ASPIRING TO SURVIVE

PRECARIAT CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

This thesis argues that neoliberal social mobility discourses are harmful to the psyche of those in precarious work and promote policies that distort phantasies of desirable goals. These discourses produce anxieties and shame, denigrate vulnerability and compel the repression of anxieties.

This thesis fills a gap in the literature, exploring precariat narratives of social mobility and related anxieties using a psychoanalytic framework, focusing on unconscious responses to discourses. Psychoanalytically-informed Free-Association Narrative Interviews were conducted remotely with ten precariat workers, as the research took place during the pandemic.

The research identified anxieties concerning prospects, survival, status, career motivations and in-work problems. Participants' goals were often incompatible with employers' agendas and dominant 'aspiration' discourses. Participants frequently seemed confused regarding what they wanted or needed from employment, due to defended anxieties and conflict between emotional needs and discourses that denigrate particular roles.

Participants free-associated towards economic injustices. Increased welfare conditionality was a persistent theme, with participants lamenting their inability to access support and resultant distress and immobility. Many participants spoke of employers' abuses of power.

There were also free-associations concerning catastrophes and abuse. These manifested as direct fears, associations between neoliberal governance and mistreatment, or metaphors for neoliberalism. These suggested troubling impacts on the psyche produced by inconsistent discourses pressuring people to remake their psyches in contradictory ways.

The findings illustrated ways in which neoliberal discourses produce anxiety but are invested in as defenses. The thesis builds the argument that these discourses cause confusion, uncertainty and distorted subjectifications, harming the psyche and impeding the pursuit of goals.

The policy implications of the findings were considered and relate to supporting the precariat to sustain mental health and focus on goals, and reducing ‘incentivising’ policies.

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Contents

1. Introduction

This thesis explores social mobility from the perspective of precariat workers. Concerned primarily with how the precariat experience and perceive the discourse and policies aimed at promoting mobility, this thesis takes a psychosocial approach to these topics and concentrates on the affective and unconscious impacts of neoliberal governance promoting social mobility, and how these interacted with participants' goals. Much of this thesis discusses 'affect', which in psychology and psychosocial theory primarily refers to emotional responses but can also refer to bodily responses not necessarily experienced as emotions. It is often drawn upon by social researchers to explain emotional aspects of social phenomena and emotional influences upon social behaviour (Wetherell 2012, p. 2), although its meanings and uses extend beyond this.

1.1 Argument of the thesis

Within this thesis, I argue that the participants felt current neoliberal governance provides insufficient support and makes it unnecessarily difficult for them to meet their needs and pursue their goals. Limited eligibility and pay levels, and other policies ostensibly aimed at compelling upward mobility, were sometimes viewed as vindictive.

I also argue that precarity and financial instability impede the precariat's pursuit of goals. Although neoliberal discourses and policies aimed at incentivisation drive desires for upward mobility, and compel somewhat aspirational behaviour such as pursuing education, they also create affective experiences that impede the formulation and pursuit of goals. These are often defended against by the people experiencing them, rendering them unknown or not fully understood. These affective experiences include stress, annihilation anxieties, status anxieties, and ambivalent priorities that render potentially upwardly mobile precariat workers emotionally overwhelmed, afflicted by mental ill-health, or confused about what goals suit their wants and needs and are reasonably attainable. I further argue that suppressed anxieties related to inconsistent, counterproductive discourses and policies

manifested as various forms of catastrophising. Participants often associated neoliberal governance with domestic abuse and oppressive regimes.

1.2 Reasons for interest in these topics

I grew up in poverty, raised by a single mother on a council estate. I always desired social mobility but it remained out of reach for most of my life. My early experiences showed me how difficult life could be, how inadequate the available support often was, and how government policy choices could make life more difficult. As I grew up, I realised that the working-class jobs of the adults around me appeared to be underpaid, stressful, exhausting, or boring. I wanted a comfortable income, and I wanted to pursue my interests and use my skills, which were mainly academic. It wasn't until I studied Sociology GCSE that I found my calling, but the road to a related career was long and treacherous. By the time I completed my BSc, credential inflation had apparently occurred, causing most relevant jobs to require applicable experience or postgraduate study, which I could not afford until I could win funding. Additionally, my mother had become disabled. I became her carer and did volunteering to maintain my skills, and small amounts of casual paid work to supplement my income. My career goals seemed out of reach. The sense of being trapped only increased as multiple crises accentuated my precariousness and caused me to develop an anxiety disorder – the worst of these being my mother's disability benefits being reassessed, threatening our entire income, and our landlords deciding to sell the house, leaving us scrambling to find somewhere else available to welfare claimants. Our eviction took place while I was completing my Masters (eventually made possible by postgraduate student loans), again disrupting my aspirations.

All these experiences suggested to me that there was an aspect of social mobility that required further study – the struggles of aspiring to upward mobility while living a precarious existence. Studying these topics and following the news made it clear that this topic was important to developing debates. Recent economic events had been characterised by crisis and precariousness: increasing numbers of people relying on precarious work, increased in-work poverty, and increased child poverty. Governance

approaches had shifted further away from providing support and become dominated by austerity and incentivisation. In the context of discourse that framed poverty as the result of dependency and apathy, support had been reduced as the need for it had increased. 2017 saw mass resignations from the Social Mobility Commission over the government's problematic approaches. At this point I felt strongly that somebody needed to take a closer look at the impact of these issues.

1.3 Overview of chapters

Chapter two reviews relevant literature on the precariat, social mobility, and neoliberalism. It argues that precarity has been exacerbated by neoliberal governance, including policies ostensibly aimed at incentivising upward mobility. Further, it explores the psychosocial impacts of mobility, aspiration, related discourses and relevant policy. It highlights psychic harms associated with these, including forms of anxiety theorised to be frequently rendered unconscious and denigrated by neoliberalism. It also illustrates a gap in the literature related to psychosocial aspects of mobility and aspiration from the precariat's perspective, especially psychodynamically informed research on unconscious and defended responses.

Chapter 3 argues in favour of researching precariat perspectives on, and lived experiences of, mobility through psychosocial methods that treat the participants as defended subjects, acknowledge the interaction of discourse and affect, and reject dualistic ontologies. It goes on to explain why the Free-Association Narrative Interviewing Method and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis were selected as the data gathering and analysis methods and outlines the application and benefits of these.

Chapter 4 explores participants' discursive positions on key aspects of mobility discourse and argues that participants, although they had partially remade themselves as neoliberal subjects through pursuing and endorsing education as a credential, also aligned with conflicting discourses and revealed a desire for policies that would support their basic needs, which would be conducive to their pursuit of various goals, including upward mobility.

Chapter 5 argues that neoliberal mobility discourses had produced uncertainty and confusion in participants regarding the goals they wished to pursue and goals that were attainable and suited to their needs. Additionally, policies enacted to incentivise mobility had created obstacles and stressors. These appeared to have caused or exacerbated mental ill-health which presented a further obstacle to their goals.

Chapter 6 argues that participants displayed a preoccupation with themes of domestic abuse, catastrophe and oppression that appeared to emerge mainly as free-associations from the interviews' topics of mobility, precarity and neoliberal governance. This chapter further argues that these free-associations occurred due to defended, unconscious anxieties related to internally inconsistent aspects of neoliberal discourse, counter-productive aspects of neoliberal governance, signs of neoliberal governance eroding social cohesion, and elements of neoliberalism that pathologise immobile individuals.

Chapter 7 summarises the research findings, applies these to answering the research questions, and explores the wider implications for policy, research and theory. It argues that aspects of neoliberal discourse and policy act to distort psychodynamic processes, producing multiple demonstrable and potential harms, and that the ineffectiveness of neoliberal governance in facilitating upward mobility and poverty reduction exacerbates these. It argues that a plurality of goals needs to be recognised, that upward mobility should be viewed as the accomplishment of personal goals rather than a means of reducing poverty, and that policy should focus on support rather than incentivisation.

1.4 Circumstances of this research

This research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, including lockdown periods. The pandemic began around the time that I enrolled, and I had to rapidly adjust my ideas for finding participants and gathering data, as these would have involved in-person interaction with people. Ultimately, all recruitment and data gathering was handled remotely, creating unprecedented challenges explained in chapter 3.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review begins with a brief history of the British working class and how the precariat emerged. This leads into analysing the concept of the precariat, and how precarious work affects people's lived experiences and subjectivities.

I then describe and critique contemporary policy discourse related to social mobility. I describe key research related to social mobility and discuss whether neoliberal constructs of social mobility that dominate economic policy achieve their purported goal of economic efficiency, establishing that precarity and social mobility discourse are linked to neoliberalism.

This leads to a discussion of the counterproductive effects of neoliberalism, and how these have shaped society while damaging mental health, financial security and social cohesion, especially for the precariat.

I seek to illuminate the role that policies and discourses play in behaviour management of the precariat – the ways in which they reinforce or reproduce power hierarchies. This is important for understanding the psychosocial effect of these discourses and what responses they have driven in the precariat.

2.2 Defining the precariat

2.2.1 The British working class and the emergence of the precariat

The precariat emerged in the wake of a shift towards neoliberal governance. The precariat are mostly from working-class occupations, although casual work is becoming a feature of middle-class professions also. This section considers the context for this shift and the circumstances of the British working class when precaritisation accelerated.

The UK working class experienced relatively high financial security in the decades following World War II, partly due to the creation of the welfare state. The late 1940's saw the introduction of a social security system providing expansive child support,

benefits for those injured, disabled, sick, retired, or unemployed, and help with maternity and deaths (Fraser 2003, pp. 250-257).

In the 1970's neoliberalism began to influence UK policy (Walkerdine 2020a, p. 380). Many neoliberal approaches, such as increased welfare conditionality and blaming claimants for their circumstances, echo older liberal ideas of pauperism and the Poor Law (Standing 2011a p. 143).

Whereas economic liberals saw competitiveness as a natural state, neoliberals believe competition needs to be protected, and encouraged (Foucault 2008, pp. 88-89, 118-119). Meritocracy became emphasised within neoliberalism and was key to providing justification for inequality, and the moral imperative for competitiveness, by implying that the system is fair because the meritorious prosper (Littler 2018, pp. 8, 90, 93, 220).

Empowered by these ideas, the agendas of policy makers such as former British Prime Minister Magaret Thatcher and former US President Ronald Reagan, widely viewed as instigators of neoliberalism, gained ground (Bastani 2019, p. 26; Doogan 2009, pp. 122-123). Privatisation expanded, social protections were reduced (Arribas-Ayllon 2005, pp. 92-93), and entrepreneurialism was promoted. This era saw reduced labour power and social support, and increased inequality. However, it also saw record occupational mobility, perhaps due to support for new businesses and changes within industries (Brewer et al. 2022, pp. 66-67).

Neoliberalism flourished after the 2008 financial crisis (Mackenzie and Louth 2020, p. 22), further eroding workers' rights and welfare. In 2010, the Conservative government began economic reforms, including welfare cuts, known as austerity (Wamsley 2023). The government began reassessing disability benefit claimants using a more stringent system to direct disabled people into employment (Barr et al. 2016). Data showed no correlation between reassessment and returning to work, (p. 455), despite many people having support reduced or ended (Shakespeare et al. 2017). Mandatory Work Activity began, forcing claimants of unemployment benefits into unpaid work placements (Cooper 2022). This has been compared to policies that preceded the welfare state (p. 201). Governments from both eras framed the unemployed as prone to state dependency and asserted that the poor are only

entitled to support if they comply with demands (p. 194). The benefit cap began limiting the welfare payments any household can receive. The two-child limit now prevents any household from claiming tax credits and Universal Credit for more than two children (Anderson 2023).

The UK's attempts to address poverty and inequality shifted away from social protection and redistribution. The goal has become equal opportunities rather than equal outcomes, to the detriment of those on the fringes of the labour market (Cantillon 2011). The UK now has one of the lowest rates of unemployment support in the OECD (Brewer et al. 2022, p. 41) and poverty rates have risen for children and families with three or more children (pp. 41-42). The incomes of the lowest earners are not rising in line with economic growth and food bank use increased by 135% between 2016 and 2020 (p. 54). Upward mobility was 25% lower in 2019 than in 2000 (p. 71).

Greer (2015) claimed that this encouraged the uptake of casual work, either to fulfil claimant conditions, escape benefits, or compensate for sanctioning. Standing (2011b) asserted that sanctions are a means of forcing people into low-paid, casual jobs (p. 38). Under less conditional welfare regimes job insecurity does not automatically translate to financial insecurity, as welfare protects against extreme hardship. Greer (2015) argued that propelling people into the labour market increases precarity by driving people towards low-paid, insecure work. Young people entering the job market are mostly restricted to precariat work (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019, p. 730).

2.2.2 Popular understanding of the term

The term 'precariat' has been popularised as the term for workers characterised by a lack of employment security – freelancers (including 'disguised employees' lacking rights and regular hours), temporary workers, and the self-employed (Standing 2009, pp. 109-111). The precariat lack the legal and social contractual agreements of the proletariat (Standing 2011a, pp. 7-8). Although this definition of the precariat is widely accepted, there is continued debate about definitions.

Felstead et al. (2020) argued that precarity is prevalent in the general workforce, with sudden loss of hours or dismissal experienced by twice as many people as those on zero-hours contracts (pp. 34, 54-55). Precariat workers are therefore not necessarily more precarious than other workers. However, for this research the significant aspects of this group are the exact form of employment, poor prospect of mobility due to low levels of all types of capital (Savage et al. 2013, p. 243), uncertainty, enforced entrepreneurialism, and experience of being shaped by neoliberal fixations on mobility, competition and individualism.

2.2.3 Defining the precariat

Standing argued that the precariat has class characteristics, and qualities that distinguish it from the working class. I broadly accept the precariat as a distinct class comprised of those in insecure labour, who lack resources to manage this insecurity. The less contentious definition of the precariat as a socio-economic group is sufficient for this research.

Some scholars (Bessant 2018; Breman 2013; Manolchev et al. 2018), challenged the idea of the precariat being a class. Manolchev et al. (2021) argued that levels of job satisfaction and group cohesion vary within the precariat, and it is therefore problematic to describe them as a class (pp. 2-3, 5-7, 19-20). Although this refuted many of Standing's (2011a) claims about the precariat, the lack of cohesive class awareness does not disprove the existence of a class unless we define 'class' as homogenised views and identity. An underdeveloped and indistinct class identity may be a feature of the precariat. Standing (2011a) identified diminished labour solidarity and work-based identity as an aspect of precariat experiences due to fragmentation and alienation (pp. 10-12).

Such class consciousness is less likely among the precariat, who are moulded by neoliberal ideology that acts as a technology of control aiming to shape the poor into ruthless competitors (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017; Harvey 2007 p. 34; Maslen 2019; Waniek 2019 pp. 166-169). Exploitation of the precariat is typically different from exploitation within other forms of employment. Self-employed workers often provide the capital required for the business, including physical materials and

workplace (Stewart and Stanford 2017, p. 421). MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019) described this as providing the “means of production” (p. 13). The proletariat were originally regarded to be defined partly by their lack of access to the means of production (Marx 1976, 1.1.4, 1.3.2, 2.6). This cannot apply to workers who provide the means of production themselves, which sets the precariat apart. While the relationship to property has changed, class divisions remain (Toshchenko 2018, pp. 45-46). With the *physical* source of economic power having reduced importance, a turn towards discourse and psychosocial theory may illuminate why power imbalances persist.

The most convincing challenge to the idea of the precariat is that insecure labour has been prevalent in the UK under previous policy regimes and has long existed in many other countries (Breman 2013; Muntaner 2016). It is argued that ‘stable’ employment has only relatively recently become the norm and only in certain countries, and that this stability was exaggerated (Breman 2013). Braga (2018) argued that precarity is normal, and that post-Fordist labour security only protected skilled unionised adult white males, leaving hidden precarity for all other groups. Pettit (2019), argued that new forms of precarity are being created, based on hope for the future entangled with notions of existential survival (pp. 723-725). This form of precarity echoes the immobility experienced by the western precariat (Savage 2015, pp. 190-192), and their struggles with narratives of aspiration. There are shortcomings in theorisation of the global precariat, and I posit that the concept of a precariat only has meaning in relative terms and will mean different things in different geographical contexts. During Margaret Thatcher’s time as UK Prime Minister (1979-1990), outsourcing and faux entrepreneurialism fuelled insecure self-employment that was similar to the modern rise of the precariat (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019). This may have been the start of precaritisation, which only temporarily slowed over some of the intervening years. This reading of events is in line with the assertion that the precariat was formed by neoliberalism (Standing 2011a, p. 1).

There is evidence for the long-term existence of precarious labour (Kalleberg 2009 p. 2), especially in China (Swider 2017), most low and middle-income countries (Muntaner 2016 p. 2), and western nations prior to the labour rights gains of the 1940’s. However, non-standard work is becoming more commonplace globally

(International Labour Organization [ILO] 2002 pp. 1-2). In the US, Kalleberg (2009) identified increases in long-term unemployment, perceived job insecurity, and nonstandard work (pp. 6-8). In the UK, there were almost a million people on zero-hours contracts in 2019, an increase of 130,000 since the previous year (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2020a p. 8), and almost five million self-employed (ONS 2020b p. 4). There has been a general upward trend over two decades, and between 2013 and 2019 the percentage of the workforce on zero-hours contracts rose from 1.9% to 2.7% (ONS 2020c, p. 2). This change in circumstances for large numbers of people renders the precariat a distinct socioeconomic group.

A distinctive feature of the modern Western precariat is the *loss* of security. The UK context is characterised by the rollback of support. Walkerdine (2010) researched the subjectivities of a former steelworkers' community and discussed the concept of a psychic skin that had held the community together and been disintegrated by the community losing its main occupation and security. Later, Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012) wrote about how this community's losses re-shaped their conceptions of masculinity and forced them to confront annihilation anxieties in a manner that caused intergenerational trauma. Layton (2010) discussed the psychic impact of the loss of security in the US due to similarly eroded support and decline of manufacturing jobs. Layton asserted that this "whittling away over time of a sense of safety, security and trust…" (p. 304) was traumatic. These papers demonstrate how rapid loss of security can have significant consequences.

There is debate over which workers constitute the precariat, and this is important to determining the population of interest. Toshchenko (2018) included those perpetually in temporary jobs, seasonal or 'gig' workers, the unemployed, interns, migrant workers and those in 'borrowed labour' (pp. 40-41). Others define the precariat more narrowly. Kalleberg and Hewison (2013) defined precarious work as uncertain, unstable, and insecure work, that shifts risks from employers to employees (p. 271). This has been formulated less abstractly as work involving irregular schedules, short-term contracts and risk of layoffs (Vachon 2018).

Parallels have been drawn between the experience of the precariat and that of immigrant workers (Jørgensen 2016). There is an argument for including immigrant

workers in the precariat due to migrant labour exemplifying precarity (pp. 959-961) and migrant workers generally being opposed to neoliberal discourses (p. 961).

Connelly et al. (2011) speculated that informal work would likely increase because it has advantages for employers, including the flexibility to fluctuate employment, screen entry into permanent roles and avoid labour costs (p. 145).

Informal work is becoming more commonplace in middle-class professions (Alonso et al. 2016; Loher and Strasser 2019; Lorey 2015, pp. 82-88; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019), challenging the perception of the precariat being from low-status roles. This highlights the diversity of the precariat and further complicates determining who fits within it.

Flexibility is also frequently a feature of precariat work, especially where hours are controlled by employers, or dependent on finding work. Wood (2016) found that flexible hours mostly grant control of schedules to managers (pp. 1997-1999) and are associated with perceived degradation of job quality (pp. 1991-1993, 2000-2003).

This research takes a pragmatic, practical approach to defining precarity, and adopts the Trade Union Congress Definition of the insecure workforce: Low-paid self-employment, insecure seasonal work, and zero-hours contracts (Trades Union Congress [TUC] 2016, pp. 4-5) This population should be accessible with minimal obstacles, and able to self-identify for selection purposes. Immigrant workers were not deemed a suitable focus for the research for two reasons. Firstly, relative lack of exposure to UK political discourse makes them distinct and would present challenges in analysing the effects of discourse. Secondly, many immigrant workers have not experienced the decline of relative security that is characteristic of the British-born precariat. These experiences were beyond the scope of this project.

2.3 Experiences and subject positionings of the precariat

2.3.1 Practical and structural challenges

Precarious work is typically seen as more harmful than liberating. MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019) linked precariat work to insecurity, disempowerment, degraded working conditions, and low pay (p. 724).

Precariat work is expanding, with a growing number of people on zero-hours contracts (ONS 2018). A significant percentage want more hours (ONS 2018, pp. 15-16). 54.7% of zero-hours contracts are filled by women (ONS 2018, p. 9), although men are over-represented in self-employment (Conaty et al. 2018, p. 13). In 2016 there were 6.34 million people in precarious work, counting only casual workers, zero-hours workers and the self-employed (pp. 12-13). Self-employment is the most common of these and most self-employed workers are in poverty (p. 13). Casual workers and those on zero-hours contracts earn less than those on fixed contracts (p. 12).

Zero-hours jobs tend to be regarded as ‘low-skilled’, whereas the self-employed are more likely to be regarded as high-skilled. Both groups suffer from underemployment (Connelly et al. 2011, pp. 148, 150) and status frustration (Standing 2011a, p. 10), with those on zero-hours contracts particularly susceptible to credential-based underemployment.

Kalleberg (2009) listed multiple problems with precarity, including wage volatility, economic instability, pessimism surrounding living standards, increased inequality, economic insecurity and increased psychological impacts of perceived insecurity (pp. 8-9). The consequences of inequality are important to understanding precariat experiences, and the psychosocial impact of neoliberalism’s focus on social mobility. Kalleberg provided evidence of these problems growing, attributing this to precaritisation, but did little to evidence that these problems are especially severe for the precariat.

Precarity is linked to hardships including housing insecurity and fuel poverty (Pentaraki and Dionysopoulou 2019, pp. 305-307). Increased precarity for welfare

claimants frequently leads to homelessness, destitution, and crime (Fletcher 2019, pp. 418-419).

The precariat have been disproportionately affected by welfare reform, partly due to how income fluctuations affect Universal Credit entitlements (Institute for Employment Studies [IES] 2019, p. 4). Requirements for working claimants to seek more work or better paid work also increase the risk of sanctions (p. 4). In the Covid-19 pandemic, many members of the precariat were denied support from furlough for several months.

Home ownership is often unattainable for the precariat. Many live at home or in shared accommodation until much later in life than those on fixed contracts, (Pembroke 2018, pp. 80-81). Precarious work is also a common route into homelessness (p. 81).

Another practical challenge for the precariat is their lack of time and lack of control over it. Standing (2013) asserted the precariat have little control over their schedules, deal with schedules constantly changing, and have multiple time demands encroaching on leisure and relaxation, including upskilling and being on call (pp. 10-12).

Finally, ‘flexible’ contracts distort power relationships in employment. Union membership and collective action are rendered less effective (Wood 2016, p. 1989).

2.3.2 Existential anxieties

Neilson (2015) described existential anxiety as unease associated with awareness of precariousness and asserted that this was exacerbated by increasing material precarity (p. 184-185). Uncertainty surrounding irregular employment and pay causes extreme stress for precariat workers (Bosmans et al. 2016) and there is “significant distress” related to such insecurity (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019, p. 735-736). Bosmans et al. (2016) attributed much of the precariat’s mental distress to a lack of supporting resources, feelings of mistrust and powerlessness within work, and inability to build a stable life (pp. 254-259).

This situation is worsened by welfare reforms having trapped many in precariat work. According to Fletcher (2019) ‘incentivisation’ methods such as sanctions exacerbate anxiety and depression, are considered life threatening, and trigger suicidal thoughts (p. 417). As already noted, Layton (2010) asserted that rising precarity in the US, due to eroded welfare support, traumatised the population, with some of Layton’s patients having nightmares of disasters that were interpreted as symbolic of “feelings of precarity that have now extended deeply into the psyches of the White middle classes…” (p. 311).

There is also a social dimension of existential anxiety connected to transitions between ‘existential territories’ (physical or imagined places or contexts) (Guattari 2000). Existential anxieties have emerged as traditional working-class jobs and routes into adulthood have been eroded by the transformation of work (Walkerdine 2015), from the post-industrialist format to the ‘knowledge economy’ or the ‘new capitalism’ (Doogan 2009). The divide is not neatly between manual jobs and knowledge-based roles, but also along class lines, with middle-class positions given greater status. This disruption of classed experiences transmitted from prior generations represents an existential threat to working-class culture. Existential insecurities often centre around insecure patterns of social reproduction (Pentaraki and Dionysopoulou 2019, p. 302).

For Standing (2011a), anxiety is an integral part of precarity, something the precariat lives with constantly, and a normal response to risks of hunger and homelessness (pp. 20, 142). This anxiety is associated with the fear of losing possessions, and the indignity of destitution (p. 20).

2.3.3 Status anxieties

Power dynamics between employers and employees are distorted by zero-hours contracts, due to the lack of legal rights (Incomes Data Services [IDS] 2014, pp. 14-15). As well as workers having negligible influence over schedules and little recourse for challenging management, this may have psychosocial impacts. More hierarchical structures are more likely to produce status anxiety, insecurity, and self-enhancement biases (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019 pp. 33-38, 61-66) and negatively

impact mental health. Being trapped in subordination can lead to depression and anxiety (pp. 43-46).

Status anxieties are associated with social evaluative anxieties. Our socio-economic system invites people to compare themselves and their 'successes' to others, and attribute relative rank (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019 pp. 19-20). This can devastate mental health, creating low self-esteem (pp. 33-36, 65-66), social anxiety (pp. 5-7), stress and mental illness (pp. 7-10). The precariat are likely to feel status anxiety acutely, due to the stigma surrounding many precariat jobs (Cam 2014, p. 58; Standing 2011a, pp. 6, 8-9, 160).

Matos (2012) conducted interviews with precariat call-centre workers in Portugal and concluded that they seemed ashamed of not living up to families' expectations, of doing work unconnected to their education, and of not having a "real job". The work was stigmatised due to being seen as unskilled. Matos attributed these feelings, and the surrounding circumstances, to neoliberalism.

Neilson (2015) theorised that shame may explain denials of precarity, and using neoliberal narratives of meritocracy as defenses against anxiety. Precarious circumstances are likely to prompt existential anxiety. Consequently, people cling to ideas of self-sufficiency or project their shame onto vulnerable groups that neoliberalism vilifies as responsible for their poverty and their nation's impoverishment.

Precariat workers are frequently welfare recipients, and therefore potentially subject to the same anxieties as the long-term unemployed or disabled. Welfare claimants are often stigmatised within political discourse and blamed for their impoverishment and wider economic problems. Chase and Walker (2013) demonstrated how welfare claimants and people in poverty are shamed by negative portrayals in media and political discourse. Their participants exhibited feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment.

2.3.4 Mental health

Bosmans et al. (2016) found a relationship between mental ill-health and precarious work, associated with powerlessness, mistrust and isolation (pp. 249, 261). This was attributed to income insecurity and power imbalances. Ravalier et al. (2017) discovered more instances of very poor mental health among workers on zero-hours contracts than those in full-time contracts. Kuruvilla and Jacob (2007) asserted that poverty and financial insecurity harm mental health. The links extend beyond the relationship between inequality, insecurity and anxiety.

Ballafkih et al. (2017) conducted focus groups with precariat workers in Amsterdam and found that their basic needs were not being met. In addition to physical needs, participants discussed their need for transparency and trust, understanding, realistic demands, social interaction, and more positive discourse surrounding social support, with less emphasis on self-reliance.

Many forms of precariat work require workers to be ‘on call’. There is evidence that irregular scheduling is harmful, due to lack of control (Vachon 2018 p. 51) lack of structure (Arribas-Ayllon 2005, p. 281), disrupted sleep (Vogel et al. 2012, p. 1127) and persistent anxiety (Standing 2011a, p. 126) that prevents relaxation (Witte 1999, pp. 171-173; Kalleberg 2009, p. 9; Vogel et al. 2012). Standing (2013) wrote of the precariat’s work encroaching on leisure through ‘career maintenance’ activities, or by preventing time being reserved for leisure. This disrupts worker’s control over leisure and social life, obstructing social interaction and self-care activities (pp. 13-15).

2.3.5. Views and values

Precariat existence has the potential to shape people’s world views. Sennett (1998) argued that modern capitalism can erode people’s sense of identity and concern for ethics. To behave ethically, Sennett argued, one must have responsibilities towards others. Kalleberg (2009) referred to this in assessing the consequences of increased precarious work, concluding that precarity “corrodes identity and creates anomie” (p. 9).

Contrastingly, Standing (2011a) viewed the precariat as a potential revolutionary class. Hauser (2018) agreed that precariat activism could provide a unifying response to neoliberalism. Braga (2018), studying precariat telemarketers, identified a “reformist instinct” (p. 233), although lacking organisation and ideology.

Many scholars think of the precariat as classless in terms of their values, identifying as working class or culturally homeless (Bessant 2018, p. 787) and partially defined by the *lack* of unifying culture, values and agendas (Hauser 2018, pp. 315-316; Parry 2018, pp. 30-31).

If there is any homogenised worldview among the precariat, it may be a neoliberal one (Houghton 2019, pp. 620-622). Neoliberalism’s acute impact on worldviews (Harvey 2007, pp. 22-23) may have strongly influenced the precariat (Casalini 2019; Frame 2019, pp. 380-381; Toschenko 2018, pp. 39-40). It has been argued that precariat workers sometimes hold “unconscious attachments to neoliberal values” (Valenzuela et al. 2024, p. 1436) such as autonomy and determination (p. 1460). Many may willingly join the precariat while continuing to castigate themselves for doing so (Dovemark and Beach 2015, pp. 582-583, 592). Alternatively, the lives of the self-employed may have been shaped by valorisation of entrepreneurialism.

Standing’s (2011a) work was largely concerned with the prospect of the precariat falling prey to populist hard-right ideologies and demagogues (pp. 148-149). The precariat’s lack of time to engage in political issues was presented as causing indifference to politics, and promoting emotional decision-making (pp. 128-129, 131-132). It is a recipe for confirmation bias and misdirected anger. The prevailing view is that inequality (including precarity) contributes to social and political division and thus to nationalism (Hoedemaekers 2019, p. 304; Lamont 2019; Layton 2014a; Standing 2011a, p. 153, 156; Walkerdine 2020b, p. 383).

Neoliberalism’s lionisation of competitiveness and individual responsibility likely erodes empathy, thus contributing to the dehumanisation of the ‘other’ and indifference toward those less fortunate (Venn 2020). Venn theorised an “affective field” (pp. 101-102) that is constituted by the affect of those within it and shapes the affect of those within it. Venn theorised that neoliberalism was undermining this.

Standing (2011a) suggested that the precariat are angry and misdirecting that anger. This occurs in situations where people have suppressed rage (Lebow 2019) and have repressed traits that conflict with competitiveness (p. 393). After decades of neglect by neoliberal governments (Chernomas 2014; Layton 2010, pp. 306-308; Lebow 2019), the precariat many feel politically homeless.

Although there is reason to theorise that hard-right ideology may be likely to spread among the precariat, the evidence does not support this thus far. Manolchev et al. (2021) from narrative analysis of interviews with precariat workers, did not discover populist or far-right nationalist tendencies (pp. 844-845).

2.4 Social mobility

Social mobility refers to people transitioning between sectors of employment (occupational mobility) or experiencing significant changes in income (income mobility). This is commonly studied in terms of people's class compared to that of their parents (intergenerational mobility) but sometimes in terms of individual's shifting circumstances (intragenerational mobility).

Since this project focusses on discourse and psychosocial dimensions, this section is primarily concerned with discourses of mobility, meritocracy and aspiration, and the psychosocial impacts of these, rather than rates or drivers of mobility. However, some of these facts are pertinent to understanding governance approaches and participants' subjectivities. The bulk of this section focuses on literature that critiques social mobility policy and discourse or addresses psychosocial impacts of these. Quantitative research is drawn on where relevant, to support or challenge these critiques.

2.4.1 Arguments for social mobility as a policy focus

Within UK politics, promoting social mobility has been almost universally regarded as worthy and attainable (Ingram and Gamsu 2022, p. 191) and viewed as a means of tackling inequality. The Child Poverty Commission became the Social Mobility and

Child Poverty Commission and then the Social Mobility Commission, illustrating how political discourse has conflated upward mobility with poverty reduction and how priorities have shifted from addressing poverty to promoting mobility.

Former Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and Theresa May all emphasised Social Mobility in key speeches and statements (Blair 2004; Brown 2010; Cameron 2010; May 2016). Boris Johnson, as Mayor of London, gave a speech lamenting the decline in social mobility (Johnson 2015). Political discourse often frames mobility as a means of addressing poverty and inequality – possibly the *best* or *only* means. One recent paper from the Social Mobility Commission mentions poverty, in the context of social mobility being a solution, dozens of times (Social Mobility Commission 2023). This implies an assumed association between poverty and rates of mobility.

Meritocracy is another recurring discourse within political speeches and publications, which frequently declare equal opportunities as their goal. The argument is that opportunity for success should depend on ability or qualities deemed desirable, such as being hard-working (Littler 2018, p. 8; McNamee and Miller Jr. 2009, p. 16). Employment opportunities should be equally accessible to all, regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, or any other immutable characteristics that may be discriminated against. This aspect of promoting 'meritocracy' is, thankfully, rarely challenged. It is better not to allow discrimination and circumstance to determine life chances. Much of the early research into meritocracy focused on reducing discrimination (Ringer 1976). Another posited benefit of meritocracy is that it funnels the highly skilled into roles that require their skills.

However, these ideas have always existed alongside discourses that posit that adequate standards of living need to be earned through displaying 'merit'. According to Littler (2018), this has come to be used as a justification for injustice (p. 8). The discourse also wavers between asserting that social mobility can help "everyone" (Social Mobility Commission 2018, p. 3) and stating that people need to compete for opportunities (Maslen 2019 pp. 603-607; Reay 2013, pp. 662-666).

This is linked to the promotion of education. Modern political discourse tends to focus on education as a credential. Rishi Sunak spoke of the importance of

education for employability and promised to crack down on courses that do not increase prospective earnings (Department for Education 2023). David Cameron (2010) called education “an engine for social mobility”. Education is commonly cited as the means to ‘better’ jobs, such as when Boris Johnson stated that “…what we can do is give everybody… the skills to find and create new and better jobs” (2020). While education *can* improve life chances for individuals, this discourse often ignores the limited capacity of the job market to absorb highly educated jobseekers and implies that *only* the highly-educated should be lifted out of poverty.

Unfortunately, the potential benefits of promoting social mobility have been entangled with class biases. From examining these discourses, it became evident that they contain false assumptions, inconsistencies, and potentially harmful elements. The following sections critique dominant discourses related to social mobility as a solution for social dilemmas and policies used to incentivise mobility.

2.4.2 Psychosocial impacts of social mobility and connected discourse

Most literature in this area has focussed on the effect of having transitioned into another class. The literature is divided on whether upward mobility is beneficial to individuals.

Sennett and Cobb (1972) explored the affective realities of working-class people in Boston. They found evidence of what they called injured dignity. Some interviewees expected upward mobility would bring them dignity, others felt that manual labour was more dignified. Feelings of indignity emerged in discussions with those who remained working-class but also among the upwardly mobile. Upwardly mobile participants were dissatisfied with their new roles, feeling that they had not gained the freedom that they had hoped for. Although this was before the modern expansion of precarity, this research is valuable to understanding psychosocial impacts of upward mobility and aspiration, as it illustrates the ambiguous affective responses that can arise from mobility or immobility, and how these can be viewed as contingent on discursive constructions of work.

Lucas (2011) built on ideas of injured dignity in analysing interviews with people with working-class ties. Lucas argued that the upwardly mobile experience class ambivalence due to striving to rise out of the working class but maintain aspects of working-class identity.

Friedman (2014), in an article calling for increased focus on experiences of social mobility, asserted that upward mobility out of the working class can be “exhausting and discomfiting” (P. 362). Friedman summarised work supporting the ‘dissociative thesis’ that socially mobile people often experience marginalisation from both origin class and destination class. They become distant from past social connections yet struggle to connect with people from their new class. Many who have experienced upward mobility report difficulty relating to those with different class backgrounds due to differing culture, experiences, or values (Folkes 2019 p. 3; Friedman 2016; Loveday 2015 pp. 571-573). Friedman (2016) related this to Bourdieu’s (2007) concept of Habitus clivé, suggesting that the upwardly mobile are split between habitus of origin and habitus of destination.

However, Zhao et al. (2017) indicated that the upwardly mobile tend to have subjective well-being scores similar to members of their destination class, while Becker and Birkelback (2018) found evidence that the effects of mobility on wellbeing are dependent on individual dispositions. Similarly, Paulson (2018) concluded that changes to habitus from upward mobility are mitigated by typically slow transitions, and by celebration of upward mobility. Perhaps dissociation can be offset by the benefits of upward mobility, with privileges of the destination class felt more acutely by the upwardly mobile due to increased comfort and security. Theories of impostor syndrome also relate to experiences of social mobility. This is the phenomenon of high achieving individuals feeling like frauds within their professions, leading to self-doubt (Clance and Imes 1978).

There is less research on the psychosocial impact of living in a society where aspiration is often treated as a “moral obligation” (Spohrer et al. 2018, p. 335) or the impact of struggling or failing to achieve your goals or be ‘aspirational’. Walkerdine (2003) concluded that a young woman she had interviewed had been sold on an impossible dream of becoming another person by neoliberal discourses that pressure individuals to reinvent and commodify themselves. These discourses

created phantasies of being someone ‘other’, positioning her against this ‘other’ that her psyche then defended against. The forms of self-determination and self-creation promoted by neoliberalism are impossible within the subject as understood in psychodynamics. Walkerdine asserted that aspects of this experience contributed to several ailments including an eating disorder (p. 246).

Castilhos and Fonseca (2016) considered consumerist aspects of this transformation, wherein lower-class students were engaged in constant identity work, using consumption to break away from “social determinants” (p. 15). They observed mostly positive effects from this, asserting that participants were working towards meaningful lives and perceived themselves as in charge of their futures.

The stated goal of improving circumstances is often entangled with efforts to “improve” working-class subjects or make them “improve” themselves (Folkes 2019 pp. 5, 16, 32, 96, 138; Loveday 2015). Such discourse is often regarded as value-laden and implies that the working class are deficient (Spohrer et al. 2018). This promotes shame among those who are immobile because political discourse typically regards this as their own fault. The centrality of social mobility therefore creates status anxiety, wherein the have-nots feel inferior, and has resulted in “a crisis in self-respect” (Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 29). Hence, those underemployed in jobs that do not utilise their skills often feel shame (Matos 2012).

The moral imperative to aspire is tied to neoliberal governance and the making of neoliberal subjects. Binkley (2011a) asserted that neoliberal governance aims to create an enterprising spirit within people by rolling back the state, compelling the subject to prioritise competitiveness and personal livelihood: “a dynamic of pure enterprise in which others appear… as pure resources in an environment of opportunity” (pp. 92-93). Layton (2014a) drew on this work to consider neoliberal discourses of rejecting vulnerability and dependency. Layton presented a clinical vignette of a student’s enterprising efforts causing them to panic and binge, indicating unconscious refusals to be ‘enterprising’.

2.4.3 Social mobility as solution to poverty

Here I discuss literature concerning the potential for individuals' socially mobility contributing to an overall increase in upward mobility (structural mobility). This is important to the research themes because this often appears to be an assumption within political discourse or an implied reason for encouraging aspiration. The extent to which this is feasible may influence precariat responses to mobility discourse.

There is a common assumption within political discourse that social mobility can solve poverty, or that rates of relative social mobility are tied to economic growth (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2018, pp. 23, 25). This is frequently tied to discussions of how social mobility can be stimulated from below by encouraging working-class people to be upwardly mobile. Social mobility can improve finances and conditions for individuals who experience it. There is a tendency, however, to ignore the difference between everyone gaining an equal *chance* of accessing higher paid jobs, and these jobs actually being accessed by everyone. The Social Mobility Commission (2018) asserted that "Social mobility is about helping everyone thrive and grasp opportunities" (p. 3). Ingram and Gamsu (2022) critiqued the claims of former Education Minister Damian Hinds that social mobility could help *everyone* to reach their potential and get a better job. They highlighted that upward mobility only helps limited numbers of individuals to escape their circumstances (pp. 194-195). This idea may be connected to a conflation of structural mobility and exchange mobility, as a distinction is rarely drawn between these. Structural mobility, or absolute mobility, pertains to widespread social mobility (up or down) experienced by most people. Exchange mobility, or relative mobility, describes the general movement of people up and down the class spectrum, with no guaranteed change to the number of people in each class, and is typically understood in terms of the odds ratios of movement between classes (Chattopadhyay et al. 2019, p. 100; McNamee and Miller Jr 2009, p. 65). A tendency to ignore the distinction between these two types of mobility could indicate limited awareness of the difference, or that exchange mobility is assumed to lead to structural mobility. This latter idea is still speculated about, with some researchers considering the possibility of correlation between these two forms of mobility, and what the direction of causality may be if any link exists, and many organisations assuming causative links between mobility and economic growth (Heath and Li

2024, chapter 9, The consequences of social mobility for the society, para. 1). However, there is little evidence that this occurs or is even possible. Heath and Li (2024) asserted that almost no research shows correlation between structural mobility and exchange mobility (chapter 9, The consequences of social mobility for the society, para. 1-2), apart from the Sutton Trust (2017) asserting that these are both associated with GDP per head, but without evidence of causation in either direction.

The idea that many individual instances of upward mobility can drive structural mobility has been questioned for several reasons. First, there is not infinite 'room at the top'. Hirsch (1977) discussed potential congestion related to "the competition by people for place" (p. 3) and speculated on limits this placed upon growth and the chances of larger numbers of people obtaining affluence. Brown (2013) termed this "social congestion" (p. 678) and claimed there are scarce employment opportunities, making it difficult for talent to move up. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2022) asserted, based on a review of quantitative research, that shifts in rates of structural mobility "have little to do with differences in mobility chances for individuals…" (p. 274) and that past dramatic increases in upward mobility were likely caused by events like the shift into post-industrialism. Therefore, barring substantial job market changes, upward mobility must be balanced by similar levels of downward mobility.

Standing (2011a) claimed that this has caused high rates of credential underemployment and 'status frustration' (p. 10). He argued that scarcity of work is artificial – much work that would have value to society does not get done because no-one is funding it. There are also few objective criteria to determine which jobs have high pay, with pay levels set by employers typically based on their businesses' needs and capacities. Work scarcity, Standing argued, is merely scarcity of employment.

In a 2022 report, the Social Mobility Commission acknowledged some of these points, particularly the different types of mobility, and workforce structure affecting rates of absolute mobility (p. 28). However, the document still focussed on promoting relative upward mobility by changing behaviours rather than increasing 'room at the top'. The chapter on "Drivers of Social mobility" (pp. 101-134) abandoned this distinction between mobility types and focussed almost entirely on factors that shape

trajectories and on encouraging individuals to compete. Thankfully, the report from the following year incorporated “Environment favouring innovation and growth” (2023, p. 242) to the listed drivers of mobility – a step forward in recognising structural factors. Demands for equal outcomes are typically met by offers of equal opportunity for those who aspire and display aptitude. Several researchers and theorists have asserted that this acknowledges that only some will benefit from social mobility and that many will be left behind (Goldthorpe 2016, pp. 106-108; Ingram and Gamsu 2022; Littler 2018, p. 3; Pearce 2011, p. 7).

One further problem with the promotion of widespread social mobility is that the working class are the key-worker class. Even if it were possible for large swathes of the working class to move into middle-class roles, it would create labour shortages among key worker roles, unless there was a vast reserve of unemployed labour, which is not the case in the UK.

2.4.4 Meritocracy

This section discusses literature and research concerning meritocracy. It begins by looking at how meritocracy informs current discourse. This is followed by literature on relevant facts about meritocracy, and the impacts of corresponding discourses and policy. Finally, this section covers literature analysing conceptual flaws within meritocracy discourse.

‘Merit’ has come to be defined as having the appropriate skills for middle-class and upper-class professions (Littler 2018, pp. 6-8). The view that people should be rewarded for labour has developed into a view that people should be rewarded for criteria that fit dominant definitions of ‘merit’.

Meritocracy was co-opted by neoliberal policy makers (Littler 2018, pp. 32-37, 40-43) as part of the agenda to push social mobility and transfer select working-class pupils into higher education. This created additional opportunities for some but responded to working-class demands for equality with a promise of equal *chances*. Social justice became dominated by the idea of the level playing field (Littler 2018, p. 30-51; Maslen 2019, pp. 600, 606; Owens and de St Croix 2020, pp. 405, 419). Merit

has come to be defined as skills, cultural capital and qualities including intelligence (Saunders 1996), motivation (p. 23), knowledge of the job market, determination, and emotional resilience (Hickman 2018, p, 417).

Much research on meritocracy is concerned with determining how much career success is determined by aptitude rather than by class or characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and disability. How meritocratic is the UK today? For women, inequal chances of relative intergenerational mobility are evidenced by the gender pay gap of 7% (ONS 2024, p. 3). This suggests that women have worse absolute income mobility than men. Heath and Li (2024) found a significant difference in chances of entering the higher salariat (chapter 5, Gender differences in career mobility). Ethnicity also plays a major role in determining life chances. Heath and Li (2024), analysing data from the Labour Force Survey 2018-2022, found low levels of relative mobility among Black Caribbean and Pakistani groups (chapter 6, Ethnic differences in rates of convergence with the majority group, para. 11).

Heath and Li's (2024) analysis of the rates of people entering the higher salariat noted that people were far more likely to enter this class from a higher salariat background than from "routine backgrounds" (chapter 5, Gender differences in career mobility, para. 5). They also found that social origins affect chances of entering higher-level occupations even when educational attainment is equal (chapter 8, Origins, education and destination, para. 4). Similarly, a study of 31 countries found that financial disadvantage in adolescence is strongly associated with chances of later poverty. Rates of both these variables appear to be increasing with each generation (Dewilde 2024).

Meritocracy has come to be presented in policy literature as opposing elitism (Maslen 2019, p. 608), allowing people to succeed through merit rather than class. As with neoliberalism, meritocracy was embraced by both sides of politics (Herzog 2016, p. 137). Alan Milburn dismissed concerns that mobility based on meritocracy has consequences for the less able, claiming that this was necessary for the UK to "flourish" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, p. 27).

A body of literature has emerged challenging 'meritocracy' discourse within dominant discourse (Herzog 2016, pp. 135-146; Jin and Ball 2020; Littler 2018; Owens and de

St Croix 2020; Reay 2018). Meritocracy discourses are key to legitimising inequality and poverty, as they conceptualise the goal as ensuring that success and rewards go to the 'right' people (Maslen 2019, p. 603). Poverty is increasingly addressed by ensuring success for those with 'merit' (Reay 2013, p. 669) rather than suitable living standards for all (Tawney 1964, pp. 77, 105-106). The less fortunate have been divided into the 'undeserving' or 'deserving' and use of welfare is demonised (Valentine and Harris 2014, pp. 87-91) as is attempting to live comfortably on working-class earnings. The poor have been pathologised as lacking merit and blamed for their own situations. This pathologisation helps create division, shame and status anxiety (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019, p. 23, 211, 242). It is key to creating moral judgements that connect money to status. Legitimising inequality via discourses of deservedness stigmatises poverty and 'low' status. Like other aspects of neoliberalism, meritocracy discourse was formed by social and political movements and within social contexts different to our own, but still informs policies and perceptions (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019, p. 211).

Littler (2018) asserted that meritocracy legitimises and reproduces inequality and power hierarches and (pp. 2, 13) by lionising individual achievement and stigmatising those who lack 'merit' (pp. 105-106). Success becomes conflated with merit and seen as meritorious in its own right. It therefore again legitimises inequality and exacerbates status anxiety (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019, pp. 33-35, 211). This frequently manifests as stress reactions to social evaluative threats (p. 35) and forms of self-enhancement bias (pp. 61-73).

The literature identifies some key conceptual inconsistencies within 'meritocracy' discourses:

- Maslen (2019) highlighted that merit in a competitive society can only ever be relative, but discourse frequently implies that *all* those with merit will be rewarded (Social Mobility Commission 2018). Policy documents emphasise the need to compete for opportunities, and a fully meritocratic society would necessitate inequality.
- Littler (2018) argued that merit is defined by those who are already successful and couched in middle-class ideals. (pp. 157, 220).

- High levels of credential underemployment (McNamee and Miller Jr. 2009, pp. 145-146) signify social congestion (Brown and Hesketh 2004 pp. 25-28; Folkes 2019, pp. 25-27). Movement is not assured by merit, and levels of demand for particular skills limit the potential for social mobility.
- The social perception of merit is broader than having requisite skills for careers. Many contributions to society are stigmatised as unskilled (Standing 2011a, p. 120-124), poorly rewarded – such as frontline health and care staff, plumbers, sanitation workers, and call centre operators (Matos 2012, p. 233) – or unpaid and dismissed as not being work – such as domestic and care tasks disproportionately completed by women (Standing 2013, p. 7). There is a plurality of merits.
- Practices for demonstrating and measuring 'merit' are sometimes arbitrary (such as norms of recruitment) or biased. Class prejudice in recruitment has been referred to as the "class ceiling" (Friedman et al. 2015): lower class background has a lasting effect on the amounts of capital accumulated, possibly due to discrimination (pp. 282-283). Recruiters' perceptions of "merit" may be biased.
- Capital accumulates around those deemed to have 'merit'. Herzog (2016) argued that since this extends advantages to family members, this contradicts the idea of individual merit, because people do not start life with equal opportunities (pp. 144-145)

This all indicates that the neoliberal concept of merit is not an objective measure of social value, but an indicator of status based on values of policy makers and employers.

2.4.5 Aspiration

Raco (2009) traced the role of aspiration discourses in the shift away from welfare provision. This was achieved via what Raco terms the "pseudo-concept" (p. 438) of welfare dependency. Welfare reforms in the late 90's and early 2000's served the purpose of incentivising 'aspirational citizenship' (p. 438).

Hoskins and Barker (2017) noted that, within politics, aspiration is often conceptualised as the drive to remake oneself as middle class. The working class are expected to ‘aspire’ to middle-class roles (p. 47). This conflates social contribution and income, and assumes that high-paid roles are more socially worthwhile.

Spohrer et al. (2018) analysed aspiration discourses in UK policy documents. They found frequent assumptions that poverty of aspiration is holding young people back, and that aspiration should be promoted to make more people upwardly mobile. These discourses were identified as technologies of the self, in the Foucauldian sense, that compel people to change their emotions and behaviours.

Definitions of aspiration tend to be different among the working class, theoretically because aspiration is shaped by what is familiar and attainable (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). This is in keeping with theories of habitus, and middle-class and upper-class definitions of aspiration may be moulded by their own habitus. Social congestion suggests that it would be counter-productive to ‘incentivise’ more people towards the top, as it will merely make attaining higher status positions more challenging and stressful.

Discourse within policy literature frequently emphasises that poverty of aspiration is stifling mobility. In Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers (HM Government 2011) the government claimed that this poverty of aspiration holds young people back. However, research has produced findings that both support and refute this.

Multiple pieces of research have demonstrated there is no ‘poverty of aspiration’. Hoskins and Barker (2017) found that students they interviewed presented aspirations influenced by family and personal dispositions, and that these contrasted with government definitions of desirable aspirations. By defining aspiration narrowly, the prevailing discourse frames the problem as a failing of the less fortunate and devalues working-class roles. This shifts responsibility away from government and legitimates inaction on poverty and inequality (Pimlott-Wilson 2017, p. 289). Hoskins and Barker (2017), Raco (2009) and Reay (2013) have all asserted that working-class people have ambitions, but these are either driven by different priorities

(personal fulfilment, contribution to society) or restrictions on what is attainable, driving many towards jobs that are unjustly low-paid.

This pressure to develop the self, ignoring structural limits, is rooted in assumptions that hardships are caused by character flaws. Spohrer et al. (2018) demonstrated the prevalence of such narratives and how they produce neoliberal subjects. Young people are framed as having potential that is held back by insufficient aspiration. This discourse creates a moral obligation to become aspirational. Spohrer and Bailey (2020) observed that the messaging of the Character and Resilience Manifesto promotes psychological governing or biopolitics. Such approaches imply that social mobility is so important that it justifies modifying people's personalities, and that people should reshape themselves into entrepreneurial subjects.

Some studies *have* asserted that aspirations are reduced by poverty and that lower aspirations perpetuate poverty for individuals. Dalton et al. (2016) attributed lower aspirations to financial worries and lack of hope. Ray (2006) found statistical evidence that a lack of aspiration to improve one's living standards does impact chances of mobility. However, aspiration was defined exclusively as pursuing material gain. While an individuals' odds of being upwardly mobile do partly depend on aspiring to high-paid roles (unsurprising, since people are unlikely to enter such roles unintentionally), this can only contribute to their own relative chances of upward mobility, and not absolute rates of upward mobility.

2.4.6 Education as panacea

Education is frequently presented as the path to social mobility (Folkes 2019 pp. 13, 21-28; Reay 2013). This has long been an explicit policy agenda and is increasingly prominent in policy discourse (Elwick 2019, p. 517). In 2017, The Department for Education published 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education' – making the connection overt. This document acknowledges that education alone cannot solve the problem but explicitly focuses on "equality of opportunity" (p. 5). It states the assumption that increased exchange mobility will be good for the economy (p. 5) and that "equality of opportunity starts with education" (p. 5).

Evidence suggests that education level does promote individual mobility. Heath and Li (2024) examining data from UK Household Longitudinal Study and the British Household Panel Survey, determined that origin has an indirect effect on destination via education. Some higher levels of occupational attainment among people with higher-class origins is explained by their higher levels of education, indicating that education does affect outcomes (chapter 8, Origins, education and destination, para. 3)

Ballarino and Bernardi (2016) found direct effects of social origin on destination were significant in 14 countries. While this was smaller than the total effect of origin (indicating that inequal educational attainment played a role) the authors noted that working-class origin had an even stronger direct penalty on life chances than ethnicity and gender (p. 258). Education does not guarantee career success or even equal chances.

Goldthorpe (2016) argued that rising rates of educational access caused credential inflation and intensified competition. He reasoned that, all other things being equal, it is impossible for relative upward mobility to exceed downward mobility and impossible for everybody to be upwardly mobile. This indicates that education can only increase each person's chances *relative* to others.

Elwick (2019) highlighted the harms of associating education with promoting social mobility, arguing that the discourse is unhelpful due to ignoring class and framing those who do not attend university as deficient. Similarly, Maslen (2019) problematised promoting competitiveness in education. Not everyone can win in a competitive system. Therefore, neoliberalism inevitably creates failure. As Maslen showed, this discourse has permeated education policy in ways that will likely exacerbate inequalities.

2.4.7 Psychoanalytical mobility research

Given the anxiety prompted by mobility discourses, policies purported to promote aspiration, and the stigmatisation of the working class, I felt that psychoanalytic perspectives on this topic may provide valuable insight. Post-Klein psychodynamics

posits that the psyche protects itself from anxiety by forming defended positionings that sometimes render anxiety and its sources unknown to the subject. It therefore seemed that there would be aspects of precariat workers' perspectives and affective experiences that research participants may not be consciously aware of, and that psychoanalytically-informed research would be essential to researching these aspects of precariat perspectives on mobility.

Relatively little research into social mobility has taken a psychodynamic approach or been informed by psychoanalytical ideas. Psychodynamics has often had problematic views of class, particularly in its early years. Freud himself dismissed the usefulness of psychoanalysis for working-class patients: "…once a poor man has produced a neurosis it is only with difficulty that he lets it be taken from him. It renders him too good a service in the struggle for existence; the secondary gain from illness which it brings him is much too important" (Freud 1958, p. 133).

Several early papers on mobility that claimed to be informed by psychoanalysis took similar pathologising stances. Numerous researchers including Dynes et al. (1956) and Douvan and Adelson (1958) researched the relationship between family and aspiration, based on the then-popular psychoanalytic theory that aspiration was driven by unsatisfactory family relations in childhood. Dynes et al. (1956) concluded that the theory was supported but Douvan and Adelson (1958) concluding that upward-aspiring boys were more likely to have healthy relationships with parents. Interestingly, Douvan and Adelson interpreted the responses of the non-aspirational boys more negatively than the responses of the aspirational boys, even when similar things were disclosed. The aspiring boys' tendency to spend money in ways their parents disapproved of was seen as independence. Conversely, the non-aspirational boys' willingness to break parental rules was seen as rebelliousness.

Work concerning psychosocial determinants of mobility continues to this day but will not be covered further here as this study is not concerned with psychosocial predictors of mobility.

Several notable studies have researched social mobility from a non-pathologising psychoanalytic perspective, and theoretical pieces have discussed possible links between mobility discourses and psychodynamic phenomena, and the applicability

of psychoanalytical approaches to researching social mobility. There are also papers that, although social mobility is not their central focus, touch on mobility or cover connected topics.

Sennett and Cobb's (1972) research did not brand itself as psychoanalytically-informed (as opposed to being psychology) but drew upon psychoanalytical ideas. They spoke extensively of splits and defenses and described the "split" (p. 97) between participants' conscious beliefs that they never had a chance of high-status careers, and the shame felt because of "inner conviction" (p. 97) of being responsible for their circumstances. Elsewhere, they explored the "defensive phenomenon" (p. 197) that apparently caused participants to engage the passive voice when talking about career accomplishments and setbacks, alienating themselves from their work. They also discussed instances of managers maintaining emotional distance from subordinates to avoid the pain of inflicting demotions or layoffs. Sennett and Cobb attributed this to "…splitting the fraternal, caring self from one's competence…" (p. 203). They referenced workers being mystified by the motives of those exerting authority over them, similar to the puzzlement that Melanie Klein observed in children being disciplined by parents. This was linked to finding themselves beholden to mutually contradictory demands – the commands of employers and personal obligations. This aspect of the research aligned with psychoanalytical ontologies, asserting that "…human beings are not hapless victims following blindly a game of behaviouristic chess, because consciousness is an active process arranging social information…" (p. 209).

London (1989) applied "the psychoanalytic and family systems theory" (p. 144) to data from in-depth interviews with first-generation college students. The research explored how these students' family dynamics had been impacted by their attending college. Participants were torn between educational aspirations and loyalty to family and social identity. London presented instances of parents opposing students' mobility and responding by binding or excluding. London also provided an example of one student seemingly being defended regarding their parents' possibly self-serving motives for pushing them towards education. This student stated that they chose not to think about it.

Lucey et al. (2003a) analysed psychodynamic processes of young women being educationally mobile. Drawing on their longitudinal study of young women transitioning to adulthood (Lucey et al. 2003b) they argued that social mobility involves psychological toil and losses. These tend to be ignored by policy makers who present social mobility as universally beneficial. The authors attempted to understand factors that cause some to long for a different class destiny, and how some reach these goals through a “socially terrifying shift” (2003a, p. 296) despite being relatively unlikely to succeed. These transitions were tinged by painful separation and identity loss. This project included interviews that were inspired by Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) free-association methods and applied Foucauldian concepts (Lucey 2004). This research into young women’s mobility is similar to what I hoped to achieve in researching precariat perspectives on social mobility, focusing on psychosocial impacts.

Reay (2005) wrote about the “emotional tightrope” (p. 921) walked by working-class university applicants. Out of the students interviewed, only working-class students emotively referenced fears for their future. Reay discussed the heightened stress and anxiety experienced by working-class students in unfamiliar environs and reiterated costs of becoming different from those in your class of origin. She argued that experiences of class are partly unconscious and had been rendered mostly invisible.

Walkerdine has extensively researched class from a psychosocial perspective, repeatedly drawing on psychoanalytic concepts. Walkerdine (2003) discussed how class contributes to creating subjectivities through discourses of upward mobility. In doing so it produces affective experiences of despair, shame, distress, and of being without a place of belonging. Walkerdine drew on interview data produced with a young woman who aspired to become a businesswoman (remaking herself from her identity as a working-class villager). By applying psychodynamic concepts, Walkerdine uncovered the hidden significance of Lisa’s statements. Lisa rejected aspects of herself that did not match her desired identity, going so far as to seemingly forget her childhood. Lisa was trying to produce a version of herself that matched her fantasies, themselves the product of neoliberal discourse. Walkerdine argued that constructions of class had shifted from being externally enforced to

being perpetuated by neoliberal technologies (in the Foucauldian sense) that compel people to remake themselves in the image of the middle class.

Later, Walkerdine (2011) applied the ideas of Guattari and other psychoanalysts to data from an interview with a working-class young woman transitioning to higher education, inspired by depictions of students on TV. This analysis focused on fantasy and imagination in aspiration and the difference between how these are realised by middle-class women with resources, and working-class women who may not know how to pursue these. Looking at affect stemming from movement between 'existential territories' Walkerdine concluded that working-class young people don't lack aspiration, but that moving to a new existential territory feels unsafe. Working-class efforts to realise such fantasies require additional prerequisites, including an imagination of existential territories beyond their class, and emotional support through the transition. Where such support is forthcoming, it is frequently tinged with conflict and confusion. These papers are not an exhaustive overview of Walkerdine's psychosocial examinations of class but represent those that focus on mobility.

Mannay (2013) revisited data gathered for a study on Keeping Close and Spoiling (Barker 1972). Mannay compared the subjectivity of woman who was a self-described "homebird" (p. 94) and her sister who wanted upward mobility. Mannay drew primarily on Kleinian psychodynamics to discuss the participants' defenses against anxiety, including splitting off 'bad' elements of working-class life. Mannay identified similar anxieties surrounding the risks and losses of mobility as those identified by Walkerdine (2011) and Lucey et al. (2003a), particularly the 'homebird' sister perceiving it as a threat to her sense of self. The aspirational sister was seen to be splitting off parts of her working-class identity, attributing 'bad' aspects of that to individuals within the community. However, there were signs that she had defended anxieties of not fitting in with her middle-class classmates. Mannay interpreted that her discourses of not wanting to change social class were defensive denials.

Most recently, Gaztambide et al. (2024) researched how race and class inform Puerto Rican's attitudes towards social mobility. They conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended, narrative eliciting questions and encouraged participants to say whatever came to mind, facilitating free-association responses in a similar way to Hollway and Jefferson (2008). They also followed psychoanalytic

frameworks in the analysis. Participants viewed white Americans as having privileged access to the “American Dream” and critiqued the prioritisation of status and wealth over community. Many participants viewed the pressure placed on Puerto Ricans to be upwardly mobile as racial rehabilitation. However, some participants derided their fellow Puerto Ricans’ lack of labour market participation or desired more Puerto Ricans in powerful positions. The researchers concluded that neoliberal mobility narratives frame certain racial identities as deficient.

Finally, we turn to Bourdieu and some of the research Bourdieu has inspired. Although Bourdieu did not brand his work psychoanalytical, several theorists have highlighted similarities between Bourdieu’s ideas and psychoanalytic concepts. If Bourdieu’s work is accepted as psychoanalytical, much of the research inspired by Bourdieu’s writings is also psychoanalytical. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into all of that work, but I will consider the most relevant instances of Bourdieu’s theories echoing psychoanalytic theory. Most relevant is Friedman’s (2016) research examining Bourdieu’s concept of habitus clivé, previously discussed as part of the psychosocial impacts of mobility. Fourny and Emery (2000) identified many psychoanalytic concepts in Bourdieu’s work, often using established terminology – denial, projection, identification and others. Fourny asserted that psychoanalytic concepts are treated as a source of dispositions that make up habitus. The concept of a cleft habitus relies on the idea of self being divided. This further evokes psychoanalytic concepts of splitting the self. Darmon (2016) highlighted Bourdieu’s reference to murdering the father via social mobility and spoke of how Bourdieu evoked Freud in elucidating his theories on ambition.

There is an even smaller branch of research that incorporates social mobility, precarity and psychodynamics together. Among these, none have directly applied psychoanalytically-informed interview techniques and psychoanalytically-informed methods of analysis to precariat perspectives on mobility.

Cooper’s (2016) paper on the ethics of political discourse surrounding precarity touched on social mobility and drew on the work of psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. It demonstrates possible ways to look at precarity through a psychodynamic lens, including the concept of melancholia and how grief has been pathologised by capitalism due to it potentially impeding productivity. Cooper

asserted that awareness of mortality is essential to ethics, providing an awareness of shared vulnerability. However, the paper is purely theoretical and discusses broad concepts of precariousness rather than precariat workers.

As noted in 2.3, Neilson (2015) looked at the relationship between anxiety and precarity, noting that “psychological responses to precarity are… articulated with neoliberal ideology” (p. 184). Neilson concluded that denial of vulnerability and disavowal of interconnectedness are frequent psychological responses to precarity. Neoliberalism, while deepening said precarity, simultaneously counters the anxiety it produces by denying mutual vulnerability and selling self-sufficiency and competitiveness. Neilson connected this to discourses that encourage people to aspire. Neilson highlighted the varying prospects of precariat workers, and that continued aspiration in the face of limited opportunities requires a disavowal of certain truths. Some fall back on prioritising individual survival, or shift blame and anxiety onto those who are ‘other’. This paper was also theory-based and Neilson emphasised how this field has not been extensively researched, highlighting the need for more work in this area.

Baker and Brewis (2020) also discussed melancholia, seeking to explain self-blame among women. They analysed vignettes from participants who took part in Free-Association Narrative Interviews (a method invented by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and dubbed FANIM by Archard (2009) and henceforth referred to as such in this thesis) and used psychoanalytic concepts to look how discourses shaped subjectivities and how the psyche responds to disciplinary discourses. They concluded that the neoliberal drive towards perfection caused self-reproach, where participants blamed themselves for not being perfect workers and became trapped in melancholia manifesting as a cycle of self-reproach and atonement. The participants displayed signs of ego-splitting, avoiding the attribution of fault to structural factors to preserve belief in ideals of a perfect worker. This research demonstrates how psychoanalytically-informed research can uncover defended affect regarding career and facilitate deeper understandings of how neoliberal discourse affects the psyche. However, this study only briefly touched upon themes of precarity and mobility.

Although there is a fairly significant amount of psychoanalytically-informed research considering working-class mobility, it is worth restating that the precariat are distinct

from the working class. Some of this research can provide insight into what precariat subjectivities related to mobility *may* be like, but it is impossible to know what is distinct about precariat perspectives on mobility without in-depth research that directly applies these approaches to studying the precariat. Considering the wealth of research highlighting how neoliberalism interacts with annihilation anxieties and status anxieties, partly by producing precarity, I argue that there is vast untapped potential in examining precariat perspectives on aspiration and mobility from such perspectives. Such research would benefit from acknowledging the role of neoliberal discourse and incorporating a framework for understanding the role of discourse alongside psychodynamic phenomenon. To maximise the potential of such research, it would be pertinent to use psychoanalytically-informed methods as well as drawing on psychoanalytic concepts in the analysis, as much of the existing research relied on more general open-ended interview techniques, quantitative methods, or secondary analysis of survey data. Gaztambide et al. (2024) illustrated how such methods could be successful in researching social mobility. Since none of the psychoanalytically-informed research on social mobility concerns the precariat, this is particularly unexplored territory.

Despite the relative lack of research of this nature, there have been several compelling papers that demonstrate the potential efficacy of this approach to understanding the interactions of precarity and mobility discourses and point towards ways that psychodynamic dimensions of social mobility could be explored.

2.4.8 Clinical psychoanalytical papers concerning social mobility

In addition to the psychosocial research and theory, there have been a number of papers published by psychoanalysts exploring the significance of class and neoliberalism to their patients and particular clinical sessions. Many of these discuss unconscious effects of mobility and related discourse.

Ryan (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with psychoanalytical psychotherapists. These addressed class generally but social mobility was a major theme. The analysis was not itself psychoanalytically-informed, and instead turned to grounded theory. Therapists used a belief that money cannot bring happiness to

challenge feelings of envy and resentment. This could be viewed as utilising discourse to defend against status anxieties, presenting an example of how mobility discourses can inform such anxieties and simultaneously be employed as defenses against them, and how these factors shape subjectivities. Ryan also observed that contempt in clinical settings “illustrates aspects of the construction of classed psyches: the working- or lower-middle-class fears of inferiority and humiliation, and the middle-class use of class as a defence…” (p. 60). Additionally, there were mentions of patients exhibiting “class-based anger” (p. 57) sometimes “expressed as political disapproval” (p. 57). Ryan argued that there was an absence of psychoanalytical frameworks for class and that greater understanding was needed because class is a determining experience, with aspects of it experienced unconsciously. Ryan was talking about analysts’ ability to understand class-based subjectivities, but this lack of a psychoanalytic framework may have also hindered psychosocial class research.

Sadek (2020) presented clinical vignettes of patients experiencing wealth shame. Upwardly mobile patients reported feelings of fraudulence due to lacking higher-class cultural knowledge and experiences. They felt inferior to others in their class of destination.

Layton (2004) discussed perspectives on ‘American Dream’ discourses of consumerism, conformity, and unfettered prosperity via social mobility. Drawing on anecdotes from psychoanalysis sessions, Layton asserted that these discourses separate individuals from society through promoting self-determination, “creating individuals who defensively deny their connections to other people” (p. 246). They also cause people to never feel they have succeeded and blame themselves for deprivation and any unattained “success” (pp. 246-247).

Layton (2014b) later discussed the mobility-based anxieties of parents and entwinement of love and money. She wrote about a friend being determined for their child to attend law school to escape the US class divide. Layton understood this as the result of anxieties passed down to the middle class alongside contempt toward the poor. Layton additionally reported that a former student’s grade-school lessons had shamed the pupils into being aspirational, inviting “feelings of low self-worth” (p. 470).

Holmes (2006) argued that success neurosis (guilt regarding one's success) is produced via internalised racism and classism. Holmes postulated that racist and classist assumptions around aptitude are so ingrained in society that pursuing success becomes taboo and either deters pursuit of success or compels the subject to punish themselves for achievements. I would argue that perhaps success itself is rendered taboo, rather than the *pursuit* of success – all are compelled to pursue success, but particular groups are not meant to achieve it.

Ryan (2019) made psychoanalytic observations regarding social mobility that could be applied to psychosocial research. She reported that many of her patients had experienced upward mobility and "considerable pain, loss, conflict and difficulty, and often guilt, in some cases amounting to trauma" (p. 422).

2.5 Neoliberalism

The conditions that maintain precarity and expand the precariat, and the discourses and structures that make precarity demoralising are believed to be exacerbated by neoliberalism (Braga 2018, pp. 183-184; Casalini 2019; Frame 2019, pp. 380-381; Toshchenko 2018, pp. 39-40, 44, 47; Volchik and Maslyokova 2019, pp. 2095-2097; Waniek 2019, pp. 166-167), which has promoted flexible labour markets and casual employment (Fletcher 2019, p. 409).

Since neoliberalism is frequently analysed in vast detail, it is difficult to concisely and fully describe. Primarily, it is the idea of governance abiding by the logic of financial markets. Most analyses focus on neoliberalism as governance in support of deregulation and the 'free market' (Davies 2014, p. 6) although it also comprises ideological elements that legitimise governance according to economic principles (pp. 6-7). Not restricted to economics, neoliberalism has become an approach to governance (Lebow 2019, p. 382). It extends market logics to all aspects of society, evaluating life in economic terms (Moisander et al. 2018, p. 379).

This governance is justified as a rational method of ensuring efficiency and growth (Davies 2014, pp. xiii, 24-28; Littler 2018, p 42; Moisander et al. 2018, pp. 383-385). Davies defined neoliberalism as "the elevation of market-based principles and

techniques of evaluation to the level of state-endorsed norms" (2013, p. 37). This has translated into promoting competition (Littler 2018, p. 43), propped up by notions of 'merit' – where 'merit' has come to mean valuable criteria within the knowledge economy (Littler 2018, pp. 40-44).

Rather than assuming competition as naturally occurring, neoliberalism promotes competitive behaviour (Foucault 2008, pp. 131-132). Freedom of the market is now promoted at the cost of people's financial security and living standards. This extends the reach of neoliberalism to systems of surveillance, incentivisation, and technologies of power. Neoliberalism is commonly regarded as a system of biopolitics (Foucault 2008) in which governance intervenes to ensure compliance with market principles (pp. 131-132). It is the idea that the 'free market' should be enforced (pp. 133-134), including within policy regarding every dimension of social life that intersects with the economy (pp. 243-248).

Neoliberal governance is associated with individualised society, wherein all are responsible for their own outcomes. For Walkerdine (2020b), neoliberalism is characterised by the extension of regulatory practices, increased surveillance and decreased support (p. 381) and self-formed individuals expected to persistently work on themselves.

2.5.1 Psychosocial impacts of neoliberalism

Pathologisation of the precariat and working class is a component of stigmatising the disadvantaged, blaming them for their poverty or dismissing poverty as acceptable (Arribas-Ayllon 2005). This is viewed as seeking to reshape people's values and behaviour so that they function as neoliberal subjects (Lesser 2014, pp. 15-17; Walkerdine 2020b pp. 386-389).

This is a quandary for this research, due to the relevance of psychosocial dimensions of precariat subjectivities and psychosocial influences of neoliberalism. In seeking to research these aspects of precariat experiences there is a risk of pathologising the precariat. Therefore, this section focuses on psychosocial papers

that consider the *effects* of neoliberalism, rather than innate qualities of the working class and precariat.

Doogan (2009) argued that labour insecurity induces anxiety associated with job loss even for those who are not at high risk of this (pp. 201-205). Insecurity is a product of neoliberal reductions of worker protections (p. 202) and is exploited by corporate powers to control the workforce (p. 205).

For Foster (2017) there are psychosocial explanations for neoliberalism imbedding itself as an apparently rational system. Drawing on Fromm, Foster asserted that neoliberalism promotes anxiety and insecurity (partly through economic hardship) but presents itself as the solution to these, by producing subjects that aspire to escape these insecurities through transforming themselves and suppressing psychic suffering (p. 14). These suppressed psychic effects generate character changes and psychic harm.

Lambert (2019) drew attention to numerous psychic harms of neoliberalism, and the promotion of consumerism as a means of expressing status. The dehumanising nature of commodified meritocracy, Lambert argues, produces uncertainty and mental ill-health (p. 329).

Layton (2010) similarly suggested links between neoliberalism and shame. Layton asserted that neoliberal subjectivities include self-estrangement and “perverse disavowal of need and interdependence” (p. 318). People deny their interconnectivity and vulnerabilities as a defense against acknowledging precariousness and shame. These phenomena were interpreted as responses to precarity, reduced welfare support, and the treatment of dependency as “shameful and frightening” (p. 318).

Neoliberalism also shapes political attitudes, compelling people to support policies and politicians against their economic interests. Chernomas (2014) asserted that successive governments abandoning the poor has produced something akin to trauma, creating a need to identify with ‘aggressors’ to develop feelings of strength (pp. 197-199). Similar theories were propounded by Waniek (2019) within the character study of ‘Julia’, who supported neoliberal attitudes while being a victim of neoliberal harms (pp. 187-188). Waniek attributed this to neoliberal discourse denigrating ‘losers’ and dismissing alternative viewpoints (p. 189). This comes close

to pathologising working-class people who hold non-collectivist views. However, there is a difference between this theory (that positions right-wing working class as victims of neoliberalism) and theories that assume innate flaws.

Since neoliberalism has been linked to increasing inequality, it can be linked to epidemics of mental distress associated with status anxiety, social evaluative stress and narcissistic tendencies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019, pp. 33-35, 61-64, 211). Layte and Whelan (2014) found a link between inequality and status anxiety, although their findings did not indicate this is especially intensified among those with lower status.

Associated research has demonstrated how consumers engage in identity work, pursuing upward transformation to increase status (Castilhos and Fonseca 2016, p. 6). According to Friedman (2016) and Walkerdine (2020b), this disrupts neoliberal subjects' sense of self and belonging. Chowdhury (2022) developed the concept of self-othering to explain how neoliberal subjects reconstitute their selves. This involves rejecting aspects of the self that contradict neoliberal ideals. Chowdhury conceived these othered aspects as negative thoughts and emotions and any failures to be responsible, individualistic, confident, and prosperous. Neoliberalism can shape affective responses, our intuition of what feels right or wrong, thus distorting the role affect is thought to play of revealing our true self. It categorises some affective responses as 'bad' and encourages us to ignore feelings that undermine our role as neoliberal subjects. Thus, affect acts "both as resistor as well as upholder of the status quo…" (p. 218).

2.6 Conclusion

The literature suggests that the discourses and policies that promote mobility impact the psyche, and that many of these impacts (status anxiety, annihilation anxieties, guilt and shame) are likely to be unconscious and defended against. Although this chapter has shown a history of research and theory regarding how these factors are experienced by the working class, research on working-class identities and psychosocial sensitivities cannot easily (or completely) be applied to problems faced by the precariat. My aim is to draw on the literature covered here but also extend the

field to study of the precariat, and develop the methods used. Since the precariat are under intense pressure to be socially mobile, and have low chances of this, they may feel such affect more acutely than most and be especially inclined to defend against it.

However, the role of technologies of power in perpetuating the source of these discourses and policies requires that such technologies also be acknowledged and considered. This suggests a need to examine the affective dimensions of social mobility discourses on precariat workers alongside the role of neoliberal technologies. Thus, I arrived at the question:

Are there affective dimensions of social mobility discourses that are experienced by precariat workers? If so, are ideas of personal responsibility for aspiration and mobility experienced as positive or do they produce distress? Are these functioning as technologies of power?

To examine this, we must also seek to understand how the social mobility policy agenda is understood by precariat workers. Not all people will have the same experiences or the same interpretations of the discourses. Some may be exposed to such discourses more than others. Without factoring this into the research, there is no way to be sure that these discourses are interpreted and experienced the way that theorists anticipate. Therefore, I must also address the question:

How do precariat workers understand and respond to the social mobility policy agenda? What is the relation between these understandings and their experience of work and mobility?

Finally, this research is not intended to exist in an academic vacuum. It is aimed at advocating for positive change for precariat workers. Similarly, the psychic experiences of the precariat are not detached from the policies that shape their lives or the decisions they must make, and their psychic injuries cannot be healed purely by acquiring an understanding of them. Policy changes need to be formulated. Additionally, said policy changes should not be designed without attention given to the wishes and needs of precariat workers. To do so would be making similar mistakes to policy makers who pathologise the precariat, have biased conceptions of their needs, and attempt to mould behaviour. To that end, I have arrived at the final

question:

How would precariat workers generate approaches that they feel would support them and aid their pursuit of goals?

3: Methods

3.1 Introduction

The literature review detailed how the precariat frequently experience financial hardship and insecurity, limited social mobility, and mental health conditions. Evidence suggests that these issues are caused or exacerbated by neoliberal governance that addresses poverty and inequality primarily through promoting social mobility via incentivising 'aspirational' behaviour and the accumulation of skills and traits conceptualised as 'merit'. The discourses that support these approaches attribute fault and shame to those who are less financially successful, causing multiple harms.

The literature suggests that counterproductive outcomes come about partly because neoliberal policies are based on inconsistent conceptualisations and class biases informed by discourses of self-reliance and the undeserving poor. Neoliberal narratives of social status, merit, individualisation and aspiration continue to be prevalent among those harmed by related policies. There is a body of work (primarily psychosocial) that considers how neoliberal governance causes distress while also creating neoliberal subjects. This theorises that aspects of neoliberalism, particularly the promotion of aspiration, promote unconscious anxieties. Much of this literature draws on psychoanalytic theory that constructs the subject as formed by unconscious defenses against such anxiety, particularly annihilation anxieties and status anxieties – which are particularly relevant to neoliberal promotion and 'incentivisation' of upward mobility, due to the role this plays in accentuating social hierarchy and financial insecurity.

Despite theoretical writing surrounding these topics, there is a relatively limited amount of research on social mobility related discourses conducted in ways that can identify and examine defended anxieties. Although existing research addresses the role of discourse and governance in exacerbating anxiety disorders, and in some affective dimensions of pursuing or experiencing upward mobility, very little of it considers how the promotion of social mobility in discourse and policy impacts the unconscious, especially the creation of specific anxieties, how these are defended

against, or why particular discourses are adopted or rejected. In addition, the literature does not cover precariat experiences of these phenomena.

This gap is important because the neoliberal agenda of encouraging people to perpetually remake themselves, and the theory that this is achieved through exacerbating particular anxieties and discourses that justify and conceal negative consequences of neoliberalism, suggests the role of unconscious processes. The form of these unconscious processes, the discourses that stimulate them, and the discourses that are adopted in response, would impact the formation of precariat subjectivities. We have theory that asserts an unconscious element to the ways these forces act upon the psyche but we do not have empirical research illustrating exactly how these discourses and governance methods affect precariat subjectivities, apart from understanding the impact on rates of mental ill-health.

The research therefore addresses the following questions:

1. How do precariat workers understand and respond to the social mobility policy agenda? What is the relation between these understandings and their experience of work and mobility?
2. Are there affective dimensions of social mobility discourses that are experienced by precariat workers? If so, are ideas of personal responsibility for aspiration and mobility experienced as positive or do they produce distress or anxiety? Are these functioning as technologies of power?
3. How do precariat workers generate approaches that they feel would support them and aid their pursuit of goals?

This research is primarily interested in their affective and unconscious responses to lived experiences, and how these have shaped or been shaped by their subject positionings (Davies and Harré 1990). Given the direct allusions to affective concerns in the research questions (i.e. how do participants respond to policy, do neoliberal ideas produce distress) and the existing research that has demonstrated links between neoliberal discourses and psychosocial responses, it was vital that the methods employed would explore affective dimensions of the discourses and subjectivities that emerge in the research encounters.

Methods that engage with anxiety and psychological defenses against it were also vital because this research is concerned with dimensions of society rife with factors that produce anxieties (which, according to post-Klein psychoanalytic theory, are often suppressed through defensive subject positionings (Klein 1975)), and discourses that stimulate these anxieties *and* denigrate the behaviours that result from them, thus potentially compelling their concealment.

3.2 Design

This section describes elements considered important to this project, and how these informed the choice of methods. I begin by discussing why a qualitative approach was needed. This is followed by an explanation of the research's emancipatory goals and how these needed to inform the methods. I then explain how the research questions suggested a specific ontology, requiring an unconventional approach. Following this, I discuss the need to incorporate discourse into the research. Various qualitative methods are then explored, elaborating on why most were unsuitable. Finally, the reasons for choosing FANIM and FDA are explained.

3.2.1 Qualitative research and case studies

This section discusses the benefits of using qualitative approaches to research affect and discourse surrounding social mobility.

Since its inception, social mobility research has been predominantly quantitative. This research has provided an understanding of rates of intergenerational social mobility (Glass 1954), structural mobility and exchange mobility (Goldthorpe et al. 1987), and differential rates of mobility between demographics (aiding our understanding of inequal life chances).

Quantitative research is not optimal for emphasising subjectivities or affect. Data collection techniques normally associated with quantitative data , such as standardised questionnaires or secondary analysis of government data records, make it harder to engage with these psychosocial dimensions because the detailed

data and lengthy interaction with participants characteristic of many forms of qualitative research is typically needed to reveal, for example, unconscious motivations of defended subjects, ambiguous affective responses, or where responses are informed by discourse or technologies (Brown and Locke 2005; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Qualitative research was deemed more suitable for this type of research because it is typically considered useful for collecting data on thoughts, affect, and subjective experience (Given 2008, p. xixx). It is also viewed as the most suitable approach for developing conceptual understandings, deconstructing assumptions and challenging received wisdom (Wertz et al. 2011, p. 2). Particular qualitative approaches are also effective in providing a voice to disenfranchised social groups and revealing elements of social reality, and subjectivities, commonly concealed from view (Greene 1994, p. 541).

Narrative research primarily looks at how stories are used in conversation and meaning-making. Often, narrative inquiry will use interviews as a means of gathering data with a narrative structure, through participants telling stories about their lived experiences and constructions of self, although their structure may not be linear and may draw on past experiences and phantasies of the future (Henriques et al. 1998, p. xiii). This has been especially useful in challenging biases and assumptions (Kidd et al. 2005, pp. 348, 356-358) and is therefore appropriate for circumventing normalised discourses. However, used alone, narrative inquiry is considered to fall into dualistic concepts of the self and fail to account for unconscious processes and historical production of subjectivities (Henriques et al. 1998 p. xiii).

The research questions establish this project as exploratory, which is commonly associated with case studies. The research sought details of precariat workers' narratives of lived experiences and subjectivities, constructions of the world, and discourses that shape them and their lives. Research into such questions is difficult to generalise from and does not usually seek to prove relationships. Rather, it is concerned with elaborating what we can investigate and theorise. Such things do not define case study research (which can fulfil other purposes), but case studies are a favoured design for this branch of research (Gerring 2006, p. 29). They are ideal for capturing data with depth and developing complex knowledge of subjective experiences.

Because of the rich data required on a set of interrelated questions, and the fragmented nature of precariat work, multiple case study design was the most practical and appropriate option (Bryman 2008; Gerring 2006). A case study focussing on precariat workers from a single business, for example, would have presented practical challenges, whereas a case study on a single worker may not have provided enough data.

The research questions are not time-sensitive – they are grounded in the present, although concerned with precariat's conceptions of past experience and phantasies of future events. This did not suggest a need for a longitudinal design. Longitudinal research could have been useful – for example, to study how participants' goals develop over time, and how these related to evolving subject positionings – but the time constraints of a PhD research project made longitudinal methods impractical. The research questions also do not involve comparisons between groups, negating need for cross-sectional design.

3.2.2 Emancipatory goals

This project has an emancipatory agenda and seeks to 'give voice' to the precariat. I wanted to ideally allow participants to voice elements of affect that I would not think to enquire about and that they might not think to verbalise or might struggle to express within structured research conditions. Such research agendas often turn to data collection and analysis methods that empower participants to express their views and subjectivities as expansively and freely as possible, with the privileged researcher exerting less control than is generally customary in research.

This indicated that co-production approaches may be appropriate (Bell and Pahl 2018; Porter 2016). Co-production involves participants in the conduct or design of the research. They are seen as inclusive and ideal for research involving disadvantaged groups (Porter 2016, pp. 293-294). Co-production draws on other approaches and can incorporate various methods. What defines it is its commitment to "mitigate the (often invisible) hierarchies between academic and non-academic partners" and a stance that research is active in creating knowledge and often shaped by privileged groups (Bell and Pahl 2018, p. 106). Co-production involves

participants more fully in the research process, giving opportunities to guide the design or gather data. Co-production research challenges researcher-led practices, seeks social transformation (Mitlin et al. 2020, pp. 546-547) and pursues equality (pp. 545-546). On a research impact level, this is important to policy research as it reflects progressive governance.

Examples of co-production research include Porter's field trials in India and Ghana, where young people were given the chance to refine data collection and analysis methods (Porter et al. 2010; Porter 2016), and Arribas Lozano's (2018) research with social movements that involved activists in designing and implementing co-analysis workshops.

Some forms of psychosocial research have also been described as co-production due to enabling participants to influence the direction of the research. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) described their psychodynamically-informed interview data to be "co-production" (p. 52) because of how it is produced through interactions of the interview pair and guided by "unconscious intersubjective dynamics" (p. 53). This term was also used to indicate that the interviewer's subjectivities also influence the data, but the authors emphasised that FANIM is designed to maximise the depth and truthfulness of responses (p. 152), recognise and account for the fact that researchers are not neutral and do influence their research, consciously or unconsciously (p. 3) and thus avoid aspects of research encounters that create power imbalances in interviews (pp. 30-31).

However, utilising co-productive methods to research neoliberal discourse requires an awareness that neoliberalism even works to co-opt and influence co-production. As Bell and Pahl (2018) warned, "Those interested in actualising this potential, however, must be wary of neoliberalism's ability to co-opt such practices so that forms of knowledge co-production are diluted, repressed, or turned against those who produce them" (Bell and Pahl 2018, p. 108).

Bell and Pahl thus argued that co-production should challenge dominant power relations including those within academia, and expand utopianism to work against neoliberal approaches. It is in this spirit that I approached this research.

A naïve ‘giving voice’ of presenting participants’ representations as reported would have been insufficient for researching affective dimensions. This project additionally sought to ‘give voice’ to participants’ subjectivities and anxieties that have been rendered unconscious. This would require particular approaches, as discussed below.

3.2.3 The precariat as defended subjects

This section explains why the research required an ontology of the subject that treats participants as defended subjects, and how this compelled a psychosocial approach.

This research aimed to study how social mobility discourses work upon the precariat and how the precariat respond to these. The research questions address dimensions of affect and governance thought to relate to anxieties and unconscious defenses. They explore the interplay between neoliberal discourse and participants’ subjectivities, not as one-way action and reaction, but as a dynamic process wherein individuals respond to or deploy discourse in myriad ways. Theories of how the precariat are shaped by neoliberalism and how neoliberal discourse promotes unconscious anxieties indicate a need to increase knowledge of the unconscious processes, to gain a fuller understanding of precariat subjectivities and affect related to neoliberal mobility discourses. There are numerous reasons why this understanding cannot be gained by widely used social research methods, including the ontological assumptions of these methods. As explained in Henriques et al. (1998) dualistic ontologies fail to adequately explain the processes by which discourses are adopted or resisted, or the reasons behind these selections, implying that the ‘individual’ is a helpless recipient of discourses, or that there is an essential rational subject that exists prior to social influences and deliberately selects subject positionings. This assumption of a division between individuals and society is opposed by a construction of the subject as comprising and consisting of multiple (often contradictory) discourses, affective states, and subject positionings. This perspective is posited by branches of psychoanalytic theory that offer explanations as to how embodied experiences are embroiled in the process of adopting or rejecting discourses, forming the unconscious as a result of defending against

desires or anxieties – that is, rendering intensely undesirable thoughts and affect unconscious and unknown. Psychodynamic theories of anxiety and defenses (Klein 1975) inform the aims of this research. The concept of unconscious anxieties and defenses related to social mobility, which is a gap in the literature concerning the precariat social mobility, is drawn from psychodynamic theories that reject conceptions of a divide between society and the individual.

These debates over conflicting views of the subject are not confined to the disciplines of psychology and psychodynamics. Dualism was the implied view of Marxism, with its focus on capitalism's distortions of the essential self and the individual's capacity to effect revolution. Althusser's later attack on history from below critiqued both the individual as agent of change and the notion of individuals having agency over their own subjectivity and behaviour (Henriques et al. 1998, p. 93). This leads us to a psychosocial approach. *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al. 1998) theorised the subject as neither fully agentic or fully determined by social forces, but formed from dynamic processes involving affect and discourse, drawing on psychodynamic theory to explain investment in particular discourses.

Social mobility discourses and precarious work connect to neoliberalism and have an affective dimension, particularly in producing anxiety. The recognition of affect and theorising the role of anxiety in the subject are intrinsic parts of psychosocial theory. Since these affective dimensions are relevant to the research questions, a psychosocial approach was appropriate. The research and analysis methods needed to correspond to a reading of psychodynamically-informed psychosocial theory that renounces dualism and incorporates the unconscious (Henriques et al. 1998 pp. 11-23)

3.2.4 Discourse and power

The presence of discourse and power in the research questions, investigating the interplay between neoliberal discourses and precariat subjectivities, also required methods that would acknowledge discourse. Ideally, these would be connected to understandings of neoliberal discourses and aid in interpreting these.

As discussed in Chapter 2, this research conceptualises neoliberal mobility discourses as a technology of control (Spohrer et al. 2018) and a value system that sets the criteria for merit (Cherlin 2019), thus perpetuating themselves. Neoliberalism creates subjectivities that act to support it (Buchan 2018). Power is thus an implicit thread of the topics being researched.

Some proponents of incorporating affect into social science are critical of research incorporating discourse (Massumi 2002). Many conceptualise affect as not being communicated via language. These ideas connect to theories of affective transmission that similarly reject, or minimalise, the role of discourse. Wetherell (2012) regarded such ideas as unhelpful in their reliance on uncanny processes, and demonstrated the shortcomings of work that considers affect to be transmitted via other means (pp. 143-148). The theorisation of the subject as comprised of affective processes and investments in discourses seems the most suitable ontology for this project. This regards discourse as integral to the formation of subjectivities and the communication of affect (Burkitt 1997; Wetherell 2012, p. 19).

Discourse, especially of the form discussed here (collections of ideas, rather than specific wordings) is also often associated with analyses of power. This is exemplified in *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al. 1998), wherein power is theorised as having complex effects on the formation of the subject, and as enforced and reinforced by discourse. Discourse is seen to form power-knowledge relations through subjects positioning themselves within discourses (pp. 200-220)

A conceptual framework for understanding power was also integral to addressing these questions. I needed to be able to identify if, where and how power produces subjection between the precariat and neoliberal discourse – for example, considering if neoliberalism was exerting force to shape participants' subjectivities and behaviour or if neoliberalism was being resisted through opposing discourses. Although power can be studied in multiple ways, the relative capacity of methods to address power need to be considered. The branch of psychosocial enquiry mentioned above, drawing on Foucauldian concepts of knowledge-power, also provides a framework for understanding power.

There are few data-collection methods that *explicitly* rely on affect, unconscious defenses and discourse analysis and are suited to interpreting neoliberal discourse (although the branch of psychosocial research already discussed has used ethnography and in-depth interviews for similar purposes). Questions that consider unconscious affect alongside neoliberal discourse would therefore be best addressed by incorporating multiple methods.

3.2.5 Considered and rejected methods.

The literature suggests that neoliberal mobility discourses are linked to anxieties and associated defenses, indicating that they would be difficult to adequately research through conventional qualitative methods of researching opinions or experiences, such as structured interviewing.

Participant observation was considered, as this has been effective in studying working-class and precariat subjectivities. Folkes incorporated participant observation into her study of working-class conceptions of mobility (2022), allowing Folkes to identify participants' need for "ontological security" (pp. 137, 141, 147). Similarly, Kim (2019) used observation and in-depth interviews in studying Korean precariat workers and discovered that neoliberal subjectivities are promoted through education and mentoring programmes. Ehrenreich (2001) worked in low-wage jobs in the US and chronicled the indignities and inequities. This approach has the advantage of not taking participant representations at face value.

However, participant observation would have been impractical due to individualised and autonomous labour that characterises many precariat roles. It would have involved significant costs and time demands. It also would have been inappropriate because this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, including periods of time when the UK was on lockdown. Participant observation would have been dangerous, unethical or illegal, as well as potentially disrupted by the suspension of many jobs.

Additionally, treating participants as defended subjects assumes that their responses may not be objective truths and that the participant will not be fully aware of their

unconscious thoughts and affect. Exploring participants' unconscious processes was a key aim of the study, and it was felt that participant observation would gather more information on directly observable external behaviours than internal processes.

Diary-based research was also considered. Video diaries were effective in researching young women's transitions to adulthood and allowed narratives of depression to be contrasted with a participant's idealised self-presentation (Walkerdine 2003). It was decided that diaries would not be optimal for this project due to pandemic restrictions likely leaving many potential participants unable to work during data-gathering.

Another popular approach is document analysis, often studying policy documents. Examples include Maslen's (2019) critical discourse analysis of a Social Mobility Commission report and Payne's (2012) content analysis of news stories, political statements and White Papers. Maslen (2019) found that the report relied heavily on promoting competition, framing education and the job market as a competition that rewards those with 'merit'. Payne (2012) concluded that social mobility is less central to governance than it is perceived to be, but that the discourse focuses on the lower end of the class structure and ostensibly related topics such as poverty. Payne argued that these discourses may have become prevalent because policies related to them push the outcomes of policy into the future. Studies such as these have helped critique official discourses surrounding social mobility policies. Although useful in analysing mobility discourse, this would not have been suitable for gathering information about precariat subjectivities and their investment in discourses. Document analysis was temporarily considered as a supplemental data-gathering method, but this proved to be beyond the scope of the research due to time constraints. It also proved unnecessary as pre-existing document analyses provided adequate framework for this project's discursive aspects – document analysis research read for the literature review demonstrated that the work of identifying aspects of neoliberal discourse had already been done and allowed me to identify examples of relevant discourses.

It would also have been inappropriate to use *conventional* structured interviews, asking direct questions about topics dominated by anxiety-producing discourses and experiences. It has been theorised that standard interviews do not elicit narrative, do

not account for defenses, and can produce responses dominated by hegemonic discourses with no way to interpret these (Hollway and Jefferson 1997; 2000). Such defended responses and avoidances are always possible, but the methods needed to be chosen to allow these to be recognised and analysed.

3.2.6 Final methodological choices

Interviewing was selected as the primary data gathering method. Many pieces of research have used in-depth interviewing or psychosocial interviewing to explore class- or mobility-based subjectivities, although there remains a gap concerning the dynamic interactions between affect and discourse, particularly among the likely-immobile precariat. The most pertinent projects were covered in the previous chapter (sections 2.4.2, 2.4.7, 2.4.8) but here I shall revisit some to demonstrate the efficacy of such methods. Sennett and Cobb's *Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), based on in-depth interviews, critiqued the impact of social mobility discourse on working-class subjectivities and mental health. They produced detailed data through in-depth interviews that sought to capture "ambiguities, subtleties, and contradictions" (p. 44). This revealed the complexities within working-class consciousness, previously masked by over-simplified conceptions of working-class perspectives (pp. 9-10). Participants struggled with loss of self-respect, and had difficult relationships with feelings of dignity, and forms of work they felt could bring dignity. This exemplifies how qualitative research is well-suited to challenging dominant discourses.

Other projects using semi-structured or in-depth interviews include Lucas' (2011) grounded theory analysis, and Owens and de St Croix's (2020) thematic analysis. Studies by Hoskins and Barker (2017) utilised interviews to study ambitions and how these were more concerned with personal fulfilment and social contributions than with the maximising of income that defines aspiration within policy discourse. This highlighting how higher pay does not necessarily reflect a role's social value.

A body of work related to class has employed psychosocial interview methods or been psychoanalytically informed. Unfortunately, only relatively few of these studies are directly concerned with social mobility, but these studies are noteworthy. These include the work of Walkerdine (2003, pp. 243-246) that explored neoliberal

subjectivities among upwardly mobile women by drawing on previously-collected interview and diary data (Walkerdine et al. 2001) and documentary footage (Walkerdine 1991, cited in Walkerdine 2003 p. 243) and considered the role of narrative identities and neoliberal discourses. By uncovering conflicts and defenses, this research found evidence of the psychic costs of social mobility that included self-othering, depression, eating disorders and repressed memory. Walkerdine and Jimenez's (2012) work regarding de-industrialised communities also touched upon attitudes toward mobility from a psychoanalytical perspective, finding that these communities' losses were related to intergenerational trauma.

This demonstrates that in-depth interviewing can be highly effective in understanding people's views and experiences of social mobility. Interviewing that employs psychosocial approaches has been especially useful in understanding affect and hidden aspects of subjectivities. They uncovered aspects of participants' subjectivities that could not have been anticipated or tested for. These studies therefore demonstrate the efficacy of semi-structured and unstructured interview methods for researching affective dimensions of mobility. The exact choice of interview method was determined by additional factors – as discussed above, it needed to be a psychosocial method, a means of engaging with affect and defended subjects, capable of engaging with unconscious processes, and emancipatory / co-productive. Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) FANIM fits all these criteria.

Lucey's (2004) PhD research into psychosocial dimensions of gender, class and education used methods partly inspired by Hollway and Jefferson's early ideas. This was connected to a project that achieved insights into young women's class-based subjectivities (Lucey et al. 2003b). As mentioned in 2.4.7, I hoped to gain similar insights into precariat subjectivities on mobility.

FANIM (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) presents a combination of researching beneath the surface and conducting co-production research, as it draws out participant's defended anxieties and allows them to guide the interview. This free-association process entails telling stories that contain meaning and implication beyond the speaker's conscious intention. It encourages the interviewee to say whatever springs to mind, thereby encouraging narratives governed by "unconscious logic" (p. 37) and affect. Hollway and Jefferson explained this process as granting access to concerns

that could not be engaged with otherwise. Free-association responses, although narratively structured, “defy narrative conventions” (p. 37) and reveal incoherences that can indicate unconscious defenses against anxiety.

FANIM co-produces data (pp. 47-52), because the questioning is shaped by participants’ wording and narrative direction (pp. 36-37), and the researcher’s meaning-frame necessarily impacts the data (p. 152). Although it has been accused of disregarding participant’s accounts in favour of interpretive authority (Fryer 2001), Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argued that FANIM improves the capacity of the research to fully give voice, by acknowledging participants’ complexity and the need for deeper analysis (pp. 3-4, 14-24, 78-79). They asserted that this method better represents participants’ subjectivities because it reveals aspects of affect that are otherwise concealed by defenses. Additionally, a free-association process allows the participant to speak about whatever they desire to speak of. In the case of this research, this would allow insight into affect and subjectivities rendered unconscious due to status anxieties and annihilation anxieties and potentially show how these have been formed, problematised or exploited by discourse. This method facilitated research of subjectivities that would otherwise be concealed due to power relations.

FANIM also relies on notions of the discursive subject, where subjectivity is formed from investment in particular discourses in response to affective experiences (most notably anxiety, suffering and conflict) and the concept of discourse as “sets of organised meanings” (p. 14). This form of discourse, rather than being another term for language, allows us to think of meaning-frames wherein ideas coalesce around a central positioning, which is compatible with explorations of neoliberal discourse.

However, a framework for thinking about neoliberalism was still required. The most widely referenced and influential conceptual framework on neoliberalism is Foucault’s writing on the genealogy of neoliberalism and neoliberal technologies of power. FDA is a form of discourse analysis developed from the incorporation of Foucauldian concepts of discourse into psychology (Henriques et al. 1998) and psychosocial research (Rose 1979; Venn and Walkerdine 1978, cited in Arribas Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017, p. 113). FDA takes a top-down approach to discourse, defining this as patterns of knowledge, and Foucauldian concepts of discourse informed the definition of discourse adopted within FANIM. Foucauldian Discourse

Analysis (FDA) facilitates the analysis of discourse as a form of power, by considering the ways power manifests and is deployed to exert force-relations. Foucauldian concepts were therefore employed in analysing the role of neoliberal discourses in participants' subjectivities. Additionally, a separate stage of FDA was conducted after the completion of the standard analysis recommended for FANIM. This stage of analysis will be explained in section 3.6.

Finally, some practical needs of the research needed to be addressed. Finding participants was challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic, and disrupted plans to seek participants face-to-face. This would have also allowed me to familiarise them with the research themes. As an alternative means of meeting these needs, a survey was incorporated. This was published via SurveyMonkey to promote the research and find participants, allowing people to provide basic background information to determine if they were suitable participants. This also allowed participants to learn about the purpose of the research, as I could not approach people directly to encourage their involvement (further details would later be provided via an information sheet). Finally, it allowed me to 'get to know' the participants a little before interviewing. Although the data from the survey would not be directly incorporated in the analysis, I allowed some of the responses to inspire interview questions.

3.3 Stage 1 data gathering – survey and recruitment

3.3.1 Sampling and recruitment

This research followed a realist approach to sampling (Emmel 2013). As generalisability was not a priority, and the population (precariat workers, i.e. in zero-hours jobs, self-employment or agency work) could be described as 'hard to reach' because they are difficult to locate and contact, this pragmatic means of recruitment was ideal. As befits the realist approach, recruitment methods were adjusted in response to theoretical development, structural constraints, and practical need (p. 158). The number of participants was also adjusted, as it does not matter as much as the suitability of the data to developing ideas (p. 59)

Participants were recruited via a preliminary online questionnaire including links to information for the research. I asked charities and unions to promote the questionnaire and information about the research through emailing contacts, and through website bulletins. The organisations that assisted were: Zero-hours Justice (a campaign group seeking additional rights for those on zero-hours contracts); and Anti-precarity Cymru (a campaign group opposing harmful aspects of employment and housing precarity).

Sample emails and posts can be viewed in Appendices i-ii. They included links to the questionnaire and information sheet.

Participants who took part in interviews were offered Love2shop gift vouchers. £20 vouchers were offered for the first interview, and additional £10 voucher if a follow-up interview was completed. This was intended as an incentive for taking part. I also felt it was morally appropriate to compensate participants for their time and contribution.

The original plan was to recruit sixteen participants from zero-hours contracts, self-employed, temporary agency workers and shift workers with no regular additional unearned income besides welfare. If there had been more than sixteen suitable respondents then participants would be selected to represent the four employment types as evenly as possible, with participants from each employment type selected in order of response. Ultimately, there were fewer than sixteen suitable respondents. The recruitment stalled after six participants were found, with the last of these responding to the survey in late 2020 and agreeing to be interviewed in April 2021. Of these six, five were on zero-hours contracts, indicating that I needed to broaden recruitment if I wanted to reach people in other forms of informal work. There were no further responses to the survey from suitable potential participants as of summer 2021, and I was already behind the research schedule. Therefore, recruitment methods were modified in the following ways:

- Shift workers were dropped from the study due to a total lack of suitable respondents and a pragmatic acknowledgement of the unmanageable time required.
- Posts promoting the questionnaire were created on pages and groups on Facebook pertaining to self-employed workers, agency workers and jobs that

typically fall within these categories (e.g. nurses, HGV drivers, creative artists). My own profile had to be used due to restrictions on the ability to post as your Page, but privacy and bias concerns were dealt with by increasing my privacy settings so that no potential participants would be able to see my other posts or personal data.

- I contacted participants from prior related Masters research on precariat aspirations. Those still in informal work were invited to take part.

These adjustments recruited four more participants, bringing the final number of participants up to ten.

3.3.2 Distributing the questionnaire

A questionnaire was built and published on SurveyMonkey to collect information on potential interview participants. Two questions gathered information on job/contract type and asked if the respondent had any additional unearned income such as capital gains, shares, or rent from leased housing. Other questions were designed to gather views related to social mobility and precarious work. This was used as a preliminary tool to gather background information and data on issues regarded as important. This helped to inform the focus of the interviews, and ensured participants were from suitable employment types and did not have additional income. A list of survey questions is in Appendix v.

The questionnaire included a brief description of the research and a link to the information sheet (available in Appendix iii), and invited respondents to provide their details to be contacted about taking part.

Links to the questionnaire were distributed by organisations and via posts on relevant social media pages, as explained above.

3.3.3 Responses and their influence on interview questions

Multiple respondents reported additional income, and did not necessarily match this study's definition of precariat. These respondents were contacted for further

information and not selected for interview unless their additional income was irregular and/or low.

Responses to open questions were sparse, except for one participant indicating that the lockdown had rendered many zero-hours workers effectively unemployed and stating that the idea that the working class should become middle class is “absurd and offensive” (Jack).

Because of this – and because questions specifically mentioning goals may have been leading and legitimised neoliberal discourses – I decided to initially avoid mentioning goals during interviews and instead ask participants what they would like their lives to be like in the future. Subsequent questions were then adjusted according to whether people adopted an ‘aspirational’ positioning.

When interviews began, all respondents had indicated that they earned less than £10,000 per annum. Most said they believed it would take more than three months for them to find alternative employment. Although this did not *directly* inform the interviews, it indicated that participants regarded themselves as highly precarious, and this likely informed my interactions with them.

Because most respondents regarded workers’ rights as important, interviewees were asked open questions about times when precarious work affected their lives and, in some interviews, rights issues were presented as an example.

3.4 Stage 2 data gathering - interviews

Because neoliberalism is believed to create anxieties that produce defended subject positionings (see Chapter 2 and 3.2.3, above), there is a need to go beyond ‘giving voice’ in a naive sense. The data gathering methods needed to view ‘beneath the surface’ and the analysis needed to adopt an interpretive stance, acknowledging that useful truths within interview data include defended, subconscious subjectivities.

In selecting methods that involve analysing the psychological motivations of participants however, it is important to avoid pathologising them and their responses (Lesser 2014; Walkerdine 2020a). This is especially important in research pertaining

to neoliberal discourses, as these discourses are known to pathologise disadvantaged people (as lazy, unintelligent etc.).

A psychosocial framework is typically utilised to engage with feelings and is therefore inherently concerned with affect, and much of the work on affect draws on Melanie Klein's development of psychoanalysis (Walkerdine 2010, pp. 92-93). Section 3.5 explains how a psychosocial framework allows the identification of defenses manifesting through inconsistent responses, changing the subject, preoccupations with certain topics, short responses, or making unexpected links. All of these can be signs of anxieties that have been defended against and rendered unconscious.

3.4.1 Free-Association Narrative Interviewing Method (FANIM)

FANIM adopts a psychodynamically-informed ontology of participant and researcher (and all human beings) as anxious defended subjects, who may not have full awareness of, or fully understand, their reasons for adopting certain subject positionings and discourses. This was based on Kleinian principles of psychoanalysis that regard the human psyche as being formed by anxieties that the mind suppresses and defends against by adopting conscious beliefs and perceptions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, pp. 19-21). In explaining aspects of Klein's work, Hollway and Jefferson summarised that infants' experiences are characterised by extreme anxiety due to their vulnerability. This creates polarised binary feelings of 'bad' and 'good'. Objects (which refers to significant people or things that an individual emotionally relates to, which may be people, concepts, institutions, scenarios, situations, groups and concepts) are split between conceptions of wholly good and bad characteristics. The ego is also split, with aspects identified as bad being defended against. We split things into categories such as 'us' and 'them', past and present. This process is achieved through unconscious projection or introjection of objects.

FANIM was designed to bypass rationalised and defended responses by eliciting emotionally laden narratives. This is intended to reveal hidden anxieties or emotional affect that may inform participants' subject positionings and discourses. It does this by following a set of key principals:

- Using open questions – these should be as open as possible, allowing participants' personal truths and priorities to be revealed, rather than privileging what the researcher thinks is important (Hollway and Jefferson 2000 pp. 34-35)
- Eliciting narrative – done via questions that appeal to story or vignette style responses, such as 'tell me about a time you were stressed by career pressures'. This encourages responses rooted in affective experience, whereas a more traditional question structure like 'what career-oriented pressures cause you stress' may elicit responses purely informed by learned discourses. (p. 35)
- Avoiding 'why' questions – Questions that begin with 'why', such as 'why do you think your career causes you stress?' are likely to elicit responses reliant on abstract rationalisations, and are incompatible with eliciting narratives (pp. 35-36). However, in my prior Masters dissertation research that utilised FANIM, uses of 'why' follow-up questions proved effective *in particular contexts*.[1] An inadvertent 'why' question regarding *another person*'s motivations allowed the participant to express their own affect by projecting it onto another. This would not work in all similar circumstances, however.
- Follow-up using participants' own wording and order – this principle is borrowed from psychoanalysis and used in conjunction with the researcher interrupting as little as possible (beyond encouraging utterances). This facilitates a 'free-association' process wherein the participant is encouraged to follow themes and topics that develop from their free-associated responses. (p. 36)
- Conduct a second interview to explore emergent or notably absent themes, and seek further evidence to develop or test hypotheses (pp. 43-44)

[1] Following contradictions emerging within a narrative, and a participant critiquing the choices of a friend who had faced similar struggles to themselves, a 'why' question elicited an explanation for the friend's choices, seemingly allowing the participant to talk of their own motivations in a way that distanced that affect from themselves. The participant had said they may give up on applying for a course because it was a gamble but could not explain what was at stake. They then criticised their friend for not applying at all, indicating that there was nothing to worry about and the application was simple. When asked the 'why' question regarding their friend, the participant speculated that their friend feared rejection. I interpreted this response as indicative of the participant's own affective truth.

Additionally, Hollway and Jefferson recommend compiling field notes after each interview, featuring reflexive observations, researchers' own affective responses, and any awareness of transference and countertransference.

3.4.2 Interview frame and conducting interviews

Template interview questions broadly used Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) first interview schedule (pp. 37-38) as inspiration. Like Hollway and Jefferson's research, this project was framed by several themes that had to be addressed, although effort was made to address these indirectly. These interviews deviated from Hollway and Jefferson's approach, in that the exact wording of the questions, the order they were asked, and the choice of questions to ask, were customised in each interview, according to the responses of each participant. This allowed each question to follow principles of free-association by using the participant's own wording and order, or to occur at appropriate times where they matched associations the participant was forming at that point.

- Can you tell me about a time growing up when your family's financial circumstances had an impact on you?
- What would you like your life to be like in a few years' time? Is there anything you'd like to do or change in that time?
- Can you tell me about a time when you've compared your life to others?
- Can you tell me about a time when a government policy had a big impact on you?
- Can you tell me about a time when a government statement or slogan prompted a strong reaction in you?
- Can you tell me about a time when your irregular income has affected your life / pursuit of goals?
- Can you tell me about a time when another aspect of having irregular work (such as irregular schedule or lack of rights) has affected your life?

Due to the pandemic, interviews were conducted remotely. This was mostly done via Zoom, although some participants requested telephone or email. This possibly created some limitations. If we accept the possibility that some affect may be communicated through body language, this aspect of expressed affect would be less noticeable on camera, and entirely unobservable via phone or email. Non-verbal communication of affect would also be impossible via email. The potential for transference and countertransference therefore may have been reduced. Additionally, the responses from the participant who communicated by email cannot necessarily be said to be free-associative, as the participant had time to carefully consider and edit their responses. This also potentially limited the amount that defended anxieties could be identified, since the participant could censor particular topics without the avoidance being apparent, or correct inconsistencies before sending the messages. However, useful data was still gathered in all cases, and there were also possible advantages to conducting the interviews remotely. Participants' taking part in the interviews while remaining in a familiar environment may have helped them to relax and allowed affective associations from aspects their everyday lives to be more present in their minds. As a novice researcher with an anxiety disorder, this was also less stressful for me than face-to-face encounters would have been, therefore allowing me to focus more on the participants' responses and think more clearly about interactions and follow-up questions.

I avoided using technical terms during interviews. Instead of using the term precariat, I referred to the employment type each participant had disclosed (e.g. zero-hours).

3.4.3 Ethics

Due to significant changes to ethics and integrity frameworks, this project kept up to date with updated regulations and abided by the UK Research Integrity Office [UKRIO] Code of Practice for Research (2009; 2023), Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] Framework for research ethics (2015), UK Research and Innovation [UKRI] Policy on the Governance of Good Research Practice (2024), Cardiff University Human Research Ethics policy version 3.0 (2024), Cardiff University's Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice versions 3.0

(2019) and 4.0 (2023), and the Universal Ethical Code for Scientists (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2007).

I took the following steps to ensure compliance with ethical procedures:

- Informed consent of participants was acquired and recorded. Participants were given information sheets and signed forms to indicate written consent for taking part and for their responses to be stored and used for the research (Appendices iii-iv). For the questionnaires, participants were required to check a box to consent to their responses being used and had to agree to receiving further information and provide contact details before they could be contacted regarding interviews.
- For all transcripts, pseudonyms were used for participants, and identifying details (locations, dates of personal events, specific workplaces) mentioned within interviews were changed or redacted.
- All recordings and transcripts were stored on Cardiff University accounts in accordance with School policy.
- Quality standards were treated as paramount, acknowledging the role that research plays in impacting academia and policy. Effort was made to ensure the standard of the research would not undermine the integrity of academia, mislead policy, or misrepresent participants. In accordance with Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) assertion of the primacy of data quality, free-association principles were adhered to as much as was practicable, and awareness was maintained of participants' possible investment in particular discursive positions, and motivation to unconsciously conceal aspects of their thoughts and feelings (p. 26)
- Again, in accordance with FANIM, objectivity and reliability have only limited applicability to this form of research and this thesis needs to specify how these were modified. Although it is recommended that the researcher strives toward objectivity, complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable in research settings that implicate the researcher in meaning making and require insight from the researcher's reflexive observations (pp. 78-79). Instead, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) recommended following the criteria of Miller and Crabtree. These criteria involve striving towards analyses that are

"methodologically, rhetorically and clinically convincing" (Miller and Crabtree 2005, p. 626). The research encounters, and the experiences that inform the narratives within these, are not at all replicable. Instead, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) recommended direct reference to data alongside theory to check the researcher's accounts can be "recognised" (p. 80) despite the inevitable existence of alternative readings.

- The research did not involve vulnerable people i.e. children under 18 years of age, or adults 'at risk' / with diminished capacity.
- Safety of participants and researcher were not endangered, and remote research eliminated almost all risks associated with lone working.

Potential risks of harm for this project were also considered. The potential for participants' emotional distress was considered the most significant risk. This could have potentially resulted from participants discussing personal hardships, shattered hopes, and any trauma suffered during the pandemic and lockdowns. The potential role of trauma was important due to the massive impact of the crisis (comparable to natural disasters) and theories that certain governance methods and discourses (which the participants had experienced acutely) may cause trauma, and that the subject positionings of many people affected by these approaches may be influenced by said trauma (Chernomas 2014; Layton 2014a; Walkerdine 2010)

Contact details for support services for mental health and material hardship were distributed to all participants. Additionally, I prepared for the possibility of more extreme psychological distress in participants by taking an online course in Psychological First Aid, which taught me to spot potential signs of mental health emergencies and respond appropriately.

In keeping with co-production goals, I endeavoured to present the research using language that would be meaningful for sociologists but also accessible to participants and other members of the public. This was restricted by the need to use precise terminology regarding research, sociology, socio-political issues, and psychodynamics. Having respect for participants was vital, and all participants were treated as having an indispensable role. Their wellbeing was a top priority, and regarded with care, and their dignity was defended (Bassey 1999, p. 77).

There are additional ethical considerations pertaining to psychoanalytically informed research methods. These are mainly explored in 3.5.6, covering the implications of interpreting participants' responses and incorporating free-association methods into research, but here I note the core concerns of how ethical principles should be applied to research of this nature.

The avoidance of harm is of paramount importance and, as noted above, there is the potential for distress due to the subject matter being researched. Such distress is sometimes equated to harm. This potential for distress was compounded by using psychoanalytically informed methods, since psychoanalytical approaches seek to uncover anxieties, and this sometimes involves reliving or processing pain that is defended against. Distress does not necessarily equal harm. One goal of clinical psychotherapy is to help patients develop conscious awareness of the causes of distress in order to heal (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p.98). As noted above, measures were taken to ensure that I would be equipped to distinguish between distress and trauma and mitigate the risk of the latter. I must emphasise that psychoanalytically-informed research is not psychoanalysis or psychotherapy and does not serve a therapeutic purpose. Therefore, although the distinction between distress and harm is relevant, the therapeutic goal of psychoanalysis is not applicable here and is not an ethical defence for causing distress or a guarantee against causing harm.

I was also careful to maintain "compassion, honesty and respect" (Archard 2019, p. 71). Compassion is more suitable and more beneficial than "sympathy", as recommended by Hollway and Jefferson (2000 p. 100), because sympathy can imply pity and therefore a negative perception, whereas compassion has connotations of care and empathy.

3.4.4 Transcription

The transcription approach took careful consideration, as different approaches suited competing research needs. Straightforward transcription of the words uttered allows room for misinterpretation and cannot capture the full nuance of responses that

encompass non-verbal or non-vocal communications. In research that looks at affect and unspoken and unconscious processes, this would not be ideal.

However, the goal of this research is to be emancipatory and co-productive. Jeffersonian transcription, and other methods that utilise detailed notation and codified elements, recommended by some researchers including Hepburn and Bolden (2017), record nuances of communication and articulation, but produce transcripts that are difficult to understand without knowledge of the symbols. These transcripts also have reduced readability that would likely be inaccessible to any readers who have cognitive disorders that affect their understanding of written text.

My earlier attempt to reconcile these approaches (for MSc dissertation research) involved phonetically transcribing all stutters, hesitancies, and non-verbal utterances, with conventional orthography used to represent full words and some non-verbal expressions. This approach succeeded in some respects but produced messy, lengthy transcripts that drew undue attention to interviewees' speech patterns and verbal trip-ups.

For this project I chose a different compromise, by transcribing primarily according to conventional orthography, ignoring most hesitancies unless they were especially lengthy or otherwise noticeable and conveyed stutters and non-verbal utterances via symbols, which were later converted to bracketed notes when quoted in this thesis.[2]

3.5 Stage 2 analysis

For data produced using the FANIM method to produce knowledge relevant to unconscious defenses and affect, it must be analysed in ways that recognise that the data is produced by psychosocial, psychoanalytically informed methods and contains elements indicative of unconscious processes. The core analysis method followed

[2] To save time, I attempted to find a secure and precise method of automatically converting recordings into text. The only full transcript that was produced (via Office365), although understandable, still contained substantial errors and lacked detail of non-verbal utterances such as stutters, sighs, laughter and word fragments. The time required to produce and correct these transcripts would have been comparable to manual transcribing, and the latter option provided an opportunity to immerse myself in the data (Clarke 2002, p. 179).

recommendations of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) for analysing data gathered using FANIM. The core principles of this are explained below.

3.5.1 Gestalt

Analyses of FANIM data seek to consider each case as a ‘gestalt’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000 pp. 68-69) – the entirety of the person’s meaning frame, or lived experiences, as communicated throughout research encounters. Thus, analysis considers the meaning of the whole text. It is vital to maintain this awareness of the whole throughout analysis and avoid analytic methods that fragment the data. Although processes and programmes for encoding data make analyses of large transcripts more manageable, fragmenting data in this way violates principles of FANIM and reduces the data’s usefulness. Keeping in mind the whole allows researchers to link elements of the data and identify links that the participant has formed (pp. 72-77). It avoids decontextualising discursive components, so that their meaning within larger narratives remains identifiable (pp.68-69). Finally, this allows the researcher to immerse themself in the participant’s subjective world in a way that is applicable to transference and countertransference (see 3.5.5).

3.5.2 Using pro forma and pen portraits

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) advised the creation of pro formas and pen portraits (p. 70). These are short documents summarising information about each participant and the researchers’ impressions of these. These can then be drawn on in forming the overall picture of the participant and their subjectivities.

The pro forma is a collection of factual details about the participant and notes on themes and ideas that emerge on initial read-through of the data pertaining to them. The pen portrait, conversely, is a descriptive text that exists to summarise the ‘whole’ participant as revealed in the research encounter.

These documents record knowledge about each participant and facilitate forming links between discursive frameworks, lived experiences, affect, and narratives. This

is intended to assist in forming a gestalt view of the participant and detecting any inconsistencies and notably absent subjects.

In practice, the pen portraits and pro formas did not greatly inform the analysis. The information contained in them was primarily drawn from the interviews themselves, and repeatedly sifting through the data from each interview suitably evoked memory and affect connected to the interviews and participants, negating much of the need for the summaries. When these were referenced, I found few details that weren't evoked by listening to recordings or reading transcripts.

3.5.3 Psychoanalytical framework

This method draws on post-Kleinian psychoanalytic principles as a basis for interpreting responses (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, pp. 55.82), and relies on theories of subject positionings being formed as defenses against anxiety (p. 59). Without this theoretical foundation, interpretive work that infers affect that participants do not overtly state, or question the meaning of participants' responses, would lack justification.

This analytical framework views anxiety as more than conscious emotional and physiological responses – anxieties are also internal thoughts that people defend against. Anxiety and its causes are sometimes defended against via the splitting of 'good' from 'bad' in perceptions of settings, people, groups, objects or scenarios, leading to the interpretation of an object as wholly good or bad (pp. 19-20). At other times, the defensive mechanism used is investment in particular discourses and subject positionings that mitigate or conceal anxious thoughts and feelings (p. 59).

These defensive devices are identified by paying attention to inconsistencies within narratives, instances of participants contradicting themselves or evading certain topics or details. They can also, as demonstrated by Hollway and Jefferson's work with 'Tommy' (2000 pp. 58-64), be highlighted by certain narrative or discursive preoccupations. Tommy's focus on 'respect' was of interest because it was introduced by him early on and kept recurring. One observation this facilitated was that Tommy was adopting the subject positioning of being well-respected in his

community partly as an idealisation of this community and partly as a source of self-respect that he had been unable to gain through work.

Here a psychosocial ontology of the subject becomes essential, as it acknowledges the subject and society as being intertwined and allows theorisation about the processes whereby discourses are accepted or rejected. Dualistic ontologies of the subject and society (and theory that holds to these ontologies) present the 'individual' as either acted upon by social forces or controlled by essentialist forces of neurology or instinct. Both viewpoints are deterministic (Henriques et al. 1998, pp. 13-19; Urwin 1998).

3.5.4 Psychodynamic defenses

Analysing data collected via FANIM therefore involves being aware of various forms of psychological defenses and alert to these potentially having manifested in interview encounters. Drawing on observations from Klein (1975), and Hinshelwood and Fortuna (2018) the most well-known defenses include:

- Projection: attributing one's own affect and subjectivities to another person, believing that they hold those feelings.
- Projective identification: interacting with a person one has projected onto in such a way as to create a matching affect in that person.
- Denial: believing or insisting that something is not true, ignoring evidence to the contrary.
- Repression: making oneself unaware of particular thoughts, feelings or other cognitive phenomena
- Displacement: directing undesirable affect at a person or object that is not its true source.
- Splitting: regarding a particular person or object as entirely good or bad.

- Rationalisation: justifying particular behaviours or affect by drawing on reason and positive motivations

3.5.5 Reflexivity, transference and countertransference

Reflexive practice is generally helpful in research, particularly qualitative research, but is essential in analysing FANIM data. Reflexivity is useful in recognising and making sense of the unspoken anxieties and inconsistencies. It is also essential for the researcher to recognise that they are themselves a defended subject, using their own experiences and responses to intuit the narrative (Garfield et al. 2010, pp. 157-159).

Hollway and Jefferson attached great importance to researchers remaining aware of their feelings regarding participants and research encounters (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, pp. 45-52). This was inspired by principles of psychoanalysis and prior psychosocial research, particularly the work of Walkerdine (1997, cited in Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p. 45) discussing how the researcher can draw on their own feelings regarding participants and research encounters as a form of data.

FANIM represents an interpretive approach to giving voice, leary of naïve representation, and looks at what is *implied* by participants' responses, and what goes unsaid. As such, it has faced criticism for its perceived potential to privilege researchers' perspectives and interpretative authority (Archard 2020, p. 47; Fryer 2001 pp. 326-327) despite this being counter to the method's intent. Reflexive practice is a safeguard against this. An appropriately reflexive researcher using FANIM should be capable of avoiding such violations of the method's aims and avoid mistaking their own subjectivities for those of participants even when inferring what anxieties have been defended against. The intent is that, by maintaining awareness of their feelings, and of transference and countertransference, the researcher should uncover and interpret the hidden meanings behind the data without allowing their biases to influence these. Data is thereby co-produced by participant and researcher.

In psychoanalysis, transference refers to the passing of affect from patient to therapist, with various forms of interaction potentially causing the therapist to share the patient's emotions. In research that is influenced by psychoanalytic principles, this phenomenon instead occurs between participant and researcher. Clarke's (2002) psychosocial research of minority ethnic groups in UK higher education (based on Hollway and Jefferson's early work creating FANIM) referred to this phenomenon using Klein's terminology of projective identification, wherein a person transfers their thoughts and feelings to another (pp. 174, 180-187). This is distinct from *projection,* the term for when a person attributes their feelings to another, believing that those feelings are contained in the other person without actually causing that person to experience them. Clarke provided an example of projection in his account of 'Colin', who tended to attribute negative experiences in education to other people, but initially claimed to have experienced no disadvantage himself (pp. 181-183).

Through this research, Clarke identified several ways in which transference / projective identification can occur in research encounters and shared examples of how these can be identified. These included communication processes, where the participant directly communicates in a way that allows them to filter and process their feelings (pp. 181-183), and controlling processes, where the participant controls the course of the encounter and makes the interviewer feel a particular way (pp. 183-185).

3.5.6 Critiques of FANIM – defences and adjustments

As mentioned, FANIM has been accused of privileging researchers' meaning-frames above those of participants (Archard 2020, p. 47; Fryer 2001 pp. 326-327). One intended purpose of FANIM is to actually accomplish the opposite – allow the participants' world views and unconscious associations to guide the interview process and research themes. However, the argument that the psychosocial researcher holds their own interpretations as authoritative cannot be blithely dismissed.

In response to these debates, I wish to specify that I in no way intend to question participants' responses as being reflective of what they know of themselves. Interpretative statements and speculations that call into question participants' accounts do so on the basis that we are all defended subjects who are not fully aware of our unconscious thoughts, motivations, emotional responses and the connections between these. Some research (notably some observational research but also some psychosocial research) posits that participants choose what they show and may be dishonest with the researcher. While it would be naive to ignore this possibility, any assumption of deliberate dishonesty from participants would violate the research's emancipatory ethos. It was important to balance ethical considerations with adherence to the principals of FANIM. Therefore, I adopted an attitude of trusting participants to truthfully relate their thoughts and feelings as they were aware of them, although these may inadvertently be distorted, incomplete, or partially censored.

Furthermore, I claim no authority in interpreting unconscious motives and associations, beyond the role I fulfil as researcher – an external sounding board for participants and a partner in the research encounter. It is impossible for each of us to fully know ourselves, just as it is impossible for any of us to fully know another, but the psychoanalytically informed research encounter provides some insight that cannot be achieved by the individual alone. Although the knowledge I have acquired via my studies allows me to facilitate this encounter, and somewhat understand its implications, I am not a qualified psychoanalyst. I am, as Clarke (2002) describes, a social researcher with a "superficial understanding" (p. 189) of psychoanalytic theory. Although I developed my knowledge of theory throughout the project, my understanding was unlikely to reach the standard of a licensed psychotherapist. Consequently, no matter how diligently I sought to restrain my analysis to observations supported by theory and evidence, the potentiality of accidentally engaging in biased speculations always exists. My interpretations of any inconsistencies or free-associations therefore simply aim to supplement and enhance the data. They do not supersede participants' direct assertions, which I acknowledge as equally valid.

Psychoanalytically informed social research has been criticised for creating too much of a line between the psychic and the social, which Wetherell (2012) considered to be far more “blurred than social psychoanalysis suggests” (p. 128). This is ironic considering the prevailing view that psychoanalysis offers a counterpoint to dualistic conceptions of the subject and rejects distinctions between the individual and society (Archard 2019, p. 40). Despite the reservations of Wetherell, there are insufficient grounds to refute this. Psychoanalytically informed research typically incorporates analysis of internal processes and interactional behaviours (including discourse), engaging with how these merge with and influence each other, with life events impacting the psyche without being viewed as deterministic of or subordinate to internal forces. Psychoanalysis weaves together cognition and affect and incorporates space for irrationality (Henriques et al. 1998, p. 205).

For Wetherell, the idea of the dynamic unconscious places too much focus on a mysterious or “uncanny” process and thus neglects and distracts from social dimensions of affect and affective transmission. This criticism is harder to refute, and this debate draws attention to the implications of a theory of the unknowable. As Archard (2019) argues, Hollway and Jefferson may overestimate what we can know of people’s unconscious motivations and defenses (p. 43). In response, I refer to my previous comments on interpretive authority – the psychoanalytically informed analysis within this thesis serves to supplement and texturise surface interpretations, hopefully allowing a deeper insight through theory and evidence. I claim no particular authority or ability to ‘know’ that these interpretations are correct. Regarding appeal to the ‘uncanny’, I assert that the use of such theory actually seeks to de-mystify the conundrums that naturally grow from contradictions and omissions in the narratives.

In relation to producing pro formas (3.5.2), I observe that such data trawling for the purpose of picking out specific biographical facts would actually fragment data in a similar way to the methods of searching and encoding data discussed in 3.5.1. and are an inconsistency in Hollway and Jefferson’s methods. The pro formas for this project therefore focussed primarily on themes and ideas rather than biographical data. This was felt to be more pertinent to the research goals than collating background information not directly related to participants’ subjectivities, affective realities, or discursive frameworks. Such trawling for biographical data would extend

the data gathering beyond details required for addressing the research questions and would potentially compromise the anonymisation of the data. The ethical framework for this project prioritised the wellbeing of the participants, including protecting their anonymity, which was of great concern to several participants due to potential impacts on their employment should their grievances with employers be connected to them. Such details were therefore included in the pro forma only where directly connected to relevant observations and I did not attempt to collate personal data extracted from interviews.

Finally, it is important to think critically about Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) claims that their method of interviewing follows free-association principles. Although they stress that FANIM interviewing is not actual psychoanalysis, some (Archard 2019, pp. 80, 90-94; Cartwright 2004, pp. 216-218) have highlighted stark differences between the interviewing and data analysis methods employed in therapeutic psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically-informed interview methods. Although differences in approach are appropriate, due to the differing objectives and ethical concerns between the two settings, some have questioned how far psychosocial research can claim to draw on psychoanalysis and free-association.

- In psychoanalysis, interpretation is built over many clinical sessions. Few FANIM research projects have the scope to conduct an equivalent number of interviews, and most rely on between one and three interviews with each participant.
- In psychoanalysis, the researcher analyses during interviews, and offers analytical observations to the patient. In FANIM, the researcher is encouraged to keep analysis out of the actual research encounter. Opinions vary on whether it is appropriate to present interpretations to participants.

I addressed this through simple adjustments to the FANIM process. Follow-up interviews were not conducted a week after initial interviews but delayed until I had given sufficient time for "the unconscious to evolve and grow in its meaning" (Manley 2009, p. 91). Manley described this period as "undefinable" and "subjective" (p. 91). This meant that analysis would be an ongoing process, drawing on reflexivity and my own unconscious processes between instances of the data gathering, rather than being confined to allotted days or times to suit a structured schedule. The choice to

delay follow up interviews to allow greater time for this evolution did not fix the relative lack of contact with participants, but I felt it would mitigate it by allowing follow-up interviews to focus more accurately on unconscious associations from the initial interviews. For example, the second interview with Amy followed up on her repeated references to being short of time and her ambiguous allusions to her motivation for leaving her career. FANIM interviews tend to, by necessity, direct the topic of the interview onto the themes and concerns of the research. This again contrasts with psychoanalysis, in that the capacity for free-association is limited. This had the additional benefit of giving participants greater flexibility in when they could take part in the follow-up interview, helping them to fit these into their irregular schedules.

My follow-up interviews therefore had only one or two pre-decided question topics. These were chosen to reflect whatever defended anxieties, unconscious associations or prominent themes emerged during initial interviews, with minimal consideration to the topics prioritised in the first interview. This required taking extra care to not inadvertently ‘feed-back’ analysis into the latter research encounter, especially where the participant may not be ready for this analysis. Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p. 155-157) cautioned that feeding back analysis may sometimes be unethical.

The adjustments listed above were not intended to make the research comparable to psychoanalysis. Such measures would be undesirable for ethical, practical, and epistemological reasons. These changes are intended to merely increase the influence of participants’ free-association processes on the research. There were further subtle adjustments made to the analysis methods to optimise the usefulness of other aspects of FANIM. Each transcript was methodically read and marked up to catalogue shifting themes, so as to readily identify where direct responses to questions ended and some form of free-association began, and also make it easier to identify which themes were associated with each other.

3.6 Discursive analysis

3.6.1 Bridging the gap: discourse, narrative, and affect

The strong influence of discourse on the topics of interest required additional analytic tools that would allow the discourses alluded to within responses to be identified in addition to the subjectivities and anxieties, to illuminate connections to dominant external discourses. Since Foucault's work extensively analysed neoliberalism as an example of biopower and technologies of power, FDA would be an appropriate means of accomplishing this. Foucauldian concepts already have a strong influence within psychosocial methods and have a notable influence on FANIM due to Hollway and Jefferson using a Foucauldian concept of discourse, but I felt that FDA specifically, drawing on Foucauldian concepts and Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism, would be valuable.

Foucauldian concepts of the self are one of the elements that informed the branch of psychosocial inquiry that FANIM belongs to. Other Foucauldian concepts, such as technologies of power and technologies of self, have also been effectively drawn on in analyses of psychosocial interviews, demonstrating instances of participants remaking themselves in response to neoliberal technologies (Walkerdine 2003).

3.6.2 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)

A definitive description of FDA would not be possible due to the inherently flexible nature of the method. Foucault embraced innovation and change and did not prescribe particular data analysis methods, and researchers who have adopted FDA have typically embraced this and each crafted their own approach. My approach to FDA was primarily modelled on the guidelines of Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), who described one purpose of FDA as "…a method of understanding the contemporary practices through which individuals constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge" (p. 111). This FDA involves looking at discourse not as systems of language, but as conceptually related sets of knowledge that shape and constitute subjectivities, defining and restricting what can be said. This is distinct from other forms of discourse analysis that often act as micro-level linguistic analyses. Similar

approaches to FDA have also been said to be useful in understanding how political issues relate to power and discourse, and questioning established structures and assumptions (Sam 2019, p. 335; Wooffitt 2005, pp. 146-149). For these reasons, I saw FDA as a means of questioning the discourses and structures that compel mobility and the assumptions underpinning these, as well as understanding how participants constituted themselves as neoliberal subjects and exerted power in resisting neoliberal subjectivities.

The incorporation of Foucauldian perspectives into this analysis is inspired by his writings on technologies of self and technologies of power (Foucault 1988, p. 18), and insight into the development and effects of neoliberalism, as detailed in Chapter 2.

For Foucault, discourse was how the social world is formulated and the means through which power is asserted. Foucault's conception of power was distinct from the common understanding of the word. Instead of power purely being something imposed from above, by a monarch or authority, Foucault spoke of a plurality of power. Power is present in every interaction, in every way that people assert social force relations to influence each other. Foucault furthermore theorised multiple forms of power:

- Sovereign power: this is the form of power that existed under monarchical societies. The word of the monarch was law, and violations were punishable by death, but individuals' actions were largely left alone. This form of power has been replaced by disciplinary power and biopower.

- Disciplinary power: Foucault discussed this in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the Prison* (1995). Disciplinary power recreates the individual, through the compelling of behaviours and through surveillance. Through discipline our roles are assigned, and we make and assert force upon ourselves to remake ourselves based upon observers' expectations, becoming both object and subject. An example of disciplinary power is the panopticon, a prison design that allows all inmates to be constantly observed and aware of their observation so that they modify their behaviour and potentially their subjectivities to comply with demands of observers and their role as prisoners.

- Biopower: This is the control of the body typically through either enabling particular survival and reproduction or through denying means to survive or prosper. Where discipline forms the individual, biopower forms the macro-level or species-body. In contrast with sovereign power, biopower asserts power over daily acts of the individual (e.g. work, sex, clothing) and actions of the body but claims no right to directly kill as enforcement, except where this can be justified through the protection of other lives. For this reason, eugenics has been discussed as a form of biopower despite the taboo nature of death within modern power relations, due to the original aim of eugenics (as conceived by the word's originator, Francis Galton) being to ensure the genetic health of the populus by allowing the poor and vulnerable to die (Taylor 2011).

- Power/knowledge: this is the power of ideas taken for granted to be truth or knowledge. This can be understood as truths held to be self-evident, forms of received wisdom, or social norms, as opposed to truths decreed by authorities. These are considered, in Foucauldian writings, as having no clear origin, and constituted of multidirectional force relations.

Power in general is therefore treated as something that emerges from below, through the multitude of force relations exerted by individuals, and through their self-subjectification. It can be used within governance to compel particular behaviours but can also be a tool of resistance.

Technologies, in the Foucauldian sense, refers to tools of power relations, and the function of these (Behrent 2013, p. 55). Technologies are a means through which power is asserted. Technologies of self are people's approaches to guiding themselves to an idealised self, via thoughts and actions. Technologies of power were defined as a means of dominating others to control their behaviour (Foucault 1988, p. 18) – although this was not restricted to actions of dominant social actors or groups and is distinct from definitions of power wherein power is wielded exclusively by one group.

I considered these concepts to be important to understanding the impact of discourses surrounding social mobility upon the precariat's affect and subjectivities.

They assist in understanding how the self is involved in governance through acts of self-governance (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017, p. 116). The literature review section 2.5 on neoliberalism demonstrated why self-governance is especially intrinsic to neoliberal governance approaches. Thus, this research interprets neoliberal governance discourses as technologies of power.

Tamboukou's (2008) research is one of the most pertinent and high-profile examples of applying Foucauldian ideas to narrative data. This research considered technologies of power as capable of shaping narratives and the discursive formation of subjectivities. This is vital to understanding the relationship between anxieties connected to and contingent on socioeconomic discourses of success and failure. From Tamboukou's perspective, concepts of technologies of power and self were not just compatible with narrative, but aid in understanding it. Narratives can emerge as examples of both of these technologies – as tools of domination or tools of shaping one's own subjectivities (pp. 104-105).

3.6.3 Conducting the FDA

The discursive analysis followed a similar approach to the FANIM analysis, in that it primarily involved reading through transcripts to identify relevant lines, except in this case those that corresponded to Foucauldian concepts of power and discourse, especially those that applied to neoliberalism. These were drawn from the Foucauldian texts already mentioned, as well as guidance on conducting FDA from Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), who suggested the following guidelines for things to consider in the documents being analysed (in addition the technologies that have already been explained):

- Problematizations: these provide a means of the researcher taking a critical stance, looking not just at the circumstances of a particular time and place but at the problems within it, and at the ways that certain actions and people are problematized within the corresponding discourse. For this project, since FDA was being applied to interview transcripts, I looked for statements that indicated the participants felt they had themselves been problematized by discourse. In addition, I looked for statements wherein participants

themselves problematized particular discourses, people, policies, or materialities, thereby further enhancing the research's value as co-production.

- Subject positions: these are positions on which people ground their truth claims, duties, and place within social interactions. I looked primarily for participants applying particular positions to themselves by identifying as a particular type of person or belonging to a particular group, but also looked at the types of discourse used, thinking about which known discourses these related to.

- Subjectification: this is a form of the making and remaking of subjects via technologies, specifically subjects remaking themselves through their behaviours, submitting themselves to a set of obligations and imposing standards upon the self.

Starting from the research questions as a framework for formulating problems to be considered (How have neoliberal social mobility discourses shaped precariat understandings and problematizations of mobility and precarity? How has neoliberal governance shaped precariat anxieties? How have these understandings and anxieties shaped their actions?) I conducted a methodical search of the transcripts and my notes from the FANIM analysis, and made handwritten inventories of indicated problematizations, subjects positionings, subjectifications, technologies, and identifiable discourses that pertained to social mobility and neoliberalism – specifically including but not limited to themes of aspiration, merit, status, insecurity and power. These were then cross-referenced with my FANIM analysis to check for how the discourses used were related to defenses against anxiety. Identified discourses being based upon defenses did not disallow their relevance to the FDA, but did shape my interpretation of their relevance to my research questions. Ultimately, though, I treated Foucault as a guide on how to think about discourse and power relations, more than an arbiter of a rigid procedure. Therefore, much of the analysis came down to lengthy sessions of careful thought about the identified discourses, how they would be viewed through a Foucauldian lens, and the implications of this within the context of the unconscious defenses that had been identified.

Genealogy is typically also an important part of Foucauldian analyses. Use of genealogy was referred to in the example analyses provided by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017) e.g. Rose's (1979) use of genealogy to critique conceptions of the development of psychology, and Venn and Walkerdine's (1978, cited in Arribas Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017, p. 113) use of genealogy to investigate the normalisation of particular child development processes. For this research, there was limited potential for applying genealogy due to the corpus of documents consisting entirely of a small number of contemporary interview transcripts. Genealogy was, however, applied in a limited fashion by drawing upon knowledge of the origins of neoliberal discourses that I gained from conducting the literature review, such as how aspects of the discourse originated with economic liberalism discourses of pauperism, and how neoliberalism has come to incorporate these alongside particular definitions of merit and aspiration. This allowed more insightful identification of relevant discourses within the interviews and the hidden significances of these.

Other work that informed my approach to using Foucauldian concepts included: Hanna's (2014) hybrid reading of Foucault that drew upon concepts of ethical telos from Foucault's later work and used these to understand modes of resistance at work within power dynamics; Folkes' (2019) use of the concept of biopower to understand the behaviour modification techniques that function to scapegoat the socially immobile.

The intention was to identify and consider the implications of comments that indicated neoliberal discourses on mobility were working as technologies of power, that forms of self-discipline were at play, or that biopower had shaped actions and subjectivities. Additionally, I looked for participants problematizing aspects of discourse and policy or asserting that they had been affected by neoliberal governance. I also considered aspects of the narratives that indicated participants were using discourses in resisting dominant mobility discourses.

FANIM is designed to cut through cliched responses and received wisdom, so this presents a challenge in applying FDA to data produced via this method, as common idioms and constructions associated with discourses are less likely to be present in the data. My approach worked around this by identifying specific narrative threads

and viewpoints that reflected relevant discourses as described in the literature and looking for subjectivities and anxieties that literature commonly connects to these discourses.

Picking out examples of discourse within the data unavoidably required fragmentation of that data. Since that violates the principles of FANIM wherein the data pertaining to each participant should be considered as a gestalt (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, pp. 68-70), it was important that FDA should not begin until the narrative analysis of each interview was complete.

In practice, although effort was made to avoid discursive analysis during the psycho-analytically informed analysis, my own knowledge of discourse at that time inevitably meant that I noticed relevant examples of discourse while reading through the transcripts at this stage and was already somewhat aware of what might be found when intentionally searching for these.

Finally, although FDA was of secondary importance to the research, acting to enhance the insights gained from FANIM, it proved crucial to understanding the significance of aspects of the FANIM data, and provided vital context for understanding the conclusions drawn regarding participants' defenses. As such, observations regarding discourse, gained from conducting the FDA, are at the forefront of Chapter 4, with conclusions regarding defenses identified in the FANIM analysis being the focus of chapters 5-6.

3.7 Adjustments made for Covid-19.

Given the pandemic that began as the literature review was underway it was impossible to say when, or indeed if, face-to-face recruitment and interviewing would be possible. The pandemic caused delays in establishing contacts because many charities and groups that may have assisted with finding participants (including the charity Action in Caerau and Ely that I had a pre-existing arrangement with) closed for an extended period, or reduced office hours. This made plans to regularly visit these organisations and interact with potential participants, temporarily impossible.

The original intent was for interviews and workshops to take place face-to-face, so as not to exclude workers who lacked required technology to do video calls, and to fully meet the normal conditions of psycho-social interviewing and better establish rapport. For this reason, my initial preference was to delay data gathering if necessary. In the early days of the pandemic, when it was reasonable to hope that the virus may eventually be eradicated in the UK, this seemed like a practical and effective solution.

However, as the first year of the research unfolded it could not be known if this would be possible. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many out of precariat work, making potential participants scarce. As of summer 2020, it could not be known how severe a second wave might be, when this might hit, and what further lockdown measures may be implemented. The decision was made to conduct all of the research remotely, via video link or phone calls, and to recruit via the aforementioned survey.

3.8 Reflexive considerations

As part of the reflexive approach, transparency regarding my own relevant qualities and views was vital. This section explores these, starting with my background and relevant views and concluding with a self-assessment of my own anxieties.

For most of my life I have supported far-left economic policies (as well as left-wing socially progressive and inclusive policies). This is informed by the research and social theory that supports these policies (as elaborated in Chapter 2) and my life experiences of growing up in poverty, later becoming an unpaid carer for my disabled mother and being made aware of how easily people can fall into hardship, how support is often desperately needed, and how inadequate or unavailable such support often is. I thus have long been opposed to right wing and neoliberal economic policies. I would describe myself as a socialist.

My circumstances caused me significant difficulties right up until I started this PhD and impacted my mental health. Frequent crises, constant stress, and regular risk of destitution caused an anxiety disorder that I still struggle with, and which sometimes manifests as social anxiety.

The Covid-19 pandemic, unsurprisingly, exacerbated this. The fears of harm to myself and loved ones was accompanied by grief over the death toll and anger at politicians for ignoring scientific advice. The timing of it also brought on frustration (with my financial problems resolved by PhD funding, I had hoped to indulge in social events and a holiday), relief (my finances were now secure so long as I continued my studies, and apart from shopping and care responsibilities I was able to stay home), and guilt (I had become privileged compared to my participants, and many of my friends, who were struggling with poverty or with jobs that could endanger them).

One of the things that increased my anxiety was the spread of conspiracy theories and opposition to safety measures. The growing prevalence of these attitudes frightened and frustrated me. I realised that some of my participants may harbour such views, because lockdowns would have caused them hardship. I grew concerned that this may damage my ability to build rapport and maintain objectivity. These views rarely emerged during interviews, and I found they did not impact my ability to interview participants. However, since some of these assertions became of interest in the analysis, it was important to be transparent about these feelings.

3.9 Participants

The research ultimately was conducted with ten participants, five men, four women, and one who did not disclose their gender. Participants' ages ranged between early twenties and late fifties. All names of participants and people they mentioned were changed within transcripts and this thesis. Names of specific workplaces were changed, and references to specific ages were redacted.

Jack

Jack was in his fifties, from a working-class English background. His parents had working-class roles. In his childhood, he never "went without", but said that he couldn't have everything he wanted. He was living with his partner, and was planning a move to escape the hostility and class divide in his area. His normal role was on

hold due to the pandemic lockdowns, and he was not entitled to financial support due to this being a zero-hours role.

Amy

Amy was in her fifties, recently divorced, with teenage children. She had a zero-hours contract job where she worked most Saturdays, and another zero-hours contract as a senior invigilator at a school. This latter role had been disrupted by the pandemic, and in 2020 Amy was offered only a fraction of her average wage for the primary exam period. This led to a dispute with the school, where Amy tried to get higher pay for senior invigilators.

Jude

Jude had recently completed postgraduate studies and was hoping to find work in academia. He had been living with his parents since submitting his thesis. He was doing infrequent work, and he was unsure about the exact nature of his contract but reported this role as zero-hours. He had also been doing large amounts of unpaid work, including article writing and applying for research grants, to start his academic career, alongside volunteering.

Tracy

Tracy was in her fifties and normally worked a zero-hours contract as “front of house” “peak relief” in museums, libraries and galleries. At time of interview, she had a temporary part-time role for such sites. It would be difficult for her to work set full-time hours due to chronic physical and mental health conditions. For this reason, she applauded the flexibility allowed by zero-hours contracts, and did not want them banned. However, she also thought these contracts were abused by management. Tracy was involved in a dispute with management over planned layoffs.

Dee

Dee was a disability support assistant in their thirties, working on a zero-hours contract. Dee was only comfortable being interviewed via email exchange, due to anxiety. Dee self-reported autism and depression. Dee indicated that they had alternated between precariat work and unemployment despite being highly qualified, primarily due to a dislike of the duties required within their more high-paid options. The interview format negated the purpose of sending additional questions designated as a ‘follow-up’.

Ahmed

Ahmed was in his twenties, living with his mother and brother. He was self-employed as a writer and completing a degree. He hoped to get a good grade so that he could get a job with high pay, but at time of first interview was taking time off, seemingly due to stress and needing to provide care. Ahmed was not eligible to claim Carer’s Allowance for providing this support.

Eva

Eva was an agency midwife in her forties, and a homeowner with two children. She was the first in her family to go to university. Her grandmother was “very, very… working class” and her parents’ finances were sufficient to allow them to run a car and go on overseas camping holidays. Eva decided her career as a child and catered her education choices towards this. She did a degree and became a nurse. She eventually decided to leave shift work and sign on with an agency.

Wanda

Wanda, forties, was working as an agency nurse. Wanda had been self-employed, with her own Limited Company until everyone working for public organisations were switched to IR35. Wanda felt negatively about this change. Wanda’s childhood

circumstances were difficult. She also cared for her grandmother prior to becoming a nurse.

George

George, thirties, was working as a film editor. He deemed himself freelance due to usually moving between short contracts with various studios, although at time of interview he was on a contract that he hoped would lead to lengthier employment. George left school early with few qualifications, then did minimum wage jobs. He eventually studied music technology. He found work on location filming leading to his current freelance work.

Michael

Michael, forties, worked as a freelance botanist. He was recruited as a returning participant from my MSc research and gave permission for the data from his previous interview to also be used here. He presented his family of origin as being well off and able to fly overseas without budget concerns. He had a degree and a Masters. He previously had permanent employment but quit to become self-employed.

Tracy and Jude did not take part in follow-up interviews, due to non-response. Their single interviews still produced useful data, but it is likely that further insights could have been gleaned from follow-ups.

3.10 Notes on conventions

3.10.1 Quotations

The quotations presented in the following chapters aim to replicate natural speech and are designed to simulate written dialogue as typically presented in mainstream reading material, and therefore be easy to read and more accessible to lay readers.

There are some exceptions. Instances where participants stammered or repeated a word or fragment multiple times in succession are represented by “[rep]”, meaning repetition. For the sake of balancing comprehensiveness and brevity certain non-verbal utterances were recorded in squared brackets: “[laughter]”. “[…]” indicates a pause. My prompts and encouragements appear within the flow of the participants’ quotes, presented within braces: “{Hmm}”.

Where necessary, words are added within squared brackets to explain a quote’s meaning within the context of the interview.

3.10.2 Terminology

Much of Melanie Klein’s theories centred around subject positions and unconscious mechanisms which she named as paranoid-schizoid, depressive or psychotic. Within Klein’s theoretical framework, extreme manifestations of these *can* give rise to mental illness but these positions and mechanisms are not referring to disorders that have come to share the terminology. These mechanisms are positions of the self that all people regularly move between (the psyche is thought to constantly switch between the ‘depressive’ position and the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position). Due to the association that may be drawn between these terms and psychiatric disorders/symptoms, and misunderstandings that could thus arise from reading portions of my analysis out of context, I mostly refrain from using these terms within this thesis, instead opting for common-use language where possible.

3.11 Conclusion

FANIM was chosen as an approach that suited a non-dualistic ontology of the subject that recognises the potential role of defended anxieties, so as best to recognise the wide array of affective impacts that may be related to social mobility discourses. In addition, FDA was employed to aid in the recognition of discourses and technologies (particularly neoliberal discourses) that may be related to the affective responses. Together these methods were intended to provide a detailed picture of how participants responded to the social mobility agenda, which policy

approaches would suit their needs, and how alignment with various discourses and subject positionings both produced anxieties and were informed by them. The following three chapters will relate the findings related to these themes, beginning in Chapter 4 with the generation of policy approaches, and how these relate to aspects of how participants aligned with or against neoliberal social mobility discourses.

4: The ladder of needs

4.1 Introduction

This chapter primarily focuses on policy approaches participants feel would support them and aid their pursuit of goals. It draws on portions of the interviews where participants either directly mentioned policy ideas and changes they desired, implied changes that would be beneficial by mentioning policies that they constructed as harmful, or implied possibly desirable policy changes via narratives of lived experiences or use of discourses. This chapter also touches on the question of how participants frame and respond to social mobility promoting policy agendas, although this latter question is covered in more depth by chapters 5 and 6.

This chapter makes the argument that participants desired policy approaches that strive to meet basic needs and indicated that this would assist them in pursuing personal goals and upward mobility. It further argues that subjectification has ensured some alignment to neoliberal action orientations of aspiring to upward mobility, despite many aspects of such discourses (such as the criteria for merit, and problematization of financial support) clashing with the priorities of other subject positionings or their basic needs. The construction of upward mobility as a means toward financial stability was therefore questioned by many participants, who tended to view financial stability as vital for achieving mobility, and mobility as either a means towards personal goals or the only option for attempting to satisfy basic needs. The participants constructed policy and discourse associated with driving upward mobility differently from how it is constructed in policy literature. They constructed their own ideas of worthy aspirations that differ from those lauded within aspiration/meritocracy discourses. Participants displayed a range of sometimes conflicting views and subject positionings related to mobility, aspiration, and governance approaches designed to incentivise mobility. Participants almost universally followed neoliberal action orientations regarding educational aspiration, and most were either pursuing some form of upward mobility or had done so in the past. However, they problematized the social pressure to aspire, the focus on formal employment, incentivisation via limited and conditional support, and dominant constructions of which forms of work are most valuable. This suggests that participants have experienced some subjectification towards aspirational behaviour

despite many aspects of neoliberal policy and discourse conflicting with their other subject positionings. Participants also reported ways in which limited support and stress had hindered their pursuit of goals.

Most of the data relevant to this chapter emerged within participants' overt representations, compared to how the questions covered by the following two chapters were primarily addressed by identifying defense mechanisms and unconscious anxieties. This chapter therefore contains relatively limited reference to participants' defended anxieties and focusses on the free-association processes explicitly evident in participants' responses and an FDA of the discourses and subject positionings related to policy and governance, many of which emerged from free-association. As explained in 3.6, this FDA approach was mainly influenced by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine's (2017) template. It uses Foucauldian conceptions of discourses and focusses on problematizations, technologies, subject positions and subjectification. The analysis also applies other Foucauldian concepts such as biopower and ethical telos, drawing on approaches to FDA used by other researchers including Hanna (2014). Exploration of these discourses here provides context for the defenses and anxieties, which are covered in more depth in later chapters. This chapter will also offer psychoanalytically-informed interpretations of participants aligning with particular discourses or subject positionings and the affective dimensions of these alignments.

4.2 Social support

This section makes the argument that participants mainly problematized limited support and conditionality in welfare and adopted universalist and redistributive subject positionings. Some discussed ways in which a lack of support had hindered their efforts to be aspirational. This indicates that they occupy subject positionings that oppose neoliberal policies of incentivisation through welfare cuts and increased conditionality.

Across the participants, there was a general opposition to many ideas intrinsic to social mobility discourses, and many policies that are widely regarded as intended to

promote upward mobility, such as increased welfare conditionality and limited support for low-wage workers.

Some participants, including Jack and Amy, were able to personally recall more robust systems of support that existed before neoliberalism was so thoroughly embedded in British governance, such as less conditional welfare or student grants, and compared these favourably to current systems. Other participants either had experience of changes wrought by more recent austerity measures under the 2010-2024 Conservative government, expressed awareness of how things had been prior to their entering work and higher education, or simply problematized the current system.

Participants lamented the impact of increased conditionality for financial support. The stringent jobseeking conditions attached to Universal Credit were repeatedly problematized. From speaking of policy changes and credential inflation, Dee came to speak of the “conditionality and harsh sanctions” that have become a part of jobcentre policy. Dee thought that “the expectation that jobseekers spend 35 hours per week looking for jobs… seems unreasonable and unrealistic”. Ahmed had similar concerns:

> I did claim [rep] Universal [rep] credit, but um, yeah, I mean, um, I suppose I could, um, if I [rep] I would prefer to claim Carer’s Allowance compared to that, cos obviously like it's still […] I'd be getting, kind of, getting that money for doing[...] for something that I'm doing… And I'd [rep] much prefer that. Um, but I [rep] don't have the option of claiming... (Ahmed).

He was unable to claim Carer’s Allowance due to being a secondary carer and a student, despite having significant responsibilities, and viewed Universal Credit conditions as an inconvenience rather than helpful, saying that if he was able to claim Carer’s Allowance “it wouldn't be dependent on other things, like um, and I feel like, um, yeah, the other things that, um, yeah, like job search and things, I don't like getting paid for that.” This stemmed from comments about wanting to be able to do more for his brother he was caring for, and a desire to not have to worry about money. Ahmed’s difficulties being a carer, and how these conflicted with his studies, were a preoccupation within his first interview, which led to them being the subject of

several of my questions in the second interview. This partially stemmed from my own disclosure that I had previously been a carer and claimed Carer's Allowance. Ahmed did not mention his caring responsibilities until after this was revealed. However, Ahmed returned to this topic with surprising frequency. It appeared that this was deeply affecting him, and that the challenges of being a carer were associated with the challenges of being a precariat worker pursuing upward mobility. Ahmed's first comment regarding the government's reluctance to help people followed on from him discussing the limits placed on earnings when one is claiming Carer's Allowance.

Ahmed later commented, after discussing factors that caused him to drop out of a previous course, that:

> ...they can't earn over a certain amount otherwise your benefits get cut, um, plus you get um, [rep] yeah the Carer Allowance gets cut and then, um, the other thing [rep] um, [rep] there's so much stuff with the[...] you can't get any benefits if you're a student, you can't get any benefits if you're a student either, you cannae get carer's allowance when you're a student either, um, which is weird, because you can get caring for someone and studying. It is doable {yeah} but very difficult [rep] very, very difficult but it can be done so, [rep] it is um weird the rules are just[...] don't make sense (Ahmed).

Comments like this suggested that Ahmed associated his inability to claim Carer's Allowance with his difficulties sustaining his studies. His comments on how the rules "don't make sense" further suggested feelings of confusion that may have fed into a belief that the government is deliberately cruel. This theme is returned to in 6.5.

Jack, evoking similar problematizations of qualifying criteria, said that Universal Credit was:

> an imaginative name. Um, I don't get [...] I can't get Universal Credit because the wife earns, um, work for local authorities don't earn a ton of money but she earns too much... for me to qualify for Universal Credit. But... you'll get just enough, er [rep], to keep yourself alive it seems. {Mm} Right? You know? Er [rep], I don't understand it. I mean [rep] why would you just give somebody that much… (Jack).

For Dee, Universal Credit's conditionality was viewed as driving people towards insecure work "the Government's assertion that Universal Credit 'makes work pay' also creates a reaction. Some employers may exploit the system to keep on paying lower wages and/or recruit staff on insecure zero-hours contracts in the long-term". Dee framed these cuts to support as intentionally weaponising precarity: "creating more pressure from the government for graduates to accept any job, however suitable it may be, whilst imposing conditionality and harsh sanctions". Although Dee related this to their own experiences as a graduate, and evoked the credential underemployment this creates, this pressure would affect all unemployed people. This was echoed in Jack's assertions that job insecurity makes people take lower wages and fight for jobs, which are examined further in 5.2 and 6.6.

Participants also expressed opposition to other cuts such as those to education support. Jude explained that he was angered by increased tuition fees:

> I don't want to swear on your recording, but the... fifty thousand pounds of debt I'm now in is [rep] pretty significant… people [rep] [inaudible] before me were not [...] didn't have, and now I do [rep] and my cohort and everyone after us is now [rep] fifty thousand in debt, so yeah, there's that… I'm not, er [sighs] I mean, I am very resentful of it [laughs]… If I lived anywhere near London I would've been in the, um, the riots, before the, um, [rep] when they announced that (Jude).

With some exceptions, there was a general perception that provision and rights have been reduced in recent decades. Amy compared current student provision unfavourably to her own experience of education. After indicating that her family of origin struggled financially, she stated that funding enabled her to pursue higher education: "we were lucky, we lived in the days when you got full grants to go to uni", indicating a belief that the full grants system that existed until 1990 was better than the current system.

Such sentiments were even expressed by participants whose views were somewhat in line with neoliberalism, such as Eva who understood social mobility as "People sort of trying to sort of better themselves? Or ,um, improve themselves?" and viewed personal attitudes as being a key factor in determining success. Describing staffing

problems in midwifery, Eva indicated that she thought cuts to student support had made it harder for certain people to train as midwives:

> …they've stopped the bursary. So I know it is more difficult for people to train now as a nurse or a midwife {yeah} Um, because if they're [inaudible], say if they were mature students, they're leaving a full-time job and they've got a family and a mortgage, um, they've got their [inaudible] tuition fees [rep] to sort and {Yeah. Yeah, of course they have} on top of losing a wage. So, like I say, no [...] [rep] my [...] um, areas of expertise is just kind of health care but I think, yeah, [rep] that's probably impacted [rep] on [rep] some people who do wanted to train as a nurse or a midwife, is that [rep] financially they can't (Eva).

George, similarly, despite believing that people should have to work to pay their way, expressed a strong belief that education should be free, saying outright that: “I don't believe in paying for education and all that stuff…”

Dee lamented the changes to Jobcentre services, which they viewed as having shifted the focus from helping people find work to forcing people into unsuitable jobs: “The last Labour government's 'New Deal' initiative wasn't so much of a 'deal' for jobseekers as a threat of sanctions or being forced into unsuitable work...” Dee also said that jobcentres now prioritise finding reasons to deny people money: “Jobcentres today seem to be more geared towards finding reasons to sanction claimants rather than actually assist them in finding meaningful work.”

This chimed with Jack’s narratives of how signing on at the jobcentre has become unpleasant compared to how it was when he first claimed in the early eighties:

> I left school, went to college for a couple of months and then realised that I really didn't want to still be in education. So I got out and I signed on for about two months or something like that. But it was just so easy, you know? {Mm} I sat opposite a guy with no screens, no security. {Huh} Er, no-one telling me […] oh, yeah. Or asking me what I've done to look for work this week to deserve my money or anything like that. We just sat there and I remember him saying, ‘okay’, he sort of filled out a few things, then I remember him saying, ‘oh, you should receive a giro by the end of the week’. And I did.

> {Yeah} It was so easy, and it was polite, and it was nice. {Yeah} Do you know what I mean? And I didn't feel [...] I felt, when I got home, I felt like I'd just, er, was part of something, as opposed to somebody was throwing me a bone, ya know? {Yeah. Yeah} It was, it was better (Jack).

Reduced state support was not just constructed as having negative side-effects or being ill-judged. Some participants took the view that the government has withheld or reduced support out of spite, rather than in the interests of policy goals. Jack believed that the hardships experienced under neoliberal policy were deliberately imposed: “You know, those jobs for life were over [...] {Mm} and it was a conscious decision to sort of like, [rep] er, to make us suffer through that”. Ahmed expressed a belief that the government objects to providing support, saying, “they don't really like to help people. Um, which is a shame.” For Tracy, these policies’ intended purpose was not cruelty, but perpetuating inequality: “it is all designed to keep the have-nots still wanting and to keep lining the pockets of the haves.”

Some participants constructed these governance approaches as akin to either fascist oppression or some form of abuse. Jack described these policies using metaphors of militarism and similes evoking violent crimes such as domestic abuse:

> What's the difference between that and getting mugged? ... Or burgled? [rep] Or coercively [rep] by a [rep] an evil psychopath partner? …They are coming out and they're saying, ‘you have to live like this’. And they'll take something good away, and they'll weaken our economic position {Yeah} and make us live like that. And I say it's wrong… we're prosecuting people for doing exactly the same thing but within relationships (Jack).

This theme and how it repeatedly emerged in various forms is fully explored in Chapter 6.

These appeals to redistributive and universalist discourses implied that participants would support larger welfare payments and wider eligibility for various forms of welfare. In addition, there were instances of some participants overtly advocating for more widely available and substantial welfare systems, sometimes arriving at these ideas from narratives and discourses surrounding the insufficiency of current support. After discussing sanctions under the current regime, Dee asserted that, “I

read a few weeks ago about a trial for Universal Basic Income that is set to take place in Wales, and I think that is an excellent idea." Tracy, meanwhile, responding to a question about government statements and action related to zero-hours contracts, rejected the idea of banning them before segueing to a sudden assertion about UBI: "what are you gonna replace them with, or how are you going to[...] I mean, do I think there should be [rep] Basic Universal Income? Yes. Absolutely". UBI had not been mentioned within either interview before the participants suddenly endorsed it.

Even Eva, the participant whose views were most in line with neoliberal discourses, acknowledged that support can help people achieve their aspirations and asserted that it is harder for people to achieve their goals without support: "…my parents supported me financially as well. Which I guess, for some people, they wouldn't have any sort of, um, financial backing or the, you know, give you emotional support or the practical support" and later "I mean ultimately it's up to the person [rep] to want to better themselves, but without support it's not impossible, but it's obviously a lot [rep] more difficult."

The interviews therefore revealed a pattern of almost all participants either problematizing the limited provisions and eligibility in current welfare support or student support, or advocating more extensive provision. There was a general adherence to discourses of universality and redistribution. Lower amounts of support were associated with personal challenges and difficulty continuing things like providing care and pursuing education. Chapter 5 explores in more detail how participants' defended anxieties indicated specific ways that precarity seemingly caused distress or trauma and was an obstacle to participants pursuing various goals.

4.3 Pressure to aspire

This section makes the argument that most participants positioned themselves in opposition to aspiration discourses by either questioning the need to aspire, challenging the possibility of everyone aspiring to the same place, or by relating narratives in which they deliberately made downwardly mobile career choices.

The widespread support for increased welfare support and reduced conditionality (as shown in section 4.2), implies a belief that people should not have to *aspire* to financial security but should be granted it where needed. This section will elaborate on participants' discursive positionings regarding the pressure to 'aspire' that is inherent in neoliberal social mobility discourses.

Among those participants who gave some direct indication of their attitudes towards this aspect of social mobility discourse, there was an inclination to problematize, or even feel hostility toward, political social mobility discourses that treat aspiration as the ideal solution to poverty, and by extension the idea of people having to pursue particular careers in order to gain financial security or an income that meets their needs.

A small number of participants expressed their opposition to such ideas directly and overtly. Jack's comments regarding the imperative to earn money in particular ways were framed in terms of rhetorically questioning why he should have to do this. He saw no need to "go anywhere? [rep] why do I need to change [rep] my designation?" This has numerous implications on his action orientations. Whereas some participants positioned themselves in opposition to such ideas yet continued to orient towards the pursuit of social mobility in their behaviours, Jack appeared to have outright resisted all pressure to be a go-getter– "I was just never a very good go-getter. And always questioned why I had to do that".

He explicitly referred to the expectations of modern capitalism as "rules": "I never understood why I have to get on your bandwagon. {Mm} Right? Do you know what I mean? {yeah} You come at me with this set of rules [laughter] and says 'well now you have to manage it like this'". For Jack, failure to comply with these rules was associated with punishment, as illustrated by his narratives concerning how he was treated when he experienced a financial crisis: "It wasn't about this person, 'oh, yeah, poor sod, [rep] yeah, he owes us money, needs to pay it back and whatever, but dadada' it was about 'well, it's just punish him'". This somewhat evokes Foucauldian notions of how discipline works – although it does not present a formal set of rules, it in effect compels the self-regulation of behaviour in ways that conform to the dominant discourse. In a sense, modern capitalism, with it's prescribed 'correct' methods of aspiring to particular types of employment, and multitudinous

requirements for employability, creates conditions of automatic surveillance and appraisal. Career performance, the accumulation of knowledge, skills and experience, is regularly surveilled and appraised through recruitment processes, with a restricted access to the means of maintaining life functioning as a potential punishment for those who do not self-regulate through maximising their employability and prospects.

Jude, however, focused more on the practical implications of addressing poverty by promoting social mobility (saying that it would create more problems because “you can't all aspire {No} to the same place”) and the psychological and emotional impact of such ideas. Jude actively felt shame surrounding his precariat employment, which he said made him feel like he was unemployed. This was apparently informed by discourses such as these, in political statements that promoted “better jobs” as the solution to poverty.

Some other participants problematized aspects of social mobility discourse, such as pay sector inequalities, but in less direct ways. George objected to the pay inequities between different career types. Having earlier asserted that everyone hopes for a better civilization, he responded to my request to define this first by talking about people and the environment thriving, through a brief tangent about the demise of small towns, and then said, “I think it's just everyone just happy, getting along, um, money is good, pay, er, across the board. I mean, I still believe you gotta work for it but [rep] It's weird [...] It's, well, it's a tough subject, isn't it? You've got billionaires out there {Mm} and then you've got people [rep] who are living on the streets”. Later, free-associating from discussing the atmosphere at sporting events and lamenting the fact that some families can’t afford to attend them, George said, “The thing is, it's the money, I think. Just [...] everything equal. {Yeah} [laughter] [rep] good money, everyone can just enjoy themselves”. His thoughts of good things were repeatedly imposed on by thoughts of inequality, leading him to make comments that indicated he thought equal pay across different job types would allow everyone to thrive. This implicitly challenges one of the core assumptions of ‘aspiration’ discourses – that some job sectors (notably knowledge-based professions) are *rightfully* more high-paid than others, and that aspiring to enter such professions is virtuous, either purely

because of their status, or because the pay itself prevents employees in these sectors from needing state support.

Some participants displayed their inclinations through narratives concerning their own career choices rather than statements about their values or viewpoints, and this is part of the purpose of FANIM. Several had deliberately made career moves, either early in their working lives or more recently following an extended career, which would be typically defined as downwardly mobile. These included Michael having given up full-time employment in favour of becoming self-employed, Amy having quit a lucrative career in IT to become a housewife, Dee having rejected the option of a career in finance to provide assistance to disabled students, and Eva cutting her hours down to part time. While those narratives of personal choices are not overt rejections of aspiration discourses, they all indicated other needs or subject positionings that took priority over conforming to 'aspirational' behaviours of simply seeking higher pay and/or status, which itself highlights how expectations of 'aspiration' sometimes conflict with other needs and priorities. I explore participants' motivations for career choices in 4.6, but for now it is pertinent to note that several of these choices were motivated in part by ethical telos and altruism.

Overall, participants seemed to frequently free-associate towards thoughts of being forced to pursue particular forms of work, and feelings of resentment connected to that coercion. By extension, and in turning towards narratives of non-aspirational career choices that were motivated by altruism, they again seemed to be questioning the notion, implicit within aspiration discourses, that these higher status, higher-pay jobs are inherently more valuable to society than other roles.

4.4 Influence of neoliberal social mobility discourses

This section makes the argument that one of the main ways in which participants aligned with neoliberal discourses of mobility, was in their narratives of supporting or pursuing education as credential. Participants were almost universally highly educated or educationally aspirational, or otherwise endorsed education, and most had pursued education as a credential, displaying action orientations that aligned with discourses of pursuing upward mobility through educational attainment. Most

had at some point pursued some form of upwardly mobile work. In a minority of cases they endorsed other neoliberal discourses such as class deficiency discourses and materialism.

This section also discusses the associations that indicated participants adhered to other aspects of neoliberal discourses surrounding upward mobility. In contrast to the evidence that participants mostly disagreed with the aspects of neoliberal discourse that champion 'aspiration' towards professional careers, most participants spoke positively of education or otherwise indicated they felt it was important in some way, mostly as a route to a career, but sometimes due to it having inherent value.

Amy was concerned with supporting her children through university and described herself as lucky for having received a grant, implying that education itself was worthwhile. Jude had completed a PhD and wanted an academic career. Dee had pursued a degree without much thought of future career, and subsequently completed a Masters and PGCert. Although Dee questioned the "gradeflation" that could result from high numbers of people going to university, they still spoke positively of Tony Blair's efforts to get fifty percent of people into university and advocated for university education to be available to everyone who has the desire and ability to pursue it. Eva stated that her time at university represented the best years of her life. Michael had completed a MSc to enhance his employability.

Although he problematized most neoliberal discourses, even Jack adopted positive constructions of education. He mentioned "bright people out there that are never gonna, er, be able to use their [rep] kinda intelligence and whatever because they're not required. Right, I'd like to see them required". To clarify, he did not appear to mean that he thought people should be coerced or forced to use their intelligence. This was said within the context of his extensively questioning the pressure to be a "go-getter" and saying things like "why can't we just be not very good at that", suggesting that when he said people should be "required" to use their intelligence, he meant in the sense of being *needed,* i.e. within opportunities that allow them to make use of their skills. This suggests a 'capability approach' to meritocracy – a focus on giving all the people with particular knowledge and skills a chance to make use of these, rather than making these skills a prerequisite for financial security. Jack constructed education not as a tool of class mobility but as a vital resource: "we need

all the education", and as a means of empowerment that can protect the working class from being manipulated and divided: "they've tried dumbing us down, haven't they? Do you know what I mean? From the Eighties onwards they started to cut education and they [rep] tried to deskill the working class, which is[...] they pretty much done. Um, [rep] and they tried to divide us…"

Several participants had pursued higher education as a means of entering a particular job sector or simply as a way of generally improving their job prospects. Eva had pursued her degree specifically to get a career as a midwife, Jude had completed a PhD specifically to pursue a career in academia (but had experienced conflict with his father over whether to choose an education route based on financial prudence or personal interests, with personal interests winning out), and George had similarly completed a degree to get work in the film and TV industry. Ahmed was completing a degree at the time of interview, with the overtly declared goal of getting a good job and more money.

This general support of education, often indicated through narratives of pursuing education, was the most common way in which participants exhibited an influence from social mobility discourses – although valuing and pursuing education is not itself inherently linked to concepts of social mobility, pursuing education in order to increase marketable skills and therefore improve prospects of moving into middle-class professions is an inherent part of most policy approaches that aim to drive upward mobility. There were also other ways in which some participants appeared to be influenced by social mobility discourses while also using discourse that either disavowed them or contrasted strongly with these aspects of the policy agenda. Jude problematized the idea of tackling poverty by getting people into "better jobs" (a phrase he used quoting Keir Starmer), due to the practical limitations of such an approach and the affective impact such discourses can have. He also indicated that the prospect of repaying student debt deterred him from wanting a high paid job – yet he had pursued education to the highest possible level in hopes of getting an academic career.

Dee problematized the commodification of education, yet also reported a self-imposed pressure to get a job that matched their qualifications, indicating a conflict between positioning themself in opposition to commodified education while

simultaneously feeling beholden to it – ostensibly rejecting the discursive aspects but adhering to the action orientations contained within them. Meanwhile, Ahmed had also adopted some aspects of neoliberal discourse but not others. He was critical of the lack of welfare provision, particularly the low pay and conditionality characteristic of Carer's Allowance and Universal Credit but seemed to adhere to discourses that construct education as a career asset and frame this as a positive thing. His motivations for pursuing higher education were to improve his chances of obtaining a well-paid job and earn large amounts of money, which he intended to spend mostly on material items that would fit the description of 'conspicuous consumption', such as clothes and a watch. Tellingly, he linked this aspiration with the goal of being happy "I don't know, I just, um, where I have more money and um, um, maybe have more, um, I don't know, um, just have more money and be [...] just be happier, maybe." However, he initially struggled to explain *why* it would bring him happiness or what he would spend the money on: "I think I would, um, um, I don't know [rep] I suppose I would, um, buy some nice stuff for myself. Maybe some nice clothes, um, um, and, um, yeah, nice clothes, maybe a nice watch". This was a notable free-association, as there was no immediate mention of a tangible link between the money and the happiness that Ahmed believed would result from it, and Ahmed even struggled to explain what purpose the money would serve when prompted. It is possible that this association had been formed due to the influence of political and entertainment media discourses that portray wealth as being a path to happiness, via self-actualisation, enhanced material comforts, or inflated status. It did become clear why he may have formed this association, as he eventually revealed through free-association that he was dissatisfied by several aspects of his homelife and hoped that high earnings may be a key to establishing an independent life. However, the fact that Ahmed also linked his grades with his future earnings potential upon graduation, believing that the former would have a significant impact on the latter, indicated that there was also an element of assumption or received wisdom at work in the formations of Ahmed's aspirations, again possibly informed by political discourse that tends to generally make direct links between educational attainment and prosperity, without discussing the nuances.

We see then two discursive constructions of education throughout these interviews, which sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict with each other. The first aligns

with neoliberal views of higher educational attainment as a desirable commodity that can be used to access more lucrative careers, thus improving the individual's financial circumstances. Several participants had pursued education broadly for these reasons and some advocated such a route for others. The second evident construction of education was as a means of pursuing interests, either in its own right or as a means of getting a job that matched those interests. It would be easy to confuse this latter goal with activity that matches the action orientations of social mobility discourses, but it is distinct: whereas mobility discourses would advocate the education and mobility primarily as means of gaining financial stability, for these participants the stated goal was the activity itself and obtaining opportunity to pursue that activity. This was even true of Eva who, although she adhered closely to neoliberal social mobility discourses in her discussions of class and had built a comfortable lifestyle from her professional wages, said she actually pursued higher education purely because it was her means of becoming a midwife, specifically. Eva's motivations for this aspiration were oblique, being unknown even to Eva herself, and feasibly may have included a desire for greater wealth and status, but she stated that this aspiration had first occurred to her when she was six years old and described it as a 'vocation'. The mobility, per se, was not her *stated* goal, which was to get the opportunity to help deliver babies. However, since Eva was unable to more clearly explain her reasons for wanting to be a midwife, it is possible that this was indeed due to a desire to escape her class of origin. This will be explored further in 5.4.

For some participants, the ultimate goal of this education route to higher wages was to earn enough money to escape the employment market. For Ahmed, although social mobility via education was a part of his overall life plan, and his primary stated goal for the immediate future, it was not his end goal but merely a stepping-stone to financial independence and freedom from employment. He mentioned wanting to eventually be able to not "play the game" and just enjoy his life. Both Eva and Wanda had pursued higher education as a means to a career but had reached a point where they wished to adjust their employment type and schedule to achieve a better work-life balance and were "enjoying the product of my labour" (Wanda), suggesting that financial independence may have similarly motivated their educational pursuits.

Although participants' stated motivations for pursuing education were varied, and only in some cases included a pure desire for higher pay and higher status, it may be naïve to take these narratives at face value, especially since some participants did struggle to articulate their motivations. The near-universal pursuit of education, and universal support of it, may be a sign of what Foucault termed subjectification – the phenomenon of people transforming themselves to fit a particular state deemed desirable within selected discourses. In this instance, it may be that participants have undergone subjectification into neoliberal subjects, primarily via the pursuit of education, without consciously or vocally acknowledging this subjectification as a motive for their choices. This would be an example of a technology of the self, wherein subjects are compelled to self-regulate their conduct. It could be said that the participants pursued or endorsed education because they felt an obligation to do so. How did these subjectifications occur? Foucauldian theory points towards processes of discipline through regulation and surveillance. Neoliberal governance here could be seen as creating a system of surveillance and appraisal, both through the formal examination and assessment of educational achievement and through the social judgments directed at those who are less educated, who may be vilified as deficient in either capability or determination, and subsequently blamed for any financial hardship they may experience.

It is also possible that participants had responded primarily to the materialities created by policy, pursuing education and upward mobility as a means of survival. From a Foucauldian perspective, this would be explained by biopower – a technology of power that concerns the process of controlling life, not through the direct threat of inflicting death but through controlling the means to support life and how these can be accessed (Taylor 2011). Since financial security is necessary for survival, and financial security is increasingly limited to occupations that required some level of formal educational qualification, biopower would likely play an active role in compelling action orientations that align with neoliberal discourses of upward mobility through education. Only limited evidence emerged to support either of these readings, but there was evidence of participants being defended regarding their education and career choices, as well as evidence of them being motivated by annihilation anxieties, both conscious and unconscious. These factors are covered further in Chapter 5, in examining participants' defended anxieties. The pursuit of

education as a credential is of course closely linked to people's career goals, but these will be touched on further in section 4.5 and fully explored in section 4.6.

Other signs of neoliberal subjectification emerged beyond discourses of education. Multiple participants blamed themselves for either their limited finances or unpleasant features of their work. Jude spoke of his "self-doubt" and "self-criticism" and the "self-inflicted" pressure to be upwardly mobile. Within a Foucauldian framework, there is no thought without discourse, and such thoughts cannot wholly originate from the self. Within the psychosocial framework there is no separation between individual and society. Any self-deprecating thoughts or feelings originate from discourse, and the act of adopting the position of inflicting these on oneself, ignoring or repressing the influence of discourse, would be an act of subjectification. In this case, Jude could be seen to be remaking himself to align with the morality of discourses that denigrate immobility and champion individual responsibility. Such subjectification is not the result of authority wielded solely from above. There is no formal rule or law that compels people to blame themselves for their hardship and for the resulting shame and negative self-image. Rather, the power that is exerted to create an alignment with these discourses would stem from a plurality of force relations, from the influence of peers, family, media discourses and coworkers, as well as the more 'powerful' authorities of state and employers. We see here the role of unconscious affect in the adoption of discourse and technologies of the self: these could not function in the same way if people were freely able to consciously attribute feelings of shame to the discourses that they have aligned with, rather than uncritically regard them as "self-inflicted". Interestingly, Jude's mentions of "self-criticism", in the context of a free-associative narrative interview, did eventually lead to him ruminating on the causes of this and tracing it back to political discourses, leading him then to critique these discourses themselves.

As mentioned, some participants adopted more distinctly neoliberal discourses related to mobility. Eva defined social mobility as working-class people trying to "better themselves" or "improve themselves", which relates to deficiency discourses within neoliberal constructions of class and mobility. The working class are problematized as deficient or inferior, and the act of aspiring to a higher class is framed as an act of self-improvement. Similarly, Amy free-associated from

possibilities of extreme financial distress to sin, saying she had not been “bad enough to be left in a big enough hole. You know, a really big hole.” This apparently stemmed from her subject positioning as a Christian, and a belief that she would be protected from misfortune if virtuous. This discourse, however, may owe more to neoliberal discourses that postulate that the actions of the less fortunate are the cause of their plight.

4.5 Power relations within work

This section makes the argument that participants frequently free-associated to reporting power imbalances and other unpleasant experiences within work, within their precarious roles and within their previous full-time roles. However, they also typically aligned to the subject positioning of ‘good workers’, remaining subservient to the needs of employers despite a lack of contractual obligations. They also tended to ignore wider ramifications of the problems they had reported personally experiencing. Many of the power imbalances tied into the motivations for career choices elaborated in the next section.

Participants almost all problematized experiences of employment, and this extended to their experiences of traditional steady employment as well as precarious work and self-employment. Several reported experiences of bosses abusing their power, but the lack of rights in precarious work seemed to have only created more opportunities for this to happen. For example, Ahmed reported that in one previous zero-hours contract job his manager would refuse him time off for study and exams and would regularly chastise and criticise him in front of customers. Ahmed felt that this manager simply didn’t like him, but also considered the possibility that this was an intimidation tactic in order to make Ahmed more compliant and more willing to work on demand: “They just seemed really off [rep] with me and, er, wanted me to kind of [...] I don't even know what their aim was, [rep] although I guess their aim was probably just to, um, er, to intimidate me and just get [rep] as much work out of me as possible…”

George reported recruitment practices within the film and TV industry that seemed to be almost entirely based on nepotism, and Tracy reported how shifts in her zero-

hours role would sometimes be withheld as punishment. In some of these cases, the participants acknowledged the inconvenience and unpleasantness of the working conditions, but did not make any reference to the wider implications of such abuses of power. George talked at length of the importance of establishing contacts to find work, how it is difficult to find work in this sector through conventional means, and how some inexperienced people get work purely because of who they know, but he did not refer to these practices as nepotism or consider the ways this may be violating employment laws or how it contrasts with expected recruitment practices in other industries.

Meanwhile, Wanda's recollections regarding her negative experiences of being employed full-time at a medical clinic were such a preoccupation that they dominated the entire first half of the interview. After discussing how a record of short-term employment can affect your employability, Wanda came to assert that those who have remained in the same job for a long time tend to "moan a lot more" and that she wants job satisfaction. It was here that she began the detailed account of all the negative aspects of being employed by the clinic, and the "bullying" that she claimed to have experienced when she needed more compassionate leave after her mother passed away.

Amy was scathing about the decisions made by her employers during the pandemic, since they had opted not to pay full wage or furlough, and instead pay a fraction of the average wages. Her "shitty employer" was constructed as "heartless". She positioned herself firmly in opposition to these practices, and legally challenged them, and additionally adopted the action orientation of doing "the right thing", hoping that making the effort to "fight for it" would improve treatment of employees: "I hope that what I'm doing will at least bring more positivity [rep] to, you know, or realisation to the school, that they can't just treat people like that". Despite this, she regarded putting less effort into her work or cancelling shifts at short notice to be "slightly evil" despite these acts not being prohibited by her contract. Within Amy's subject positioning, formally challenging decisions on pay via official channels and legal representatives is a legitimate method of redressing power imbalances, but adopting behaviours contrary to what is informally expected from her is morally questionable. It is possible that Amy views these deeds as less acceptable because they would

inconvenience coworkers, but the strong moral stance taken against such behaviour implies a strict limitation within Amy's action orientations. Only formal methods of opposition are permitted, and prioritising one's own interests by breaching the informal expectations of the worker-employer dynamic is not, even though it is within the limits of actions implicitly permitted by written contractual agreements.

Similarly, Michael tried not to "misuse" his right as a freelance contractor to choose which days he works and accepted many demands from clients. For example, he stated that "I can ring them up and simply say, 'I'm not coming in on this date' {Yeah} and there's nothing really that they can do to me about that. Um, fortunately, my skills are in high enough demand, unlikely that people would refuse me future work just for doing something like that on one occasion". Although this was ostensibly an example of his flexibility it also illustrates the perceived chance that if Michael rearranges his schedule more than once per project he may lose future work. Additionally, Michael spoke of how the deadlines for completing projects often led to gruelling work hours, indicating that even as a contractor he is beholden to imposed deadlines that cause him significant fatigue. Michael apparently criticised himself for this fatigue, saying that he should not feel that way if he has slept. This could be taken as a sign of subjectification similar to those presented in 4.4. Neoliberal discourse endorses strength and the ability to overcome adversity. This is particularly inherent in discourses surrounding poverty and mobility – one must be resilient enough to withstand hardship in the process of achieving upward mobility, and one must weather the demands of one's work in order to succeed. Through such discourses, neoliberalism exerts power over workers by instilling an obligation to self-govern one's resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Further hidden power imbalances (particularly those that appeared to influence Michael) are explored further in 5.5, in considering the reasons for participants defensively overstating their autonomy.

Many of Foucault's writings, including *Discipline and Punish* (1995) and *The History of Sexuality volume 1* (1978), recommended genealogy as an analytical tool for understanding the effects of discourse on the modern world. Genealogy traces the origins of discourses in order to understand the context they developed in and the power relations they helped to create or perpetuate. Although this has limited

applicability here, a genealogical perspective can help us to understand these power dynamics. Certain requirements are placed upon employees on standard contracts that do not officially apply to the self-employed and people on zero-hours contracts, yet participants were shown to adhere to them *and to defend their conduct within interviews by appealing to corresponding discourses.* These narratives illustrate how traditional action orientations surrounding employment and workplace power dynamics, which originated as official contractual requirements, have developed into action orientations within subject positionings. They therefore persist despite being formally redundant in more flexible casual contracts. One simply does not cancel a shift on short notice or fail to turn up, *even if technically permitted to do so.* One does not give less than full effort even if reciprocal regard is not shown by the employers, and even full pay cannot always be relied on. One manages exhaustion regardless of cause and does not allow exhaustion to obstruct one's work. Formal rules that were originally established explicitly to adjust the behaviours of employees appear to have developed into dominant discourses of moral obligation. By adhering to these rules that originated with formal full-time employment but should not technically extend to zero-hours contracts, Amy and Michael adopted the subject positioning of good workers, who display deference to the needs and expectations of employers.

It is worth reiterating that these negative experiences were related through free-associative responses and were laden with emotive language. They were of personal significance to the participants. However, they did not usually extend their problematization to the potential impact on wider society or political positions. Although some adopted a subject positioning of being apolitical, almost all participants made some statements about political policy or discourse in relation to other themes. They were aware that these employment narratives related negative things, but apparently avoided the wider implications.

4.6 Motivation in career choices and goals

This section makes the argument that many participants had opted to leave full-time employment due to power imbalances and unpleasant experiences. The majority had therefore prioritised perceived freedom and independence over upward mobility,

including freedom to determine schedule or hours, freedom to make ethical choices, or freedom to pursue work that matches their ethical/ altruistic ideals. This section further argues that these latter freedoms imply that the goals and tasks of high-paid upwardly-mobile roles frequently conflict with conceptions of socially-beneficial actions. For this reason, my analysis of these narratives drew inspiration from Hanna's (2014) hybrid reading of Foucault, incorporating his work on ethics with his work on power/knowledge. As Hanna acknowledged, Foucault's four precepts of how one cultivates the self as an ethical subject may not have been intended as a tool of analysis. They did, however, prove applicable to understanding how subjects resist subjectivities through engaging in ethical behaviour.

This section provides an overview of participants' stated aspirations and how these compare or contrast with dominant discourses of aspiration as pursuing upward mobility. This also includes descriptions of unattainable fantasies that some participants spoke of instead of concrete plans. This section ultimately critiques the promotion of particular careers framed within policy discourse as 'aspirational', questions why these are more highly valued and rewarded, and contemplates the differences between this priority and those expressed by participants. This section thus builds on the argument that the incentivisation of upward mobility is at odds with the needs of the participants, and that participants' subjectivities challenged the justifications for this.

Unpleasant or adversarial incidents that occurred within traditional full-time employment were often part of the participants' motivation for switching to their current mode of working. Michael left permanent employment partly because he was penalised for completing documents as instructed. Wanda was driven away from her permanent role because her managers attempted to 'bully' her back into work too soon following a bereavement, and because of authoritarian management. Jack quit shift work at a supermarket because he felt that shifts were being unfairly shared out. For these participants, their narratives of significant career choices were associated with feelings of unfair treatment, of resentment of and resistance to unjust penalties or pressure received from managers. This implication that traditional forms of employment were associated with being subject to such mistreatment, and moving towards precarious work had been, at least partially, an attempt to extricate

themselves from power hierarchies. This being the case, it seems that these participants were driven away from secure work by the behaviour of senior staff and the insufficient protections against mistreatment within their secure roles.

Elsewhere there were instances of participants free-associating towards unattainable phantasies of idealised futures. For example, Jack tended to respond to questions regarding what he wanted to do or change in the future by talking about being able to "wave a wand" and make "populism and nationalism" disappear, and "I'd like [rep] a much more even playing field. {Yeah} You know, and not just, not like [rep] I'm [redacted age] gonna be [redacted age] but like, you know, for younger ones and whatever, a much more even playing field". These responses were starkly different to the responses of most participants (and the form of responses expected) in that they were about things he wanted for other people, for the world in general, rather than himself. They were also about things that he could not attain through his own actions and that were perhaps unlikely to happen regardless. Free-associating in this direction may be taken as a sign of Jack being inherently altruistic, and of being inclined towards hopeful and idealised phantasies. He had, after all, adopted a non-aspirational subject positioning. Alternatively, it is possible that these responses were indicative of Jack avoiding consideration of his own wants and future outcomes that might be realistically attainable.

Sometimes career goals and choices were associated with moral concerns and altruistic subject positionings. Michael stated that:

> I'm very much concerned with er, actually doing the botany work, doing it well, doing it right. Um, one of my other motives for going self-employed was a desire to stay at the front line and not to move into a sort of a management role, where I would just be deciding what other people would be doing… I think there's, there's an image that businessmen… do whatever that turns a profit. Whereas I come from the other direction, I start 'I will do this. I *hope* it turns a profit' (Michael).

He reported having had concerns over his previous employers removing environmental recommendations from reports to save clients money, and that this had been a key motivation (amongst other factors) in his decision to become

freelance, so that he could have more control over which recommendations get fed back to clients: “I know that what I’m putting out is what’s actually getting to the people making the decisions”. This, he reported, was facilitated by his being his own boss and therefore being in charge of such ethical choices: “And then if [rep] they had gone ahead they would have been doing it against advice, rather than saying, ‘well we [rep] followed the advice’ […] {mm} ‘Okay they had a junior person saying different but we [rep] listened to the main one’”. This supported Michael’s assertions that he chose to be a botanist due to having a passion for protecting the environment. Discussing how reduced environmental regulations may impact his work, he stated that: “I do the work because I'm concerned for the environment. So {Yes} it all interacts but it definitely goes beyond how it would affect me personally.”

Similarly, Dee stated that they had decided not to become an accountant, after completing a degree in accountancy, because they did not like the idea of helping rich people get richer: “I disliked the fundamental principles of accountancy work - for example, maximising the profits on behalf of corporate shareholders, or finding ways for a company to avoid paying taxes”. The fact that Dee chose not to pursue potentially highly lucrative work, despite already having the required qualifications, indicates that ethical concerns were a high priority in choosing a career. At time of interview, they were instead providing disability education support, which they reported to be “personally rewarding”.

Amy expressed concerns over her former IT role costing people their jobs (which was mentioned in conjunction with her narratives of leaving the role), although she later seemed reluctant to confirm that she had ethical concerns. When asked for clarification regarding her feelings regarding this, Amy struggled to decide if she had considered this an ethical dilemma and repeatedly returned to talking about the desire to adopt children at that point in her life. She stated multiple reasons for quitting this IT role. “…what I was doing was making other people redundant.”; “getting rid of people's livelihoods. Um, which isn't, you know, isn't a great feeling, sort of thing”. Alongside this she stated that she had felt it was time to have children, and implied that the work was too demanding. These factors are discussed more fully in 5.3 and 5.4, when we look at Amy’s anxieties, but here we need to acknowledge that although Amy expressed discomfort associated with the moral

implications of her job, and mentioned this alongside detailing her decision to leave, she was reluctant to explicitly categorise her decision to leave as motivated by an ethical dilemma. One possible explanation for this is that she was defending against the concept that her employment forced her into actions that were incompatible with the action orientations within her other subject positionings. If so, this speaks of the tremendous power of discourses that construct employment as either benevolent or a moral authority, that Amy would experience apparent anxiety at the suggestion that she had to quit to assert moral agency.

Ethical telos therefore seemed to be a strong motivating factor among these participants. Ethical telos is understood as “the establishing of a moral conduct” (Foucault 1990 p. 28). This is reached through determining ethical substance or identifying a particular part of oneself as central to moral behaviour, establishing a mode of subjection that establishes their obligation to abide by given rules, and forms of elaboration – working on oneself to comply with the appropriate moral rules (Foucault 1990; Hanna 2014 pp. 147-149, 151). In my participants, the forms of elaboration sometimes manifested as a drive away from ethically questionable employers or roles, and at other times manifested as an altruistic drive towards roles where they felt they could do the most good. The contrast between the ethical telos involved in these choices and the ethical implications of the alternative roles they left behind highlights how these participants did not frame material rewards and financial security as being rewarded to the roles with the most social value. The implications within much of the discourse surrounding upward mobility, that the rewards for differing roles across class are commensurate to the value of the work, are contradicted here. Pay level and social contribution were not perceived to correlate, and adherence to ethical substance and pursuit of ethical telos took priority over both financial gain and job security.

The other factor that appeared to have driven multiple participants towards precarious roles was the flexibility itself. This was especially true of Tracy, whose physical and mental health problems sometimes prevented her from working and whose continued employment was made much easier by the fact that her zero-hours contract allowed her to choose when and how much she worked:

> …the flexibility of it is great. You know. Um, cos you can say to them, ‘Well, oh, I can't do the beginning of that week, cos I’ll be doing such and such, but yeah I can do all that, and that weekend. The flexibility is awesome. Zero-hours, if they were properly policed and regulated, can be very, very good. Especially for like a recovering agoraphobic… (Tracy).

Eva also fervently spoke in favour of the flexibility of agency work. “I prefer the flexibility… the money is slightly better, but it's flexibility is the main thing…” She expressed clear elation over the better work-life balance this had afforded her (laughing with joy when saying that it was “great”) although she did also believe that people without some financial security in the form of savings or property should be cautious of it. Wanda also said that “I kind of feel that flexibility and freedom works very well for me”. The potential implications of adherence to flexibility narratives and related narratives of autonomy are discussed further in Chapter 5, but here these associations serve to demonstrate how the topic of non-standard work is frequently associated with flexibility discourses, and flexibility was, (or was, at least, framed as) a strong motivator in several participants’ career choices.

A Foucauldian reading of these conflicts would view them as the result of competing subject positionings with mutually exclusive obligations. Although neoliberal governance has shaped them through technologies of self – discipline through the surveillance and appraisal of educational achievement and career management – and the application of biopower – the potential withholding of the means to extend life – avenues of resistance can be observed. This extends not only to the overtly ethics-based conflicts and the rejection or pursuit of particular modes of work as forms of elaboration towards a conflicting ethical telos, but also to the desire for flexibility, as participants expressed a desire to spend more time with family or have more time for rest and leisure, which may be related to other subject positionings such as partner or parent. Notably, in writing this and trying to think of how to name a subject positioning wherein somebody dedicates time to self-care and leisure or generally avoids overworking themselves, I was unable to think of or find a succinct word for such people. This was a notable example of something being unsayable within the available discourses as they manifested within these narratives.

However, the alignment with flexibility discourses could serve to further subjectify people to neoliberal discourses. Given that the market requires flexible labour, discourses that lionise flexibility and the independence it brings serve to direct people towards the precariat. For many, the precarity that this entails may be greater than anticipated and the flexibility less expansive and useful than desired. This is especially true of those for whom discourses of flexibility are a source of status or empowerment, as seemed true of some of these participants. Through the widespread acceptance of independence as a virtue and source of pride under neoliberalism, neoliberal subjects may remake themselves as the forms of workers neoliberalism requires, subject to neoliberal power while attempting to extend their own power. 5.5 will explore this in more detail.

As explained, some participants had previously pursued and obtained higher-class roles that they had subsequently left. Michael's motives for working as a botanist have already been discussed. The stated motivations for others were often oblique, perhaps due to the passage of time. Amy did not elaborate on her motivations for pursuing a career in IT, and Wanda merely indicated that she was influenced by her mother and her experiences as a carer. In both these cases, there is too little evidence to make any confident assertions regarding their motivations, or whether any subjectification played a role. Again, Eva had no concept of why she wanted to be a midwife, other than having met a midwife and feeling she had a "calling" or "vocation". However, she also lamented the difference between her family's finances and those of her friends, who went on much more expensive holidays. It is therefore possible that desire for a relatively well-paid job was one motivation for Eva's career choice. If so, it could not have been the only factor (as midwifery is not among the highest-paid professions) and Eva was defended regarding this motive (see 5.4).

4.7 Work resistance

This section makes the argument that several participants aligned to a form of work-resistor subject positioning that could be described as employment resistance, and that this further evidences a misalignment between participants' discourses and discourses that prioritise working hard to gain upward mobility. In addition to the

aforementioned tendency to opt out of formal employment, some participants displayed a desire for less societal focus on employment (often referred to as “work”) and more focus on other creative or socially-conscious activities that are currently unpaid. There were also indications of participants desiring a better work-life balance, and either seeking upward mobility as a means to this end or, having already experienced some upward mobility, opting to use their financial stability to improve their work-life balance.

There were recurring themes of work-resistance throughout many of the interviews, with some participants seemingly adopting the subject positioning of work-resistor. This was where participants’ constructions of mobility contrasted strikingly with dominant mobility discourses. Jack, again, problematized the pressure to work, imagining an ideal future where people do not have to do paid work and can focus more on helping people around their communities. This raises the question of what constitutes ‘work’ - an ongoing and lively debate in itself, with many implications for how we think about the structure of our society and economy. From context, Jack appeared to be speaking of employment or, more broadly, wage labour, contrasting this with the various forms of unpaid work that are not adequately completed due to being unpaid and due to people’s requirement for pay and limited time and energy. Elsewhere, Jack provided a more comprehensive description of the alternative he envisioned:

> …we are all responsible for ourselves but we look after each other… you'll have your own chance to join up and be with like-minded people there and then, but it doesn't take away from your responsibility that that old lady down the road mustn't be left to starve to death… The kiddy mustn't be left to go out and discover crack cocaine... (Jack)

Jude similarly questioned why society should be so focussed around “work”. Firstly, he discussed the positive aspects of doing less paid work. “I started painting, cos I had more time. {Mm} [rep] I wouldn't have done it had I not been, um, [clicks tongue] you know. Having like more time than usual to spare”. From this observation, he contemplated the worldviews that prioritise paid work, and his own reaction to them “…why can it not be like an option for like other people or for like the longer term? [rep] Why is it that like we have this thing in society that being like so like

independent and career-focussed and work driven, you know? … I'm still finding ways to, like, make my life feel worthwhile…".

The lived experiences of abusive working conditions and negotiating between the action orientations of their employment and those of other discursive formations may have partially informed these participants' career choices. It also seems that these things may have contributed to some participants adopting discourses akin to work resistance. For example, Jack stated that "I don't believe in fighting for the right to work" because "…you end up decorating the avenues of the wealthy... Don't fight for the right to work. You fight for the right to live. {Yeah} Regardless [rep] of [rep] whatever you want me to do... And, no I don't wanna work in your sodding factory for eighteen hours a day…" Jack emphasised that he was not endorsing laziness or selfishness, and displayed his own construction of what "work" is thought to be and the work that he felt needed to be done:

> …we've gotta look after each other, [rep] er, so that otherwise what you end up with is just the same old sort of survival of the fittest, just the bullies and everything, but, um, regarding mobility, [rep] why do you need to go anywhere? [rep] why do I need to change [rep] my designation? …I mean, I might want to project something, but that's just me being pretentious. But other people will project something upon me. Like, you know, like, um, er, the voice of authority, right? The voice of authority, for me, is always gonna be an accent *like this* [affected RP accent] (Jack).

Here Jack displayed an association between the imposed impetus to do particular forms of work, the discourse of encouraging upward mobility, and the influence of an authoritarian elite. These were all collectively contrasted against Jack's advocated scenario of people looking after each other.

For Amy, the opposition to the impetus to be fully employed was less political, and seemingly more motivated by her own perceived inability to endure full-time work: "I can't go back to IT because that was full on."; "... I don't think I could go back to full-time work. I'm just like, I've been out of full-time work for so long, I don't want to have to do full time work again."; This feeling of being unable to work full time may have been based on a burnout that Amy was defending against, which is explored fully in

Chapter 5 when participant's defenses surrounding such issues are examined. For now, it is the resistance to full-time employment that is significant, and the fact that this is based on a perception that it could not be endured. This idea was also accompanied by perceptions of employment being gruelling and exploitative– "I don't envy people going to work all day every day... and slogging for an employer who makes money out of them. Because I've been there, done that, as well".

It does not seem likely that precarity and mobility may be straightforwardly associated with these discourses of work resistance or resulting from work-resistance. Some participants, such as Ahmed, did see upwardly mobility as a potential long-term path towards work-resistance, due to the potential to become wealthy and therefore no longer having to "play the game", although this perception was far from universally present. For several participants, such as Jude and Jack, it was the rejection of pressures to be mobile, and resentment of mobility being treated as a prerequisite for financial security, that led to work-resistance discourses entering the conversation. This points to a pattern among some participants of additional pressures having highlighted material privations, demands, and inequalities that are deemed unacceptable or intolerable and prompted these participants to question our socially accepted patterns of work and employment more broadly. These again, like the aforementioned turns towards ethical telos and the endorsement of greater social support, created a mode of resistance to dominant discourses of prioritising profit and the pursuit of upward mobility, but also acted as a mode of resistance against subordination to the instructions and goals of employers.

4.8 Conclusion

These participants mostly constructed altruistic socially-conscious activity, the exploration of interests, and the maximisation of their own personal agency and work-life balance as worthy goals for motivating their employment choices. For those who seemed to be pursuing wealth, and those who had done so, this seemed to be primarily a stepping stone to reducing their hours and achieving financial independence from employment. This could be described as their own discursive construction of social mobility – not toward status, high achievement and prosperity,

but towards a life that matches their personal goals, has room for desired social contact, fits their skills and interests, and does good for others.

The evidence presented in this chapter has indicated that the participants of this study largely free-associated from topics of aspiration and precarity to condemning cuts to welfare support, persistent low amounts of welfare support, and high conditionality. Where mentioned, there was repeated problematization of how these measures were used to push people into work, and how this goal was used as a performative policy ostensibly to combat poverty. Several participants were suspicious of the motives behind high levels of conditionality and low levels of provision, constructing policy makers as being unwilling to help people and aiming to increase inequality and power imbalances due to class bias. Participants' goals seemed to mostly be informed by desires to have work-life balance, contribute to society in ethical and altruistic ways, pursue interests and lead worthwhile and fulfilling lives. These motivations were sometimes perceived to contrast with the goals of employers.

These findings not only demonstrate that most participants would endorse higher rates of welfare and broader eligibility for various forms of welfare but also demonstrate that the topics of precarity and mobility are closely associated with topics of reduced government support, mostly due to these being seen as a cause or exacerbating factor in precarity and an obstacle to mobility. These common associations lend credence to the idea that neoliberal policies such as reduced state support are not only connected to precarity and immobility within social theory (wherein both material and discursive links have been identified) but that this generalised connection is, on some level, present within the discursive frameworks of these participants and, perhaps, those of many precariat workers.

Why then did these associations form? Beyond the apparent factor that participants have found a lack of support to be detrimental or obstructive, there remains insight to be found in drawing upon theory a little further. Participants were frequently talking of the basic needs of themselves and others, the demands of surviving (both physically and emotionally) and how these sometimes competed with the pressure to aspire and sometimes overlapped with them, and the feelings that stemmed from their needs not being met. People's basic needs are granted great importance in

psychodynamic theory. People's needs for sustenance, warmth, and human contact, and the experiences of these needs being met or unmet are considered to play a critical role in the formation of the psyche (Klein 1975).

This recalls Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943), which postulated that people's basic needs for food, shelter, and so forth take primacy over other needs such as love, esteem and understanding. Neoliberal approaches to stimulating mobility prioritise status and accomplishment equally to survival needs by making accomplishment a prerequisite to fully meeting basic needs. This is demonstrated by the reduction of support and rights to incentivise aspiration (Fletcher 2019; Folkes 2019; Loveday 2015; Raco 2009). Perhaps this disregard for basic needs and distorting of priorities was what influenced participants in this study to associate towards speaking of support for basic needs, and why some participants felt compelled to speak of the essential need for money and how it's absence can threaten basic survival: "If you haven't got money, you can't live, can you? You can't eat" (George). However, there are few concrete examples of narratives that show participants being influenced by neoliberal discourse in this way. The clearest example was that of Amy aspiring to start her own business in order to "achieve" something "significant" despite her repeated references to lacking the time for even her essential tasks. Beyond this, there were instances of participants prioritising particular action orientations over physical needs and security, but in direct contrast to the demands of neoliberal compulsions to be upwardly mobile. The previous career choices reported by Dee, Michael, and Amy all indicated that the financial security offered by particular roles and upwardly mobile opportunities was considered less important to them than acting according to their ethical principles and altruistic impulses.

Unsurprisingly, participants aligned with multiple coexisting (and sometimes contradictory) discourses and subject positionings related to neoliberal governance. Some of these reflected neoliberalism – (learner/learned, striver, good worker, capitalist realism) and others overtly opposed it (non-aspirational, work/employment resistor). Still others appeared to be somewhat at odds with neoliberal discourses and the material factors associated with them but had prompted adjustments that allowed the participants to sustain both positionings (Christian, self-carer(?), altruist,

parent, partner). Some of these overlapped and merged with or informed one another and some contrasted with each other. Overall, some participants had adopted neoliberal subject positionings of being upwardly mobile, particularly around education and entrepreneurialism wherein these were viewed as reliable routes to prosperity. However, these were often at odds with these participants' other representations, such as doubts surrounding their future prospects, desires for better work-life balance, adherence to another ethical telos, or misgivings regarding the pressures of study and work. These discursive frameworks were the basis of participants' resistance against dominant neoliberal discourses of aspiration and mobility. Although affected by these dominant discourses, and somewhat subjectified, many participants had asserted power where they could, and these narratives of doing so were frequently presented alongside discourses that supported the move away from formal employment. Certain narratives presented efforts to resist or escape aspects of employment while simultaneously making the participants further subject to neoliberalism, such as pursuing education in the hopes of getting a high-paid job and eventually saving enough to leave work, or leaving full-time work to acquire flexible schedules and control over in-work conduct. While neoliberalism encompasses, subverts, and informs so much of modern western choice architecture, the line between where neoliberal subjectivity ends and resistance against it begins is unclear.

Were these discourses the cause of resistance or the means by which resistance was enabled and justified? A purely Foucauldian reading would probably suggest the latter, whereas a reading that draws more widely on psychosocial theory and affect may suggest the former. In either case, such resistance would not be possible without these discourses that channel power from a plurality of sources – discourses of work-life balance related to reducing hours or adopting flexible work, discourses of altruism and ethics related to rejecting roles that maximise profits at the expense of what is best for others, and discourses of work resistance related to a goal of leaving work or a rejection of certain aspirations. It would perhaps be impossible to clearly determine whether these discourses and subject positionings were the motivating factor in participants' choices, or if they were employed as a justification of these choices and a means of claiming the social power to act in ways that defy the imperatives of other actors within the free market. Without far more vigorous

research, such interpretations depend entirely upon theoretical positions on how discourse functions and interacts with affect, and within the theoretical framework employed in this study it would be fair to say that the participants themselves would be unaware of which of these interpretations is true. Chapter 5 further explores some of these contradictions and how they may stem from defended anxieties, some of which appear to be informed by neoliberal discourse.

In summary, participants drew on a range of discourses that either aligned with or resisted dominant neoliberal discourses of mobility. These included education credentialism, striving, and work compliance, but also employment resistance, self-care, altruism, social responsibility, redistributive governance, and basic needs. The widespread alignment of action orientations with education credentialism discourses suggests that neoliberal applications of biopower have been effective in stimulating this aspect of aspiration. However, alignment with redistribution discourses indicates resistance to methods of biopower utilised within welfare provision. Through evoking these discourses and the concept of basic needs, participants exerted power to resist imposed neoliberal obligations to conduct themselves in particular ways or seek higher paid jobs to earn entitlement to financial stability. Financial stability, in the form of financial support, was thereby framed as a prerequisite for aspiration, in contrast to neoliberal mobility discourses that use the promise of financial stability as an aspiration incentive.

Similarly, participants' evocation of discourses containing ethical telos and action orientations that conflict with those of mobility discourses, such as self-care discourses and altruism discourses, can be viewed as resistance to aspiration obligations. Through these discourses, participants built subjectivities that displayed self-worth based moral fortitude, rejecting the judgements of worth imposed by meritocracy discourses that posit that a person's value and worthiness should be assessed by their earnings and job status. These conflicting discourses are also indicative that the action orientations within neoliberal discourse are at odds with other discourses and subjectivities that participants were invested in, and possibly experienced as attempts to control their methods of engaging with the economy.

These go some way toward answering the question of how participants would develop approaches that they feel would support them and aid their mobility.

Participants calling for increased levels or wider eligibility of support, coupled with problematizing conditionality in various forms of support, suggest they would develop an economic system with far more redistribution and universal support. The data presented here can also provide some insight into precariat understandings of the wider social mobility agenda. I would argue that this is broadly seen as a spurious justification for withholding support, a contributing factor in power imbalances within employment, and a cause of precarity and worry. These elements combined are seen as creating barriers to personal goals in general, including those that actually align with neoliberal constructions of aspiration and upward mobility. Moreover, there is an apparent perception that neoliberal definitions of mobility and aspiration contrast with the forms of work seen to be socially beneficial, personally interesting, or suitably flexible, and sometimes even aligns more with forms of work seen as immoral. Neoliberal discourse is out of step with precariat goals and their subjectivities surrounding social justice, and neoliberal policy obstructs the needs of precariat, even including their need to become upwardly mobile neoliberal subjects.

All of this does not mean that neoliberal discourses of aspiration and mobility did not have power over the participants, even beyond their overall alignment to education credentialism. Some of the participants evoked working-class deficiency discourses or evoked narratives that displayed their alignment with compliance discourses within adopted subjectivity of a good worker, and these comments apparently drew on discursive constructions of class and merit that could be traced back to long before neoliberalism but have formed some of its core justifications (see chapter 2). The following chapter will uncover many ways in which participants displayed signs of defended anxieties that were closely related to these discourses.

Having established that some negative affective experiences, including anxiety and frustration, are perceived to be caused by social mobility discourse and associated governance, and that these factors are viewed negatively by precariat workers, and having identified some of the discourses and subject positionings adopted by the participants, the following chapter further addresses the affective dimensions of social mobility discourses and participants' positionings within these discourses. It makes the argument that these harms include the stress, anxiety, shame and frustration that are commonly thought to be widespread outcomes of such

governance, but also extend to many other affective states and interpersonal conflicts that appeared to have emerged from participants defending against these anxieties. Chapter 5 also further explores the impacts of people's basic needs being unmet or under threat, the psychic damage this can do, and how these factors impeded some participants' pursuit of their goals.

5: Attack and defense - defended anxieties related to social mobility and precarity

Chapter 4 demonstrated that participants problematized many factors related to mobility and efforts to promote it but aligned to mixed subject positionings that included somewhat aspirational action orientations. Chapter 5 argues that unconscious anxieties inform some of these discursive alignments, and result from the identified problems and defenses employed against them. The chapter argues that participants' defended anxieties related to these conflicts instilled confusion over desirable and achievable goals and concealed negative affective responses that were detrimental to pursuit of goals, and which could be exacerbated by pursuit of particular goals or further adherence to neoliberal subjectivities.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on participants' anxieties that related to neoliberal discourses and policies surrounding the promotion of social mobility (especially as a solution to poverty and inequality), and which appeared to be detrimental to participants' lives and their pursuit of upward mobility or other goals, either directly or through the creation of psychological defenses. At times, participants were able to consciously acknowledge and report their anxiety, but at other times they had defended against it, which either concealed the source of their problems or created uncertainties and behaviours that themselves were problematized by the participants.

In this chapter, I argue that the types of anxieties and defenses prompted in the participants in relation to the discourses and policies in question were often harmful and of a nature that would hinder their ability to be 'aspirational' or to assess what they personally want and need from their careers. These anxieties and defenses acted to impede the participants' pursuit of goals, including upwardly-mobile 'aspirations'. Although the futility of neoliberal policies attempting to create 'rational actors' has been discussed by other theorists and researchers (e.g. Binkley 2011b; Layton 2014a; Lemke 2001; Walkerdine 2011) here we explore the idea that these discourses and policies exacerbate this obstacle, becoming counter-productive to

the outcomes they allege to pursue. This chapter also provides examples of the impact this has on precariat workers, and an additional reason why recent approaches to promoting rational ‘aspirational’ activity do not have the desired effect and instead promote doubt, fear, and confusion.

As explained in Chapter 3, the use of FANIM was intended to facilitate free-association from the topics raised by questions, but also to elicit responses that would illuminate defended anxieties. Said anxieties turned out to be even more prevalent than I anticipated. It is prudent to disclose that my own experiences of precarity and precariousness created in me many intense anxieties, and as such I was alert to evidence of similar anxieties in the participants. However, I was not prepared for the frequency, intensity, or variety of defended anxieties indicated by the responses.

Participants’ defenses seemed to display effects of precarity and neoliberal discourse that were distinct from the effects indicated by their free-associations. Their most extreme free-associations suggested employment experiences and neoliberal discourse were associated with personal traumas (especially connected to abuse or interpersonal mistreatment), and with potential catastrophes (especially connected with forms of oppression). By contrast, their other defended anxieties that seemed to be hidden behind known defensive mechanisms such as repression or denial focussed on the practical aspects of their current circumstances – money worries, status anxieties, ambivalent feelings towards family, mental health issues, regrets and uncertainties surrounding career choices, and negative aspects of their working life.

This chapter explores those defended anxieties, the signs of harm resulting from them and the ways they may hinder participants’ abilities to achieve their goals. The discourses and circumstances propagated by precarity and by the promotion of ‘aspiration’ leave people uncertain of what they want and need from their careers or employment, as well as about their own potential and limitations.

To reiterate, this chapter unveils some of the anxieties that participants appeared to be defending against within the interview and explores the possible explanations for these. The focus is primarily on anxieties that appear connected to precarity and

social mobility, but there is also acknowledgement of other anxieties that are pertinent to understanding why the participants felt or thought in particular ways. It deals primarily with how participants' capacity to make clear decisions about their futures and their goals appears to be impaired by anxieties, by defenses that may be limiting their self-awareness, or by associated and intermingled discourses. Drawing on Foucauldian perspectives, this section also touches on discursive and affective conflicts that complicate participants' constructions of goals, and how discourses inform anxieties and shape defensive constructions.

5.2 Defended anxieties surrounding finances

This section argues that many participants avoided speaking about financial problems and precarity or minimised the impact of these. This indicates a defended attitude towards these topics, which could hinder decision making on issues that require acknowledgement of financial limitations or prospects.

Many participants expressed money worries, and this was a theme throughout most interviews, although some participants placed more emphasis on this than others. A small number of participants actually claimed not to worry about money, despite evidence to the contrary, and some expressed worries but minimalised the risks they faced. Jack, for example, after relating a narrative of having faced possible homelessness, stated that he doesn't "worry about things anymore". He also said that "…I don't worry about things anymore. [rep] not to that degree, er, yeah {Yeah} I don't. I want material security but I'm not gonna worry over it. And if I lose all my material security tomorrow, touch wood I won't, but if I did [...] I'm still breathing…". This was contradicted elsewhere by him expressing "I never want to go through any of that again..." and his statement that "I don't wanna be sort of, um, fighting for everything and worrying about losing everything." It was further contradicted by his admission that he avoids borrowing money or taking out credit, indicating an aversion to financial risk: "if you're talking credit scores and all that, If I wanted to go out and get huge loans for things [rep] I'm probably gonna be told no. But I don't wannoo."

The inconsistency of Jack's asserting that he doesn't worry anymore *and* doesn't "want to go through anything like that again" seemed to indicate a psychological defense, an act of convincing himself that he was unconcerned with material needs. Jack later confirmed that this was at least close to the truth, in saying that he decided to stop worrying about what other people (particularly creditors) thought. By rejecting his regard for the desires of financial institutions, he can divest himself some of the worry associated with financial hardship and debt. Although he still does not want to experience severe financial hardship, the main thing he wants to avoid is the intense worry he previously experienced, and he indicated that he can accomplish this by rejecting his feelings of obligation through adopting narratives of class conflict. However, there remained inconsistencies in his account. This narrative of rejecting obligations to a certain class did not explain his statements claiming a lack of concern for material things. It also would not fully protect him from the worry of financial hardship. Since the incident reported, Jack hasn't been through any other situation that would likely cause such intense worry, and therefore could not know how he would now respond to such incidents. Even in light of this clarification, it still seems that Jack experiences more worry than he allows himself to be aware of (given the contrast between his references to worry and his claims that he does not worry). He has adopted a defensive subject positioning of someone who can "not give a damn".

Similarly, Tracy implied that she always has enough hours from her zero-hours contract job, without outright denying financial hardship or worry. When asked questions related to any financial hardship she may have experienced, she either changed the subject (sometimes to things tangentially associated, such as her work and skills, sometimes to unrelated topics such as Welsh beaches) or responded with comments regarding the consistent levels of available hours and how these have been equivalent to either part-time or full-time work, depending on the time period. This created an impression of a positive assessment of work availability while avoiding discussion of whether these hours were sufficient for her needs. Two pieces of evidence cast doubt on the idea that the hours and pay were always adequate – firstly, she commented on a pattern of unfair distribution of hours, wherein two coworkers were being granted more hours than the rest. Second, she related an incident where front of house staff had been told there was not enough money for

them. Both these details contradicted Tracy's implication that there had always been enough hours.

George adopted an inconsistent positive outlook, alternating between discussing plans for the future that could be viewed as optimistic (without displaying awareness of certain likely obstacles) and dwelling on the chances of employment-related problems arising. George was hopeful that his trainee position would lead to a twelve-month contract, which was probable. However, he also spoke at length about planning to get a mortgage and buy his own home if he did get this contract. He talked about the changes this would bring about in his life – having more space, having to be more careful with money, living near interesting places, and not knowing people at his local pub – as though he was expecting this to happen. Although he acknowledged the possibility of this plan being undone by his failing to get the job contract, he said nothing about the possibility of being refused a mortgage – which would be a possibility as a first time buyer on a temporary contract, with apparently little savings (as indicated by his comment about when he can't find work: "You think, 'oh right, okay, I haven't saved anything'"). Contrastingly, George spoke of his expectation that there would be 'blips' in his future career, and admitted, near the close of the second interview, that he doesn't trust the future, or trust work. He also made inconsistent comments regarding how easy it is to find work – from confident predictions: "I've applied for this job here. And I always find work somehow" to recollections that indicated difficulties in finding work: "…jobs come up on Facebook for [rep] sound work... and there's like hundred and fifty people before you..."; "…it's just been hard work really, just trying to [rep] get out there…"

This echoed (and contextualised) comments he had made about worrying he might get fired if he posted offensive comments on social media – George's awareness of his precarity, discussed minimally elsewhere in the interviews aside from mentions of his difficulties *finding* work, shone through in these moments. How can we make sense of George displaying such high levels of optimism and pessimism, almost simultaneously? It is possible that perceived immediacy and distance allowed George to reconcile these conflicting expectations – he mentioned not trusting the 'future' alongside not trusting work, implying that his fears of problems were associated with times that are far off. Perhaps he did not anticipate 'blips' until later

in life. However, this does not explain why George acknowledged the possibility of getting a twelve-month job contract off the back of a trainee position but displayed no doubts regarding the chances of getting a mortgage with a temporary job contract. Further, this interpretation allows us to understand how George could hold such contradictory expectations, but does not explain *why*. His attachment to these hopes could be described as a “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011, p.1), an attachment to fantasies of a better life that is possibly out of reach, in ways that actually impede one’s aims. However, this still does not explain why George held onto such inconsistent optimism.

Participants also tended to avoid discussing hardships, either from their past or within their current precarious work. Some participants avoided describing their childhoods even when directly questioned. Eva immediately jumped to the point in her life when she went to university. Besides referring to speaking to the midwife who visited after her brother was born, she did not divulge any details about her life prior to applying to university, until after I had divulged similar details. Even then, this was reserved to saying that they “weren’t rich” and didn’t have such extravagant “foreign holidays” as her friends; Wanda never directly described her material circumstances growing up, and only hinted at them via allusions to factors known to contribute to deprivation. She stated she was raised by a single mother in the seventies, implying a particular significance to how these factors would have shaped her circumstances, and asserted that children weren’t “as valued as they are now” – implying that she feels like *she* wasn’t valued. Although she did not specify who she was not valued by, her positive appraisal of her mother would seem to leave only her father or the government as potential targets of this accusation. From what little Wanda said, I ascertained that her family of origin had a low income. Wanda asserted that she “struggled” but did not provide any details on what form those struggles took. Other participants provided inconsistent descriptions of their childhood circumstances, either by relating contradictory facts or (more typically) by providing summaries that did not match the facts provided. Amy described her family of origin’s financial circumstances as “fine”, despite mentions of having to be careful with money, and how her childhood circumstances taught her to be careful with money. Although Tracy was upfront about her childhood circumstances being “shit” she gave inconsistent explanations of why this was the case. She asserted that there is more

support available for poorer families now than there was in the seventies. This was the basis for her claim that her mother “did the best she could with what she had”. These comments were made in the context of Tracy attempting to explain why she wanted to do better for her children than her mother did for her, while emphasising that she did not place blame on her mother. However, she had said that her mother was “too proud to claim financial help from the government” indicating that help was available but that she did not claim it. It is unsurprising that these participants would be defensive about experiences from their childhoods, especially experiences of traumatic deprivation. However, such defenses were similarly evident in participants’ descriptions of their current or recent financial difficulties, even when these had apparently been less extreme. Tracy avidly avoided discussion of periods of financial difficulty, changing the subject each time such things were asked about (once by relating amusing anecdotes displaying her skills helping customers, then later by asking questions about where I live and praising Welsh beaches).

Ahmed indicated that he was, at time of his first interview, taking a break from his undergraduate course due to stress, which appeared to have been caused by balancing study with precarious work to pay his rent. This was not directly stated as the cause of the mental health problems that led to the break in studies, but this could be inferred via separate free-associations that contributed to his narrative. Ahmed mentioned having difficulty paying rent and bills while at university, despite working alongside his studies. These problems had seemingly been alleviated by moving back to the family home, but despite this he repeatedly mentioned a desire to not “have to worry about money”. Early in the first interview, Ahmed reported that he had previously had “money problems” which had caused “stress and anxiety”. He later reported that mental health issues had been a factor in deciding to take a break from studying: “I also had, um, maybe some mental health issues as well at that time. So, um, that's kind of, um, led me to have potentially take a break from studies…” Given the timing of the difficulties he had in work (i.e. during his studies) it seems likely that these caused Ahmed enough stress and anxiety to disrupt his studies. However, as noted, he only revealed this connection between his mental health problems and his money worries indirectly, providing the relevant information piecemeal. This itself could be significant.

Why did some participants deny or avoid discussing financial hardship and the worry surrounding it? Post-Kleinian psychodynamic theory allows us to understand this. As described in Chapter 3, the principals of post-Klein psychodynamics are central to the recommended approach to analysing data produced via FANIM. Klein claimed that the self was formed by unconscious psychological defenses, principally those that are required to repress anxieties (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p. 19). Klein viewed threats to personal survival as the root of our earliest anxieties, and postulated that they continue throughout our lives, being vital to our continued determination to survive (Hinshelwood and Fortuna 2018, pp. 54, 96, 100).

As with the research of fear of crime in which FANIM was first used, these interviews touch upon experiences and affect related to capacity for survival. Perhaps George was defending against annihilation anxiety prompted by awareness of his precarity. Starting from this assumption, an explanation presents itself: unable to deny negative aspects of his current precarity, George may have been splitting positive and negative perceptions of the future based on the contract type he would have. In Kleinian theory, this is one possible way that the mind defends itself, with particular objects being either denigrated as wholly bad or idealised as wholly good. Therefore, it is possible that George associated precarity with all that was bad: living in a small town, in one small room in his father's house. The twelve-month contract, contrastingly, represented "the start of my career". It was not, in George's mind, a temporary position and therefore not part of the phase of his life defined by precarity. This became the focus for his positive hopes for independence and security. Maintaining this perception (and hope) would require George to ignore any uncertainties that would remain once he got this contract.

This is not an unprecedented phenomenon, as shown by the earlier examples of Jack and Tracy also denying fears of financial hardship. Those participants' answers again lie within theories of annihilation anxieties, but also status anxieties, which are known to be a major source of stress (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019, pp. 33-35; Dickerson and Kemeny 2004) especially in highly unequal societies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019; Layte and Whelan 2014). The participants may have been either defending against annihilation anxieties associated with knowledge of possible extreme hardship, or hiding signs of hardship or related anxieties due to these being

seen as signs of weakness or low status. Both these defenses would serve neoliberal discourse. The former would limit acknowledgement of the potential harms of neoliberalism, while the latter would limit how much one can express regarding the actual harms of neoliberalism. From a Foucauldian perspective, these possibly illustrate examples of psychodynamic defenses serving as technologies of power, allowing neoliberalism to perpetuate itself because its negatives will be either unspoken or unrecognised.

These defenses should be considered in the context of neoliberalism, because of the theoretical assessments that link neoliberalism to precarity and anxieties surrounding threats to survival (Chernomas 2014, pp. 197-199; Scharff 2016) and to encouraging people to compete for status (Davies 2014, p. 197; Layton 2014a, p. 165; Littler 2013, p. 54). The role of neoliberalism should also be considered because there is evidence within the interviews that links these narratives with aspiration discourses and experiences of neoliberal policy reforms. Jack spoke of job insecurity being deliberately introduced:

> They started in their job and they retired in that job, with a tidy pension, right, and, er, and they did alright, like, and that paid their mortgage and dadadada. Well, that's all gone, isn't it? Like, do you know what I mean? So, um, the idea, like, so job insecurity. Job insecurity makes us fight each other for the jobs. Job insecurity [rep] makes us take lower wages… this thing has not been introduced by accident. {Oh no.} It's not a byproduct of capitalism or whatever. It's a... pointed attack on ordinary people… (Jack).

He also referred to concepts of aspiration as being founded in class conflict and a concept imposed on us by people in authority:

> …regarding mobility, [rep]why do you need to go anywhere? [rep] why do I need to change [rep] my designation? Right? {Mm.} And [rep] the [inaudible] that is projected on me? I mean, I might want to project something, but that's just me being pretentious. But other people will project something upon me. Like, you know, like, um, er, the voice of authority, right? The voice of authority, for me, is always gonna be an accent *like this* [RP accent]. {Mm.} You see? Because they're the ones that tell you off. They're the ones that tell

> you you're doing wrong, they're the ones that tell you dadadadadadada. Um, and all these things [rep] are just […] they're a nonsense. {Yeah.} We don't need them. Well, [rep] I don't need to wear a badge saying, 'I am this class' or 'that class'. I am the same as you, whether you like it or not (Jack).

Many aspects of the anxieties and defenses discussed are seen to impede the participants' pursuit of goals. Jack's denying worries and simultaneously avoiding potential sources of worry indicates that his anxiety concerning such affective experiences may have influenced his choices and construction of goals without him being aware of this. Tracy's defended anxieties concerning her financial stability and potentially facing conditions similar to her childhood experiences are a source of self-doubt that could be detrimental to her mental health or make it more difficult for her to make decisions regarding the work she takes on. George's inconsistent appraisals of his precarity and future prospects may make it harder for him to make beneficial choices regarding his work and housing. Ahmed had demonstrably had his mental health harmed by stress and precarity, and had his aspirational activities disrupted by these harms, but appeared at least partially defended regarding this.

5.3 Defended anxieties surrounding exhaustion and burnout.

This section makes the argument that some participants were puzzled by affective experiences that apparently stemmed from the stress of high-status work or pursuing mobility. They had defended against the causes of being stressed or burned out. Such defenses were hindering the ability to make decisions regarding their wellbeing and prospects.

There were also examples of participants appearing to be burned out or exhausted but actually lacking an awareness of this or otherwise being unable to *express* awareness of this. That is, there was evidence of burnout within several participants' narratives but participants gave little to no explicit acknowledgement of currently being burned out, or minimalised the significance of their exhaustion and the impact it had on their lives. This latter form of these defenses came most substantially from Michael, in discussing the cumulative impact of the long hours he had been working around the time of the interview.

> I guess it's cumulative. {Mm} It's, er, yeah, it shouldn't be. It shouldn't [rep]. {Hmm.} You might think that having had a night's sleep, I'd be refreshed the next day, [rep] which [rep] I am. In some ways. But [rep] it kind of […] it builds up. {No.} And [rep] when you're on your hundredth day of getting home and think 'oh, I've only got a few hours before I go again', then it's [...] it sort of gradually [...] (Michael).

Michael afterwards employed a natural law discourse in explaining the long hours and tight deadlines, and resulting tiredness, he sometimes has to deal with, saying that it is the "nature of the work". Michael seemed to employ this discourse as a means of dismissing thoughts of *why* his work features such challenges. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is typically the function of discourses that construct aspects of societies' organisation as natural, and therefore implied to be immutable, spontaneously occurring and morally neutral. This reference to natural law removes acknowledgement of Michael's contractors having agency (which is relevant to his apparent desire to perceive himself as having high levels of autonomy, as explored in 5.5 below). It also protects the discourse of empowered worker – by enduring the 'natural' challenges of his work, Michael validates his positioning as powerful and in control. The conflict becomes framed not as a power conflict between himself and contractors, but a struggle to endure natural forces. Michael alternately asserted his ability to overcome this 'natural' challenge and subtly denigrated himself for experiencing tiredness. This evokes Fisher's (2009) theory of capitalist realism, which asserted that capitalism has come to be regarded as representing a natural social order, and the only possible way to organise the economy. Michael's construction of inconvenient aspects of his role as the "nature of the work" implies a similar assumption on a more micro level – that specific features of employment are natural – aligning with what I will henceforth refer to as a capitalist realism discourse.

When he indicated that he shouldn't be tired because he sleeps each night and therefore should be refreshed (despite indicating that he often only sleeps for a few hours), Michael implied three beliefs – firstly, that he was deficient for being so severely impacted by his hard work. Secondly, that such long hours should not have a cumulative effect. Thirdly, that the hours he works are primarily dictated by natural factors, and not by client's decisions regarding deadlines.

Another way in which Michael indicated defenses against acknowledging exhaustion was where he asserted that being self-employed was like being “never at work or always at work”. He gave no explanation for how this is like being “never at work” but gave a detailed explanation of how it is like being “always at work”. He related this to his time spent finding work and communicating with contractors, which he claimed he did not limit to specific times (further elaborating that he will answer emails during leisure activities and is rarely “off completely”). He also said that he has completed reports while on holiday and had completed work while returning from a holiday. He explained this with a rhetorical question of “what else was I gonna be doing on a minibus?” Given that there would be multiple options (conversation, music, reading, audiobooks, and social media being a few possibilities), this claim to have nothing else he could do with the time seemed spurious. This lack of delineation between work and rest, coupled with his minimising the impact of this (it is balanced by his also being “never at work”) could contribute to accumulating fatigue and could be a defense against acknowledging the extent of his pressures.

Jude also displayed signs of burnout and of defending against knowledge of this. Jude made repeated references to being “in storage”, without defining this, other than to say it was while he “waits”. When he first raised this, it was in reference to his academic ambitions. This seemingly implied that he was waiting for opportunities. He spoke of trying to get articles published and how this could take years, implying that this was a strict prerequisite to beginning his career. However, several things cast doubt on this. Firstly, such achievements, although they greatly improve one’s chances of getting academic work, are not a strict prerequisite. It is unlikely that Jude, having completed a PhD, would be unaware of employment options that did not require publication. Secondly, Jude later indicated that it was not just academic employment that he was ‘in storage’ away from. He mentioned recent efforts to get ‘out of storage’ and in doing so referred to several other things he had not been doing for several months, including volunteer work, socialising and looking for work outside academia. He also discussed, at various points, his desire to move out of his parents’ house (where he had been staying since completing his degree and had chosen to remain for “a year or so” for similarly undefined reasons) but asserted that he was not currently willing to do this due to low income from the precarious work he was doing. However, this act of waiting would gradually deplete his savings and

reduce his ability to start an independent life. The most obvious interpretation of these comments is that Jude did not think it wise to move home without having a reliable income and was waiting for his career to start. It would be inappropriate to dismiss these factors. Regardless of his savings and the prospect of them being further diminished, it is understandable that Jude would not want to make any financial commitments while making only small amounts of money from a precarious job. However, this further supports the fact that some aspects of being ‘in storage’, such as not pursuing additional work, was not a practical choice.

Two manifestations of countertransference initially hindered my ability to understand Jude’s subjectivities but later proved key to deciphering why Jude had placed himself in ‘storage’. Jude exuded a low mood throughout most of the interview. He spoke slowly and somewhat listlessly, rarely displaying enthusiasm or strong emotion. This low mood was infectious, producing feelings in myself akin to boredom and frustration. I quickly realised these responses were not true to my own attitude towards the interview, or feelings on how it was progressing (since Jude’s narratives were fascinating and relatable), and thus recognised them as affect I was picking up from Jude. However, this did little to help me to think objectively about Jude’s narratives or understand the reasons Jude was feeling this way and unconsciously transferring those feelings to me. Secondly, Jude admitted that he sometimes judged himself for his circumstances:

> …it's that voice. It comes from the place {Yeah} in your head, of like self-doubt and self-criticism. Um, but like [rep] you know [rep] you do question all your life choices. And it is purely because of like an internalised thing that like you know internal thing that I have, which is like, you know, if you're not [sighs] you know, moving on in some way with your life {Mm}. Being independent. You know, furthering your career in whatever way, then like it's, you know, it's terrible (Jude).

This judgement was tangibly transferred to me during our interactions, as I found myself judging Jude for not making more effort to be aspirational and independent, despite my not viewing these actions as virtues or obligations, and not normally being inclined to judge people for their finances or employment. This was related, in part, to my confusion as to his reasons for being in “storage”. It remained possible

that it was Jude's intention to indicate that he was in storage because of waiting for opportunities in academia, but if this was the case then the logical inconsistencies and false assumptions this idea depends on still indicated that Jude was defending against some separate anxieties.

When this analysis was halfway completed, I experienced a trauma that allowed greater insight into Jude's affective realities. My wife went into hospital for surgery and then suffered a series of near-fatal health problems stemming from post-operative complications. For several weeks, I felt unable to work even though I was not entitled to paid leave at that time. Returning to this analysis when my wife was recovering, I felt more empathy with Jude's apparent *need* to be in "storage", regardless of whether or not it increased his precarity. The more I thought about his narratives of being in storage, the more I identified with them and found myself recognising my own tendency to procrastinate in the face of adversity, even if associated risks will increase with time. I realised there was evidence that Jude was 'burned out' and needed rest. He had mentioned, in passing, having previously been "a bit burned out and tired" after finishing his thesis and before moving in with his parents, but had not indicated that this state had lasted or if he had or had not recovered. He also referred to a "PhD sort-of break", but all these observations were presented in the past tense. This suggests he was having difficulty with perceiving his current self as 'burned out'. Jude had also briefly mentioned a breakup that occurred around the time of completing his thesis, due to his not having enough time for his partner. He blamed the pressure of completing his thesis for the breakdown of the relationship: "it wrecked a relationship I was in at the time". This relationship was at a serious stage, as Jude described "going back to" his partner each day, indicating that they had been cohabiting. Having spotted the significance of this, I understood that Jude felt the need for a period of "storage" to recover from the emotional trauma of the separation and the stress of completing the PhD.

Amy similarly gave signs of having been burned out by work but seemed unable to apply her knowledge of this to understanding her current state. She made repeated references (over one hundred) to being short of time, to lacking time to complete tasks, and to time seeming to pass quickly. After initially seeming perplexed by this, she eventually attributed these experiences and perceptions to her age, saying that

she thought her body and brain were slowing down. There were, however, signs that Amy remained vital and energetic. She was reportedly only in her fifties, and her dynamic speech patterns and mannerisms had initially made me assume she was in her forties. More pertinently, Amy made references to full-time work being too tiring for her: “I can't go back to IT because that was full on.”; I don't envy people going to work all day every day…”; “when I was in my IT role, um, I worked really hard…”; “I don't think I could go back to full-time work. I'm just like, I've been out of full-time work for so long, I don't want to have to do full time work again.” The way that Amy repeatedly returned to her preoccupation with time, suggested a need to express something that was troubling her on a deeper level. Her apparent inability to connect this to stress or tiredness suggests a defense of some form here. It’s important to be clear that Amy’s last experience of full-time employment was over ten years prior to the interviews, and so it may not be realistic to posit that she was still suffering burnout from this. However, it may be that Amy experienced some form of work-related burnout that continued to deter her and that she was suffering a similar form of exhaustion in the wake of her stressful divorce and experiences in precarious work: “it's very stressful.... to some extent, it's made me obsess about how I spend my money.”

There were other signs of defenses surrounding Amy’s motivations for having quit her IT career (which are explored fully in 5.4). These involved Amy appearing unable or unwilling to speak more about her ethical concerns surrounding the impact of her work on other employees, and repeatedly insisting, unprompted, that she left the career to have children. Within this exchange, as we see later, Amy appeared to have multiple layered defenses, such that the deepest level of defense could not be identified, but it seemed as though burnout may have played a part in her motivations, and that this may be one thing she was defending against.

Why deny the reality of this? We can trace this back to both annihilation anxieties (e.g. if I cannot cope with these demands I will perish) or to status anxieties associated with the societal obligation to be resilient and able to cope with demanding situations. However, Amy did not seem ashamed of her reluctance to work full time. She may have been defended about the tiredness itself, which would suggest that it was the annihilation anxiety she was defending against rather than

any social judgement. Alternatively, she may have been defended regarding the reasons for her tiredness, perhaps unable to face the factors that had caused her to reject full-time work, or unable to face the emotional exhaustion she had suffered because of her divorce. This may be related to her associating the feelings of burnout with other truths that she was defending against, as I explore when talking about participants' anxieties surrounding their career choices.

For the majority of participants who showed signs of being defended on the subject of their burnout, it seems that it was the idea of their vulnerability itself that was the primary thing they were defending against. Amy and Jude were both upfront about their reservations surrounding employment and yet still struggled to acknowledge their mental fatigue. However, policies used to incentivise aspiration are not necessarily blameless here, as they do increase the threat of financial hardship and the pressures that contribute to burnout. Amy and Jude were both short of work and income at the times of their interviews. Furthermore, the discourses surrounding these do tend to denigrate physical and emotional vulnerability (Layton 2010) and therefore could be components of technologies that prompt anxiety surrounding vulnerability.

Michael's defenses against his anxiety surrounding tiredness, and the causes of this, will likely make it more difficult for him to make healthy decisions regarding his future workload and this career path. Jude's apparent defenses regarding his burnout, and regarding his uncertainty surrounding academia, will likely make it more difficult for him to make suitable choices on career paths and on when and how to come out of "storage". Similarly, Amy's defenses regarding her perception of time and possible prior burnout from working full time, may cause her to lack an awareness of her needs when making future career choices. Any goals the participants decide on or pursue without a clear awareness of their stressors and limitations could be undermined by similar challenges. The anxiety surrounding vulnerability, possibly based on neoliberal discourses of independence and rationality, could therefore be seen to potentially reduce participants' capacity to manage their mental health alongside their pursuit of goals

5.4 Defended anxieties surrounding career choices

This section makes the argument that many participants were defended regarding their motivations for making certain career choices, or for contemplating future career moves, particularly moves into or out of certain lucrative careers. These choices could hinder their ability to make career choices that suit their emotional needs.

Several participants displayed or asserted a lack of knowledge of their own motives for their career choices. Eva could not explain why she had become a midwife, beyond saying she developed the idea after speaking to the midwife who delivered her younger brother and that it was a 'vocation'. This may not have appeared psychosocially significant on its own, but it directly contrasted with Eva's assessment of other young women's reasons for choosing that career. Explaining that she thought there was a shortage of midwives because they were recruiting too many young people who were unprepared for the demands of the role, and therefore quit after a few years, Eva asserted that young people choose midwifery because they have seen Call the Midwife: "They don't realise what it actually involves. {Right. Right. So [inaudible]} They might watch Call the Midwife and think... that's a nice job {[laughter]} Cuddling all those babies…" This is enormously different from her assessment of it as a "vocation", which was the discursive formation she drew on when trying to decipher her own motives, especially since the context and phrasing suggested that this was a general comment about midwifery, that people drawn to the profession generally view it as a vocation: "…people do say things like midwifery, it's not a career choice, it is a vocation. It's just something you're born to do…" This uncertainty and inconsistency surrounding motives was further complicated by Eva not being able to give any other explanation for why she wanted to be a midwife: "I've got no idea [laughter] {You don't know [laughter]} I don't know…. I remember my brother being born... I remember the midwife coming out to see, um, him at home, and asking her a few questions about what she was doing and why she was doing it, and I think it's just in my head ever since."

Eva also persistently discussed her desire to change careers, but purely in ways which were non-critical of midwifery – she wanted a change, or a chance to use her skills differently, and emphasised (unprompted) that her looking for other jobs was

not because of being unhappy with her current work. As we shall explore further in 5.6, she also mentioned multiple unpleasant aspects of the job but claimed not to be affected by them as much as her coworkers: “…not as much, I would say, as [rep] the permanent staff, but yeah, it does get wearing….” It seemed that Eva was defended on the subject of her feelings toward her career, her reasons for pursuing it, and her desire to leave. Taking Kleinian theory as a jumping-off point again, it seems that Eva may have chosen midwifery without a clear idea of the pressures it would entail. She laughed joyously when talking about her positive experience of going part-time. She may have been projecting her feelings (and her unacknowledged motives) towards the job onto colleagues who had quit. The psychic defense of projection involves attributing thoughts and feelings that are perceived to be negative or inappropriate to other people. Eva seemed to partly blame the high take-up rate for early retirement for the lack of staff and resulting pressure on the service, saying, “I think that there's always been a shortage of midwives, [rep] you know, probably with any, um, healthcare profession, um, but with the pandemic I think a lot of, um, people took early retirement. Those who were about are going just, sort of, ‘sod it, I mean, [rep] I'm gonna retire now’ so they took early retirement” and “it's hard now. [rep] it's the worst I've ever known it, in terms of staffing”. Although Eva did not directly denigrate the midwives who had left (apart from the young midwives who she thought joined without understanding the pressures) her perception that high numbers of people leaving midwifery was putting strain on the service suggested that the thought of leaving the job herself, for similar reasons, may cause her some shame that she would have difficulty facing.

Eva had constructed midwifery as something she had been ‘called on’ to do, perhaps by some instinct or destiny, but also revealed through her choice of words that she viewed social mobility as the working class “…trying to sort of better themselves? Or ,um, improve themselves?”, drawing on deficiency discourses that frame the working class as needing improvement, and that she was the first person in her family to attend university (thus, in her terminology, improve herself). She said little about her circumstances prior to this, except to say that her friends’ families could afford to go on better holidays than hers could, implying some envy of their lifestyles. If Eva felt that becoming a midwife was both a nice job that involved cuddling babies, and a path to escaping the denigrated working-class position, then this would plausibly

lead to her struggling to face how she feels about her career that she has devoted several decades of her life to.

Amy had similar difficulties explaining (or confronting) her motives for a career choice, in this case having already left a previous career. Having previously worked full time in IT for ten years, she had given up a well-paid career and become a stay-at-home mother. Initially, she hinted at multiple reasons for this change without explicitly identifying one. She mentioned that what she had been doing was “making other people redundant”, that she realised this around the same time she realised “there’s more to life than going to work and making money” and that she was glad to be “able to step away and have children”. Curiously, she employed the phrase “more to life” again when talking about building her own business:

> …there's got to be more to my life [rep]. {Mm.} It's a bit like[...] why was I put here? you know, I was like, ‘I don't’[...] At the end of the day, when I go to my grave[...] what will I have achieved? Okay, I've got two great children. They've, you know, they're growing up… they're hopefully gonna do, you know, work hard [rep] and do good things for themselves, but [rep] what will I have to show for my life? So, part of me is still looking for that. You know, I've done stuff, but... it’s nothing significant. I've just... trundled along through life. And do I [rep] how do I want people to remember me? (Amy).

She also spoke of how she couldn’t “go back to IT because that was full on”, implying a degree of exhaustion from intense work (as explained in 5.3). I sought to address this minor inconsistency during the second interview and began by following up on how Amy felt about “making other people redundant”. Amy seemed to either have difficulty answering or was reluctant to answer. Asked about her comment that making people redundant “wasn’t a great feeling” and whether this was an ethical dilemma, she replied: “…yes and no. I mean, [rep] it wasn't that much of an ethical dilemma, as it were, it was, you know, [rep]I think the first [...] it was that I was, you know, I'd approached thirty and thought, ‘maybe, you know, I should be thinking about the children [rep] thing as well’”. When I fed back an interpretation that she “just didn’t feel great about the job” she asserted that this was “part of the decision but not all of the decision…” and she finally let out a frustrated sigh when I speculated that it wasn’t what she wanted to do. It is important to note that I was not

questioning Amy about her reasons for quitting, only her feelings regarding the role, but she repeatedly reasserted that she quit to have children instead of talking about how she felt about the role.

Was Amy, as speculated in 5.3, defending against acknowledging burnout because of discourses that promote productivity and perseverance and denigrate vulnerability? Was she defending against said burnout because it brought up annihilation anxieties? Was she defending against criticising the ethics of her former career due to a commitment to discourses of benevolent business, or to defend against feelings of personal guilt? Was her unprompted insistence that she left her career to have children driven by guilt surrounding mixed motivations for having children? If so, what does this say about her feelings concerning her ex-husband, who she said “had got to do great things because of [rep] because I was there, um, looking after the children in the background…”

There is little direct evidence of any of these things, and as much as each of these explanations appear to fit what Amy expressed and how she expressed it, I remain uncertain of what was underpinning her mixed and apparently defended accounts of this dramatic life change, and unable to make confident claims. It is at least clear that Amy was defended regarding the circumstances surrounding the end of her IT career and start of her time as a stay-at-home mother, as well as her feelings regarding her previous role or her motives for leaving. Societal expectations appeared to play a role in that, and Amy’s pondering of how she would like to do something significant that was expressive of her individuality drew upon aspiration discourses that seemed entangled with these internal desires and her reluctance to contemplate her reasons for leaving her career.

I felt curiosity and confusion regarding why Amy was initially vague about her feelings, why she was later so doggedly insistent that she left specifically to have children, why she was so reluctant to comment on the morality of her former career despite having previously implied concerns regarding this, and why she made repeated references to how she could not return to that career because it was “full on” and she could not “go back to full time work…” because “it's very time consuming, and I'm finding that my time is, um, it flies by”. The interpretation I favour is that Amy was defending against multiple anxieties associated with having ended

her career. Firstly, she was not motivated purely by a desire to have children but wished to believe this. Motherhood mandate discourses of the duties of motherhood (Gotlib 2016), which are rooted in patriarchal pronatalism, may have produced guilt associated with her having had multiple reasons for this major life change, making Amy feel as though any reason beyond an uncomplicated desire to have children is selfish. This defensive belief may also have served as a defense against resentment of her husband's success that she facilitated. Secondly, as discussed in 5.3, she had suffered some degree of burnout or exhaustion as a result of this full-time high-pressure career and seemed to be anxious about the topic of having felt that way. Thirdly, she appeared to have anxieties surrounding the ethical implications of the job she had done – despite briefly objecting to how it had made other people redundant, she later resisted prompts to comment further on this, repeatedly avoiding the question to re-assert that she left the job to have children, suggesting a blockage. It seemed that this was an attempt to avoid confronting her feelings regarding her former position, as well as an effort to avoid any implication that she may have had multiple reasons for becoming a stay-at-home mother. As is explored in more depth in 6.2, Amy also appeared to be defended regarding her feelings regarding her divorce and her ex-husband, and there were signs of her associating the feelings with her experiences in precarious work, perhaps displacing those feelings onto her employers. Amy appeared to have suffered burnout due to overwork and perhaps guilt over redundancies. This informed her decision to leave work and coincided with deciding to have children. For whatever reason, Amy does not wish to closely examine this burnout or the ethical dilemmas, preferring to frame motherhood as the only pertinent reason for the decision.

Amy appeared to express resentment of having put career aside so her husband could do "great things" while also vehemently denying any motives for becoming a stay-at-home mother beyond wanting to have children. Amy's ex-husband appeared particularly dedicated to his work, having worked away a lot. Amy may have formed a resentment of her husband having done this while her career was abandoned, but this is at least partly informed by defended anxieties surrounding her burnout and ethical dilemma.

Amy's future career ambitions centred on phantasies (for these were not yet solid plans) of starting a business, which was discussed in the wake of her statement that "there's got to be more to my life". Amy drew on discourses of legacy and accomplishment ("when I go to my grave […] what will I have achieved?" and "how will people remember me?") and significance "I've done stuff but… nothing significant". Explicitly linking to career-as-purpose discourses, Amy suggested that this would address bigger questions such as "why am I existing?". Amy acknowledged the things she had achieved in her family life, but sometimes minimalised the importance of them, referring to having lived "just because so that I could have two children" and referred to helpful acts she had done for others as "little things". She lamented how she "didn't reach great peaks in my career" in contrast with how her husband "got to do great things". Amy therefore seemed to think within the career-as-purpose discourse that is fairly pervasive in both political ideology and mainstream media. Amy constructed achievement as synonymous with significant career success. Amy was not speaking about these accomplishments as something she hoped to be praised and recognised for in life. Rather she specifically mentioned "when I go to my grave" and how she wanted to be remembered. She also framed these ideas as more personal and individual than things she had done for people in her personal life, describing her potential business as "something that is me". This is entirely consistent with neoliberal discourses of individualism and self-expression and status acquisition through career success. Despite having previously acknowledged that there is more to life than work, Amy was unable to construct general good deeds and helpfulness as "great things" or "significant" or an expression of her identity, compared to aspirational and entrepreneurial activities. This did not sit altogether comfortably alongside her stated aversion to full time work and her much-discussed shortage of time. It may be that there was an unstated assumption on Amy's part that starting a business need not be time-consuming, but this seems unlikely. Instead, it may be that discourses of entrepreneurialism and business as an achievement that grants meaning to the span of one's life disallows acknowledgement of the likely practical difficulties or the possibly similar time-demands of entrepreneurialism. It may also be that Amy was so invested in this idea that she was defending against the knowledge that this would likely demand a significant time-commitment.

All of this is important for the sake of understanding Amy's ruminations over her job options going forward. If she was suffering burnout but was unable to acknowledge this, and unable to acknowledge the potential demands of starting a business, this could have serious consequences as she pursues her goals. Alternatively, if she left her IT career for ethical reasons, or because of pressure from her spouse, then her reluctance to admit this indicates internal conflicts that she needs to resolve before she can fully understand *why* she feels the need to do something "significant" and why she feels a business venture would satisfy this need.

Wanda mentioned early on in her interview that as an agency nurse she feels obligated to go into work "all-singing, all dancing, happy and jolly". This is straightforward enough, but Wanda also quite suddenly began to contemplate her emotional state and ruminate on how often one can be happy. Wanda asserted that people are not "happy" all the time, and therefore cannot accurately describe their ongoing, continuous state as "happy". Rather, she asserted that it was more appropriate to think in terms of whether one is content, elaborating that though she may only be "happy" twenty percent of the time, she is "content a hundred percent of the time". Clearly, she is not literally "happy" for much of the time. This is probably typical of most people, but Wanda's sudden impulse to discuss this in relation to us exchanging observations on how our lives had improved (with "happiness" itself not a topic of discussion at that point) seemed to indicate something deeper at work, perhaps a need to talk about her lack of happiness. The cause of this lack of happiness was unclear, and may have stemmed purely from Wanda's depression, but Wanda's apparent need to speak of the events that had led to her choice of becoming a nurse (having "struggled" for most of her life, being a carer for her grandmother, her conflicts with her employers in the clinic where she had previously been employed full time, and her mother's passing) and the ways these experiences were entangled with her self-confessed tendency to be aggressive, suggested that these past experiences and the career choices were a possible factor. For example, Wanda's account of the reasons for her depression and her reported prior tendency to be "aggressive" varied. At first, both were suggested to be results of her mother's death, and her "crying for help". However, she later attributed a tendency to not "consider other people's feelings" to her formative years, having "struggled for everything" and caring for her grandmother. She mentioned that one symptom of her

depression was acting aggressive as a means of “protecting herself”. Wanda was initially attributing these problems solely to the death of her mother, but she later attributed her difficulty considering other’s feelings to her early struggles and feeling like she needed to “struggle forever”. The only moment that Wanda displayed anything akin to the aggressiveness she described was snapping at me when I appeared to disagree with her regarding whether teenagers need to make career choices. Wanda’s momentary aggressiveness possibly related to her reported reasons for becoming a nurse. This decision was informed by her being a carer for her grandmother (because her mother had a weak stomach) and by her mother’s encouragement. Given that the topic at hand when Wanda became confrontational was early years career choices, perhaps Wanda had conflicted feelings regarding her own choices. Additionally, Wanda’s early dominance of the interview, despite seeming to be a defense, focussed on critiquing aspects of her employment experiences. Although she later claimed to be “happy with life” and “enjoy the work”, this claim of being happy was seemingly a manifestation of her previously mentioned tendency to describe herself as happy when this is not a state she expects to be in most of the time, and may explain her free-associating towards defining happiness.

Jude, as discussed in 5.3, above, made references to being in storage without defining what this meant, and to “waiting” without indicating what he was waiting for. As previously explained, Jude’s references to “waiting” and being “in storage” were somewhat difficult to explain without recourse to psychodynamic theory. While they appeared to be Jude’s way of conveying that he was recovering from burnout and emotional distress (under the guise of waiting for his academic career to begin) this was not the only possible explanation. Jude also alluded to the upsides of having few hours in work, saying, “…like painting... when I had more time. But um, like I wouldn't, you know, and I wouldn't have done that otherwise, and yeah like I think it's something which I [inaudible] channel ideas.” Beyond the assertion that there are positives to taking down-time, this held further implications because Jude had previously spoken of generating “ideas” in relation to thinking of alternative career paths: “See what happens in the next six months, if this project actually comes through or not, and then I'll reconsider. [rep] The other effect of, like, being in this, like, weird situation, is that also, I've started to have, like, [laughter] all these fantastical ideas and, like, things you could do instead”. Despite these being

ostensibly back-up career paths if Jude does not manage to get into academia, taken together with Jude's vaguely explained reasons for being in storage and his lack of acknowledgement of alternative paths into academia, it's plausible that this time away from work was helping him generate ideas for how he may reappraise his career ambitions. Throughout the interview, he mentioned multiple negative aspects to academia and negative experiences he'd had associated with academia but also mentioned his father's firm belief that Jude's education should lead directly to employment. His construction of higher education as a stressful and destructive activity that involved burnout, feelings of being in a "race against time" to complete his thesis, and the breakdown of a relationship, suggested that Jude had some negative experiences associated with the end of his most recent encounter with academia. Doubts about the desirability of an academic career were absent from Jude's discourses, (which focused only on the difficulties of attainment), but so were references to the recent reduction of money and opportunities within the academy. Jude may have rendered the idea of *choosing* to change paths (rather than being forced to reconsider due to lack of options) unthinkable. Such a choice would not fit within the action orientations made available within dominant neoliberal discourses of career progression. Jude said that "It feels a bit of a waste if I've, like, done the PhD and all that sort training and work and then it's not gonna matter for your career" discussing a personal investment in using the PhD informed by a form of sunk-cost fallacy (Thaler 1980). Also, as mentioned above, Jude appeared to be generating alternative career ideas. Perhaps, then, Jude was conflicted over his desire to enter academia and placing himself in storage while he reconciled these doubts and considered other options. Although it remains possible that Jude was actually only concerned about the likelihood of finding work in academia, his procrastination in actually applying for such jobs suggests an unconscious motivation.

Many participants displayed signs of self-criticism related to neoliberal values that they otherwise claimed to reject or simply did not apply to others. Two of these participants spoke of experiencing "self-imposed" pressure to improve their prospects. Dee reported "a self-imposed pressure in that I personally felt like I should apply for jobs related to my qualification". Jude similarly spoke of judgement he inflicts on himself due to his employment status:

> Evil voice on your shoulder like telling you, you know, you're worthless and shit and everything, you know, [rep] it's that voice. It comes from the place {Yeah} in your head, of like self-doubt and self-criticism. Um, but like [rep] you know [rep] you do question all your life choices. And it is purely because of like an internalised thing that like you know internal thing that I have, which is like, you know, if you're not [sighs] you know, moving on in some way with your life {Mm}, being independent. You know, furthering your career in whatever way, then like it's, you know, it's terrible (Jude).

We see here an example of how people can construct experiences and the affect that arises from them as natural or the result of their own allegedly flawed psychology. By constructing these thoughts and feelings as self-inflicted, they are no longer viewed as being influenced by external discourses and circumstances. Within the ontology that this thesis is working from (and, arguably, also within dominant discursive formations of how human consciousness works) such spontaneous manifestations of self-criticism and self-pressure could not occur. All humans are at least partially the product of their socialisation, and discourse constitutes and limits what we can think and speak about. Any urge these participants felt to criticise or pressure themselves must have been related to discourses that construct particular actions or inactions as undesirable thus indicating a need for shame. The fact that these participants constructed these psychological outcomes as self-inflicted rather than the result of discourses and/or affective responses to modes of governance, shifts the blame for stigmatisation from outside actors to themselves as (apparently) fully self-created fully agentic actors. This is emblematic of the established tendency within meritocracy and aspiration discourses to attribute blame to those experiencing hardship. The parallel here seems almost uncanny, as the idea of spontaneously occurring self-inflicted negative thoughts is itself not a part of these discourses but nonetheless echoes their impacts and serves to conceal and reinforce their affects, functioning as a technology of control.

This section has demonstrated ways in which some participants' career choices had apparently been influenced by motives that they had subsequently defended against, suggesting that these motives had produced anxiety. Eva's apparently defended reasons for wanting to be a midwife, coupled with her defending against negative

feelings regarding her continuing in this role, were demonstrably making it difficult for her to decide her next career step. The subtle indications that this career choice may have been linked to neoliberal discourses of aspiration and class-deficiency suggest that these discourses compelled her toward a career that, though prosperous, has turned out to be unpleasant for her, and have made it more difficult for her to achieve adequate awareness of her motivations and needs. Amy's anxieties and defenses regarding her reasons for leaving her IT career, and her anxieties concerning the chance of achieving some form of neoliberal self-expression through enterprise, may cause problems if she does eventually build a business. Wanda's defenses regarding her happiness, her conception of happiness, her enjoyment of her work, and the reasons for her depression and aggressiveness, all apparently link back to her career choice and the motives behind it. Jude, in addition to his defenses regarding his burnout, is blaming himself for his stalled career and was defending against the discursive roots of such self-denigration, potentially exacerbating an already acute confusion regarding his desired goals.

5.5 Defended anxieties surrounding flexibility and independence.

This section makes the argument that some participants were defended regarding their level of autonomy within their current roles, opting to believe that they had more flexibility than they really did and thus ignoring violations of their autonomy and impositions upon their leisure time. This would render it difficult for these participants to change their working practices or employment in ways that better meet their desire for flexibility, and may encourage continued adherence to work types that do not benefit them as much as they believe they do.

Several participants endorsed the flexibility that their mode of working provided. For some participants this made sense for them and their individual circumstances, but for others it appeared to be drawing upon flexibility discourses.

Eva said that she had changed to agency work for the flexibility, and that this was "the main thing" despite the money also being better, because it allowed her "quite a good work-life balance". Tracy explained that flexibility was vital for her due to chronic health conditions that sometimes prevented her from working, pointing out

that “when you do have a long-term health condition or disability, zero-hours is awesome”. Given Tracy’s self-reported health conditions and Eva’s financially stable circumstances that have resulted from her decades of full time work it is easy to see why this type of working appeals to them (despite Tracy qualifying her praise of zero-hours contracts by saying they are “abused by management…” and “used as a form of, um, punishment and reward…” and despite her defenses indicating that her contract perhaps does not always provide sufficient income). However, for Michael, despite his positive statements about his flexibility, there were signs that his flexibility was not only somewhat limited – due to preparation and self-promotion tasks overlapping with leisure time, and due to frequently tight schedules partly determined by contractors – but that he felt the need to oversell his autonomy and control.

Michael’s accounts of his freedom to take days off work seemed to be the least consistent part of his narratives. He initially stated that it was more a question of if he can *afford* the time off rather than if he can *get* the time off. This seemed to allude to his choices in how much work he books, but was later illuminated by an account of informing a company that he would be unavailable on a particular day and them getting someone else in. He also asserted that he could phone up when needed and tell the contractors he was unavailable on particular days. He qualified this, however, in saying that it shouldn’t affect his employability if it is only “one occasion”, and that he does not misuse this option, implying that rescheduling too often *would* affect his employability. Finally, towards the end of the final interview, Michael claimed that when he needs time off he can just tell contractors to “deal with it!” As well as this contrasting with his previous suggestion that this option should not be misused, it seems unlikely that delivering this news in such a confrontational way would go over well, and unlikely that Michael would genuinely do this. Although Michael likely said this jokingly, not intending it to be taken literally, this still raises the question of why he felt the urge to display such bravado. There was no other instance in the interviews where he overtly ‘flexed’ or attempted to present himself as especially assertive.

Michael needed to dedicate significant amounts of time and effort to securing work and planning his projects. He dismissed the importance of this by saying that he factored it into his invoices (albeit by adding to the cost of fieldwork, rather than

charging directly for planning) and dismissed the value of the personal time he puts into these tasks. However, by discussing these features of his working life repeatedly, mentioning the interruption of casual leisure activities, admitting a deliberate delineation between his work time and his personal time, and claiming to have nothing else to do in situations where alternative activities would clearly have been available, Michael revealed a situation where he is simply “always at work” (as previously explored in 5.3). This recurring narrative theme and these subtle ‘confessions’, juxtaposed with his desire to overstate his autonomy, indicate that Michael had adopted a protective subject positioning of somebody who has full control over his work hours and costs, but perhaps retained feelings of powerlessness and injustice that he felt the need to express without recourse to acknowledging that they are caused by his circumstances. It was clear that work, including the unpaid work of finding and planning jobs, consumed a great deal of Michael’s time and energy, that he was defended regarding how demanding and tiring his work can be (and the reasons this is the case), and that he rarely gives himself time to completely switch off. He also held himself to quite high expectations regarding how much work he could do with little rest. He did not comment on the extent to which these tasks are essential to his security. To him they simply “made sense”. This was possibly a means of defending against the anxiety that comes with his precarity and the work required to safeguard himself against financial shortfalls, by being pragmatic about how he manages his time and work-life balance.

Michael’s defenses regarding the extent that work impinges on his leisure time, and the extent that he has to do unpaid work to maintain his self-employment, will again make it more difficult for him to achieve a work-life balance and may limit his ability to make healthy choices regarding his work in the long-term.

5.6 Defended anxieties surrounding unpleasant aspects of work

This section makes the argument that participants were defended regarding undesirable or stressful experiences in work, and at times defended regarding the cause of these. They thus were defended regarding their level of satisfaction with

their work and/or careers, in ways that would hinder their ability to make career changes that would benefit them.

Most participants spoke openly about the less pleasant aspects of their work, and some took the interviews as an opportunity to vent. However, there were some who, although they acknowledged problems within their roles, avoided considering the implications and potential consequences of these for themselves or others.

Eva spoke at length about the stresses being experienced by other midwives, particularly due to the Covid-19 pandemic: “…people are tired, they've had enough. They don't want the extra work now… They're just exhausted. {Yeah, from the past year and a half.} Um, there's a lot of sickness. Um, not just Covid-related sickness but stress-related.” The stresses she went on to mention included the additional strain caused by mothers coming in with Covid and having to maintain and enforce general safety precautions, but she denied that she was experiencing these herself – “I think I've avoided the worst of it, um, literally because I can pick and choose when I want to work, and where I want to work.” The reasons she gave for her apparent resistance to this stress seemed defensive, as they did not match the problems she had described and therefore did not seem like suitable remedies to them – for example, she claimed that her ability to switch workplaces meant it was “quite nice for me. I don't always work in the same place. You know, cos I work nationwide. So I don't caught up with all [rep] the politics and the management.” This was despite having not listed workplace politics as a problem and having asserted that she had experienced no problems with coworkers.

Ahmed similarly chose to speak of challenging aspects of being a carer as though they were problems for other people, rather than himself. This was sometimes indicated by his speaking in the third person whenever he explained these challenges: “you know, when you’re caring for someone it can be like very frustrating actually, just sometimes like um when the person you're looking after, they're very um can be [rep] a bit [rep] they're just maybe a bit… they're difficult, being difficult”. Like Eva, he also felt the need to claim that these problems were worse for other people than they were for him, transitioning from discussing his problems to claiming he did not experience these problems: “…it's so difficult, like, er, you can't um, go out when you want, like, especially if he's up and around. I mean technically here, [rep]

in my home, like um, since there's multiple carers you can [...] it's my mum and myself, you can like kinda go out and [inaudible] the other pressures at home…". This impulse to minimise his own problems in comparison to others has several possible explanations. Either Ahmed was telling himself that this issue doesn't affect him in order to avoid facing the anxiety that such restriction prompts in him (an example of the defense mechanism of denial), or he was reluctant to express discontent with his situation, either due to guilt for resenting his family's needs, or guilt over complaining about a problem which is experienced more acutely by others. This latter reflects a common discourse that one should not complain about one's circumstances because other people are experiencing worse. Although not known to be a neoliberal technology, it is easy to see how such action orientations could help preserve the status quo within a competitive system where there is likely always somebody worse off.

For George, it was the *implications* of the problems he was experiencing that were either defended against or unrecognised. Although he spoke extensively of the problems finding work in the TV and film industry, he addressed these only as practical obstacles to be overcome and refrained from making any overt moral judgement of these or considering the potential wider impacts. For example, he spoke of the need to know the correct people in order to get jobs and objected to a director hiring a friend who had no experience despite wanting to know George's experience before hiring him. He spoke of not being able to apply for jobs through normal avenues, and how not getting along with a particular person can harm employability. At no point did he name these issues as nepotism, or even use popular adages such as 'it's who you know, not what you know'. George did not discuss how nepotism can contribute to social congestion and deny opportunities to those from lower class positions, he only acknowledged the challenges it created for him and mostly focused on what he needed to do to overcome these. This approach to problematizing seemed to reflect a pragmatic discourse of 'that's the way it is'. As previously mentioned, such discourses of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009) tend to frame undesirable social circumstances as unchangeable (and often as naturally occurring rather than deliberately built) and thus exclude consideration of the principles behind them or any potential for change.

Michael, as explored under 5.3 and 5.5, also tended to frame certain aspects of his work as immutable, and alternately championed his ability to manage them or queried his inability to manage them. He also tended to minimalise several work-related problems, (such as irregular pay, occasional long hours, tiredness, delineation between personal time and work-related tasks), and exaggerate the positives (such as flexibility). The details and implications of these minimalisations and exaggerations have already been discussed. What I should add to those analyses here is the alternate explanation that Michael was denying unpleasant aspects of his work generally in order to continue feeling positive about it, so that affective responses that could challenge his ability to happily continue his work could be avoided or repressed. This explanation could also be applied to the other participants who were defending against unpleasant aspects of their work. If we were to accept this explanation, then this would be similar to emotional labour required in many jobs, except employed for the sake of the worker's own affective stability and comfort.

Immutability discourses often coexist with adaptability discourses, wherein the individual either has no choice but to change themselves to overcome the structural problems or where doing so is an obligation within the action orientations of the discourse. Can we make sense of this within a Kleinian framework? Speculatively, we could say that such discourses that obligate strong action orientations prompt anxieties concerning failure to abide by those action orientations. Certainly, there are elements of aspiration discourse that champion people ignoring the wider implications of social problems and focussing on how they as individuals can address their problems. Additionally, it may be that considering the wider implications of such circumstances can cause some people an intolerable level of anxiety due to how it may require acknowledging power imbalances, unpleasant aspects of lived experiences, and additional challenges to survival. Such adaptability discourses tend to frame undesirable situations as things that can and should be weathered and place the onus to change on the person or persons suffering from those circumstances. Although this can provide motivation for individuals to persevere and overcome challenges through learning, it also excludes consideration that outside forces are responsible for having built those unpleasant circumstances and that they should perhaps be changed.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to build the argument that precarity and neoliberalism create various psychosocial impacts that are harmful to individuals and counterproductive to the pursuit of various goals including ‘aspirational’ behaviour.

Neoliberalism carries within it the action orientation of being a ‘rational actor’ (Binkley 2011b, Layton 2014a) – it imposes a moral obligation on people to make ‘rational’ decisions oriented towards maximising their own financial success and productivity, and in doing so stimulate growth and remove themselves as a potential burden to the state (Layton 2014b, p. 468). The evidence here demonstrates that such decisions are probably never entirely rational, which is in keeping with psychosocial theory, but it also demonstrates that multiple anxieties and defenses, often related to aspects of neoliberalism, render it even more difficult for people to make rational decisions about their futures and the pursuit of their goals in general, including decisions concerning ‘aspiration’ of the kind encouraged by neoliberalism. Participants’ defenses related to these anxieties created confusion over goals that they desired and could achieve, and concealed negative affective responses that could be detrimental to choosing and pursuing goals if unrecognised.

How can George, adopting such an optimistic outlook on his available options that he ignores likely obstacles, yet remaining distrusting of the future, make appropriate life choices? How can Amy, possibly experiencing or susceptible to burnout but seemingly unaware of this, and enamoured by the idea of entrepreneurialism as a means of leaving a legacy, accurately assess how much time and energy she can and should put into her business ideas? Nurturing several layers of defenses regarding her past career choices, how can she think clearly about what future paths would be fulfilling for her and why? How can Eva, so loyal to her chosen career and yet so unaware of why it appealed to her, and so determined to deny being affected by the same stresses that she claims affect everyone else, make clear choices about whether to stay the course or change careers? And how can Michael, invested in discourses of flexibility and autonomy, and drawing feelings of empowerment from it to the extent that he feels the need to overstate his autonomy, and yet unable to fully

confront the extent to which tertiary time imposes on his life and employers' demands wear him out, achieve a sustainable work-life balance? How can he accurately assess whether his current mode of working is meeting his needs? Neoliberalism, by promulgating discourses that stoke anxiety surrounding status and work ethic, and stoking annihilation anxiety by threatening people's financial stability and continued ability to survive, induces psychosocial states that limit people's self-awareness, their ability to know what they want or need, their ability to distinguish reliable paths from risky and demanding paths, and their ability to foresee problems and challenges. Neoliberal policy sometimes defeats its own stated goals and traps people in a catch-22 situation wherein it is even more difficult to fulfil the obligations neoliberalism demands of them and become the rational neoliberal subjects they are encouraged to be.

Such internal inconsistencies must surely produce further cognitive dissonance. They are also likely to prompt certain questions in people's minds: what purpose does neoliberalism actually serve? Do those who endorse it and implement it through policy genuinely believe that it will guide people towards prosperity? If not, what then is their agenda? Why inflict such evident harm? Such doubts must surely be troubling to anyone who ponders them, even (or especially) if they do so only unconsciously. Some of the apparent psychodynamic manifestations of these disturbing uncertainties are covered in the next chapter, which explores the unexpected and alarming tangential topics that participants seemed to associate with the topics of precarity and social mobility.

This chapter set up an argument about how neoliberalism works in relation to precarious work that belies most of the explanations that currently exist. I would argue that, rather than being an incentivising though psychologically harmful form of governance, that promotes mobility in the interests of market forces, neoliberalism is primarily a system of technologies that maintain the status quo through psychological reshaping of individuals, sometimes through specific psychological harm that functions as control, creating subjectification that is unlikely to challenge the goals and needs of job creators and government. In doing this, it generates complex anxieties and defenses, and thus ambivalences, that frequently hinder effective pursuit of goals, including upward mobility. It is therefore functioning more as a

means of psychological manipulation than as a behaviour modifier. Rather than making the participants here act in economically efficient ways, governance by incentivisation and shame simply obscures the true nature of the power dynamics in play while obstructing behaviours that could upend the status quo. The following chapter supplements this argument by demonstrating more of the anxieties and confusions that arise, and themes of precariat anxieties that may demonstrate that suppressed annihilation and subservience anxieties related to neoliberal discourses are manifesting in troubling ways.

6: Free-association is not free – participants' associations with mobility and precarity

6.1 Introduction

This chapter argues that participants frequently free-associated from topics of mobility and precarity to a range of dark themes including abuse, societal catastrophes and oppression. The previous chapters demonstrated that participants often felt that their basic needs were unmet and that concepts of merit within neoliberal aspiration discourses seemed to clash with their values. They also demonstrated that the conflicting priorities and demands prompted anxieties and defenses that had hindered the pursuit of goals or had clear potential to do so. The dark themes covered in this chapter may have been connected to participants' conflicted subjectivities and associated defended anxieties, either as a projection of anxieties or as a sign of unconscious qualms regarding the governance approaches that inform their material circumstances and produce pressure to be upwardly mobile, particularly their evident harms and perceived inconsistencies within their justifications. I would argue that these are some of the ways anxieties, particularly surrounding threats to survival and subservience to particular discourses, manifest when the true sources of them are rendered unconscious, and illustrates some ways that people unconsciously respond to the problems within neoliberalism.

This chapter primarily deals with the most extreme tangents resulting from free-association when discussing aspiration and precarity and attempts to make psychosocial sense of why participants came to think of and discuss these things within the interviews. Each section explores the connections between the narratives that emerged and the topics raised for discussion by contemplating the apparent affective overlaps.

This chapter was nearly not written, at least in the form that it ultimately took. Many of these associations seemed thinly connected to the topic of the research, and the only apparent interpretations of them seemed to carry potentially controversial implications. It seemed that attempting to make psychosocial sense of these may involve highly speculative analysis and thus lead to bold claims with minimal concrete evidence.

The importance of discussing these topics, despite how tangential and extreme they may seem, was brought home by an unusual manifestation of countertransference and collective free-associating that occurred within one of the first interviews but remained unrecognised until writing up this thesis. In attempting to explain forms of social division he was afraid of, Jack had made reference to the Milgram (1963) experiments, wherein participants were ordered to administer electric shocks (which unbeknownst to them were not real) to fake test subjects. When these experiments were mentioned, that was when the unusual transference occurred between Jack and myself.

Jack did not know the name of the experiments he wished to reference, only that they involved people being ordered to inflict electric shocks. Despite being familiar with this experiment, I asked him if he was talking about the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo 1973), which was another controversial study that involved some participants taking on the role of prisoners and others acting as guards. Both this and the Milgram experiments were thought to breach ethical standards and both dealt with the human capacity to inflict suffering, but whereas the Milgram experiments concerned obedience to authority, the Stanford Prison Experiment dealt with the behaviours of people given authority. I was entirely familiar with both of these studies and afterwards could not understand why I had made such an elementary mistake. I put it down to a momentary lapse of concentration and dismissed its relevance, and the relevance of Jack's initial comment, until much later.

The night before I had planned to begin writing the first draft of this chapter, I had a dream about visiting the home of a sociology lecturer who had taught several modules of my BSc course. This lecturer had taught modules on violence, inequality, and power. In the dream, this lecturer had two empty prison-style cells within his home. The entrance to one of these had been partially sealed with wooden planks, and I could not initially see inside because, although there were gaps between the planks, the cell was dark. I examined a photograph on my phone, that I had previously taken by reaching between the planks. I realised that I had taken this photograph in a previous visit which I had since forgotten. A hole had been smashed through the rear wall of the cell. My former lecturer explained that the cell had been

occupied by a woman who had been a participant in my Masters dissertation research, but that she had broken out.

This former prisoner was Ashley, one of two participants from the Masters research who had discussed potential political catastrophes including societal collapse (who granted permission for use of data from this interview). On waking, I could not ignore the significance of all this. My thoughts returned to Ashley's comments from her interview, my free-associative leap towards thinking of the Stanford Prison Experiment, and Jack's initial mention of the Milgram experiments (which I had continued to ignore, through the entire process of analysing the interviews, up until having this dream). Ashley's free-associative turn towards societal collapse and government oppression is discussed in 6.5, which also considers the potential implications of themes of catastrophe overlapping themes of oppression.

Ultimately, these observations could not be ignored. Associations that had initially appeared to be diverse and individualised eventually revealed patterns – overlapping discourses referring to various forms of abuse, injustice, catastrophes and oppression, sometimes in conjunction with each other, with (for example) one of these topics being used as metaphor to illustrate comments about another. Ultimately, this chapter needed to include these associations due to the significance for these participants – the implications for how the participants constructed precarity, social mobility discourses, and associated policy approaches and how they had been affected by these things.

This chapter makes the argument that the emergence of these associations indicates negative psychosocial impacts from, and perceptions of, current economic governance models – especially the incentivisation of 'aspirational' behaviour through policies such as targeted cuts to support and public spending, and the discursively connected focus of addressing poverty via the promotion of 'aspiration'. This chapter also raises the prospect that associated thoughts of eroded social cohesion, conflict, uncertainty, oppression and victimisation are likely to be detrimental to participants effectively achieving their goals, gaining financial security, or otherwise actively engaging in the kinds of aspirational behaviour that policy makers ostensibly wish to promote. These associations are also examined for the possible reasons why the discourses and policies being explored prompt these

specific ideas, what this implies about the nature of this governance approach, and the potential impact of participants unconsciously observing and making sense of the most problematic aspects of how our economy is governed. Finally, the psychodynamic implications of this analysis are discussed, elaborating on how these policies and discourses may be shaping and distorting people's movement between depressive and paranoid-schizoid positionings.

6.2 Personal problems

This section makes the argument that participants sometimes associated the themes of the interviews with particularly painful personal experiences, such as divorce, eviction, relationship breakdowns, and mental health problems. These could be interpreted as an unconscious manifestation of their experiences of aspiration and precarity causing similar pain.

This section discusses the narratives of personal and financial problems, including Jack's loss of his flat subsequent to being denied a loan, Ahmed's struggles with providing care, various accounts of relationship breakdowns, and almost universal reporting of mental health conditions.

Jack recounted his prior experience of losing his flat multiple times in vivid detail. His recollections of events from that time were so sharp that he was able to indicate the precise moments where an advisor from the bank went quiet or made particular vocalisations. He recalled an exchange that culminated in the advisor telling him to live within his means, and in doing so seemed to recall the exact wording and the exact moment an advisor stuttered. "...I'll never forget, he said, 'that's no problem', and he went tapping away, and... He started stuttering. And he said, 'Oh', he said. I said, 'what's the problem?' He said, 'Er, I can't do that'". This was not a random recollection, this was a vivid memory of a significant life event.

This narrative re-emerged unbidden multiple times, initially following on from Jack discussing his ideal future on a tropical beach "without the expectations of the last forty years", and the phantasy of grabbing "one of them and you made them do what we've had to do… with the penalty being, you know, you're gonna lose your [home]"

For Jack, one thing he ‘aspired’ to was freedom from economic expectations. Jack therefore free-associated from thoughts of the expectations of recent decades (tellingly, a period of time roughly corresponding to the rise of neoliberalism in the UK) to thoughts of inflicting such expectations on the rich, complete with the ‘penalty’ of losing a home, to recalling his own experience of losing his home. To Jack, the pressures of modern capitalism have been deliberately inflicted on us, and the consequences we suffer from failing to adequately engage in the economy (e.g. homelessness) are penalties that are a means of punishing us for noncompliance: “they weren't dealing with a person. It wasn't about this person, ‘oh, yeah, poor sod, [rep] yeah, he owes us money, needs to pay it back and whatever, but dadada’ it was about ‘well, it's just punish him’”. As discussed in Chapter 4, these comments echo Foucauldian theory on discipline – the ways in which society uses technologies to attempt to remake behaviour. However, we can see that Jack heavily entangled his narratives of having been out of work, denied support, and almost made homeless, with thoughts of the restrictive elements of our economic system and feelings of being oppressed by an authoritarian system. We shall return to discussing this latter association in 6.5, to explore why multiple participants associated aspiration and precarity with oppression and persecution.

For Amy, the most striking personal challenge to which she free-associated was her divorce. Amy only gave subtle signs of actually free-associating from discussing precarity and social mobility to discussing the divorce – early in the first interview she went from talking about alternative career choices she could have made, to discussing the uselessness of regret, to talking about how her religious beliefs led her to believe she would be okay. It was from this that she cycled around to first mentioning her divorce:

> There is a reason why I'm in this shitty place at the moment, you know, and, you know, the reason why that job wasn't there for me… or, you know, whatever it was, I missed out on that because something better is around the corner. And I've been [...] right so far... sometimes it's taken a long time, but I have got there, you know? I was going through a divorce with my ex-husband for years, and [...] but I'm out of it now (Amy).

Ultimately it was the topic of precarity that immediately preceded Amy bringing up her divorce, but it is unclear whether the free-association stemmed from the topic of precarity specifically, or from the topic of overcoming personal challenges more generally. Amy's narratives of being denied full furlough during the Covid-19 pandemic, where she was offered a fraction of her average wage for the period and fought her employers for a higher rate, did make it clear that Amy associated these events with her divorce on an affective level. Amy refrained from using emotive language when discussing the divorce, but the emotionally-laden words she used in connection with being denied furlough by her employers and the dispute she consequently had with them, appear to closely resemble the emotions we might expect Amy to feel in relation to being suddenly divorced and left in a financially precarious position: "they're saying it's for the good of the school {Hmm} but then they're not, it's a bit heartless... They're not really. They're all about their, you know [...] They're heartless, really." Also, in reference to her efforts to be helpful: "you do it to start with, because you want to. You offer. But then when people just, I suppose {yeah}. I dunno, throw it back in your face… take it for granted and then, and don't show you the gratitude that you deserve…" For context, Amy acted as a stay-at-home mother and housewife for many years: "he had got to do great things because of [rep] because I was there, um, looking after the children in the background and, you know, letting him go where he needed to go" and then her husband abruptly announced divorce, and Amy subsequently had to take him to court to get a sufficient settlement.

It would be valid to simply categorise this as an example of displacement, of Amy attempting to avoid thinking critically of her ex-husband and instead attributing qualities of heartlessness and ingratitude to her employers. However, the apparent free-association that occurred implies there is something additional going on, and that Amy perhaps associates her labour dispute with such feelings because it does share qualities with her divorce and therefore occupies an overlapping emotional space. She feels that both have been heartless, that both have taken her for granted.

George and Jude also made reference to relationship breakdowns, and drew connections between these and issues related to precarity: "…the financial pressure, like, [rep] was a part of that as well. That sort of building of pressure cooker feeling

{Mm} at the end of the PhD. {Yeah} Um, [inaudible] [rep] it wrecked a relationship I was in at the time" (Jude).

George stated that he "…lost a relationship during the whole degree stage as well…" and attributed this to a "dark time" he went through while studying. However, there were signs that perhaps George's reluctance to have children was a source of conflict between himself and his ex-fiancée, and that this reluctance was due to his anxieties concerning the precariousness and inequality in society: "I was saying for a while, like, on my misses or you know whatever, I wouldn't wanna bring a child into this world. {Hmm. Hmm.} [rep] I just don't think there's any hope for it really". Since he had previously claimed to want a relationship and a family, saying that "…you learn from your mistakes…" but later expressed reluctance to have children, this suggested that this opposition to having a family was the "mistake" that he was attempting to learn from. This reluctance largely stemmed from feelings that:

> …why would you bring somebody into this world to be exposed to all that? {To all the, er, um, to all the fighting, is it? Is that..?} The negativity, it's all, you know, the Black Lives Matter, all that kicking off {Mmm} and the riots and this pandemic and {Yeah} conspiracy theories and no-one knows what's bloody going on anymore. The government… and, you know, jobs aren't secure, there's more and more people coming into the world {Yeah}. Kids dying on boats trying to flee countries. {Yeah} [rep] {So much going on} Yeah, it's just heartbreaking really, isn't it? [rep] it's not a way of life really anymore. It's just a struggle. We are fighting for survival. And the rich are making richer and the poor are getting poorer (George).

Lastly, almost every participant disclosed some form of mental health issues in connection to the topics or their narratives concerning precarity. It was apparent from even a surface reading of the data that most of the participants experienced their nonstandard contract type as a source of great anxiety. Multiple participants stated this outright and elaborated on the knock-on effects of this, such as opting not to think of the future at all or needing to take breaks from aspirational activities such as pursuing education. Dee informed me that "Having a zero-hours contract has also at times caused a lot of stress and anxiety - not knowing whether I will be able to continue to afford to live - and exacerbated my long-term depression…" and "Now,

for the sake of my mental health, I am less concerned with pursuing any career goals, and instead practising mindfulness, living for the current moment as much as possible rather than spending too much time planning for a future that might never happen…". This need to prioritise their mental health had also deterred Dee from claiming Universal Credit as "it just was not worth the stress and adverse effect on my mental health". The instances of participants putting aspirational activities on hold due to mental health problems caused or exacerbated by precarity and aspirational activity, and the signs of them free-associating from themes of precarity and aspiration to themes of these mental health problems, further supports the argument within Chapter 5 that neoliberal discourses and policies create obstacles to pursuing goals.

In relating the story of losing his flat, Jack said: "It was just so I [rep] could not sleep. And it [rep] there was anxiety and stress…" Amy showed signs of burnout, as discussed in previous chapters. Tracy disclosed that "Zero-hours, if they were properly policed and regulated, can be very, very good", and "I do have chronic health conditions as well, as well as the anxiety and [...] I'm such a barrel of fun". When asked about her negative experiences in her previous roles, Wanda disclosed "when my mum died, I was in my thirties and... it just triggered depression? {Mm} And it's not an acute depression now, it's a chronic depression, and I'm, er, [rep] I'm settled on antidepressants." As mentioned above, George also said that he had been through a "dark time". Many of these problems were related to the participants' precarious circumstances (at least, within their representations) but more pertinent to the questions we are exploring here is the fact that so many participants were reminded of their mental health problems and felt compelled to disclose them while discussing their precarity and social mobility, even in cases where they were not presenting the precarity as a contributing factor. There was a widespread tendency to associate these topics with each other. Jack first mentioned his prior experience of burnout after contemplating the possibility of making one of "them" do "what we've had to do". Dee first mentioned their depression when talking about the uncertainties of living on a zero-hours contract and the stress and anxiety of not knowing if there'd be enough money to "continue to afford to live". Ahmed first referred to his stress and anxiety after stating that "I have had money problems in the past".

Why did so many participants free-associate to narratives concerning severe personal challenges? On face value, the reasons could be varied and individuated. Wanda initially appeared to be presenting the details of her previous full-time employment as a means to compare and contrast this with her then-current agency work that is ostensibly less stressful, yet still appears to contribute to a state of limited happiness. Amy gave more tangible signs of overlapping affective associations between her employment difficulties and her divorce, apparently due to similarities between how she had been treated by her employers and her ex-husband. Jack quite overtly critiqued capitalist systems in general, and his narratives of losing his flat were an example of this but they were also a poignant and emotional recollection of trauma that seemed to resurface repeatedly in relation to discussing precarity and class.

These participants' responses all shared the theme of free-associating from discussion of precarity and mobility to painful recollections or affective responses. Regardless of the varied ways in which this occurred, the fact that multiple participants found these topics reminiscent of painful losses, rejections, personal crises, and stressful challenges, is surely significant and worthy of further exploration.

In 6.3, below, I discuss some further instances of participants free-associating towards narratives of traumatic lived experiences, specifically experiences of being a survivor of crime, in the context of a wider discussion of participants free-associating to the topic of crime, most frequently the topic of abuse.

6.3 Abuse and other crimes

This section makes the argument that participants associated the themes of the interviews with memories and metaphors of domestic abuse and other crimes. This could be interpreted as a result of unconscious feelings of being psychologically manipulated or mistreated by our economic system or modes of governance.

Allusions to crime appeared as both narratives of past experiences of crime and crime as metaphor used in discursive framings of policy approaches. The crimes

referenced included theft and generalised violence, but the most frequently referenced crime was domestic abuse (including financial abuse, neglect, gaslighting, and verbal abuse), and this is the primary focus of this section.

For Tracy, sharing narratives of her conflicts with her employers (over planned layoffs), along with other topics associated with poverty, appeared to prompt recollection of her experiences of domestic abuse, most especially the abuse perpetrated by her father against her mother. This association first emerged when she described having confronted a manager over “inflammatory language” and admitted that she normally avoids “confrontation cos of how I grew up.” As the interview progressed, Tracy repeatedly appeared to associate these experiences with thoughts of financial hardship. She later free-associated to ruminating on the domestic abuse from talking about how she doesn’t want her own children to have a memory similar to her own memory of there being no food in the house except a “Bag of frozen parsnips.” In an apparent attempt to reinforce the notion that her mother was not to blame for the financial hardship, Tracy said there was less financial support available “back then” and apparently evidenced this by saying that the police would not take action when “my dad kicked off, the police would be like, ‘can't do anything, it's a domestic’”. The incongruity of this statement (lack of police action against domestic violence used to demonstrate a lack of financial support) suggests either that Tracy unconsciously associated this hardship with the abuse (to the extent that they were basically conflated), or else she was unable to find a more concrete example to back up her assertion that her mother was not to blame for the financial hardship they suffered. The fact that Tracy had already stated that her mother had refused welfare payments out of pride, made this assertion that they were in poverty because support was *not available* appear even more spurious, and also means that further denial of her mother’s culpability was redundant, suggesting free-association between hardship and abuse is a more likely explanation for using police inaction as an example of inadequate financial support.

This association between financial hardship and abuse also arose when Tracy compared her own finances to those of her brothers, who make more money than she does (which Tracy indicated via describing how they take their families to Disneyland). In support of saying she did not feel jealous of people with more

money, Tracy asserted that "…I'm more concerned about the people who are doing way worse than me. {Yeah} Um, and I view myself as lucky. I view my childhood as lucky. Because no matter what my parents [...] or how my parent's marriage was, um, I was loved…" Again, the oblique reference to her parents' marriage, likely a callback to the narratives regarding the domestic abuse, was spurred by pondering the topics of poverty, inequality and aspiration.

What can we make of these associations? The fact that confronting her managers evoked thoughts of her childhood experiences of witnessing domestic abuse is unsurprising on the surface. However, the associations here, and the fact that this is unsurprising, also highlights other important implications. Firstly, confrontation in a workplace setting should not be of a nature that could be in any way comparable to domestic abuse. And yet, within Tracy's narratives, not only did the professional confrontation quickly evoke thoughts of the abuse, but Tracy made repeated references to managers using "inflammatory" and derogatory language. It seems that the behaviour of management in this workplace closely fit the definition of verbal abuse, and that the confrontation was extreme enough to evoke memories of domestic abuse. Why then should we regard these experiences as being in any way different to verbal abuse that takes place within the home? Why are such incidents typically accepted as features of a legally permitted (although often resented) tough management style?

Tracy did not only free-associate to these memories when discussing confrontation – her free-associating to the topic of domestic abuse stemmed more frequently from discussing financial hardship. It may be significant then that although this initial mention of domestic abuse occurred when discussing confrontation, this confrontation was necessitated by management threatening Tracy's financial security via planned layoffs (which also happened to be the context for the "inflammatory language" that management had used towards staff). Taken alongside Tracy's moments of associating domestic violence and her childhood experiences of poverty, we see that financial hardship and abuse are linked in Tracy's subjectivities. Interestingly, Tracy's choice of wording for describing how zero-hours contracts are misused was that they were "abused by management" and "used as a form of, um, punishment and reward…" and this term "abuse" was repeatedly used in referenced

to the actions of managers, but never in reference to the domestic abuse she suffered, which was always either described more specifically, vaguely alluded to, or referred to as “violence” or “a domestic”.

Did this association stem from Tracy having connected memories involving both domestic abuse and childhood poverty? Although this would have been the simplest explanation, it did not quite fit for two reasons: Firstly, Tracy indicated that the poverty began *after* her father had left, as a result of her mother not having enough pay and not claiming welfare, and her father not paying maintenance. Second, the topic of domestic abuse also appeared in the form of references to an ex-partner who had kept Tracy “locked up in the house, literally…” Tracy took a tangent into this latter narrative when asked what it was like having a zero-hours contract. Claiming to be providing context, Tracy provided significant details about a former pet before eventually cycling back to the topic of suffering PTSD as a result of the domestic abuse, and the story of how she came to get her zero-hours contract job, never directly answering the question. Was this an avoidance tactic, the result of Tracy steering the conversation in a different direction to avoid talking about her finances? Or was it another example of Tracy free-associating from the topic of financial precarity to the topic of abuse?

Jack, meanwhile, used domestic abuse (in this instance, financial abuse) as a simile to explain his disapproval of economic policies that seek to make people live their lives a particular way. Discussing how he is not particularly good at working hard and making money, Jack said “…there's many ways [rep] I can and would be useful to society, [rep] er, to make my contribution {Yeah} right? …why does it have to be in the ways they tell me? {Yeah} like, do you know what I mean? {Yes} [rep] why, you know, why can there not be provision for me?” Here he appeared to be lamenting the need to do particular forms of work in order to have money (perhaps in reference to forms of unpaid work, perhaps an allusion to his earlier comments on social mobility that he should not have to change his designation). Jack also gave examples of the types of policies he was speaking of and compared these policies to various forms of crime.

> So who's got any right to come and impinge their ideology... what a word for their ideals... their greed and their spite and their anger and their malice… and

> they impose that upon me? What's the difference between that and getting mugged? {Yeah} Right? {Yeah} Or burgled? [rep] Or coercively [rep] by [rep] an evil psychopath partner?... It's not different … to what government are doing to us. It's not different. It is the same. They are bullying. They are coming out and they're saying, 'you have to live like this'. And they'll take something good away, and they'll weaken our economic position {Yeah} and make us live like that. And I say it's wrong (Jack).

Although this followed on from Jack objecting to things that he viewed as excessively restrictive laws, this appeared to be an allusion to how neoliberal economic policy 'incentivises' aspirational behaviour through conditionality and cuts, and possibly to how our job market and economic system only provides adequate financial rewards to people who do particular forms of work "…we have to live in all of that, don't we? Like, do ya know what I mean? {Yeah} [rep] The people that've imposed it upon us, er, they've got private police forces, they've got the police force that we paid for, they've got all these barriers, er, er, in the way so we can't take it offa them."

6.4 Catastrophes

This section makes the argument that participants sometimes associated the themes of the interviews with potential catastrophes including societal collapse. This could be interpreted as an unconscious manifestation of extreme generalised anxieties resulting from precarity or as a sign of unconscious fears regarding the destabilising and conflict-creating influence of neoliberal governance.

The themes of potential future catastrophic events or extreme tragedies sometimes emerged as possible examples of participants generally catastrophising, and at other times seemed to have a more precise and meaningful connection to the topics being raised. These included potential public tragedies, widespread social conflict, and societal collapse.

Multiple participants also alluded to oppression in various ways. Although these associations would qualify as a form of political catastrophising, they are not

discussed in this section but instead covered in 6.5, as these associations were particularly distinctive and vivid.

Both George and Wanda expressed fears of societal conflict, especially in relation to the actions of activist groups who they perceived as causing unnecessary disruption and division. For George, the catastrophes he feared were mostly connected to protestors blocking roads, which he feared would lead to children being kidnapped and murdered by predators: “Or just Doctor appointments or picking kids up from schools. And you've got kids that are being murdered then, you think well [rep] why was that kid murdered? Oh well cos Insulate Britain were blocking the parents getting to the [rep] school, so the kid was left on their own and was picked up by a stranger”. George also appeared distressed by a worry that farms would have to close due to loss of profits and that this would lead to there being no fresh food and only frozen food would be available. Neither of these scenarios seems likely, for reasons I will not belabour here. Suffice to say that, for George, news related to these activists prompted extreme anxiety that manifested in phantasies of unlikely catastrophic outcomes that were only tangentially connected to the events triggering the anxiety. This is characteristic of what psychoanalysts call a paranoid-schizoid positioning. Not to be confused with schizophrenic symptoms or clinical paranoia (which are sometimes understood to be extreme outcomes of paranoid-schizoid positionings), paranoid-schizoid positioning refers to a positioning within which the self frequently responds to feelings of being under threat by forming the belief that it is being attacked. A psychoanalytical appraisal of George’s anxieties would therefore suggest that he forms phantasies of these catastrophes because the protests and civil unrest make him feel threatened or feel that vulnerable aspects of his social surroundings are under threat.

Wanda similarly expressed fear of protests, suggesting that they formed part of a government plan to divide and conquer the population. Free-associating first from discussing Brexit (as an example of a statement or slogan that has prompted a strong reaction in her) to discussing how nationalism has been inflamed, Wanda came to speak of the Black Lives Matter protests and the felling of the Colston statue, “Which actually was vandalism. {Mm} But yet the police stood back and did nothing. {Yeah} And allowed vandalism to happen. {Yeah} And that gives a very bad

message. And I think it's all connected, especially from the Conservative perspective, that actually divide and conquer is better than allowing all of us to rise together." There appeared to be a lack of clear definition of "rise together" as she denounced collective protest as divisive and did not define what other actions would be an appropriate form of rising together. Regardless, she went on to say that "…there are a few things that I feel as an individual that government are doing to segregate us, as a community {Yeah} On very clever tactics." Here we see a form of conspiratorial thinking, as Wanda appeared to be suggesting that the Conservative government was directing police to allow illegal acts within the context of protests (and perhaps encouraging the racial conflict that inspired the protests) in order to more easily control the population. Although there is evidence of governments encouraging racial conflict as a distraction, an excuse for their shortcomings, and to encourage certain voting behaviours (Alford 2014; Pérez-Paredes et al. 2017), the suggestion that this was part of a more complex plan involving the encouragement of illegal behaviour and directly controlling policing methods, has no evidential foundation and seems somewhat convoluted.

These examples of political catastrophising took perhaps their ultimate form in Jack's statement that "…who knows, in five years time, [rep] will we be crossing the channel? [laughter] {[laughter] yeah} Do you know what I mean? {Yeah} Asking France to rescue us?"

What could explain this tendency towards thinking and speaking of potential catastrophes in connection with the topics of precarity and mobility? One possible explanation may be collective trauma. Walkerdine (2010) spoke of the collective trauma suffered by a close-knit south Wales community (Steeltown), following the closure of the steelworks that had been the focus of the working lives for men in that community for centuries. Building on the work of Bick (1968), and the tradition of work inspired by Bick's notion of the psychic skin, Walkerdine applied this idea to understand what had been experienced by the people of Steeltown (Walkerdine 2010, p. 96). Walkerdine postulated that the steelworks helped to provide a form of second skin to the people of Steeltown and that their sense of containment was breached. The concept of psychic skin explains the psychic processes that allow us to maintain containment of primitive anxieties by providing an affective sense of

boundaries. The psychic skin contains the self and prevents disintegration (pp. 95-97).

The research here is not directly comparable to Walkerdine's research on Steeltown because this research was not focused on a single community. To apply the idea of a collective trauma would require extending these ideas to a more diffuse and diverse group, based on responses from participants who do not coexist, interact with each other, have mutual social contacts, or live within the same physical boundaries. The experiences of precariat workers across the UK cannot be said to be precisely analogous to the workers of Steeltown. However, similarities exist that may allow us to make sense of what was occurring in the unconscious of these participants. Could secure work (or, perhaps more pertinently, secure income) also provide a second skin that contains anxieties? Quite aside from allaying annihilation anxieties by providing the essentials for life, the culture of full-time permanent work was, as George might have put it, a "way of life" in the UK for several decades. Even those who were out of work had a relatively reasonable sense of security and continuity of experience prior to the welfare reforms of the past couple of decades. Entire generations grew up observing the lives of family members who had those forms of security, and this itself may have provided a sense of containment. If we should apply these ideas to the transition from widespread permanent full-time employment to the widespread precarity of insecure work we see now, then it implies that the precariat as a whole may be experiencing a form of collective trauma from adapting to "fighting for survival".

This change to the "way of life" was evoked by other participants who seemed troubled by the changes to our affective field (Venn 2020). For example, Jack commented on the "nasty and petulant" qualities he perceived to be increasingly prevalent in society. Both George and Amy expressed issues with trust, with George stating that "I think my biggest issue is trust, right now. For everything. {Yeah?} I don't trust what's going on in the world. I don't trust what's gonna go [...] what's coming up in the government and what they're gonna do, I don't trust work." Amy was less direct in expressing her difficulties with trust, never using the word directly but working towards themes of trust at the close of the second interview. She doubted her employers' motives for offering invigilators work overseeing practice

exams, voicing a suspicion that they were being offered work that the staff did not feel safe doing. She mentioned concern over letting workmen access her home in case they steal things, and she has no faith in her dishwasher to last because she believes items are programmed to break down after a set period of time. These last two examples arose out of free-association towards the end of the second interview, in a series of anecdotes that initially seemed superfluous, but which I later came to suspect were Amy's way of exploring her feelings of distrust.

6.5 Oppression and persecution

Closely related to the previous section, this section explores participants' associations toward themes of oppression. These narratives of oppression took various forms, such as participants framing contemporary events as oppressive (sometimes in the form of conspiracy theories), fascist imagery and metaphors used to critique particular aspects of economic governance, and references to certain forms of oppression or totalitarianism potentially occurring in the future. This section is distinct from the discussion of references to other socio-political catastrophes mainly because the causes of these free-associations appeared distinct, although sometimes interconnected.

Let's begin with Ashley's political catastrophising, which was evoked by the dream I had regarding the prison cell. This catastrophising was rooted in fear of our own government. In the interview I conducted with Ashley for the closely related MSc dissertation research (Jones 2019), she abruptly turned towards speaking of how societies can collapse and how our own society could collapse. She free-associated towards this after discussing her feelings regarding the then-current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, saying that "he could do bloody anything." Ashley mentioned Syria as an example of how a fully functional modern society can abruptly be destroyed. Ashley and her husband had gone so far as to prepare an escape plan in case something like this should happen in Britain.

We see here one way in which themes of political catastrophe intermingle with themes of oppression – the anxiety surrounding political leaders whose actions are unpredictable, who do not give due consideration to the needs of the society they're

governing. The feeling Ashley appeared to be expressing was that the Prime Minister at that time was someone without boundaries to his behaviour and decision making. Such leaders frequently display disregard for democratic processes and the rights of the population they govern.

Another possible explanation for this overlap can be inferred from the transference and countertransference that occurred between myself and Jack. Just as Jack had intermingled the circumstances of the Milgram experiment with the findings of the Stanford Prison Experiment, I too had confused these, perhaps because of emerging themes within the interview that connected the rise of right-wing governance with eroded social cohesion and anomie. Regarding Jack's references to the Milgram experiments, these are frequently drawn on to explain sadistic behaviour under fascist regimes. Theorists tend to think of these as being evidence of the power of authority and commands to override an individuals' morality (Hollander and Maynard 2016). However, this did not appear to be Jack's interpretation, as it was not a willingness to obey unethical orders that Jack used this as an example of: "They found that people sort of, kind of wanted to dish out a bit of pain. {Yeah.} and this is where… we're just scratching that side of human nature now in this country..."

Jack was not speaking of people following orders unwillingly, he was discussing how brutal circumstances can bring out sadistic elements of human nature, and indicating a belief that this side of human nature was being stimulated within our current sociopolitical circumstances in the UK. What specifically prompted these thoughts? This had all proceeded from Jack discussing what he saw as the resurgence of far-right nationalism in the UK, which led onto comments regarding his difficulty believing that could happen in the UK:

> …you wouldn't have thought it would rise up here, would you? {Hmm [inaudible] go on.} I mean If you'd said to me in the eighties, [rep] when Thatcher was going at the worst of her excesses, right? …even in those worst excesses there were so many people pushing back [rep] and you had such a sense of camaraderie (Jack)

He later added, "We were against that kind of thing… If you'd've said to me that this would happen, I'd say 'Ah, what ya[...] you're joking. There's too many of us".

The disbelief he expressed, contrasting with his confident assertions that such nationalism is indeed rising up here, echoes widespread discourses of astonishment at the success of nationalist discourses among the working class, such as seen in Piraeus, Greece (Bithymitris 2021, p. 482) and the U.S. (Chernomas 2014), but the reasons for this have already been discussed in chapter 2. Here I wish to focus on the fact that Jack had apparently come to view fascism as rising despite his apparent previous denials of the possibility. The point he appeared to be making was that such approaches to governance bring out cruel and sadistic impulses in people, rather than *command* people to do cruel things. In many ways, this echoes the apparent causes of participants fearing conflict and the breakdown of social cohesion, and perhaps further explains the overlap of these themes and anxieties. Perhaps this stems from a recognition of structural and discursive factors that promote rivalry and competitiveness, that stoke narcissism by increasing gaps in status (and the importance of status) (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019), and that appear to cause increases in violent crime (Kwon and Cabrera 2019).

Jack's apparent assertion that neoliberalism is "scratching that side of human nature" tallies quite neatly with the metaphors he utilised when discussing how neoliberal capitalism forces conformity to certain behaviours, such as "why do we have to take part in that? Why do I have to line up, right? {Yeah} With shiny boots. I'm not in the army. Right? {[laughter]} Why do I have to line up and march..?"

Might Jack be correct in his assertion that current circumstances are stimulating cruel and authoritarian impulses? There is certainly work from several theorists and researchers that asserts that authoritarianism, xenophobia and sadistic urges (as well as support for extreme populist figures like Donald Trump) may be linked to imposed financial hardship, insecurity and status anxieties. Alford (2014) asserted that aversion to being dependant on government stemmed from a need to deny dependency due to needs being unmet. This paranoid-schizoid reaction of hatred toward those who may treat them as dependent thus leads them to support right-wing populist politicians whose discourses of self-reliance appeal to their sense of self. Alford also mentioned the theory that societies that primarily stimulate paranoid-schizoid positioning encourage the construction of enemies and hatred of more vulnerable people (p. 206) Similarly, Cichocka and Cislak (2019) argued that

nationalism is a form of collective narcissism that forms in response to denigration and powerlessness, in a sense a self-aggrandisement by association with a particular national identity. Bithymitris (2021) also argued that the working class are vulnerable to nationalism because it offers protection against uncertainty (p. 482). Thankfully, nationalist appeals to the working-class need for affirmations are not always successful, due partly to boundaries between capitalist discourses and collectivist discourses (pp. 485-487), but there is seemingly enough vulnerability to generate palpable anxieties in some.

There were echoes of these fears in Jack's somewhat out-of-character Covid-scepticism. I was initially uncertain if this Covid-scepticism was psychosocially significant or if my own feelings on the matter had drawn my attention to this unduly. Although my opposition to the views he expressed needs to be acknowledged, as it may have inadvertently coloured my analysis, Jack's views on this seemed to be at odds with his views on other issues. Elsewhere, Jack expressed a strong belief in the need for people to look out for each other – this was stated explicitly multiple times in the interviews. He also tended to take rational, evidence-based stances on other political issues, such as immigration. In contrast, Jack's reasoning for thinking coronavirus was being overblown was at odds with factual realities and prioritised individual freedom over collective responsibility. Jack's suspicions were based on the idea that the UK government had faked or exaggerated the pandemic as an excuse to close the borders, as a xenophobic policy, because Priti Patel said in 2019 that she wanted to close the borders and Jack viewed it as too much of a coincidence that Covid occurred a few months afterwards. Jack did not acknowledge that closing borders had been a goal of many on the political right long before that, nor that our own Covid border security had been relatively permissive compared to many other countries, nor that government had the power to restrict immigration *without* any public health crisis, nor that Covid was a worldwide problem that initially appeared in China and not the UK, nor that some form of lockdown measures had been imposed in almost all countries. It is worth reiterating that Jack's manner of reasoning in all other issues discussed was evidence based. This idea of a global conspiracy to justify closing the UK borders seemed at odds with his usual way of thinking, except that it was consistent with his tendency to be suspicious of the government's motives. At times, this became entangled with discussion of the expectations

surrounding work, with a theme of wanting freedom seeming to refer to both the lockdowns and the lack of autonomy Jack felt was a part of our economic system.

> I'd like to be left alone. Like, you know {Right} I want me freedom back. {Yeah} Right? Do ya know what I mean? Now, the way I see it, right, is I can't get any government money. The government, when they gave me furlough, it was… almost nothing anyway. So because I don't get any money from the government […] I mean, I'm happy to obey the sensible laws of the land. You know what I mean? {Mm} I'm not gonna go out murdering and dadadadada, and all that kind of stuff. Robbing banks. But other than that, leave me alone. Right? Ya know? They're not putting food on my table, so don't give me your laws to, to {Mm} like, to say I can't go out and I can't do this... (Jack).

There were signs that this opposition to lockdowns was driven by factors that were different from those he stated and that perhaps was a result of Jack's feelings of being oppressed. Jack asserted that "I'm not convinced with this little government of beauties that we've got, right, that they're gonna relinquish those powers that they have over us." Perhaps there was even an association in Jack's mind between Covid precautions and neoliberalism – a feeling that the lockdowns were an extension or extreme manifestation of the governmental control he perceived to be a feature of the past few decades: "all I want is to be left alone to sort of go into that, you know, that last hump, over the twilight bit and into the whatever. However long I've got. To do it in peace... without the expectations of the last forty years, which is, you know, [rep] madness…"

For example, his claim to want his freedom to work restored strongly contradicted his comments about employment in other contexts (e.g. outside of discussions of lockdowns). The purpose of this freedom fluctuated in Jack's representations, as he at one point argued against fighting for the right to work, arguing that in doing this people "decorate the avenues of the wealthy" and we should instead "fight for the right to live". Jack overtly questioned the modern work ethic and the extent to which our society is built around work, and described in some detail how our society may function better if people were allowed to not seek paid work, or at least did not need to pursue wealth and mobility: "we are all responsible for ourselves but we look after each other. We don't need to join different classes and different clubs" and "you'll

have your own chance to join up and be with like-minded people there and then, but it doesn't take away from your responsibility that that old lady down the road mustn't be left to starve to death."

In some instances, the denial of finances for those who do not aspire was therefore equated with the enforcement of an unwritten rule that forbids people from living life outside of the demands of neoliberal capitalism. This framed modern capitalism as a controlling system that people are forced to comply with: "…ever since I left school, it's been move the posts, move the posts, move the posts {Yeah} Hey, you got this, then move... you know, [rep] the rules of the game, they just kept changing. And I definitely at some point got fed up with trying to keep up." Jack also used metaphor to equate particular forms of economic activity to being forced into military service: "why do we have to take part in that? Why do I have to line up, right? {Yeah} With shiny boots. I'm not in the army. Right? {[laughter]} Why do I have to line up and march…" Again, Jack was free-associating from thoughts of neoliberal policy to thoughts of military discipline and imagery frequently associated with the Nazis. Nowhere was this more explicit than when, in response to my observation that the government position seems to be to encourage work, and to view work as the route to happiness, he evoked the infamous Auschwitz slogan by paraphrasing "'work makes you free' {[rep]} It's rather worrying…"

To clarify, I am not making an attempt to equate neoliberalism with Nazism. The two are entirely distinct and the harms of neoliberalism are not on the same level (or of the same nature) as the horrors of the holocaust. But it cannot be ignored that participants repeatedly free-associated from topics concerning neoliberalism to thoughts of various forms of fascism and oppression. For the moment, rather than make any attempts to find actual parallels between these political stances, I will try to make some psychosocial sense of why participants made these associations.

If these associations had only manifested in Jack, they would have been somewhat unsurprising. Jack presented as a staunchly far-left person, of the kind that sometimes does compare modern right-wing politics and politicians with the Nazis. However, these free-associations to oppression were *not* confined to Jack, nor was oppression always constructed as taking the form of Nazism or similar regimes.

Michael's allusions to oppression were discussions of possible future events, although for Michael this was hidden behind a layer of defenses. Michael's anxieties surrounding potential future oppression were linked to Brexit, which he mentioned in response to questions regarding news topics that had made him anxious about his prospects. Upon starting to discuss Brexit, Michael described potential future scenarios of people being dragged from their homes and deported. Although he introduced these scenarios within an assertion that he "didn't think" such scenarios would happen, he provided no other explanation as to why he had mentioned them. In a later interview, after again referring to the potential ramifications of Brexit, he discussed how one of his relatives (an immigrant) may have been affected, had she not left the UK: "I was very concerned about the situation with […] would her legal position change? Would she still be […] able to work?" He also discussed how people he knew had been the targets of hate speech. "I mean, it never, thank God, touched us directly but, I, [rep] know people, know friends of friends, people I've run into who [rep] tell stories about being stopped in the street and asked, 'so when are you leaving then?'" Michael is himself a member of an ethnic minority (UK born) yet never mentioned the potential of being a target of hate crimes himself.

His assertion that the dystopian scenarios would not happen was a comforting assumption in some ways, and following Michael's own assertions, he did not believe that such assumptions were still reliable: "the comfortable assumptions that ten years ago it wouldn't have occurred to […] anyone that things, some things could change {Yeah} Now […] you don't know what's going to happen next". Considering this alongside his indirect way of approaching his fears on this topic it seems likely that Michael mentioned these scenarios because he unconsciously did fear them coming to pass. These narratives spilled over into discussion of a fear of racist hostility towards ethnic minorities, expressed as hostility towards immigrants. Michael talked about all these anxieties indirectly, only expressing direct concern for his sister-in-law and mostly making vague comments about uncertainty, change, and hostility. Given that Michael is visibly a member of an ethnic minority, it seemed likely that he had fears of these issues affecting other people as well as his sister-in-law, perhaps including himself and the rest of his close family.

Dee, similarly, seemed to be alluding to some form of persecution when discussing the changes made to the jobcentre, including welfare sanctions, and then going on to draw a comparison between the rebranded Jobcentre Plus and the Newspeak conventions described in the novel ‘1984:

> Certainly, jobcentres now had more 'services' than before. But I think many people would disagree that they were 'better' than before. Jobcentres today seem to be more geared towards finding reasons to sanction claimants rather than actually assist them in finding meaningful work. Further to my previous email, I think I need to clarify my explanation of 'Newspeak' (or at least my interpretation of it!). The word 'doubleplusgood' is used to replace words that are 'more than' good. The word 'doubleplusungood' is used to replace words that are 'more than' bad. (Dee).

The variety of political perspectives that these narratives of oppression and catastrophe link to suggest that these ideas did not stem from a particular political discourse or subject positioning that participants aligned to. Although the details of each narrative reflected some strongly held assumptions regarding particular political subject positionings, general themes of oppression and catastrophe emerged regardless of the political discourses being drawn on.

6.6 Further explanations

Why should these oppression anxieties be associated with the topics of prospects and aspiration? There are multiple apparent explanations, which may all have been causative factors. One explanation was suggested by Jack, in his assertion that right-wing politicians “don’t care about us”. Jack associated the most nationalistic and xenophobic of sociopolitical orientations with the economic policies that typically endorse free-market capitalism and the removal of social safety nets:

> …the rise of the far-right has really, really bothered me, cos this authoritarian, er, er, [rep] tangent that we're going off on and, er, you know, because [rep] I know that to them I don't matter. {Mm} And neither do my kids, who are adults

> or whatever, they don't matter either… if [rep] there is a net now, it ain't gonna be there for much longer (Jack).

In his assertion that “to them I don’t matter” lies the implication that policy makers who would endorse oppression of minorities would also typically leave the poor and vulnerable to perish and allow inequality to get worse. If we assume this association is present in the minds of other participants (which is not certain, as some people do believe that free-market capitalist policies will lead to prosperity, or that governments with xenophobic policies would provide more support to ‘natively born’ citizens if not for the demands of immigration) then it could be a realistic explanation as to why some may free-associate from discussion of their prospects and financial security to thoughts of xenophobic and authoritarian policies.

Another explanation is that participants on some level consider aspects of our current (neoliberal) economic system as being oppressive. This may seem controversial, but there are numerous possible roots for this association. Davies (2014) discussed how neoliberalism jettisons previously core principals of justified governance – under neoliberalism the state’s authority is no longer justified based on sovereignty that is ostensibly in service to the common good or popular consent. Instead, neoliberalism aspires to allow consent and co-operation to be coerced in order to shape people’s behaviour in ways that serve the market. This is justified, allegedly, by the idea of governance in accordance with technical expertise, that good governance must follow the recommendations of expert economic knowledge. However, this only holds true if particular economic theories are assumed to be more reliable than other forms of knowledge and be a higher priority than all other considerations. The contradictions, false assumptions and paradoxes within neoliberalism have been discussed in chapter 2. It is uncertain whether most people who have not directly studied neoliberalism and its associated policies and discourses would consciously realise these problems, but it would seem likely that many people living within and navigating a neoliberal economic system, attempting to become upwardly mobile while surviving precarious circumstances, and hearing news reports of political discourse that lacks internal consistency, would notice the contrast between their lived experiences and the narratives endorsed by neoliberalism, and between the stated intentions for policies and the observable

outcomes of them. For example, the idea that limited support is intended to increase mobility appears to be undermined by participants' experiences of having their aspirational activities disrupted by the stress or practical obstacles created by a lack of support.

Closely related to this is the concept of persecution, which several participants alluded to in one way or another. Ahmed seemed to be making this connection when discussing the low provision and high conditionality attached to Carer's Allowance and these made him feel that carers were "scapegoats", even though he was unable to articulate why this conditionality made them scapegoats, specifically.

People may not only form an association to fascism due to feeling like they're oppressed by rules and policy-supported structural factors that restrict their options, they may also form this association from feeling that policy makers are targeting particular groups of people (which they may or may not be part of) with deliberately cruel policies designed to maintain or exacerbate hardship.

These could be seen as manifestations of persecution complexes. According to Klein, depressive and paranoid-schizoid positionings are components of the self that develop in response to anxieties that stem from early formative experiences of having needs such as hunger and having these be alternately sated and unsated. The source of nourishment is also phantasised as a source of persecution when nourishment is not provided, the feelings of hunger interpreted as caused by an attack. Consequently, this tendency to constantly shift between the depressive and paranoid states continues throughout life. Perhaps the 'Bad breast' persecution complexes that manifest in infants (Klein 1975) are echoed in participants' feelings that government figures want them to struggle. However, since there exists evidence that this latter persecutory denial of care is real (such as political statements that denigrate the poor, policies that reduce support or deliberate inaction on things like employment rights, sick pay, furlough support for the precariat, and the cost of living) what kinds of unconscious anxieties must this evoke and, by extension, appear to confirm? Might this summon forth memories or affective responses associated with those early 'bad breast' anxieties? And, if so, might the fact that government figures can often be *demonstrated* to be deliberately depriving people of 'nourishment' make people feel as though their earliest and longest-held anxieties were always real?

Could Jack's construction of Covid rules have been an example of this? Could Wanda's theories of divide and conquer also have been? Both expressed fears and misgivings that were at odds with views they expressed in relation to other topics. For Jack, he claimed to want his freedom back (in relation to work) and yet elsewhere rejected the idea of fighting for the right to work. For Wanda, she indicated that protest was causing conflict yet advocated a nebulous alternative goal of rising together. Both these fears were based somewhat on conspiratorial thinking. For Wanda, the division was being deliberately manipulated by the government through Machiavellian plots. For Jack, there was a fear that the danger of Covid had been exaggerated to justify closing the borders.

Finally, we should acknowledge the position of powerlessness that is characteristic of precarious work and consider the potential psychosocial impact of this powerlessness, especially where it is felt to have been deliberately inflicted. Precariat workers are the least likely group to become upwardly mobile and, while mobility is not necessarily a prerequisite for empowerment, there are numerous ways in which upward mobility can afford a person a sense of greater power and autonomy. From the standpoint of the capability approach to poverty (Sen 1999, pp. 87-90), upward mobility may provide the individual opportunities to pursue goals and interests that have previously been denied to them, both because of increased spending power allowing access to more social and leisure activities, and because the career change itself may represent that person accessing a job sector and social role they had previously been locked out of. Although people's reasons for seeking particular careers vary, and motivations can often include pressures from political discourses, familial expectations, and desires for money and status, people's career goals can also be strongly motivated by a desire to take part in the activities involved in the career itself, as seen in the representations of several of this study's participants. For example, as detailed in 4.6, Michael specifically became a botanist due to his interest in protecting the environment.

In such cases, the act of accessing an ideal career that they had previously been locked out of may be empowering. Precariat workers with such goals are often denied the opportunity to pursue them. This suggests a powerlessness associated with *immobility* and the potential of being permanently trapped in subordinate roles.

Such immobility involves a lack of personal choice over how one's time is spent and what ethical telos one abides by.

Reflecting further on the empowering aspects of having increased spending power, we should consider the material dimension of that – the limited spending power of many precariat workers. In addition to the increased likelihood of having a low income overall, precariat workers need to be particularly careful with their spending. In addition to these imposed limitations, precariat workers are often trapped in such undesirable circumstances, as their chances of upward mobility are limited and there appears to be no political appetite for improving the circumstances of the least well-off through financial support or pay regulation.

In addition to these associations formed between discussion of precarity and social mobility, some participants directly asserted that their hardships had been deliberately inflicted on them, either due to conscious inaction and negligence or through active interference to decrease people's power. Discussing the restrictions placed on eligibility to Carer's Allowance (particularly those surrounding limits to work) Ahmed asserted that "It's definitely a rubbish system. [laughter] They don't really like to help people" implying that eligibility criteria exist to give the government an excuse to withhold help from people who need it. Discussing the limited amounts provided to carers, and the government response to a petition on this issue, he said "they say they care but, like, carers they, carers are being quote en quote, like, they just seem to be the scapegoat…"

Ahmed could not clearly explain what he meant by carers being scapegoats. His explanations for why he felt carers were treated as 'scapegoats' did not match the accepted definition of the word.

> I think the government's preference is that… people, will, er, look after their loved ones, um, so in this way I think I feel like they're kinda treated like scapegoats, they just want, kind of, um, it, like, um, the burden on the families, even though may be quite [...] it typically is very taxing and difficult as well, and oh yeah taxing, and draining at times as well. So, um, yeah they're treated kinda like scapegoats, just like, um, giving a small amount, um, and there's so many restrictions on this benefit as well (Ahmed).

While it is possible that he simply misused this word through mistaking it's meaning, Ahmed was well educated and had an extensive vocabulary. None of Ahmed's accounts explained in what way carers might be unfairly blamed for anything, rather he concentrated on discussing the ways in which carers have too many conditions placed on eligibility, receive too little money, and are used by the government as a means of saving money on domiciliary care.

Did the use of this word indicate an association or affective response that Ahmed was unable to articulate (and perhaps unable to consciously process)? This seems likely, given how much the literature categorises government discourse surrounding benefits claimants as scapegoating (e.g. Doherty 2017; Folkes 2019; Nielson 2015). However, we should be cautious in making that assumption. Ahmed incorrectly used some other words and terms (i.e. "safety blanket" instead of "safety net") and given how much nerves and hesitancy seemed to affect him, it is possible that he got words mixed up due to being flustered. Also, given that some accusations of scapegoating welfare claimants have been directed at government in the media, it is also possible that Ahmed has formed a word association from media discourse he has encountered.

Jack took this theme of deliberately inflicted hardship further, asserting that precarity had been deliberately created:

> Greenspan, [rep] the guy that used to advise Ronal Reagan in the Thatcher days and whatever, er, he was the one who introduced job insecurity…. Job insecurity makes us fight each other for the jobs. Job insecurity [rep] makes us take lower wages... this thing has not been introduced by accident. {Oh no} It's not a byproduct of capitalism or whatever. It's a... pointed attack on ordinary people (Jack).

Jude similarly traced issues of poverty and underemployment to deliberate policy choices that are seemingly informed by biases. Talking about his judging himself for his lack of work and feeling "worthless and shit", he free-associated to political discourse that ignores the need to support people out of work and instead focuses on aspiration. Acknowledging the role that this discourse had played in his feelings of worthlessness, he drew particular attention to Keir Starmer's comments about

promoting “better jobs” – “it sort of comes from like the sort of government emphasis on like getting people back into work. You know. {Mmm, yeah.} And like, and the whole kinda discourse that like the, you know, Labour under Keir Starmer, just all about like better jobs, you know. No talk of like changing [rep] the welfare system…”

Although these latter comments were not directly linked to narratives related to oppression, we see a sense of powerlessness and victimisation that could inform feelings of being oppressed, that echo experiences of people more overtly and severely mistreated by their governments. That some of these participants were made to feel particularly badly about themselves as a result of these policies and discourses, and some felt they were treated like scapegoats, also creates an uncomfortable link with the themes of abuse discussed in 6.3, as they share some qualities with tactics of psychological abuse such as gaslighting and victim-blaming.

6.7 Conclusion

The four themes discussed in this chapter (personal challenges, crimes, catastrophes and oppression) overlapped in various ways, and were often associated with each other. Government actions and inactions were sometimes seen to have a malicious motive, which linked the participants’ experiences of hardship with the themes of oppression. There were cases of financial hardship and government policy being associated with the crime of domestic abuse. The line between catastrophe and oppression was repeatedly blurred, as was the line between societal catastrophes and personal catastrophes, with several participants alluding to how the former may cause the latter. The overall pattern of these associations suggested feelings of deliberately inflicted hardships, and sinister manipulations, inflicted by government in manners that were linked to both authoritarianism and domestic abuse. These in turn were also associated with fears of the erosion of social cohesion and a growing sense of conflict and hostility.

Neoliberalism ostensibly aims to empower people via motivating or ‘incentivising’ them. Within neoliberal discourse, embracing individualism and taking charge of one’s own life are framed as empowering subjectivities, albeit often seen to blur the line between empowering and manipulating (Spohrer et al. 2018, pp. 337-338). The

reality is distinctly different, however. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, there are signs that imposed states of precarity and stigmatising discourses can make precariat workers feel much less inclined towards aspirational behaviour, either because of how pressures impact their mental health or because these experiences lead them to view their goals as out of reach. People's complex psychological defenses formed in response to neoliberal discourse and policy can also cloud their awareness of what they want and need, naturally making it much more difficult for them to meet these wants and needs, or even choose particular paths. In these ways, in addition to the structural limitations created by precarity, neoliberalism actively disempowers precarious neoliberal subjects, and perhaps this too contributes to the association with oppression – the perception of being simultaneously compelled to aspire and obstructed from aspiring, with the ability to meet basic needs being held hostage, may feel like being subjected to sadistic attacks rather than efficient governance.

This chapter argued that people's responses to the government policies and discourse that shapes their lives so thoroughly are vastly more complex than is acknowledged by policy discourse that constructs people as (or would seek to shape them into) individualistic rational actors who will pursue their own best path towards survival and upwards mobility. It also problematizes the treatment of people in this manner, illustrating the affective impact of the circumstances created, the discourses utilised, and associations formed. That these discourses, policies, and the implications of them act on people's psyches in damaging ways is fairly clear. Beyond these observable manifestations it is also important to consider the potential psychodynamic ramifications. The discussion chapter that follows includes a speculative summary of what other psychodynamic affects these factors *could* have, based on the outcomes of this analysis and prior theory and research that tallies with these findings.

Overall, these three chapters have argued that participants felt that their basic needs were going unmet, and that minimal financial support and inequal pay made it harder to meet these needs. Simultaneously, adequate pay and security for meeting these needs is increasingly restricted to particular forms of work that conflict with either their health needs or their other subject positionings, implying a dominant value system that was at odds with their priorities. Some neoliberal subjectification was

evident, perhaps as a means of survival or perhaps due to alignment to neoliberal moral obligations, with widespread pursuit of education as commodity and many goals that were aspiring to at least minor upward mobility (albeit balancing this aspiration with other priorities). These competing subject positionings, as well as awareness of neoliberalism's implied value judgements and evident inconsistencies and counter-productive outcomes, have given rise to varied anxieties and defenses regarding aspirations and precaritisation, that in turn have produced affective states that blur and distort phantasies of goals and obstruct their pursuit.

The combined result of these defended anxieties regarding survival, subservience, and compromises of ethical and personal priorities, appears to be a manifestation of dark and extreme fears and affective associations with trauma and mistreatment. This is at odds with the dominant view of how neoliberalism functions and paints it more as a system of psychological torment than as a method of making people economically efficient and rational. These aspects of the precariat experience of neoliberalism are mostly absent from the existing literature.

7: Discussion and conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This research explored precariat constructions of social mobility and related discursive elements such as aspiration and meritocracy, and the psychosocial impact of these discourses and policies informed by them. This thesis has so far explained how this was achieved via psychodynamically-informed free-association interviews with precariat workers.

This chapter summarises and considers the main themes of the findings, how these relate to the research questions, the strengths and limitations of the research, speculative consideration of wider psychosocial implications, how the findings relate to existing knowledge and theory, and recommendations for policy and further research.

7.2 Addressing the research questions

Here I return to the research questions and consider each in turn, placing them in the context of the research that was conducted. This section provides a summary of the findings relevant to each question. Primarily, this focuses on:

the stresses and traumas experienced and how these shape behaviour, limit options, and create potential for future uncertainty;

the perceptions of neoliberal mobility-focused policy as elitist, harmful, and out of touch with personal aspirations; the participants' desire for policy to provide for basic needs and how this is seen as potentially helpful for aspiration.

7.2.1 Question 1

How do precariat workers understand and respond to the social mobility policy agenda? What is the relation between these understandings and their experience of work and mobility?

The research uncovered multiple ways in which participants constructed aspects of the social mobility policy agenda. With one notable exception, participants were mostly opposed to the idea that people should have to pursue higher-class careers to gain sufficient income. Participants recollected and phantasised various goals, many of which prioritised other aspects of life that contrasted with the priorities of social-mobility policies and employers in higher-pay occupations.

The findings in this area need to be divided between how participants *understood* the social mobility policy agenda and how they *responded* to it.

Beginning with how participants *responded* to this, there were a variety of responses, often existing alongside each other. Most participants had pursued higher education to access a career or were in the process of doing so. Several had set up businesses or intended to do so. This indicated widespread *attempts* to adhere to the action orientations that neoliberal governance advocates. However, these attempts were hindered or deterred in multiple ways, particularly by competing demands on time and energy (care responsibilities, household maintenance, and earning a living) as well as psychological and affective responses that hindered ability (high incidence of mental health problems, participants being anxious and defended regarding issues related to their aspirations, and confusion and cognitive dissonance regarding prior choices and future options). There was some awareness that policies that compelled and necessitated aspiration also hindered the pursuit of goals.

Moving on to how participants *understood* the social mobility policy agenda, they framed this negatively. Some participants used metaphors of military oppression and drew comparisons between recent economic policies and criminal acts such as mugging and domestic abuse. One participant described the treatment of Carer's Allowance claimants as scapegoating and held the perception that the government does not like to help people. There was implication within this participant's narratives that this problem was also endemic to other welfare services. Welfare reforms, commonly aimed at 'incentivising' people to find more lucrative work, were perceived as motivated by an aversion to helping people, a desire to pressure people into unsuitable work, and a need to justify withholding money.

Regarding mobility-related discourse, participants largely positioned themselves in opposition to ideas like aspiration and meritocracy. Only one participant framed upward mobility as self-improvement. All other participants whose responses touched on these discourses voiced objection to some aspect of these. From George's indications that he believed in equalised pay, to Jack's rejection of the idea that people should have to be 'go-getters', to Tracy's assertion that the system is designed to maintain inequality, there was a pattern of participants rejecting the moral imperative to 'aspire' and the implication that this should be a prerequisite to earning stable, adequate wages. Returning to participants' *responses,* there was similarly a pattern of some participants having left permanent employment and sometimes transferred to precarious roles within the same field, indicating a rejection of social mobility discourses through their narratives. These patterns of narratives and free-association, compared to the patterns of behaviours, suggest a troubling contrast between participants' subject positionings and their action orientations. Although many pursued particular careers due to these representing tasks that they regarded as having value to the world, and therefore allowed them to contribute something, there were also participants who had pursued, or were pursuing, upward mobility purely for financial gain. Some of these participants were also among those who voiced opposition to mobility-promoting discourse or 'incentivising' policies. This, along with the fact that some participants chose career changes that could be perceived as downwardly mobile, suggests that some of the 'aspirational' behaviour displayed through phantasies of future events or through narratives of previous (rejected) modes of working was motivated by feeling that these were a necessity for adequate income, rather than a response based on goals and values true to these participants. We must be cautious, however, in drawing conclusions from this. It would be easy to assume that this indicates some success arising from the social mobility policy agenda, with hardships motivating people towards the 'high-status' careers that policy makers wish them to pursue. Although technically true, the discourses and policies involved in 'incentivising' these goals still hindered the attainment of them, producing avoidable distress without necessarily producing the desired results. We should also be mindful of the morality behind the coercion of major life choices in this way, especially in light of the contrast between the monetary value placed on various jobs by employers, and the social value placed on these

jobs by workers, as well as the likely futility of coercing aspirational behaviour when it is thought that this cannot change the overall numbers of people within each class.

7.2.2 Question 2

Are there affective dimensions of social mobility discourses that are experienced by precariat workers? If so, are ideas of personal responsibility for aspiration and mobility experienced as positive or do they produce distress? Are these functioning as technologies of power?

The research identified a range of affective experiences seemingly related to social mobility discourses. For some, these conjured feelings of worthlessness, while some expressed feelings of uncertainty and distrust. Others seemed to link these discourses with oppressive governance styles. Almost all participants reported mental health problems, and several explicitly stated that efforts to be socially mobile had contributed to this *and* been frustrated by it.

Disclosures of mental health conditions were almost universal across the participants and several linked these to their experiences of precarity or the ‘reformed’ welfare system. Others indicated such links through narratives or free-associations. Multiple participants appeared to have had their career trajectories disrupted by these conditions.

The identified defenses, and the anxieties they appeared to be defending against, suggested participants experienced intense anxiety associated with potential income loss and the reality that their income was sometimes insufficient. These were sometimes entangled with feelings of shame, either due to their lack of economic activity or difficulties in providing or caring for family. There were instances of participants expressing feelings of worthlessness connected to their precarity and associating these feelings with political discourses that prioritise social mobility, rather than financial support.

Participants also experienced defended anxiety connected to their level of autonomy, their capacity to be entrepreneurial, and feelings regarding their chosen profession.

Some participants appeared defended regarding their level of happiness and how happiness could be gained. Wanda's constructions of happiness were inconsistent, while Ahmed initially associated upward mobility with happiness but struggled to explain the link between these.

There were instances of participants feeling that they had not achieved enough or not expressed themselves because they had not had career success. Many participants free-associated from the interview topics towards themes of abuse, catastrophe, and persecution. As well as implying that participants may think of the economic system as abusive, persecutory or causing catastrophes, this gives some insight into the affective responses. Widespread associations of modern economic forces with past experiences of abuse, present feelings of persecution, and fears of worsening persecution or catastrophes indicate feelings of mistreatment, powerlessness, and precariousness. It was my view that there were links between perceptions of being coerced by choice architecture, feelings of being manipulated, and thoughts of abuse and oppression. There were also strong links between topics of insufficient support and feelings of being victims of wilful malign neglect.

Trust issues were raised by several participants, including George listing the things he does not trust (including government and "the future"), and Amy's turn towards narratives that followed a theme of distrust.

It would not be accurate to say that these discourses functioned as technologies of power, as they did not appear to be functioning *as reputedly intended* – that is, within this cohort, they had not typically produced neoliberal subjects that truly believed in the power of upward mobility to lift people out of poverty, or the righteousness of some forms of work having higher pay. They had also not produced subjects who could unproblematically distance themselves from emotional concerns or interdependency in favour of focussing on earnings potential. They had, rather, mostly produced multiple subjects who were struggling to balance the need to be socially mobile or entrepreneurial (as a potential means of escaping precarity) and the other concerns and priorities they each had.

These discourses did in some ways function as technologies of control in that they allowed participants to defend against awareness of power imbalances and the

causes of their problems. However, the anxieties associated with these manifested in other ways, connecting to self-doubts, generalised anxiety, trust issues, risk-aversions, trauma responses, conspiratorial fears, confusion regarding priorities and limitations, and fears of catastrophes. These defended positionings are likely to hinder efforts to be upwardly mobile or to pursue other goals and the narratives presented here provided specific examples of this happening. These discourses appear to primarily function as justifications for neoliberalism, a means of perpetuating it and concealing its harms, but is only seen to partially fulfil these purposes, to great detriment to workers and the chances of achieving goals.

7.2.3 Question 3

How would precariat workers generate approaches that they feel would support them and aid their mobility?

Participants tended to condemn low provision and high conditionality for financial support, across different forms of welfare and student support. Several stated that they would like to see increased welfare rates and eligibility, or new welfare systems such as Universal Basic Income. There was no demand for informal work contracts to be banned, but there was support for regulation to prevent these being misused by employers.

As demonstrated primarily within Chapter 4, the precariat workers who participated in this study mostly advocated for more financial support from government. Where specifics were mentioned, these concerned welfare support for the unemployed, Carer's Allowance, and grants for students. Two participants suggested implementing Universal Basic Income. There were appeals for higher pay and extended eligibility. Although not all participants directly appealed for such changes, there was near-universal criticism of limited support, and instances of current provision being compared unfavourably to what was previously available.

Participants tended to view their precarity and financial hardships as being an obstacle or deterrent to their goals, including those goals that match the dominant

definition of ‘aspiration’. Often this was due to negative mental health impacts caused by precarity and the pressures of chasing financial stability.

Where participants mentioned the oft-proposed banning of zero-hours contracts, they opposed this idea. Participants had a generally positive view of employment types that offer flexibility. Some had deliberately traded their full-time employment for more flexible forms of work, partly due to negative behaviour from employers and managers, or personal desires that were incompatible with those of employers. Although the research findings indicated that this was sometimes connected to self-determination anxieties, technologies of control, and discourses that have ‘sold’ precarity to workers, there were also instances where the practical upsides to the flexibility were inarguable and essential for the participant – such as zero-hours contracts allowing participants to work alongside managing illnesses and adjust hours according to fluctuating availability.

There were multiple instances of participants critiquing how zero-hours contracts are misused by managers, but also multiple instances of participants condemning the actions of managers in permanent full-time employment. A general desire for more regulation of managers’ conduct was implied.

Several participants expressed concern over policies designed to shape their behaviour and coerce them into making particular career or life choices. There were also instances of participants alluding to feelings that people were being controlled or manipulated, and free-associating towards topics related to coercion and manipulation in other contexts, which apparently stemmed from associations with neoliberal policy.

Several participants appeared to feel that the policy focus on upward mobility, particularly as a means of people gaining financial stability, were disparaging. This was evidenced by participants making direct comments challenging the concept of needing to be socially mobile, but also by the instances of participants free-associating between this topic and narratives of negative self-perceptions associated with their employment.

Some participants aligned with work-resistance narratives, either by asserting that workloads were too demanding, or by challenging the prioritisation of work and speculating that a less work-focused society may be healthier.

However, most of the participants endorsed education in some way, and this was often presented as either being valuable in and of itself, or as a means of proving competency for careers, which in turn were sometimes seen as the only viable route to sufficient income, but more often seen as the opportunity to do things participants viewed as fulfilling or socially worthwhile.

The above findings indicate that participants of this study would endorse policy approaches that provide them financial stability while allowing them to continue working flexibly. They would endorse policy approaches that increase financial support for people. There was widespread implication that this would assist them in becoming upwardly mobile and achieving goals that would improve their wellbeing, as well as afford them greater opportunity to help others. More manageable ways of accessing education would apparently be especially welcome due to the potential to facilitate access to interesting and benevolent careers. This would represent a reversal of policy approaches that have aimed to ‘incentivise’ people towards aspirational behaviour by making state-support and low-wage work less tenable.

Participants would likely endorse policy approaches that increase the regulation of managerial conduct within precarious roles and steady employment. Several participants would also likely endorse more radical policy changes aimed at de-emphasising the role of employment in modern life and the obligation to work.

Participants would likely oppose further policy changes aimed at indirectly shaping economic behaviour and policy approaches that treat mobility as a solution to poverty.

7.3 Core themes

This section summarises the core themes and main findings of the research, including: the tendency to challenge cuts and endorse increased state support; the

tendency to value and/or pursue education; the prevalence of work-resistance narratives; patterns of defended thinking that included defenses against financial anxieties, work-related pressures, flexibility limits, and regret or repressed motivations for career choices; the tendency towards free-associating to examples of personal trauma, metaphorical themes of abuse and oppression, and fears of social catastrophes and totalitarianism.

This section also makes speculative connections between these themes and how the unconscious processes may have been related (for example, how valuing education may have stemmed from repressed anxieties surrounding prospects, or how free-association towards traumatic narratives and phantasies may have stemmed from repressed financial stresses) and how some of these may have been informed by factors outside the research's remit, including structural limitations and the Covid-19 pandemic.

7.3.1 Resistance to neoliberal policies and goals of free-market capitalism

There was widespread opposition to austerity measures, most notably cuts to financial support including provision for precariat workers, jobseekers, students, and carers.

Most of the participants objected to reduced financial support and other austerity measures. For Eva, these caused additional pressures on midwifery services. For Jack they were instantiated by the contrast between the relaxed welfare claiming experiences of his past and modern conditionality, and the feeling that safety nets were being removed. For Amy, it meant less support for her to help her children and for them to attend university. For Ahmed, it was a sign that the government did not want to help. Several participants objected to aspects of welfare conditionality.

Multiple participants opposed or resented the pressure to be socially mobile and the use of upward mobility to combat poverty and inequality (although one participant did take a notably opposing view that social mobility is about the working class bettering themselves). Jack objected to having to change his designation and play by "their rules", while Jude drew attention to the psychological impact of politicians

concentrating on “better jobs” and the impossibility of everyone aspiring to the same place.

There was widespread endorsement and/or uptake of education, which could be seen as the result of neoliberal discourses. However, this had often been in pursuit of particular aspirations that were not necessarily (or, at least, not entirely) motivated by money or status. Most participants prioritised fulfilment over prosperity. Most still pursued some form of education and skilled work, but several had chosen career paths based on a sense of what they viewed as beneficial to others or personally interesting, or rejected lucrative career options that clashed with their values. Several participants had walked away from certain careers in favour of options that could be considered downwardly mobile, for the sake of either family, flexibility, morality, or mental health.

The fact that pursuing goals that do not match policy-makers construction of ‘aspiration’ has led many of the participants to precarity should not be taken as a sign that such aspirations are foolhardy or that precarity is self-inflicted but should awaken us to the fact that employers’ goals frequently do not align with the goals and values of workers. Therefore, upwardly mobile careers therefore do not necessarily reward those that are most deserving in the eyes of people outside of politics and business. They often neglect to reward socially-conscious and altruistic activities and instead reward those most deemed valuable by employers and policy makers. These valuations apparently contrast with the appraisal of many workers – perhaps because they are based on factors such as the supply and demand of particular skills, and which tasks are useful to employers. Just as supply and demand is thought to affect the price of goods, it similarly affects the price of labour and is likely to be a stronger determinant of pay than evaluations of tasks’ social benefits. Why then should aspiration towards upward mobility be championed and the rewards treated as deserved, as though it indicates a person is making a greater contribution to society? As illuminated by the Covid-19 pandemic, many workers in low paid and/or precarious roles (often regarded as having little value) are the key workers of modern society, with indispensable duties. Now that there is wider recognition that job class does not necessarily indicate a more important contribution to society, effort must be made to redress some of the pay imbalances that result from employers’

valuations of work. Meritocracy discourses that present these valuations as fair have a self-perpetuating nature. Littler (2013) argued that meritocracy perpetuates inequality and allows plutocracy to perpetuate itself. It empowers those who best embody the neoliberal conception of ‘merit’, placing them in a position to recruit others based on the same criteria.

7.3.2 Annihilation anxieties, status anxieties, and the shaping of defended subject positionings

Overall, the interviews painted a picture of precariat workers who had experienced significant negative affective outcomes due to aspiration and meritocracy discourses.

The most prevalent annihilation anxieties concerned either the reliability of regular income, or the likelihood of prospects improving. There were also signs that some participants had difficulty admitting exhaustion or burnout resulting from work, denigrating themselves for feeling tired (such as Michael’s assertion that he shouldn’t be tired if he had slept at all) or speculating about apparent symptoms of burnout without an awareness of the cause (such as Amy’s struggles with time management and Jude’s being ‘in storage’).

The most prevalent status anxieties concerned career choices (past and prospective) motivated by discourses or subjectivities that prompted shame or confusion. These included Eva’s apparent inability to understand her reasons for choosing midwifery and reluctance to acknowledge negative aspects of the profession that may have been informing her desire to leave.

Anxieties concerning class of origin were seemingly tied to status and traumatic recollections of prior annihilation anxieties. Eva’s limited discussion of her circumstances growing up and unfavourable comparisons to her peers’ travel options was likely due to status anxiety, and shame associated with her working-class origins or the motivations that led her to midwifery. Tracy’s association between financial precarity and experiencing domestic violence as a child seemed to suggest an overlapping trauma response, and this informed her denials of current financial hardship and avoidance of the subject. For Tracy, there was also status anxiety

entangled with this, as she displayed anxiety concerning the prospect of being unable to provide for her children and thus feeling similar to her mother.

There were instances of participants being defended regarding the extent of their flexibility, in ways that suggested anxieties surrounding hierarchy and subservience, which have been highlighted as a major cause of status anxiety (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019). Alternatively, autonomy may have been something that they depended on for their mental health, because it allowed them to maintain social connections or self-care activities, adhere to values, or deny dependency on employers or contractors – this would indicate that the limitations of autonomy were perceived as a threat and caused annihilation anxieties. Such annihilation anxieties could also be caused by awareness of how limits on their autonomy, and resultant stresses, could make it difficult to maintain this form of work. This could also have been because they presented a threat to participants' subjectivities. Participants could have been deriving some comfort or pride from adopting the subject positioning of independent worker with maximised freedom, and thus felt the need to defend against details that threatened this subject positioning. In any case, it became apparent that this may be a factor in driving people towards taking precarious work and remaining in such roles.

Regarding low levels of support being viewed as a sign that the government does not want to help, we should be mindful of the possible affective impact of such perceptions. Perceptions that the authorities tasked with providing support and structuring our society in beneficial ways are deliberately inflicting hardship or withholding help is bound to have a psychological impact. If those with power over us and the economy we rely on are seen to be actively cruel, petty and sadistic, then the authoritative body that is supposed to be a source of stability becomes a threat and a source of precariousness. This could lead to people feeling like victims of attack and abusive actions. Further, it risks delegitimising democratic processes, thereby leaving the door open for acceptance of fully undemocratic forms of governance that portray themselves as acting in people's interests. Thankfully, contrary to theories of a "dangerous class" there was little sign of participants supporting totalitarianism or socially regressive ideas. There was, contrastingly, substantial evidence of participants fearing such agendas.

7.3.3 Abuse and oppression

Most of the participants at some point free-associated towards extreme negative associations, such as domestic abuse, societal collapse, food supply-chain failure, ethnic cleansing, and fascism.

For Tracy, as noted above, the link appeared to be a trauma response. For some others, the causes of these associations were more opaque, but could be traced to mistrust of the political class and feelings of being victimised, neglected and manipulated. George and Jack explicitly expressed a lack of trust in the government, while some other participants, including Ahmed, expressed feelings that the government were maliciously neglectful. Still others, like Tracy, condemned government figures in emotive and explicitly phrased terms.

There was some tendency for feelings of persecution to inform some irrational and unlikely fears, including fears of conspiracies. These constructions are classic examples of a shift towards paranoid-schizoid positioning (which, again, is a common positioning associated with feeling attacked and threatened, and believing threats to exist based on such anxieties), and modes of defense that include misattributing unacceptable feelings onto other objects and using false conceptualisations to make sense of the perceived threat.

How much of the fears of civil conflict stemmed from persecution anxieties and how much stemmed from fear of aggression and the ways that symbolic aggression and conflict are being encouraged? In Chapter 6, I theorised that unconscious observations of competitiveness being promoted led to this association towards thoughts of societal collapse and existential anxieties, but there may be another level to this. There are theories within psychodynamics that human beings fear their own aggression (Klein 1975). What then might we suppose the psychodynamic consequences might be of encouraging aggressive impulses (such as extreme assertiveness, competing for resources, denigrating the vulnerable, and choosing to neglect others' needs) especially via endorsing these impulses as virtues? As discussed further in 7.6.2, these discourses, or technologies, coerce thought patterns that distort the distinction between depressive and paranoid schizoid

positionings, and require neoliberal subjects to occupy aspects of both positionings simultaneously, and reject aspects of each. For example, adopting self-protective behaviours characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position while harbouring feelings of guilt or shame, characteristic of the depressive position, for alleged ‘failures’. What unconscious anxiety may result from the promotion of forms of symbolic aggression?

Another thing to consider in relation to this pattern of catastrophising (which is distinct from but not incompatible with the idea of collective trauma) is that many precariat workers have to be constantly vigilant against risks. Whereas a person with a regular income can establish a routine budget, precariat workers typically have to prepare for contingencies – they may set money aside for emergencies, paying themselves a wage when their income is good and saving the excess, regularly looking for available shifts or supplementary jobs. They live with constant awareness that the following month may be one where they can’t make rent or buy enough food. This way of living could, potentially, encourage an anxious mindset and encourage precariat workers to be alert to catastrophes. This could also be compared to the alertness to danger that presents in people who have survived traumas, including abuse. Could experiences of precarity, and of needing to continually prove oneself to survive, thus trigger memories of past traumas?

7.4 Strengths and limitations

Project strengths discussed here include: innovative application of FANIM to explore economic experiences and discourses; insights gained into best practice of applying FANIM; the attempt to integrate FANIM with aspects of FDA; The insight gained into conducting research almost entirely remotely.

This project broke new ground in the approach to studying lived experiences of precarity in conjunction with social mobility discourses. Research on mobility and precarity, with notable exceptions, is mainly quantitative and rarely psychodynamically-informed. Although there has been a limited amount of qualitative psychosocial research in this subject area, this is the first use of FANIM to research such topics, and the first study to apply this form of psychosocial approaches (as

opposed to quantitative studies of correlations with related factors such as health and personality) to studying precariat perspectives on social mobility.

Resultingly, it is also the first time FANIM has been applied to the research of anxieties surrounding precarity and related governmentalities, ensuring a unique insight into unconscious processes connected to these. It is also one of the first times that any form of FANIM has been applied to understanding experiences of economic issues. This study provides (to date) the only data regarding precariat workers' unconscious and defended responses to topics of social mobility. As argued in chapter 2, although there have been significant amounts written about psychosocial impacts of these factors on the working class the precariat are distinct due to their lack of rights, limited mobility, and the intensity of the annihilation anxieties and status anxieties they likely experience. This research therefore takes an innovative approach and, hopefully, will inspire further psychodynamically-informed research on these topics.

Additionally, this is a rare example of FANIM being combined with FDA, providing insight into the interplay between technologies of power, unconscious anxiety, and defenses against anxiety.

This project also, amongst others completed during the Covid-19 pandemic, may be valuable as an example of how best to conduct remote research.

The limitations discussed here include: The limited cohort – imbalance of different employment types, no immigrant workers; any missteps made in implementing the methods; potentials for sampling bias; interviews being conducted remotely during the pandemic and how this may have influenced responses.

One of the limitations of this study is the small number of participants. This is far from unusual for research projects of this type, using these methods, but may be seen by some as a small sample. The number of participants found was lower than originally intended. In some ways, this helped to narrow the project's focus, which could have ended up unmanageably broad, given the complex and expansive data that was produced. Indeed, the search for more participants ceased partly because I judged that data saturation had been reached.

Related to this difficulty finding participants, another limitation was the imbalanced representation of different employment types among participants. The original intention was to have an even amount of each employment type. Although this was not essential for research of this type, which does not seek to calculate the prevalence of particular views or experiences, it would have been helpful in ensuring that the representations of participants in one form of precarity did not overshadow representations from other participants.

Furthermore, the majority of participants were contacted about the study via unions and activist groups. There was, therefore, some potential for that to skew the forms of responses given. As explained further in 7.6, it seems that this did not unduly influence the types of people who participated, or skew the cohort towards politically active people, but the potential was there. This potential was initially overlooked due to certain assumptions that the precariat is an inherently heterogenous group and the cohort would likely be similarly varied. Steps were taken to rectify the imbalance of contract types among participants when further participants had to be contacted, by promoting the research to groups on social media dedicated to discussing particular jobs (such as nursing and creative arts) or sharing job adverts. Although this form of research does not aim for representative samples, it served this project's aims of collecting varied perspectives.

Again regarding sampling, it may have been better to screen for homeowners and exclude people who owned a fully paid-off home, as it could be argued that these people are not on the 'sharp edge of precarity' that was identified as a definitive quality of the precariat in Chapter 2. However, the inclusion of workers with no ongoing housing costs provided some insight into the contrast between the meaning of non-standard work for those with housing security and those without it, and how each of these groups expressed similar desires but different priorities.

The innovative method of researching these issues, though a notable contribution to research, did lead to another limitation in that there was limited guidance available on how to properly implement the methods in this context or how to handle difficulties or ambiguous situations. This was further compounded by this research being undertaken by an inexperienced researcher. Although this latter point is normal for PhD research, there was some awareness that my lack of experience would not

have been such a hindrance had I been using a more well-established research method. Equally, the lack of best practice knowledge for researching this topic in this way may have been better handled by a researcher with more practice in conducting similar interviews. There were moments within some interviews where I breached certain principles of FANIM, such as the inadvertent use of ‘why’ questions, and, at times, interjections and prompts that may have exceeded the limited interventions recommended. In my view, these breaches were minor, unlikely to have affected the validity of the research, and produced valuable data. The positive to be drawn from this is that these could be seen as ‘teachable moments’ that allow some insight into what happens when these principles are breached.

7.5 Relating findings to existing theory and knowledge

This section discusses existing theory and the findings of the research, including how the research supports theories on the psychosocial effects of neoliberalism, how the participants’ subjectivities compared to popular constructions of the precariat, what participants’ insights tell us about contradictions within neoliberal discourses, and how participants’ associations may reflect theories of democracy being eroded by neoliberalism.

Since this research provides the only existing direct data on the unconscious effects on precariat workers of the social mobility discourses that form a central part of neoliberalism, it offers invaluable evidence to support the growing body of theoretical work on the psychosocial influences of neoliberalism. The theories regarding neoliberalism’s promotion of narcissism and related behaviours such as nationalism (Layton 2014a; Hage 2003; Miyazaki 2010) are partially supported by my findings. Although there was little sign of narcissistic traits among participants, there was evidence of psychodynamic processes known to cause narcissistic traits in some people. Moreover, participants’ inclination to free-associate towards topics of eroded affective field, growing conflict and hostility, manifestations of abusive behaviour, and resurgent nationalism, suggest common anxieties related to observed behaviours that could signify growing narcissistic trends in society.

My findings do not support the literature that identifies lack of labour solidarity as a feature of the precariat (Standing 2011a). Most participants were at least partially aware of, and critical of, economic and class structures they had experienced, and some couched work-resistance discourses in somewhat revolutionary terms, challenging the need for employment to be a central focus of society. The fact that many participants were contacted via the mailing lists for unions and zero-hours activists may have led to the cohort being more class-conscious than most precariat. However, most of the participants who were contacted via these organisations were not involved with them due to political proclivities, but because they had turned to them for advocacy during employment difficulties. Also, there were participants such as George, who was not contacted via a union or activist group and, although he claimed that he was not well versed on political theories and expressed confusion on certain topics, still questioned things like pay inequalities, commodified education, and poverty.

Kalleberg's (2009) claim of psychological impacts from perceived insecurity is supported by the data produced here, albeit sometimes indirectly. My study produced several narratives surrounding participants suffering mental ill-health due to perceived insecurity, but also several examples of people being defended regarding their insecurity. While some may not regard this as an 'awareness' of insecurity, due to the denials of it, the approach taken by this research presented specific examples of how this awareness still exists in the unconscious and produces anxiety.

Based on the literature of Casalini (2019) and Frame (2019) Chapter 2 briefly speculated about the possibility of a homogenised neoliberal worldview existing in the precariat (although this research proceeded from the assumption that the precariat were likely to have heterogenous views). There was little sign of homogenised neoliberal views among the participants. There was a tendency to follow the action orientation of pursuing education as a means to upward mobility, but this was, as discussed previously, more motivated by personal goals or by a conscious awareness of this being one of the few options for escaping precarity, rather than being based on a belief that upward mobility was a moral imperative, or that only those with higher skills *deserve* financial security. The responses that most

strongly implied that aspirations had been shaped by neoliberal discourse, rather than circumstances produced by neoliberal policy, were those that indicated valorisation of entrepreneurialism (such as Amy's framing business ventures as an achievement and self-expression) and self-employment (such as Michael's defended exaggeration of his flexibility). There were small signs of participants free-associating towards meritocratic discourses (Eva's thinking of mobility as working-class people improving themselves, and George's assertion that "you have to work for it"), but these were rare and appeared alongside themes of participants critiquing and sometimes unreservedly condemning policies connected to neoliberalism such as austerity measures, conditionality, and the reliance on upward mobility for alleviating poverty. There was little sign of negative perceptions of people who aren't upwardly mobile, but, as predicted by Dovemark and Beach (2015) there were examples of participants denigrating themselves for their precarity or underemployment, or appearing to harbour defended self-denigrating feelings which they projected onto others (such as Eva's criticisms of people who wanted to leave midwifery and people who entered the profession for nebulous reasons).

There were signs of participants adopting a subordinate subject positioning, conforming to social conventions that originated within full-time employment contracts. The relative lack of formal obligations in casual employment often only applied to employers, and employees are still expected to abide by unwritten expectations. Instead of reliability and diligence being formally mandated it is enforced via technologies of power that encourage individual employees to govern their own conduct: Amy and Michael both resisted the urge to cancel shifts on short notice, despite having the right to do so. There were signs of participants drawing on discourses wherein conditions created by their employers, clients, or capitalism in general were natural and immutable, evoking the concept of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009). Participants appeared to have affective or defensive reasons for adopting capitalist realism discourse, and it acted as a reason not to challenge or question their circumstances, and a defense against awareness of their subjugation. My findings also broadly align with the recent findings of Valenzuela et al. (2024) that the precariat develop unconscious, ambivalent attachments to neoliberal ideas.

There was little sign of participants fitting the definition of a ‘dangerous class’ in the way that Standing and others have characterised this as a class of people drawn towards nationalist and anti-democratic political figures. There were, however, signs of several participants feeling disillusioned about our political system and the options available within it, which has also been predicted to be a quality of the precariat (Alonso et al. 2016; Littler 2018). Many participants condemned the actions of the then-current Conservative government, but there was little support for opposition parties, with some participants also speaking negatively about the Labour Party.

There were also instances of participants ignoring potential threats to their financial security or prosperity (George’s assessment of his plans to get a mortgage, Amy’s entrepreneurial ambitions). I interpreted these as defenses against anxieties regarding their precarity, but they also reflect Layton’s (2010) theories on irrational exuberance – an attachment to unrealistic assumptions of permanently increasing prosperity, that protect against the pain of being abandoned by government. They are also reminiscent of Berlant’s (2011) idea of “cruel optimism” (p. 1) and Pettit’s (2019) application of this to how neoliberalism develops cruel hope of prosperity. All this evokes some of Ezzamel and Willmott’s (2008) findings regarding the discourse of strategy and how senior staff at a company held to discourses of a growing market. Perhaps such irrational exuberance within industry informs the discourses in wider society, or perhaps irrational exuberance knows no class bounds and is a universal psychic defense.

Contrastingly, there were also signs of participants (including some of the same participants) dwelling on anxiety-provoking events and phantasies. Returning to speculations regarding the instances of catastrophising, which appeared to reveal these as phantasies *provoked by* anxiety rather than the reverse, it should be noted that Lee et al. (2023) applied the theory of “pre-traumatic stress” (p. 42) to general conditions of precariousness, suggesting that it is caused by anticipation of terrible fates.

Finally, the prevalence of discourses related to oppression demands further consideration of research and theory that asserts that neoliberalism undermines democracy. Venn (2020) drew numerous links between uncertainties and conflicts fostered by neoliberal capitalism and forces that threaten democracy. Davies (2014)

argued that the strategic leadership that is a feature of governing according to market principles “necessitates a break from other visions of politics, based in notions of representation, democracy or non-economic community” (p. 130). Bruff and Starnes (2019) argued that neoliberalism deserves more criticism for its undemocratic reorganisation of society. Cooper (2023) claimed that protectionist politics arose from neoliberalism, leading to anti-democratic and authoritarian governance. Similarly, Cox and Skiddmore-Hess (2022) argued that neo-fascism had emerged from the wreckage of neoliberal capitalism. Maher (2023) traced convergences between neoliberal and fascist principals in the present day and in early 1900’s neoliberal sympathies for fascism. Butler (2012) highlighted how the effects of precarity are unequally distributed, and some lives are valued and protected more than others. This is just a small selection of relevant literature found. There was vastly insufficient space to describe all the literature that has compared neoliberalism with, or blamed it for, anti-democratic governance, let alone assess in detail how specific theories are reflected by my findings. I would argue that some level of awareness of these problematic anti-democratic aspects of neoliberalism may have contributed to participants’ free-associating from topics of aspiration and precarity to topics of oppression.

7.5.1 Wider psychosocial implications

Considering the findings in a broader context of psychodynamics, this section considers what other unconscious effects may stem from such psychosocial contexts (beyond what is evidenced), and what the wider implications may be if these findings could be generalised to a wider population. This includes discussion of how the discourses covered here may encourage orientation towards the paranoid-schizoid position and manic strategies. This section also contemplates how mobility discourses distort the boundaries between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position, and how encouragement to be competitive may interact with anxieties surrounding aggressive impulses.

According to Klein, the depressive position is characterised by a focus on concern for others, and the paranoid-schizoid position is characterised by concern for self.

Neoliberalism seemingly compels the paranoid-schizoid position, by encouraging concern for self and discouraging concern for others by attaching blame to people for their misfortunes and shaming those who are dependent on the state. In doing so, it may be inadvertently planting the seeds for resistance by creating neoliberal subjects who, having adopted a paranoid-schizoid positioning, are sensitive to feelings of persecution.

However, neoliberalism also plays off the depressive position, encouraging feelings of guilt and shame for 'failing' to be upwardly mobile or economically active enough, or 'failing' to deprioritise the needs of others and ignore interdependency. Klein (1975) also spoke of manic states wherein the subject attempts to deny dependency on others. Neoliberalism encourages such manic strategies of denying our interconnectedness and reliance on each other. To be too reliant on others is framed as shameful (Layton 2010). Therefore the parameters of the depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions are blurred and distorted. Individuals are compelled to both reject aspects of the depressive position (dependency) while using other aspects of it (guilt) to discipline dependent behaviour. What might the consequences be of neoliberalism manipulating such foundational aspects of human psychology in such paradoxical ways? Layton (2014a; 2014b) asserted that neoliberalism's imperatives to reject dependency generate shame and could lead to grandiosity and other narcissistic states. Beyond this, we know little about the potential outcomes of these distortions – sometimes termed perversions (Layton 2014a) – of the fundamental structure of the self, and can but speculate and generate theory to be explored by future research.

The first possible outcome that I can imagine (drawing from admittedly limited knowledge of psychodynamics) is that some people could become entangled in ever more confused and convoluted defensive states, something of a feedback loop of defended subjectivities and affective states. Concern for others prioritised above commitment to 'rational' self-interest generates guilt and is defended against. Consequently, an orientation towards naked self-interest, and perhaps towards scorning the poor and minorities, ensues. However, if this is recognised on any level this too could generate guilt and a shift back towards the depressive position. People may feel compelled to defend against the feelings of guilt and the discourses and

knowledge associated with them and defend also against the ‘self-interest’ orientation and its roots. The likely consequence of such internal conflict is extreme cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) and increasingly complex and contradictory webs of defended beliefs. For someone who has been immersed deeply enough in such discourses, it would be impossible to ever comfortably embrace either the depressive position (because concern for others and accepting weakness are not within the action orientations of neoliberalism) or the paranoid-schizoid position (because applying blame to outside forces is also outside neoliberal action orientations, which encourages neoliberal subjects to blame themselves for hardship, and deflects criticisms of the system).

It is unsurprising that displacement of blame and denigration of minorities results from such dynamics, but I suggest that the consequences of these enforced distortions of the psyche may prove to be more far-reaching. It would be hard to predict exactly what these effects could be, especially with any degree of confidence, although the participants’ occasional allusions to increased hostility, competitiveness, spite, and untrustworthy behaviour suggest a perception of growing conflict.

I would also tentatively speculate that such distortions of the psyche could lead to higher prevalence of manic states (Klein 1975) and personality disorders. The psychoanalytical approaches that have been drawn on by my research and analysis in this project are typically intended to help maintain balance between seeking the positive pole while acknowledging negatives. This is why it is pertinent to examine neoliberal subjectivities from a psychodynamically-informed perspective. Envy, annihilation anxieties, and the balance between paranoid-schizoid (care for self and feelings of persecution) and depressive positions (care for others and feelings of guilt) are all pertinent to neoliberal governmentalities. Simply demonstrating the efficacy of this illustrates how catastrophic the impact of these governmentalities could potentially be, as they seek to reshape core components of the self.

Neoliberal discourses of rational actors and rational governance only acknowledge particular facets of human psychology. They operate on the assumption that people can be compelled to individualised behaviour that prioritises individual survival, and that this is best accomplished by technologies of power and penalisation via withheld support. This approach acknowledges only some tenets of human behaviour – that

we are driven by existential anxieties and that our responses can be shaped by reinforcement. This approach ignores the role that dependency plays in our earliest formative experiences, and therefore the role it plays in our subjectivities, construction of objects, and affective experiences. To encourage the rejection of dependency is to risk many unforeseen psychosocial consequences – psychosocial ripples, if you will. Furthermore, the withholding of financial support (either as a punitive measure, as in welfare sanctions, or by allowing erosion of employment rights and pay) is designed to exacerbate annihilation anxieties and prompt survival behaviours. This is likely to catastrophically impact subjectivities and affect, as it is prompting the most intense, and defended, unconscious anxiety. It is inherently irrational (and arguably irresponsible) to attempt to shape human psychology and behaviour on a societal scale while actively ignoring vital aspects of human psychodynamics and affect. Governmentalities that rely on promoting social mobility tend to ignore the psychic realities that lie beyond what can be directly measured and influenced by policy and discourse.

Policy makers in this arena are in the business of, essentially, psychological manipulation. Psychological manipulation within other settings (such as relationships) is rightly condemned as abuse. It is unsurprising therefore that any awareness of being manipulated would give rise to feelings of being mistreated. The allusions to totalitarianism in some narratives suggest a more specific association in some participants, and it is worth considering if this may be due to a construction of neoliberal policies as anti-democratic, perhaps due to the manipulation, or perhaps due to an inarticulate awareness of conflicts between neoliberal governance and democratic rule (Davies 2014). Moreover, the experience of being manipulated via coercive control is itself known to cause distress and trauma (Lohmann et al. 2024), and we should be cognisant of the potential for such policies to psychologically harm thousands of people. Although some have argued that the ethics of psychological manipulation is determined by the intention and results (Lau 2023), the evident harms of ‘incentivisation’ (partially due to evaluation and annihilation anxieties), coupled with the spuriousness of the discourses, should be cause for concern. Regarding the prospect of a turn towards far-right populism, my analysis revealed more signs of participants experiencing anxiety over this being observed in others or potentially gaining influence (as illustrated in 6.4-6.5), than signs that participants

had themselves been influenced in that direction. However, signs of participants having defended against full awareness of their precarity, emotional vulnerability, motives for career choices and goals, and the causes of undesirable aspects of their employment, suggests deep-seated anxieties connected to their existence as neoliberal subjects, and some of the harms and manipulations inflicted upon them.

7.6 Recommendations for future research

This section endorses further use of FANIM to explore economic issues and anxieties surrounding these. In doing so, it draws on the project's strengths and weaknesses to make recommendations on how FANIM should be applied in similar projects. It also draws on preceding sections to suggest psychosocial phenomena that may be worthy of investigation. Finally, it considers how the knowledge presented here may be enhanced by research using other methods, including some that were discarded from this project.

There remains much potential to expand the application of FANIM to similar topics linked to economic discourses. These topics sparked many interesting, unexpected associations. Many other socioeconomic factors may produce profound psychodynamic effects and defended anxieties that FANIM can potentially make sense of.

Although in-depth qualitative research can never be assumed to be wholly representative, there may be scope for a project with more expansive resources to conduct free-associative interviews with more participants to test if the themes that emerged here are prevalent in larger samples. Alternatively, there is potential for survey research to tailor questions to the themes developed here, although this would have the limitation of being unable to identify or circumnavigate participants' defenses.

I would advise researchers using this method to experiment with its application. Certain impulsive breaches of FANIM in the process of conducting the interviews for this project and the preceding, closely-linked, Masters research, paid off in valuable ways. Firstly, the volunteering of personal information, although it may be considered

inappropriate when conducting free-associative interviews in a clinical setting, repeatedly proved valuable in forming a rapport with participants, and encouraging them to open up about their personal struggles, although care must be taken to consider the potential influence on the participants' free-associations, especially when the data is analysed.

Further, this project exemplifies the rich analysis that can result from taking time to fully immerse oneself in every interview. The adopted process involved repeated full readings of the transcripts for each participant, followed by listening to the recordings of the corresponding interviews on repeat for a full day. By doing this, I could ensure that both the words that were spoken and the participants' affective expressions were given adequate attention, helping to identify the discourses used and the affective transferences and countertransferences that occurred. Ideally, listening to the transcripts took place while engaging in relaxing yet stimulating activities. The activity that best helped me to think clearly about the implications and connections was hiking, ideally in nature. Several of the most important insights were produced while passively analysing the data in this way, including Amy's overlapping responses to divorce and furlough, and Ahmed's ambiguities regarding his caring role.

This project was originally going to include additional stages of data gathering to increase the co-production within the project. These would have been focus groups, allowing participants to voice their thoughts on extracts from policy documents (selected based on themes that emerged during interviews) and offer forms of data of their own choosing. Although analysis of the FANIM data took priority, these additional stages were abandoned reluctantly and would be worth exploring.

I regard one of the most pressing research agendas related to these topics to be the unintended impacts of choice architecture / 'nudge' on the psyche, since this research suggested these are implicated in distortions of unconscious processes. I would be eager to research this further, especially as they pertain to neoliberalism. Additionally, the surprising tangential associations between themes of mobility and themes of catastrophes, abuse and totalitarianism bear further investigation, and I would be interested in further exploring these.

7.7 Recommendations for policy

This section endorses policies that match needs and priorities that participants displayed. Recommendations include: giving precariat workers wider eligibility for, and increased rates of, financial support – including support for overlapping responsibilities such as studying and providing care; regulating zero-hours contracts and creating additional rights; legislating for greater flexibility under full-time contracts; expanding employment rights, such as sick pay, for precariat workers; applying extreme caution in use of 'nudge' measures and policies designed to shape tangential behaviours; avoiding pathologising and denigrating implications within policy discourse that frame the low-paid, underemployed, disabled or unemployed as deficient; focusing social mobility policies on the potential for fulfilment of goals rather than poverty alleviation; using direct interventions to alleviate poverty (for example, reducing wage inequality).

The answers to question 3, related to how participants would likely generate policy that they feel would support their needs, showed that participants were overall in favour of increased state support for various roles that limit earnings potential, and believed that such support would be helpful in enabling people to pursue their chosen career goals, as well as support them in pursuing activities that would be beneficial to themselves and others. I therefore endorse redistributive policies. Since multiple participants spoke against strict conditionality and limited eligibility and some lauded the flexibility of their modes of working and would not favour greater adherence to traditional work patterns, it seems appropriate to endorse Universal Basic Income as the ideal means of meeting the identified needs. UBI was directly suggested by two participants and was the only specific policy intervention mentioned besides student grants and reduced conditionality for claiming Universal Credit and Carer's Allowance.

The primary difficulty in implementing UBI is cost. In the UK, even a modest weekly UBI payment of £100 per adult and £50 per child would cost £314 billion pounds per year (Loft et al. 2020). However, this figure does not account for factors that would mitigate some of this cost (assuming UBI were properly funded and implemented

and did not replace other public services), such as the amounts that would be saved by cancelling equivalent conditional benefits, reducing bureaucracy and preventing social problems and health conditions in the long-term (Johnson, Degerman, and Geyer 2019).

Participants would benefit from UBI for various reasons, that mostly amount to UBI likely alleviating stress, allowing sufficient security to concentrate on goals, and facilitating autonomy. Financial insecurity was, unsurprisingly, a concern for many participants – Jack was reliant on his partner and carried defended fears of homelessness, Amy was struggling to make ends meet and pay for house repairs, Jude reported reluctance to take risks due to his precarity, Tracy was fearful of being unable to provide for her family and Ahmed was struggling to balance caregiving, employment and studying.

The widespread reporting of mental health issues, which participants often linked overtly to experiences of precarity and striving, also suggests that UBI would aid mental health. Many of the broader insecurities that appeared to stem from participants' precarity or their struggles to contend with the impetus to be aspirational, and that shaped participants' defended views of their wants, needs and realistic options, could be alleviated by the provision of an income that removes the chief cause of annihilation anxieties. This would allow space to consider their goals, and the best route towards them, without having to balance these against survival.

Although UBI was specifically endorsed by some participants, it is not the only policy that would address the identified problems and concerns. Expansive basic services or a job guarantee may also alleviate the difficulties and anxieties experienced by these participants. A job guarantee scheme may allow some to fulfil social needs that are not covered by existing employers without having to resort to self-employment. For example, those who have identified needs within their local community, as Jack implied, or those who desire independence to complete existing roles in a more socially conscious way. This would be one policy approach that could offer the flexibility and agency of non-standard work but with a reliable wage and full employment rights.

Basic services would fulfil most of the same functions as UBI, without the downside of technically subsidising profit-based providers and thus having to cover the cost of profit margins (Büchs 2021). Either basic services or UBI would allow these participants to continue their current flexible employment without fear of destitution and assist some in continuing aspirational activities (such as Ahmed's studying, Amy's business ideas, or Jude's attempts to publish articles) alongside their other obligations and without having to physically or emotionally overstretch themselves to earn a living until their aspirations are fulfilled.

Another potential benefit that would result from each of these policies is that they would protect people in the event of future emergencies. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated how the precariat can get left without adequate support in crises that restrict the forms of work that can be done. This was demonstrated by the responses of participants who experienced work shortages, temporary bans on forms of work they rely on, inadequate furlough and fears over a lack of access to sick pay. Basic services or UBI would eliminate most of these problems in the event of similar future crises.

I recognise that each of these projects would involve significant cost and preparation and are unlikely to be feasible in the immediate future, until policies can be drawn up and funds can be reallocated. That being the case, there are multiple ways that precariat workers could be assisted in the near future.

Due to some participants opposing the idea of banning zero-hours contracts and illustrating ways that they are helpful, I instead advocate for policies that will provide precariat workers protections similar to those with full-time permanent employment. Firstly, it is vital that sick pay entitlement be extended to all people with at least semi-regular work. Access to some form of severance pay, or an equivalent, could also alleviate the risks and anxieties associated with precarious work. Hypothetically, workers could be eligible to claim this if they can demonstrate a) that they have had semi-regular work within a particular role throughout a particular length of time and b) that they have been made aware that either there will be no work in this role forthcoming for four weeks or more, or that work from this role has already been unavailable for four weeks or more. Finally, precariat workers with established history of regular work, especially on zero-hours contracts, should have greater legal

protection from punitive withholding of shifts. The Employment Rights Bill from the recently-elected Labour Government and Prime Minister Kier Starmer laid out plans to grant workers greater choice over their contracts. This includes people on zero-hours contracts gaining the legal right to demand fixed hours if they consistently work over a set minimum, and a right to compensation for cancelled shifts (UK Government 2024a). These changes are similar to some that I was planning to recommend, and may go some way to reducing precarity, but I would endorse expanding the coverage of such rights. Primarily, the reference period of 12 weeks may be overly restrictive and indicates that people on zero-hours contracts will not be offered guaranteed hours until they have been in a role for at least 12 weeks. Since many of the participants found themselves in the precariat due to finding formal employment unsuitable, I also note and applaud the plans to grant people in full-time work greater rights to flexible working accommodations (UK Government 2024b) and would endorse further expansion and strengthening of these rights.

In contrast to the enhancement of workers' rights, Starmer's government has acted to maintain benefit caps (BBC 2024), promised crack down on benefit fraud (Independent 2024) and announced plans for a more stringent approach to expecting employment from disabled people and those on long term sick (Big Issue 2024). Such an approach would repeat the mistakes of the previous government's counter-productive austerity measures, particularly the ineffective disability benefit reassessments. I would argue that increased conditionality, appraisal and surveillance would exacerbate many of the psychic harms that have been discussed here and I would strongly urge the current UK government to change course.

It is recognised that this research was conducted in Wales and most of these recommended policies are beyond the remit of the Welsh Assembly government. The aforementioned austerity-esque policy agenda of the current British government suggests that a national rollout of unconditional support via UBI, Basic Services or Job Guarantee is unlikely. Should these policy recommendations be considered by the Senedd, I would advise public statements of intent and values regarding any policy approaches that the Senedd views as desirable but are not empowered to enact. This could place pressure on the Westminster government to take equivalent action or to expand the Senedd's responsibilities and would also address any public

misconceptions over the limits of the Senedd's powers, and the policies they would ideally implement.

I would advise policy makers to be cautious in enacting policy intended to influence choice architecture (commonly known as 'nudge theory'). Some of the findings here indicate that the participants were partly aware of the use of policy to limit or 'incentivise' particular choices, and that some were negatively affected by these approaches. Some identified these as deliberate cruelty or coercive manipulation. Others merely critiqued these approaches for their inefficacy, side-effects, or both, such as Jude's assertion that we cannot all aspire to the same place. Furthermore, it is possible that some of the catastrophising surrounding oppression and manipulation was rooted in feelings of powerlessness and victimisation inflicted by policies ostensibly designed to coerce aspiration.

Finally, there were signs that some participants questioned the whole focus on forms of employment over socially beneficial unpaid work, the system of deciding what work is rewarded and levels of remuneration for different jobs, and the standard level of work-life balance. These participants would likely especially welcome radical policy changes to de-emphasise employment.

7.8 Conclusion

This research was the first to adopt a methodology that acknowledges that topics of precarity and social mobility are likely to be connected to intense status anxieties and annihilation anxieties and thus treat the precariat as defended subjects in relation to these topics. Other studies have used open-ended interviews to produce data on the precariat, but these have not utilised the same analytic methods or theoretical frameworks. Haekal et al. (2021) used a similar interview approach but drawing on phenomenological perspectives. In addition, those interviews were not conducted with people currently experiencing precarity, but rather with students facing the prospect of precarity. Similarly, Cho (2022) looked at affective discourses of precariat workers using interviews and ethnography, but this did not use psychoanalytically-informed methods.

One of the closest existing research projects to what has been presented here is that of Yang and Chae (2020), who used interview methods and a psychosocial approach to researching the precariat. However, the psychosocial theory was different from that used here (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) and the research specifically looked at the challenges of unionising young precariat workers in South Korea. The findings of this paper were mostly unrelated to findings talked about in this thesis, but did support the notion that precariat workers display “identities and behaviors characterized by resistance towards employers” (p. 66).

Perhaps the closest existing research to this project is the aforementioned work of Valenzuela et al. (2024), who applied a Lacanian psychoanalytic analysis of interviews with precariat workers and discovered that they develop attachments to neoliberalism. However, this research did not use FANIM and was unconcerned with social mobility.

This research therefore contributes the first data directly concerning precariat workers defending against mobility-based anxieties and thus the first specific examples of the objects of these anxieties, the ways they manifest, and defenses employed against them. From the widespread tendency to dismiss or minimise the impact of various aspects of precarity, to the tendency to hold multiple contradictory views on mobility (e.g. the belief that education funding is required for healthy levels of recruitment but that success is determined by character; the belief that we should fight for the right to work alongside the belief that doing so only assists the wealthy), these examples may prove invaluable to understanding anxieties produced by precarity and social mobility discourses, and the psychosocial impacts of these. Some of the examples provided by this research match the findings of prior research and theory regarding the impacts of neoliberalism, and in doing so provide evidence of several psychosocial impacts, such as precarity-related annihilation anxiety, denials of precarity, appeals to capitalist realism, displacement of anxieties, and neoliberal subjectification.

Moreover, the surprisingly widespread association between the topics of precarity and mobility and topics of catastrophe, trauma, and oppression provides a startling insight into a phenomenon that suggests extreme negative perceptions and effects of neoliberalism, and may be worthy of further investigation.

This research has endeavoured to show that much can be learned about the impacts of socioeconomic policies beyond the directly perceptible emotional and psychological effects, and even beyond the level of lived experiences reported through workers' representations. It has demonstrated that being part of the precariat is a complex experience that develops many anxieties concerning survival, social status, autonomy, and ethics. The consequences of these anxieties extend beyond mental health issues, to play a part in forming people's subjectivities, goals, perceptions, and opinions. Research that acknowledges such consequences is uniquely valuable in researching groups that have particular cause to be anxious and defended and topics that are especially likely to produce anxieties and defenses.

Taking this approach has shown that some participants in this study were defended regarding the extent of their precarity, the limits of their autonomy, their prospects, how much they worried about their futures, their goals and the motivations behind them. They also displayed fears linked to their precarity, such as fears of failing loved ones, being persecuted, or experiencing catastrophes. The solution to this, based on assessment of how such anxieties can be alleviated and on participants' free-associated narratives and consciously chosen recommendations, is to end financial insecurity and the societal pressure to enter particular careers in order to 'earn' an adequate secure income.

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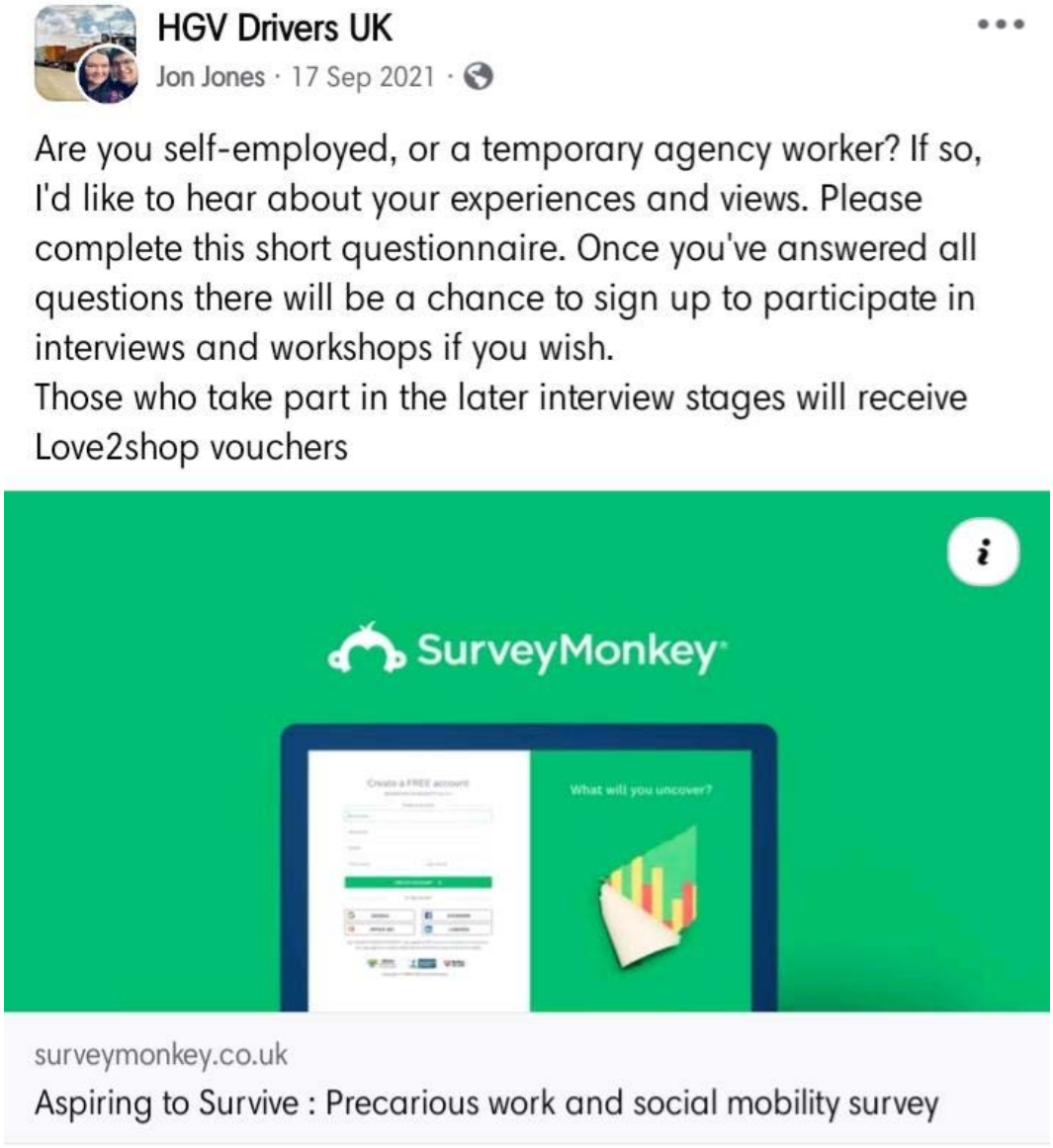
Appendix i: Sample text of recruitment emails

Jon Jones, a PhD student at Cardiff University, is looking for people to complete a short questionnaire about irregular / independent work and possibly join in a larger interview-based research project. If you are on a zero-hours contract, self-employed, a temporary agency worker, or doing shift work, your views are important, and we invite you to complete the online questionnaire below and have a look at details about the rest of the research. You are under no obligation to take part, but it's an opportunity to express your views. Those who take part in the later interview stages will receive Love2shop vouchers.

https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/PKPB2WZ
https://debatingtheobvious.weebly.com/uploads/4/6/8/6/46863407/j_jones_research_information_sheet_2020.docx

Appendix ii: Example of recruitment post on Facebook.



This post was shared on the following Facebook groups: HGV Drivers UK; Agency Nurses UK Forum; Coronavirus Key Workers Support Group; TV and Film Freelancers working in Wales; Agency Drivers UK IR35; UK AGENCY HEALTHCARE JOBS; Self-employed and zero hour contract workers Pandemic Group; Creative Freelancers UK; UK Homecare / Domiciliary Care.

Appendix iii: information sheet

Social Research Project

Aspiring to Survive: Precariat Constructions of Social Mobility and Social Justice

Hello. I'm Jonathan Jones, a PhD student at Cardiff university, and I'm researching the views of people who have irregular work hours or are in insecure work.

Details of the Research

I am interested in the idea of 'social mobility', which examines how and why people move between job sectors and social classes. There's a lot of research in this area, but not much of it looks at how people think and feel about their goals. This research has been approved by the university ethics committee. If you are on a zero-hours contract, you are self-employed, or you are doing agency or shift work where your hours vary, then I would like to speak to you. I am interested in what experiences you have had in pursuing your goals in work and other aspects of life, and what kind of goals you think people are expected to have. I am also interested in what your thoughts are on how people in government deal with problems like job insecurity and inequality, and the way they promote social mobility.

The views and experiences of people in irregular or insecure work are very important. If you are doing this kind of work, your insights are valuable to my research.

I am a student at Cardiff University, doing a PhD in Social Science. This research is for my thesis and is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. If you have any questions, comments or concerns you can contact me directly or contact Cardiff University. Contact details are at the end of this information sheet. You can also use these details if you wish to make a complaint.

What does the research involve?

There will be several stages to the research. Firstly, I would like people interested in the research to complete a short online questionnaire. This will collect background data on the kind of work you do and what you think the major issues are in relation to this. This will give you an opportunity to tell me what issues you think later stages of the research should focus on.

After this, I would like to interview some people about the subjects discussed above. Interviews will take place via telephone or secure video link and last about an hour. It will be quite informal. I will encourage you to tell stories about your life and would focus on the details that you value and want to talk about. I may need to ask you about times when you have experienced hardship or found it

difficult to achieve. Those who take part in this stage of the research will receive £20 Love2shop vouchers.

If you wish to continue, there can be a third stage in which you will be invited to take part in online workshops, where we will look at quotes from policy documents and speeches and you will be able to feed back on what you think of these. This will give you a chance to comment on specific policies and policy-makers' perceptions of insecure work, and say how you think these have shaped your experiences.

Finally, I will give all participants the chance to suggest other ways they'd like to express their thoughts and experiences, which could be anything from photos, diaries, creative writing or art.

You do not have to take part and nobody will object if you refuse. If you would like to be involved, this would be chance for you to share your knowledge and opinions. I would need to audio record the interviews and workshops for my notes.

During all stages of the research, you will be able to pause, or end the session early. If you need to, please ask.

Confidentiality Agreement.

If you decide to take part, all written records and anything I write about the interview in my thesis will give you a pretend name and use as little personal detail as possible. Anything that could identify you will be changed or kept vague. We would both sign a form that would act as a written promise from me to respect your anonymity. It would also confirm that you agree to take part. If participants reference other identifiable features or sensitive data within recordings, these details will also be altered or blanked out within the transcripts and thesis.

How the Research Will Be Stored.

The questionnaire data, recordings, transcripts, and anything else you contribute will be stored securely for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years after publication, then destroyed as instructed by GDPR laws. The University may need to access the data to confirm my work.

At any time up until June 2022, you may withdraw your consent for me to use this data, without giving a reason. In this case, your data will be destroyed and will not be used in my written thesis. This is your right, and there will be no consequences for you if you choose to do this. After this date, the research will be written up and submitted to the university.

How the Research Will be Used.

I will be writing a long thesis for my PhD, based on what I find out from the research. My analysis will include psychosocial observations where I consider ways your work patterns and government policies may have affected you emotionally. The written thesis may include data from your questionnaire responses, anonymised **quotes** from your interview and workshop, etc. The written research will be viewed by assessors and my supervisor. There is a chance that the research findings will be published, such as in an academic journal or online, and it may be presented to policy makers.

What next?

You have time to think about whether you'd like to take part and I will get in touch again soon to see if you're interested. If you are, we'll arrange for you to sign the consent form and a flexible schedule for you to take part in each stage of the research.

Thank you for reading this and thinking about taking part.

Jonathan Jones

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Appendix iv: Consent form

School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building,
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Primary researcher: Jonathan Jones (PhD student).
Email: jonesjp5@cardiff.ac.uk
Telephone: 07496517999
Supervisor 1: Prof. Valerie Walkerdine. Email walkerdinev@cardiff.ac.uk
Supervisor 2: Dr Marco Pomati. Email: pomatim@cardiff.ac.uk
Cardiff University telephone number: 029 2087 5179
Cardiff University e-mail: SOCSIpostgrad@cardiff.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

SREC Approval Reference: SREC/3852

Aspiring to Survive: Precariat constructions of social mobility and social justice.

Purpose of Study: To explore the views or precariat workers (those in irregular/insecure jobs) on their lived experiences of pursuing social mobility and their views on policy approaches that impact on this.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences.	☐
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from Cardiff University where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	☐
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee.	☐
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐

8	I consent to being audio and video recorded	☐
9	I understand how recordings will be used in research outputs	☐
10	I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication	☐
11	I agree to take part in the study. I hereby assign to the researcher all copyright in my contribution for use in all work stemming from this project and future projects.	☐

Name of participant:

Date:

Signature:

Name of person taking consent:
Jonathan Jones
Date:

Signature:
J Jones

Appendix v: questionnaire text

Aspiring to Survive : Precarious work and social mobility survey

Precarious work

This is a short questionnaire to ask about experiences with non-standard or precarious work. If you are working age, currently live in the UK, and on a zero-hours contract, working in a temporary job, or working freelance or self-employed, I would like to hear about your views and experiences

Question Title

* 1. What is your contract / employment type in your main job?

- o Self-employed / freelance
- o Shift worker
- o Temporary agency worker
- o Zero-hours contract

Question Title

* 2. Do you have any other form of income, not counting welfare benefits and tax credits (e.g. capital gains, shares, rent from leased housing, etc.)?

- o Yes
- o No
- o Rather not say

Question Title

3. Based on the past year, what is your estimated annual earnings from all job (after tax)

- o Up to £10,000
- o £10,001 - £20,000
- o £20,001 - £30,000
- o More than £30,000
- o Rather not say

Question Title

4. What is your job industry?

- o Accountancy, banking and finance
- o Business, consulting and management
- o Creative arts
- o Energy and utilities
- o Engineering and manufacturing
- o Environment and agriculture
- o Healthcare
- o Hospitality and events management
- o Information technology
- o Law
- o Law enforcement and security

- o Leisure, sport and tourism
- o Marketing, advertising and PR
- o Media and internet
- o Property and construction
- o Public services
- o Recruitment and HR
- o Retail
- o Sales
- o Service sector
- o Social care
- o Teaching and education
- o Third Sector
- o Transport and logistics
- o Other / rather not say

Question Title

5. If you were to seek other employment now for any reason, how long do you think this would take?

- o Up to one month
- o Up to two months
- o Up to three months
- o More than three months
- o Rather not say

Question Title

6. Which issues surrounding irregular employment are important to you? (click all that apply)

- o Rather not say
- o Future employability
- o Job security
- o Representation
- o Use of skills
- o Irregular income
- o Employment benefits
- o Workers' rights
- o Interaction with employers / organisers / contractors
- o Irregular schedules
- o Other (please specify)

Question Title

7. Which of these things are important to you in terms of your future career ambitions? (click all that apply)

- o Status
- o Pay grade
- o Work-life balance
- o Contribution to society
- o Use of skills

- o Rather not say
- o Enjoyment of job
- o Other (please specify)

Question Title

8. Which of these issues surrounding social mobility do you regard as important? Please select all that apply.

- o Access to education
- o Doing well in education
- o Being aspirational
- o Job availability
- o Class
- o Inequality
- o Portrayals in media
- o Views of policy makers
- o Other (please specify)

Question Title

* 9. I consent for my information to be stored by Cardiff University and used for the purposes of research

- o I consent

Question Title

10. Would you like more information about taking part in interviews and workshops (online or over the phone)?

Those who are selected for the next stage of the research and take part in interviews, will receive Love2shop vouchers / giftcards. A link to information about the research can be found here: INFO SHEET
If you would like to be contacted about this, please supply your contact details.

- o No
- o Yes - I would like to be contacted with details on how I can take part in further research.

DONE

This questionnaire available at https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/PKPB2WZ