followed by 1009 comments.

2.3 Analytic Procedure

In terms of the analysis performed in the present study, Potter and Wetherell's (1987) – as well as Potter's (2012) refinements – and the more recent Budds, Locke and Burr's (2017) stages of discourse analysis were used as broad guidelines. Also utilised was Giles's (2016) guidance for a discursive approach to observing online communities, which he outlines with particular reference to discussion forums. Data are analysed with a view to exploring (1) how women are constructed in relation to employment and employment practices, and (2) the assumptions about the nature of employment built into these constructions. With regard to the latter, initial exploration of the forum comments suggested that a reading of the data in terms of banal capitalism may be analytically productive, and thus as the analysis developed this concept was used to organise the data. At all times, however, attention was paid to the potential for deviant cases to challenge the emerging analysis. Therefore, the analysis process was rendered predominantly – but not entirely – inductive.

The process of data analysis began with reading the data (i.e. comments in each of the three chosen threads), followed by the selection of relevant data. Relevance was determined by two consecutive stages (see Appendix C for detailed information regarding these stages). The first stage comprised the inclusion of posts that contained one (or more) of three types of selection criteria: (1) gendered nouns (e.g. 'women', 'men' etc.); (2) gendered, relational nouns (e.g. 'mother', father' etc.), and; (3) abstract nouns relating to gender and gendered practices (e.g. 'gender', 'sexist' etc.). It is worth noting that all three types of nouns were added to a 'watch list' on an ad hoc basis whilst re-reading the data. That is, once the use of a particular keyword (that corresponded to the aforementioned criteria) had been identified within one comment, all subsequent comments containing the word would be flagged up. A further criterion was then applied. This took the context in which these noun(s) were used into consideration. In this, double posting, obvious jokes, and posts that contributed to smaller conversations within the thread deemed irrelevant to the current study (e.g. whether gender or race is more prevalently discriminated against) were all excluded from further analysis. At this point, in addition to the already-selected data, it became clear that within the 'Hiring Practices' dataset a significant portion of data contained advice directed to the female original poster that did not necessarily align with the aforementioned selection criteria. These posts were collected due to their volume and the fact that they were strongly, albeit implicitly, linked to gender (i.e. offered to the *female* original poster).

Consequently, this resulted in a total of 1334 comments being available for analysis (134, 973 and 227 from the 'Hiring Practices', 'Gender Pay Gap' and 'Women's Career Choices' datasets respectively). When collated onto a single document, these 1334 comments equated to 189 pages of data; thus amply exceeding the 100 pages of data recommendation put forward by Wiggins (2017) for a project of this scale. Exceeding this recommendation also accommodated for saturation of data, whereby replies to other posts

may contain content from the cited post; thus repeated material may consume a significant portion of the overall word count (an issue highlighted by Coulson; 2015).

Data obtained from each of the three threads were treated as three separate datasets for the purposes of manageability, as well as to allow comparisons to be made between data from each thread. The data were then re-read with the interpretive repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) of each individual comment being noted (and the number of times the same repertoire featured in other comments). Often, this related to how women were constructed with regard to a certain topic (e.g. negotiating salary), which resulted in a number of repertoires within each of the three datasets being formed. Of these repertoires, the three most commonly referred to repertoires within the first two datasets ('Hiring Practices' and 'Gender Pay Gap') were chosen for use in the present study. The third dataset ('Women's Career Choices') contains only two repertoires. This is the result of the only other repertoire within the dataset that contained a substantial number of examples in the data not providing a significant amount of original discursive material (that had not already been covered in the other datasets' featured repertoires). The resulting total of eight repertoires were then scrutinised at a more detailed level. The data that formed the examples of these repertoires were coded with, broadly speaking, two lines of focus. The first was posters' constructions of women in relation to employment, and the discursive devices used to do so. The second, the concept of banal capitalism and how posts were situated in relation to it, was implemented when it became apparent that the concept was applicable to the data.

3

Analysis

The analysis section of the present study comprises eight subsections in total, each one covering a commonly-recurring interpretative repertoire found within the datasets. Within the first dataset, 'Hiring Practices', these repertoires are: 'Commenting on the original poster's experience', 'advice offered to the original poster', and 'practical suggestions (tricks)'. In the second dataset, 'The Gender Pay Gap', they are: 'Women are not business-minded', 'women don't negotiate salary', and 'Women who are assertive are seen as 'bitchy''. The third and final dataset, 'Women's Career Choices', contains two interpretative repertoires: 'Women are uninterested in certain careers' and 'women are given special treatment'. It is perhaps important to note that some examples featured in this section include content that could pertain to more than one interpretative repertoire. These comments are placed within the interpretative repertoire subsection which predominantly represents them. Additionally, all comments are reproduced in their original form, with no attempt made to correct spelling or grammatical errors.

3.1 Hiring Practices

As outlined in the Method section, the 'Hiring Practices' dataset comprises comments that addressed an opening post that recounted an incidence of potentially sexist hiring practices:

> I've been out of work for a solid 9 months now. I work on computers; long story short, doesn't matter if it's a PC, POS, server, whatever. If something's wrong with it, I can likely fix it.
>
> Today, for the second time on a phone interview, the interviewer brought up my gender. The interviewer started to say, "So, um, just so you know, we can't really make any accommodations..." Then he stopped.
>
> I'm thinking I filled out the portion where they ask if you have any disabilities incorrectly or something, so I reply, "Well, I don't have any disabilities, so that's not a problem."
>
> "No, it's not that, it's just that everyone else in the division are men."
>
> "Oh." I was a little in shock. I really need this job, but I know this isn't kosher. "Why would that be a problem?"
>
> I think he must have realized he made an error because he hurried on to a technical line of questioning without answering. Understand, this is the second time something like this has happened. If two verbalized this to me, how many thought it?
>
> I can't help but think if there were a man's name at the top of my resume, I would have a job by now. I hate this feeling and I'm seriously considering changing careers. Any advice or encouragement would be appreciated. (Reddit, 2015a)

This dataset features the following three interpretative repertoires: ‘Commenting on the original poster’s experience’, ‘advice offered to the original poster’, and ‘practical suggestions (tricks)’.

3.1.1 Commenting on the original poster’s experience. The first prominent interpretative repertoire found within the ‘Hiring Practices’ thread comprises comments that remark upon the experience described by the original poster in her narrative. Within the repertoire, posters tend to either play down the original poster’s accusation of sexism – by attempting to interpret the interviewer’s actions – or highlight the interviewer as a ‘sexist anomaly’ in an otherwise sexism-free IT industry. The first example, Comment 1, constructs the ‘sexist pig’ interviewer as an anomaly but treats sexism as a natural, yet educable, behaviour:

Comment 1.

> I’m a long time lurker and generally don’t post but felt the need to chime in here as a male software developer/technical recruiter. Your story saddens me. Bluntly, it’s bullshit.
>
> Some of the most kick-ass developers I work with are female. My current team lead whom I hold with extremely high regard is female. There are totally companies where you can thrive assuming you have the technical/interpersonal skills. pleasePleasePLEASE don’t let a few sexist pigs steer you away from the industry.

> I was specifically trained NOT to do stuff like this because it may-or-may-not justify a law suit. At the time I thought the training was silly and it was obvious, but clearly some people still need it.

In Comment 1, the poster begins using category entitlement (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992) in order to convey his stake in the subject matter as a 'male software developer/technical recruiter'. Referring to one's position of employment is relatively common in cases of category entitlement, such as the allusion to being a 'police officer' and the role's associated specialist knowledge (Ellis & Cromby, 2012). The poster justifies his use of category entitlement as a reason for 'chim[ing] in' despite being a 'long time lurker'. This, firstly, serves to introduce himself as qualified to explain the interviewer's behaviour due to his and the interviewer's similarities in terms of gender and occupation. Secondly, this subtly works to present himself as someone who wouldn't ordinarily wade into such debates but felt the need to due to strength of feeling. Therefore, as he is not the type of person to comment on posts arbitrarily, his comment holds more value than others as a result of arising from professional expertise. Fact construction (Edwards & Potter, 1993) is then carried out by the poster, by providing first-hand evidence of women succeeding within the IT industry (as 'kick-ass developers' or a 'team lead'). Edwards and Potter (1993) note that the use of fact construction enables speakers to 'handle the dilemma of stake or interest to show that their report is justified by the facts' (p. 36), which in the current case allows the poster to demonstrate that there are in fact organisations in which the original poster could 'thrive', should she possess the correct skillset. The poster then uses a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to plead with the original poster ('pleasePleasePLEASE') not to be discouraged from applying for further development positions due to 'a few sexist pigs'. The minimisation used via 'a few' suggests that the problem of sexism is located at an individual level; it is not a

systemic problem, but rather a problem of a few ‘sexist’ individuals in questionable organisations, as opposed to being a feature of the industry more widely. Therefore, sexism is not typical in the IT industry as a whole.

The poster then switches attention away from the original poster and to the interviewer mentioned in the opening post. He notes that, being in a similar position as the interviewer, he was in contrast ‘specifically trained not to do stuff like this’, as it ‘may-or-may not justify a law suit’. This implies that sexism within the IT industry is natural, and the only reason it is not reproduced by the poster himself or other men within other women-friendly organisations is a result of specific anti-sexism training. Ultimately, two key summary observations can be made about Comment 1: Firstly, there is an onus on the female original poster to be resilient when faced with periodic, yet inevitable, experiences of sexism within recruitment processes; secondly, sexism is treated as an individual-level matter that merely requires occupational ‘training’ to eliminate, with the motive for undergoing it being purely financial (by attempting to avoid a ‘law suit’).

Whereas Comment 1 identified the interviewer in the original poster’s anecdote as an anomalous ‘sexist pig’ within the IT industry and chastises his behaviour, the following example, Comment 2, attempts to rationalise the interviewer’s behaviour. By doing this, the poster constructs the sexist expectations of the original poster – which requires being ‘“one of the guys”’ – as ordinary:

Comment 2.

> The fact that he pointed out specifically that everyone else in the department was men leads me to believe he might be worried they’d say something that would offend you, and possibly bring about a lawsuit. If it was maternity leave

> he wouldn't have bothered with the interview would he? An interview wouldn't change that factor, but maybe he was feeling you out to see how much you're "one of the guys".

Comment 2 consists of an explanation for the interviewer's behaviour, by drawing upon 'the fact' that he brought up the gender of other employees in the department, and attempting to interpret the interviewer's cognition behind that decision ('leads me to believe…'). The poster suggests that the interviewer's rationale was simply to warn the original poster that the men currently working at the organisation may 'say something that would offend [her]', which would 'potentially bring about a lawsuit'. It is worth noting that, once again, potential financial loss is the prime deterrent to exhibiting behaviour that could be interpreted as sexism. Next, the poster rules out issues associated with maternity leave from the interviewer's line of enquiry via a rhetorical question, as otherwise 'he wouldn't have bothered with the interview would he?'. This implies that the interviewer's allusion to the original poster's gender lacked seriousness or any sexist connotations. That is, maternity leave is a taboo topic in job interviews, and the interviewer is constructed as *certainly not* alluding to it (or else 'he wouldn't have bothered with the interview'). The poster then presents another theory: 'maybe he was feeling you out to see how much you're "one of the guys"'. This would therefore suggest that in order to enter into an industry wherein men routinely say things that 'would offend' women, a woman must become '"one of the guys"' to fit into the workplace by being unperturbed by such comments. Continuing with treating sexism as inevitable and a fait accompli, the following quote – Comment 3 – recognises gender inequality within the IT industry but urges the original poster to go against the grain (as opposed to becoming '"one of the guys"'):

Comment 3.

> Keep going, don't change. I'm a guy and I've been in the IT industry since 1991. It's full of guys who think they know all the answers, or that their answers are better than everyone else's. Full of childish egos is the best way to described IT. I used to be one of those guys, but i grew up and realised it's not the best path to happy customers, or successful solutions. You need to be smart and manipulative. I treat it all like a technical problem that needs solving. Don't be scared of saying someone is wrong, and always think about how you can best make the user/customer happy.

Similar to Comment 1, Comment 3 also encourages the original poster not to be put off by her experience ('Keep going, don't change'). The rest of the comment can then almost be viewed in two sections: (1) how the IT industry is, and (2) what the original poster should do to fit into it. Similar to the previous comments, the poster first utilises category entitlement (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992) to describe himself ('a guy' who has 'been in the IT industry since 1991'), which acts as a precursor to offering insider information about the IT industry. The 'guys' who comprise the industry are characterised by apparent facts: they 'think they know all the answers...' and have 'childish egos'. These traits are recognised by the poster to be disadvantageous in business (they are 'not the best path to happy customers, or successful solutions'), and he himself 'grew up' and realised this. By adding this, the poster manages his accountability for being 'one of those guys' in the past; it was a simple matter of not having '[grown] up' sufficiently. On a broader scale, however, the industry as a whole evidently remains full of the aforementioned 'guys who think they know all the answers'. Advice is then offered to the original poster; she needs to be 'smart and manipulative' in

order to advance. She must also be confident within this unyielding environment, by not ‘be[ing] scared of saying someone is wrong’.

The notion of offering such advice to the original poster was also found to be an interpretative repertoire in its own right within the dataset. Therefore, the next subsection of the analysis of the ‘Hiring Practices’ thread features examples of comments that focus on the original poster herself, in contrast to commenting on the original poster’s anecdote.

3.1.2 Advice offered to the original poster. As mentioned, another common interpretative repertoire within the ‘Hiring Practices’ dataset was direct advice offered by posters to the original poster. This often takes the form of exhorting the original poster to be confident by applying for further IT jobs, or the more extreme suggestions of applying for a job in a different industry or relocating to find work. The following two quotes, Comments 4 and 5, are examples of concise advice given to the original poster. The two examples highlight somewhat contrasting recommendations; ‘[call] out interviewers on their shit’ versus (for the time being) ‘grin and bear it’:

Comment 4.

> Don’t change careers. Be confident in your skills, and keep calling out interviewers on their shit.

Comment 5.

> Yes, if you want a job be sure to call your interviewers out on their shit. Or wait. Maybe just grin and bear it, then once you're hired call them up on their shit, while absolutely nailing your new job.

Both of the above comments share a similar composition. That is, within these examples, an onus is placed on the original poster to do something about the present climate of commonplace sexism in the IT industry. In Comment 4, the original poster is encouraged not to 'change careers' and instead 'be confident in [her] skills' (akin to the aforementioned, overarching findings by Gill & Orgad, 2015). However, the original poster is also advised to flag up such incidences of sexism by 'calling out interviewers on their shit'. Comment 5 – a reply to Comment 4 – is structured somewhat differently, but the same tropes appear. The original poster is first advised, perhaps ironically, to 'call interviewers out on their shit' before the poster states: 'Or wait. Maybe just grin and bear it, then once you're hired call them up on their shit'. By encouraging the original poster to 'call them up on their shit' after she has secured the job, this suggests that doing it prior would place her chances of being hired in jeopardy. This in itself only adds to the depiction of the deep-rooted, patriarchal IT industry as something not to be trifled with. In both comments the onus is firmly on the original poster (and therefore women) to go about challenging sexism within an unchangeable, evidently sexist environment. Conversely, the responsibility of other parties (the interviewer, the organisation etc.) seemingly goes unacknowledged. This is echoed in the next data example, Comment 6. The poster in this example provides more detailed advice to the original poster and, as in Comment 4, confidence is alluded to once again.

Comment 6.

> Just keep studying, applying and interviewing. Eventually, you will find a company that is a good fit. While it's true that there is a demand for people in IT you still have to prove you know your stuff.
>
> Tailor your resume to their job listing. Also, brush up on whatever skills they list. If they list too many different skills (common in IT) pick a few and be confident about those. Yeah, this kind of stuff can suck but eventually you will find a company that is the right fit. That company will just want a competent person regardless.

Comment 6 begins with encouragement directed at the original poster; 'Just keep studying, applying and interviewing'. The minimisation invoked via 'just' coupled with the following line ('Eventually, you will find a company that is a good fit') suggests that encountering incidences of sexism and effectively being turned away because of one's gender is an inevitable process and the original poster should realise this. The phrase 'a company that is a good fit', however, implies an organisation that is willing to accommodate women, which the original poster will 'eventually' find in her quest for employment. Therefore gender itself is reduced to an aspect of 'fit' between employee and organisation.

A recurring theme throughout the comment is the poster's numerous attempts to bolster the original poster's competence and confidence, which, by implication, are lacking. The original poster is advised to 'keep studying', 'brush up on [her] skills' and 'be confident'. Ultimately, the hypothetical organisation at which the original poster will secure a position 'will just want a competent person regardless'. It is perhaps notable that

throughout the comment there is no reference whatsoever to the incident described by the original poster or the interviewer, with advice aimed squarely at the original poster to adapt her behaviour and 'play the game', so to speak. The next example, Comment 7, also accepts that sexism exists within the industry. However, the original poster's persistence is constructed as the only entity that can make a change to this:

Comment 7.

PLEASE DON'T GIVE UP!

The IT specialist where I work is female, and I'd throw money down on her abilities any day of the week over any other IT worker out there. She's awesome, and the world would be a less great place if she had given up when she was where you are now.

This isn't just about you getting a job. It's about blazing a trail that needs to be blazed. If you give up, you're proving the naysayers right; that women don't belong in IT and other science fields. You're not just getting a job, you're also making things just a teensy bit easier for the countless females who want to follow in your footsteps.

I sincerely hope you decide not to let them down.

The poster of Comment 7 starts by urging the original poster, 'PLEASE DON'T GIVE UP!'. This phrase, along with the use of capitalisation and an exclamation mark, exhorts the

original poster into working within a world of inevitable sexism. Failure to do this would be 'giv[ing] up'. The poster then goes on to give an example of a female 'IT specialist' who has commendable 'abilities' and is 'awesome'. She didn't 'give up when she was where you are now'; instead she persevered and became a success story. In the next paragraph, the poster uses minimisation to stress that the original poster's situation 'isn't *just* about you getting a job' (which is further emphasised via repetition later in the comment). Instead, 'It's about blazing a trail that needs to be blazed'. Despite the poster's seemingly egalitarian stance, the responsibility for change is placed squarely at the feet of the original poster. The original poster is then issued with the consequences of 'giv[ing up', which would ostensibly result in 'proving the naysayers right; that women don't belong in IT and other science fields'. By constructing an apparent consensus of sexist 'naysayers', the poster's rhetoric pressurises the original poster to accept and operate inside a discriminatory system out of a sense of loyalty to advocates of gender equality. The depiction of the original poster as a pioneer of equality within 'IT and other science fields' is bolstered by a decision to not 'give up' as 'making things a teensy bit easier for the countless females who want to follow in your footsteps'. Another depiction of an apparent group of people ('females who want' a career in the IT industry) is intensified by the use of extreme case formulation (ECF; Pomerantz, 1986) ('*countless* females').

The comment is concluded with a personal expectation of the original poster: 'I sincerely hope you decide not to let them down'. Therefore, the outlook of women's capability to break into 'IT and other science fields' rests solely on the original poster (and, by extension, other women in her position), who owes it to the poster and the 'countless females' of the future. The only other path presented to the poster, failing to prove herself by 'giv[ing] up', is constructed as essentially failing her gender.

The final two examples of advice offered to the original poster take a slightly different slant, in which the original poster is not encouraged to endure or change a sexist IT industry, but avoid certain organisations completely.

Comment 8.

> As a male in IT who hires people, talent is in demand. We don't care what your gender or ethnic background is. We are just dying to meet anyone who knows what they are doing and isn't nuts. My advice for OP is to move to a city with a booming tech community. I can't imagine being out if work for 9 hours where I live.

Comment 9.

> Look into IT for libraries. You will have to check with your county or school district. It will require a civil service test. Libraries tend to have mostly women and have women IT people also.

First, in Comment 8, the poster uses category entitlement (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992) to clarify his stake on the matter of hiring practices in the industry (as a 'male in IT who hires people'). He then strips away variables that are ostensibly not taken into account in the hiring process ('we don't care what your gender or ethnic background is'). As a result, 'talent is in demand' and employers 'are just dying to meet anyone who knows what they are doing and isn't nuts'; failure to get a job, therefore, is due to lack of ability or mental instability. The poster then offers the original poster a radical solution; 'move to a city with a

booming tech community' where, it would seem, male employees are more tolerant of female employees. This therefore not only suggests that gender inequality is absent in cities with a 'booming tech community', but also encourages the original poster to go to an extreme length to escape sexism (i.e. by relocating to one of these cities). Again, the onus is placed on the original poster – as opposed to wider entities – to be the one to change.

The content of Comment 9 echoes the stipulations of Comment 8. The poster of Comment 9 recommends that the original poster focus on employment within a specific sector of IT by 'Look[ing] into IT for libraries' and offers practical advice regarding 'check[ing] with [her] county or school district' and taking 'a civil service test'. The reason for this suggestion is because 'Libraries tend to have mostly women and have women...IT people also'. Again, the original poster is encouraged to effectively admit defeat by entering a female-dominated sector and joining fellow 'women...IT people'. As opposed to admitting defeat *per se*, the final interpretative repertoire of the 'Hiring Practices' thread features practical suggestions put forward by posters to aid the original poster in working around sexism.

3.1.3 Practical suggestions (tricks). The third, and final, most common interpretative repertoire found within the 'Hiring Practices' dataset involved practical suggestions being offered to the original poster. These 'tricks' consisted of wily strategies, such as altering her name on her résumé, which are put forward by posters to aid the original poster in her search for employment. More implicitly, however, they regard sexism as inevitable and requiring such 'tricks' to be put into action in order for women to secure employment. For example:

Comment 10.

Change your name to a guys name and re send out your resume, thrn report back.

Comment 11.

Or just abbreviate your first name like "K. Smith" instead of your full first name. I wouldnt change it to a guys name but rather would leave it ambiguous.

Comment 12.

I always use my first initial instead of my first name.

Comment 13.

> OP, you could put a similar male name or just a first initial on the resume. As... An experiment. Though i guess potential employers might use linkedin to scope you out before an interview. Even linkedin could be make gender neutral.

The first quote, Comment 10, advises the original poster to 'change your name to a guys name and re send out your resume, th[e]n report back'. The straightforward, practical tone constructs the radical act of changing one's name on a résumé (to one implying a different gender, no less) as a reasonable and necessary solution. This tone continues through the subsequent examples. The poster of Comment 11 presents a marginally less drastic approach: 'abbreviate your first name...instead of your full first name'. However, regardless of the excessiveness of suggestion, the onus is on women – and only women – to change how they go about applying for jobs. Comment 12 draws upon personal experience, along with the use of ECF (Pomerantz, 1986), to state that 'I *always* use my first initial instead of my first name'.

The final example of practical suggestions put forward by posters is Comment 13, which is structured as a stream of consciousness; suggesting an idea before questioning it and suggesting another idea. Like the preceding three comments, the poster recommends that the original poster 'put[s] a similar male name or just a first initial on [her] resume'. The poster's explanation for this trick is 'An experiment'. The poster then attends to a potential flaw in this suggestion: 'i guess potential employers might use linkedin to scope you out before an interview'. As well as the suggestion of changing her name on her résumé, the original poster is then provided with a second trick to use in the event of (a) the first trick appearing to

work, and (b) a potential employer searching for her LinkedIn profile. This involves removing her gender from her hypothetical LinkedIn profile in order to make it gender-neutral.

As mentioned, a matter-of-fact tone is built into each of the examples such as via minimisation ('*just* abbreviate your first name'; and see Lee, 1987, on the function of *just*) or simple instructions with no justification ('change your name...'). This constructs each of the various tricks as useful, straightforward, and relatively commonplace. Firstly, the need to employ such tricks essentially recognises that sexism may be present within hiring practices. Secondly, the one and only solution for the original poster, and women, to secure employment in a male-dominated industry is for them to use these tricks to work around inevitable sexism. These findings, broadly speaking, embody the tone of the 'Hiring Practices' dataset. Posters effectively treat sexism as inevitable within employment, as well as basing their assertions and advice upon the capitalistic 'every *man* for himself' sentiment. That is, the original poster must enter an environment in which sexism is rife alone, regardless of whether she *resists* sexism, works *within* sexism, or works *around* sexism.

3.2 The Gender Pay Gap

The second dataset analysed during the study featured comments pertaining to the topic of the gender pay gap (or lack of one according to the aforementioned infographic; see Appendix B). As with the previous section, 'Hiring Practices', this section also contains three interpretative repertoires. These are: 'women are not business-minded', 'women don't negotiate salary', and 'women who are assertive are seen as 'bitchy''.

3.2.1 Women are not business-minded. Comments pertaining to the first interpretative repertoire construct stereotypes of women not being business-minded (e.g.

willing to job hop or advance their career), which often arise from posters' use of anecdotes. The first example, Comment 14, contrasts women's supposed non-business-minded behaviour with the model of male business-minded behaviour:

> *Comment 14.*
>
> I've noticed a difference in the willingness of women to job hop. They're more likely to stick with a lower paying job out of a sense of loyalty to their coworkers. "Oh, I can't leave them, they need me." Guys are also not penalized for demanding more money in the negotiation process. Women aren't supposed to do that. Women are trained not to demand, not to set their own value, not to rock the boat.
>
> I don't think there is rampant sexism; I think companies are perfectly happy to pay people less who don't demand more and aren't willing to leave when they aren't paid what their skill set is worth.

The poster of Comment 14 opens their comment by drawing upon a personal anecdotal observation ('I've noticed...'), which therefore avoids potential challenge due to the privileged nature of the claim. An apparently common behaviour is then ascribed to women: 'They're more likely to stick with a lower paying job out of a sense of loyalty to their coworkers'. This is demonstrated via the use of reported speech (e.g. Holt, 1996) in order to bolster the credibility of the poster's claim ('"Oh, I can't leave them, they need me"'), as it 'distances the speaker from the message' (Juhila, Jokinen & Saario, 2014, p. 5). The matter of negotiating pay is then introduced (see also Section 3.2.2 below): 'Guys' are 'not

penalized for demanding more in the negotiation process'. In contrast, 'women aren't supposed to do that'. Here, the gendered nature of banal capitalism comes into play. That is, a fundamentally capitalistic activity, salary negotiation, sees 'Guys' in a more favourable financial position as they are not 'penalized for demanding more', whereas women find themselves in a less favourable financial position because they simply 'aren't supposed to' demand more money.

In previously discussed comments, the blame for women's (or in the case of the 'Hiring Practices' dataset the original poster's) disadvantage was placed on women themselves. However, in Comment 14, a secondary object of blame is put forward: women are 'trained not to demand, not to set their own value, [and] not rock the boat'. The poster concludes by appearing to dismiss gender discrimination as a cause of the gender pay gap ('I don't think there is rampant sexism'). Instead, 'companies are perfectly happy to pay people' (i.e. women) less money because they 'don't demand more and aren't willing to leave when they aren't paid what their skill set is worth'. Therefore, the poster builds in a lay socialization account of gender, with the onus for going about diminishing the gender pay gap placed on women (or rather '*people*'). Furthermore, banal capitalism is essentially addressed by the poster, before being repudiated as a contributing factor. This acceptance of the inevitability of sexism is also an element in the next example, Comment 15, which is bolstered throughout via the construction of (anecdotal) facts:

Comment 15.

> This is what I have found also, women are generally – in my experience – more interested in job security and job satisfaction than they are in career advancement and financial compensation.

> Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, I would say it's the healthier choice.
>
> As far as companies actively preventing women from reaching prominent positions, I must say I've never found this. I'm sure it happens, but mostly business tends to focus on the bottom line. If a woman is a better suited candidate for a position (will make the numbers look better), and she has the ambition to make the numbers look better I haven't found many companies that would pass her over for a less ideal candidate, just because its a man.

Comment 15 begins with the poster clarifying the anecdotal basis of the observations to follow ('This is what I have found...'). The poster observes ('in my experience') that 'women are generally...more interested in' two aspects of employment: 'job security and job satisfaction'. These two factors, which are oriented more towards well-being, are then contrasted with two capitalistic, business-oriented factors: 'career advancement and financial compensation'. In doing this, the poster creates an implicit construction of men's behaviour. That is, if women are said to be more interested in the former two factors, then men therefore must be more interested in the latter two. The ostensible preference of women is then given apparent approval by the poster ('Which isn't necessarily a bad thing', 'it's the healthier choice'). Thus, whilst women are constructed as authors of their own financial misfortune (by not being interested in career advancement and/or financial compensation), they are also commended for their non-avaricious attitudes. It is worth noting that the behaviours promoted by capitalism are recognised as being *un*healthy, but still this does not lead to any suggestions that this system is therefore in need of reform; rather it is simply a fact of life.

The poster then denies observing any corporate glass ceiling-type incidents, once again via anecdotal evidence ('I've never found this'). This is formulated as a disclaimer (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1988), however, as the poster adds that they are 'sure [that] it happens'. As an aside, egalitarian disclaimers are often used to make otherwise sexist claims (e.g. Hunter, Augoustinos & Riggs, 2017). The use of a disclaimer in Comment 15, however, acknowledges the possibility that sexism is present in the industry, but plays down its presence via the poster stating that he has 'never found this'. The poster's subsequent claim that 'business[es] [tend] to focus on the bottom line' goes unquestioned as a natural economic process; therefore the possibility of an association between business processes and the gender pay gap is implicitly acknowledged as inevitable. What is *not* acknowledged is that it is a social process which advantages men. The possibility that it might therefore be the object of efforts to redress gender inequality is ignored. The poster goes on to suggest that a woman who is a 'better suited candidate for a position ([which] will make the numbers look better)' is more likely to be offered a position than 'a less ideal candidate, just because [he is] a man'. Whilst advocating a gender-neutral skills-based approach to job recruitment, the poster also suggests that the presence of quotas will have an additional impact ('[which] will make the numbers look better'). This raises suspicion of women having a competitive advantage in the workplace purely due to their gender.

Despite articulating an awareness of business processes being potentially sexist (i.e. 'I'm sure it happens'), the poster still fixates on what a female candidate must be (i.e. 'a better suited candidate for a position'; 'ambiti[ous]') in order to secure employment. As with Comment 14, the poster places an onus on women as the only entities capable of confronting gender inequality within the system. Any suggestions that businesses shouldn't 'focus on the bottom line', or that the units around which our working lives are organised should be run along any other lines than the business model are not given; therefore making capitalism (and

thus inequality) banal. In Comment 15, women's behaviour is explicitly constructed, while men's behaviour is implicitly constructed, and used as a foil to women's deviating (and non-business-minded) behaviour. The following example, Comment 16, also follows this pattern, but adds somewhat more devious characteristics to the depiction of men that women should perhaps adapt in order to get ahead in business:

Comment 16.

> A more loyal / less competitive person might wind up in lower-paying positions, because she doesn't pursue her advancement to the extent that others may – for example, when something goes wrong, perhaps she takes responsibility instead of shifting blame onto someone else (or merely isn't as effective at shifting blame). Or, perhaps she's content to fill her roles, and isn't as aggressive at finding ways to advance

Comment 16 first highlights the type of person likely to 'wind up' (denoting the individual has little choice) in a lower-paying job; one who is more loyal and less competitive. For these reasons, '*she* doesn't pursue her advancement to the extent that *others* may'. Following a gender-neutral noun ('person'), the use of a female gender-specific pronoun ('she') strongly indicates that this is an exclusively female problem, with the aforementioned traits being found in women only. By implicit contrast, 'Others', on the other hand, alludes to men who therefore do 'pursue [their] advancement'. The poster depicts the hypothetical woman as 'perhaps...[taking] responsibility instead of shifting blame onto someone else' or not being 'as effective at shifting blame'. These actions, while they may be associated with those of an honest person, are highlighted as women's Achilles heel. This is depicted as a contrast to

men, who therefore must be deceitful in order to secure higher-paying jobs. Incidentally, the notion that 'shifting blame' is advantageous and ultimately rewarded within workplaces is treated by the poster as uncontroversial. However, the possibility that this issue could contribute to the gender pay gap remains unconsidered. The poster continues, 'Or, perhaps she's content to fill her roles'. Again, a not necessarily bad characteristic is depicted as being negative when compared to men's behaviour. This is furthered by suggesting that in comparison to men, the woman may not be 'as aggressive at finding ways to advance'; consequently incorporating aspects of ambition and business-mindedness (or lack thereof) as causes of the gender pay gap. Whereas in the previous three examples the comparison between men and women has been made more-or-less implicitly, in Comment 17 we see the construction of an explicit difference between men's (advantageous) and women's (disadvantageous) employment-related behaviour. This is achieved by constructing an anecdote featuring a female former colleague of the poster, which is used to make more general claims about gender to explain the gender pay gap:

Comment 17.

> A ex coworker of mine is the breadwinner and took a more lucrative job. She felt really bad about it, but it was $10k more a year. How many guys would feel bad about a $10k boost in pay? Very few. A lot of people stay there when they could be making a lot more elsewhere. But loyalty. Friendship. That's what snags a lot of women. You don't abandon your friends.
>
> She was smart. She left for more money.

> A lot of women have trouble separating the professional and the personal because society pushes them to be nice above all. Make friends. But work is not home. Workmates can be friends but they are workmates first. The loyalty you have to your job is not the loyalty you have to friends. Women get really screwed by the "friendship" problem.
>
> Men will leave a job if it doesn't pay what they know they're worth. More women need to start doing that. Want me? Pay me. This place offered me $10k above what you are. Here is my two weeks if you can't make the numbers dance for me.
>
> Women need to start thinking like men in this regard. I'm not giving a company a discount just to be nice. Fuck that.

The poster of Comment 17 begins by providing an anecdotal ('A[n] ex coworker of mine...') example of women's reluctance to engage in business-minded behaviours such as, in this instance, job hopping. Men's attitude to job hopping is then summarised: 'How many guys would feel bad about a $10k boost in pay? Very few'. Thus, job hopping is constructed as *the* way to 'do' employment. Men's behaviour is added as a foil to women's, who are ostensibly averse to doing this. This is highlighted in the poster's anecdote of their former female colleague, as she 'felt really bad about' being 'smart' by accepting a job with greater pay.

The anecdote featuring the poster's female 'ex coworker' is then used as a springboard to making more broad generalisations about women: '*A lot of* women have trouble separating the professional and the personal'. However, women themselves are not

entirely to blame. Similar to Comment 14, the cause of women's inability to be business-minded is 'society', which 'pushes [women] to be nice above all'. Therefore, with regard to getting ahead in employment, women are essentially doomed from the outset. Advice is then offered by the poster to female readers: 'Make friends. But work is not home. Workmates can be friends but they are workmates first. The loyalty you have to your job is not the loyalty you have to your friends'. This clarifies how women should view their work 'friends' as well as who they should show 'loyalty' to. The condescending tone of the poster's guidance (simple, clear facts and instructions flagged up for oblivious women, e.g. 'Make friends'; 'work is not home') implicitly constructs women as in need of such advice in order to realise that they have the ability to job hop – if, of course, they could bear to part with their workmates – in order to receive a better salary and escape being 'screwed by the "friendship" problem'. While, like in previous examples, the poster places an onus on women to change their behaviour in order to conquer inequality, this time it is spelt out in no uncertain terms to its non-business-minded – and clearly childlike (evident by requiring such rudimentary facts to be reiterated) – female audience.

Next, once again, men's behaviour is introduced as a business-minded and thus successful foil to women's financially-disadvantageous behaviour. Men are articulated as engaging in behaviour that will work to their advantage; being assertive and tactical ('Men will leave a job if it doesn't pay what they know they're worth'). Women, who fail to convey these qualities, are repeatedly advised to change their behaviour to become more like their successful male counterparts ('More women need to start doing that', 'Women need to start thinking like men in this regard'). Ironically, however, the poster's previous construction of female employees implies that women are actually *better* employees than men, as they are less likely to leave and less likely to demand a pay rise. The poster concludes the comment by affirming his own attitude to a hypothetical scenario on behalf of all men: 'I'm not giving

a company a discount just to be nice. Fuck that'. From that, it can be assumed that women would behave in the opposite manner, by being feeble and benevolent by 'giving a company a discount just to be nice'. This portrayal of women as non- avaricious was also found in the present dataset as an interpretative repertoire in its own right, in the form of women ostensibly failing to negotiate salary.

3.2.2 Women don't negotiate salary. Within this interpretative repertoire, women are constructed as – for one reason or another – less likely to negotiate salary than men. Again, anecdotal evidence is used to bolster posters' assertions, and in the final extract (Comment 20) women's apparent reluctance to negotiate salary is blamed on cultural influence. This takes the onus away from *individual* women to an extent, but without identifying the problem as being the capitalistic nature of salary negotiation itself. The first two examples featured in this subsection assert this apparent tendency as factual, while the latter example explains *why* this may be the case. The poster of the following example utilises an anecdote to make his overarching claim:

Comment 18.

> This actually happened with my wife. She and a male colleague both applied for the same job, and she was upset because they offered him $40k more annually than here (exact same qualifications between them, no difference on paper). My followup question was "Did you ask for more?" "No."

> She was offended, and possibly rightly so. I mean, maybe the people are just sexist and offered the guy $40k more out of the starting gate. Or maybe he being a tall and handsome guy successfully negotiated $40k more after being offered the exact same amount my wife was earlier. And since my wife didn't attempt to negotiate, she doesn't know what they would have offered to pay her.

The comment opens by discussing women's apparent reluctance or inability to negotiate salary via anecdotal claims about the behaviour of a 'real world' female example ('This actually happened with my wife'). The poster of Comment 18 recounts an anecdote about '[his] wife' and her 'male colleague both appl[ying] for the same job', which resulted in the male colleague being offered '$40k more annually'. Some additional information is given about the two candidates in the narrative, who possess the 'exact same qualifications', meaning that there is 'no difference on paper'. By adding this, the poster highlights the candidates' only dissimilarity: their gender. Therefore, the woman was offered an unspecified salary and the man was offered a substantially bigger salary, regardless of their expertise.

Following the event, the poster's 'wife' is described as 'upset' and 'offended', though the poster adds, 'possibly rightly so'. The poster queries why this inequality came to be, which is recalled via reported speech (e.g. Holt, 1996): 'My followup question was "Did you ask for more?" "No."'. The poster then considers the existence of sexism in that particular hiring scenario ('I mean, maybe the people are just sexist...'). However, instead of continuing this line of enquiry the poster presents an alternative, individual-based explanation: 'Or maybe he being a tall and handsome guy successfully negotiated $40k more after being offered the exact same amount my wife was earlier'. The detailed imagery

ascribed to the male colleague ('tall and handsome') as well as the fact that he 'successfully negotiated' constructs him as an appealing and competent professional. The poster's 'wife', on the other hand, lacks any descriptive imagery; she simply 'didn't attempt to negotiate'. This not only constructs the female candidate as the least business-like, but also places accountability for her comparatively inferior financial situation squarely on her for failing to consider negotiating her salary, whereas with her male colleague this was instinctive. Sexism *may* have been a factor but this is not certain, as his wife failed to negotiate (which would prove or disprove this theory). The notion of contrasting men and women's avaricious and non-avaricious behaviour is continued in the next example, and is boiled down to a simple matter of greed:

Comment 19.

> There are so many variables. From what I've seen, women are less likely to ask for a raise, or more money to begin with. Less likely to negotiate in the first place. Does this come down to women simply not thinking they are worth just as much?
>
> For men, and my friends, even if a company says no, we get them to agree to a 6 month review to go over performance and salary package. Not to mention it's not just salary, it's the entire package. 401k/matching, perks, vacation days, company car, free coffee or catered lunches. The list goes on and on.
>
> The way I see it women in my field are just as level as the men. They just do't ask for more. So maybe they aren't as greedy.

Comment 19 opens with the poster using personal experience (‘from what I’ve seen...’) to inoculate against potential challenges. This is followed by the declaration of three broad claims, in which women are less likely to: (a) ‘ask for a raise’, (b) ‘ask for...more money to begin with’ and (c) ‘negotiate in the first place’. In accordance with these assertions, the poster then puts forward a rhetorical question: ‘does this come down to women simply not thinking they are worth just as much?’. This inference introduces an aspect of ‘worth’, whereby women are implied to value themselves less in comparison to their male counterparts. It is interesting to note that while this implication is ascribed to women, the organisation that allows for such disparity goes unmentioned. Therefore the disparity is simply women’s fault.

The poster begins a new paragraph by introducing men into the equation in contrast to the previously discussed women. Once more, the poster manages their stake in the subject matter by adding ‘my friends’ and ‘we’; thus appearing to legitimise their previous generalisation of the entire male population (‘for men...’) through the actions of ‘[his] friends’. A generalised characteristic of assertiveness is then ascribed to men; ‘even if a company says no, we get them to...’. The forcibility of ‘get them to’ is offered as a stark contrast to the comparably passive behaviour of women who, for whatever reason, are ‘less likely to negotiate’. This negotiation behaviour is constructed as an advantageous quality, as the poster proceeds to build an extensive list of attractive fringe benefits that can be and are brokered by men in addition to their negotiated salary (dubbed the ‘entire package’). To summarise, the poster clarifies their personal viewpoint on gender equality with a reference to their personal area of work: ‘women in my field are just as level as the men’. In spite of this apparent gender balance regarding ability, however, women still ‘[don’t] ask for more’. The poster then suggests that the negotiating behaviour of men may be classified as greed

('maybe [women] aren't as greedy'), hence painting women as contented earning a lower salary – and no fringe benefits – than men. In doing this, women's non-avaricious behaviour is treated as a potential cause of the gender pay gap, with the nature of a process that rewards greed overlooked as an unquestionable fait accompli. The next example, Comment 20, is a direct response to Comment 19. Comment 20 moves away from straightforwardly asserting that women fail to negotiate salary, and instead offers an explanation as to why women ostensibly lack this assertiveness (and are less likely to negotiate salary) by incorporating the influence of culture.

Comment 20.

> An interesting component that I've noticed is that for the most part, boys tend to be raised by their dads and girls tend to be raised by their moms. This is how culture is passed down. Moms that were raised in conservative households will pass on their conservative values to their daughters, even if the labor market has moved beyond that time. In other words, culture lags economics by at least 30 years or so.

The poster of Comment 20, akin to Comment 19, commences by declaring that their outlook is formulated as a result of anecdotal knowledge ('An interesting component that I've noticed is that...'). Like the preceding comment, the poster then formulates a broad statement: 'boys tend to be raised by their dads and girls tend to be raised by their moms. This is how culture is passed down'. The poster explains gender differences in behaviour via a lay developmental psychology whereby males' and females' contrasting attitudes arise due to paternal or maternal influence. Henceforth, over time, 'moms that were raised in

conservative households will pass on their conservative values to their daughters'. As Comment 20 was posted in direct response to Comment 19, it is reasonable to assume that these 'conservative values' correspond to the supposed unassertive and agreeable traits of women referred to in Comment 19. The poster adds that therefore 'culture lags economics' to create this gender divergence. Again, in placing the fault on women's apparent reluctance to negotiate salary (which causes the gender pay gap) on inherited social attitudes, the poster allows for the implication that wider social/cultural processes are important, whilst nevertheless adopting an essentially passive position that is firmly entrenched within banal capitalism. Because 'culture lags economics by at least 30 years or so', there is no need to take any action to seek to effect cultural change; rather, this process will unfold in and of itself. The corollary of this, of course, is that any intervention to address the gender pay gap is unnecessary.

The interpretative repertoire of women not negotiating salary is complemented by another interpretative repertoire found within the 'Gender Pay Gap' dataset: women who *do* negotiate salary are seen as bitchy.

3.2.3 Women who are assertive are seen as 'bitchy'. The third and final interpretative repertoire included in the 'Gender Pay Gap' subsection concerns the ostensible notion that women who are assertive may be seen as 'bitchy'; a characteristic which has so far implicitly been argued to be the key to men's success within employment. At this point it is perhaps important to highlight the distinction between 'use' and 'mention' (Potter & Litton, 1985), as this highlights an important difference in the way that this repertoire was mobilised in comparison with other repertories discussed in the present study. In two of the three selected examples, the 'bitchy' repertoire is passively *mentioned* in claims about women who negotiate salary, and thus 'refer[s] to an *available* explanation' (p.85, italics in

original). In contrast, data in the previous two subsections, 'women are not business-minded' and 'women don't negotiate salary', consistently featured posters *using* the repertoires themselves by drawing upon personal beliefs in order to construct their assertions.

The posters in the first two examples draw upon fact construction in order to proclaim that this belief commonly exists. Note that, like previous featured examples, the poster of Comment 21 *uses* the repertoire, whereas Comment 22 simply *mentions* the repertoire:

Comment 21.

> It definitely comes off as aggressive when women negotiate salary. I would say as long as you're firm but polite, as well as stating the reasons why (education, experience, local averages) then it won't come off that way.

Comment 22.

> The research also says that women who negotiate are seen as "bitchy" and "emasculating," instead of "driven" and "assertive."

Comment 21 begins with the poster stating that, 'It definitely comes off as aggressive when women negotiate salary'. The emphasis of 'definitely' implies that he has made this firm conclusion as a result of experiencing women 'aggressive[ly]' negotiating salary first-hand. Similar to the nature of the examples of data analysed in the 'Hiring Practices' subsection of the thesis, the poster then appears to offer advice to women: 'I would say as long as you're firm but polite' and 'stat[e] the reasons why...then it won't come off' as aggressive. While practical, this advice is built on the assumption that women who negotiate salary go about it

by being impolite, whilst failing to ‘state the reasons why’ they deserve increased pay. Comment 22, on the other hand, uses fact construction to bolster their claim. This is done via the poster referring to ‘The research’ when affirming that ‘women who negotiate are seen as “bitchy” and “emasculating,” instead of “driven” and “assertive.”’. This *mention* of women being seen as ‘bitchy’ or ‘emasculating’ contrasts the previous first person examples of fact construction and therefore distances the poster from being seen as making the assertion himself. The poster exchanges the stellar, business-like qualities (‘“driven” and “assertive”’) – which are presumably conveyed by men when they negotiate salary – for negative, unproductive qualities (‘“bitchy” and “emasculating,”’). It is worth noting that ‘emasculating’ would be considered particularly unfavourable within a patriarchal world of business. Asserting that women who negotiate salary *are* in fact seen as ‘aggressive’ or ‘bitchy’ is a common element in Comments 21 and 22. The final example – Comment 23 – also makes this claim, but additionally considers a solution for this and speculates why it may not work:

> *Comment 23.*
>
> One big problem with negotiation is the “bitch factor”. A pushy and self assertive woman is much more likely to be seen as bitchy, grabby or undeserving than her male equivalent. As such many women get negative feedback when they try to go into such negotiations and some eventually stop.

> While it's easy to say to women "be more assertive and demanding!" it's not really relevant or constructive when this tactic won't gain them much because of a cultural bias against it.

The first paragraph of Comment 23 is presented as a series of facts. The first emphasises that a 'big problem with negotiation is the "bitch factor"'. That is, a 'pushy and self assertive woman is much more likely' to be seen as one or more negative qualities from a three-part list ('bitchy, grabby, or undeserving'). This apparent fact is constructed as an explanation for women apparently not negotiating salary, due to the 'negative feedback' they receive when they 'try' to do it.

Unlike the majority of previously analysed comments, the second paragraph of Comment 23 addresses a recurring motif within the data; blaming women for their financial undoing and urging only women themselves to change this. As such, the poster states that 'While it's easy to say to women "be more assertive and demanding!" it's not really relevant or constructive when this tactic won't gain them much because of a cultural bias against it'. Again, 'cultur[e]' is presented as a barrier to achieving gender equality, so therefore inequality is considered inevitable and inescapable. While Comment 23 goes a step further than other examples of data by highlighting a problem with placing an onus on women to change their behaviour, women changing their behaviour is the only solution offered to solving this issue.

Furthermore, an observation can be made about this repertoire and the previous repertoire ('women don't negotiate salary'). Regardless of whether women don't negotiate salary or do negotiate salary – and come across as 'bitchy' – the posters' emphasis is invariably on women (or men, should their behaviour be used as a foil). This individual-level focus lends itself to maintaining banal capitalism by treating an explicitly capitalistic process,

salary negotiation, as a routine feature of employment. Failure to engage in this behaviour, like women allegedly do, results in individuals receiving their just desserts: economic failure and, in the case of women, the gender pay gap. The fact that the examples featured in this subsection simply *mention* claims by reporting on apparently general opinions (e.g. 'It definitely comes off as aggressive when women negotiate salary', 'One big problem with negotiation is the "bitch factor"') accentuates this routine onus on women, as well as the existence of banal capitalism. Again, the capitalistic 'every man for himself' principle forms the basis on assertions in which posters place an onus on women themselves as being accountable for – and the only entity capable of solving – the gender pay gap. Also, the process of salary negotiation (a wholly capitalistic practice) and the inequality constructed as being associated with it (i.e. women being paid less as a result of not engaging in it or being seen as 'bitchy' etc.) is effectively regarded as inevitable. That is, no alternative solution of resolving this inequality (i.e. one that revolves around making changes to the function of salary negotiation, or to the competitive values that underpin it) is even considered.

3.3 Women's Career Choices

The final dataset, 'Women's Career Choices', comprised comments pertaining to an original post in the form of a tweet authored by Christina Hoff Sommers. It read: 'Want to close [the] wage gap? Step one: Change your major from feminist dance therapy to electrical engineering'. Analysis of this dataset resulted in two interpretative repertoires being featured: 'women are uninterested in certain careers' and 'women are given special treatment'. Within both subsections, posters begin to identify attempts by the wider world to essentially address gender inequality, and assert that women abuse these efforts.

3.3.1 Women are uninterested in certain careers. The first of two selected interpretative repertoires in the 'Women's Career Choices' dataset comprises comments that construct women as being uninterested in certain careers; hence being the cause of gender inequality and the gender pay gap. This depiction is regularly offered in contrast to the construction of an egalitarian world of employment, which is fully prepared to provide opportunities for women. The following example positions women as the sole barriers to gender equality, in spite of other entities' attempts to achieve it:

Comment 24.

> My school actively encourages women to go into engineering. Companies are looking to hire women engineers. If you're a woman with a degree in any engineering, people will throw jobs at you.
> Yet there's still 5 women in my engineering classes out of 130

Similar to previous examples, the poster of Comment 24 arranges their comment as a sequence of facts, from which the reader can draw their own conclusion. This begins with the poster managing their stake (e.g. Potter, 1996) in the subject matter via a reference to 'My school', which 'actively encourages women to go into engineering'. In addition to this, 'Companies are looking to hire women engineers'. The first two sentences construct the world, or rather 'companies' and the poster's 'school', as unbiased to the point of being pro-women; 'actively encourag[ing]' women to enter a male-dominated field. This is then taken a step further by asserting that women have something of an unfair advantage in this industry (an interpretative repertoire that is explored in detail in the next subsection): 'If you're a woman with a degree in any engineering, people will throw jobs at you'. The metaphorical

'throw[ing]' of jobs emphasises the abundance of opportunities given to women with an engineering degree which, by (implicit) contrast, men do not get. Focus is then turned to how women themselves respond to this egalitarian, magnanimous world. The poster remarks, 'Yet there [are] still 5 women in my engineering classes out of 130'. The use of specificity highlighting the low proportion of individual women attending engineering classes is contrasted against the poster's construction of the wider world, which 'encourages' and is 'looking to hire' women. Therefore, it is individual women's career choices which cause the gender pay gap, in spite of attempts by the sector to close it. This sentiment is mirrored in the next example, with the poster positioning himself as the only entity within his narrative who was willing to aid gender equality:

> *Comment 25.*
>
> I'm an IT Director for a large organization. Over 10 years in the position I've only interviewed 1 woman. That woman lied on her resume so she should not. have even been interviewed. I've received only a handful of applications from women over that time and they had no experience in the field.
>
> I hired one woman that I knew but I lured her from another organization who had a lot of experience.
>
> It's a male dominated field but not by choice.

Comment 25 opens with the poster's use of category entitlement (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992), which establishes the poster as 'an IT Director for a large organization' who has been

in the position for ‘Over 10 years’. In that space of time, the poster remarks that they have ‘only interviewed 1 woman, despite being in the aforementioned context of a ‘large organization’. The female interviewee in question is then depicted negatively: ‘That woman lied on her resume so she should not. have even been interviewed’. In addition, other female applicants overseen by the poster are also described in an uncomplimentary light, due to having ‘no experience in the field’. The poster then recounts an exception to this: ‘one woman that I knew...who had a lot of experience’. In this case, however, the poster constructs himself as the agent of her being hired; having ‘lured her from another organization’. The comment is concluded with a one-sentence summary excusing (Scott & Lyman, 1968) the poster’s responsibility for the current state of gender (in)equality: ‘It’s a male dominated field but not by choice’. Therefore, women are blamed for the gender pay gap because of their indifference towards certain fields such as – in this comment – the IT industry. Furthermore, the poster constructs himself as being the only advocate of gender equality within his narrative; a result of the poster being behind the one case of a woman being hired. In comparison, other female applicants – who did not have the poster’s support – failed to secure a position due to either fabricating their résumé or having no previous experience. Or, of course, through not applying in the first place.

The following example, Comment 26, moves beyond discussing women not applying for jobs in the IT industry to women who *are* employed in the IT industry:

Comment 26.

> Also in IT. We have one female manager, one female lead, and one female tech on the service desk. None of them are all that good at the jobs.

> There just aren't many capable and qualified women in IT. They're getting a little more into development but infrastructure work is lagging badly. I wish I knew how to get more women involved just because more people getting in increases the likelihood of finding someone who's any good at it.

Akin to the poster of Comment 25, the poster of Comment 26 also opens with category entitlement (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992): 'Also in IT'. The poster continues by listing the female employees at his place of work: 'one female manager, one female lead, and one female tech on the service desk'. This three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) enables him to demonstrate that his organisation is willing to employ women, and that it does so in a variety of roles; something which inoculates against possible accusations of sexism. However, despite the organisation's best efforts, 'None of them are all that good at the jobs'. A more sweeping assertion is then made about the IT industry, which the poster describes as containing not 'many capable and qualified women'. The use of minimisation ('There *just* aren't many...') aids in constructing this claim as matter-of-fact and obvious. The current state of progression of women in the IT industry is then detailed, wherein women are 'getting a little more into development but infrastructure work is lagging badly'. The poster responds to the previous two statements by professing, 'I *wish* I knew how to get more women involved...'. By using the verb 'wish', the poster constructs the aim of women becoming interested in varied career sectors as highly desirable (something which further inoculates against any impression of sexism), but as almost impossible. This is similar – albeit arguably more ardent – to the assertions made in Comment 25, whereby the outgroup of women are depicted as conformists who are unable to comprehend that their career choices are ostensibly causing them to be on the wrong side of the gender pay gap. This is echoed perhaps more fervently in the last example of the 'women are uninterested in certain careers' repertoire.

Comment 27 also subtly introduces the idea that women anticipate being hired simply because of their gender:

Comment 27.

> So much this. I've been in IT for around 18 years now, in senior level positions for most of that time. I can count on one hand the number of women I've interviewed over that entire period of time. And of those, only one with experience and passion for the work. The rest just sort of showed up, expecting, I don't know what...
>
> I've had managers hold off on hiring for a position for 6 to 8 months because they had been instructed they HAD to hire a woman for the position. Only to eventually hire a guy because there were exactly zero female applicants. And yet we males in IT are vilified as enforcing a male dominated hierarchy. My ass. There are so very few women who want to do the work. The few women I've worked with who actually had passion and drive in the field were great team mates who easily pulled their own weight. I've got exactly nothing against working for and with women. If only they'd fucking apply.

Following another case of category entitlement (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; 'I've been in IT...'), the poster of Comment 27 recalls that he 'can count on one hand the number of women [he has] interviewed' over the period of 'around 18 years'. A rare example of a good female candidate ('with experience and passion for the work') is given before describing the bad remainder ('the rest just sort of showed up, expecting, I don't know what...'). The latter

portrays women as demanding, and perhaps willing to take advantage of their gender in order to be offered a job (a theme that is explored fully in the following subsection).

The poster initiates the second paragraph of the comment by asserting that he has 'had managers hold off on hiring for a position for 6 to 8 months because they had been instructed they HAD to hire a woman for the position'. The capitalisation of 'HAD' implies that female candidates for that particular position were unfairly prioritised, while flagging up the '6 to 8 month' length of time that the 'managers' had to wait in the name of gender equality. The poster follows this with: 'Only to eventually hire a guy because there were exactly zero female applicants'. This figure ('*exactly* zero') is stressed, which emphasises the lack of female applicants over the '6 to 8 month' period as well as accentuating the fruitlessness of this decision, as a 'guy' was 'eventually hire[d]' anyway. The poster then reflects upon a constructed stereotype: 'And yet we males in IT are vilified as enforcing a male dominated hierarchy', which is retorted to with 'My ass'. As such, 'males in IT' are constructed as being unfairly misrepresented, when it is women themselves who are seemingly uninterested in careers in the IT industry which therefore creates a 'male dominated hierarchy' through no fault of men themselves.

A contrast is then given, whereby the poster constructs the 'few' female employees 'I've worked with' in the IT industry as distinctly less negatively (as 'having passion and drive in the field' and being 'great team mates who easily pulled their own weight'), thus resulting in a more balanced – and plausible – representation. This is then followed with a disclaimer (Wetherell & Potter, 1988; 'I've got nothing against working for and with women'), which establishes him as a rational, non-sexist IT worker. However, the poster's apparent egalitarianism doesn't get a chance to be put into practice, as he adds, 'If only [women would] fucking apply'. Again, by the poster excusing (Scott & Lyman, 1968) his responsibility for gender inequality the onus is on women for their career choices and thus

financial disadvantage. Furthermore, in Comment 27 the poster constructs men as being commonly, and unjustly, blamed for this.

3.3.2 Women are given special treatment. The final featured interpretative repertoire of the third dataset includes constructions of women being undeservedly employed on the basis of their gender. Rather ironically, the portrayal of women as being prepared to exhibit guile (which up until this point has been linked to men's exemplary business-minded behaviour) is considered to appear incongruous. The first of three examples utilises an anecdote to warn of the pitfalls of hiring women for the sake of hiring women:

Comment 28.

"If only they'd fucking apply."

Ya be careful what you wish for. I see more than a few women applicants because they have had "I.T. training" in the military. They listed a bunch of stuff on their resume that they may have had a class on or seen someone else do, but they had no understanding of how to do any of it themselves. The scary thing is that some of them actually get hired. Veterans preference helps a lot. What happens is after they are hired, they play dumb, but act very sweet to the boss. After a very long "training" period they still can't do any work by themselves so the boss ends up giving them a "special assignment" which entails them doing one very specific and easy thing, and this gets them out of all the other duties of the position. Then others pick up the slack.

To begin, the poster of Comment 28 quotes the final sentence of Comment 27: 'If only they'd fucking apply'. This is responded to by the poster issuing a warning ('be careful what you wish for') before providing evidence from personal experience ('I see...') to support his caution. The poster claims that he 'see[s] more than a few women applicants because they have had "I.T. training" in the military. The use of scare quotes to highlight '"I.T. training"' serves two purposes; firstly to add irony to this apparent skill by implying that it may be somewhat dubious, and secondly to construct the 'more than a few women' who use this as potentially deceitful. The latter purpose is emphasised by the following sentence, in which these women are described as having 'listed a bunch of stuff on their resume...they [have] no understanding of how to do any of it'. This thereby creates an image of dishonesty as well as imprudence, for lacking the foresight to consider how that action may prove problematic in the future. In spite of doing this, the poster notes that 'some of them actually get hired', which is labelled rather dramatically as 'The scary thing'.

The poster then recounts the ensuing sequence of events: 'What happens is after they are hired, they play dumb, but act very sweet to the boss'. The notion of 'act[ing] sweet' is gendered to imply that women know how to manipulate people, which thus adds an additional aspect of disingenuousness to the depiction of women. This continues: 'After a very long "training" period...the boss ends up giving them a "special assignment" which entails them doing one very specific and easy thing, and this gets them out of all the other duties of the position'. Again, the poster makes use of scare quotes; however, in these instances ('"training" period' and later '"special assignment"') they are used to emphasise the exceptional allowances that said female employees are granted in contrast to employees such as himself (i.e. men). The first instance of such ('"training" period[s]') is also given a time-specific narrative structure via the use of ECF ('*very long* "training" period') to accentuate this further. The '"special assignment"', on the other hand, 'entails them doing one very

specific and easy thing, and this gets them out of all the other duties of the position'. Therefore, the extent of pampering that the women receive from their 'boss' leads to their role within the organisation being altered completely, as they have dodged 'all the other duties of the position'. The poster adds that 'Then others pick up the slack'. The reference to '*others*' implicitly positions men (and potentially women who *didn't* claim 'they have had "I.T. training" in the military') as the victims of these women's underhandedness.

The next example, Comment 29, echoes the essence of Comment 28, but instead stresses the amount of unprofessional incidents a female colleague was allowed to escape discipline for:

Comment 29.

> Hahaha we went thought this at our company... You get all women in HR, and they are like 'we have to hire a female IT person.....'
>
> WOW what a fucking hellish 1 year that was..... she ended up banging our marketing director, add the fact that it was mandated that we hire a woman, holy fuck was it hard to get rid of her.....after she continually just sucked, and kept fucking up those HR computers, along with everything she did, and months and months of documentation, she was finally let go....

The poster of Comment 29 first introduces their claims as arising from personal experience ('*we* went through this at *our* company'). The scenario at 'our company' is then described by using ECF (Pomerantz, 1986) ('You get *all* women in HR...') and reported speech (Holt, 1996; 'they are like 'we have to hire a female IT person''). The combination of the two

devices works to construct both biased hiring practices (‘we have to hire a female IT person’) and biased decision-making team (‘all women in HR’).

The results of this are summarised in the first sentence of the second paragraph: ‘WOW what a fucking hellish 1 year that was’. The capitalisation of ‘WOW’ at the start of the sentence accentuates the poster’s subsequent recollection of a fervently-described ‘fucking hellish 1 year that was’. Again, the poster highlights that ‘it was mandated that we hire a woman’, which emphasises that the responsibility for the numerous unproductive incidents that follow is on the ‘all women’ HR team and their instruction to ‘hire a female IT person’. The numerous unproductive incidents in question are described throughout the comment by the poster in order to construct an intolerable ordeal inflicted upon the poster’s organisation as a result of being mandated to ‘hire a female IT person’. The unprofessional actions of the ‘female IT person’ are listed by the poster: ‘she continuously just sucked’, ‘kept fucking up those HR computers, along with everything she did’, and ‘she ended up banging our marketing director’. It is worth noting that the latter of the three actions adds sexualisation to the depiction of this female employee, whereby sexual complications were brought into the workplace by *her* as opposed to the marketing director. This is achieved via the poster’s use of agency (i.e. *she* slept with the marketing director, not the other way around).

These non-business-like actions resulted in ‘months and months of documentation’. This therefore, along with the ‘fucking hellish 1 year’ description, provides a time-specific narrative structure to emphasise the negative experience (further highlighted by the use of repetition; ‘months and months’). The poster comments that ‘she was *finally* let go’, which tallies with his previous assertion: ‘holy fuck was it hard to get rid of her’. These remarks bolster the essence of the poster’s comment, in that the use of gender quotas (and thus the addressing of gender inequality) are damaging due to the hiring of female candidates who

cause distress for an organisation and its employees. While Comment 29 hinted at female employees receiving exceptional treatment in contrast to male employees, the final example explicitly constructs women as being fully aware of this, by retaining the option to 'cry sexism':

Comment 30.

> Ok, but there's definitely pressure on HR to hire more women and it's more difficult to fire them. I'm sure there's plent of unqualified men, like any industry, but men can't cry sexism when they get kicked out for screwing up (again).

Comment 30 begins with its poster conveying certainty of the existence and practice of biased hiring (and firing) practices: 'there's *definitely* pressure on HR to hire more women and it's more difficult to fire them'. A disclaimer (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1988) that male employees can also be unqualified is then added: 'I'm sure there's plent[y] of unqualified men, like any industry, but men can't cry sexism when they get kicked out for screwing up (again)'. The disclaimer is used to (a) contrast men and women's capacities to take advantage of their respective gender to interfere with organisations' dismissing decisions ('men can't cry sexism'), and (b) construct women as perpetually substandard employees ('they get kicked out for screwing up (*again*)').

The poster effectively implies that women deviously take advantage of this state of affairs by being hired as a result of 'pressure on HR to hire more women' and 'cry[ing] sexism' in order to cover up their unprofessional behaviour. Interestingly, taking advantage of these processes is done for the sake of capitalistic gain; in the first instance by securing a

job and income, and in the second instance by being given their job back or financial compensation from a gender equality lawsuit. It is also worth noting that whilst women are the main focus of the poster's constructions in Comment 30, men are implicitly constructed as the average employee and a foil to women's superior treatment and underhand behaviour. That is, there is *not* 'pressure on HR to hire more' men, it is *not* 'more difficult to fire' men, and men '*can't* cry sexism when they get kicked out'. Therefore, the dice are loaded in women's favour yet inequality still persists.

Yet again, the concept of banal capitalism can be applied to the present 'Women's Career Choices' subsection. The capitalistic mantra of 'every man for himself' is apparent in the data, with the blame for current gender inequality being placed on women, predominantly by not applying for jobs within certain career sectors. Whilst posters placing sole responsibility on women to change their behaviour has also been found in the previous subsections, this blame is intensified somewhat in the present subsection. This is the result of a number of posters constructing the world around women as actively supporting gender equality (e.g. favouring female applicants); a gesture which is responded to by women by ostensibly not applying for jobs. Additionally, in previous examples throughout the three datasets, men are constructed as exhibiting behaviour that is deemed to be advantageous within employment; job hopping, negotiating salary, being competitive, shifting blame and so on. These capitalistic – or capitalistically-motivated – actions are constructed by posters as being entirely acceptable, to the extent that these behaviours are *the* way to get ahead in business; the reason a gender pay gap exists is because women *don't* engage in these behaviours. However, when the tables are turned and women are constructed as engaging in these behaviours (negotiating salary, being devious, etc.) it is constructed as problematic, chiefly to the disadvantage of men.

4

Discussion

The present study explored, for the most part, the construction of women with regard to employment, and how the concept of banal capitalism was embedded in such constructions. The preceding analysis section outlined the various interpretative repertoires that were identified within the data. In the present, concluding, section, some common elements within these repertoires will be drawn together.

The first dataset concerned sexist hiring practices – a common issue faced by women in their search for employment (e.g. Sheltzer & Smith, 2014). The comments that formed the dataset pertained to an anecdote recalled by the (female) original poster, in which an interviewer alluded to gender before awkwardly changing the subject and ultimately not giving her the job. Within this dataset, sexism in the IT industry was constructed in one of two ways. The first way isolated the incidence of potential sexism experienced by the original poster by identifying the interviewer as an anomaly in an otherwise egalitarian IT industry. Therefore, the fact that the original poster had encountered such an incidence was perhaps a sign of a bad 'fit' between employee and organisation, and thus gender was reduced to a case of 'fit'. The second way constructed sexism as commonplace, natural and inevitable. This could be addressed in one of two ways: as a result of male employees 'growing up' or through specific occupational training. The latter of the two was linked to a purely capitalistic motive; avoiding a lawsuit put forward by a female employee. It is worth noting that regardless of which of the aforementioned two ways the IT industry was constructed, both share a common element. That is, sexism within the industry is constructed as inevitable; be it on a small, infrequent scale or a wider, 'boys club'-esque scale.

A significant amount of the 'Hiring Practices' data comprised comments offering advice by posters to the original poster, with the essence of these comments taking the form

of one of three outlooks: *resist*, work *within* or work *around* sexism. The first outlook encouraged the original poster to *resist* sexism by calling out sexist behaviour such as that of the interviewer in her anecdote. Interestingly, in one comment, pressure was mounted on the original poster not to be discouraged from entering the IT industry as a result of her experience. Failing to be resilient by giving up her search for a position in the industry was constructed as essentially failing her gender. The second outlook underpinning posters' advice to the original poster was to work *within* sexism. This involved constructing a requirement for prospective candidates for the job to be 'one of the guys', meaning that the original poster would have to become impervious by sexism in order to enter the IT industry. Often, this advice also encouraged the original poster to be confident in her skills; mirroring the 'confidence cult(ure)' notion highlighted by Gill and Orgad (2015) that was discussed in the literature review. This attitude also aligns with the notion of real-world organisations offering leadership programs aimed specifically at women, which aim to develop aspects of women's leadership behaviour, understanding of business, and – most relevantly – her confidence. The third and final outlook, work *around*, comprised comments exhorting the original poster to take somewhat radical action in order to secure an IT position. Minimisation was regularly used by the posters to normalise these suggestions; the original poster *just* relocate to a city wherein the IT industry may be more welcoming to female employees, or *just* change her name on her résumé in order to experiment with her chances of being offered future interviews.

Once again, all of the three outlooks regarded sexism as a fait accompli. In order to address this issue, posters frequently placed an onus on the female original poster (and, by extension, women) to be the one(s) to bring about change, by resisting or working around sexism. Failing that, the option to work within sexism was also provided as an option. It may perhaps be unsurprising that the advice offered by posters outwardly focussed on what

the original poster could do in her situation, since her opening post was a personal anecdote. However, posters' implicit constructions of the world and how the female original poster is situated within it remained problematic in relation to gender equality, regardless of who their assertions were directed towards. That is, irrespective of which of the three outlooks posters' advice adopted, the focus on advising the original poster (or women as a collective group) to act as an individual (or individuals) – a belief similar to findings by Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987) and Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2016) – neglected the taken for granted background of the context in which women were being advised to act.

The second dataset analysed in the current study comprised comments relating to the gender pay gap – or apparent lack of one – shown via an infographic. To a greater extent than the 'Hiring Practices' data, posters of comments in the 'Gender Pay Gap' dataset regularly constructed generalised stereotypes of women's behaviour. For example, women were depicted as more interested in job security and job satisfaction, less competitive, and less likely to negotiate salary. All of these example stereotypes were constructed in comparison to an implicit benchmark – men's behaviour – which was regarded as a conventional example of how to go about business and employment (and thus not be on the wrong side of the gender pay gap). The deviation of women's behaviour from this benchmark (i.e. being '*more*' of a quality or '*less*' of a quality) was always treated as negative, and also as a cause of the gender pay gap. Coincidentally, it was men's behaviour, or stereotypical masculinity, which was more compatible with capitalist structures while women's behaviour remained fatally incongruent. Furthermore, entirely positive qualities such as loyalty and willingness to accept blame for one's own mistakes – which were even commended by posters – were considered inferior to the polar opposite qualities of men's behaviour, purely on the grounds that they may not be financially advantageous.

As a result of posters constructing women's apparent non-avaricious behaviour as the sole cause of the gender pay gap, women changing their deviating behaviour was deemed the sole solution for minimising the gender pay gap. Therefore, again, an onus was placed squarely on women to be more avaricious in one way or another, while the capitalistic context in which this issue of gender inequality is situated went seemingly unnoticed as a natural and invariable system. However, the latter third of the 'Gender Pay Gap' subsection goes some way to illustrating the viewpoints that exist when women *are* perceived to meet men's 'benchmark' business-minded behaviour by negotiating salary. This, according to posters, commonly results in women being seen as aggressive and/or bitchy. As a result, (a) alternative strategies for achieving gender pay equality are absent from discussion, and (b) the existence of sexism goes somewhat unacknowledged as a result of women trying – and failing – to be financially savvy, because of its incongruous demeanour.

On more than one occasion, blame was lifted somewhat from individual women and placed instead upon broader influences that cause women's non-business-minded behaviour. That is, societal expectations and how women are 'trained' were constructed as obstacles to women's ability to successfully change their behaviour to become more business-minded (e.g. by negotiating salary or being interested in career advancement). This practice, if anything, accentuated the presence of banal capitalism via simply implying that the way *women* are apparently socialised into behaving non-competitively, for example, is problematic. Alternative explanations for the gender pay gap were overlooked, such as how men are ostensibly socialised into behaving competitively, or the system itself that enshrines the competitive business values governing the need to 'negotiate' one's salary.

The third dataset analysed in the present study concerned posters' assertions regarding women's ostensible career choices – an often-raised explanation for the gender pay gap (e.g. Chevalier, 2007). Within this section, comments regularly constructed the wider world as

either indifferent or supportive of achieving gender equality, but certainly not unsupportive (i.e. sexist). For example, one poster's school was described as actively encouraging women to enter a male-dominated sector, while in the outside world organisations were portrayed as being willing to throw jobs at women who hold an engineering degree. Focus was then turned to women, and how they respond to such opportunities: choosing not to enrol on male-dominated courses and choosing not to apply for jobs in male-dominated sectors. As a result, strategies employed by the wider world (i.e. men) to attain gender equality were regarded as futile.

Several examples of data also constructed what female employees are like when they secure employment in male-dominated industries. Of course, posters commonly claimed that this was simply the result of gender quotas being put into place. Alternatively, on more than one occasion, women were proclaimed to lie on their résumé which led to them – undeservedly – securing a position, which ascribed an element of underhandedness to posters' depiction of women. Once employed, women were constructed (often via anecdotal evidence) as bad employees, which was used almost as a warning against hiring women purely for the sake of a greater gender balance. In many cases, the unprofessional behaviour purportedly exhibited by female employees extended the aforementioned 'underhandedness' characteristic, such as 'playing dumb' in order to manipulate their supervisor into reducing their workload, or 'crying sexism' once their employment is – inevitably – terminated. In contrast, men were often, implicitly, implied to be at a disadvantage as a consequence of women carrying out such ploys. That is, in the first instance – women 'playing dumb' and receiving a reduced workload – the other employees (i.e. men) were mentioned as having to 'pick up the slack' as a result. Additionally, in the second instance, it was explicitly maintained that men did not have the ability to 'cry sexism' to contest their dismissal; a strategy that women could employ should they wish to do so. To further the supposedly

unscrupulous facet of women's behaviour, an aspect of awareness of gender equality directives was also built into the construction of women. Namely in one data example, a number of women who did apply for a job and get offered an interview 'showed up expecting'; implying that these women were prepared to take advantage of the possibility that they may be hired solely on the basis of their gender.

In spite of these constructions – women's apparent awareness of how to 'play' the system, and the female-favoured job market environment – gender inequality is still present, and was recognised by posters in the form of a gender imbalance in certain industries. Akin to data sourced from the previous two datasets, the blame for this inequality was distanced from the existence of sexism and sexist employment practices. Instead, responsibility was placed on individual women for simply not applying for jobs in male-dominated sectors, or of course failing to be professional (like men) when they *do* find themselves employed in these positions.

The discussion will now draw upon a number of recurring elements and/or discursive devices in the data that featured in more than one of the three datasets. For example, many comments were prefaced by category entitlement, which often involved a poster introducing their assertions as coming from someone in the IT industry; a male-dominated sector which was flagged up many times within the data. This not only served the purpose of legitimising the poster's claims, but also provided an alternative perspective in many cases within the 'Hiring Practices' dataset. That is, posters who introduced themselves as an explicitly- or implicitly-constructed 'male in IT' could respond to the female original poster by describing the industry from a male outlook. This category entitlement was often accompanied by arguments from the poster's personal experience in order to inoculate against potential contestations by other posters; thus bolstering fact construction. As an aside, a deviant case

could be found in Comment 22, in which the poster distanced himself from the claim he was making as opposed to drawing upon personal experience (i.e. 'The research also says...').

The notion of stating what women (or the original poster in the case of the 'Hiring Practices' dataset) need to do to combat gender inequality was also a common theme throughout all three datasets. In order to do this, generalisations about women's apparently inferior (in comparison to men's) behaviour were frequently made. However, regardless of the generalisation made, women's behaviour was always deemed unsuitable for a business environment. For example, many posters depicted women as compassionate and temperate akin to assertions made by Chevalier (2007) regarding women's altruistic career choices. That is, women were constructed as: loyal to their colleagues, interested in job satisfaction, non-competitive and non-avaricious. The highlighting of these characteristics and preferences often prefaced advice regarding what women *should* do in order to succeed within employment. These findings from the present study, as previously mentioned, highlight real-world women leadership programmes. Whilst such initiatives are undoubtedly undertaken with good intentions, their entire existence risks undermining any attempts to effect real cultural change by instead seeking to change women to make them better adapted to the world of banal capitalism. Ultimately, the non-career-motivated characteristics of women were treated as barriers to their financial prosperity, due to holding them back from job hopping, negotiating salary, and/or moving up the corporate ladder. Rather ironically, in some generalisations of women's apparent employment-related preferences and behaviour, women were in fact constructed as *better* employees than men. This was found particularly within the 'Gender Pay Gap' dataset, wherein women were portrayed as being less likely than men to job hop and/or demand a pay rise; both especially attractive traits from an employer's perspective. These repertoires are, in some important respects, incompatible with the

repertoires drawn upon in the other two datasets as they essentially suggest that women should be *preferred* in the hiring process.

Particularly within the final dataset, 'Women's Career Choices', women (or some women) were portrayed as being willing to put into practice some of the business-like attributes conveyed exclusively by men: exhibiting guile, negotiating salary, and/or willing to take advantage of something (i.e. their gender) for the sake of securing employment. Despite these qualities being regarded as the secrets of men's financial success within the workplace, the cases of women demonstrating such tactics were met with negativity. That is, instances when women utilised the apparently male traits were identified as incongruous (e.g. 'bitchy' in the case of salary negotiation), entitled, and/or causing inconvenience for men.

Finally, an overarching concern of the present study was the identification of banal assumptions concerning the inevitability of capitalistic forms of socio-economic organisation, and their gendered nature. The competitive 'every man for himself' ethos of capitalism was employed routinely by posters within all three datasets. Women, addressed either as a collective group or on an individual basis (i.e. advice offered to the original poster in the 'Hiring Practices' dataset), were held solely accountable for being the only entity capable of diminishing gender inequality. The problem was thus framed in terms of women themselves, rather than the wider context in which employment is situated. Adopting a business-oriented mindset and taking on capitalist values such as competitiveness were seen as unquestionable, even when posters oriented to the negativity of these practices. The fundamental responsibility for women being in a disadvantaged position in the first instance was also placed on women themselves. In many cases, as previously discussed, women were constructed as failing to meet the ostensibly business-like behaviour exhibited by men. This notion aligns with the gendered wording of the capitalistic 'every *man* for *him*self' principle, whereby the world of employment is regarded as a man's world. This is treated as an

inevitable, unchangeable fact of life, and thus there is an inability to formulate solutions or ideologies in an environment other than one that is built upon capitalistic processes. As an additional note, capitalism was also behind the seemingly only motivation for eliminating sexist behaviour exhibited by male employees in male-dominated career sectors. That is, sexist behaviour was treated as an almost innate characteristic in men which required occupational training to correct, solely to avoid a lawsuit should a female employee be offended by it.

The present study was not without its limitations. While the use of three datasets provided arguably sufficient data for use in the analysis, they were all sourced from one website: Reddit. The credibility of Reddit as a discussion website for use in qualitative research was previously discussed (e.g. Ovadia, 2015); however, it is – of course – one discussion forum-type website amongst many. Less equivocal discussion forums with regard to gender (e.g. A Voice for Men, Mumsnet etc.) would likely provide more uncompromising data regarding the construction of women or men, potentially aligning with the motivation(s) of that particular community. Similarly, less equivocal Reddit threads within ideological gender-based subreddits (e.g. Mensrights, Feminism) may have offered differing constructions and repertoires to those found in the current study, due to the context in which people talk or write shaping their discourse.

The way in which the datasets were analysed in the present study (i.e. datasets were analysed and presented separately from one another) may also have been altered in order to yield a greater depth of analysis. An alternative approach of combining data from all three datasets may have allowed for interpretative repertoires to be examined in more detail as a result of larger, broader repertoires being formed over three datasets. The approach of the current study, however, remained appropriate for its purpose of comparing the construction of

women with regard to three aspects of employment, and provided a greater extent of manageability.

With regard to future research, at least two aspects of the current study could be expanded upon. Firstly, the present study utilised online data sourced from discussion threads. Clearly, this is not the only form of online data available for study nor is it the only potential source of naturalistic data wherein the principles of banal capitalism may be illustrated. Indeed, it is certainly not unimaginable that the capitalistic 'every man for himself' sentiment nor the notion of failing to address capitalistic processes as potential origins of inequality may be reproduced in written documents or interview data, for example. The overarching subject matter of the present study – employment practices – may indeed lend itself to the analysis of female (and male) employees' discursive constructions of their experiences within various organisations. Secondly, banal capitalism is just one extension of Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism. As noted by Reicher, Hopkins and Condor (1997), the notion of banality can be applied to a number of other divisions of humankind, such as race and gender. Future research may investigate how and why these banalities within discourse, in which a certain group may go unacknowledged (and therefore implicitly *acknowledged*) as being somehow superior, are reproduced.

The present study ultimately aimed to explore the ways in which women were constructed in relation to three aspects of the broad topic of employment (hiring practices, the gender pay gap and women's career choices). Within the data, women's behaviour was frequently constructed as deviating from men's behaviour, with the latter being considered financially advantageous and also the norm within employment. Consequently, with regard to gender inequality within employment (e.g. the gender wage gap), individual women were held accountable for their disadvantaged position. The only solution offered to address this was for individual women to change the way that they engage with the capitalist world,

which itself was taken for granted as the natural and inevitable way in which the world should be organised. Changing the capitalist assumptions underpinning contemporary business practices was not even considered, which highlights the extent to which the taken for granted nature of capitalism also functions to reinforce a set of masculine assumptions about the way the world works. Capitalism is thus not only banal, but that banality serves to obscure the gendered nature of banal capitalism.

5

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Appendices

Appendix A

Reddit search strategy

The following terms were inputted into Reddit's in-site search engine:

Female-related nouns		**Employment-related nouns**
'woman'	*paired with*	'pay'
		'wage'
'women'		'salary'
		'job'
'female'		'work'
		'career'
'gender'		'hiring'
		'management'

e.g. 'woman pay', 'woman wage', 'woman salary' etc.

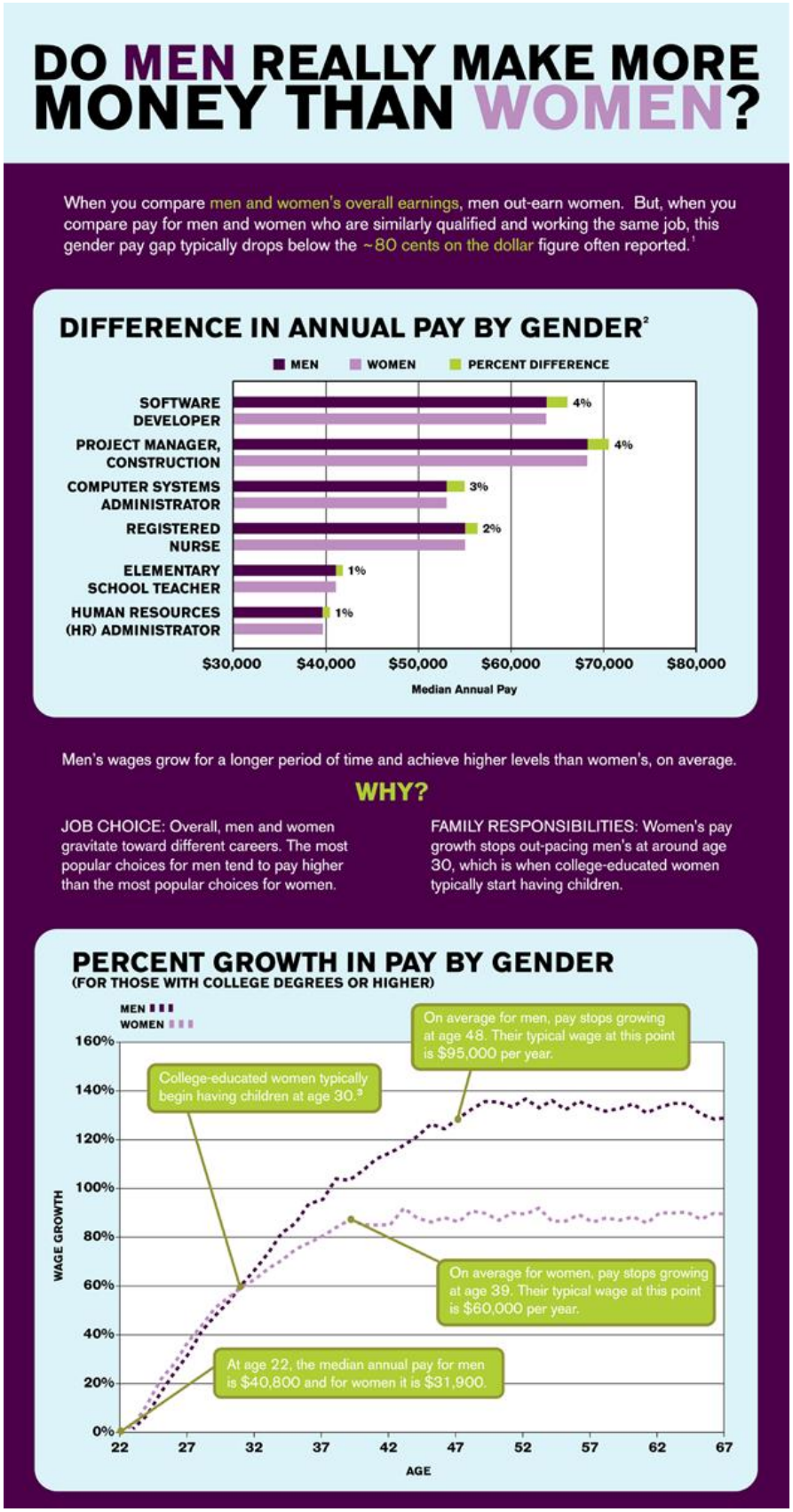
Standalone, non-gendered compound nouns
'pay gap'
'salary negotiation'

i.e. simply put, 'pay gap' and 'salary negotiation'

Appendix B

'Do Men Really Make More Than Women?'

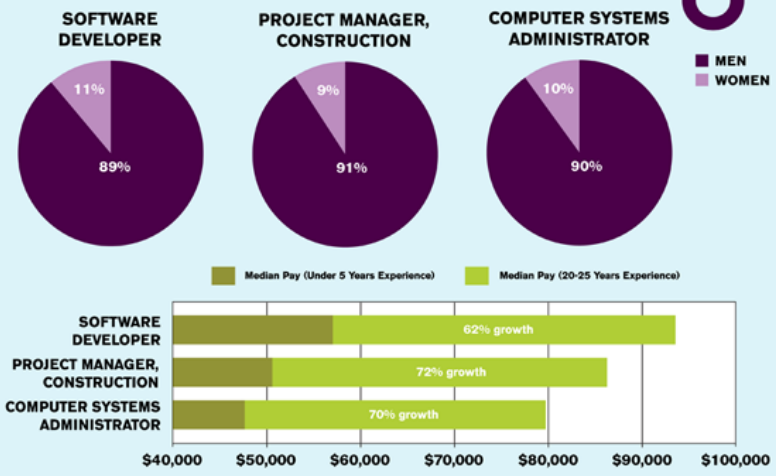
The following infographic was linked to in the Reddit post titled 'When you compare salaries for men and women who are similarly qualified and working the same job, no major gender wage gap exists' (i.e. the 'Gender Pay Gap' dataset):



THE EFFECTS OF JOB CHOICE

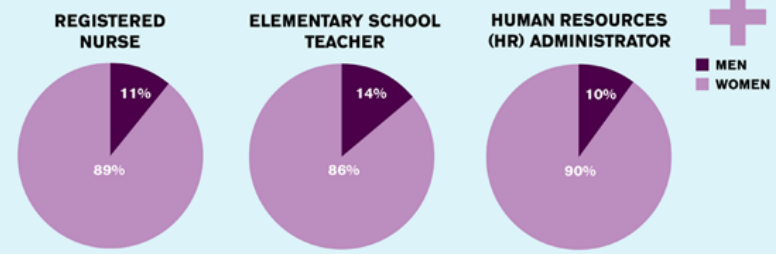
COMMON JOBS FOR MEN

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics



COMMON JOBS FOR WOMEN

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics



Sources:
1. http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120110.htm
2. http://www.payscale.com
3. http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jan/09/opinion/la-oe-gregory-birthrate-20110109

See the methodology: http://www.payscale.com/gender-lifetime-earnings-gap

PayScale

Appendix C

Reddit search strategy

The following terms were inputted into Reddit's in-site search engine:

Gendered nouns
'woman', 'man', 'women', 'men', 'female(s)', 'male(s)', 'girl(s)', 'boy(s)', 'gal(s)', 'guy(s), 'lady'
Gendered, relational nouns
'wife', 'husband', 'mother(s)', 'father(s)', 'mum(s)', 'mom(s)', 'dad(s)', 'girlfriend(s)', 'boyfriend(s)'
Abstract nouns relating to gender and gendered practices
'gender', 'sex', 'sexism', 'maternity', 'paternity'