

# Is neoliberalism making you anxious? Metrics and the production of uncertainty

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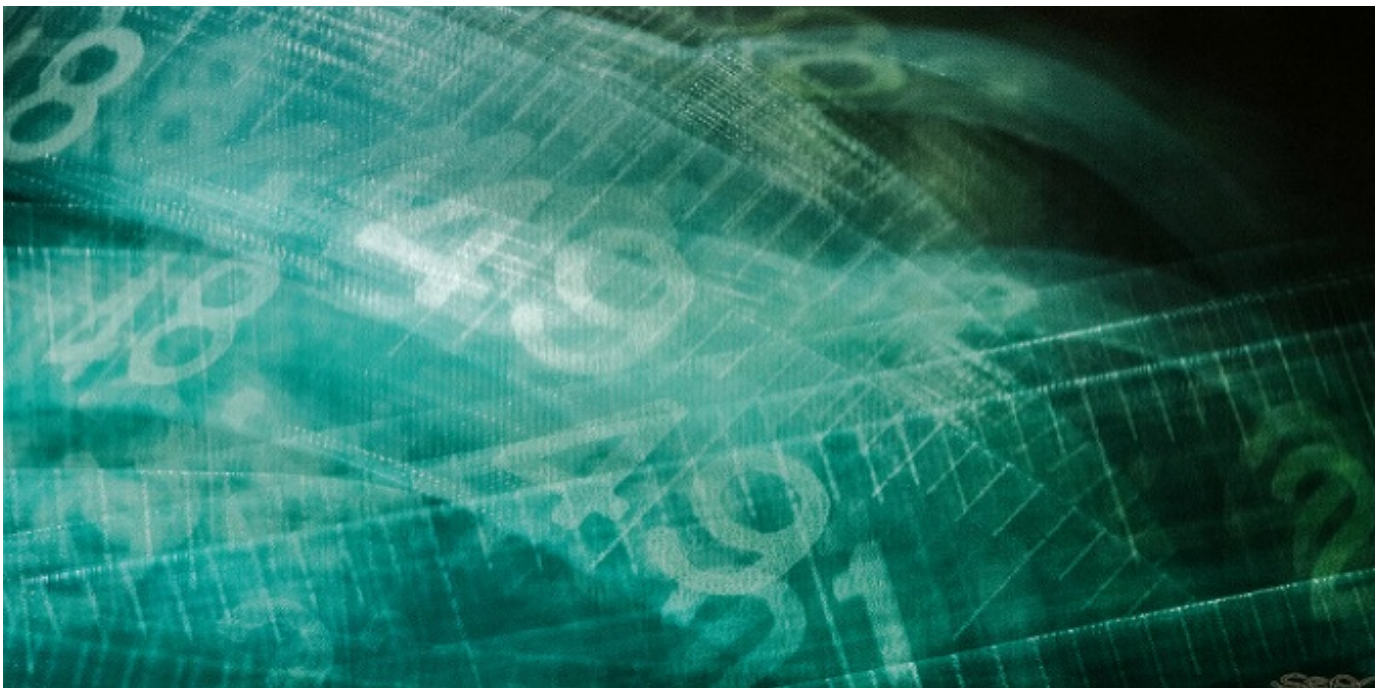
*In order to understand the roll-out and consequences of neoliberalism, we need to think about the role of measurement and metrics in our lives, argues [David Beer](#). More than this, though, we need to reflect on how these metrics make us feel. The picture seems to be one of increased anxiety and insecurity about ourselves.*



To borrow a phrase from social media's lexicon, neoliberalism is a concept that is *trending*. And with good reason: it captures something of the times. Narratives vary, but at its core the term captures the [roll-out](#) of market structures across all domains of social life. This is a form of governance in which the promotion of competition is central to the pursuit and implementation of what [Wendy Brown](#) describes as 'the model of the market'.

These ideas are now quite familiar yet there is one crucial aspect that doesn't get the attention it deserves: we are measured almost constantly in our lives. From the many ways that our performance is measured at work, to the way that our organisations are ranked in league tables, through to credit scores, risk scoring for insurance and then to the measures captured by smartphones, fitness apps, wearables and even the stats on our social media profiles. The list goes on. [Metrics are an embedded part of our lives](#).

Through these metrics we are pushed and pulled in all sorts of directions by the imperative to be competitive. The rankings produced by those many competitions encourage us to follow the logics of metrics by making 'informed' or 'strategic' choices about what services and products we consume. Metrics shape how we judge and, more crucially, how we are judged. Systems of measurement are the mechanisms of neoliberal roll-out. In short, metrics are needed to enable differentiation, to facilitate rankings and to demarcate winners from losers. But to understand how markets govern, to understand how they discipline us and shape our behaviour, we need to understand how metrics make us *feel*.



## How do you measure up? (Image credit: [Sonny Abesamis](#) CC BY 2.0)

To instigate behaviour, measurements need to be affective. They need to provoke bodily and emotional reactions that lead us to adapt. Provoking a response requires us to feel certain ways. By provoking feelings, metrics are able to shape our lives before, during and after the act of being measured. We anticipate being measured and we shape our behaviours in accordance with those anticipations. But this goes beyond a simple gaming of the system. This is not just about us adjusting to the measures in a pragmatic attempt to do well, to fit in, or to position ourselves favourably. These are important, but the point is that we need to see this in terms that capture the physical and emotional costs of these calculative competitions. These are what [Ros Gill](#) has called the 'hidden injuries' of neoliberalism. Anxiety, shame and uncertainty abound.

We can reflect here [on accounts](#) of 'anxiety' and 'gut-wrenching fear' felt by teachers when they are being assessed, measured, and ranked. This shows how the experiences of neoliberal metrics and rankings create bodily reactions. We can also turn to accounts of the [working experiences](#) of those operating in hi-tech data-heavy and metric-loaded working environments, in which measurement is a constant nagging and anxiety-inducing presence in the lives of workers. We need not stop there though, it has even been suggested that the [quantified self-movement](#), based upon the ability and desire to measure our own bodies through apps and wearables, [can be anxiety inducing](#). This is where, [as one user described](#), the revelations and constant switched on presence of such devices end up increasing stress levels – the suggestion being that it is stressful to discover that you don't get enough sleep, that you don't exercise enough and that you don't compare well to your friends' shared data. According to this experience these devices make our limitations clear to us.

Measuring ourselves for fun, despite the rhetoric of bodily management, may also then be producing '[hidden anxieties](#)'. And, of course, social media use is often thought of as stressful, as a recent [Pew Research Centre report](#) has outlined – the [scaling up](#) of metric based measures of our performance on these social media platforms will only extend this. We are even able to analyse our own performance on Twitter to see if anyone actually sees or reacts to the things that we say, and not just through likes and shares but through detailed stats on the '[engagements](#)' with our Tweets.

In his book [The Limits of Neoliberalism](#), Will Davies suggests that uncertainty is crucial to the functioning of neoliberal governance. It would seem that the aim of a neoliberal approach is to produce uncertainty which then stimulates competitive entrepreneurial activity. The more uncertain people are, the more they are likely to be pushed and prodded into value production. The presence of competition is aimed at making us feel uncertain about what will happen, how we will be ranked and what this will mean. The spread of neoliberal models of the market are geared towards the ongoing production of uncertainty. The use of indicators and measures to assess our performance – whether at work, in our lifestyles or in our social media based networks – provoke feelings of uncertainty and precarity. Therefore, insecurity is the objective.

And the insecure individual is the self-training individual. It is perhaps little wonder that we are seeing reports of an '[anxiety epidemic](#)'. This could well be, at least in part, a product of the systems of measurement and ranking as they become instantiated in emotional and physical wellbeing. In attempting to understand such phenomena, we perhaps need to reflect on how metrics are being used to provoke anxiety. The deeper our anxiety, the more pliable we are as self-training consumers and producers.

It has been suggested that quantitative indicators are [deeds](#): they have intentions, they have aims. They are bound up with certain notions of value and worth. These numbers don't just measure; they exist to provoke feelings in us that might then lead to practices.

Neoliberalism is not an '[art of governance](#)' that operates at a distance. Rather, through the deployment of various metrics it is able to operate at the level of our bodies and emotions. What makes neoliberalism so powerful as an art of governance is its ability to provoke uncertainty, to play with emotional and physical experience and to demarcate

visions of what is worthwhile. Neoliberalism is founded on the production of uncertainty and anxiety through metrics. This is how models of the market translate into individual action. We have to wonder what the implications will be if we continue to expand the metric-based evaluations implicit to the roll-out of the 'model of the market'. These feelings will only be exacerbated if we continue to try to measure everything. The intensification of the measurement of our lives could well intensify the production of our uncertainty and anxiety.

### **About the Author**

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