Luck and precarity
Contextualising fixed-term academics' perceptions of success and failure

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Abstract

What does it mean to attribute success to 'luck', but failure to personal deficiency? Based on two waves of interviews conducted with fixed-term academic employees at different career stages, the chapter explores the narrativization of success and failure amongst staff working at the 'sharp end' of the neoliberalising UK higher education sector. Arguing that precarious employment situations precipitate the feeling of being 'out of control', the majority of the participants' narratives were characterised by a distinct lack of agency. The chapter examines the recourse to notions of chance and the consolidation of 'luck' as an explanatory factor in accounting for why good things happen; however, in tandem with this inclination is the tendency to individualize failure when expectations have been thwarted. While accounts of fixed-term work are suffused with notions of chance and fortune, 'luck' remains an under-researched concept within sociology. The chapter thus concludes by considering what the analysis of 'luck' might offer for a fuller, politicized understanding for the academic profession.

Key words: Academic identities; agency; casualization; higher education; individualisation; luck; responsibility; success.

Introduction

> *'Mine is a dizzying country in which the Lottery is a major element of reality' (Borges 1998:101).*

Processes of expansion, marketization, and audit have transformed the landscape of the UK's higher education (HE) sector in recent years (Ball 2012; Brown with Carasso 2013; Burrows 2012; Cronin 2016; Loveday 2021; McGettigan 2013; Morrish and Sauntson 2020; Nash 2018; Neyland et al. 2019). Existing research on the 'neoliberalising' sector has shown that academics are experiencing substantial stress, anxiety and pressure to perform (Baron 2014; Gill 2014; Kinman 2014; Loveday 2018; Morrish 2019; Sullivan and Simon 2014), as well as being in increased competition with one another (Knowles and Burrows, 2014).[1] However, while these wider processes undoubtedly impact all employees in the sector, a distinction can be made between what Kimber (2003) terms as a 'tenured core' and a 'tenuous periphery' of academic workers.

In 2019/20, 33% of academic staff working in UK HE institutions were employed on fixed-term contracts (HESA 2020),[2] and recent research has explored the impact of casualization on teaching and pedagogy (Leathwood and Read 2022). Yet how do casualized academic employees feel about the temporary nature of their own work? While fixed-term contracts have become increasingly normalized under the guise of flexibility (Barcan 2013; Bryson 2004; Sennett 1998), a number of studies have shown how differential perceptions and experiences of casualized work are likely to be contingent on the intersection of factors such as gender, ethnicity, migratory status, and age (Archer 2008; Bryson 2004; Ivancheva et al. 2019; Lopes and Dewan 2014; Reay 2000; UCU 2020; Wang 2020); the variegated nature of the labour market in HE also means that academic discipline may influence career progression, as well as aspirations to remain working within the sector (Vitae 2013, 2016).

However, while casualization is not experienced in a monolithic way, academic work has become increasingly individualized (Coate et al. 2015; Gill 2013, 2014; Gill and Pratt 2008; Leathwood and Read 2013; Sullivan and Simon 2014); fixed-term academics experience multiple forms of uncertainty related to their career trajectories, finances, mobility and future plans, but whilst attempting to forge

stable academic carerers for themselves they are also responsibilized for managing risk (see also Reith 2004: 397) and coping with uncertainty (Gill and Donaghue 2016; Loveday 2018). What, then, might individual academics' perceptions of success and failure tell us about the wider processes at work in the neoliberalising HE sector and its implications for the future of the academic profession?

Based on 83 interviews conducted with 44 casualized academic employees, the chapter begins by exploring the empirical context of the research before turning to focus on two interrelated facets of the lived experience of employment uncertainty: first, the narrativization of chance and the consolidation of luck as an explanatory factor in making sense of success; and second, the corresponding tendency of the academic participants to individualize failure when expectations have been thwarted. While it is argued that accounts of fixed-term work are suffused with notions of chance and fortune, perceptions of 'luck' remain under-researched within sociology. The article thus concludes by considering what 'luck' might offer for a fuller, politicized understanding of processes of subjectification in the academic profession.

Researching 'casualization' in HE

This chapter emerges from a wider project conducted between 2014-16, which aimed to explore how fixed-term academic staff make sense of their uncertain employment situations, the types of factors that influence their perceptions, and the impact on them of wider processes at work in the UK's rapidly evolving HE sector. Based on a qualitative longitudinal research design, a total of 100 interviews were conducted with 44 casualized academic staff in three 'waves'; the findings of this chapter are based on the first two waves of interview data comprising of 44 preliminary interviews and follow-up interviews several months later with 39 of the participants.

All participants were employed on fixed-term contracts in UK HE at the beginning of the research and were recruited through personal and professional networks, and the use of snowball sampling. Participants varied in age between their late twenties and mid-fifties; 18 were male and 26 female; 27 were British, but participants from other European countries, Australasia, Asia, the Middle East, North America and the Caribbean were also interviewed. The project aimed to capture and contrast the perceptions of casualized academics working in different types of role (researchers, teaching-only staff, and lecturers) and at different career stages: the most junior participant at the time of interview was only two days into their first appointment post-PhD, while the two most senior participants held professorial positions. Participants were based in different types of university around the UK, and while the majority worked in social science disciplines, academics from the arts, humanities, natural sciences, law and architecture are also represented.

As academics themselves, those interviewed were well-versed in research ethics. The biggest concern was to guarantee the anonymity of those taking part; as Magnus - a post-doctoral social scientist - notes in one of our interviews: "if there weren't risks to making a big fuss about how shit it is at the beginning of your career, then you wouldn't have to anonymise this". Due to the participants' considerable anxiety that their interviews might render them identifiable to colleagues and employers, it has not generally been possible to provide precise biographical details in this paper. Apart from the use of pseudonyms, care has also been taken to work with participants to sufficiently anonymise other details, such as employing institutions. All participants have been provided with copies of their interview transcripts to allay any fears over anonymity, but also to stimulate discussion and reflection during follow-up interviews.

Since the research aimed to explore how the casualized academics make sense of insecure work, interviews were designed to probe participants' subjective understandings of their employment positions (see also Gill and Pratt 2008; Tweedie 2013). To capture work histories, the first 'wave' of interviews began by asking participants to describe how they had come to be in their current role,

before questions were posed to explore participants' academic identities, future career plans, emotional responses to work, impressions of short-term employment, and the effects of work on other areas of life. Follow-up interviews were conducted with as many participants as possible to track changing circumstances and perceptions, but also to allow for the possibility of 'the establishment of a genuine two-way dialogue' (Sinha and Back 2014:474).

At the beginning of the project in 2014, I was myself employed on a fixed-term lecturing contract, and the participants were made aware of my contractual situation. Müller and Kenney (2014:543, following Felt et al.) claim that the so-called 'peer-to-peer' interview – based on 'shared membership in the academy' - can facilitate 'trust based on assumed similarity of experiences'. However, Mercer (2007:6) warns that 'greater familiarity can make insiders more likely to take things for granted, develop myopia, and assume their own perspective is far more widespread than it actually is'. Thus, while I chose to discuss my own position and experiences openly with participants to foster confidence and as a means of establishing a shared stake in the issue of casualization, I was careful in the first wave of interviews not to ask questions that would merely chime with my own impression of fixed-term work in HE as a politicized issue (see UCU, 2016), rather than simply a 'flexible' working arrangement (see Barcan 2013; Bryson 2004; Sennett 1998).

Informed by an abductive approach to data analysis, the research focused on participants' perceptions of academia and their working lives to address the construction of meaning (Tavory and Timmermans 2014: 21). Interviews were thematically coded and compared across cases, but also diachronically for those interviewed twice. One of the main themes to emerge from the first wave of interview data was the notion of luck; this finding was then explicitly discussed with participants during the second wave of interviews. Interviews are not understood here as having the potential to uncover an objective 'reality', and the participants' opinions are not taken as 'fact'; instead, the interview process is conceptualised as an act of construction between researcher and researched (Hammersley 2003:120), and discourse is understood as 'occasioned' (Gill 2000:175). Following Strübing (2007: 585), 'Data, seen in this way, is not the unhewn material that a researcher starts out with, but rather the *relation* between the field, the research issues, and the researchers established in the course of the analytical process.' In the subsequent section, I explore the connection between perceptions of success, the narrativization of 'luck' in the interviews and the participants' sense of agency.

'Counting my lucky stars': Perceptions of success

On beginning her first fixed-term humanities lectureship, Alice describes "counting my lucky stars". Similarly, when describing getting a job as a teaching fellow in the humanities, Alan notes: "I was very lucky", and then continues on to describe what he felt was the "fateful moment" (see also Giddens 1991) determining his appointment. These types of asides were common during the first wave of interviews conducted: participants tended to construe success in terms of luck – irrespective of variables such as gender, ethnicity or age, or length of contract - so that finding a job or being awarded a grant was often expressed as the result of some fortuitous encounter, series of events, or as pure happenstance. Even participants in more senior positions had a tendency to also describe success as a matter of chance, such as Sarah - a social science professor on a fixed-term fractional contract - who describes being head-hunted by a prestigious funder to head up an international project: "It's sort of like a gift that's fallen out of the sky: I'm just lucky". In this section, I want to argue that this frequent recourse to notions of luck, chance and happenstance by the participants in this project is indicative of the diminished agency of casualized academic staff in the landscape of UK HE. My interest here is in exploring how academic employees *make sense* of their positions; it is clearly not possible to establish objectively whether the participants have really been 'lucky' and if success has been a matter of pure 'chance'. However, I want to argue that the narrativization of 'luck' is reflective of the tenuous position in which a sizeable proportion of the academic workforce now find themselves.

There remains a striking lack of sociological literature engaging with notions of luck outside of the sociology of gambling (eg. Reith 2002, 2003), which can perhaps be explained by Smith's (1993:513) contention that 'luck' has remained at the level of a 'residual category' – a 'tacit taboo' (Mattausch 2003: 506; see also Sauder 2020). What, then, might be the danger of conceptualising the concept of 'chance' as being beyond the purview of sociological analysis? Smith (1993:528) argues that:

> …sociological models which include chance avoid the assumptions of either total chaos or total regularity. Instead, the three main causal elements of 'agency', 'chance' and 'conditions' are placed within a diachronic relationship where agencies, working within the constraints of logically defined conditions and chance impacts, in turn, modify these circumstances through a combination of intended outcomes and unforeseen chance consequences. Thus, the acceptance of chance as a sociological concept does not deny the significance of either structure or agency.

My interest here, then, is in using perceptions of luck as a starting point for thinking through the relationship between agency – understood here as an 'individual's capacity for action' (McNay 2004:179) – and the wider structural conditions of employment in the HE sector. Reith (2003: para. 2) argues that 'the way we deal with uncertainty is central for understanding how societies operate and organise themselves'. She notes how the application of reason during the Enlightenment sought to eliminate 'irrational' notions such as 'luck', and that the result of such a project was the creation of the new idea of 'risk', or 'the science of uncertainty', as a means of mastering the unknown (Reith 2003: paras. 13-4; see also Giddens 1991; Hacking 1990). Yet Giddens (1991:130) has argued that: 'Notions of fate refuse to disappear altogether, and are found in uneasy combination with an outlook of the secular risk type and with attitudes of fatalism.'

Taking issue with the use of rational choice theory to analyse the relationship between luck and power, Lukes and Haglund (2005:54) assert that:

> 'Luck', according to the dictionary, means either 'chance' or 'fortune, good or ill'. It is hard to see how it can play a useful explanatory role in accounting for differential outcome power (or social inequality) [...] Chance suggests mere accidents and fortune suggests destiny or fate or an act of God. But we are, supposedly, trying to explain […] the mechanisms that create and sustain inequality in positions or access to resources. Chance, Destiny, Fate and God constitute various different ways of declining to provide such an explanation.

Rachel - a social scientist who had been working as a post-doctoral researcher before being appointed as a lecturer on a permanent contract - also wonders if 'luck' is sometimes used as a convenient way of covering over privilege, as Lukes and Haglund (2005) argue. Yet the narrativization of luck and chance in my research suggests that these concepts were not consciously invoked as a way of denying advantage. Instead, the participants appeared to take recourse to these notions when describing situations over which they felt no control. Byrne (2003:30) links the narrativization of one's life to 'processes of subject construction'; she argues that an attention to narrative processes is 'likely to offer a key entry point into the 'techniques' or 'practices' of the self' (Byrne 2003:30). In particular, a focus on the context in which stories are produced may provide valuable insight into the production of subjectivities (Byrne 2003:32). It was a striking feature of the first 'wave' of interviews conducted that very few of the participants presented voluntaristic accounts of their career trajectories; instead, the vast majority tended to narrate their academic careers as happening *to* them, rather than presenting themselves as agents in control of their working lives.

Daniels (2003:619) asserts that 'luck implies the existence of agency, good or bad, outside of the control of the human individual', and recourse to the notion of 'luck' when describing fortuitous experiences was one of the unanticipated ways in which participants tended to express a lack of agency. Anne, a social science post-doctoral researcher, comments in our first interview together: "I guess maybe my interview is quite boring in a way because I was quite lucky to get the job in the first

place". The way in which Anne narrativizes her career trajectory points to a fundamental lack of control: hers is merely a 'boring' story since her appointment is understood as a matter of chance. In a similar manner to Anne, when asked how he had come to be in his current role, Philip - who was also working as a post-doctoral researcher in the social sciences at the time of our first interview together - noted: "I think I was probably quite lucky in some respects". He explains: "I know I should have more faith in my own skills and abilities, but it does feel a lot like luck".

I want to turn now to the case of David to think through how having 'faith in one's own skills and abilities' might be diminished by the wider conditions in which fixed-term employees find themselves in HE. During our first interview , David had been job-hunting for some time and had applied unsuccessfully for a number of post-doctoral fellowships; his mood was low and he confided that he was questioning his "commitment" to pursuing a career in academia. However, by the time of our second interview ten months later, David had secured a prestigious post-doctoral position in another EU country where he was shortly due to move.

David: I keep saying this to people and I believe it when people were congratulating me on getting the [funding] that I do think that it's also a matter of luck in the sense of however you want to define luck: everything […] that's not within your power to control […] I just cannot *believe* that my application for the [funding] was light-years ahead than the ones I had done before and that had been rejected.

Author: You said [in the last interview when describing failure], "I tend to personalise it, or individualize it, I tend to bring it down to my own understanding of reality, or my own capabilities and competencies" And I thought that was interesting talking about how when you hadn't had these successes, you individualized that […] But now you've had a success, you're saying: 'oh, it's luck'.

David: It's definitely luck too. […] me saying it was luck – I'm definitely not saying it was only luck, but me saying that it was also luck, maybe that's actually not necessarily not recognising my efforts or my capabilities, but rather because I had seen before how these efforts, these capabilities had not come to some kind of fruition; I now think that it's not that I got so much better […] Let's say I was good enough. I was good enough. So something else must have happened, been added to the equation.

                                          […]

            But like I said before, attributing chance to one's success maybe has to do with how you develop an understanding of how *hard* things are. Having said that, to be the devil's advocate of what I just said, it's funny because when somebody else has a success […]I don't think 'they were lucky', I think they were fucking good […] The underlying, unspoken message there is that they are so much better than me, to come back to something we were talking about – competition – last time.

While grant applications to research councils in the UK are thought to have grown after the 2014 Research Excellence Framework exercise, success rates have conversely been reported as declining (Matthews 2015)[3] so that 'once success rates drop below 20 per cent, the process "becomes more of a lottery"' (Martin cited by Matthews 2015, n.p.). It is hardly surprising, then, that in David's case above, he sees being awarded a grant as a "matter of luck" due to the wider, competitive landscape of the UK's HE sector. As Knowles and Burrows (2014:249) warn: 'metricization' runs the risk of 'unleashing new forms of academic competition'. In this competitive environment, David sees the achievement of other academics as being an indication that they are "fucking good", yet he understands his own successful funding application as being merely *good enough*. I want to argue, then, that the invocation of 'luck' by David points to a sense of diminished agency for casualized academic employees, but also highlights the lack of entitlement he feels: the suspicion here is that

while David has merely been 'lucky', the natural talent of other academics means that they are deserving of their rewards.

While recourse to luck was a common feature of the narrativization of success, participants conversely tended to make sense of their frustrations or failures in individualizing terms, as David notes in our first interview together when he describes trying to come to terms with a fruitless search for jobs and funding: "I tend to personalize it, or individualize it, I tend to bring it down to […] my own capabilities and competencies". This seemingly ambivalent position – that is, invoking 'chance' in the case of success, but then taking personal responsibility for failure – is summed up neatly by Imogen, a lecturer in the social sciences, who explains: "You've also got that small voice in your mind that says: 'no, you're a bit shit', or 'you're a bit lucky', […] or 'you're probably both'". Below I want to consider the individualization of disappointment and thwarted ambition as symptomatic of the wider conditions of the contemporary academy.

'I am my own obstacle': Individualising barriers to success

I have been arguing that for the academic participants in this project, the narrativization of luck is indicative of a feeling of being 'out of control', which is precipitated by the short-term nature of their employment contracts. However, in tandem with the propensity to take recourse to 'chance' in the case of success is the tendency of the participants to individualize failure: while the casualized academics in this research often neglected to take credit for success in the telling of their academic stories (even if they did acknowledge hard work), failure to succeed – for example, in job-hunting, interviews, or publishing – was often attributed to a personal shortcoming, or miscalculation. As Reith (2003: para. 25) notes: 'Ill fortune is no longer seen as a punishment from God, but as a personal failure…attributable to laziness, ignorance or irresponsibility'. In this section, I want to explore the ways in which perceived barriers to success are individualized, so that the most agentic aspect of the participants' narrativization is in the claiming of responsibility for failure or thwarted expectations. This is perhaps most succinctly summed up by Peter – a humanities post-doctoral researcher – who notes in our second interview together: "I tend to think – does this count as agency? – I tend to think, 'I am my own obstacle'. So it's not the most empowering version of agency!"

'Imposter syndrome' and feelings of fraudulence are already well-documented within research on HE (see for example Barcan 2013: 191-216; Gill 2013; Knights and Clarke 2014; Sullivan and Simon 2014). Barcan (2013:192) argues that 'recent decades have produced conditions that have greatly intensified' the phenomenon of feeling like a fraud, and she contends that while 'experienced as a sense of personal inadequacy', fraudulence can be 'linked to the social positioning of the academic and/ or to a critique of institutional organization, pedagogical framework, or disciplinary orthodoxy' (p.195). Karen - who was working on a number of teaching contracts in the humanities during the course of my research – explains:

> "I'm losing touch with my own research, I really don't have anything interesting to say, so part of that is the necessity of getting an income - and securing your living position takes you away from your own work - and then you start to feel separate from it and that engenders a feeling of disconnection and fraudulence […] meanwhile you're applying for things and trying to sound smart and not feeling very smart."

Miller and Morgan (1993) examine the production of academic CVs as a kind of 'auto/biographical practice', which must give 'the impression of being a 'proper academic' or a 'proper scholar'' (p.140); they conclude that 'there is an increasing element of alienation in the production of CVs' (p.142). In their research on female mid-career academics, Coate et al (2015) note the gendering of self-promotion: '…feminine "norms" suggest a certain amount of modesty that conflicts with what might be seen as self-promotion' (p.10). However, irrespective of gender, many of the casualized participants in my own research appeared to be uncomfortable with the self-promotional aspect of

academia; as Howard - a social sciences researcher - comments: "my goodness, look at all of those self-promotional people still promoting themselves on Christmas Day, and it begins to wear you down". In their study of business school academics, Knights and Clarke (2014: 340) note, 'we were reflexively aware that as academics interviewing other academics, we comprised a specific audience for whom our participants authored particular narratives'. Thus, it was not surprising to me to find a gulf between legitimated forms of public presentation and self-promotion – such as in the CV, the interview, the conference paper, or on social media – and how the casualized academics described feeling about their self-presentation during interviews; in this sense, Maclean's (2016) development of Laing's notion of 'double binds' as 'contradictory demands and expectations' is helpful in thinking through such a disjuncture and the way in which particular kinds of discourses are occasioned (see Gill 2000:175).

In her research with younger academics, Archer (2008:282) notes that, 'they were all able to see (at least in part) how their situations were not simply the product of their own responsibilities, successes and failings'. While in my own research the participants were well-aware of the wider processes occurring in HE and the implications of these processes for their own careers, there was also a tendency to individualize failure when describing set-backs, and this occurred across the sample irrespective of variables such as gender. This ambivalence can be illustrated by the case of Pedro, a social scientist who was working on a part-time teaching-only contract at the time of our first interview, but was job-hunting when we spoke next nine months later, a process he sums up by noting: "you are always a candidate". He had recently been unsuccessful in an application for a temporary lectureship, an experience which he felt had been lacking in transparency:

> "when you are in a situation like this where you […] keep getting 'no's, negatives and you keep rearranging your narrative about yourself and putting in question what you are and what you're worth and having to shape it to continuous judgements […] you obviously want to learn lessons from these failures, so you want to […] see […] what was it that I did wrong, what can I improve and therefore it's very easy to fall into that idea that I failed because I didn't do this right, so that's what I have to change. So you get into this cycle of trying to improve yourself as an individual and so trying to find […] what is wrong in yourself to be improved."

In their critique of technologies of neoliberal governmentality in academia - such as audit, Davies and Bansel (2010:9) describe how, 'Like a well-trained pony, the free individual responds willingly to the smallest signs telling it where it should run and how it should leap'. While the casualized academics in my research are able to be reflexive about the potentially pernicious effects of neoliberal management techniques on both their own lives and the academy, it is nonetheless extremely difficult for the majority of those interviewed to resist such tactics: 'Technologies of audit and surveillance, of self-audit and self-surveillance, are not simply discourses of responsibility and accountability but technologies for the reproduction of responsibilised and accountable subjects' (Davies and Bansel 2010:9; see also Leathwood and Read 2013; Loveday 2018).

The penalty for resistance is made more acute by the precarious nature of the participants' employment situations, in that failure to comply brings with it the risk of employment contracts not being renewed, appointments not being made, grants not being awarded. I want to argue here that it is hardly surprising, then, that given the wider structural constraints within which academics are currently working, the very little agency the participants do perceive themselves as having relates to the possibility of working *on the self*: of improving perceived deficiencies, of being wily enough to avoid potential mistakes, of playing the long-game even if the future is unthinkable (Gill 2014; Leathwood and Read 2022; Ylijoki 2010). As Katie, a postdoc in non-laboratory-based sciences, explains: "I treat everything as a potential opportunity where I'm going to screw it up and upset everyone". She describes having "agency when it's something that I'm maybe not doing well enough and I feel like I should be doing […] better". Gill (2013:240) has argued that:

> Being hard-working, self-motivating and enterprising subjects is what constitutes academics as so perfectly emblematic of this neoliberal moment, but is also part of a psychic landscape in which *not* being successful (or lucky!) […] is misrecognised - or to put that more neutrally, made knowable - in terms of individual (moral) failure.

When asked how she had come to be in her present position, Lesley – a research assistant in the humanities - began our first interview by stating: "well my understanding of my career is that it's all been a bit accidental, I guess". When I raised this statement with Lesley in our second interview together nine months later, she explained:

> "I think a lot of it is maybe an attitude change in that when I was reading [the transcript] I was struck by the same thing, it's like [I] sound like an idiot. […] I know that's definitely not what you were saying, but saying that everything that's happened is chance […] it just struck me as stupid. […] I think it's when faced with these largely inscrutable structures, like universities and hiring systems […] it all seems quite chance-based, but talking to other people and seeing how they go about things, and realising that actually there's probably been some plan, or I've put myself in a position to be able to react to these good opportunities […] and trying to be more responsible and mature about how I narrate my life: […] that would hopefully lead to feeling more empowered about it."

While Lesley gestures towards the "inscrutable" wider structures in HE, she then goes on to reproach herself for not being "more responsible and mature about how I narrate my life" – arguably a reaction that epitomises how the 'regulatory norm of the autonomous, responsible subject' (Rose 1992:153) in the neoliberalizing HE sector involves a shift in focus from the conditions that precipitate uncertainty to an incitement to take personal responsibility for set-backs, failure, or the anxiety precipitated by such uncertainty (see Loveday 2018, following Isin 2004).

I have been arguing that lack of control is keenly felt by the majority of the participants across all career stages, and this is intertwined with the pervasive sense of risk associated with employment insecurity. In order to mitigate this sense of diminished agency, a number of strategies were described by those I interviewed (see also Archer 2008) in order to impose control on situations in which they felt relatively powerless. For Lesley above, taking individual responsibility is one such route to perceived empowerment. However, the most common way in which the casualized participants - across all disciplines and career stages - attempted to wrest back some modicum of control was through working excessively, and long working hours are also characteristic of the wider sector (Anderson 2006). For example, Gregory - a researcher in health and social sciences - explains: "you feel like you have to do absolutely as much as possible and do absolutely as much as is in your control, which is working as much as you possibly can".

Yet some of these 'coping mechanisms' have the paradoxical effect of intensifying already disadvantageous situations, such as escalating high stress-levels (Kinman 2014; Loveday, 2018; Morrish 2018). When I ask Magnus – a post-doctoral researcher – about how much control he feels he has over his working life, he explains:

> "…all I can say is that the control that I have […] is to do the best that I can do […] and try to do my job as well as I can. But that has limits, and that has effects on the rest of your life […] But you can also do all that and be the model fucking junior academic […] and still not get a job […] the agency I feel like I've got is that I can do that as best as I can […] even though that can have detrimental effects on other areas of my life, and also just makes me stressed the whole time […] But then I feel completely agentless in terms of I've got no control over whether a job comes up […] I feel like I could jump the hurdles perfectly, and do everything exactly as they want, but still there's nothing there".

Adkins (2004:192) argues that: 'One of the most influential ideas in contemporary social theory is that a range of aspects of social life are both characterized by and increasingly require reflexive forms of conduct'. Whilst reflexivity remains a 'contested' concept (Farrugia and Woodman, 2016:627), Akram and Hogan (2016:608) define it in terms of how 'agents must engage with their own concerns and negotiate the best course of action for themselves'. They note that reflexivity 'is heightened in periods of breach' (Akram and Hogan 2016:608) - and the uncertainty precipitated by employment insecurity can arguably be construed in this manner - yet they caution against equating reflexivity with agency. In their critique of Margaret Archer's work, Farrugia and Woodman (2016:640) demonstrate that there is reason to be suspicious of 'the valorization of reflexivity within conditions that foreclose the successful establishment of a *modus vivendi*'. Thus, for Magnus above, there is both an awareness of the 'hurdles' that need to be jumped as a 'model' junior academic hoping for a career in academia, yet he perceives himself as having no control over the possibility of securing a permanent job at the end of his current position; while he can attempt to 'negotiate the best course of action' (Akram and Hogan 2016:608), the wider conditions in the HE sector under which he is working will determine whether this path is ultimately successful. In this sense,

> Knowledge about risk for these competitive vulnerable subjects is no escape from danger: rather, it is itself dangerous knowledge. It produces an ever-present awareness of the danger of failure to recognise, anticipate, and manage risk. It provides academics with the means for deciding what action to take but also the means by which they might be found to have done something wrong. (Davies and Bansel 2010:15).

The academics in my research are compelled to take individualized choices and risks by virtue of their precarious employment situations, yet the conditions under which they are labouring radically constrain their outcomes. I want to conclude below by considering the political implications of these working conditions for the academic profession, before proposing that the concept of 'luck' might provide a new locus for resisting the pernicious effects of neo-liberalization in the sector.

Conclusion: Puncturing the neoliberal logic of enterprise

I have been arguing in this chapter that my participants' seemingly contradictory responses to success and failure – that is, the invocation of 'luck' in favourable circumstances, but the taking of personal responsibility when things go badly - are indicative of academics' diminished agency, but also of the wider conditions within the changing landscape of UK HE. In this sense, I have aimed to bring together an analysis of chance, agency, and structuring conditions (Smith 1993).

The demands of the neoliberalizing university have created enterprising academic subjects who understand their own professionalism as being increasingly individualized. Academia valorises the individual successes of 'superstar' academics (Knights and Clarke 2014:338) through narrowly prescribed - and often unrealistic - measures of esteem; meanwhile certain forms of labour remain 'hidden' from authorised public performances of capability (Miller and Morgan 1993:135), and competent academic selves must relentlessly be promoted for purposes of public engagement, 'impact', student recruitment, and career progression. In tandem with the celebration of individualized success, comes a creeping responsibilization in the event of failure: suspicions that if only one had worked harder, had the foresight to anticipate and negotiate set-backs, or produced better work then success might have been possible (see also Sullivan and Simon 2014). These tendencies are then undoubtedly amplified for those casualized academics who find themselves at the 'sharp-end' of the sector and whose 'capacity for action' (McNay 2004:179) has been diminished.

Whilst the HE sector benefits from the intensification of work and the endless striving towards so-called 'excellence', the individualization of the academic profession has wider political implications beyond its immediate impact on staff. As previously noted, the little agency that the majority of the participants in my project perceive themselves as having relates to work *on the self*; if processes of

subjectification in the sector have the effect of focusing the gaze inwards, then the gaze outwards is in danger of becoming blinkered; thus, the real threat of individualization is its capacity to foreclose the solidarity necessary to resist such processes.

However, while Davies and Bansel (2010:5) caution that 'neoliberal government […] systematically dismantles the will to critique', there has in fact been a burgeoning of critique aimed at the neoliberalizing university in recent years, and the University and College Union's 'Four Fights' campaign – involving a sustained period of industrial action in 2020 - has sought to highlight the dangers of casualization, even if the dispute currently remains unresolved. Yet, industrial solidarity is not without risk for insecure workers, and some employees will be more constrained in their ability to resist than others; additionally, precarious employees require solidarity not merely from one another, but from those who are positioned in structurally advantageous situations, such as senior managers (see Loveday 2021). So long as the wider culture of the academic profession upholds the values of 'enterprise' and individual success, then genuine possibilities for professional solidarity will be shut down.

In this chapter, I have been using the invocation of 'luck' in the case of success as a kind of heuristic springboard (see Da Col and Humphreys 2012:3) to investigate the production of academic subjectivities in an environment of escalating competition and expectations, and I want to conclude by returning to this concept of 'luck' as a means of puncturing neoliberal discourses of enterprise. While I have argued that perceiving success as a matter of luck points to the gradual erosion of insecure employees' confidence in their own skills and abilities, I believe 'luck' might also have an interesting potential to disrupt those narratives that celebrate the success of the 'superstar' individual, while simultaneously encouraging the taking of responsibility for failure. The notion that successful academic careers are forged through enterprise alone – that is, work on the *self* to develop more ambitious plans, to become more industrious, to manage time better, and to take risks in the pursuit of 'excellence' - emphasises the agency of the individual whilst failing to take into consideration the structural constraints under which academics are labouring, but also the intervening role of chance in mediating success and failure. The open acknowledgement of 'luck' unmoors the neoliberal logic of enterprise: hard work does not always pay off, merit is not evenly rewarded, risk-taking can back-fire, and the individual academic may have very little control over this. The perception of success as a matter of luck amongst the casualized participants in my project exposes the wider processes at work in the academic profession; acknowledging the role that 'luck' might also play in failure challenges the very logic that underpins contemporary universities.

Notes

[1] I refer to the 'neoliberalising' sector here to gesture towards neoliberalisation in HE as a *process* underscored by competition; competition plays a legitimizing role in the transformation of universities, which are run on market principles but must remain accountable to government (see e.g. Cronin 2016; Dakka 2020; Loveday 2018, 2021; Nash 2019; Neyland et al. 2019: 76-112).

[2] At the time of research, the figure was slightly higher at more than 34%; yet once atypical contracts were taken into consideration, the University and College Union estimated the figure to be closer to 54% (UCU, 2016).

[3] In the case of five out of six of research councils (Matthews 2015).

Acknowledgements

Author biography

Dr Vik Loveday is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London.

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