The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity

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Abstract
This article adds to contemporary analyses of neoliberalism by shedding light on its psychic life. Writers in the Foucauldian tradition have explored how subjectivities are reconstituted under neoliberalism, showing that the neoliberal self is an entrepreneurial subject. Yet, there has been little empirical research that explores entrepreneurial subjectivity and, more specifically, its psychic life. By drawing on over 60 in-depth interviews with individuals who may be entrepreneurial subjects par excellence, this article adds to our understanding of how neoliberalism is lived out. The article is divided into 10 sections, with each section exploring a distinct contour of entrepreneurial subjectivity. They show, for example, that competition is not only other-directed under neoliberalism, but also directed at the self, and that exclusionary processes lie at the heart of the constitution of entrepreneurial subjectivities. By providing a theoretically informed analysis of a wealth of empirical data, the article makes an original contribution to our understanding of the psychic life of neoliberalism.

Keywords
Foucault, gender, neoliberalism, qualitative interview method, self, subjectification

Much has been said about neoliberalism in recent years. Since the 2007/2008 financial crisis, authors have revisited the historical origins of neoliberalism (e.g. Davies, 2014; Gane, 2014a, 2014b; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009); traced its genesis, persistence and poly-valency (Gilbert, 2013); and explored how neoliberal attitudes have come to inform everyday life (Mirowski, 2014: 89–155). However, less has been said about the ways in which neoliberalism is lived out on a subjective level. Writers in the Foucauldian tradition have explored how subjectivities are...
reconstituted under neoliberalism, showing that the neoliberal self is an entrepreneurial subject\(^1\) (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1992). Yet, there has been little empirical research that explores the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity and, even more specifically, its psychic life (Butler, 1997).

This article seeks to address this gap by drawing on over 60 in-depth interviews with female, early career, classically-trained musicians. As recent research in cultural studies has shown (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Ross, 2008), public discourses have positioned young women and cultural workers as ideal entrepreneurial subjects. By exploring the accounts of individuals who, as cultural workers and young women, are twice positioned as entrepreneurial, this article offers an empirically-based analysis of how entrepreneurial subjectivity is lived out. Thus, the article represents a valuable and original contribution to discussions on neoliberalism in two key ways. First, it addresses questions of subjectivity, indeed of the psychic life of neoliberalism. Second, based on empirical data, it attempts to explore entrepreneurial subjectivity from the ground up. As such, the article expands the scope of contemporary debates on a widely discussed and timely topic, both thematically and methodologically.

Following a review of the existing literature and a discussion of the research methodology, the main part of this article is divided into 10 sections. Each section develops the article’s line of argument by exploring a distinct contour of entrepreneurial subjectivity. As I will show, entrepreneurial subjects relate to themselves as if they were a business, are active, embrace risks, capably manage difficulties and hide injuries. Crucially, entrepreneurial rhetoric does not hold absolutely because entrepreneurial subjects draw on a range of discourses in their talk. Some discourses, however, are also markedly absent, such as political perspectives that highlight the need for social change. Instead, desires for change are directed away from the socio-political sphere and turned inwards. Social critique is transformed into self-critique, resulting in a prevalence of self-doubt and anxiety. Competition too seems to be self-directed, suggesting that entrepreneurial subjects compete with the self, and not just with others. Last but not least, entrepreneurial subjects reject those who are not entrepreneurial. By drawing on theories of abjection, I will argue that these repudiations are not side effects of entrepreneurial subjectivity, but that they are constitutive of it.

Neoliberalism, Entrepreneurial Subjectivity and its Psychic Life

As Foucault (2008: 226) has argued, ‘the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself’. Under neoliberalism, the enterprise form is extended ‘to all forms of conduct’ (Burchell,
1993: 275) and encompasses subjectivity itself (McNay, 2009). In contrast to classical liberalism, neoliberalism does not assume that conduct automatically takes on an entrepreneurial form; instead, neoliberal regimes develop institutional practices for enacting this vision (Brown, 2003; Gilbert, 2013).

Conducting its life as enterprise, the enterprising self is bound by specific rules that emphasize ambition, calculation, accountability and personal responsibility (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1992). Crucially, the resources to become an entrepreneurial subject are unevenly distributed. As Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) have argued, the subject of self-invention is predominantly middle class (see also O’Flynn and Petersen, 2007). And while discourses of entrepreneurial self-help have appealed to members of black and migrant communities (Gilroy, 2013), the constitution of entrepreneurial subjectivities also produces its ‘others’ (Scharff, 2011a; Williams, 2011). In relation to gender, some authors have argued that entrepreneurship is implicitly equated with the masculine (Bruni et al., 2004). Recent feminist research has, however, made the opposite argument and shown that women, and young women in particular, have become positioned as entrepreneurial subjects par excellence (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

The neoliberal incitement to manage one’s self as enterprise, and the way this cuts across gendered, racialized and classed power dynamics, raises questions about the ‘psychosocial effects of neoliberalism’ (Layton, 2013; see also Saleci, 2010). Recent psychoanalytic work has demonstrated that neoliberal subjects disavow vulnerability and instead manifest an intensified individualism (Layton, 2010). Foucauldian thinkers have highlighted similar themes around the repudiation of dependencies (Binkley, 2011a); the illusion of autonomy (Davies, 2005); and the emphasis on personal responsibility (McNay, 2009). More broadly, feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression (Hall and O’Shea, 2013: 12; see also Ehrenberg, 2010; Sennett, 1998) have been linked to neoliberalism.

This literature makes a range of important contributions, but is frequently theoretical in perspective (Beradi, 2009; Davies, 2005; Hall and O’Shea, 2009; McNay, 2009), historical (Ehrenberg, 2010), or rests on textual readings (Binkley, 2011a; Bröckling, 2005). Sennett’s work (1998) is also wider in focus and based loosely on mixed and informal sources. Although some of the psychoanalytic literature draws on vignettes from clinical work (e.g. Layton, 2010), there is little systematic empirical research on the psychic life of entrepreneurial subjects. This article attempts to address that absence.

**Introduction to the Study**

The data analysed here stems from a larger research project on the working lives of female, classically-trained musicians. In order to explore the
psychic life of entrepreneurial subjects, the study analysed the accounts of individuals who are twice positioned as entrepreneurial: as young women and as cultural workers. The links between youth, femininity, consumption, self-transformation and notions of choice suggest that young women have been hailed as neoliberal subjects (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Ringrose and Walker dine, 2008). Equally, cultural workers are ‘paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood’ due to the cultural sector’s emphasis on autonomy, self-realization and competition (Ross, 2008: 32). The study focused on the experiences of classical musicians as entrepreneurialism has gained traction in the industry (e.g. Myles Beeching, 2010) and because the classical music sector has been relatively under-researched in studies on cultural work. Based on 64 in-depth interviews with young female classical musicians, the study provides insight into the accounts of individuals who may be entrepreneurial subjects par excellence.

The majority of research participants were in their late 20s/early 30s and at an early stage in their career. My sample consisted of instrumentalists, singers, conductors, and composers. Reflecting the under-representation of working-class as well as black and minority-ethnic players in the profession (Yoshihara, 2007), the majority of my research participants were white and from a middle-class background. Also reflecting wider working patterns in classical music (Yoshihara, 2007), most of my research participants were freelancers and held multiple jobs ranging from teaching to performing.

Interviews were conducted in London (n = 32) and Berlin (n = 32) and the sample resonated with the international make-up of the profession. While about two-thirds of the research participants were German or British, another third came from a range of national contexts, including other European countries as well as the US, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and Singapore. The international composition of the sample may explain why I could not detect notable differences between the two sets of interviews in Berlin and London. Crucially, this does not efface differences in the history of neoliberalism in the two countries (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009). In relation to the subjective processes under investigation here, I could not, however, identify differences that seemed to be nationally specific.

Having gained the informed consent of the research participants, I recorded the interviews and analysed the data to explore the psychic life of entrepreneurial subjects. I borrowed the term ‘psychic life’ from Butler because her question ‘What is the psychic form that power takes?’ (1997: 2) resonates with my interest in the psychic dimension of neoliberal governmentality. Rather than draw on psychoanalytic work, which explores ‘the psychosocial effects of neoliberalism’ (Layton, 2013), I have found Butler’s poststructuralist perspective more useful. The term ‘effect’ suggests to me that there is a subject that precedes
discourse or, in this case, neoliberalism. By contrast, the term ‘psychic life’ conveys the formation of subjectivities in and through power. Based on the concept of subjection, which ‘signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject’ (Butler, 1997: 2), the notion ‘psychic life’ lends itself to my exploration of the ways in which entrepreneurial subjectivities constitute themselves in and through discourse.

In the context of my analysis, ‘discourse’ is akin to the discourse analytic notion of ‘interpretative repertoire’ and is comparable to a set of meanings that individuals draw on in their talk. ‘Discourse’ thus refers to distinctive ways of talking about objects and events in the world (Edley, 2001). These repertoires differ and thus allow us to draw boundaries between discourses. Crucially, as I will demonstrate below, contexts provide a range of discourses that individuals can draw on. This explains why certain discourses, such as entrepreneurialism, do not hold absolutely.

This approach is informed by discourse analysis and provides the interpretative framework of the study. More specifically, I drew on discursive psychology because it regards social and psychological phenomena as features of discourse (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and thus provides us with analytical tools to explore psychic life through talk (Scharff, 2011b). This form of discourse analysis looks for recurrent patterns in talk and explores their rhetorical function. The subsequent analysis will use interview extracts to present the patterns that I identified in relation to entrepreneurial subjectivity and its psychic life. Even though each example is from an individual speaker, taken as a whole they are illustrative of the features of the talk of many speakers. For this reason, I only use pseudonyms and do not provide any detailed information about the participants’ demographic backgrounds (see also Taylor and Littleton, 2012). This approach does not allow me to explore if, and if so how, the research participants’ positionalities affect negotiations of entrepreneurialism. Nevertheless, I hope that my analysis demonstrates the insights that can be gained from a discursive approach.

The Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity: The Self as Business

Resonating with McNay’s (2009) argument about the economization of subjectivity, research participants referred to themselves as a business. These statements occurred in discussions about freelancing. According to Lauren, it would have helped to have more information about ‘how to run a freelance business, with yourself as the product, which is what we are’. Business language, crucially, was used in several contexts, and one participant who discussed her experiences as a black musician referred to her skin colour as her ‘USP’, her unique selling point (Susan).
According to Gershon (2011: 539), the view of oneself as a business designates a ‘move from the liberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were property to a neoliberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were a business’. This shift changes the relationship of the self to the self where ‘one becomes a subject for oneself’ (Rose, 1990: 240). By relating to itself as a business, the entrepreneurial subject establishes a distance to its self and can subsequently work on it.

The resulting work on the self took on various dimensions. Julianna stated: ‘I try to sleep well, eat well, exercise, meditate – basically work on myself’. Similarly, Kim stated that ‘you have to take care of your mental health, and if you’re down, you’ve got to just work through it’. This work on the self was constructed as an ongoing activity. Resonating with Bröckling’s (2005) argument that the entrepreneurial self is in a constant mode of becoming, Janine told me that there were ‘no limits’ to self-improvement. These statements demonstrate that the self as business needs constant attention, and that various aspects of the self – physical, mental and spiritual – are worked upon for optimization.

**Constantly Active and Still Lacking Time**

According to du Gay (1996: 193), there is a real sense in the world of enterprise that ‘one is always at it’. This sense featured in accounts that emphasized the importance of being active:

I am active in sending CVs, trying to do the odd audition, trying to do all that kind of networking side. I am not just sitting at home thinking ‘The universe will take care of me!’ (Hope)

The emphasis on being active ties in with a neoliberal philosophy of time where being idle is to be avoided (O’Flynn and Petersen, 2007). Holly told me that she watched TV to relax, but said:

I started knitting these incredible, elaborate things, because if I am watching TV, at least I am getting something done. So basically, it is quite difficult to unwind. I can’t really do that. So yeah, I feel as though I always have to be doing something.

The entrepreneurial self orients to time with a view to making the best use of it. The resulting constant activity means that there is also a feeling of a lack of time. As Julianna pointed out, ‘Seriously, the thing is: there is no time. There is no time for anything’. Since there are no limits to self-improvement, productive uses of time become paramount. And because
self-optimization applies to various spheres of life, there is a sense of constant activity and lack of time.

It is worth highlighting that I do not regard the research participants’ accounts as reflections of ‘reality’, but as utterances that are doing things. By talking about productive uses of time, the research participants orient to entrepreneurial discourses, reiterate them and, through these reiterative enunciations, performatively produce entrepreneurial subjectivity. This means that my analysis does not only trace the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivities, but also provides insight into how entrepreneurial subjectivities are constituted in talk.

Embracing Risks, Learning from Knock-Backs and Staying Positive

In line with the shift to the self as business, entrepreneurial subjects bear risks like companies. ‘According to the neoliberal perspective, to prosper, one must engage with risk’ (Gershon, 2011: 540). Indeed, the research participants actively embraced risks: ‘it is not that I just like it, I love it!’ (Amalia). Similarly, knock-backs were not framed as discouraging, but as learning experiences:

If you get knocked back, do you go ‘Oh, that means I am shit, and then I’m gonna give up’, or do you go ‘Oh well, I’ve got to learn something here so that it doesn’t happen next time’. (Lauren)

Worries related to knock-backs were kept at bay and the participants adopted a positive attitude instead. They attempted ‘to keep that sort of sunny and positive attitude, and not trying to get too bogged down in the future’ (Christine).

Resonating with a wider shift towards positive thinking, which is ‘implicated in a more general logic of neoliberal subjectification’ (Binkley, 2011b: 372), Elena told me that she weighted positive things more than negative things: ‘At the end of the day, I decide myself whether I’m happy’. According to Ehrenreich (2009: 8), ‘positive thinking has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy’. Some contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity, such as having a positive attitude, are depoliticizing. When positive attitudes are valued at the expense of anger or despair, critique and the impetus to change something other than the self have little use-value.

Surviving Difficulties

Apart from responding to challenging circumstances by adopting a positive attitude, research participants talked about difficulties in their own
lives as something that had now been overcome. Difficulties, I noticed, were mainly located in the past:

   Especially last year, I had a very difficult time last year just trying to just keep going. But this year I am getting more work, doing things with people and developing more contacts, so – it is always going in the right direction, so it’s good. (Eve)

Some participants stated that it took them a long time to deal with difficulties. Elena told me ‘I started working on them in my early 20s. Now, I am 31 and I have the feeling that, for about a year, I’ve solved the biggest part’. And even when participants were in ‘a bit of a slump’ at the time of interview, they emphasized that ‘it’s been mostly up, actually, since I started professionally’ (Susan).

The temporality of these statements is meaningful because it constructs the subjects in question as capable managers of their lives. Even though they encountered difficulties, they survived them. Examining the prevalence of survivor discourses, Orgad (2009: 151) has argued that this ‘formation is closely linked to the discourse of neoliberalism and its underpinning concept of the enterprising self’. Stories about past difficulties re-constitute the entrepreneurial self because they demonstrate that it has the capacities to tackle problems. Tellingly, the survivor discourse emphasizes the individual’s emergence from suffering, but not its causes (Orgad, 2009). Empowerment is thus framed as an individual endeavour and wider socio-political issues remain unaddressed.

Hiding Injuries

The survivor discourse ties in with repudiations of vulnerability under neoliberalism (Layton, 2010). This denial of vulnerability came to the fore in the research participants’ discussions of playing-related injuries. Many musicians experience health problems (Zaza et al., 1998), and yet these injuries tend to be hidden. More than half of the research participants had suffered from playing-related injuries, but pointed out that they were ‘half a taboo’ (Astrid). Injuries were covered up out of fear that others would think it would develop into something chronic (Angela), that one would be seen as an unreliable player (Amanda) and, therefore, not asked to work (Linda).

While research participants represented injuries as something that is best kept under cover, they also normalized them. According to Anke, ‘almost everybody has something’. Despite the acknowledgement that injuries were common, only a few research participants linked the prevalence of injuries to work conditions. Kim stated: ‘if you are playing in a very cold hall, that can cause injuries’. Having an injury was overwhelmingly seen as an individual failure, which ‘mostly shows that your technique is
wrong’ (Annegret). This construction of injuries reflects wider trends in neoliberalism where failure is individualized (Beradi, 2009; Burchell, 1993; Layton, 2010; Saleci, 2010). Responsible for managing opportunities and constraints, the entrepreneurial self only has itself to blame if something goes wrong. The impact of socio-economic forces is disavowed and well-being presented as achievable through appropriate self-management.

Negotiating Competing Discourses

Although the research participants preferred to hide their playing-related injuries, they openly discussed their emotional vulnerabilities as musicians. ‘If you are playing music’, stated Ashley, ‘you are so vulnerable’. Describing similar sentiments, Alice told me that being booed at after performances was ‘like somebody digging your heart out’. As opposed to their engagements with injuries, the participants did not hide their vulnerabilities as performers.

This apparent paradox can be made sense of by recalling that entrepreneurial discourses intersect with other discourses (Halford and Leonard, 2006), such as discourses around artistic labour. Jette explained that dealing with negative feedback was difficult because: ‘We obviously totally identify, on a very personal level, with what we do, somehow as artists’. By discussing instances where they felt vulnerable, the research participants orient to their positioning as artists. Through this discursive move, they draw on an alternative repertoire of meanings and disrupt their performance of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

The research participants’ engagements with vulnerabilities demonstrate that entrepreneurial discourses are negotiated in contexts that provide a range of discourses. This does not mean that alternative discourses, such as the one on artistic labour, are unproblematic (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). It does, however, mean that entrepreneurial discourses are not deterministic and that even those individuals, who are twice positioned as entrepreneurial, draw on different discourses that may affirm, subvert or resist entrepreneurial rhetoric.

Disavowing Inequalities

While research participants drew on several discourses, discourses that highlight structural inequalities were rarely evoked. As Gill (2014) has argued in relation to cultural work, patterns of discrimination often remain unspeakable so as not to puncture neoliberal mythologies of individual achievement. Arguably, entrepreneurial subjectivities are in part performed through a disarticulation of inequalities. Even though the classical music profession is characterized by pronounced inequalities that, for example, relate to the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities (Yoshihara, 2007), the research participants used various rhetorical tools to disavow them.
This was particularly noticeable in relation to sexism. Participants emphasized that they had never personally experienced any form of gender discrimination and implied that it was therefore not an issue. Emilia told me ‘in Germany, there’s not much sexism. I haven’t experienced any’. On the rare occasions that forms of sexism were acknowledged, they were trivialized. Annegret stated: ‘I know the dirtiest jokes and the most women-hostile jokes ever. But […] I can laugh along’. Indeed, several research participants suggested that it was an advantage to be a woman because work where appearance mattered was ‘easier to get when you are a well-presented lady’ (Ashley). Through these rhetorical moves, sexism was rendered unspeakable and, arguably, unintelligible. Having observed that ‘curiously, many successful musicians are men’, Jasmin went on to say ‘and I don’t know why that is’.

The disavowal of structural inequalities means that desires for change are directed away from the socio-political sphere and ‘turned inwards’ (Mäkinen, 2012: 147). The self becomes the locus for change so that ‘social critique is increasingly replaced by self-critique’ (Saleci, 2010: 31). Some musicians were ‘pissed off’ (Isabella) that they often had to work for free. On the whole, however, anger was rarely evoked. Instead, self-critique and associated feelings of anxiety and self-doubt prevailed.

Anxious, Self-Doubting and Insecure

Anxieties came to the fore in the research participants’ discussion of the precarious nature of the classical music profession. Talking about their working lives, many participants expressed the sentiment that ‘you just don’t know what’s gonna come’ (Ashley). These insecurities provoked anxieties. Ashley told me that she was living her ideal at the moment but that ‘there’s this fear in the future that I just won’t continue’. Similar to the discussion of artists’ vulnerabilities, the research participants’ acknowledgement of anxieties breaks with entrepreneurial rhetoric. Notably, anxieties were discussed most openly in relation to casualized work, which is associated with neoliberal policies of labour market deregulation. In a context where the negative repercussions of deregulation were most acutely felt, entrepreneurial discourses ceased to be prevalent.

As I have alluded to before, precarious work conditions did not give rise to anger. Instead, insecurity and self-doubt were prominent. According to Ashley, ‘everyone seems to be very insecure’ and many research participants made casual remarks about ‘not being confident at all’ (Saaga) or being ‘crap’ in comparison to others (Sasha). These references to self-doubt can be seen as performances of artistic identity through reiteration of the common trope that artists are never content with their work. However, I also regard the prevalence of self-doubt as closely linked to the precarious nature of the profession. Liz had the
feeling that ‘if you are not at the top then you’re in danger of losing a livelihood’. Here, insecurities about one’s performance are connected to fears about one’s livelihood. Anxieties become prevalent, resonating with Tyler’s (2013: 8) argument that neoliberal democracies ‘function through the generation of consent via fear’. In the absence of narratives that highlight the impact of socio-economic structures on individual lives, and in a context where work is experienced as precarious, anxieties and self-doubt seem to prevail.

**Competing with the Self**

Many commentators have pointed out that the entrepreneurial subject is competitive and that it ‘relates to others as competitors’ (McNay, 2009: 64; see also Mirowski, 2014: 92). Resonating with this claim, the research participants described the classical music world as ‘very competitive’ (Kerry). Interestingly though, they simultaneously emphasized their dislike for competition. Holly said that the profession ‘can be quite competitive. And I don’t like that and I try to remove myself from that as much as possible’. Equally, Judith felt that musicians should ‘support each other’ instead of engaging in competition.

In distancing themselves from competition, some research participants drew on an artistic discourse and claimed that competition was ‘uncreative’ (Sonja) or ‘incompatible with music’ (Clarissa). As aforementioned, entrepreneurial rhetoric intersects with other discourses and therefore does not hold absolutely. Indeed, the research participants’ reluctance to engage in competition seems to break with the entrepreneurial logic of constant competition and suggests a rupture in the performance of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

While this represents one possible interpretation, I want to offer an alternative reading by suggesting that competition may also be self-directed under neoliberalism. As Petersen and O’Flynn (2007: 205) have argued in relation to neoliberal subjectification, ‘[t]he only person with whom one competes is oneself’; ‘the voluntary “competition with oneself” is the only fuel needed for the fully entrepreneurial subject’. This ‘competition with oneself’ came to the fore in Nora’s statement:

> It’s nice to recognize your individuality as well, rather than kind of thinking ‘Well, I want to be doing better than that person, or I want to be at the top of my field’ or that sort of thing. Just thinking ‘Well, aren’t we all doing very different things’.

Instead of engaging in competition with others, Nora emphasizes her individuality. Crucially, competition is not absent from Nora’s account; she explicitly orients to it by referring to thoughts such as ‘I want to be better than that person’. However, Nora
rejects these thoughts and instead attempts to recognize her individuality. Similarly, Carolyn told me in relation to competition that ‘you have to try and be really grounded, and realize that you are all on your own routes’. In both statements, competition seems to be directed towards the self through the emphasis on ‘individuality’ or being ‘on your own routes’.

Along with other authors, I maintain that competition with others continues to exist under neoliberalism. By offering a reading which shows that the entrepreneurial subject also competes with the self, my aim is to expand our understanding of the different ways in which competition may manifest itself. In parallel with my observation that desires for change are internalized, competition may also be turned inwards under neoliberalism. As Gill (2007) has argued, internalization can denote a ‘deeper’ form of exploitation. The entrepreneurial subject’s reluctance to engage in open competition with others may be indicative of power dynamics working on a ‘deeper’ level where competition is not only directed at others, but also at the self.

Establishing Boundaries and Blaming ‘Others’

In the interviews, the research participants also established boundaries between different kinds of individuals, particularly between ‘lazy’ and ‘hard-working’ people:

We have this kind of stigma about civil servants [...] ‘I have a cold so I’m gonna take at least a week off and get paid by the tax payer, thanks very much’. You know – musicians aren’t like that. We wanna work. We really want to work. (Lauren)

In telling me that she had successfully secured funding for her training as a singer, Alice also expressed a disdain for laziness:

I put my head down and I did the applications. Nothing happens by accident. It really doesn’t. And there are so many lazy singers, and I don’t have any time – I don’t have any – I don’t have any pity for them if they are in that situation, because they are just lazy.

Resonating with the findings of psychoanalytic research, the research participants showed little empathy for the hardships of others. Rather than regard the lack of empathy as an effect of neoliberalism (Layton, 2013), the drawing of boundaries and disdain for laziness can be seen as constitutive of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Tyler (2013), as well as Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008), have used the theoretical framework of abjection to show that neoliberal subjectivities are constituted through exclusionary dynamics. While the processes described here are more akin
to repudiation than abjection, the notion of abjection suggests that the entrepreneurial subject configures itself through the rejection of that which it is not. By presenting themselves as hard working, the research participants construct themselves as entrepreneurial. This construction simultaneously involves the repudiation of those who do not work hard and a lack of empathy if they do not achieve. Accordingly, the drawing of boundaries between ‘hard working’ and ‘lazy’ people may not simply be an effect of neoliberal governmentality, but a “‘core organ’” (Tyler, 2013: 212).

Crucially, and as Tyler (2013) and Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) have shown, racialized and classed subjects tend to be positioned as the ‘other’. Thus, the exclusionary dynamics of entrepreneurial subjectivity do not only extend to the positionalities required to become an entrepreneurial subject, but also to the kinds of subjects that are othered in this process of becoming. This observation adds to the existing literature on the exclusions of entrepreneurial subjectivity I discussed earlier. Following this line of argument, exclusions under neoliberalism do not only relate to the kinds of subjects that do not have the resources to become entrepreneurial. If the constitution of entrepreneurial subjectivities involves othering, exclusionary processes may lie at the heart of neoliberalism.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on empirical data to identify 10 contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity. My analysis highlighted various aspects, ranging from the construction of the self as business and the internalization of competition to the argument that exclusionary processes may lie at the heart of neoliberalism. While my analysis resonated with the wider literature in various ways, I also reframed existing accounts, particularly by arguing that competition is not only other directed, but also directed at the self. This argument suggests that power may be working at a ‘deeper’ level, but also expands our understanding of the different ways in which competition may manifest itself under neoliberalism. Equally important, my argument that othering processes are constitutive of entrepreneurial subjectivity adds to existing debates on the exclusionary dynamics of neoliberalism.

Crucially, my analysis has not foregrounded all the possible contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Some aspects may need further investigation. Talk about consumption, for example, was relatively absent from my research participants’ accounts. And yet, consumption may be another practice through which the entrepreneurial subject constitutes itself. In this vein, I hope that my analysis represents the beginning of a larger, and empirically informed, conversation about the psychic life of neoliberalism.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the British Academy and the Economic and Social Research Council for funding this research. My thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this article. Finally, I would like to thank Rosalind Gill, Bruna Seu and Ann Phoenix for their very constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

Note

This work has been supported by the British Academy (SG120354) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K008765/1).

1. In the literature, both terms – neoliberal and entrepreneurial subject – are used. I prefer the term ‘entrepreneurial subject’ because it foregrounds that the entrepreneurial form lies at the heart of configurations of subjectivity under neoliberalism. I will, however, use the expression ‘neoliberal subject’ when citing literature that employs this terminology.

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