

Work and ‘the crafting of individual identities’ from a critical standpoint

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In this paper we start by critically problematising the argument that employment is important to the crafting of individual identities by drawing on the work of Michel Foucault to trouble taken-for-granted assumptions in psychological research on unemployment and modernist understanding of the ‘individual’ as a unitary and stable subject. We then elaborate our theoretical position and demonstrate how a Foucauldian standpoint can help to rethink how we think about, act upon, and experience unemployment. We then argue that, rather than describing the effect of unemployment, power-knowledge has contributed to the production of neoliberal subjectivity, including neoliberal unemployed subjectivity. More particularly we argue that ‘unemployment’ and ‘mental ill-health’ are not independent phenomena in a cause effect relationship but are, rather, two facets of socially constituted violence which functions to maximise the working of the neoliberal labour market in the interests of employers and shareholders.

“Foucault himself favours the dissolution of identity, rather than its creation or maintenance. He sees identity as a form of subjugation and a way of exercising power over people and preventing them from moving outside fixed boundaries.” (O’Farrell, 2014)

In this paper, we engage with what was positioned in the Special Issue’s call for contributions as ‘work’ by engaging with ‘employment’ through the lens of critical unemployment studies and engage with what was positioned in the call for contributions as ‘the crafting of individual identities’ by engaging with what we, following Michel Foucault, position as the reconstitution of the neoliberal subject. Before we do this, we briefly explicate what we mean by ‘from a critical standpoint’. When we describe our position as a critical standpoint, we are referring, in part, to what Foucault (2003a) describes as ‘critique’. Because this is fundamental to our work in general and this paper in particular we quote him below at length:

The core of critique is basically made of the bundle of relationships that are tied to one another, or one to the two others, power, truth and the subject. And if governmentalisation is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice

through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself [sic] the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth (p. 266).

Drawing on this definition of critique we will begin firstly by explicating how our standpoint makes use of Foucault’s work on power, truth and the subject and then focus our attention on the production of the unemployed subject.

Power-Knowledge and the Subject: In Relation to Work(lessness) and (un) Employment

When we use the word ‘truth’ we prefer to use it as a verb; that is, we are interested not in what is ‘true’ but rather which statements have been ‘truthed’ or given the status of truth; how the ‘truthing’ was/is warranted; and whose interests are served by the truthed statements, that is, those statements accorded the status of truth. For us, a knowledge is a system of interconnected statements which has been ‘knowledged’ by this we mean given the status

of knowledge as opposed to opinion. Different knowledges usually serve the interests of different groups in different ways and knowledging is accomplished in different ways within different regimes of truth.

In relation to work(lessness)/(un)employment and the individual, we are thus interested in which statements and knowledges ‘about’ ‘unemployment’ and ‘the unemployed person’ have been truthed (there is a huge international literature spanning over eight decades, for narrative reviews see Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938; Fryer & Payne, 1986; Hanisch, 1999; Wanberg, 2012), how this truthing was warranted (largely through modernist mainstream psych-science, for example unemployment research in psychology has long been preoccupied with the casual relationship between unemployment and mental well-being, and Winefield (1995) argued that only well designed longitudinal research could test this issue, the underlying assumptions of the issue of causality and research design are here based in modernist/scientific discourse) and whose interests have been served by this truthing (seldom those of the subjects of this research, we would maintain).

Following Foucault, we regard it as impossible in theory as well as in practice to disentangle knowledged systems of statements from power relations. As Foucault put it, both “directly imply one another” (Foucault, 1991, p. 27). For us, as for Foucault (2003a), power-knowledge is an analytical grid that can be employed to rethink the constitution of a system, how it is made acceptable, and what impact it has on people’s lives. Using the grid of power-knowledge enables thinking of power relations as integrally *productive* as much as constraining.

In relation to work(lessness)/(un)employment and the individual, we see knowledge systems ‘about’ ‘unemployment’ and ‘the unemployed person’ as directly implying and being implied by power relations which produce unemployment and unemployed people in ways which both enable and simultaneously constrain what they are and can be.

The constitution and reconstitution of

the unemployed subject can thus be examined using the analytical grid of power-knowledge. Unemployed subjects do not, from our standpoint, exist prior to power-knowledge but rather are constituted by being ‘power-knowledged’ via authorities (like unemployment researchers and other social scientists whose work warrants: theories of unemployment; measurement of unemployed people’s ‘self-esteem’ and ‘mental health’; the accumulation of statistics about the scale of unemployment; and ‘documentation’ of unemployed people’s ‘lived experience’), and by unemployed people coming to know themselves i.e. power-knowledging themselves discursively through the discourses available to them, including those whose constitution is accomplished at least partly through the work of unemployment researchers and other social scientists.

Foucault’s claim that critique is the movement by which subjects give themselves the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth means to us that, at a minimum, when engaging in critique we interrogate systems of knowledge statements which have been truthed and uncover how this is related to the constitution of power relations. At the same time this entails interrogating power relations-as-constituted with regard to the sets of statements that construct objects and subject positions which they imply. In relation to unemployment we interrogate statements, power-knowledges and regimes of truth through which work(lessness)/‘unemployment and unemployed subjects’ are constituted by being ‘power-knowledged’ through the work of unemployment researchers, psychologists, economists, bureaucrats, policy makers, politicians and so on.

Power-Knowledge and the Unemployed Subject/Workless Citizen

Definitions can be useful places to begin when utilising this analytical framework. One of the most obvious points about (un)employment is what is consistently left out of discussion. Employment is frequently defined as a contractual relationship of exchange of labour power for income (Fryer, 1995; Fryer & Payne, 1986). To understand

unemployment as being without such a contractual relationship only makes sense through a particular way of ordering the social world (constituting the parties between which contractual relationships are possible) with that ordering legitimated through knowledge claims appealing to certain types of authority. This definition of unemployment assumes an essentially capitalist economic system in which some have labour power to sell and others have capital to set up the means of production and to buy labour in a labour market.

Dominant power-knowledged discursive systems of statements constituting unemployment and unemployed subjects position workers as both ‘human capital’ and entrepreneurs of themselves. This is a manifestation of neoliberalism for whereas neoliberalism is widely regarded and presents itself as a political rationality based in deregulation and absolute non-intervention, neoliberalism – as Foucault (2008a) recognised – is actually thoroughly interventionist, not in relation to the workings of the market but in relation to society “in its fabric and depth” (Foucault, p. 145) which in turn is manifested in re-subjection/resubjection. The ‘entrepreneur of the self’ is a subject position that is the product of dominant systems of neoliberal power-knowledge.

The construction of subject position available within systems of neoliberal power-knowledge can be traced through the truthing done by authorities on unemployment. The most widely used operationalisation of ‘unemployment’ by social scientists, non- and governmental bodies is the International Labour Organisation ([ILO], 1982) definition which positions a person as unemployed if they are of an age to be employed, without employment, ‘want’ employment, are available to be employed, and have *actively sought* employment in the previous four weeks. While there are several consequences of this operationalisation which we have discussed elsewhere (see Fryer, 2013; Fryer & Stambe, 2014) the assumption of an ‘active subject’/‘active society’ is telling with regard to how the unemployed are constituted. To be

sure, the move towards an active society can be located in the definition of unemployment that emphasises the ‘actively looking for work’ rather than the passive unemployed subject. In relation to labour market policies of unemployment the notion of the ‘active society/subject’ can be located in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) documents (for example, see 1994, 1999) which move away from certain understandings of unemployment requiring demand solutions to understandings of unemployment as requiring supply solutions. Analysing these discursive strategies, Triantafyllou (2011) argues intervention into unemployment has been thus redirected at individuals, developing and maximising their human capital.

The need to be productive in unemployment includes not just looking for work but actively working on the self to increase ‘employability’, job-readiness and active job search (Dean, 1995). This has meant that the locus of intervention has shifted from the economic processes to the unemployed person. Technically this means the unemployed subject must engage in ‘workfare’ practices in order to qualify for welfare. This is not just a case of filling in the correct forms but, as Dean argues, entails the reforming of how people come to understand themselves and work upon themselves to suit the needs of the current labour market: a neoliberal subjectivity.

McDonald and Marsten (2005) have documented how case management in Australian welfare organisations produces the skills, capacities, and attributes congruent with the ethical subject of neoliberalism, one who is, “motivated, confident with good self-esteem, someone willing to take responsibility for their actions, displays good work ethic, takes pride in their appearance, is literate and numerate, who does not use drugs or alcohol, is mentally sound and moderately intelligent” (p. 390). The various technologies endorsed to conduct the conduct of unemployed people include motivation meetings, case management interviews, compliance with Employment Pathway Plans and group training sessions. Training sessions focus on imperatives to recognise personal strengths and weaknesses,

plan strategies, develop job search skills, market oneself, engage consistently in active self-work and acceptance of techniques of the self. If the unemployed are non-compliant with regard to processes resubjectivating them into 'enterprising selves' of neoliberalism then they are labelled deviant, lazy, difficult and 'dependent' (Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1998).

Brady (2011) reflects that the emphasis on the production of a neoliberal subjectivity forecloses other ways of being. The potential diversity of subject positions that can be performed in the current labour market are not only confined to neoliberalism however as the research by Montenegro and Montenegro (2013) demonstrates the governmentality of social workers with immigrants to Spain reproduced the self within a grid of intelligibility as 'Third world women' whose possibilities for being in the labour market were restricted to stereotypical occupations, which also happened to be low paid and insecure (work like cleaning and service roles).

Psychological expertise when governing the unemployed on welfare has been located not just in the expected sense of expertise regarding 'psychological disorders' and interventions, but also in 'therapeutic' case management, being able to recognise distress as being reflective on 'repressed issues' of clients or engaging in processes of 'confession' enabling them to 'spill their souls' (McDonald & Marsten, 2005). Moreover, devices used to mark out and separate unemployed clients from one another further contribute to the constitution of certain unemployed subjectivities through being power-knowledged. For example the Job Seeker Classification Instrument is an 'evidence based' (Productivity Commission, 2002) system that streams people on the job seeker allowance according to risk and 'work barriers' (e.g. (dis)ability, time unemployed). McDonald, Marsten, and Buckley (2003) argue this classification instrument is productive of the field of possibilities available to jobseekers, limiting what they can say and do, by drawing on discourses relating to the ideal psychological, behavioural and

emotional subject. With this classifying instrument the jobseeker is matched and compared, and a set form of reformation is mapped out; the gaze is fixed upon the body of the unemployed through the, "seamless web around the unemployed, created by a highly integrated form of infocracy, imposes a regime of control and obligation" (McDonald et al., 2003, p. 521).

The Psy-complex, Unemployment and Neoliberal Subjectivity

We hold that any discussion about unemployment and subjectivity requires an examination of the psy-complex, which is "the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise" (Rose, 1999, p. vii). The psy-complex is just one of many 'apparatuses' or systems of relations between "discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). The psy-complex is an apparatus in that it is a network of systems of truthed statements, theories, techniques, practices etcetera, which together constitute psy (Rose, 1985). The psy-complex is composed not only of psychology but also psychiatry, counselling, therapy and related disciplines and it has increasingly colonised popular media, 'common sense' ways of talking about oneself (Parker, 1997). In relation to unemployment, the psy-complex positions problems of unemployment as 'psychological', constructs and deploy expertise in relation to them and regulates them in part through the (re)construction of subjectivity.

The psychologisation of 'everything', which is a manifestation of the domination of the psy-complex, has brought about a situation in which claims that paid work is important "for both community engagement and the crafting of individual identities" are positioned as 'common sense'. Social inclusion has come to mean labour market inclusion (the importance of 'work' for 'community engagement'). In a speech entitled. "The dignity of work" the then Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (2011) declared, "[a]ll of

them people [the unemployed on welfare] will be better off with work.... In today's economy, inclusion through participation must be our central focus". Of course, this approach does not question whether 'inclusion' will result in an improvement of circumstances. [Cis] women's 'emancipation' has often been tied to inclusion into the labour market, but, as Bacchi (1999) points out, such inclusion can produce other problems of class and colonisation and ignores questions relating to physical and sexual violence, the wage gap and other structural issues facing women in the labour market.

Further, who you are, your 'individual identity' can be conflated with 'what do you do?' as neatly embedded in the title of a career counselling self-help text "Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for you Through the Secrets of Personality Type" (Tieger & Barron, 2007). Indeed psychology has been hugely instrumental in the analysis, categorisation and description of our jobs, in areas such as the meaning of work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010), leadership (Lord, Hannah, & Jennings, 2011), individual motives and organizational culture (Moon, Quigley, & Marr, 2012), interview and recruitment (Salgado, Viswesvaran, & Ones, 2001) and job analysis (Dunckel, 2001) to name a few. Townley (1993) working from a Foucauldian perspective describes the role of occupational psychology to not just compartmentalise our work but also ourselves as workers. She describes the psychological assessment devices as technologies which simultaneously produce a worker with a modernist understanding of the 'individual' with essential and unchanging personalities, that in itself is definable and can be matched to a job (which itself exists as an object other than as an organisational construct) as well as separating workers from each other, these measurements divide the work within themselves: measuring capacities, skills, traits which can, once rendered technical (and therefore 'de-politicised' see Li, 2007), be governed.

Consider, for example, the focus on moderator variables in psychology of unemployment literature. Paul and Moser

(2009) argue that understanding how some individuals suffer more than others during unemployment can help identify the "living conditions and coping mechanisms of such resilient people to enable us to develop successful interventions against unemployment distress" (p. 266). Unemployed people are here divided into resilient and non-resilient, with the focus on teasing out what the resilient *do* to cope with unemployment in order to develop ways to govern those who are not coping as well. McKee, Song, Wanberg and Kinicki (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of unemployment literature through the lens of McKee-Ryan and Kinick's (2002) life-facet model of coping with job loss, which attempts to explain the variability in the experience of unemployment via a coping-stress framework. The meta-analysis focused on measures relating to work-role centrality, coping resources and strategies, cognitive appraisal, all of these were found to have stronger relationships to mental health than demographic and human capital variables. As well as being individualising, the demographic variables used, for example 'gender', were poorly operationalised and failed to grasp the complexity of the performance of gender (Butler, 1990; for more discussion of the problematic study of gender in unemployment research see Strandh, Hammarström, Nilsson, Nordenmark, & Russel, 2013). In these studies, 'unemployment' itself is left unproblematised just as the examination of the role of psychological expertise in the governmentality literature exposed how the individualising of unemployment as being psychological, behavioural, and emotional rendered the social, political and economic aspects of unemployment invisible.

This brings us to the key function of psychology as a knowledge producing entity in the workplace: with the truth claims of objectivity produced in scientific and modernist discourses, psychology valorises the role of the individual in the workplace (Hollway, 1984) obscuring the political, social and structural effects of power relations. As Cruikshank (1993) argues "there is nothing personal about self-esteem" (p. 328).

We have in the past found the huge body of psychological literature (going back in a

contemporarily recognisable social scientific form at least to the 1930s, but in other forms even before, see Fryer & Payne, 1986) to be rhetorically useful to resist reactionary political statements and practices which positioned the unemployed subject stereotypically as a 'dole bludger' or 'skiver' as is evident in the discourses constructing the welfare policies noted in the governmentality studies considered above. The authors of the psychological literature (for narrative reviews see Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938; Fryer & Payne, 1986; Winefield, 1995; Wanberg, 2012), with a few provisos, effectively unanimously concluded that unemployment was not only associated with but 'caused' individual mental health problems including anxiety, depression, negative self-esteem, dissatisfaction with life, social isolation, community dysfunction and population morbidity and that the deleterious impact of unemployment went beyond the unemployed individual to spouses, children, non-unemployed people living in unemployed communities, people anticipating unemployment, those who want/need more employment, those insecurely employed suffer similar psychological consequences.

However, we now reject the approach underpinning this literature. This sort of research of psychologists, widely understood as 'into' the relationship between 'unemployment' and 'mental health', now seems to us research which contributes to the constitution of unemployment, the constitution of 'mental health' and the constitution of the relationship between them. It also (re)reproduces bureaucratised, acritical, 'scientific' knowledge-production-and-legitimation methods and re-inscribes modernist notions of separate, individualistic, agentic, subjectivity and contextual social structure. As Cullen and Hodgetts (2001) assert "because unemployment is an inherently social phenomenon arising from inequitable societal structures, approaches that separate the individual from the social are inadequate for encapsulating the complexities surrounding its meaning and impact" (p. 24).

To be clear, we position 'unemployment' and 'mental health' as 'real' but only insofar as they are constituted within problematic dominant discourses within problematic

dominant apparatuses. These discourses are problematic because they are implicated in the constitution of oppressive social orders. It should go without saying that 'oppressive' is used here (in the sense of Iris Marion Young, 1988) without any imputation of individualised intention to be oppressive. Of course, because 'unemployment' and 'mental health' are discursively constituted does not mean they are 'imaginary' in a conventional sense and does not mean they have no material effects and we are emphatically *not* saying that the oppression of people (including their auto-oppression through subjective reconstitution) is illusory or imagined in a conventional acritical sense but it does mean that its existence is contingent on the persistence of the network of interconnected constructed and maintained social elements which produces and maintains it.

A key task in understanding and contesting 'unemployment' is through a set of practices coordinated with a particular regime of truth which mark unemployment (which did not previously exist) out in reality and in particular mark unemployment out in reality through the (re)constitution of unemployed subjectivities. Our contention is that a network of interconnected constructed and maintained social elements, including discourses of unemployment and mental health (and implicated psy-complex constructions like psychological well-being and misery) whose primary function is to control inflation, reduce wage costs, discipline etc. also simultaneously: constructs and 'makes real' a category of 'the unemployed' necessary to make the neoliberal labour market work in the interests of employers and shareholders i.e. capital, a category which is composed of different people on the basis of varying criteria at different times and in different places and which is only meaningful, i.e. only exists, by reference to that network); visits diverse forms of social violence upon and into the members of that category; constitutes and reconstitutes the subjectivity of 'the unemployed' in such ways as to (re)produce the compliant human means of production

required by the employers, shareholders and government within the contemporary version of the neoliberal labour market.

The apparent relationship between ‘unemployment’ and ‘mental health’ is, from this critical standpoint, revealed as not to do with ‘natural’ and inevitable psycho-biological consequences of depriving an unemployed person of employment-related, psychologically necessary, structures nor of frustrating the agentic potential of the individual unemployed person but a set of connected manifestations of social violence necessary to make the neoliberal labour market function optimally in the interests of employers and shareholders.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to illustrate a form of critique of psychological work and employment and unemployment research which draws upon post-structural and post-modern works such as those of Michel Foucault. There are many ways to characterise critique from a Foucauldian standpoint. In an interview in 1981 Foucault (2003b) stated that critique is not about making claims about whether the present is or is not good in its current state but it is about dismantling taken-for-grantedness: “To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy” (p. 172). Our critique focused on the ways of subjection, how power-knowledge produces a particular subjectivity of unemployment in the ‘active society’, how this is linked in with the discourse of neoliberalism, and how the psycho-complex is integral to this type of governmentality.

Throughout this paper, we have tried to demonstrate how a mode of critique following Foucault provides a way to trouble and rethink enunciations and actions in relation to work and worklessness, employment and unemployment, which are “too easy”. We used the statement that work is important to the crafting of identities as a starting point to excavate the dominant discourses of neoliberalism, political economy and psychology in the constitution of unemployed subjectivities which function to blame the individual at the expense of a serious and thorough critique of the current oppressive labour market.

We have recommended the positioning of the unemployed subject as subjectively and materially (re) constituted as ‘unemployed’, a socially and historically produced identity which is different to a person-in-context’ approach (see Nic Giolla Easpaig, Fryer, Linn, & Humphrey, 2014) moving beyond modernist scientism and drawing inspiration from post-modern social theory.

We believe it is vital researchers in this field give themselves the “right to question” the way power-knowledge is constructed in relation to unemployment in order to find ways to uncover and resist it. However, in closing, it is important to emphasise that although power “is produced from one moment to the next...in every relation from one point to another” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 93) yet it is also “mobile, reversible, and unstable” (Foucault, 2003d, p. 35) opening up “means of escape or possible flight” (Foucault, 2003a, p. 142).

In the spirit of this, we have also tried to provide an example of engaging in what Foucault (2003d) referred to as “hyper and pessimistic activism” (p. 104), a constant critique, that doesn’t just peer outwards but is very reflexive, peering in as well, which seeks to destabilize and reverse dominant power-knowledge in relation to unemployment in ways which facilitate new ways of understanding and indeed new ways of being unemployed.

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