



The neurotic academic: anxiety, casualisation, and governance in the neoliberalising university

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ABSTRACT

Based on empirical research conducted with academic staff working on fixed-term contracts, the article explores the subjective experience of anxiety in the UK's 'neoliberalising' higher education (HE) sector. As HE undergoes a process of marketisation, and the teaching and research activities of academics are increasingly measured and scrutinised, the contemporary academy appears to be suffused with anxiety. Coupled with pressures facing all staff, 34% of academic employees are currently working on a fixed-term contract and so must contend with the multiple forms of uncertainty associated with their so-called 'casualised' positions. While anxiety is often perceived as an individualised affliction for which employees are encouraged to take personal responsibility, the article argues that it should be conceptualised in two ways: firstly, as a symptom of wider processes at work in the neoliberalising sector; and secondly, as a 'tactic' of what Isin [(2004). The neurotic citizen. *Citizenship Studies*, 8 (3), 217–235] refers to as 'neuroliberal' governance. The article concludes by proposing that the figure of the 'neurotic academic' is emblematic of the contradictions facing the contemporary academy.

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Introduction

Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception. (BIS 2016, p. 8)

The rise of the so-called 'neoliberal' university has already provoked a great deal of academic interest. Krause-Jensen and Garsten (2014, p. 1) assert that, 'With remarkable consistency educational reforms have been put forward that rest on a particular and similar rationale: to achieve global competitiveness and adapt to the advent of the so-called "knowledge economy".' Davies (2014a, p. 310) notes that definitions in the existing literature on neoliberalism tend to view it as 'an inventive, constructivist, modernizing force,' which foregrounds the notion of competition, and aims to transform institutions that exist 'outside of the market' through the cooperation of the state. In her research on 'reputation capital' in higher education (HE), Cronin (2016, p. 396, emphasis in original) argues that university PR work enables the state to 'justif[y] itself to the market through the legitimising function of staging and managing competition.' In this sense, the influence of neoliberalist ideas on UK HE can clearly be seen in the government white paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS 2016), which preceded the Higher Education and Research Act in 2017, and set out a series of proposals to make competitive – through governmental policy – a public sector portrayed as being composed of backward-looking 'incumbents' (pp. 8–10; p. 21; p. 23).

Yet what are the effects of these neoliberalist ideas on those engaged in teaching and research activities in the UK's HE sector? Academics represent a curious lacuna in the white paper (Woodcock and Toscano 2016), and the effects on academic staff of the wider changes occurring in the HE sector remain underexplored (see Gill 2013, p. 229, Baron 2014, p. 254); as Scharff (2016, p. 107) comments, 'Much has been said about neoliberalism in recent years' although 'less has been said about the ways neoliberalism is lived out on a subjective level.'¹ This article has two aims: firstly, to explore one particular aspect of work amongst an under-researched group: the prevalence of anxiety amongst fixed-term academic staff; and secondly, to develop a new theoretical approach to the study of anxiety in the neoliberalising university via Isin's (2004) work on 'neuroliberal' governance.

Previous research has pointed to the potential negative impact on academics' mental health and well-being (Kinman and Jones 2003, Kinman and Wray 2013, Kinman 2014, Guthrie *et al.* 2017) of the wider changes occurring within the UK's HE sector, such as marketisation, expansion, and the measurement of teaching/ research activities. The Health and Safety Executive defines work-related stress as: 'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them' (HSE), and a University and College Union survey found that 79% of academic staff surveyed either 'agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (33%) with the statement "I find my job stressful"' (UCU 2014, p. 1). A range of phenomena have all arguably contributed to a generalised landscape of anxiety within the sector: the intensification of workloads; increased competition; pressure to publish and secure grant income; the financial prerogative to recruit students onto degree programmes; constraints on employees' time; and the imposition of processes of audit, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (see Barcan 2013, Gill 2013, 2014, Baron 2014, Knowles and Burrows 2014, Sullivan and Simon 2014, Davies 2014b, Berg *et al.* 2016, Pereira 2017). McLean (2016) – following Laing – has explored how academics adapt to meeting what she describes as 'contradictory demands and expectations' (p. 2), and asks: '*is it honestly any wonder* that people who are check-mated by the double-binds of "normality" decide to adopt "abnormal" coping strategies, manifesting themselves in anxiety, stress, and depression?' (p. 9).

In 2015/2016, 34% of the UK's academic workforce was working on a fixed-term contract (HESA 2017), although the UCU (2016) maintains that the extent of so-called 'casualisation' in the sector is far greater.² Yet there is very little qualitative, empirical research specifically concerned with the experiences of this group within the contemporary academy.³ In addition to pressures facing all academic staff, those working on temporary contracts must contend with multiple forms of uncertainty relating to finances, job-hunting, forging a career, and future plans; staff must then inevitably find strategies to manage any resulting stress (Gill and Donaghue 2016). In their work on contract researchers, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (1998, p. 500) note that, 'the amount of anxiety generated by such structural insecurity tended to vary greatly, depending upon *inter alia* the biography and circumstances of individual researchers.' Gender, ethnicity, age, and social class background – combined with current financial situation and family circumstances – are likely to impact on the experience of precarious work (Bryson 2004, ECU 2009, Lopes and Dewan 2014, TUC 2014); similarly, the type and mode of employment, plus contract length, may also affect perceptions (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 1998, p. 501). It should also be noted that outside of the specific context of academia, casualisation disproportionately affects BME employees in the UK (TUC 2015) suggesting that biography not only affects the experience of fixed-term work, but also influences the possibility of securing permanent employment.

The article begins by considering the relationship between governance and the production of anxiety in HE, before exploring the context of the empirical research. Two different ways of conceptualising anxiety amongst the casualised academics in the research are then explored: first, anxiety as a kind of 'symptom' of the wider conditions of precarious work in the neoliberalising sector; and secondly, as a 'tactic' of what Isin (2004) terms as 'neuroliberalism,' which he defines as 'a rationality of government that takes its subject as the neurotic citizen' (p. 223). The article concludes by

proposing the figure of the ‘neurotic academic’ as the embodiment of the contradictions at the heart of the UK’s HE sector.

Governing the anxious neoliberal subject

Gane (2012, p. 629–630) notes that ‘neoliberalism is not simply about deregulation, privatization or governing through freedom, but also about intervention and regulation with the aim of injecting market principles of competition into all forms of social and cultural life.’ He writes that ‘active processes of (self-) government and (self-) surveillance that come from the market and which, most commonly, take the form of audit’ have facilitated the inauguration of competition in the education sector (p. 629). Not surprisingly, then, as such ‘principles of competition’ are introduced into HE, a burgeoning body of literature is emerging that seeks to make sense of governmentality in universities and the production of academic subjectivities (e.g. Davies 2005, Archer 2008, Davies and Bansel 2010, Davies and Petersen 2005, Petersen and Davies 2010, Ball 2012, Morrissey 2013, Baron 2014, Krause-Jenson and Garsten 2014, Cannizzo 2015, Clarke and Knights 2015, Berg *et al.* 2016). As noted, academics are increasingly subject to a variety of disciplinary practices and forms of audit – broadly conceived here as Foucauldian ‘technologies of power’, which are designed to measure their productivity, success, and ‘excellence.’ Yet these practices also have the effect of responsabilising academics for their own performance, whilst inculcating in them enterprising forms of behaviour – understood here as ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1988). As Dardot and Laval (2013, p. 261) note:

[...] neo-liberal rationality produces the subject it requires by deploying the means of governing himself [*sic*] so that he really does conduct himself as an entity in competition, who must maximise his results by exposing himself to risks and taking responsibility for possible failures. ‘Enterprise’ is thus the name to be given to self-government in the neo-liberal age.

Yet in his critique of the ‘rational subject’ presupposed in the existing literature on risk and neoliberal governmentality, Isin (2004, p. 219) contends that ‘while it is important to point out that people conduct their lives on the basis of perceived dangers, it is problematic to underestimate the importance of affect in how subjects conduct themselves.’ Indeed, ‘the production and manipulation of affects’ (Hardt 1999, pp. 97–98) amongst workforces in post-Fordist society is foregrounded in the autonomist Marxist notion of ‘affective labour,’ although Gill and Pratt (2008, p. 16) argue that ‘the anxiety, insecurity and individualized shame that are endemic features of fields in which you are judged on what you are produced’ are largely absent from such analyses. What role, then, might anxiety play in governing the enterprising academic subject?

Berg *et al.* (2016) examine the ‘neoliberal production of anxiety’ in universities in their analysis of audit processes in five northern European countries, including the UK. They link explicitly the rise in anxiety amongst academic staff to the competition inherent in systems of audit – such as the REF in the UK – and the reconceptualisation of academics as ‘human capital.’ In her work on ‘new managerialism’ in Australian HE, Davies (2003, p. 93) notes: ‘fear and anxiety are useful, from the system’s point of view, as they work to fuel a constantly renewed (though largely futile) resolution to make a self who is appropriate to, and regarded as good enough within, the new system.’ Indeed, in their analysis of Marxian subsumption in HE, Hall and Bowles (2016) argue for an understanding of the university as ‘anxiety machine’ (p. 33), and put forward the claim that anxiety ‘is not an unintended consequence or malfunction, but is inherent in the design of a system driven by improving productivity and the potential for the accumulation of capital’ (Hall and Bowles, 2016).

Despite its symptomatic presentation as a problem of the individual, anxiety has an active role to play in the creation of the type of entrepreneurial academic subject who aids competition by taking risks – ensuring a continuous drive towards ‘excellence’ whilst adding value to the neoliberalising HE

sector (Berg *et al.* 2016, Hall and Bowles 2016) – yet is incited to take personal responsibility if these risks do not pay off (Loveday 2017). Rose and Miller (2010, p. 273) note that:

[...] government is intrinsically linked to the activities of expertise, whose role is not one of weaving an all-pervasive web of ‘social control’, but of enacting assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse aspects of conduct through countless, often competing, local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement.

In this sense, I want to argue that anxiety should be conceptualised as one such ‘tactic’ of governance – that might variously persuade, induce, or incite academics to adjust their ‘conduct’ in line with the objectives of the sector – and so I understand anxiety here as part of what Adams *et al.* (2009, p. 249) phrase as an ‘anticipatory regime’, which is used ‘to interpellate and govern subjects.’ Below I discuss the empirical context of my research into casualised academic work in HE, before moving on to explore anxiety as both a ‘symptom’ and a ‘tactic’ of governance within the sector.

Investigating casualisation in HE

I interviewed 44 academic employees working on fixed-term contracts in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as part of a project that aimed to explore the subjective experience of casualised academic labour, but also to consider how individualised employee experiences are related to the wider HE sector. The project sought to capture and contrast a variety of types of experience, so the sample comprised of academics working in different types of position, discipline, and HE institution, and at different levels of seniority from post-doctoral to professorial.⁴ The project followed a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) design, and 100 interviews were conducted over a 21-month period: out of the 44 academics who participated in total, 39 took part in a follow-up interview the following year, and 17 of these were then subsequently interviewed a third time. Using a QLR methodology has allowed the participants’ changing employment circumstances to be tracked over the course of the project, and has also facilitated the diachronic analysis of perceptions and identities (Thomson and Holland 2003).

In their discussion of precarious work, Gill and Pratt (2008, p. 19) argue for the importance of focusing on ‘the meanings cultural workers themselves give to their life and work,’ and so semi-structured interviews were designed to explore participants’ subjective understandings of casualised academic work. Participants were invited to describe how they had come to be working in their current positions, and then further questions were asked about: academic identities; attitudes and emotional responses to casualised work; future plans; and the impact of fixed-term employment on life outside work. In subsequent interviews, transcripts from previous meetings were explicitly discussed with participants to provide prompts for further discussion, but also the opportunity for further reflection on their trajectories over an extended period.

Müller and Kenney (2014) have examined the methodological implications of conducting research with peers; based on Müller’s research with post-doctoral life scientists, they explore interviews as ‘agential conversations,’ which ‘enable different kinds of reflection, connection, and disruption’ (p. 21), and argue for an attention to the ‘subtle effects of interviews’ (p. 3). In my own research, my positionality as an ‘insider’ was one potential point of ‘connection’ between us: when I began the project, I was employed on a fixed-term lecturing contract, which was made permanent during the course of the research; I disclosed my own changing employment circumstances to participants and these were discussed during subsequent conversations between us. My research also arguably intervened in some of the participants’ impressions of fixed-term work; as Müller and Kenney note, ‘stories may travel outside of the interview room’ (p. 21). For example, several months after the project ended, I received an email from a participant with a link to a blogpost she had written on casualised academic work (Petrova 2017).⁵ She explained:

Sending you something which was prompted by talking to you and thinking through those issues because of your study [...] Long story how it got there, but it felt good to speak up. Thank you for helping me to see that this is not natural.

Thus, while at the project inception I had set out to avoid merely asking questions that would corroborate my own views on fixed-term work, I was aware that through the very act of researching ‘casualisation’ my project had the potential to intervene in participants’ perceptions.

The research raised some ethical concerns relating to anonymity and confidentiality: I have been acutely aware that the content of interviews could potentially be compromising, making insecure employees more vulnerable should participants’ accounts be recognisable to employers; thus, it is not always possible to provide detailed biographical information about participants or their institutions. I have worked closely with those involved in the project to anonymise their accounts, and copies of interview transcripts were provided to participants to vet as they saw fit.

Following an abductive approach to data analysis ‘centred on the relationship among theory, method, and observation’ (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, p. 6), interview transcripts were coded thematically, compared across cases, and analysed over time (for those participants who took part in two/three interviews). As an academic embedded within the research context myself, it was certainly no surprise to me that anxiety was one of the key themes to emerge from the data analysis; yet during the research, I became interested not only in participants’ subjective perceptions of anxiety, but in thinking through what this proliferation of anxiety might be *achieving* within the sector. Below I explore the presentation of anxiety amongst my participants as a kind of ‘symptom’ of insecurity in the neoliberalising university, before then examining anxiety as a ‘tactic’ of governance.

Anxiety as a ‘symptom’

In her analysis of the ‘neo-liberal university,’ Gill (2013, p. 237) notes how ‘privatised anxieties’ appear ‘to reflect on the value and worth of the individual, rather than the values of the institutions that make intolerable demands’ (see also Pereira 2017, p. 192). Feeling anxious is often seen as a personal shortcoming – a failure to adequately deal with the competing demands of the job, a lack of competency, or an inability to adjust to an increasingly competitive and demanding environment; staff experiencing anxiety may then have to turn to strategies to help themselves ‘cope’ better (Gill and Donaghue 2016). Yet Smail (2015, p. 81) argues that ‘acute distress and anxiety’ should ‘be taken seriously, not by our trying to eliminate them as mechanical defects in an otherwise satisfactory system, but rather by attending closely to their significance.’ He suggests that, ‘the kind of “symptoms” of which people complain are not merely indications of something’s having gone wrong which can be put right, but rather are forms arising out of people’s *experience* of the world’ (Smail, 2015, p. 81, emphasis in original). In this section, then, I want to consider the ‘significance’ of individualised experiences of anxiety amongst the casualised academics in my research by arguing that anxiety is symptomatic of ‘casualised’ work in the neoliberalising sector.

During the first ‘wave’ of interviews I deliberately avoided describing fixed-term work in the language of ‘precariousness’ (Gill and Pratt 2008, Ross 2008) so as not to influence participants’ interpretations; yet many of the casualised academics chose to frame their experiences in these terms. Tom – who was working as a social sciences post-doctoral researcher when we first spoke, before having secured a permanent lectureship by the time of our second interview – describes the feeling of precarity as: ‘a looming [...] I mean it’s a heaviness that’s there, that’s a weight on your mind; it kind of leeches into, I’d say, most of the things that you do, leeches into the commitments you take on.’

In their research on casualisation with workers across several different sectors in Australia, McGann *et al.* (2016, p. 779) conclude that ‘the combination of perceived job insecurity and the intermittent and uncertain scheduling of work patterns gives rise to psychosocial stress by depriving non-standard workers of the temporal and economic resources needed to plan their lives.’ For the vast majority of participants in my research, anxiety was a palpable feature of the interviews, viscerally felt and variously stoked by different features of their uncertain positions. While concerns over time-management, meeting employer expectations, and the evaluation of performance are common to all academic staff regardless of contract-type, the insecurity inherent in casualised work may

amplify these worries, as well as creating additional uncertainty over the future, difficulties in long-term financial planning, and a fear of being beholden to specific individuals/institutions for work or reputation.

Forging an academic profile was also a potentially fraught process. Knights and Clarke (2014, p. 342) link a ‘lack of self-confidence’ to ‘the number of points at which academics are assessed and judged,’ yet they also argue that such difficulties are ‘exacerbated by the feeling of not living up to an ideal image of what it means to be an academic.’ Particularly for those participants working on teaching or research-only contracts, it was common to reject a straightforward identification as an ‘academic’: for Howard – a social science researcher – the impermanence of his position results in the feeling of merely being a ‘provisional academic’; and for Ben – an early career humanities teacher – ‘you’re an academic in waiting’:

it’s this bizarre scenario of effectively you’re treated like an hourly paid worker but there’s a sort of ‘nudge-nudge, wink-wink’ that you’re an academic, but you’re not an academic if you look at actually what you’re being expected to do, or how you’re being treated, or what you’re being offered.

Such responses might reflect the projection of an academic ‘ideal image,’ but are also characteristic of the impermanence of casualised work: the participants were often incredibly anxious that their attempts to build an academic career would ultimately be fruitless. Indeed, by the time of our third interview, Ben had decided to leave academia after not having found another position beyond his hourly paid teaching role: ‘I have said to a few people, “this is it.” I can’t take it anymore. Things aren’t going anywhere. I am not particularly happy, so I might as well walk.’

Employees working on fractional teaching-only contracts or in research-only posts may also face marginalisation – or ‘occupational misrecognition’ (MacGann *et al.* 2016, p. 777) – as ‘only casuals’ within their institutions (MacGann *et al.* 2016, p. 779). For example, Roxy – a social scientist who at the time of our first interview was working on a teaching-only contract, whilst also conducting research for a third sector organisation – describes the feeling of having to work out of a colleague’s office: ‘you have your office hours, but it’s your colleague’s name with the more permanent contract on the door [...] It’s just psychological crap like that that just makes you feel a bit like, “God, I’m a real loser!”’ Such marginalisation was also perceived by more senior participants in the project, such as Sandra – an established social science professor – who described taking up a new appointment and bringing a research grant to her new institution, yet feeling ‘very much on the outside and not part of anything’ to the extent that she avoided a departmental away day: ‘I just did not know whether to come or not [...] so if you don’t go to those kind of things then you really are completely on the outside of everything [...] you just exist in name almost.’

The interviews conducted with the casualised academics were suffused with anxiety regardless of the level of seniority, but anxiety was particularly prevalent for those who lacked financial security, or who had caring responsibilities – the burden of which often remains gendered; as the TUC (2014, p. 11) notes, ‘casualised and precarious work pose particular problems for women.’ Duration of contract and length of time spent working on casualised contracts also affected levels of anxiety: on beginning a fixed-term lectureship in the humanities two days after finishing her PhD, Alice felt optimistic about her future academic career and described feeling ‘fancy-free and footloose’; in contrast, the majority of participants had been working for much longer periods of time on multiple contracts, and described experiencing feelings of anxiety, stress, fatigue, and – in a few serious cases – mental ill-health, which for some participants had resulted in being signed-off work.

I conducted three interviews over a 19-month period with Gregory – an academic working in health and social sciences – who at the time of our first interview had taken a job working as an hourly paid teacher in a private college after a fixed-term teaching contract in a university ended. From the outset, he explained:

the fact that there’s a time constraint [...] an end to the teaching, it was unknown, totally murky, and never on a footing knowing what’s really going to happen there. I think it definitely builds the anxiety and adds to all that worry about being competitive at a certain point, and that’s absolutely exhausting; exhausting for no reason.

In our second interview the following year, Gregory had begun a one-year post-doctoral position in an elite institution, but after receiving a very negative review for an article, he described:

... questioning maybe I should have become a carpenter or a bronze worker or something like this. And I remember reading that review and the first thing that went through my mind is, 'how am I going to explain this to my supervisor?' and this is going to really undermine my position [...] you feel really ashamed.

In relation to the well-documented 'imposter syndrome,' Knights and Clarke (2014, p. 341) note that: 'The sense of not living up to the ideals of what it is to be an academic fuels and fires our anxiety and insecurity and so we almost distance ourselves from the activity.' Receiving the negative peer review prompts Gregory to question not only the article he has written, but his choice of embarking on an academic career, yet by the time of our third interview he had gained a five-year research contract in another institution. However, in the interim period between interviews, he had experienced a breakdown after an intense period of over-work: 'I just wanted to give up.'

In this section, I have sought to draw attention to the anxiety inherent in my participants' experiences of 'precarious' academic work and the sometimes quite serious effects of this on their lives, as in the case of Gregory's breakdown. Yet while anxiety should – quite rightly – be conceived as an *effect* of the conditions under which it is produced, I want to continue below by examining the *affective* dimension of anxiety: what might anxiety be doing within the sector?

Anxiety as a 'tactic'

Berg *et al.* (2016, p. 173) argue that, 'under neoliberalism precarity is purposely created to operate on minds and bodies as a disciplinary and disciplining practice,' and that this 'operates ... in both the affective and somatic registers, through constant feelings of anxiety and physical ailments.' So far, I have presented anxiety as a common 'symptom' of the uncertainty inherent in precarious academic work. In this section, I want to think through anxiety as a kind of 'tactic' (Rose 1992, Rose and Miller 2010) of what Isin (2004) refers to as 'neuroliberal' governance by considering my participants' experiences of job-hunting and the crafting of an idealised 'entrepreneurial academic self' in the pursuit of more secure academic work.

While some of the participants in my research were working on fixed-term contracts lasting for several years, many of the casualised academics were employed on short-term teaching/lecturing contracts, sometimes working multiple roles in different institutions. The process of job-hunting was – not surprisingly then – a frequent topic of conversation during interviews, particularly for those nearing the end of contracts or who found themselves without work. For example, Maria describes coming to the end of a social sciences teaching contract and searching for jobs:

There's been a few really bad interviews [...] I guess they feel worse because I'm older and [...] now I want a career, so there's more riding on the job interviews for me than there were when I was 25 [...] it's demoralising and then to know, sometimes they tell you how many people applied for the job, [...] there's like 80 people [...] going for a part-time teaching job that's one night a week, it just makes it feel like: 'my God' – if those are the odds, it just feels insurmountable, like you almost apply for the jobs with the sense that you're not going to get it.

As Sennett (1998, p. 9) has argued, 'It is quite natural that flexibility should arouse anxiety: people do not know what risks will pay off, which paths to pursue.' Anxiety, then, can be seen as a symptom or side-effect of precarious work, yet I also want to argue that anxiety has a much more active role to play in the neoliberalising HE sector in that it incites candidates to take personal responsibility for the crafting of an academic profile appropriate to the demands of the wider objectives of the sector. For Tom, one response to counteract the 'looming' feeling of precarious employment was a 'tendency to over-commit.' Echoing Foucault's (2010 [1979], p. 226) pronouncement that 'homo oeconomicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself [*sic*],' Tom explains: 'I feel this need to create myself as this [...] entrepreneurial academic subject that we're all encouraged to become.'

Alvesson and Spicer (2016) argue that 'coercive' forms of power in HE – such as the incitement to 'publish or else' – are only effective when located within the context of 'a robust agenda around

“research” which is strongly supported by notions of “research excellence” (p. 40). However, they note that these must be ‘linked in turn with strong forms of identity regulation and identity work’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016, p. 40). As previously noted, the identity of ‘academic’ was equivocal for many of the casualised participants, yet there was an awareness of the need to construct a kind of idealised ‘entrepreneurial academic self’ for the purposes of securing employment or research grants. Pedro – a social scientist – described the process of searching and applying for jobs after the end of a fractional teaching contract, and how he had requested comments from a member of the panel after an unsuccessful interview:

The feedback was all about: ‘you had this chance, you blew it, next time do better’, and that’s what you get, ‘I could have done better, I’m going to do better, and then I learn my lesson: next time I’m going to be better.’

The entrepreneurial academic subject is a self who is incited not only to do better, but *to be* better as Pedro phrases it above, yet success is not always within the control of these entrepreneurial subjects (see Loveday 2017). Sullivan and Simon (2014, p. 206) have linked what they describe as ‘academic survival’ to the need to ‘take individual responsibility for our outputs, our performance, our promotability, our economic viability and our health and wellbeing.’ Becoming responsabilised involves working on the self: a shift from paying attention to the conditions that enable or constrain the formation of subjectivities, to an individualised subject who *chooses* to be responsible for those conditions (see Rose 1992, p. 142). As Lemke (2001, p. 201) notes in his discussion of Foucault’s analysis of governmentality, ‘[neo-liberal rationality] aspires to construct prudent subjects whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to alternative acts.’ I want to argue here that Isin’s conceptualisation of the ‘neurotic citizen’ (2004) – ‘who governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties’ (p. 223) – is instructive to the analysis of casualised academic work as it points to how ‘neoliberalism’ (as a mode of governance) takes as its subject ‘someone who is anxious, under stress and increasingly insecure’ (p. 225). In this sense, I want to argue that the construction of an entrepreneurial academic self is *predicated* upon anxiety rather than *in spite of* anxiety.

During our first interview, Karla – a social scientist who had been working for several years on a full-time teaching contract – described how she intended to apply for a lectureship at her own institution. However, by the time of our second interview, Karla had been signed off work with stress-related illness, and recounted the experience of her unsuccessful job application. Despite being short-listed, she felt that there had been several irregularities in the process, including a more senior member of staff informing her in advance of the interview that she would not be given the position. After asking for feedback on the outcome, she was informed that the successful candidate had ‘American pedigree,’ leading her to conclude ‘it’s not a meritocracy’: ‘I think what they meant was there’s nothing you could have done.’ While the academic participants in this project are well versed in – and critical of – the changes happening within the neoliberalising HE sector, there is nonetheless the expectation that casualised academics must engage in the type of self-work described by Pedro in order to successfully secure employment (see also Archer 2008); knowledge of this expectation must co-exist with an awareness of the constraints under which they labour, as permanent job opportunities are limited and candidates may face structural barriers to progression (e.g. Coate and Kandiko-Howson 2014). As Archer (2008, p. 272) – following Butler – notes in her exploration of younger academics’ identities, it is important to acknowledge that ‘tak[ing] up the language of neoliberalism and audit within their construction of selfhood and academic identity’ is not a matter of ‘reflecting’ the conditions under which these are produced, but is ‘constitutive and productive’ of that environment.

Under neoliberalism, Dardot and Laval (2013, p. 265) argue that:

It is the efficient, competitive individual who seeks to maximize his [*sic*] human capital in all areas, who not only seeks to project himself into the future to calculate his gains and losses like the old economic man, but above all seeks to work on himself so as constantly to transform himself, improve himself, and make himself ever more efficient.

Yet, as Isin (2004) notes, the self-work involved in this ‘transformation’ into an idealised academic subject assumes the capacity for rational, future calculation: Pedro describes the incitement to improve as a job candidate, yet the quest to shape an employable academic self – for example, via publication record, successful grant applications, positive teaching evaluations, or professional esteem – is not a disinterested one, and the project of attempting to forge an academic career was fraught with anxiety for the majority of the casualised participants in my research. Employment insecurity makes such a ‘projection’ into the future particularly challenging (Ylijoki 2010, Müller 2014): as Rob – a researcher in the sciences – notes: ‘There’s no certainty in the future’; and Adela – a post-doctoral social science researcher – explains: ‘There was this staff development day [...] the lady who ran it [...] asked us to imagine ourselves in five years’ time [laughing]. You can’t ask a post-doc that!’ Such responses were characteristic of the casualised participants’ attitudes when asked about long-term plans, and this impacted on their ability to formulate career strategies, to construct coherent research profiles, and to navigate life outside of work (particularly for those with dependents). During our first interview, David – a social scientist – describes an extended period of job-hunting and several failed research funding bids:

you asked me about planning, and no: there is no planning, and I bet that this is making me think about life [...] in a very specific way, which is – I don’t even know how to put it into words – but I’m flirting with the idea of not bothering with a career. [...] I keep on focusing on all the negative stuff, like the stress, the kind of competition in a sense, the anxieties: so I have a lot of insecurities about being in this particular job and I feel that the more I get myself into it, maybe the more this will come into play rather than the opposite. So maybe I’m rationalising in a way that I can then get to the conclusion that it’s not worth staying in.

As with the case of Ben above, the type of ‘exit’ from academia that David describes can be conceptualised not only as a side-effect of the anxiety generated by casualised work, but as part of the built-in logic of competitiveness under ‘neoliberalism’ (Isin 2004). In relation to HE institutions, this has been made clear in the government white paper: ‘we need to confront the possibility of some institutions choosing – or needing – to exit the market. This is a crucial part of a healthy, competitive and well-functioning market’ (BIS 2016, p. 38). Indeed, Davies (2014b, np) contends that,

[the] rising level of unhappiness in this sector [HE] is, if not the goal of neoliberal governance, then certainly one of its most important tools. Put simply, if you want less people doing publicly-funded research, you have a choice: kick them off the payroll just like that ... or make the career increasingly painful until people leave of their own accord.

While competition undoubtedly produces anxiety, anxiety itself then has an active role to play in governance: it is not merely a residual effect, but helps to drive competition as it shapes academic subjectivities. Anxiety, then, acts as a tool in delivering the objective of competitiveness, and those who do not meet the required standards – or who fail to ‘cope’ – are compelled to exit the sector. Magnus – a post-doctoral social science researcher – was one of the participants most anxious about his career prospects:

There’s an anxiety that goes into your work because you’re worried that if you don’t do everything, and more than everything, and impress everyone more than you’re meant to [...] I’ve got perfectionist tendencies, and if you have that combined with worrying that everything that you do [...] will be clocked and thought about in order to determine what might happen afterwards, there’s this subtle internal policing going on [...] put people in insecure positions and they behave themselves.

Akin to Isin’s (2004) figure of the ‘neurotic citizen,’ Magnus describes how the anxiety precipitated by employment insecurity results in the responsabilisation of the self. Significantly, Isin argues that the shift from ‘neurotic subjecthood to citizenship involves responding to calls to adjust conduct not via calculating habits but soothing, appeasing, tranquillizing, and, above all, managing anxieties and insecurities’ (p. 226). What I term as the ‘neurotic academic’ is an entrepreneurial figure governed *through* anxiety, but one who is also incited to then take responsibility for the self-management of those anxieties. As Gill and Donaghue (2016, p. 92) have argued, even those measures employed by

universities to promote ‘wellbeing,’ or strategies – such as apps or ‘academic survival’ blogs – used by academics to manage stress might be seen as ‘individualised tools,’ which:

call forth an enterprising, self managed and ‘responsibilised’ subject who can ‘manage time’, ‘manage change’, ‘manage stress’, demonstrate resilience, practice mindfulness, etc. – whilst leaving the power relations and structural contradictions of the neoliberal university untouched and unchallenged.

I want to finish below by proposing that this figure of the responsibilised ‘neurotic academic’ has become emblematic of the contradictions at the heart of the UK’s neoliberalising HE sector.

Conclusion: governing the ‘neurotic academic’

The article began by considering the central role of competition to the UK’s neoliberalising HE sector, and the resulting pressures that this has placed on academic staff through processes such as the REF and the TEF. While stress undoubtedly affects staff at all levels and appears to have become a strikingly normalised experience across the workforce, I have been arguing that insecure academic work presents a set of additional challenges for casualised employees.

While the prevalence of anxiety is characteristic of increasingly individualised and responsibilised academic work, I have also been engaged here in considering the wider ‘significance’ of anxiety (Smail 2015, p. 81): the anxiety experienced by the participants in my project is very much a product of the environment in which it is generated; anxiety, then, can – in the first instance – be considered as a kind of ‘symptom’ of a problem reflecting both the neoliberalising landscape of HE and the precarious working conditions of the participants in my project. However, in the second instance, I have been arguing that anxiety is a kind of ‘tactic’ of what Isin (2004) terms as ‘neuroliberal’ governance; in this sense, *anxiety is both produced and productive, it is both an effect and affective*.

Far from taking as its subject the type of competitive, calculating actor envisaged by proponents of the marketisation of HE, ‘neuroliberalism’ as a mode of governance pivots on the figure of what I term as the ‘neurotic academic’: an entrepreneurial self who is governed through responses to the anxiety precipitated by uncertainty in the neoliberalising HE sector, whilst being simultaneously incited to take responsibility for the management of those anxieties; those unable to ‘cope’ with such demands may be compelled to ‘exit’ the sector. The possibility of any kind of rational reckoning with the future in order ‘to calculate his [*sic*] gains and losses like the old economic man’ (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 265) is foreclosed by employment insecurity, so what emerges is a kind of neurotic anticipation based on the unknown: an engagement with the future structured around worst-case scenarios, career strategies built on ‘what if?’

I have presented here participants’ individual experiences of anxious labouring, yet it is precisely the individualisation of anxiety that illuminates wider processes of ‘neuroliberal’ governance at work in the sector. While those academics who are rendered vulnerable through insecurity are increasingly responsibilised by ‘neuroliberal tactics,’ those who find themselves in structurally advantageous positions may have not only failed to challenge the neoliberalisation of the sector, but may have aided and abetted these modes of governance. Indeed, Hoofd (2015, p. 2–3) goes so far as to diagnose the university as suffering from an ‘auto-immune disease’ in that it “‘succumbs” to those neoliberal theories, techniques and technologies that it itself has produced or brought forth.’ If, as Fisher (2011) has noted, the ‘privatisation of stress’ is a ‘taken-for-granted dimension of a seemingly depoliticised world’ (p. 122), then the individualised and responsibilised figure of the ‘neurotic academic’ should point to the contradictions emerging in the UK’s neoliberalising sector, and the political dangers of failing to resist.

Notes

1. Peck (2010, p. 8) warns that ‘the word [neoliberalism] has become the bane of many a political lexicographer,’ so I use Peck’s alternative term ‘neoliberalisation’ here as ‘an open-ended and contradictory process of regulatory restructuring’ (Peck 2010, p. 7; see also Cronin 2016, p. 400 following Peck, Theodore, and Brenner); by

referring to the *process* of ‘neoliberalisation,’ I also hope to avoid what Davies (2014a, p. 310) has called ‘the simply pejorative use’ of the word ‘neoliberalism’.

2. Estimated at 54% once atypical contracts are included (UCU 2016).
3. For exceptions see: Allen-Collinson and Hockey (1998); Bryson (2004); Kimber (2003); Lopes and Dewan (2014); Loveday (2017); Müller (2014); Ylijoki (2010).
4. Participants were identified through personal/professional networks, and snowball sampling. In terms of the sample: 18 of the participants were male and 26 female; they were aged between their late 20s and mid-50s; and ethnically, while the majority were White, there were also BAME participants. While all worked in the UK’s HE sector at the time of the first interview, 17 of the participants were originally from other areas of the world, including EU countries, East/Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North America and the Caribbean, and Australasia.
5. Blogpost and personal correspondence cited with participant’s permission.

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