Life as an enterprise: Ten ways through which neoliberalism is experienced on an emotional level

The definition of neoliberalism has changed over time to include not just economic theories but also social principles. But what does it mean to lead life in a neoliberal society? Based on empirical research, Christina Scharff outlines 10 ways through which neoliberalism affects us emotionally.

The term neoliberalism has been used in different ways, not only across time and space, but also in various academic disciplines. Marxist analyses have approached neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that promotes strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. Yet debates in cultural studies and sociology have argued that neoliberalism affects social life more generally. According to this school of thought, neoliberal market principles extend beyond the political and economic spheres by inciting individuals to conduct themselves in an entrepreneurial fashion.

This sociological perspective on neoliberalism, and specifically the writings that are informed by the work of Michel Foucault, argues that neoliberalism calls upon individuals to live their lives as if it was an enterprise. This means that individual lives are guided by the principles of enterprise, which emphasise ambition, calculation, and personal responsibility. Equally important, these enterprise principles apply to a range of spheres, such as education and our working lives.

By living our lives as if it was an enterprise, certain behavioural traits become prominent, such as being proactive, rather than passive, self-reliant, accountable and responsible for our actions. Individuals, who live in societies where neoliberal perspectives are dominant, are encouraged to become autonomous and to demonstrate self-initiative, self-improvement and self-belief. As can be imagined from these debates, the ability to conduct one’s life as if it was an enterprise is unevenly distributed and cuts across existing inequalities along the lines of gender, race and class. The resources to continuously self-invent, for example, tend to be more accessible to members of the middle-class.

The incitement to live one’s life as if it was an enterprise, and the fact that this process takes place within existing power dynamics, raises the following questions: What happens if individuals live their lives according to the principles of enterprise? More specifically, how is this ‘enterprise culture’ experienced on an emotional level? Recent psychoanalytic work has shown that the call to live one’s life as if it was an enterprise leads to disavowals of vulnerability and intensified forms of individualism. Equally, sociologists have highlighted similar themes around the repudiation of dependencies; the creation of an illusion of autonomy; and the emphasis on personal responsibility. More broadly, ‘feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression’ have been linked to societies where a neoliberal outlook is widespread.

The already existing research has made a range of important contributions, but is frequently theoretical in perspective, historical, or rests on textual readings. Although some of the psychoanalytic literature draws on vignettes from clinical work, there is little systematic empirical research on how neoliberalism is lived out emotionally or, what I have called, ‘the psychic life of neoliberalism’.
My empirical study, which is based on over 60 in-depth interviews with individuals who lead their lives according to enterprise principles, attempted to address this gap in existing research. My research identified ten contours that characterise the ways in which neoliberalism is lived out. According to these findings, individuals:

- Relate to themselves as if they were a business;
- Embrace risks like enterprises and consider knockbacks useful learning experiences;
- Present themselves as capable managers of difficulties and hide weaknesses;
- Are not exclusively guided by the principles of enterprise;
- But rarely discuss wider social structures, such as inequalities;
- Direct desires for change and feelings of anger away from the social sphere;
- Transform social critique into self-critique;
- Demonstrate feelings of self-doubt, insecurity and anxieties;
- Compete with themselves, and not just with others;
- Reject those who are not entrepreneurial by drawing strong boundaries between ‘lazy’ and ‘deserving’ people.

My findings resonate with the existing research in several ways by, for example, showing that anxieties are prevalent. Yet my research reframes existing knowledge by suggesting that competition is increasingly self-directed. While this is not to say that competition with others no longer exists, it is to highlight that the self increasingly competes with itself – whether this relates to hours worked, exercise done or calories consumed. This is not only an interesting observation, but also one that is meaningful sociologically as it suggests that ‘power’ or ‘ideology’ work on a ‘deeper’ level. If competition is mainly directed at the self, there is an absence of external standards, which may render competition potentially limitless.

This new perspective expands our understanding of the different ways in which competition may manifest itself in contemporary societies. Crucially, my analysis has not shed light on all the possible ways in which neoliberalism may affect our emotional lives. Some aspects, such as consumption, are absent from my discussion and may need further investigation. I do, however, hope that my research represents the beginning of a larger, and empirically informed, conversation about the psychic life of neoliberalism.

About the Author

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