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Shame, subjectivity, and pandemic productivity

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, the lockdown, isolation, and quarantine restrictions which were put in place in many countries obliged many people to begin working from home. Concurrently, advice in the form of articles and social media posts emerged, urging people to use the 'opportunity' of isolation during the pandemic to engage in self-improvement activities or launch a business. In this paper, I consider the ways that the temporal collapse between private and work life can be seen to exacerbate the degree to which these productivity discourses played upon neoliberal conceptions of identity formation through self-commodification and optimisation. The discourses frequently used a combination of shame and the suggestion that productivity was an obligation to the community, as well as to the self, to justify themselves and make finding purchase to engage in a critique of the broader structural issues at play more rhetorically difficult.

Keywords: productivity, neoliberalism, working from home, neoliberal subjectivity,

Introduction

In the first few months of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, several things happened almost simultaneously. First, lockdown or quarantine regulations required many people to stay home, sometimes with exceptions for work. Secondly, many companies ordered as many of their employees as possible to move to working from home. Thirdly, the economic impact of the pandemic resulted in large numbers of people being left un- or under-employed. Finally, in many places entertainment venues and the large gatherings associated with them were one of the first things to disappear and the last to be reinstated, leading, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, to a shuttering of people's normal social routines. The combination of working from home; in some cases, sudden unemployment; and a lack of social engagements, resulted in an abundance of 'spare time', or at least, in the assumption that people would have newly available spare time. My own Twitter feed was overwhelmed with commentary from academic staff who suddenly needed to switch their teaching to online-only mid-semester, while friends of mine in other fields commandeered kitchen tables or couches as makeshift offices, propping laptops up on books in an imitation of ergonomic desk set-ups. In New Zealand, where I live, the government ordered all employees considered 'non-essential' to work from home at our highest COVID-19 alert level, and strongly encouraged them to continue working remotely as restrictions were slowly rolled back.

Concurrent with the increase in people trying to adapt to working remotely under what were frequently described as 'unprecedented circumstances', was an influx of suggestions about how to remain productive. Some of this was genuinely helpful and well-intended – I saw seasoned freelancers on Twitter sharing advice based on their own experience of working from home. Some of the advice, however, carried the distinctive tone of neoliberal imperatives to constant productivity as a veritable obligation, or marker of value or virtue. These suggestions occurred both in full length articles, but also in widely-circulated social media posts, and varied in tone. Two of the most widely circulated tweets on this topic read:

“Just a reminder that when Shakespeare was quarantined because of the plague, he wrote *King Lear*” (Cash 2020).

And

“If you don't come out of this quarantine with either:

- 1.) a new skill
- 2.) starting what you've been putting off like a new business
- 3.) more knowledge

You didn't ever lack the time, you lacked the discipline”
(Haynes 2020).

Articles on the topic often offered advice on how to maintain or even improve productivity when working from home due to COVID-19 (Arruda 2020; Blank 2020; Bruner 2020; Davis 2020). One article encouraged people to make the most of the lethal pandemic and “use your self-quarantine time to become a “Coronapreneur”” (Carosa 2020). The advice being offered veered from pragmatic tips about how to adapt to working in an entirely new environment, to the suggestion that the appropriate response to the pandemic lockdown was to take it an opportunity to continue developing oneself as a relentlessly “self-optimizing subject” (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017).

The increased degree to which the home was a site of blended labour and leisure also reflects the temporal characteristics of the pandemic. Confined to their homes for the duration of a lockdown or quarantine period (sometimes left open-ended), many of the incitements to productivity talked of making use of newly available ‘free time’. In this article, I examine the features of some of the texts which urged readers into productivity, and consider existing research into the commodification of self, and the cultivation of appropriate neoliberal affective states. In particular, this article explores how neoliberal exhortations to pandemic productivity highlight the way that care of the self has become a site of personal responsibility, openly presented as important primarily for its influence on economic productivity.

Neoliberalism here refers to the move towards economic and governmental structures characterised by a focus on individual responsibility, a dismissal of structural determinants of life chances and inequalities, in which there is a “reconfiguration of subjects as economic entrepreneurs” (Davies and Bansel 2007: 248; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Scharff 2016). Neoliberal economic policies, such as the deregulation of labour markets, encourage the proliferation of precarious employment in the form of casualisation or “gig economy” work (Scharff 2016; Moisander et al. 2018; Farrugia 2019). A focus on individual responsibility in neoliberal discourses and knowledges has the result that structural barriers such as poverty, or a lack of appropriate childcare or maternity leave options (even under non-pandemic conditions), are frequently framed as personal failures (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008: 229). Neoliberal subjectivity – especially for women – has been observed to be characterised by a repudiation of vulnerability; by a drive to constantly treat the self as a project which requires maintenance and improvement; and through an emphasis on maximising “productive uses of time” (Layton 2010; Scharff 2016: 113; Gill 2017). I am interested in considering the relationship between the collapsing of the distinction between public and private spaces, and the multiple discourses which sprang up urging people to improve themselves or their earning potential during the pandemic. I argue that this is another instance of the incitement to “self-realisation through labour”, with the

ability to disentangle personal identity from work-self made yet more difficult by the lack of temporal divisions (Farrugia 2019).

Temporal characteristics of pandemic time

In terms of a collapse between professional and private, the temporal consequences of lockdowns were not limited only to physical spaces, but extended to virtual ones as well. I attended a 30th birthday party hosted on Zoom, and the friend who was ‘hosting’ (a word which carries multiple connotations in this situation) sent the invite from their professional profile, because the paid account meant the party would not be called to an abrupt end after 40 minutes. After a day of video calls for work, I would relax by video calling friends, sometimes without moving from my chair. The virtual spaces I moved through and the affective resonance of speaking to a screen had become my social life as well as my professional one.

This bleeding over of work into personal life was sometimes addressed by articles offering advice on productivity. One commonly dispensed piece of advice was setting aside a specific physical spot in the home to work from, in order to make it clear when one was or was not working. Another article advised people to “simply close the work laptop to transition to home life” when they were finished for the day (Davis 2020). These suggestions did at least acknowledge the impact which the lack of distinction between being ‘at work’ or ‘at home’ could have on people’s ability to relax.

The seemingly sensible suggestion that people demarcate a particular space in their home for work, however, makes particular assumptions about the size of a home and who it is shared with. I am writing this at the only full-size table in my house, where I have been working for the last few months. When my housemate, a teacher, needs to run a Zoom class from the lounge, then I relocate to my bedroom and work from there, with my notes, pens, and reference books strewn around me on the duvet. There is no space in my bedroom for a desk. My living situation is in no way bad or uncomfortable, but it is a living situation – it is a home, not designed to double as an office for two adults who both need to speak with students and colleagues, and would prefer not to do that from our beds. Suggestions that I mark off a particular area of the house for work to retain some kind of temporal division are impractical, and the notion that I have a second ‘work’ laptop is similarly disconnected from my material realities.

I would usually shy away from such directly autobiographical comments in my writing, but this question of the table at which I write calls to mind Ahmed’s writing on positionality (2006). The practicalities of where and how I write is part of what informs my curiosity and concern about the implications of a lessened or

collapsed temporal distinction between spaces of labour and leisure. As I noted, the move to working from home increases the degree to which the home is a blended site of work and recreation, but for many people (disproportionately women) the home is already a place filled with obligations to perform domestic labour. Meanwhile, suggestions that the home could be divided in order to incorporate a distinct workspace make an ability to distinguish between work and private life a classed or economic privilege. Additionally, the assumption that working from home creates 'free time' implicitly assumes that either the reader has no other work to attend to in the home, or that their other obligations can be disregarded as less important than the project of material or economic productivity.

Discourses of pandemic productivity

Articles dispensing advice on maximising or aspiring towards pandemic productivity, in the early months of the pandemic, used several tactics to justify or normalise using quarantine or lockdown as an opportunity to be economically productive or self-commodifying. To begin, a theme which can be discerned in both of the tweets quoted earlier in this article is one of productivity as a marker of personal value or worthiness, in particular the notion that being productive during a pandemic was simply a matter of 'discipline'. This linkage also establishes being 'disciplined' as an inherently desirable and entirely controllable personal quality. The word 'discipline' here continues to produce differences in material outcomes and circumstances as being entirely within an individual's control.

To consider the second tweet, by Haynes (2020), as a text, it presents three goals as being desirable or even obligatory during a lockdown period: learning a new skill, gaining knowledge, or starting a business or other venture. It presents either self-commodification or the development of additional or new income streams as a necessary goal. The closing sentence of the tweet dismisses any objections to the desirability of these aims. It also makes reference to and then again dispenses with complaints that under normal circumstances people's lack of time prevents them from attaining these goals. There are a number of assumptions operating here. The first is that quarantine will provide people with more time, not less: this assumes the audience do not have additional childcare responsibilities as a result of schools being closed, and that they have not experienced a sudden increase in food preparation and cleaning work as a result of their household spending more time at home. The second is that the home is (or ought to be) a suitable space for labour, with the necessary space, quiet, and materials for study, upskilling, or developing a business. Finally, it refuses to accept the possibility that being in the midst of a global crisis might make the focus required to achieve any of these goals difficult or impossible, or that said crisis could result in a reassessment of

priorities, especially for anyone whose health or age places them at a higher risk. Each of these structural barriers to pandemic productivity are then effectively dispatched with the implication that they may be overcome by 'discipline'.

In some instances, productivity was established both as an opportunity to achieve individualistic benefits through entrepreneurial activities and simultaneously as an opportunity to deliver a social good or an obligation to a personal or professional community, reflecting Hall's observation of neoliberal ideologies which succeeded in drawing together "contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments" (2011: 713). One example proposed that "your entrepreneurial acumen can serve all mankind" (Carosa 2020), while in another, graduate students reflected that their university administrators had articulated a plan to "protect and sustain our community with the goal of being as productive as possible as possible" (Paez and Jarvis 2020). These discourses assist with situating productivity within the specific cultural moment of the crisis, linking it to broader commentary about the need to think and act collectively.

Another approach more directly acknowledged the mental and emotional impact of the crisis, but proposed ways to limit or mitigate its impact on economic productivity. These tended to place the responsibility for managing emotional responses to the crisis on individuals, encouraging additional self-management and disciplining to avoid displaying inappropriate affective responses. One reminded readers that "productivity will suffer if you're in a constant state of stress" and suggested that to combat this, people should choose not to read or watch the news, as "avoidance can be a powerful stress reducer" (Arruda 2020). Another text advised that "you still have control over your mental health to allow you to remain productive" (Blank 2020). A third, aimed more specifically at an academic audience, suggested allowing for "downtime" and referred to its role in helping to "maintain your research productivity" (Bruner 2020). These suggestions acknowledge the stress of the crisis, but their concern for the impact on mental and emotional well-being only exists in so far as that well-being might impinge on productivity, exhorting caring for the self primarily as a resource to be optimised (Scharff 2016).

Discourses of "discipline" sometimes took the form of instructing readers to maintain a positive affect and "control" their anxiety. This imperative to positivity was frequently linked to the relationship between a calm affect and economic productivity. One text suggested people should "be smart with your energy so that you remain productive" and added that "you still have control over your mental health to allow you to remain productive" (Blank 2020). Controlling what were arguably normal reactions to the unusual and highly stressful situation, was situated as an obligation, part of the project "to craft the self as a subject

of value to the contemporary labour force”, in this case to ensure one’s work capacity was not impeded by the pandemic (Farrugia 2019: 48). The desirability and necessity of this kind of self-management is partially undergirded by a long-term neoliberal project to entwine self-identity with subjectivity as a worker, and with the tendency to disavow vulnerability as part of a neoliberal subjectivity (Layton 2010).

Finally, some texts did acknowledge the additional burden of domestic labour which some people were facing, but did not recognise the structural reasons for this, instead reframing it as an issue to be managed on an individual basis. This is in keeping with the broader neoliberal tone of the discourse, which creates conditions in which it is expected that “individuals are to become agents of their own success” (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008: 227). The instructions to “not get stuck with all the chores” and to “delegate household duties” are aimed predominantly at women (Blank 2020), and position an unequal burden of household labour as a failure of management, or forgetting to delegate. This has the effect of subtly extending the degree to which a household is recast as a site of work, directed to subjects for whom “their whole life and lifestyle is enrolled as a productive force by managing the “environment” in which they live and work” (Moisander et al. 2018). Additionally, the texts do not remind other adults (mostly men) who may be doing less housework to ensure they are picking up their fair share – instead household labour, either in its completion or its delegation, remains an individual problem to be solved, mostly by women.

Productivity, subjectivity, and shame

These discourses link being industriously entrepreneurial and productive to individual subjectivity: they are tied implicitly to personal value and identity, making the project of maintaining or optimising productivity during lockdown an opportunity to demonstrate resilience. This personal narrative of ‘survival’ or persevering through adverse conditions has been identified as a hallmark of the “psychic life of neoliberalism” (Scharff 2016: 114). Overcoming these structural inequalities becomes part of an expected project to “manag[e] the environment in which they live and work” (Moisander et al. 2017). An imperative to produce the home as effective workplace is a further encroachment of the tendency towards neoliberal conflation of economic productivity with personal identity. Writing about precarious new media work and its effects on the development of a personal discourse of effective self-management, Gill identifies several features which appear common in the kind of entrepreneurial productivity which these texts encouraged (2010). These included an expectation of continual upskilling, an inflexibility with regard to the demands which parenting placed on people’s

(but particularly women's) time, as well as the twinned experiences of precarity and entrepreneurialism. Gill argues that the nature of the work "incites into being a new ideal worker-subject whose entire existence is built around work" (2010: 249). The sensibility of neoliberal post-feminism which Gill articulated in 2007 had by 2017 become so widespread and entangled in so many media texts it was virtually ubiquitous (2007; 2017). In a similar vein, I would argue that the expectations to develop the self as a "worker-subject" have spilled outwards from spaces such as new media and become commonplace, their spread heightened by the movement to working from home (or, perhaps, living at work).

Intertextually the discourses about self-improvement and 'upskilling' during lockdown, or proposals that it was an opportunity to start a business, were responding to the financial crisis which was emerging. The idea that there was an imperative to launch a business, finesse a 'side hustle', or otherwise "enhance[e] their own value-creating qualities" was clearly scaffolded around the precarity which typifies many people's working lives (Vallas and Hill 2018: 291). Further, the self-monitoring of affective states echoes Veldstra's point that "the stakes of the implicit demand for emotional labour are highest at its intersection with precarity" (2020: 4).

The conditions of neoliberalism create an "incitement to produce the self as a project of entrepreneurial development", with an increasing pressure to situate oneself as "culturally intelligible" through work (Farrugia 2019: 48-49). Discourses of maximising productivity or constituting one's subjectivity through work can be seen in evidence in "personal branding" literature, which venerates "individuals who take responsibility for working on themselves" and frequently incorporates narratives in which the subject overcomes crises through "self-realization" and a turn towards becoming entrepreneurial (Vallas and Hill 2018: 291). The productivity being urged during lockdown then is tapping into existing discourses of an identity as a worker being inextricably linked to personal identity, particularly in relation to characteristics such as resilience and self-reliance which are constituted as desirable attributes. The neoliberal discourses which encourage "finding individualistic rather than collective solutions to economic distress and collective social problems", merge with the financial precarity typical of neoliberalism, further heightened by COVID-19 (Layton 2010: 308; Moisander et al. 2018). This functions to create an urgency: the subject must be responsible for themselves out of a fear of economic ruin and simultaneously as part of an ongoing project to establish an identity as resourceful and constantly self-optimising. The removal of any temporal divide between personal and professional spaces hastens the collapse of any remaining distinction between work and personal identity – your work is your identity, and your home is your workplace, now.

Added to this is the role of shame in the discourses urging readers towards productivity: both in the directives to overcome or disregard emotional responses or structural barriers, and in the suggestion that continuing to be productive is a duty of service to a nebulous 'community'. The acknowledgement of difficulties which individuals working from home during a pandemic might face, like declining mental health or increasing burdens of domestic labour, then their dismissal with superficial solutions which still place the responsibility on the individual affected, are arguably worse than no acknowledgement at all. By acknowledging then rejecting these difficulties as legitimate, they aim to correct behaviour to the appropriate self-disciplining and self-managing mode through shame. An inability to 'appropriately' manage them is shameful – the "failure that will be lived as a personal failing" – not the pinch felt by an individual affected by broader structural inequities and world events (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008: 229). The directive that mental health is within the reader's control also touches on the appropriate affective responses expected under neoliberalism, especially of women – of being upbeat and positive (Elias et al. 2017). The second deployment of shame is in the suggestion that productivity is a duty to other people: this arguably embeds productivity as a characteristic of identity by linking it discursively to other personally valued characteristics which may not traditionally be linked to work, such as empathy or dependability. A failure to be productive in these terms is not only a failure to maximally develop oneself, but a failure to be an effective part of a cohesive whole.

The collapse of private and public spaces leaves individuals with no space to reflect on what these discourses mean, or how they operate. There is no literal space away from work, if your home is now your workplace, and no psychic 'space' under the kind of constant motion which is made imperative under no-nonsense urgings to endless "individualistic striving" (McRobbie 2015: 4). One response observed in people operating within these entrepreneurial systems is a tendency towards focusing on competing with oneself, and to identify difficulties which arguably have clear structural determinants as being most readily solved through self-improvement (Scharff 2017). The nature of the precarious system of work and 'hustle' experienced by many "coronapreneurs" is that the relentless action leaves little time for reflection of where their experiences fit into broader systems: there are more pressing issues at hand, and their identity has been wholly enmeshed with their work. The refraction of a drive for productivity through the lens of 'community' functions as a further sleight of hand, the shadow of addressing of structural issues, functioning to keep more detailed excavation at bay through a combination of financial insecurity and shame.

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