The Affective Life of Neoliberal Employability Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we re-examine employability and neoliberal practices that shape the subjectivities of university students, making three interlinked arguments.

Firstly, we argue for the need to move beyond seeing neoliberal subjectivities as solely constructed by the interplay between discursive and material practices. In doing so, we take seriously the affective life of neoliberalism and those affects that saturate the formation and circulation of neoliberal reason (Anderson, 2016, p. 736). We suggest that neoliberalism has a 'psychological register' (Ehrstein et al., 2020, p. 198), whose 'happy objects' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 30) of freedom, enterprise and success resonate with individuals, encouraging them to become subject to a neoliberal discourse of employability.

We then apply an affective lens to explore how final-year students talk about becoming an employable graduate. We examine finalists' discursive repertoires and their affective responses to various recruitment practices.

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In doing so, we identify some inherent tensions in becoming employable. For example, the qualities of self-confidence and resilience that are associated with the happy object of success (Ahmed, 2010)—translated in this context as 'being an employable graduate'—seem to conflict with narratives encouraging graduates to continually seek advice, mentoring and feedback (Wright, 2011). In this light, success becomes potentially unachievable, reinscribing the imperative for ongoing self-improvement and perpetuating a dependence on external sources of validation.

Finally, we argue that in the context of graduate recruitment, the affective life of neoliberalism is opening a space for new online advice applications whose seductive promise is to help graduating students become the success (i.e. an employable graduate) they want to be, by helping them to game the recruitment process. We focus on technologies such as recruitment apps and advice platforms, which encourage students to value the practised performance of employability over the possession of employable attributes.

IDEAS OF AFFECT

Scholarship on affect, like that of Massumi (2002), is a response to a perceived lack of recognition of the role of feeling and embodiment as part of social practice (Fischer, 2016). It is argued that this failure of recognition is reflected in an overemphasis on cognition (and thus discourse) in understanding modes of experience and meaning-making (Massumi, 2002). As a consequence, there has been a 'turn to affect' in some sociological analyses (Leys, 2011).

Affect, however, is a nebulous concept. The imprecision and uncertainty surrounding what is meant by affect reflects a cleavage in the psychological theories from which it has emerged (Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012). On one side, Massumi (and others including Thrift, 2004, as cited in Leys, 2011) seeks to sever the connection between cognition, emotion and affect. Pinning his discussion to interpretations of experiments on human subjects, Massumi makes the much quoted statement that there is a 'missing half-second' in which bodily responses (affect) are not conscious and act independently of thought in reaction to stimuli (2002, p. 28). Affect in this perspective does not have an intentional quality, but instead is linked to a palette of basic and hardwired emotions (see discussion in Leys, 2011).

In contrast, other theorists, including Wetherell (2012) and Ahmed (2004), rely on psychoanalytic ideas to resist any severance of cognition, emotion and affect. Indeed, they maintain that the outcome of such a severance is simply to re-inscribe the mind–body dualism of enlightenment thinking. Rather, Wetherell argues, affect is embodied meaning-making (2012, p. 4), involving 'both sense and sensibility' (2012, p. 13). From this perspective then, affect is not simply turbulence, a bodily upheaval beyond consciousness; instead, the links between nerves, body parts, behaviours, thoughts, feelings and narratives may have a range of organised, patterned, interactive and recursive qualities. Equally, Ahmed argues that it is unhelpful to make a distinction between emotion and affect. Such a distinction, she argues, obscures the complexity of the inter-linkage between bodily and emotional responses (Schmitz and Ahmed, 2014). Instead, in her work (2010, 2014), she uses the term emotion to explore how affect/emotion operate in practice, and specifically how emotion (in the sense she uses the word) acts to structure the subject, 'show[ing] how the subject arrives into a world that already has affects and feelings circulating in very particular ways' (2014, p. 98).

In this chapter we follow the lead of Wetherell and Ahmed. We follow Ahmed in using the term emotion (and occasionally the formulation affect/emotion) to embrace the emotional thoughts, feelings and behaviours experienced by social actors, including university students as part of social practice and interactions involved in higher education in the United Kingdom, and in particular employability-related recruitment practices. As highlighted later, we focus in particular on emotion/affect as it appears in interview talk.

In arguing that the subject is part of a world in which emotions already circulate, Ahmed points to another dimension of affect/emotion, one taken up by several theorists. Rather than seeing emotion as only located within an individual, or focusing on emotional exchanges between individuals, Ahmed (2004), Anderson (2014, 2016), Shajahan (2020) and Wetherell (2012) use a range of metaphors to propose that emotion extends beyond individuals, to social collectivities in terms of economies (Ahmed), affective practices (Wetherell), emoscapes (Shahjahan) or affective atmospheres (Anderson). Operating at a collective level, such affective emotional systems are understood as flowing between people, across space and to be temporally located. Thus, Anderson's concept of affective atmospheres conjures ideas of climatic conditions, of high and low pressure and of temporary and diffuse clouds of emotions reflected in the notion of an

'affective present' (2016) or 'climate of opinion' (2016, p. 734 citing Friedman & Friedman, 1998). Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, Anderson associates the era of Thatcherism with a mood of authoritarianism (2016, p. 748). From this perspective, affective atmospheres are the emotional backdrop and enabler of particular forms of reason, including neoliberal reasons. At the same time, Anderson argues that affective atmospheres can also be understood in terms of 'structures of feeling' (citing Williams, 1961), the particular atmospheric formations that serve to contribute to and influence the 'affective present' (2016, p. 746). Referring back to the Thatcher era, he argues that associated with an authoritarian mood is a sense of threat, a fear of internal enemies (miners) and of other races (Black) and ethnic groupings (Irish), that contributes to the reinforcement of a pervasive climate of opinion and to the legitimation of political and social policy initiatives.

Anderson stresses that there is not one singular structure of feeling that corresponds with a singular neoliberal reason. Rather, he provides a sense of jostling affective formations interacting in a 'tangle' (Anderson, 2016, p. 748, citing Collier, 2012) of different aspects of social practice that resonate with neoliberal logics to inform policy developments and the lived experience of individual subjects.

The pertinence of Anderson's ideas to our chapter is illustrated by the work of Raco (2009). In his study of post-millennium Britain, Raco charts a shift in ideas of citizenship. He argues that 'states' (2009, p. 437), or more usefully the government of the day and associated interest groups, have sought to marshal discourses that work together to legitimate neoliberal forms of being which entail accepting responsibility, seeking status and success, and expressing positivity. What has emerged, he argues, is an aspirational form of citizenship, a subjectivity in which citizens have responsibilities, not rights, including the responsibility to be independent, to make and take opportunities, and to seek material and social success (2009, pp. 438–440). Citizenship in this account is not only a discursive construct, and it has affective dimensions (hope, despair, resilience, guilt, shame) produced and reproduced in historical epochs and particular locations, through Anderson's tangle of affective atmospheres, structures of feeling and discursive flows.

In taking this approach, we are also adopting Ahmed's argument that 'emotions *do* things' (2004, p. 119). That emotions 'work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective' (Ahmed, 2004,

p. 119). In other words, emotions are 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29) binding constructs, values and concrete objects together into powerful configurations. It is emotions that imbue particular constructs with a tenacity that facilitates the circumvention of 'rational discussion', translating them into taken-for-granted ways of being, such as, for example, the requirement to be an aspirational responsibilized citizen.

Ahmed illustrates her argument of the 'stickiness' of emotions by reference to the role of family as both a social construct and a happy object. Marrying and being part of a family promises the happy-ever-after of fairy stories. In this sense, happiness as a positive affect is seen as the outcome of being married, being part of a family. But the reverse is also true; being married, being part of a family is already seen as being happy, an understanding achieved through a shared orientation within society that marriage is a happy state.

We argue below that employability enjoys a similar happy status in the current neoliberal affective atmosphere. As with the family, employability invokes the promise of happiness, in this case the happiness of a graduate job. Equally, *being employable* is already a taken-for-granted happy state. As a result, affect/emotions not only attach to and intensify concepts and ideas of employability; in so doing they are also implicated in the governance of neoliberal subjects (Blackman et al., 2008), requiring individuals to achieve employability. Those subjects who do not share the aim of employability become cast as awkward or problematic, and those who do not achieve employability—are not employable—become associated with the negative emotion of failure.

Affect, Governance and Graduate Employability in Higher Education

We now develop our second argument that the neoliberal valorisation of qualities such as enterprise, self-confidence and resilience seems at odds with a parallel narrative insinuating that individuals are never 'good enough', and which continually encourages them to seek out guidance, coaching and advice with an elusive promise of thereby achieving success. In doing so, we draw on Grey's (1994) classic study of an accountancy firm and his conceptualisation of 'career as a project of the self', as well as our own research on graduate employability (Handley, 2018; Handley & den Outer, 2022).

In his 1994 article, Grey moved the debate about labour process discipline from its traditional focus on surveillance and the panoptique techniques of the workplace, towards the 'various ways in which governmentality operates on, in and through subjects' (p. 479) who are thereby encouraged to self-manage and self-discipline themselves. Whilst acknowledging the power of workplace practices such as performance appraisals (see also the classic work by Townley, 1993, 1994), Grey turned his attention to the self-disciplining produced as an individual crafts his or her career as an entrepreneurial project of the self. This process begins even before individuals start their first job (p. 482). The subject being constructed is not the 'organisation man' of Whyte's era (1956) but an enterprising self for whom a career is likely to cross organisational and occupational boundaries in the search for new and self-serving opportunities (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Of particular interest to this chapter are Grey's observations about the affective qualities that successful recruitment candidates felt they should display and inhabit. Above all, accountancy trainees were 'expected to display enthusiasm and commitment at all times, regardless of the tediousness of the chores assignment to them' (1994, p. 486). The displays of enthusiasm were not necessarily instrumental acts. Although disillusioned by the tedium of basic auditing, the trainees reframed their affective experience in positive terms, as an important rite-of-passage in a longer-term career project. As one individual commented, 'I don't think "this is really boring"; I think "this is getting me to where I want to be" [because] it's getting me a qualification I can do anything with' (p. 487). A disillusioning task was thus invested with a future-oriented meaning linked to the happy object of employability and graduate employment.

Grey's analysis shows how the affective life of trainee accountants is shaped through a range of informal and formal workplace interventions, albeit with the driving force coming from the individuals themselves as they construct their career as entrepreneurial selves. But what is it that feeds the form and substance of these workplace interventions? The governmentality literature has shone an analytical light on some of the 'webs of knowledge and expertise' (Grey, 1994, p. 480)—especially from the 'psy' disciplines including psychiatry and psychology—that have produced a range of intervention techniques such as annual appraisal procedures and practice (e.g. see Townley, 1993). We know that such schemes encourage

individuals to understand and evaluate themselves in particular ways encoded in the scheme, in a process that Ikonen and Nikunen (2019, p. 824) have called 'steering at a distance' (see also Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999; Walters, 2012). But what is less well discussed is the affective dimension of governmentality.

One contention explored in this chapter is that the affective atmosphere associated with neoliberalism encourages individuals to want to become aspirational, self-reliant and adaptable. Raco (2009), for example, describes a neoliberal governance which sees the state as a facilitator of (but not an automatic provider to) individuals in a responsibilities-based politics (pp. 437–8). He contrasts this with the 'old-fashioned policies' (p. 436) of the UK welfare state and its emphasis on a fair distribution of collective wealth, and on a rights-based political focus. Raco contends that the path for the emergence of a neoliberal politics was enabled by a public mood (or what Anderson might call an affective atmosphere) increasingly vocal in its disdain for people deemed to be 'living off the state', at the same time when other citizens found working/living conditions to be precarious in what Giddens (2003) called a 'runaway world' of insecurity. In the context of this public mood, a neoliberal politics could flourish which celebrated active, aspirational, entrepreneurial citizens as those who deserved (and were more likely) to succeed. At the same time, however, what was lost was the security associated with a view that the Keynesian welfare state would always be there to support all citizens in times of hardship (Raco, 2009, p. 438). A fear of insecurity if one did *not* take responsibility for one's future, alongside a positive vision of the fruits of entrepreneurial activity, fostered a shift from what Raco describes as a politics of expectation to a politics of aspiration (p. 438).

In this context, employability offers subjects the promise of happiness, and employability shapes their affective experience. In Grey's study (as just one example), displays of enthusiasm and willingness to cheerfully endure humdrum tasks become attributes which the accountancy appraisal systems in Grey's study valorised as being so important. Looking more widely across a range of occupations, the 'right' attitudes for entrepreneurial workers come to be associated with initiative, flexibility, adaptability and availability (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Vallas & Cummins, 2015).

Affect and Discursive Repertoires in a Qualitative
Study of University Students

In the final section of this chapter, we illustrate some of the ways that university students talk about employability. To do so, we draw on findings from an earlier study of final-year students talking about what employability means to them, how they try to demonstrate that quality during recruitment processes and how they project an employability which reflects an entrepreneurial self (Handley & den Outer, 2022). The chapter draws out discursive repertoires as well as affective dimensions of their talk about employability.

The topic explored in the study was employability in relation to the graduate recruitment process. We know that a good proportion of university students want a graduate job, and especially one that offers a formal graduate development programme combining a decent salary with structured training and mentoring opportunities. In exchange for hard work and enthusiastic commitment, graduates expect to finish such development programmes as highly marketable individuals with career options in the same organisation or with a new employer (de Vos et al., 2009; Clarke & Scurry, 2020). However, as might be expected, such graduate development programmes are highly competitive. Recruitment is often a long, drawn-out process in which applicants must regularly demonstrate their eligibility in order to pass through to the next (and subsequent) stages. The filtering and funnelling that characterises graduate recruitment processes means that to reach the final stages of face-to-face interviews or assessment centres, applicants must usually complete multiple online tasks and gamified psychometric quizzes, and create content such as recorded 'interview presentations', that is, answering pre-given questions to a webcam but without a live audience (Stone et al., 2015; Georgiou & Nikolaou, 2020; Jack, 2020).

Recruitment is thus a complicated journey that finalists must successfully navigate if they want the prize of a graduate job. In our study, we examined how finalists talk about their expectations and experiences of navigating recruitment processes, including how they interpret the messaging in the graduate-job promotional materials they encounter. The study complements our earlier work on how graduate recruitment websites discursively construct the notion of the employable graduate (Handley, 2018), by exploring the perspective of finalists themselves.

The design of the study combined interviews ($n = 17$) and two focus groups ($n = 7$) with finalists from a university in the relatively affluent southeast of England. Focus group participants also engaged in an individual interview of between 40 and 70 minutes. Of the 17 participants, 9 were female and 8 male. Finalists were from a range of disciplines including sciences ($n = 6$), business and management ($n = 9$), and humanities ($n = 2$). The university in question is not in the top 'Russell Group' of research-led institutions, but nevertheless has a high proportion of privately educated undergraduates compared with most UK universities (HESA, 2020), and the participants are thus likely to be from middle-class families with relatively high career aspirations. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts, first-order coding and memoing were managed with the support of the proprietary software package, MAXQDA. Second-order coding and interpretation of data tended to rely on memoing and on discussions between the research team members as we read, re-read and drew out themes that pertained to finalists' discursive repertoires and their affective responses to various recruitment practices.

As a starting point, we asked interviewees what the term 'employability' meant to them. The struggles which finalists expressed in trying to pin down this concept reminded us of Morley's labelling of it as a 'socially decontextualised signifier' (2001, p. 131): that employability makes sense only when associated with a specific context. Without that context, many of our participants struggled to identify anything more specific than 'having skills' such as team-working. Some talked of employability in terms of possession (Holmes, 2013) of skills, knowledge and attitudes, and a small proportion talked of a 'fit' or 'match' with the employer, especially cultural fit. Affective dispositions were also cited, such as the importance of having and demonstrating an 'enthusiasm and willingness' to do more, and to give 'all your efforts' [Sapta, psychology[1]], in a manner resonant with Grey's 1994 study reported earlier.

Interviewees seldom mentioned the substantive content of degree programmes unless we asked a direct question about that. Science students acknowledged that particular degree qualifications opened the door to technical roles such as biomedical clinician, but students on business and management programmes rarely cited or praised subjects or modules. One student [Jess] mentioned her ethics module, but implied that its value was

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

more in signalling her personal moral qualities, rather than in learning about ethical frameworks and their application to management dilemmas. For non-science disciplines, the degree programme was generally seen as a plain vanilla baseline, needed to meet graduate employers' recruitment filter of having an upper-second-class degree in order to meet the first hurdle for a graduate job. In our earlier research on graduate recruitment websites, we found that this narrative—that the degree is only a mere starting point—was prevalent across many sectors, particularly those that require a professional qualification for trainee practitioners, such as accountancy. None of the participants in our study chose to counter these narratives by citing higher education's broader educational and cultural values. The affective quality of students' talk about their degree programmes was thus surprisingly neutral, without either enthusiasm or anxiety. Instead, the affective life of neoliberal employability discourse flourished in discussions about how employability was *performed*, resonating with Brown and Hesketh's (2004) suggestion that finalists learn to become 'players' in a game where the happy object (Ahmed, 2010) of a successful graduate job comes to those who perform employability in desirable ways.

Most of our interviewees had much to say about the tactics required to navigate recruitment processes. Some cited templates such as S.T.A.R.[2] which had been learnt from university careers services as well as from graduate recruitment advice websites (such as sites from accountancy firm PwC or from third-party recruitment agents[3]). Indeed, it was sometimes the recruitment websites themselves that offered guidance to steer and coach finalists on how to get a graduate job. One interviewee talked of the proliferation of online situational 'tests' given to job applications. In a typical test, applicants are given a problem situation such as a customer complaint and asked to type (in 'no more than 200 words') their thinking process and response. The recruitment sites offer *both* tests and guidance on completing those tests, in a formulation that resonates with Foucault's conception of a governance practice (Foucault, 1978, 1982; see also Rose, 1999).

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[2] S.T.A.R. = Situation, Task, Action, Result. Sometimes an E is added for Evaluation.
[3] For example, see https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/psychometric-tests and https://www.pwc.co.uk/careers/student-careers/undergraduate-graduate-careers/our-programmes/graduate-opportunities.html

Whilst some finalists expressed confidence that they'd learned to signal employability, others were anxious about this processual aspect of employability and were continually on the lookout for yet more advice, guidance, tips and interview-response templates about how to display the right kind of employability. One might interpret this signalling activity as a form of agency around how to craft the appropriate persona, and how to manage impressions (Goffman, 1959). But this interpretation overlooks the extent to which recruitment websites and other sources of advice are already shaping assumptions about what is an appropriate performance.

When explaining how they learn to navigate recruitment processes, the finalists in our study talked of directly asking people from a wide range of information sources: family, former placement employers, alumni and—less frequently—lecturers and university careers services. Graduate recruitment websites are also used as sources, but the information is 'read' in different ways—sometimes uncritically, but sometimes from more effective positionings such as distancing or cynicism. As part of our interview protocol, we showed participants websites from well-known graduate recruiters that regularly appear in The Times Top 100 Graduate Recruiters list,[4] including PricewaterhouseCoopers (accountancy), Jaguar Land Rover (automotive), Aldi (food retail) and Goldman Sachs (financial services). Our working assumption was that the materials on these sites might have a governing effect by encouraging potential applicants to notice the visually and discursively represented characteristics of graduate work, to evaluate themselves against that representation, and then to copy that representation to some extent (or actively resist it). What we noticed instead was a more nuanced variation in the way our interviewees talked about the graduate recruitment websites. We identified four patterns of what Potter and Wetherell (1987) call 'discursive repertoires'. These repertoires were sometimes used in conflicting ways by the same participant, and so do not characterise individuals as such. The repertoires that we observed were reading for 'fit', reading instrumentally, distancing and benign cynicism. For comparative purposes, we include an illustrative quotation for each of these repertoires below (Table 5.1).

Finalists talked positively and enthusiastically of the prize of the happy object of a graduate job and the success that was expected to follow, but also expressed anxiety about how to manage and 'game' the process. This was especially the case for those who had already begun job-hunting.

[4] https://www.top100graduateemployers.com/

Table 5.1 Discursive repertoires

Discursive repertoire	Illustration
Reading for 'fit'	'Employability is about the skills needed. Does the person fit? So, usually I look at the job description, and it has "you need to be creative and analytical thinking". It has a list, so I look at that. Employability is really whether you just fit what they're looking for'. [Jenny, business]
Reading instrumentally	'I prepared for the assessment Centre by trying to memorise what they had said about their values and their ethics, and then saying that *I completely agreed with the ethics and their values and I'm the right man for this kind of thing because* … I believe we believe in the same things. Stuff like that'. [Andy, English literature, emphasis added]
Distancing	When looking at the Aldi website, Mina noted the highly structured portrayal of a working day and the activities involved, and inferred that the company probably wanted someone analytical, and 'fitting their structure'. After a short pause, she added 'not me'. [Mina, marketing]
Benign cynicism	Adam said his first impression of the Goldman Sachs site was 'it's all very CSR[a]', and he later commented that it is so easy for the major companies to 'put on this façade of who they want people to think they are'. [Adam, business]

[a]Corporate social responsibility

Anxiety about the process was also anticipatory, in that many had heard horror stories from other job-seekers who told of long trajectories of online tests, automated online interviews (with no real person to talk to), quizzes and other hurdles that had to be mastered before getting to the holy grail of an assessment centre or real-person interview. The early stages had to be mastered through guile and strategy, as explained by Lottie:

> It's not so much that you force yourself to be someone else but you do have to show or emphasise their values. Maybe they don't quite match, or you don't quite feel as strongly about them, but you have to demonstrate it to get to the next stage. It's about getting to the face-to-face, to meeting people—getting rid of all the online things—then you can be yourself. But you're always having to push and become the company, to get to that bit. [Lottie, marketing]

Learning to 'get to the face-to-face' encouraged finalists to seek out and be open to the seductive promise—of 'happy-ever-after' graduate employment—from the online recruitment-advice apps and graduate

websites. Finalists are routinely drawn towards new apps such as 'Debut' to learn to 'be employable': to learn what to do, say, wear, document in one's CV and so on. These apps, sometimes contained in graduate recruitment websites and sometimes embedded in third-party commercial apps, tend to rely on algorithmic matching and profiling processes and are instantiated in psychometric tests, gamification apps, talent-spotting apps and various online and often-automated applications which offer coaching, practice runs for the psychometric tests, 'hints-and-tips' advice—all to beat 'the system' and get to those final selection stages where you can talk to a real person. The offer of a helping hand by a supportive coach (even if only a bot) is compelling. Lottie talked of the Debut phone app:

> You can build your own profile on the [Debut] app and then you get talent spots, so it's like, 'Oh, congratulations, you have been talent spotted by BT ' and you get first slot to register for the BT video talking about their graduate scheme. You can be fast-tracked. If they're trying new innovative ways to engage a new audience, I like that. I appreciate it. And you connect with them better because it gives you hints and tips about the application process. [Lottie, marketing]

Online games were also mentioned and were well-regarded as a youth-friendly addition to an employer's suite of recruitment tools. Finalists seemed to assume that the apps gave them a positional (Holmes, 2013) advantage over others, although one [Mina, marketing] commented that her long-standing business interests were surely more valid than 'comments picked up from a job site'. However, the growing proliferation of these helper apps seemed to create another existential issue for some of our participants: the continual anxiety that there must be yet another piece of advice to be sought and mastered, another S.T.A.R.-type template to be found and used. Jessica illustrates this affective crisis of confidence and feeling of failure which made her ever more dependent on advice. Her experience illustrates what Archer called fractured reflexivity (2012), where the internal conversations about how to proceed are overwhelmed by choices and advice to the detriment of agentic decision-making.

> I go to university, and yet I can't even get a job at Tesco, so what is it they want? … It's frustrating. I work so hard for [the online assessments], but if you can't get past that—(sigh). I'm hardworking and I like a challenge—I think that should make me employable. I've done so much research. I get all of those books, and I'm looking for the type of person they want. You know,

in Careers, they have the books like TARGETjobs, and there will be a page about how to update your CV, so I'll read those and I'll make notes and then I'll go back to my CV … I don't want it to look like 'oh, she's copied that' [Jenny, business, emphasis added]

Our exploratory study showed signs of how the advisory landscape for graduating students is changing. Whilst employability advice has traditionally been offered by real people engaged in real conversations—for example, by advisers in university career services—the advisory landscape has rapidly extended beyond universities to online and mobile apps, driven by algorithmic decisioning and possibly funded by third-party commercial mediators who may have little direct connection with the employers themselves. This implies that the mechanisms by which students are learning about employability are increasingly out of the control of universities and graduate employers. There are at least two possible reasons for this shift: one commercial, and the second connected to the purported rise of the 'therapeutic society'. The commercial reason is perhaps that as recruitment moves online, and CVs and personal data are shared with third-party apps such as Debut, recruitment becomes digitised and potentially monetised by commercial platforms in a process fuelled by surveillance capitalism and the 'new gold' of aggregated personal data (Zuboff, 2019). It is plausible that recruitment advice and practice-testing platforms are operating on a business model, whereby interactions with students are free because their data (e.g. uploaded CVs, and responses to online tests linked to personal data) are highly valuable to the data aggregator. A second reason relates to what some argue is the rise of the 'therapeutic society' (Wright, 2011; Ecclestone, 2009), whereby individuals increasingly seek out advice, mentoring and coaching. Advice is sought in anticipation of successful outcomes such as the status and rewards of a graduate job, and advice-seeking is construed as the act of responsible citizens. Yet the elusiveness of success generates anxiety, which fuels more advice-seeking in the hope of finding the 'right' guidance as a passport to getting the graduate job.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter we argued for the need to take seriously the affective life of neoliberalism and to move beyond seeing neoliberal subjectivities as constructed solely by an interplay between discursive and

material practices. Affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2016) become the emotional backdrop and enabler of particular forms of reasoning and drive particular forms of behaviour. We argued that the 'psychological register' (Ehrstein et al., 2020) of neoliberalism valorises an aspirational self-confidence that success will come provided one is enterprising, self-confident, resilient and enthusiastic. As shown in work by Grey (1994), Brown and Hesketh (2004) and others (e.g. Handley & den Outer, 2022), some graduate job candidates are led to seek the happy object of success by learning to 'play the game' and displaying the qualities that they believe employers expect of them. They learn the value of inhabiting a discourse of responsibility and initiative, and so demonstrate a desire and willingness to learn how to perform employability and to show that they 'fit'. Paradoxically, our research also found that whilst many job-seeking graduates spoke the language of enterprise, enthusiasm and positivity, at the same time some expressed a deep anxiety about needing to do more, not being 'good enough' and wanting more advice, practice tests, guidance and coaching. It seems that although our graduate interviewees bought into an aspirational 'happy-ever-after' narrative, some became more dependent (and less self-reliant) on the expanding employability advice market, and on the third-party commercial organisations that feed on job-seekers' insecurities.

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