The Handbook of Neoliberalism

Simon Springer, Kean Birch, Julie MacLeavy

Gender and neoliberalism

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Christina Scharff
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Gender intersects with neoliberalism in various ways and it is not my intention to provide an overview of these complex entanglements here. Such an overview would depend on our understanding of ‘gender’ and ‘neoliberalism’, which are concepts that have been defined and used differently, depending on disciplinary orientation, political outlook, and spatial and temporal context, to name just a few. In addition, existing research on the manifold intersections between gender and neoliberalism demonstrates that the theme can be explored in a range of contexts, including, but not limited to: education (Davies 2005; O’Flynn and Peterson 2007), parenting and maternity (de Benedictis, 2012; McRobbie, 2013), embodiment and beauty norms (Elias et al forthcoming; Evans and Riley 2013; Luo 2012); contemporary work cultures (Ikonen 2013; Swan, 2008; Walkeridine and Jimenez 2012); development (Cornwall et al. 2008; Koffman and Gill 2013; Pedwell 2012; Wilson 2013); the postfeminist media culture (Butler 2013; Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009), and the ways in which neoliberalism intersects not only with gender, but also with race, class and neo-colonial dynamics (Allen 2014; Ringrose and Walkeridine 2008; Roberts and Mahtani 2010; Scharff 2011; Tyler 2013; Walkeridine et al. 2001; Williams 2014).

Instead of attempting to provide an overview of the various ways in which ‘gender’ and ‘neoliberalism’ have been analysed and theorized, this chapter will hone in on recent feminist research on contemporary western societies. This body of work has suggested that women, and in particular young women, have been constructed as ideal neoliberal subjects. Public, media and policy discourses have positioned young women as subjects of capacity who can lead responsibilized and self-managed lives through self-application and self-transformation. Based on empirical research, I will explore these subjectivities. In particular, the chapter draws on over 60 in-depth interviews with young, female classical musicians. Female musicians are chosen because, as I will demonstrate, they may be neoliberal subjects par excellence. By focusing on the ways in which the research participants negotiated playing-related injuries, which were prevalent but often hidden, the chapter will shed light on some of the contradictions, exclusions and politics of neoliberal, gendered subjectivity.

Young women as ideal neoliberal subjects

As discussed in this handbook, neoliberalism is a contested concept and conceptualized variously. This chapter is informed by Foucauldian approaches (Foucault 2008) that regard neoliberalism
as a mentality of government (Barry et al. 1996). Here, neoliberalism is understood as more than a set of free market principles; amid other dynamics, neoliberalism extends to the organization of subjectivity (Brown, 2006). Under neoliberalism, individual citizens are construed as entrepreneurs of themselves and their lives (Brown 2003, 2006). Neoliberal subjects are entrepreneurial subjects who calculate about themselves and work on themselves in order to better themselves (du Gay 1996). In the literature, both terms – neoliberal and entrepreneurial subject – are used; therefore, I will employ them interchangeably here.

Feminist research has demonstrated that women, and young women in particular, are increasingly positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). As Angela McRobbie (2009: 15) has shown, young women have become ‘privileged subjects of social change’ who capably maximize newly won opportunities such as access to the labour market and control over reproduction. This hopeful positioning of young women is well captured in the slogan of the Nike-sponsored, and globally disseminated, project ‘the girl effect – the unique potential of 600 million adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world’ (Girl Effect, n.d.; for a critical discussion, see Koffman and Gill 2013).

According to Bronwyn Davies (2005), the neoliberal self is defined by its capacity to consume, which further privileges the feminine through the long-standing association between women and consumption. The neoliberal incitement to self-transformation is also associated with femininity (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). It is mainly women who are called on to transform themselves, which becomes particularly visible with regard to the management of the body and sexuality (Gill and Scharff 2011).

There are stark contradictions between women’s hopeful positioning as subjects of capacity, on the one hand, and intensifying forms of governmentality, on the other. This raises a range of questions relating, for example, to the exclusions that neoliberal subjectivities (re-)produce. As several researchers have pointed out, the neoliberal self, closely tied to the ability to consume, is predominantly middle-class (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). In addition, the empowered, female neoliberal self is often constructed in opposition to allegedly powerless ‘other’ women.

When I conducted research on how a diverse group of young, British and German women engaged with feminism and gender (in-)equalities, I found that they often presented themselves as empowered and that they did so by constructing the figure of the oppressed, ‘other’ woman who was a passive victim of patriarchy (Scharff 2011). Arguably, neoliberal subjectivity is formed through processes of abjection (Tyler 2013), which position empowered and self-managing subjects as morally superior (Brown 2003). The ‘other’ of the neoliberal subject – vulnerable, powerless, passive, and dependent – is often constituted along all too familiar hierarchies of power. Despite its inclusionary rhetoric – all 600 million adolescent girls have the potential to change the world – formations of neoliberal subjectivity seem to reproduce classed and racialized exclusions.

And how can we make sense of the privileging of the feminine under neoliberalism? How do neoliberalism’s subjects of capacity, namely young women, negotiate their positioning? In order to answer this question, and to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between gender and neoliberalism, I conducted 64 in-depth interviews with individuals who may be the quintessence of neoliberal subjectivity. I interviewed young, female musicians because they are twice positioned as entrepreneurial: as young women and as individuals who work in the cultural sector. As Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2008: 2) have shown, cultural workers are ‘hailed as “model entrepreneurs” by industry and government figures’ and, to use Andrew Ross’s (2008: 32) words, are ‘paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood’ due to the emphasis on autonomy, self-application, and competition in the cultural sector. By drawing on the accounts of young female cultural workers, my study did not focus on a group that is readily associated with
entrepreneurialism and neoliberalism; nevertheless, it provides insight into the accounts of individuals who may be entrepreneurial subjects par excellence.

Interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes and the majority of respondents were in their late 20s/early 30s. I spoke to musicians who played a range of instruments (string, woodwind, brass, piano, organ, percussion), as well as singers, conductors, opera directors and composers. While based in London (n = 32) or Berlin (n = 32), the research participants came from a range of countries and, reflecting the under-representation of working-class as well as black and minority-ethnic players, most identified as white and middle-class. In order to identify recurring discursive patterns in the talk of the participants, and to grasp the rhetorical function that they fulfil, I drew on discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Taylor and Littleton 2012) to analyse my data. As I hope to demonstrate, discourse analysis offers useful analytical tools to trace how the research participants talk about and negotiate playing-related injuries.

Hiding injuries

Many musicians experience health problems from the high physical and psychological demands of their profession (Bennett 2008; Zaza et al. 1998). More than half of the research participants interviewed for this study had suffered from a playing-related injury, ranging from hearing problems, postural issues and repetitive strain injury to focal dystonia and more instrument-specific illnesses such as vocal problems among singers. Liz, a pianist, told me about the first time she had had an injury:

I was playing so much, and I got a wrist injury. So at the time I thought that everything was over and I wouldn’t play again, just because I went through a phase where I couldn’t turn taps or door handles. I had a brace on my arm for a while. It was like a very – it was tendonitis. And I really lost hope at that point.

Equally, Annabel told me that she had back pain from carrying her instrument around, and then went on to say:

And I once had a really bad breakdown where I got Tinnitus. A lot of musicians get that… It went away. But I really thought ‘Now I have to do something completely different.’ Even though it was a really quiet tone. But it drove me insane.

And when I asked Zola whether she had ever had an injury, she said:

Yes, I can show you a very nice scar. Yeah, I had this thing that they called tennis elbow. It actually appeared when I was in college in my last year, right before I was supposed to do my last exam, my recital.

In other, more severe cases, research participants had to stop playing their instrument for a sustained period of time. When I interviewed Esmeralda in October, she told me that she had had to stop playing the viola several months before because of tendonitis:

I still cannot do any gigs or concerts, if they ask me. Because now all I’m doing is practising every day, now I’m doing like 30 or 40 minutes and then I have to stop because I’m getting tired. You know, I have to build it up gradually. So I cannot play. All I can do is teach.
Lena and Elena also could not play the violin for several months following injury. Lena had tendonitis when she was 16 and ‘couldn’t play for three months’. Equally, Elena told me:

You commonly call it a ‘played-through finger’ and that tends to mean that the nerve in your finger is inflamed because of the pressure of your finger on the string. And it hurts. If it was only numb, it would not be so bad, but it really hurts. And then you can’t play for a time so that the nerve can calm down again and then you can play again. And I had it and it just did not go away. I could not play for three months.

As these statements illustrate, playing-related injuries are common and can impact on musicians’ ability to play their instrument and pursue their profession.

The extracts also demonstrate that the research participants discussed their injuries in the interview. Many, however, pointed out that injuries were not openly talked about among musicians. When I asked Lauren whether she had ever had any injuries, she told me about her experiences and went on to say:

Part of the problem with my industry – one of the problems of my industry – is that there is a massive stigma attached to injury, so people don’t talk about it as much as they should. People will… musicians will keep on playing on injuries, rather than admit that they are having trouble, because they don’t wanna lose their work or they don’t wanna be seen to be unreliable.

Numerous research participants shared this sentiment. Kim told me that musicians did not discuss injuries openly and explained:

It’s because there’s so many of us going for the same work. And there’s always that competition, and you know, we all need money, and we can’t just be dropped because of that. So yeah, you have to keep it under cover. And yet, you know, the strain of it creates injuries.

Equally, Linda stated that it’s best to keep injuries hidden: ‘I suppose you might be worried otherwise that if someone thinks you are injured they won’t give you concerts or ask you to do anything.’ These statements suggest that musicians do not discuss injuries openly out of fear of losing employment opportunities. As in other cultural sectors (Gill and Pratt 2008), employment opportunities in classical music tend to be scarce and the working lives of musicians are precarious. As a report by the Musicians’ Union (2012) has demonstrated, many musicians have portfolio careers, which are marked by low incomes (less than £20,000 a year for 56 per cent of those surveyed), uncertainty, and lack of workplace benefits such as pensions. An analysis of the earnings of freelance cultural workers in Germany has documented similar trends (Schulz et al. 2013). The precarious nature of the profession, itself linked to neoliberalism (Kalleberg 2009), makes it difficult to address injuries.

Repudiating vulnerability: injuries as normalized but not politicized

In this section, I want to take my argument further by showing that injuries remained hidden not only because of fears of losing work, but also because they were constructed as a personal weakness. Summing up musicians’ attitudes towards injuries, Susan stated that ‘they’ll talk about how to look after yourself, but people don’t really talk about their own problems, because it
then shows weakness’. When I asked Esther why musicians did not really discuss injuries, she responded: ‘It’s a weakness, isn’t it and then you might not be asked [to work]. That’s the problem.’ June shared Esther’s sentiment and emphasized that musicians – singers in her case – did not discuss injuries for fear of being seen as ‘faulty’: ‘Singers fear for [sic] being looked at as a – for being slightly, you know, [a] faulty product. They don’t wanna be seen as faulty.’ In this context, it is notable that June uses the expression ‘product’ to talk about singers. Indeed, many research participants referred to themselves as products that had to be sold and marketed, suggesting that subjectivity itself is economized under neoliberalism (McNay 2009; see also Scharff 2015). Here, however, I want to focus on the negation of injuries and suggest that it is not merely linked to the fear of losing employment opportunities, but also to a wider repudiation of vulnerability under neoliberalism. As Micki McGee (2005) has pointed out in her research on self-help culture, vulnerabilities tend to be denied in neoliberal culture:

Not only is it the labour of others, and the value of labour itself, that must be denied by the masterful self, but also it is the vulnerabilities of our bodies. In the model of the self-mastering self, the forms of selfhood that ‘fail’ to be self-efficient, self-reliant, and self-authoring are seen as somehow defective (Ibid.: 174).

McGee’s description of ‘failed’ forms of selfhood as ‘defective’ resonates with June’s statement that singers do not want to be seen as ‘faulty’. Arguably, injuries remain hidden because they puncture the image of the autonomous, neoliberal self and instead evoke the spectre of weakness and failure.

While research participants represented injuries as something that is best kept under cover, they also normalized them. According to Anke, ‘almost everybody has something’ and Elena pointed out ‘there are specific things for every instrument which mean that it’s unhealthy’. When I asked Kristina whether she had ever had an injury, such as tendonitis, she replied: ‘No, fortunately no tendonitis. But I have back pain. But I think everybody has something.’ Jasmin answered the same question in a similar fashion and normalized injuries by stating:

Yes, so everybody has chronic back pain, really crazy. I also do. So, I notice – I mean I have not yet had any treatment, and I have not been to the doctor because of it, but something is definitely funny with my right-hand side. But that’s totally normal.

Despite the acknowledgement that injuries were common, only a few research participants linked the prevalence of injuries to work conditions. Kim stated: ‘if you are playing in a very cold hall that can cause injuries’. Saaga, too, reflected on her experiences of playing for an orchestra full time for a year, stating that the rehearsal and concert schedule was ‘a little much’, having led to several players developing injuries. When told by the orchestral management that the tight schedule was normal, Saaga disagreed: ‘It depends on what you are doing, which orchestra even, there is a huge difference in the workload between different orchestras and different countries.’ In making this statement, Saaga links the prevalence of injuries to the wider issue of workload. Generally, however, the research participants did not reflect on the more structural causes of injuries. Injuries were normalized, but not contextualized. This also meant that there was no scope for politicization. None of the research participants were angry about the prevalence of injuries. Indeed, anger, as an affect that can give rise to politicization, was remarkably absent from the research participants’ accounts. This observation ties in with wider accounts of neoliberalism that regard depoliticization as one of its features. As Lois McNay (2009: 66) has argued, ‘the organization of society around a multiplicity of individual enterprises profoundly depoliticizes social and political relations’.
Individualizing injury and emphasizing self-care

Instead of regarding injuries as linked to the high demands of the profession, the research participants constructed them as an individual issue. In this way, they could acknowledge the prevalence of injuries without linking them to structural causes. Gesche told me that ‘actually, most musicians have back pain or something’, but subsequently pointed out that it is basically ‘one’s own fault’ if one is or gets injured. Arguing along similar lines, Emilia stated ‘it’s usually just like a bad technique if you’ve got… I mean that sounds really awful, but it is often the reason why you get tension problems.’ Equally, Isabella pointed out that if musicians did something wrong, they had to teach themselves the right technique to avoid injuries: ‘You have to be clever enough to understand, to understand you are doing something wrong, because even if you were taught wrongly, in the end you have a mirror and you can teach yourself.’

In these statements, the responsibility to avoid and manage injury is firmly placed on individual players. The impact of wider forces, such as work conditions or the intensity of training, is disavowed and wellbeing presented as achievable through appropriate self-management. As Nikolas Rose has pointed out, ‘reality and destiny’ have become ‘matters of individual responsibility’ under neoliberalism (Rose 1992: 142). Equally important, the argument that ‘you can teach yourself’ constructs the individual as capable of addressing the source of injury, and of changing it. The individual is thus represented as an autonomous being who, through responsible self-management, can cope with various demands. Structural constraints are elided and the capable, self-mastering neoliberal subject is reinstated. Thus, the discourse that injuries can be avoided through successful self-management not only responsibilizes individuals, but also reinstates neoliberal subjectivity; injuries do not highlight vulnerabilities, but instead serve as an incitement to self-management.

The construction of injury as a personal shortfall also reflects wider trends in neoliberalism where failure is individualized (Burchell 1993). According to Mark Banks (2007: 63), ‘[f]aced with a multiplicity of discourses that reinforce the autonomy, and thus potential culpability, of the “enterprising self”, success and failure are understood as triumphs and tragedies of individual design’. The individualization of failure is well captured by Saaga’s reflections on the prevalence of injuries and why musicians do not discuss them:

I think people are not so willing to say the real truth about it because it feels that always something is wrong with me, it feels like everyone is so strong and that I am not as good a player, or something is wrong with my technique if it keeps happening.

Saaga’s claim ‘something is wrong with me’ illustrates that neoliberal subjects only have themselves to blame. Similarly, Astrid observed that injuries were common at the conservatoire she trained at, but went on to say that they were not discussed and ‘half a taboo’. When I asked her why this was the case, she replied: ‘Well, because it shows you obviously did something really wrong.’ In these statements, the individual is represented as the sole source of injury. Annegret told me that it was easy to get tendonitis, but then went on to say: ‘It usually shows you that you did something technically wrong. Because, actually, it’s not designed that you get it.’ Arguably, sources of pain and injury that are outside the individual are unintelligible, at least in the context of the research participants’ accounts. Based on this logic, difficulties can only be regarded as individual failure.

Resonating with the research participants’ individualized approach to injuries, the solutions and coping mechanisms they suggested were all limited to individual acts. More specifically, several research participants emphasized the need to take ‘care of the self’ in order to deal with
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the prevalence of injuries. According to Amy, ‘you just have to be kind of sensible and try and be fit and look after your body and be healthy and stuff’. Similarly, Faith told me about her approach to managing injuries, stating: ‘And I’m very aware of taking care of my body. And like having to go for massages, or like exercising and stretching.’ Discussing the consequences of her injury at 16, Lena said: ‘I’m very aware now of what I need to do to take care of myself. I know the warning signs for when I’m getting too tense or overworked and I have techniques now that I can use to stop that.’ As these statements illustrate, the risk of having an injury is transformed into a problem of self-care. Amy, Faith and Lena are responsibilized and ‘aware’ of the need to look after their physical health. In neoliberal fashion, wider risks – such as musicians’ exposure to playing-related injuries – are placed in the individual domain (Lemke 2001). Instead of attempting to change workloads or work conditions such as playing in cold environments, the research participants’ strategies revolve around self-management.

Conclusion: better to be sick than angry

In this chapter, I drew on over 60 interviews with young, female, classical musicians to shed light on neoliberal subjectivity. Having argued that the research participants were twice positioned as entrepreneurial – by being young women and cultural workers – I drew on their accounts of playing-related injuries to offer one perspective on the interplay between neoliberalism and femininity. As I have demonstrated, injuries are common among musicians and yet, they often remain hidden. The unspeakability of injuries can be attributed to the precarious nature of the classical music profession. However, I also suggested that injuries remained hidden because vulnerabilities tend to be repudiated under neoliberalism. Sickness punctures the image of the capable, autonomous neoliberal subject and may best be kept under cover. Apart from being hidden, injuries were normalized and their cause was often attributed to individual failure. Wider social factors, such as work conditions, were rarely evoked; instead, individual musicians were responsibilized and called upon to prevent and manage injuries. By exploring the research participants’ negotiation of playing-related injuries, I thus shed light on a range of processes that characterize neoliberal subjectivity, such as responsibilisation, an incitement to self-care, and the individualization of failure.

To be sure, the research participants did not exclusively exhibit a neoliberal outlook. As has been demonstrated in detail elsewhere (Doolin 2002), neoliberal rhetoric does not hold absolutely and individuals draw on competing discourses, including ‘acceptance, modification or resistance to the entrepreneurial self’ (Halford and Leonard 2006: 657–8). While I found that the research participants’ negotiation of playing-related injuries was predominantly couched in neoliberal rhetoric, I demonstrated elsewhere (Scharff 2015) that the interviews were marked by competing discourses. A neoliberal outlook was common, but it was not the only one. In tracing the different ways in which the research participants’ negotiation of injuries reflected a wider neoliberal perspective, I did not mean to suggest that neoliberalism determined their sense making. Instead, I used the musicians’ engagements with injuries to illustrate the workings of neoliberal subjectivity and to foreground some of its key features.

In conclusion, I hope to have demonstrated that young women’s positioning as neoliberal subjects comes at a cost. Indeed, the prevalence of injuries among the research participants resonates with Angela McRobbie’s (2009) wider argument that being ‘culturally intelligible’ as a young woman in the current postfeminist and neoliberal moment makes one ill. Speaking more specifically about young women’s engagements with feminism, McRobbie argues that feminism is disarticulated in a postfeminist context. According to McRobbie, young women are gender-aware – they have all bumped into feminism – but feminist awareness has to be given up in the
era of postfeminism, turning it into an object of loss. This loss becomes opaque and gives rise to a melancholia with attendant patterns of self-beratement, and in a context where pathologies become treatable and normalized. Instead of opening up spaces for asking critical questions about masculine domination and heteronormativity, the postfeminist era forecloses such critical engagements, giving rise to a range of disorders.

While my chapter did not focus on the research participants’ engagements with gender issues, there are interesting parallels between McRobbie’s argument and the research participants’ accounts. In both cases, wider social awareness is replaced with an individualist outlook, and pathologies become normalized. This observation highlights that young women’s positioning as neoliberal subjects is characterized by various tensions. Apart from reproducing existing exclusions along the lines of race and class, neoliberal subjectivity seems to entail a repudiation and yet also normalization of injuries that is coupled with a heightened sense of individual responsibility. Of course, my observations may not only apply to young women but also to other groups; further research is needed to explore how these dynamics play out among different demographics. The research does, however, suggest that the privileging of the feminine under neoliberalism, at least in the context described here, comes at a cost because it heightens the pressures associated with neoliberal governmentality.

1 Forty-four musicians in my sample identified as middle-class, seven as working-class, and two as lower middle-class. Eleven were not sure how to describe their socio-economic background, which resonates with broader arguments that popular awareness of class seems to wane. Four described their racial background as mixed-race, 56 as white, one as black, one as Asian and two as East Asian.

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