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**Striving for Success: A Grounded Theory Study of  
High-Performing Women in the Swedish Workplace**

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## STRIVING FOR SUCCESS

### Abstract

The aim of this empirical study was to find out which characteristics, behaviors, and drives high-performing women have in common in order to illuminate why they have become successful in their work. The aim also included getting insights into some of the challenges that these women meet. Participants were fifteen high-performing women who work in business and academia in Sweden. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the participants, and grounded theory methodology was used to generate an empirically based core category and associated subcategories of significant qualities that characterize the participants. It was found that the women in the study have adopted a kind of superwoman persona that is made up of six major qualities that have enabled the women to become successful in their work: 1) they carry out work their own way by engaging in job crafting, 2) they believe in themselves, 3) they are good girls, 4) they have grit, ambition, and determination, 5) they go the extra mile in their work due to that they are personally engaged in what they do, and 6) they make things happen by displaying proactive work behavior. It is presented how the empirical findings support, and contribute with new knowledge to, the existing research literature, and implications for both research and practice are discussed. The various costs of being a high-performing woman are also taken into consideration.

*Keywords:* high performance, success, grounded theory, interviews, superwoman, job crafting, self-confidence, good girl, perfectionism, grit, work engagement, proactive work behavior

The business world is abundant with information about what defines a high performer, featuring articles with titles such as “Ten ways to spot a high performer” (Reid, April 1, 2010), “High performer or average worker? How can you quickly tell?” (Stack, Sep 24, 2012), and “How do you know if you are a high performer?” (Quinn, n.d.). Articles that offer quick and easy descriptions such as these tend to lack research foundation and be highly subjective in nature. The research literature, on the other hand, acknowledges the elusiveness and ambiguity of the description of the high performer, which has resulted in that there is no consensus of what defines high performers, and that there is a poor understanding of what outcomes their behavior has on their colleagues and the organizations they work for (Call, Nyberg, & Thatcher, 2015). Call and colleagues (2015) distinguish between the typical high performer, and the more specific subcategories of high performers referred to as stars and experts. They define high performers as individuals who display “disproportionately high performance”, and stars as those high performers who do not only perform higher than their lesser-performing colleagues but also have visibility (performance and reputation that is observable to others), and social capital (valuable business relationships). They describe experts as those high performers who consistently show “superior performance” in their work tasks, which they have accumulated through sustained deliberate practice (see Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993, for a more detailed description of experts). The different definitions of the high performer, and the lack of a clear understanding of the various aspects that pertain to this type of employee, calls for further detailed, exploratory research.

According to Cheung and Halpern (2010), few research studies have been conducted on high-performing women who have reached the top of their field. One reason for this may be the small number of women who have reached this level in their careers, and another reason may be that most of the research on this population is qualitative in nature and primarily relies on time-consuming in-depth interviews (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). When considering the studies that focus on the personal characteristics that can be found in high-performing women, the number of studies shrinks even more. Several of the studies conducted with high-performing women have found that the women described themselves as self-confident (Aycan, 2004; Duffy, et al., 2006; Noonan, Gallor, Hensler-McGinnis, Fassinger, Wang, & Goodman, 2004; Piterman, 2008; Reavley & Lituchy, 2008; Reynolds, 2010; Weidenfeller, 2012; Yewchuk, Äystö, & Schlosser, 2001), determined (Aycan, 2004; Fochtman, 2012; Ismail, Mohd Rasdi, & Wahiza Abdul Wahat,

2005; Noonan, et al., 2004; Yewchuk, et al., 2001), hard-working (Hewlett & Rashid, 2010; Ismail, et al., 2005; Weidenfeller, 2012; Yewchuk, et al., 2001), or as being passionate about their work (Aycaan, 2004; Hewlett & Rashid, 2010; Reynolds, 2010; Richie, Fassinger, Linn, Johnson, Prosser, & Robinson, 1997). A lesser number of the studies that were found show results that indicate that the women were persistent (Noonan, et al., 2004; Piterman, 2008; Richie, et al., 1997), ambitious (Hewlett & Rashid, 2010; Reynolds, 2010; Weidenfeller, 2012), and wanted to develop in their work (Aycaan, 2004; Reynolds, 2010; Weidenfeller, 2012). Some of the studies also found that the women reported being non-conformist (Piterman, 2008; Reavley & Lituchy, 2008), risk-taking (Reavley & Lituchy, 2008; Weidenfeller, 2012), resilient (Fochtman, 2012; Weidenfeller, 2012), flexible (Piterman, 2008; Yewchuk, et al., 2001), trustworthy (Aycaan, 2004; Fochtman, 2012), in control of their work (Duffy, et al., 2006; Ismail, et al., 2005), and willing to make sacrifices to get to where they wanted to be (Aycaan, 2004; Piterman, 2008).

Only a small number of studies have investigated the personal characteristics of high-performing women using grounded theory methodology (for example Richie, et al. 1997, and Noonan, et al., 2004), which is the type of methodology used in the present study. One major advantage of using grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, for further information) is that the results will be grounded in the data that has been collected rather than based on previously conducted research, which will enable the researcher to better understand the lived experiences of the participants in the study. For this reason, all the data was collected and analyzed before scouring the literature for previously conducted studies which had investigated the personal characteristics of high-performing women. Moreover, the methodology does not only offer further insight on psychological processes, but can be used to develop complex theoretical models (Noonan, et al., 2004), which is required when exploring the different aspects that pertain to the high-performing woman.

The main reasons for conducting the present study were to gain a better understanding of an under-researched population, namely young, high-performing female professionals in Sweden, and to discover how they have managed to become successful in their work. Most of the research conducted thus far has investigated middle-aged women who already have established careers, which sets the present study apart from other studies that have been conducted. The study will enable people to gain a better understanding of this under-researched population,

which is surprisingly enough rarely spoken about in favorable terms (see, for example, Perski & Rose, 2008, on high-performing women walking into a ‘capability trap’ and burning out because of their way of working). It should be evident that there are not *only* negative consequences of being a young high-performing woman in Sweden, but that this role also comes with various positive outcomes. The study is of further importance because it enables a better understanding of concepts in the literature that have not yet been fully developed, and shows which venues that could be interesting to take in future research. This will be elaborated upon in the Discussion.

The aim of the present study is to find out which characteristics, behaviors, and drives these young high-performing women have in common in order to be able to shed more light onto why they have become successful in their work. In order to reach this aim, the study attempts to answer the following questions: 1) what qualities do the high-performing women have in common that have enabled them to become successful in their work, and how are these qualities displayed?, 2) what are the possible benefits and costs of having these specific qualities? and 3) despite having to sacrifice certain aspects of their lives, why do these women keep striving for success in their work? To my knowledge, no study with this particular research focus, and study sample, has previously been carried out.

### **Theories Related to High-Performing Women**

The purpose of the following literature review is to provide background knowledge of the specific qualities that make the high-performing women in the present study successful in their work. Following grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the study was conducted prior to doing any review of the literature, which has led to that the sections chosen for the literature review are a direct result of the findings from the study. There are six sections in the literature review: 1) job crafting, which is closely related to the first section in the results “Doing things your own way”, 2) self-confidence, which is associated with the second section in the results “Believing in yourself”, 3) the “good girl”, which corresponds to the third section in the results “Being a good girl”, 4) grit, ambition, and determination, which refers to the fourth section in the results “Reaching for your goals”, 5) work engagement, which pertains to the fifth section in the results “Going the extra mile”, and 6) proactive work behavior, which is connected to the sixth section in the results “Making things happen”.

### **Job Crafting**

Job crafting - a relatively new, but rapidly expanding concept in the organizational behavior research literature (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013) - has been defined as a way for employees to redesign their jobs to better fit their strengths, values, and passions (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2007). It is considered to be a rather complex process that individuals engage in over time, rather than a separate, one-time event (Berg, et al. 2007; Berg, et al., 2013). The job crafting process begins with that individuals are motivated to redesign their jobs for one or more reasons, such as finding meaning in the work that they perform, or fulfilling a certain passion that is at the current moment outside the scope of their job description (Berg, et al., 2007). The process continues with that individuals recognize the opportunities for job crafting and engage in certain behaviors to redesign their jobs, for example, altering the type or number of tasks performed in the job (Berg, et al., 2007). It eventually results in individual outcomes, such as increased meaning and enjoyment in the work, or increased competence and personal growth (Berg, et al., 2007).

Job crafting can be performed through actively changing one's work tasks, the relationships one has with others at work, or the way one thinks about the tasks involved in the job (Berg, et al., 2007; Berg, et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). When employees engage in job crafting through changing tasks, they may redesign their tasks in a way that suits them better, allocate more time and energy to the tasks they consider to be worthwhile, or add personally meaningful tasks or projects to their work (Berg, et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). When changing the relationships to others at work, employees can adapt, or change the purpose of, existing relationships in order to promote higher quality interactions, or build new relationships that will add greater meaning to their work (Berg, et al., 2013). When engaging in cognitive job crafting, employees may think of their work as a whole instead of separate parts, and thus create a perception of heightened impact or purpose that their job has on others (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). If they, on the other hand, do not like certain parts of their job, they can narrow their focus to specific parts of their job that are especially meaningful to them (Berg, et al., 2013). Employees will be more likely to engage in job crafting if they have the freedom to take initiative in their work and to work autonomously (Berg, et al., 2013). If the employees are able to engage in job crafting, it may lead to benefits, such as increased

motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (Berg, et al., 2013), but also possible costs such as stress or regret (Berg, et al., 2007).

Berg and colleagues (2013) argue that to engage in job crafting, employees must first and foremost have a ‘job crafting mind-set’, which enables them to believe that they can, and have the right to, proactively shape their job at their own discretion. Employees need to be able to envision the job as flexible building blocks that can be rearranged in a chosen manner and believe that they have the ability to rearrange these blocks themselves. They also need to be resourceful and have the ability to take advantage of the resources present in their work (Berg, et al., 2007).

The literature on job crafting presents research on employees that do their own thing at work regardless of what other people say. In the next section, the literature on self-confidence will be explored. It could be argued that high self-confidence is needed in order for an employee to choose to engage in job crafting in the first place, as is evident from the text below.

### **Self-confidence**

Self-confidence is generally defined as an individual’s belief in his or her ability to perform a task competently, to produce positive results, or to accomplish his or her goals (Kanter, 2006; Langowitz & Minniti, 2006; Perry, 2011; Schunk, 1991; White, 2009). It has, however, been found in the literature that some researchers define the term differently, which has resulted in that there is not a consistent theory of self-confidence (Cramer, Neal, & Brodsky, 2009). Self-confidence is thought to not only influence an individual’s work or studies, but essentially every aspect of his or her life. It will affect the individual’s ability or willingness to, for example, engage in an activity (Kanter, 2006), complete various tasks, think optimistically, or overcome setbacks (Perry, 2011).

Self-confidence is often used interchangeably with the more specific concept of self-efficacy in the research literature, although the two concepts are built up of different features (Cramer, Neal, & Brodsky, 2009; Leigh, 2008; Levy, Nicholls, & Polman, 2011). For example, self-efficacy is a context-specific judgment of whether or not one will be able to carry out a designated task successfully (Bandura, 1977; Zimmerman, 2000), whereas self-confidence is more generally applied to various types of tasks. Self-confidence also relates to concepts such as self-esteem and the self-concept. Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) defined self-

esteem as an individual's sense of self-worth, that is, how much value individuals place on themselves. Either they place high value on themselves and have a positive definition of the self, or they place low value on themselves and have a negative definition of the self. This evaluation is a specific individual's perception rather than a reflection of reality, and it may therefore be difficult to determine its accuracy. There is not necessarily a relation between a given individual's self-confidence and self-esteem, since they may differ in the same context. The self-concept may comprise self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, and other aspects of the self. Research points to that the self-concept is hierarchically organized in the way that, on the top, there is a general self-concept (sometimes termed global self-esteem) that is formed from an individual's collective self-perceptions based on his or her previous experiences; and below that are various subarea self-concepts (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Schunk, 1991).

Self-confidence has been linked to performance in various types of fields. According to Langowitz and Minniti (2006), high self-confidence increases the work performance of entrepreneurs in the way that they tend to better perceive opportunities, and are more likely to start a new business, than those who are less confident in their abilities. High self-confidence has also been linked to increased performance in, for example, sports (Levy, et al., 2011), or nursing (Leigh, 2008; Perry, 2011; White, 2009).

Drawbacks of having too much confidence is that one can become arrogant, in the way that one will refuse to see any flaws or weaknesses, or overconfident, in the way that one will become unreasonably enthusiastic or optimistic about something that may very well fail. On the other hand, if an individual has too little confidence, he or she will have an excessively pessimistic, or defeatist, attitude, which may lead to the individual choosing to not engage in a new activity, or giving up at the sign of even the smallest difficulty (Kanter, 2006).

The literature on self-confidence generally refers to individuals who believe in themselves, and it is closely connected to the previous section, which refers to individuals who "do things their own way" despite what other people may say. It is also associated with the next section, but in a different manner, in the way that the two concepts are seemingly contrasting, since "good girls" tend to doubt themselves. As will be discussed later in the paper, however, the two concepts have more in common with each other than one might think, and can co-exist in the same individual.



### **The Good Girl**

Perski and Rose (2008) have, through their research on high-achieving Swedish women, characterized what they refer to as the “good girl”. According to their definition, good girls are capable, high-performing individuals who are driven by a strong desire to achieve. These individuals have high standards that they are striving towards, and continuously pursue difficult challenges. They are often able to achieve much more than what is expected of them, which may, in part, be based on that they spend the majority of the waking hours of their lives working. Good girls believe that their self-worth is based on their achievements, which leads to that they need to be the best at everything they do, not only in their work life but also in their personal life, in order to feel good about themselves. Despite their high achievements, good girls tend to doubt themselves, which results in that they want to receive confirmation by others in order to feel sure about themselves. Moreover, they are afraid to get rejected, which leads to that they tend to suppress their own needs and emotions in order to avoid conflicts.

Perski and Rose (2008) state that the good girl tendencies are often experienced from a very young age and tend to be encouraged by adults both at school and at home. The high achievements that are often the result of the good-girl behavior tend to give great satisfaction that is difficult to get elsewhere, which is the reason to why this type of behavior continues over the years and becomes a part of these individuals’ identities. As time passes by, it becomes increasingly difficult for the good girls to keep up their behavior, because the standards that they are aiming towards keep getting higher and the challenges harder, causing a vicious circle that is difficult for them to get out of (Perski & Rose, 2008).

According to the research done by Perski and Rose (2008), part of being a good girl is also being a perfectionist. Perfectionists, similarly to good girls, set unreasonably high standards for performance in an attempt to become flawless, and they have a strong fear of making mistakes and disappointing others (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate 1990; Perski & Rose, 2008; Stoeber & Damian, 2015). These individuals tend to be excessively self-critical, thinking that nothing they do is ever good enough (Perski & Rose, 2008; Stoeber & Damian, 2015). In addition, they are inclined to keep their work life highly structured and often have a difficulty trusting their work to others because they fear that it might not be done “the right way” (Perski & Rose, 2008). Furthermore, perfectionists are more disposed to worry and rumination than others,

leading to that they have a difficulty to put away work and relax at the end of the day (Stoeber & Damian, 2015).

Being a perfectionist can have both positive and negative outcomes. According to Stoeber and Otto (2006), perfectionism can be beneficial when it focuses on setting high performance standards and striving for perfection, in the way that it can lead to increased positive affect, conscientiousness, and adaptive coping. They argue that it can, however, be harmful to the perfectionists when they are consumed with a fear of making mistakes, of being negatively evaluated by others, and of not living up to their own expectations.

### **Grit, Ambition, and Determination**

The literature on good girls relates to the current section in the way that gritty, ambitious and determined individuals are similar to good girls because they also tend to work hard and for long periods of time. Grit has been defined by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly (2007) as having “perseverance and passion for long-term goals”. Being gritty entails working persistently toward a certain aim, and upholding interest and effort over several years or decades despite experiencing hardships and lack of progress or success (Duckworth, et al., 2007). Grit is a newly defined concept in the research literature on positive psychology (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and there is still much to be known about its fundamental psychological mechanisms (Duckworth and Gross, 2014).

In a measure of grit (see Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), individuals are tested on their consistency of interest and on their perseverance of effort. The scale is based on the premises that gritty individuals: 1) keep pursuing the same goal for years, 2) do not let new ideas or projects take their eyes of the goal, 3) have been interested in the same goal for several years, 4) maintain their focus on the goal, 5) finish whatever they begin, 6) are not discouraged by setbacks, 7) are hard-working, and 8) are diligent (Duckworth, et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

Terms that are close synonyms to grit, but that do not adequately explain all the aspects of the concept are “passion and tenacity” (Baum & Locke, 2004), “perseverance” (Terman & Oden, 1947), and “zeal and hard work” (Galton, 1892). Grit is also considered to be closely related to concepts such as “conscientiousness” (McCrae & and Costa, 1987), “need for achievement” (McClelland, 1961), and self-control (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). It overlaps with

conscientiousness in terms of achievement aspects, but is different in the way that it involves having “long-term stamina rather than short-term intensity” (Duckworth, et al., 2007). According to Duckworth and colleagues (2007), grit is also similar to need for achievement in the way that both terms are achievement-oriented, but differs in the way that grit entails setting quite challenging, long-term goals and need for achievement involves setting only somewhat easily manageable goals that are dependent on immediate feedback. Self-control, defined as the ability to control one’s behavior and emotions when facing momentary temptations, is strongly related to grit in the way that both concepts have the same underlying psychological processes (Duckworth and Gross, 2014). According to Duckworth and Gross (2014), self-control is, however, distinct from grit in the way that it most often comes into play when dealing with numerous substitutable short-term goals, whereas grit is only used when managing fewer long-term goals of enduring value.

When it comes to work performance, Duckworth and colleagues (2007) found that gritty individuals in both educational and work contexts perform higher than less gritty individuals. One possible explanation for these findings is that gritty individuals work harder and for longer periods of time than individuals who are less gritty, which is something that increases the likelihood of success in the activity pursued (Duckworth, et al., 2007). Duckworth and colleagues have argued, based on the results from their studies, that grit may be a better predictor of success than intelligence, self-control, or conscientiousness, which have previously been stipulated to be good predictors of success. Since there is still much to be known about the relationship between these concepts, one should be careful about making further inferences about this before having explored it further in empirical studies.

What has not been mentioned in the main literature on grit are the drawbacks of tirelessly pursuing long-term goals when for example engaging in performance contexts. Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman (2009) have found in their research on goal-setting behavior that pursuing goals that are too narrow may lead to that individuals fail to notice important features of the goal. Trying to reach goals that are too challenging, on the other hand, may lead to that the goals will not be reached, or that individuals may engage in unethical behavior in order to reach them (Ordóñez, et al., 2009). Moreover, Ordóñez, and colleagues (2009) argue that it is important for an individual to set a goal that is suitable for the individual in question, and to pursue the goal for its own sake in order to increase the intrinsic motivation experienced.

In order to be able to pursue long-term goals, it could be argued that individuals need to be personally engaged in their work, which is what the next section will be about.

There is not an abundance of literature specifically on ambition and determination, but the concepts are included in this section because of their importance to the women in the present study as they reach for their goals in their work, and because of their close association to grit. Merriam-Webster Online (2016a) defines an ambitious individual as someone who has a desire to achieve a particular goal which is not easily attained, such as becoming successful, powerful, or famous. According to Locke (2000), ambitious individuals set high standards, and difficult goals, for themselves and tend to achieve them simply because they are not satisfied with anything less. A determined individual, on the other hand, is defined as someone who has a strong feeling that she is going to do something that she has decided upon, and that she will not allow anything or anyone to stop her (Merriam-Webster Online, 2016b). Having determination will enable a person to continue to try to achieve something that is difficult (Merriam-Webster Online, 2016c).

This section on grit, ambition, and determination relates to the next section on work engagement in the way that the individuals who have these characteristics generally tend to be personally engaged in their work as well, and tend to go the extra mile in their work.

### **Work Engagement**

Work engagement is a concept that has only recently started to gain popularity in the research literature (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008). It is a rather ambiguous construct that can be defined in several different ways and there is no clear definition that has reached a consensus among researchers (Bakker, et al., 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008). However, according to Bakker and colleagues (2008), most researchers do agree on that work engagement is characterized by having a high level of energy and strongly identifying with one's work, which will be described in more detail below.

From an overall perspective, work engagement can be defined as 1) a personal disposition, referred to as trait engagement, 2) an affective psychological state, referred to as state engagement, or 3) directly observable behavior in the workplace, referred to as behavioral engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Macey and Schneider (2008) argue that trait engagement can be thought of as a personality trait, or as an enduring tendency to experience a

positive affective state in work and life as a whole. Individuals who have an engaged personality type are generally proactive (Macey & Schneider, 2008), industrious and ambitious (Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark & Goldberg, 2005), and internally driven (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, as cited in Macey & Schneider, 2008).

According to Macey and Schneider, the dispositions shown in trait engagement partially result in that individuals display state and behavioral engagement. State engagement, the type of engagement that has received the most attention in the research literature according to Macey and Schneider (2008), is defined by Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.” This state of mind is not specific to any situation and it usually lasts for an extended time period (Schaufeli, et al. 2002). Vigor is characterized by having high levels of energy, the willingness to put much effort into one’s work, and an ability to effectively handle stress and adversity at work (Bakker, et al., 2008; Schaufeli, et al. 2002). Dedication is displayed in an individual who strongly identifies with his or her work, who feels that there is a meaning to what he or she does, and who feels enthusiastic, inspired and proud (Bakker, et al., 2008; Schaufeli, et al. 2002). Absorption refers to being fully concentrated on, and immersed in, one’s work in the way that time flies by quickly and it feels quite difficult to detach oneself from work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker, et al., 2008; Schaufeli, et al. 2002). Absorption is similar to the state of flow, which is a short-term peak experience, rather than a long-lasting state of mind such as absorption (Schaufeli, et al. 2002). The three dimensions of state engagement, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption, are considered as having stemmed from the three dimensions of burnout (Schaufeli, et al. 2002), which is the opposite of work engagement. These dimensions are emotional exhaustion, which is the draining of emotional resources due to work, cynicism, which is a negative and unsympathetic attitude towards work, and professional inefficacy (Schaufeli, et al. 2002; see Maslach & Leiter, 1997, for research on burnout), which is the belief that one is inefficient in one’s work (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007).

The third type of work engagement is behavioral engagement, which can, according to Macey and Schneider (2008), be looked upon from several different viewpoints. One way to look at behavioral engagement is that it implies a work behavior that goes beyond what is ordinary or typically expected (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Another way to look at it is that it implies putting in extra effort, which includes devoting more time, brainpower, or energy, to work than is

required (Towers-Perrin, as cited in Macey & Schneider, 2008). Some even refer to behavioral engagement as when employees are “giving it their all” (Bernthal, as cited in Macey & Schneider, 2008). Engaged employees may not simply be doing something more, but also something different, than their less engaged colleagues, meaning that they may be able to find ways of working smarter and more efficiently (Macey & Schneider, 2008). When it comes to work performance, it has been argued by Bakker and Demerouti (2008) and Bakker, and colleagues, (2008) that engaged employees typically perform better than non-engaged employees.

In the following section, an area that is similar to behavioral engagement will be discussed. This section will build on the information that has already been presented and provide further understanding of how employees take personal initiative in their work and behave proactively.

### **Proactive Work Behavior**

Proactive work behavior has, according to Bindl and Parker (2010), only recently started to gain considerable interest to researchers and practitioners alike. This is mainly due to new research developments and the increased importance of this type of behavior in today’s workplace (Bindl & Parker, 2010). There is no single definition or theory that explains proactive work behavior (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000) due to that researchers differ in their judgments of whether it is a personal disposition or a function of situational forces (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000). The only consensus among researchers, according to Crant (2000), is that proactive behavior involves active rather than passive behaviors at work.

Bindl and Parker (2010) define proactive behavior as an action brought about by an individual that is intended to initiate a change in the work situation, or in the behavior of the individual. It includes taking personal initiative (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000; Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996), which means foreseeing problems that may occur in order to pre-emptively act on them instead of simply reacting to them after they have occurred (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000), going beyond required work tasks (Frese, et al., 1996), and creating own personal goals (Bindl & Parker, 2010). It also involves challenging status quo and actively taking charge of a work situation in an effort to constructively shape the work environment (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000), as well as persevering through difficulties until the desired

change occurs (Crant, 2000; Frese, et al., 1996). Additionally, proactive individuals tend to seek out new information and opportunities and act on them (Crant, 2000), and find alternative ways of doing certain tasks (Frese, et al., 1996).

It has been suggested that the behaviors exhibited when being proactive, such as initiating a change in the work environment, may lead to higher job performance (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000; Frese et al., 1996; Seibert, Kraimer & Crant, 2001). Proactive work behavior does not always lead to positive outcomes (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Crant, 2000; Frese, et al., 1996), however, since it may bring about various obstacles and setbacks, such as resistance or punishment from managers that do not appreciate the initiative taken, or actions that are poorly executed due to that they have not been previously attempted (Frese, et al., 1996). Crant (2000) suggests that it could be useful to evaluate the possible costs and benefits before engaging in proactive behavior to be able to judge whether or not it is appropriate in a given situation.

In the following sections of this paper, the literature on proactive work behavior, as well as the previous sections that have been presented, will be further explored through empirical research that has been carried out in the present study.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were 15 high-performing women working in Stockholm, Sweden. Five women were working as senior recruitment professionals, five were academics from diverse university research departments, and five were project managers/engineers in infrastructure.

Different inclusion criteria were used for the different groups of participants. The recruitment professionals were judged to be high performers from their recruiting performance and the speed of career advancement. This was determined by the information provided on their LinkedIn profiles, and feedback from their company that identified them as high performers. The female academics were judged from the number of articles published, the number of awards and scholarships won, and the quality of their academic backgrounds; information that was available online. The female project managers/engineers were judged from their career progression, the honors and awards achieved, and the size of infrastructure projects they had been working on (a determinant of high performance in the industry), also determined by the information provided on their LinkedIn profiles. The recruitment professionals and the project managers/engineers

were identified mainly through connections on LinkedIn (approximately 1.2 million people in the author's extended network) and the female academics were identified through university websites of three of the major universities in Stockholm, Sweden, which listed all of their researchers in the different departments. The main reason behind selecting high-performing employees from the particular fields mentioned above was that the author of this paper has had personal experience from each of them and therefore believed that this would lead to better identification of, and access to, suitable participants. Additionally, it was important for the participants to be working in fields that had the following attributes: 1) the performance is visible to the outside observer, 2) the performance could easily be judged of whether it is at a high or low level, and 3) the performance is objectively quantifiable, or would be judged the same by independent researchers. Since the interviews were to be held in English, only the participants who spoke fluent English were considered for the study. The participants' ages ranged between 26 and 35, with a mean age of 30. Only two of the women were mothers, but the majority of the women were in serious relationships at the time the interviews were being held.

### **Interview Guide**

The main instrument used in the present study was a semi-structured interview guide (see *Appendix B*) that would minimize the potential influences on the participants' responses by the interviewer. The participants were, in addition to the already established questions, asked individually tailored follow-up questions based on what they shared during the interview. This shed more light onto specific subject areas that were particularly interesting to the participant in question. If a certain question elicited a vague response from a participant, it was reformulated so that she could answer it more easily. The questions in the interview guide touched upon the following areas:

- (1) Personality traits (any personality traits that the participants chose to share about themselves, and follow-up questions that tapped into the Big Five taxonomy: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion/Introversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism).
- (2) Goal-setting (past, present, and future goals).
- (3) Work performance (definition, certain behaviors exhibited at work, and work structure).
- (4) Work motivation (motivational factors, identification with work, and ideal work environment).



When ten out of fifteen interviews had been carried out, the researcher noticed that the same key categories were appearing throughout the interviews. The decision to engage in theoretical sampling (see a detailed definition of this concept in Charmaz, 2006) was thus made, in order to collect more data that focused on the key categories and their properties. This would result in that the categories would become more robust and firm, and that they would become saturated with pertinent data. In order to ensure that no important information would be lost, however, open-ended questions about the participants' personal characteristics and work behaviors were always asked.

### **Procedure**

Prospective participants were contacted via email in the three work fields. Fifteen participants answered that they were interested in participating in the study. The interviews took place at different company offices in Stockholm, Sweden, in meeting rooms designed especially for interviews, or at downtown cafés, depending on each participant's preference. All of the participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, and sign an informed consent (see *Appendix A*), prior to starting the interview. The participants were informed that they could discontinue the interview at any time without any repercussion and that their identities would be kept entirely anonymous. Each of the interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes to one hour and were audiotaped.

The interviewer took field notes during the interviews, and wrote extensive memos after the interviews, to provide sufficient background information for the analysis of the interview transcripts. The audiotapes from the interviews were transcribed, and notes were written down for interruptions, emphasis on particular words, and laughter. Caution was taken to ensure that the participants could not be identified through their quotes in the transcripts. The transcripts ranged in length from 8 to 13 single-spaced pages. The field notes, transcripts, and memos, created a total of 217 single-spaced pages of original research data that were to be analyzed.

### **Analysis and Background to the Analysis**

The analysis of the qualitative data collected in this study has been based on grounded theory methodology. There are two different epistemological stances in this type of methodology: the objectivist stance, supported by Glaser (1992), and the social constructionist stance, supported by

Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory researchers taking an objectivist approach 1) aim to explain and predict empirical phenomena at a general level, not taking into account specific research contexts, 2) assume that there is an external reality that is discovered by passive and neutral observation, 3) believe that data are self-explanatory and ignore data that are partial, limited, or missing, and 4) deny the existence of prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions due to that they believe that they should come into the research process without these, and therefore remain unbiased (Charmaz, 2008). Grounded theory researchers taking a social constructionist approach, on the other hand, 1) create an abstract, interpretive understanding of empirical phenomena and deduce that this understanding is based on the specific circumstances taking place in the research process, 2) regard reality as multiple and constructed under certain conditions, 3) believe that the research process develops through interaction between the researcher and the research participants, meaning that the researcher is part of the research situation and affects it through his or her positions, perspectives and interactions, and that the data are produced during this process, 4) regard research participants' views and voices as essential to the analysis and presentation of the data, instead of prioritizing their own views, 5) collect enough data to be able to understand and document how the participants make sense of their lives and worlds, 6) have the ability to develop new understandings and theoretical interpretations of the studied phenomenon, 7) adapt research strategies to new information, insights, and questions that have emerged throughout the research process, 8) encourage using previous knowledge and theoretical preconceptions, and meanwhile subjecting them to rigorous examination and scrutiny, and 9) closely examine the research directions taken, and the decisions made, by themselves (Charmaz, 2008).

The actual methodology that is used in a grounded theory study will be determined by the approach (either objectivist or social constructionist) that has been taken by the researcher. The current research study uses the social constructionist approach to grounded theory methodology. The main reason for this is that this particular approach to grounded theory was deemed to be the most suitable for the type of data that would be collected, that is, participants' subjective accounts of how they make sense of their lives and worlds. Moreover, since the author's personal views are in accordance with the social constructionist stance, and the author felt that she had enough understanding about the participants' worlds to co-create a reality with them, this was another important reason that led to the use of this approach.

According to Charmaz (2004) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) view of grounded theory, the methodology provides the researcher with tools that structure and organize data collection and analysis, resulting in highly systematic qualitative research. The research process results in theory development in the way that the first set of interviews is analyzed and then followed by continued data collection from new participants to provide further support for the theories that have developed from the previous data. Grounded theory methods are unique in the way that they develop theories from the interview data that has been collected rather than from other scholars' work (Charmaz, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2004) argues that when collecting data, it is important to gather rich data from which the researcher can arrive at theories that may be developed in further research. The result of collecting data in this manner is that the more research that is done, the more focused the data collection will become (Charmaz, 2004). Although grounded theory methods are rigorous in the way that they are grounded in collected data, they may also be used creatively and flexibly in order to obtain innovative results and to uncover new perspectives on the phenomenon that is being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the present study, when analyzing data based on this methodology, the researcher went through the following analytic phases: line-by-line coding, focused coding, and memo-writing (see Charmaz, 2006, for more information about these concepts). Line-by-line coding, or microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), means carefully studying each line of data in the transcript and naming it in a way that helps the researcher understand the action that is taking place within the line (Charmaz, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is quite different from other types of qualitative analysis since it compels the researcher to listen closely to what interviewees are saying and how they are saying it instead of thinking about the data in general terms (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the current analysis, the steps in line-by-line coding outlined in Charmaz (2006) were employed. Each of the line-by-line codes were made as active and as specific as possible, which allowed the researcher to observe the significant processes that were occurring within the line, and to develop theoretical categories. If one line generated more than one code, the second code was written next to the first code to allow for all of the codes to be considered in the analysis. The line-by-line coding allowed the researcher to stay critical of the research, and it helped to develop ideas for further research. This type of coding resulted in that many different ideas were considered in the initial phase of the analysis and that the reoccurring ideas were made more focused in further analysis. Through the line-by-line coding in the present study, over

5000 codes were identified and considered in the next step of the analysis, which is focused coding.

Focused coding (Charmaz, 2004), or conceptualization (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), refers to the action of considering codes that occurred several times, or those that are especially interesting, in the line-by-line coding and making them into conceptual categories that are clear and concise. These categories are expected to be logical and accurate reflections of the data that has been collected and they should enable the researcher to filter through a great amount of information when doing further research (Charmaz, 2004). In the current study, the steps in focused coding delineated in Charmaz (2006) were adhered to. The focused codes that were developed from the line-by-line coding in the study were either taken directly from the transcript (*in vivo* codes), or represented the researcher's theoretical definition of the actions present in the data. Approximately 30 different categories were identified through this analysis by considering how many times they occurred throughout the transcribed interviews, and their perceived importance in the context they were in. Based on the number of women who described themselves according to each of the categories, and the extent to which the women identified with them, they were also considered in order of importance.

Memo-writing is the analytic phase that comes after the focused coding (Charmaz, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), but before the first draft of a paper, and it helps the researcher to define patterns in the data and to break the categories into smaller components that explore the processes taking place. In the present study, the guidelines on memo-writing described in Charmaz (2006) were followed. The memo-writing in the study made sense of the categories chosen in the focused coding by defining, and elaborating on, them. The data within each category was studied and the different categories were compared to one another in order to gain further understanding of the patterning of the data, to find gaps in the analysis, and to make sure that those were the categories that best explained the data. For the sake of comprehensiveness, the categories developed through focused coding were grouped into six distinguishable key categories, which characterize the women, and explain how they have become successful in their work. In order to allow for the memos to become more complex and theoretical, a thorough analysis was then performed, questions were posed, and directions for further data collection were suggested.

## Results

The Results section consists of the core category found in the study, which has six unique subdivisions. These subdivisions directly correspond to the preceding literature sections. As previously mentioned, “Doing things your own way” is connected to the literature on job crafting, “Believing in yourself” is linked to the research on self-confidence, “Being a good girl” refers to the good girl concept, “Reaching for your goals” is associated with the literature on grit, ambition, and determination, “Going the extra mile” connects to the research on work engagement, and “Making things happen” refers to the literature on proactive work behavior. The subsections correspond to the six qualities that the high-performing women in the study have in common, which have enabled them to become successful in their work.

Throughout the section, the participants’ responses are discussed according to the following system (similar to the one used in Richie, et al., 1997): 1) words such as “the women in the sample”, “the majority”, “most”, “generally”, and “tended” indicates that 8 or more of the participants answered in a particular manner, 2) words such as “several”, “a number”, or “many” refers to 4-7 of the participants, and 3) words such as “a few” or “some” refers to three participants or less. The women may also be referred to in more exact numbers.

### The core category

The core category that emerged after the majority of the interviews had been held revealed a particular type of woman, who, in this case, is referred to as the “superwoman”. This woman is, in this study, defined as someone who:

1. does things her own way by working independently and autonomously, and taking the road less traveled;
2. believes in herself, meaning that she is confident and remains strong in herself;
3. is a “good girl”, that is, a perfectionist who has very high internal standards that she tries to live up to, and who has a hard time saying no to things;
4. is gritty, ambitious, and determined when reaching for the goals that she has set up for herself;
5. goes the extra mile by working excessively hard and dedicating much time to her work, tending to repeatedly go beyond what is expected of her. Moreover, she is someone who

continuously wants to learn more and to develop in her work, and who is emotionally invested in what she does;

6. “makes things happen” by working proactively, and taking charge when working with others, impelling them to move forward.

The women interviewed in this study either fully, or almost fully, embody this superwoman persona, and they have in different stages throughout their lives identified more, or less, with the various qualities outlined above. They indicated having personally chosen to take on this role, and having stayed with it throughout their lives because of the positive things they have been able to achieve. According to the women, they have due to their choice, however, also had to suffer through some negative consequences, such as having had to make various types of sacrifices, or from time to time having had to experience stress, anxiety, loneliness, tiredness, or exhaustion.

In the subsequent parts of the Results section, the six different subsections that constitute the core theory, and the negative consequences of having these superwoman-qualities, will be discussed.

### **Doing things your own way**

The women in the sample described that they “do things their own way” by working independently and autonomously, and by taking a road less traveled, which will be presented in detail in the sections below. These results relate to the literature on job crafting.

**Working independently and autonomously.** The women expressed that when they work independently and autonomously, they do not have anyone who tells, or shows, them how to do their work. They structure, and carry out, their work themselves after having been given, or taken, the freedom to do so. According to the women, they have, in most cases, been given freedom in their work by their employer, and they have found a way to meet the formal requirements of their employer while still maintaining their own unique focus in their work. One of the recruiters reported: “I don’t have any manager that tells me exactly how I need to structure my work... as long as everything else is in order... they don’t care the way I get there”.

Several of the women reported that when an authority figure *does* tell them to do something that is not in accordance with what they had in mind, they refuse it and instead go with what they think is best. Many of them feel like they have had to learn to rely on themselves,

and work independently, because they have nothing, or no one, to lean back on. One of the consultants disclosed that she was raised by her parents to take care of herself, having been left to try new, and sometimes unsafe, activities on her own from a very young age. Some recruiters and academics maintained that they have learned to rely on themselves either due to that they have gotten the wrong advice, or nonexistent feedback, from their superiors, learned that they know their work better than anyone else, or never needed any help from others to do their work. Not having anyone to rely on has, according to these women, led them to either feel a pressure to succeed on their own, become scared of failure, experience additional stress in their work, or feel lonely, overwhelmed, or betrayed. For better or for worse, this has forced them to become independent in their work, and also enabled them to overcome difficult hurdles.

A number of the women explained that when they work independently and autonomously, they get very focused on what they are doing and transition into a state of flow, which they describe as “going into a bubble”, being “isolated from the world” or being “all in my head”. Several of the women described working independently and autonomously as being physically alone by saying “I work the best alone”, “I practiced on my own”, and “I was left to do my own thing”. One of the academics said:

But it was just me. No one was there. No one would judge me. No one would grade me. But it was just me and I wanted to do better and better for every day. Work a little bit harder, perform a little bit better, for me.

One of the consultants admitted that she detested engaging in teamwork because she always felt the need to do all the work herself in order for it to be done well. She also described herself as always being a bit “special” because she isolated herself from others and focused on what she was doing.

A few of the women expressed a strong need to work autonomously. One of the academics said: “...being able to have this autonomy and to have this freedom... I mean, that’s everything.” One of the academics and one of the consultants directly expressed their ability to work autonomously and independently as what has made them the high-performing women they are today.

**Taking a road less traveled.** The women explained that when taking a road less traveled, they tend to pursue what *they* want, and develop *their own way* of going about their work. One of the recruiters maintained that she goes about her work in a way that personally suits her, regardless of what the norm is amongst the rest of her colleagues, and another one of

the recruiters declared that she can accept being “number three” in her company (as opposed to being number one), performance-wise, if she can be this on her own terms. A third recruiter stated that she found her own niche in her work, which was neither asked for, nor expected of her. One of the consultants expressed that she always wanted to be the youngest person with the highest salary in her role, which is something that she has achieved in her work.

Some of the women declared that they take a road less traveled in the way that they engage in unconventional activities, think outside the box, and challenge held beliefs. One academic said when explaining that she engages in different activities from her peers:

In a lot of cases, I tend to do the opposite of what maybe the majority are doing... So I maybe have a little tendency to do the things I know will make me stand out, but not just to stand out -- to challenge myself.

One of the consultants described that she loves “twisting questions”, which basically means that when her co-workers think about a question, or a problem, in one way, she takes a different stance and looks at it from a different angle which has not been previously considered. Another academic explained that she has unconventional research interests which make her stand out:

...the reasons that I do [her particular work] is a little bit controversial within my field, so I -- and if they say that “we can give you this post-doc position, but then we want you to research this ‘more traditional thing’”, I don’t think I would do it... I’m not sure I wanna compromise that much with what I wanna do.

A third academic asserted that she believes that she has a different, and superior, view of work than most other people, which she finds to be a problem, since others do not see the same potential in certain projects that she does.

A few of the women claimed that they tend to create their own life path in the way that they start from nothing and then themselves decide which path they are going to take next. They described that they usually embark on unknown and uncharted territory in their work because they feel that they need to tailor their work to their personalities, and because they see opportunities that others before them have not seen. One of the recruiters said about the business area that she has successfully built on her own: “I started a business area that didn’t really exist at the time when I started” and another recruiter who also started her business from scratch stated that “...it took a year to get up and running and the two last financial years I have been doing very well.”



The individuals presented in this section maintained that they do things their own way by being independent, and non-conformist, which is highly consistent with the next category “Believing in yourself”, where it will be shown that the women tended to report being confident women who are strong in themselves.

### **Believing in yourself**

The women in the sample reported that they believe in themselves by being confident and by being strong in themselves, which is presented in the following subsections. These findings are associated with the literature on self-confidence.

**Being confident.** All of the women, but one, showed in different ways during the interviews that they are confident in themselves and in their abilities. The woman who did not show confidence in herself is no less high performing, or successful, than the other women, but maybe more so than many of them. She, however, has a different drive than the others, which is a fear of failure that continuously makes her question herself and pushes her on until she reaches the top. Nevertheless, almost all of the women expressed that they are confident in themselves in the way that they believe that they know how to do their job well. One of the recruiters, who showed a confidence in herself throughout the interview, showed that she believes that she can do her job well when she stated “I’m not an expert in a specific job -- otherwise I would do it myself -- I’m an expert in recruitment, so I can consult and advise clients about that... I’m quite relaxed and confident in what I’m doing.” Another one of the recruiters reported “[In] the area that I cover the most I don’t feel stressed at all. I know everyone and I know how to deal with everything.” Moreover, one of the academics displayed her confidence in the quality of her work when she said “...I’m working with people who are as good as I am.” The reasons behind the women believing that they know how to do their job well are, for example, that they have seen that they have had good results in their work, that they feel like they have proven themselves in the eyes of their managers, or that they have a way of working that has shown to be successful, which they apply time and time again.

Many of the women also showed that they are confident in themselves in the way that they believe that they can achieve what they set out to do in their work. One of the academics stated “I have learned... from my own experience that I will make it.” One of the consultants said “I always want to produce the best and I know that I can do it... I have a thinking that

nothing is impossible in this world. It depends on which energy level you put into that work.” The belief that the women have that they can achieve what they set out to do is grounded in, for example, that they have a history of achieving their goals, that they have already gotten so far that they can easily see themselves going further, or that they have been told by others that they believe in them.

A few of the women expressed that they have confidence in themselves by believing that what they do in their work has an impact on others, in the way that their work changes other people’s lives.

**Being strong in themselves.** Some of the women illustrated that when they are strong in themselves, they tend to refrain from doing something just because they are expected to. They maintained that they, for example, have the ability to stand up to authority if they strongly believe in something, and that they are firm in their opinions and will not change their minds just because someone says something contrary. One of the academics described herself as being a person who is quite opinionated and who challenges held beliefs in her field, which she admitted “can sometimes be provocative, especially to men”. The women also expressed that they have been able to decline attractive offers in favor of something that is even better, and that they will not be persuaded to embark on a more traditional road than the one they have chosen.

One academic and one consultant described that they are strong in themselves when they do something that they are afraid of doing. The academic explicated that she does what she is afraid of doing because she believes that she will regret it if she does not do it, and that she wants to learn how to conquer her fears and next time not be as afraid of them. The consultant stated that she does what she is afraid of doing after telling herself that the actual consequences are going to be minimal, despite what she may feel before doing it. The same consultant also claimed that she has the ability to control her feelings and be level-headed in pressing situations, which may also be one reason to why she has the ability to do things she is afraid of.

A few of the women expressed that they are strong in themselves when accepting criticism and turning it into something constructive instead of feeling poorly about it. One of the academics said, illustrating the strength she has within herself: “I don’t get defeated very easily... and that, I think, is a really important strength to have.” Other women have indicated that they are able to fight back when they are being treated unjustly, for example, due to that they

are women, have a different focus than the majority of people in their field, or are younger than the person who is attempting to put them in their place.

One of the consultants, and, arguably, one of the highest performers of all the women, displayed the strength that she has within herself by expressing how she slowed down her incredibly fast work pace over a course of several years before getting burned out. According to her, she accomplished this by doing the following:

...so I went back into myself and thought “What is really important? Am I working -- am I living for the work or am I living for my private life?” And then during this period I decided “No, it is my private life that is more important”. And I changed my structure, so I’m not working more than 40 hours per week, ever.

She explained that today, she believes that she is performing even better than she did before, at the same time as she feels like she has the time to relax, process and reflect on her feelings and newly acquired knowledge, and has control of the situation because she now knows what to do when work becomes too stressful. There are several women who have reported behaving in a way that may lead to them eventually burning out, for example working inordinately many hours for a prolonged period of time, driving themselves to their limit time and time again, working on too many things at once until they feel like they almost cannot handle it anymore, and so on. Thus far, all of the women have reportedly avoided pushing themselves to that limit, and the majority of them have maintained being aware of the importance of having a good work-life balance, although only some of them are actively working towards achieving it.

Another one of the consultants stated that when work becomes too stressful for her, she has a routine to go to the gym and do weight training exercises. The routine that she explained not only shows off her physical strength, but her mental strength as well, because when she is able to reach her physical limit, her physical strength transforms into mental strength:

There is like a physical limit. Then I go home and the day after, the work feels really easy, ‘cause the deadlift was so heavy and I didn’t know if I could really manage that -- the other things at work feels much easier. I don’t feel like I have a limit.

According to some of the women, their strong personas have caused some of their colleagues to either respect or fear them, become offended by them, or think that they are aggressive. The women know that they can be viewed this way, and they maintained that they actively try to downplay these qualities in themselves, and try their best to be kind and attentive to others.

Since the women presented in this, and the previous, section reported that they do things their own way by being independent, and non-conformist, and that they believe in themselves by being confident and strong, the category discussed in the next section, which is “Being a good girl”, may seem contradictory. It will soon be evident, however, that these categories have more in common than what one might first think and that they together contribute in the quest to solve the puzzle of what qualities high-performing women have in common that enable them to become successful in their work.

### **Being a good girl**

The women described that they are “good girls” in the way that they strive for perfection, set high standards for themselves, continuously want to improve, and try to please others in order to avoid disappointing them, which will be discussed in the following subsections. These findings are connected to the literature on the “good girl”.

**Striving for perfection.** The majority of the women expressed that they strive for perfection in their work. They explained that when they strive for perfection, they want their work to be completely flawless in order to feel satisfied about themselves and to not experience any personal struggles. Most of the women described their work as less than perfect, which made them feel like they had not done a good enough job. One of the academics said when looking back at her results in high school:

I got a 97 out of 100 when I graduated at high school and everybody thought, you know, she’s gonna have 100 out of 100... I went through some struggles when I was seventeen and eighteen, so I ended up having only 97.

The same academic stated that she believed that in order to reach truly high performance, one should attain perfect results and not get stressed, tired, or worn out, while doing this. She indicated not having achieved this level of performance herself, which, according to her, makes her less than perfect.

Several of the women reported that when they strive for perfection, they want to be exceptional at not just one thing, but at everything. They described not only getting fully involved in many different work tasks, but also in organizations, sports, and their relationships with family and friends. A few of the women reported that they have realized that they cannot continue being involved in all these areas of their lives and that they have started to become more selective in what they choose to engage in. Others maintained that they have chosen to

keep being engaged in these activities, but that they have become better at managing the time they devote to each of the activities.

One of the academics and one of the consultants expressed that they have a tendency to go into details in the way that every single piece of a work has to be perfect, even the things that do not matter to the end result. Both of them also asserted that they do their best to avoid falling into this trap in order to not overwork things, and to be able to finish their work on time.

A number of women displayed that they are perfectionists in the way that they are self-critical. These women expressed that they may doubt or question themselves, never think that what they do is good enough, and sometimes even make derogatory remarks about themselves. One of the recruiters said the following about herself:

I'm really critic of myself. I'm a high-achiever, I think, but I'm never satisfied. Even though I achieve high, I don't think it's good enough. So, I think I'm a typical "good girl" and I need to learn "good enough". I'm quite anxious to be honest. I'm really scared to fail. And this fear, sort of, pushes me on all the time. So I'm driven by fear of failure, I would say.

Some of the women disclosed that they are prone to worry and that they have a hard time letting go of work, and relaxing, at the end of the day. Each of these women described this particular tendency as something negative that is getting in the way of their work rather than something that is helping them to perform better, and that this is one of the downsides of being a high performer.

**Setting high standards.** The women described that when they set high standards they do so because they feel pressured to perform highly. They indicated that this pressure may come from within because they want to perform highly for themselves, or it may come from the field that they are working in, from the company they work for, or from their customers. When the standards are internal, they may, according to the women, stem from them wanting to prove something to themselves, make something of themselves, or make themselves proud. When they are external, they may be set in place in order to stay in a competitive field, or to prove something, or show respect, to others. One of the recruiters displayed her high internal standards by saying:

I think I'm from quite humble beginnings and I always wanted to achieve much better than my parents did. And I knew since I was a kid that I needed to achieve better than them... I think not coming from Stockholm and all, I think that has really driven me to -- I have to succeed here.

Some of the women claimed that this pressure to achieve makes them feel good about themselves, but others indicated that it may be an added source of stress. For example, one of the academics said that she cannot free herself from the high standards that are imposed upon her in her work because adhering to them is, according to her, the way to stay in academia.

Several of the women reported that when setting high standards, they aim to be in top positions in a company or in academia, for example a CEO or another high-ranking manager, or a professor with tenure. The women indicated that the primary reason for this is being able to make others develop, but also for them to prove to themselves that they have the ability to reach the top in their field, or to have a high salary.

Some of the women explained that they do not only have high expectations of themselves, but also of others. Two of the academics claimed that they know how to do things the correct way, in their opinion, and that they notice whenever someone else does something that does not live up to the expected standards. One of the academics also stated that she finds it of great importance to work with people who are as competent as, or more competent than, her, and that she would otherwise not be able to stand her job. Another academic declared that she, in general, expects people to put in an effort in their work, because this is what she does. Moreover, one of the consultants admitted that if she were to spend her time on something, people have to make it worth her attention by showing her something that has a high enough standard to be worthwhile for her.

The women explicated that when setting high standards, they want to do things properly, or the right way, according to them. They described doing their work thoroughly, and not taking any shortcuts that would compromise the quality of their work, or their own integrity. Moreover, they expressed that they take the time necessary to understand and learn things in depth, rather than rushing through things when it is not wise to do so. One of the consultants maintained that she seeks information from various contrasting sources before making decisions at work, and one of the recruiters declared that she takes caution to give the correct information to others, and follow up on how that information was received.

**Wanting to improve.** The women in the sample reported wanting to improve in their work, which was expressed by them as either having a will to develop, or by them actively challenging, or pushing, themselves in their work. The women described wanting to develop in the way that they 1) keep on improving their knowledge about their work, 2) develop more skills,

3) improve the skills that they already have, 4) get better at their job, 5) perform more advanced work tasks as time goes by, 6) do different tasks rather than the same tasks over and over again, or 7) move upwards hierarchically in the organization. One of the consultants stated about her need for development in her work: “Development is really important. I get really, really bored if I’m doing the same thing all over again... [The] ideal workplace is where you have the possibility to grow.” One of the academics said: “Never stand still is my key motto... Every task I have, I need to progress, I need to move forward.”

The majority of the women reported - besides having the wish to develop in their work - actively challenging, and pushing, themselves in their work in order to achieve this sought after development. The women described challenging themselves in the way that they 1) tell themselves what they have to do in order to develop, 2) make themselves do things that they do not know how to do, that they are uncomfortable with, or that they are afraid of, or 3) throw themselves into new opportunities. They reported challenging themselves because of, for example, fear of failure or a wish to succeed, the wish to stand out or to perform better than others, or the desire to conquer difficult things or to achieve their goals. One of the academics stated about challenging herself in her work:

I like to challenge myself, to always go outside my comfort zone... I try to maintain that, to always have one foot in my comfort zone and one foot outside. ‘cause that’s the way I think I develop the most.

Another one of the academics said:

...it’s just been in my nature since I was a kid... to try to challenge myself... so maybe just I saw at that age, ok, you have to just push yourself, do what you are afraid of doing, and then you will learn, you will be better at it.

**Trying to please others.** The majority of the women disclosed that they try to please others in their work. Several of the women reported doing this by, for example, saying yes to new tasks and opportunities at work that they would have liked to be able to say no to. Four of the women shared the following statements in the interviews: “I have maybe difficulties in saying: ‘No, I’m not going to do this’.”, “... I would say that if I am on a 100% and someone presents me with a 20% more workload, I would probably just say yes and go with it”, “I usually say yes...”, and “Before, I said yes to everything”. According to the women’s accounts, some of the reasons behind saying yes to things that they would rather have said no to is that they, at times, have 1) felt forced to say yes, 2) wanted to show everyone how good they were and that

they could take on everything, 3) not wanted to lose valuable job opportunities, 4) followed other people's recommendations. It is important to note, however, that the more experienced these women get in their work, the more they seem to develop the ability to say no to things that they would have said yes to earlier in their work lives. According to the women's accounts, the ability to say no is something that seems sought after, and is something that they are continuously working towards.

Some of the women maintained that they try to please others in the way that they focus on what others are thinking and how they are feeling about them, and that they try to not disappoint them. One of the academics stated: "I want to make people happy and be like a "good girl"... and don't make them disappointed", and another academic said: "I do care a lot -- too much about what others think about me... Approval, acceptance... I should be happy with what I did no matters what others says, but it's not always like that...". One of the recruiters said about not wanting to let people down:

"...I can't let people down, I just can't let anyone down ever. So, if a client calls me on holiday, I actually almost get a panic attack that I can't do anything about it and I have to say that I can't do anything until I'm back on that date. And then between that time, I can't stop thinking about it really."

A few of the women reported trying to please others by adapting themselves to suit others' needs and holding their own feelings in. According to these women, they can be formal or informal depending on the person, focus on making the other person feel comfortable, and not step on anyone's toes. One of the recruiters said about adapting to others:

I always adapt to them. So I follow the way they are. If they are quite personal from the start, I have no trouble being personal back. Actually, I prefer that and I open up quickly. But if I notice that they are quite strict and a very strict professional behavior, I will copy. So, I'm a copy cat, 100%."

The women expressed that they are able to do things their own way, and believe in themselves, at the same time as they tend to show certain characteristics of a good girl. This may seem contradictory since one type of behavior goes against the current and another one goes with it. However, both types of behaviors are, according to the women's accounts, able to effectively complement each other, and work together, in the women.

That the women are able to both be confident women who go against the status quo, and women who sometimes are self-critical and question themselves, could be explained by that they, at their core, know that they are doing a good job and that they have great potential to



continue being high performing in the future, but that they nevertheless allow themselves to let this confidence waiver from time to time in order to ensure that they are on track with their high-quality work. The underlying reasons for doing this are reasonably the high and perfectionist standards that these women also tend to have, and their yearning for high performance and success. Moreover, according to the accounts of several of the women, they behaved more like good girls earlier in their lives, but as they have matured, they seem to have broken loose of some of the restraints that come with having this role. Nowadays, they seem to be more critical towards following the rules that others have set out for them; a behavior that relates to the actions associated with “Doing things your own way” and “Believing in yourself”, which were discussed in the two earlier sections. Thus, contrary to the belief that one can only be either confident, or insecure, in oneself, these results display that the confidence in these women may fluctuate over time, and perhaps even depending on the situation, although more information would be needed in order to draw such a conclusion.

### **Reaching for your goals**

The women in the sample described that they reach for their goals by being gritty, ambitious, and determined, which will be discussed in the subsequent sections. These results are linked to the corresponding literature.

**Having grit.** The majority of the women in the sample demonstrated that they have grit, or perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Based on what the women shared during the interviews, they reach for their goals by showing grit in the way that they 1) keep pursuing the same goals for years, 2) have shown passion for their goals for as long as they have been striving towards them, and 3) have overcome setbacks and shown tremendous persistence when reaching for their goals.

The women explained that they keep pursuing the same goal for several years to, for example, reach success within their chosen field, keep advancing in their careers by getting frequent promotions until they reach high-level managerial positions, or get a PhD. One of the recruiters said about reaching her goal to succeed: “I’m very eager to succeed and then I do my best to reach there. So if it takes some time, then fine, it takes the time it takes.” One of the consultants reported that she has always had a plan for her future and what she wanted with certain goals. Earlier, her goal was to become a project manager, but since she has reached that

goal, that step is behind her. Her current short-term goal is to become a group manager, and her long-term goal is to go even further and become a department manager. According to her, she is aiming towards continuously advancing until reaching the highest managerial position that she deems suitable for herself. One of the academics added that she has always known that she wants to get to the top, and that she, throughout her life, has been searching for the “next level”, or for a “ladder” to climb. The academics who are finishing up their PhD have been aiming for this goal for several years, and one of them demonstrated this by saying: “I think getting my PhD has been my goal since I started at the university. Since I’ve been an undergraduate, I’ve wanted to get a PhD.”

The women show grit when expressing their passion for reaching their goals, something which they reported having had for many years. One of the recruiters maintained when talking about being passionate about her goal: “I’ve shown the whole way that I wanted to do this...”, and one of the academics added: “[the goal] was something that I always knew that I wanted to do.” The consultant above who talked about her goal to advance as a manager said about why she is passionate about this goal:

I feel like [being a manager is] *so* interesting, because when I see when I work as a project manager, it doesn’t matter how good you are in techniques, or how you are good in doing calculation. If you’re good in communicating and you’re structured, and you know how to talk to people, and read people, that’s so much more interesting. So, that’s why I wanna be a group manager -- handling development of resources.”

One of the academics expressed a deep love and appreciation for her area of research, which she plans on developing throughout her life:

Well, the love I have for [her research area]... it’s the thing that really drives me to go on, because I really like it, I believe in it. Also, I believe in the importance of this kind of work for making what I like better... I think that I can contribute to something that I think that it’s my love... it’s a sense-making place of identity for me. It’s very important. I always loved it.

The women also showed grit when showing that they have overcome setbacks and shown much persistence in their work. They explained that the setbacks that they have had to deal with when trying to reach their goals have been, for example, having a close family member that passed away, being heavily criticized for a research paper, or trying to start a new business in a market that is not being very receptive. They confessed that they have had a difficulty getting past these setbacks, but that they have nevertheless kept on working towards their goals and that they have been able to reach some of them along the course of their lives. One of the academics said about

someone close who passed away: "...it's like a sorrow... sadness that I will never get away from... that is a part of me..." Despite this deeply rooted sadness that this woman carries with her, she explained that she has been able to focus on her work and do quite well for herself and reach several of her goals. Another one of the academics said about being criticized by a colleague: "...that really was a low point. But I think I grew a lot from that and I think that was really, like, a turning point... I think that was the best thing that has happened to me in this process (getting her PhD)." A recruiter shared her experiences about starting a new business in a non-receptive market: "The first year was quite tough... it was tough times to be in... you need to be very persistent... I've been trying to be persistent and go through the hard times to get to where I want to be."

When being asked if they would consider giving up on their goal if it proved to be excessively difficult for them, the women answered, for example: "I would keep on going... I don't think I would give up. I would just find new ways of reaching that goal.", "I would probably strive even more.", and "I would probably give it much more time... I usually expect it to take, maybe double time as I first thought of. 'cause usually it's not as hard as I thought, but it takes much, much, much more time."

A few of the women also showed grit when mentioning that they do not let new projects take their eyes off the goal, and that they finish whatever they start. One academic stated when being faced with new projects that she believes that all the different things she does will help her get the job that she wants. A recruiter said when talking about being offered new jobs:

I don't see any benefit of, sort of, jumping around and trying different agencies, even though I've been headhunted myself perhaps sometimes... If [I] do a good job [at the company she works for], [I'll] have the pay-off at some point.

One of the academics stated that she is the kind of person who never gives up and who finishes what she has started, no matter what. She added that it might be bad to stay with something that hurts her in a way, but that it is a part of who she is. At one point she called herself "a masochist" for behaving that way towards herself, although when she talked about it, she seemed to show some pride in her behavior. Another academic said:

I always had to finish in a way, because [I] can't really leave something not finished... when I'm working on something in the beginning and I'm enthusiastic about it, I can work for hours, I can work late at night -- but I feel like when at some point when I lose that enthusiasm, I feel like this is something I have to do, it's more like a burden. Of course I can work the same amount of hours, but then of course, the stress part comes in.

The quality of being gritty is similar to the quality of being ambitious in the way that both of the qualities result in the women reaching for impressive long-term goals, despite the quality of grit being much more intricate than ambition.

**Being ambitious.** The women in the sample reported that when they are ambitious, they have the desire to succeed in their work, either by reaching a specific goal that is important to them, or by attaining exceptionally high results in general. One of the academics maintained that she has an ambition to become an influential professional in her academic field in order to be able to change it for the better. She does not stop there, but she also claimed to be striving to become *the best* professional of the specific sector that she is working in. Two of the recruiters spoke in more general terms about becoming successful in their work, which, according to them, means becoming the highest performing professional in their company compared to their colleagues, and to consistently reach the exceptionally high results that they are aiming towards. The women asserted that they do not only have an ambitious mindset, but that they also behave in a way that will get them closer to their goals. One of the academics said about her ambitious behavior:

...all the things I'm doing -- it's also towards a bigger goal, that I see that all the effort I do, all the different things -- it's piling up to be something bigger... at the end of the day, it will help me achieve something, like maybe get that job I want.

Many of the women indicated that they are not satisfied with being ambitious for a short amount of time, but that they are ambitious over time, throughout different stages of their lives. One of the consultants stated:

...when I studied, I always wanted to have all "A" grades. I always, in the career, wanted to be the youngest at the highest position, with the highest salary. Yeah, I always had a plan for my future and what I wanted with certain goals.

Most of the women also reported showing ambition by continuously wanting to develop and learn new things in their work. One of the consultants maintained that her ambition and her drive are what keeps her going in her work, and that she is interested in development and in seeing "what's behind the next door" and "what they talk about in the next table". Another one of the consultants showed her ambition when talking about seizing opportunities that would get her further in her work:

I do not want to set limits to anything... You see opportunities and you take them... I definitely want to undertake projects that will get me further. I do not want to do repetitive work that anybody would do, anyhow. I want to feel creative through my job.

Furthermore, according to several of the women, they show their ambition by setting a more difficult goal after having already achieved a previous goal that they had aimed towards. One of the recruiters explained that after having reached the financial goals that were expected of her from the company, she no longer saw this as a big enough challenge and wanted to focus on giving the best quality advise to her clients. One of the consultants declared that after having reached the project manager role that she had sought after for a long time, she has moved past that accomplishment and is now aiming for the more impressive title of “group manager”. A possible downside of always setting more difficult goals, after just having achieved a goal that they have aimed towards, is that they may never become truly satisfied with their achievements, and that they may never know when they have reached that point of being able to consider themselves to be truly successful. A few of the women reported not even stopping to celebrate their achievements before embarking on the next challenge. This may be a typical behavior of a good girl, described earlier in the paper, which these women have also reported being.

Moreover, a few of the women also showed ambition by aiming for not only one goal, but several goals, including both their work life and private life. Two of the consultants expressed a will to attain a high position in their company at the same time as having children. Another consultant declared that she not only wanted to get further in her job and have a second child, but also write her dissertation and finish her MBA, *and* learn a fourth language.

**Being determined.** The majority of the women claimed that they are determined in their work. They demonstrated that when they are determined, they 1) have their mind set on something that they want to accomplish, 2) do not waiver in their conviction, 3) behave in a way that will get them closer to what they want by going above and beyond what most people would generally do in the same situation, and 4) make things happen instead of coming up with excuses of why they cannot do something. Each of the women expressed being determined to accomplish different things, which are also the main things that drive them in their work. The recruiters who showed determination explicated that they are either determined to succeed, to avoid failure, to commit themselves fully to their work, or to achieve a work-life balance. The academics who demonstrated determination reported that they are either determined to challenge and develop themselves, to continue working in the same field in the future, or to do their work on their own terms. The consultants who exhibited determination maintained that they are either determined to improve their work up until a certain point that a very difficult goal has been reached, to not let

anything get in the way of what they want, or to stand out and be the best. One of the consultants summed up the general attitude of these determined individuals in one short quote: “If I set my mind to something, I make that happen.”

Having grit, ambition, and determination relates to the previous category “Being a good girl” in the way that it is the high expectations that the women have of themselves that lead them to set an ambitious long-term goal that they are striving to reach. It also relates to the next category “Going the extra mile” in the way that the women put much effort into their work, do more than what is required of them, and engage personally in their work.

### **Going the extra mile**

The women stated that they go the extra mile in their work in the way that they spend much effort on their work, go beyond what is required of them, and engage personally in work, which will be discussed below. These results are related to the literature on work engagement.

**Spending much effort.** All of the women in the sample reported going the extra mile in their work by putting much effort into it. They maintained that when they spend much effort on their work, they are hard-working and conscientious, give one hundred percent, and put many hours into their work.

Each of the women asserted that they are hard-working individuals. The recruiters stated that they are quite active during the workday, perform many work tasks, and make much effort on the tasks that they perform. Most of them admitted that they end up staying late in the office and think about work during the weekends. The academics claimed that they carry out a large quantity of work every day, take on more work tasks than they are supposed to, and, similarly to the recruiters, put much effort into each of these tasks. The consultants reported taking on a large workload, taking work home with them, working harder than their colleagues, and thinking a lot about work.

Many of the women indicated that they are conscientious in their work. To these women, this means that they are organized and thorough, that they want to do their job well, that they plan their work and have full control over it, and that they pay attention to small details. One of the recruiters said when explaining how she is organized and thorough in her work: “I’m very organized, focused. So for every role I’ve taken on, I’ve been doing, sort of, much research and

mapping.” One of the academics stated about wanting to do her job well: “...at the end of the day, someone’s gonna read what I’m handing in and I can’t just hand in something unfinished or something that’s of poor quality...”

According to several of the women, they give one hundred percent in their work. When the women expressed giving one hundred percent, they referred to the amount of effort they put in, or how consumed/committed/dedicated they were to something. One of the recruiters said: “...I think my clients appreciate that [she gives one hundred percent] because they don’t want me to work on something and then not been able to give one hundred percent. So they respect that decision often, and they’re happy because then they can find someone who actually can spend one hundred percent on it. And then the next time they would come back to me because they’re like ‘oh ok, so then I know she’s really spending all her efforts on it when she does say yes to her job’.”

The majority of the women described that they spend many hours on their work. The women reported that when they do this, they work more than full-time in the way that they work many hours per day/week/month, they stay longer at work or work from home, or they work nights, early mornings, or weekends. One of the consultants said about the amount of time she spends on her work: “I work maybe more than most... if it’s really intense, then, of course, I’ll work the night. I’ve worked the night since I started my new [job]... I’ve had 192 overtime hours in two months...” One of the academics said about her way of working: “This is not a nine-to-five job... This is a lifestyle. I work on evenings, I work on weekends, I work every day.”

The women reported that when they make much effort in their work, they have to deal with various negative consequences, such as having to make sacrifices because of their work. For example, two of the academics emphasized that they have had to sacrifice several things in order to be able to go beyond what is required of them, and to do their work the best they can. One of the academics admitted that she has put off having a family for many years of her professional working life to allow for time to complete her PhD and establish herself as a researcher. The academic said about her thoughts on the matter during her PhD years that she felt like she had to make those sacrifices because she was so devoted to her work. The other academic said about her views on making sacrifices to get to where she wants to be:

...what I want to achieve in the end, it requires of me that I will have to sacrifice things all the time... I can sacrifice a lot if I know that [her work] is something I want to do. I can see that it’s worth it in the end.

Moreover, one of the consultants asserted that she sacrifices all of her free time because of putting much effort into her work. She added that this is a choice that she has consciously made for herself, and that the reason to why the majority of other people do not achieve the things that she does is that they choose to not make that same sacrifice.

Other negative consequences that the women indicated having had to deal with are being tired, feeling stressed out or taken advantage of, or feeling scared that they may end up working too much for their own good. They, however, maintained that these negative consequences are worth it because of what they are gaining from the way that they work, and they thus end up holding on to their superwoman personas.

**Going beyond what is required.** The women explicated that when they go beyond what is required, they do more than what is expected of them to do in their work, or they overachieve targets that have been set for them. The recruiters who reported that they do more than what is expected of them stated that they, for example, interview five times as many people than they have to in order to feel comfortable, sell more services than necessary, or get in touch with more clients, or candidates, than is required. One of the recruiters said: "I'm always going the extra mile in the sense that I'm very, very active in network events... Every situation is an opportunity to get new contacts and exchange business cards..." One of the academics maintained that she tends to always prepare extra material in order to fully understand something, and one of the consultants claimed that she has learned many subject areas and computer programs by herself, which is not required of employees in her company.

The women also tended to describe that they overachieve targets that have been set for them. The recruiters mostly mentioned financial targets that they go beyond, the academics talked about their academic performance, and the consultants about promotions, job offers, or positive feedback from clients, or managers, due to their generally high performance at work. One of the recruiters stated about going beyond her targets: "We have financial targets and so far I've been producing -- overachieving those targets." One of the consultants said about the positive feedback she gets from clients: "I often hear that [her customers are] very excited with what they're given, and they're very satisfied with the products or the concepts, or whatever it is, and it's beyond what they'd thought they'd get."

**Engaging personally in work.** All of the women in the sample reported engaging personally in their work in one way or another. They maintained that when they engage



personally in work, they show that they 1) are passionate about their work or love their work, 2) enjoy, or are enthusiastic about, their work, 3) have fun at work, 4) identify with their work, 5) find a meaning in their work, or 6) get absorbed in their work.

The majority of the women reported being passionate about their work, or that they love what they do. What they maintained loving about their work was, for example, what they are creating or accomplishing with their work, the specific work tasks that they have, or what they get out of their teamwork with colleagues. One of the recruiters said about the importance of passion in her work "...if I'm not passionate of what I'm doing then what's the point of doing that..."

The women typically stated that they enjoy their work, or that they feel enthusiastic about it. According to them, they enjoy their work, for example, because they feel that they can inspire others or make their clients happy, because they like their colleagues or their employer, or because they take pleasure in what they get to do in their work. The women maintained that they feel enthusiastic about their work when, for example, they get to work with new things that they are excited about, they are able to make a real change, or they see that their efforts are paying off. One of the consultants said about her interest in what her company does:

I really believe in what [the company she works for is] doing and what they are trying to accomplish... I think we have a great business idea and they think I can contribute, and I think I can contribute, and that keeps me interested in it.

Some of the women declared that they have fun at work, which is something that is important to the women in question. The women described that when they have fun, they get more easily absorbed in their work, they feel more satisfied with their work, and they enjoy the time they spend with their colleagues. One of the recruiters said: "I have fun all the time... Otherwise I wouldn't be here! I think the way we deal... with the situations we face in our group is the part that I have most fun with. It's really nice."

The women tended to report that they identify with their work. According to the women, the way in which they identify with their work is, for example, that they make their work the center of their lives, that they take their work personally, that they let their work define them, that they feel close to their work, or that they are so connected to work that they let their performance at work affect what emotions they experience, for better or for worse. One of the academics stated about making her work the center of her life:

I identify a lot with my work, I think. Yes, like, a lot, a lot... I definitely think that I'm pretty obsessed with work... I also think that happens to everybody at the end of their thesis period, I don't think anybody is not identifying with their work... Right now there's not a lot of other things in my life than this work...

Another one of the academics said about letting her work define her that she always puts a lot of herself in her work and that if things do not go as she wants, she risks questioning herself. She added that she tends to put herself and her work as the same thing, and that she therefore identifies much with her work. One of the recruiters admitted about her emotional connection to her work:

I think I am too much connected to my work, emotionally-wise. Because when I... get good feedback from a client or whatever, I get so happy. Like really, really happy. But if I fail, I can go home and cry.

A number of the women, interestingly enough only academics, maintained that they find a bigger meaning in their work. According to two of these women, this means that they believe that they are contributing to their field, or to society as a whole, with something of importance. A third academic stated that she finds a deep personal meaning with what she is researching, and a fourth one reported that she believes that all the work she is doing is accumulating into something bigger, which is connected to her long-term goal for her work.

Several of the women indicated being absorbed in their work. For some, this means going into a state of flow for a limited period of time, and for others it means being engrossed in something for a longer period of time, such as months or years. One of the academics explained what happens when she gets caught up in her work: "I can work 'till four in the morning... I forget about time and space..." and when she finally manages to take a break she thinks: "I'm just going to write this, I'm just going to write this... I just want to get back to the sentence." Another one of the academics reported that throughout her dissertation, she was consumed with her work and thought about it constantly.

The category "Going the extra mile" relates to the category that is presented in the next section, which is referred to as "Making things happen". The categories relate to one another in the way that those women who put much effort into their work, and do more than what is necessary, also tend to be proactive go-getters who do not just wait for things to be handed to them but make sure that they get what they want on their own.

**Making things happen**

The women reported that they make things happen in their work by working proactively, or by taking the role as a leader, and pushing others, when working in teams. These findings, presented below, are linked with the literature on proactive work behavior.

**Working proactively.** The majority of the women described that they make things happen by working proactively; creating work for themselves instead of waiting for the work to come to them. Three of the recruiters explicated that they have created their businesses from scratch by working proactively and having attained new business clients for themselves as well as their closest colleagues. Moreover, one of them declared that she seeks to resolve problems before they occur and she tends to “see solutions” instead of problems. One of the academics asserted that she tends to “reach out with her research” to make people see her and her work instead of waiting by the sidelines. The consultants explained that they behave proactively in the way that they either choose themselves which tasks to work on before being told what to do, actively take on new tasks that are out of their comfort zone, find themselves new opportunities in their work, or make a change in their work if they find it to be necessary. One of the consultants stated about being proactive:

I like to be proactive. So, I choose the thing I like and then I dive with my head down in that. ‘cause I consider it really important that if you like what you do, what you do is going to be done well... It’s a kind of self-defense, I guess. If I start with choosing tasks... and I’m up 110% or a 120%, somebody else coming to me and “Oh, I need to get this done”, “Sorry, I’m already at 120%”. ‘cause then I know that the things I’m going to do, I kind of have control of them.

According to the women, they take the initiative when engaging with potential work contacts, which is one specific type of proactive behavior that was found in many of them. One of the recruiters stated that she takes initiative by picking up the phone and calling potential clients instead of waiting for them to come to her. The recruiter also maintained that she attempts to build a relationship with the people she does business with even before they have tried to do so. She said about creating relationships with her clients: “I do try to push for a relationship a bit sooner maybe.” Another one of the recruiters declared that when she engages in networking events with potential clients, she sees the events first and foremost as an opportunity to develop new contacts. Two of the academics claimed to take initiative on what to work on when working in teams, and the consultants maintained that they take initiative when they feel that something

that has not been done needs to be done, or they come up with an idea that they want to voice with their employer.

**Pushing others.** Many of the women reported taking on a leadership role in their work in order to push others in various ways. Interestingly enough, only academics and consultants talked about taking on this particular role in their work (often an informal one), even though all of the recruiters had a senior role with at least one person to have formal responsibility over. The reasons for taking on the role as the leader and pushing others that were mentioned by the women were: 1) to inspire or to develop others, 2) to get a feeling of being able to control, influence, or change the way something is done, 3) to structure a project that was going the wrong way, or 4) to get people who were not doing anything in a project to become active contributors. One of the consultants said about developing the people working her company: “I don’t want to rule, I just want to develop [others].” Another one of the consultants said about enabling others to move forward in their work: “...kind of cool to be that change and also make the opportunities...”

The women maintained pushing others in the way that they 1) tell, or show, them what to do, or how to do something, 2) encourage, or celebrate, their accomplishments, 3) give the right prerequisites to them in order for them to accomplish something, or 4) get on the same wavelength as them and find a way of going forward together. One of the consultants said about showing people how to do something: “I always call the person I’m explaining to and *show* them how [something is] structured... And I always check one extra time with every person that they have understood a certain task for example.”

The category “Making things happen” can be considered to be a continuation to the closely linked category “Going the extra mile”, in the way that working proactively and pushing others can be seen as something that is not required in one’s work. “Making things happen” also relates to the other categories “Doing things your own way”, “Believing in yourself”, “Being a good girl”, and “Reaching for your goals” in the way that the women who have these qualities tend to be highly performing individuals, which has been displayed in the previous text.

### Discussion

One of the six key categories that was found from the present study was “Doing things your own way”. When scouring the research literature for an existing theory that corresponded to the features of this category, job crafting, and how it related to job autonomy, seemed to be the best match. It was discovered in the study that the participants autonomously decide what to work on, when to work on it, and how to structure their work. This finding is supported by the job crafting literature, which states that employees tend to engage in task crafting regardless of whether or not it has been approved by management (Berg, et al., 2007), and that this behavior increases if they have the freedom to work autonomously (Berg, et al., 2013). It was also established in the study that the participants believe that they have what it takes to independently carry out their work, and this is supported by the existing research literature on the “job crafting mind-set”, which enables employees to believe that they can, and have the right to, shape their job at their own discretion (Berg, et al., 2013). Considering the research that has previously been carried out with high-performing women, the results which showed that the women expressed themselves as independent and non-conforming (Ismail, et al., 2005; Piterman, 2008; Reavley & Lituchy; 2008) are supported. Something that was uncovered in the study, that can contribute to the existing research literature, is that the high-performing women in the study tend to craft their jobs in a way that makes them able to simultaneously meet the requirements of their manager while still finding their own unique focus in their work. In addition, some of them are able to see opportunities that others before them have not seen, think outside the box, and challenge the way work is currently performed, which are findings that add to the existing research literature.

A second category that was uncovered in the study was “Believing in yourself”, which coincides with the literature on self-confidence. It was found that the participants are confident in themselves and their abilities in the way that they believe that they know how to do their job well, and that they can achieve their goals in their work. The results also showed that the participants are strong and confident in themselves in the way that they, for example, dare to be different than the majority of people, are able to stand up to others, and go out of their comfort zone. The findings from the study confirm the existing research on self-confidence, and also add something new to it by taking a slightly different stance on confidence and looking at the internal strength of the individuals. Considering the research that has previously been carried out with

high-performing women, the results which showed that the women described themselves as being self-confident are supported by the majority of the research that has been found.

Another category that was established in the study was “Being a good girl”, which closely relates to the research literature on the good girl and the associated trait of perfectionism. It was found in the study, in the majority of the participants, that they have exceptionally high expectations of themselves, that they want their work to be flawless, that they have a strong desire to achieve, and that they continuously pursue difficult challenges. It was also discovered that they want to please others, and that they are sometimes overly critical of themselves, or doubt themselves. Each one of these findings are consistent with the literature on the good girl and perfectionism. Additional findings that go beyond the existing literature on the “good girl” are that the participants do not only have high expectations of themselves, but also of others, and that they are surprisingly humble and modest about their achievements, oftentimes downplaying them. The present study has also worked to bring together both the good girl and the perfectionist in the same person, which in the research literature are most often presented as two distinct, but associated concepts. This has allowed for an increased understanding about how the different features of the two concepts are connected. Considering the research that has previously been carried out with high-performing women, the findings that the women have high expectations of themselves and a strong desire to achieve (Aycan, 2004; Hewlett & Rashid, 2010; Reynolds, 2010; Weidenfeller, 2012) are supported, but the rest of the findings from the current study go beyond the previously conducted studies that have been found.

An additional category from the study was “Reaching for your goals”, in which the majority of the participants claimed that they show grit, ambition and determination in their long-term pursuits. Findings on grit from the present study showed that the participants tend to pursue the same goals for several years, and display sustained passion and perseverance towards these goals. It was also maintained by the participants that they finish what they start despite obstacles, or temptations, that may come up, and put much effort into their work. All of the findings from the present study were supported by the existing research on grit and it is suggested that further research could add more value to the existing research in the area. The findings from the study on ambition and determination in the women relate to the literature on grit, as well as the literature on goal-setting, in the way that these qualities make it more likely for individuals to set more challenging goals and ultimately achieve higher than they would have

would they not have been as ambitious, or determined. Considering the research that has previously been carried out with high-performing women, the findings which showed that the women expressed themselves as ambitious and determined are directly supported. The finding which showed that the women described themselves as gritty is indirectly supported in the way that the exact terminology has not been used (Noonan, et al., 2004; Reynolds, 2010; Richie, et al. 1997; Weidenfeller, 2012), but that the women in the research reported showing both passion and perseverance for long-term goals.

Accompanying the previous categories found in the study is the category of “Going the extra mile”. The two concepts work engagement and workaholism were compared and contrasted in an attempt to find out which of these concepts were most closely related to the features displayed by the participants who go the extra mile in their work. It was deduced that work engagement more fully portrayed these participants compared to workaholism, in the way that they are not driven by an uncontrollable drive to work excessively hard (Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008), but have “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, et al. 2002). They tend to put extra effort in their work because they *want to*, not because they feel like they *have to*. Findings from the present study showed that the participants tend to be dedicated to their work in the way that they personally identify with it, find a bigger meaning in it, and feel enthusiastic and inspired by it. The findings also showed that they put much effort into their work and tend to get fully absorbed in it. These findings are in line with existing literature on state engagement (see, for example, Schaufeli, et al. 2002). The results from the study also show that the participants tend to go beyond what is expected of them, give one hundred percent, and spend much time on their work, which are findings that are in accordance with the literature on behavioral engagement (see, for example, Macey & Schneider, 2008). The results also lean towards that the participants show trait engagement (see, for example, Macey & Schneider, 2008) in the way that they described being industrious, ambitious, and proactive individuals, but more information would need to be obtained from these individuals in order to be able to draw this conclusion. Results from the study that go beyond the literature on work engagement are that the participants tend to challenge themselves by learning new things instead of working on what they already know, and that they are willing to sacrifice important things in their lives in order to do their work the best way possible. These findings are instead supported by the literature on high-

performing women that has been found. This research also states that the high-performing women that were investigated reported showing engagement and commitment to their work (Aycan, 2004; Fochtman, 2012; Hewlett & Rashid, 2010; Ismail, et al., 2005; Noonan, et al., 2004; Richie, et al. 1997; Weidenfeller, 2012), and tended to go the extra mile (Fochtman, 2012; Hewlett & Rashid, 2010; Ismail, et al., 2005; Noonan, et al., 2004; Richie, et al. 1997; Weidenfeller, 2012), which is in accordance with the results from the present study.

The final category that surfaced in the study was “Making things happen”, which correspond closely to the research literature on proactive work behavior. Findings showed that the participants are active rather than passive in their work, that they take personal initiative, that they seek out new opportunities, and that they take charge in work situations. They also tend to resolve problems before they occur, challenge status quo, and continuously push themselves in their work. All of these findings have been well-supported in the research literature on proactive work behavior. Results from the study that go beyond the literature are that the participants not only push themselves in their work, but that they also tend to take the initiative to push, and develop, others in the work that they do. Considering the research that has previously been carried out with high-performing women, the finding that the women expressed showing proactive work behavior is not widely supported. This finding can thus be considered to go beyond the existing literature on high-performing women that has been found.

### **Limitations**

The participants in the study were selected through purposeful sampling where only those who met a predetermined criterion were included in the study, that is, high-performing women in the beginning of their careers in Stockholm, Sweden. The selection of participants was further limited to a few chosen fields (academia and two particular business industries) in which participants could be easily identified and approached, and only to those women who had provided information about their previous performance online (either through LinkedIn or university web pages). The sample was also selected in the way that the participants needed to be able to speak fluent English, which meant that they had to work in an international workplace where English was habitually used. Since the participants were busy, high-performing women, those who chose to participate in the research may have been limited to those who had a personal



interest in sharing their success stories, had confidence in psychological research, or wanted to gain a better understanding of themselves or high-performing women in general.

Moreover, using qualitative research methodology, and the grounded theory approach in specific, does not allow for the results to be generalized to the wider population, for example to high-performing women around the world. Conducting, for example, quantitative research on selected concepts, using a large sample of participants from a variety of occupations and geographical locations, would allow the results to be generalized to the wider population.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This research is important in the way that it allows for further insights about the characteristics, behaviors, and motivations of high-performing women, and enables researchers and business professionals alike to gain further understanding about this type of working professional. As was mentioned briefly in the introduction, this understanding is of value to researchers in the way that the different facets of newly developed concepts such as job crafting, the good girl, and grit, have been further developed, and can be expanded upon even more, or tested for in future research. It is significant for employers in the way that they can get closer to understanding how to most effectively attract, retain and develop these types of individuals (see for example Call, et al., 2015, about the value of star performers). It is also important for high-performing women in order for them to gain further understanding of themselves, and for employees who want to become higher performers since they can learn about both the possible advantages and disadvantages that may come with being this kind of employee.

There are several possible benefits and costs of having the specific qualities that the high-performing women in the study do. Doing things their own way at work could have positive outcomes such as getting a job that is specifically tailored for them as well as autonomy and freedom in their job. It could also include drawbacks such as experiencing unwanted independence, alienation, or stress, getting bad feedback from management, or jeopardizing the organization's productivity if work is carried out in a way that does not fit with the organization. Believing in themselves could result in positive outcomes such as increased self-confidence (which may counterbalance the self-criticism and doubt experienced from being a good girl), carrying out challenging tasks that are out of their comfort zone, and reaching their goals because of having the confidence to pursue them in the first place. It could also have possible drawbacks

such as having people around them becoming offended by them, or viewing them as aggressive, or even scary. Being good girls could lead to high work performance, and encouragement and approval from others, but it could also result in negative consequences such as a poor work-life balance, low self-esteem, stress, worry, and doubt. Having grit, ambition and determination could have benefits for the participants, such as being able to reach desired goals and having the ability to do something that they love for several years without getting sidetracked. It may, however, also have some drawbacks, such as failing to reach the goal if it is too challenging. If the goal is too narrow, or not the right type of goal for them, it might lead to that the women become less open, flexible, and creative. If the aim is to reach the goal, no matter what the cost is, it may result in their engaging in unethical behavior. Going the extra mile in their work could lead to benefits such as high performance, personal development, overall positive affect, and the occasional peak experience. However, if the women become too engaged in their work, it could lead to that they burn out and that they will as a result experience exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy at work. They may also experience other negative consequences such as having to make sacrifices, or experiencing tiredness or stress. Finally, displaying proactive work behavior could result in that the women initiate a wanted change at work or that they are able to get the things they want out of their work, but it could also lead to obstacles and setbacks such as resistance or punishment from management, or bad relationships with colleagues if not done the right way.

Future research should employ qualitative and quantitative research methodology to further explore how the different qualities identified in the high-performing women in this study are connected to one another in the process of reaching success at work. It should also look more into why high-performing women seem to be willing to sacrifice important things in their lives in order to become successful at work. Moreover, the supposition that being a good girl and having grit may surface in early ages, and that crafting one's job, behaving proactively, and being engaged in work, may occur only in later stages of one's career, should be investigated in future research. Another interesting venue would be to interview high-performing men as well as high-performing women in order to compare and contrast the findings. Finally, concepts such as self-confidence, determination, commitment to work, persistence, and ambition, which have in several qualitative studies on high-performing women shown to be common characteristics of the women, should be further investigated using quantitative methods such as surveys.

### Conclusion

The aim of the present research study was to contribute to the existing research literature on high-performing women by illuminating the characteristics, behaviors, and drives that have enabled these women to become successful in their work. The aim also included getting insights into some of the challenges that these women meet.

To summarize the findings discussed in this paper, it can be said that the women in the study have six major qualities in common that have enabled them to become successful in their work: 1) they carry out work their own way by engaging in job crafting, 2) they believe in themselves, 3) they are good girls, 4) they show grit, ambition and determination when reaching for long-term goals, 5) they go the extra mile in their work due to that they are personally engaged in what they do, and 6) they make things happen by displaying proactive work behavior. These six qualities can be combined into a superwoman persona which the women have indicated that they have adopted.

Moreover, it was found that there are various inconsistencies and negative consequences associated with being a high-performing woman. One major inconsistency that was reported by the women in the study was that they are independent and non-conformist, while simultaneously wanting to please others and not step on anyone's toes. Another major inconsistency that was described by the women was that they are confident women who go against the status quo, at the same time as they are women who sometimes question themselves and are self-critical. The negative consequences associated with being a high-performing woman that the women in the study maintained having experienced from time to time were, for example, feeling stressed out, overwhelmed, worried, or anxious. Tiredness, exhaustion, or being on the verge of burning out were also mentioned as costs of performing highly. A number of the women reported feeling that they have had to make important sacrifices to get to where they want, not being able to relax and let go of work at the end of the day, and feeling scared that they may end up working too much for their own good. They also claimed sometimes feeling taken advantage of, doubting themselves, not being satisfied with their own achievements, and being scared of failure. Some of the women stated that they could feel pressured to be able to work independently, which in some cases led to them feeling lonely, or betrayed by others.

Conclusively, there are three major reasons for why the women in the sample keep striving for success in their work despite having to deal with various negative consequences. The

reasons are that the women 1) desire to reach a valuable long-term goal, such as getting to where they want to be in their careers, 2) want to show that they are good enough to reach their high standards or become the best at what they do, and 3) wish to be noticed by others in their field and get the authority they need to make improvements to the field.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A*

#### INFORMATION ABOUT THE INTERVIEW AND INFORMED CONSENT

Dear X,

With this letter I would like to invite you to participate in my study that is being conducted to fulfill the requirements for a master's degree in psychology at Lund University. The purpose of the study is to examine how high-performing women in the workplace characterize themselves and illuminate the ways in which they are motivated. To answer these questions I am performing interviews with various high-performing women. As you have been identified as a high-performing woman I would now like to draw on your expertise and experiences. I hope you find this topic interesting and that you are willing to share your knowledge with me.

#### **About the interview**

Your participation consists of attending an interview session lasting approximately 45 minutes. During the session you will be asked a series of questions concerning your personal characteristics and behaviors, and your work motivation. The interview will be audio taped. Please note that participation is voluntary and you are, at any time during the interview, free to discontinue your participation.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Felicia Wolontis at 072-211 45 59.

**By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understood the information above. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.**

I understand that I will be given a copy of this form.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix B***Questions to the High-Performing Women in the Interview Guide****Personality traits**

My first question to you is: How would you describe yourself personality wise?  
Do you have any idea where (the specific personality trait mentioned) comes from? /  
You mentioned that you are (the specific personality trait mentioned); could you describe a specific situation in which you have shown (the specific personality trait mentioned)?

How would you say that your personality has changed since you were younger?

*On rare occasions when the interviewee would not be very talkative, more specific questions such as the following ones would be asked, along with follow-up questions specifically tailored to the interviewee's answers:*

- 1) When it comes to performing a new task at work, do you consider yourself to be open and curious, or cautious? Could you develop on that?
- 2) Would you say that you stick to a rigorous plan when carrying out your work or do you take things as they come? Could you develop on that? / Could you describe a situation in which (the behavior mentioned) has occurred?
- 3) Are you more of an extrovert or an introvert? How do you notice this?
- 4) Would you say that you are concerned about getting along with others, or do you let yourself and your work come first? Could you develop on that?
- 5) How do you react when things get especially stressful in a work situation?

**Goal-setting**

Are there any specific goals that you are striving towards in your work? / What goals have you set for yourself in your work? How have you tried to reach these goals (throughout the past few years)?

**Work performance**

What does high performance mean to you?

Are there any specific behaviors that you perform in a work situation that makes you successful at what you do / high-performing in your work? Could you mention some of these behaviors?

How do you structure and prioritize your work?

Do you believe that you are performing at your best in your work? What makes you say this?

**Work motivation**

Could you mention a few things about your work that motivate you the most?

To what extent would you say that you identify yourself with your work?

Could you describe a specific work situation in which you have been especially motivated?

How would you picture your ideal workplace? Why is this workplace especially motivating for you?