WHAT LIES BENEATH? THE DISCOURSE OF EMPLOYABILITY AND THE IDEAL, WORK-READY SUBJECT

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This article is a reflection on the discourse of employability and work-readiness. The ideal subject of this discourse is queried, and I explore what is included in, and what is excluded from, this particular notion of subjectivity. This reflection seeks to reveal lacunae or spaces for transforming our understanding of how this discourse shapes lived experiences. The framing of the subject of this discourse is considered within the neoliberal context, with brief consideration given to the affective, geographical, temporal and moral dimensions inscribed within this site.

That employability is topical within academe is evidenced by the sheer volume of material that engages in some way with the concept of employability. A search for the term 'employability' in Google Scholar returns over 200,000 references to academic books and articles, while the term 'employability AND curriculum' returns over 80,000 results. Education at all levels, but particularly post-secondary, focuses not only on technical skills and knowledge, but on providing opportunities for learners to develop transferable or twenty-first-century skills. These are seen as crucial to the employability agenda, which is reinforced in both national and institutional policy (Arora, 2013). Educational outcomes coalesce with the concept of graduates' work-readiness and future work success (Wolff & Booth, 2017). Education within New Zealand is, as Ell and Grudnoff (2013, p. 74) note, "very much in the thrall of international discourses," and its engagement with the employability agenda is no exception.

Skills, personal skills, capabilities, transferable skills and attributes are all terms that are often used interchangeably, although they lack agreed definitions (Leveson, 2000). Similarly, employability is interpreted, and measured, in different ways (Yorke & Knight, 2006). For the purposes of this reflection, I draw on the Otago Polytechnic (n.d.) definition of capabilities – "a range of personal qualities and attributes that enable [learners] to be effective, and which enable them to perform in the workplace and in the community." Otago Polytechnic has developed a framework for learner capabilities that, at the time of writing, consists of 25 attributes that are considered to contribute to graduate employability. These include such traits as being effective communicators, working well in teams, acting sustainably and being culturally competent (Otago Polytechnic, 2018).

While Otago Polytechnic's learner capability programme aims to add value to learners by enhancing work-readiness, its development is employer-driven, with research data from employers identifying the capabilities considered important in new graduates. An employer-centric approach allows employers to play a key role in setting the agenda for educational outcomes (Baptiste, 2001; Gerrard, 2017). Tension exists in this research approach, which identifies and segments industry into discrete sectors that are more reminiscent of the nineteenth century than the present state of work-in-flux. The World Economic Forum (2016) predicted that over 5.1 million jobs could be lost in the five years preceding 2020, due to market upheaval. Also, with less access to secure, long-term and full-time paid employment, the employer-centric approach encourages an environment in which subjects strive to meet the dictates of employers in order to compete for diminishing returns (Down & Smyth, 2012; Read, 2009).

Euphemistic language is used to describe the subject who can weather the uncertainty of this labour market. Adjectives such as flexible, agile, adaptable and entrepreneurial are, at face value, considered positive personal attributes of the employable subject. The Otago Polytechnic framework (2018, p. 3) describes a capable person as

one who can "adapt quickly to new and changing situations. Operate outside my comfort zone." There is no space within this paradigm to challenge change, whether it is seen as good, bad or indifferent. Individuals must cope or be left behind. In this sense, adaptability and flexibility can arguably be read as enforced acceptance and positivity when deemed surplus to employer requirements (Sultana, 2018; Urciuoli, 2008). This trope of individual flexibility in the face of change also undermines the potential for collective and collaborative approaches to seeking positive social outcomes, and the wherewithal to oppose changes that reinforce conditions of inequity.

The discourse of employability has achieved the status of logical or sound guidance, foreclosing any challenge to neoliberal hegemony (Arora, 2013). Lorey (2015, p. 66) refers to the notion of precarity within the neoliberal context as a governance tool which normalises the "just tolerable." This level of acceptance calls to mind the words of Erich Fromm (1965, p. xiii): "Modern man still is anxious and tempted to surrender his freedom to dictators of all kinds, or to lose it by transforming himself into a small cog in the machine, well fed, and well clothed, yet not a free man but an automaton."

The capable, employable individual potentially lacks the freedom to create self beyond employable subjectivity. They may be so intent on meeting the criteria of that subjectivity, as discussed below, that alternatives for self and collective ways of existing are not considered.

Neoliberalism is intimately engaged with the creation of *homo economicus*, who is essentially a form of capital – a being that requires continual maintenance in order to remain competitive (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Read, 2009). The commodification of the self encompasses physicality, skills, predispositions, knowledge and attitudes, so that one effectively becomes, as Foucault (2008, p. 226) noted, an "entrepreneur of the self." Seaman's research (cited in Urciuoli, 2008, p. 211) with students in elite United States higher education institutions revealed that these students considered themselves, not primarily as people, but rather as "products," a very telling reflection of the commodification of self.

The commodification of self contributes to the fetishisation of skills, which is evidenced by the flourishing business of teaching capabilities (Urciuoli, 2008). In the United States, billions of dollars are generated annually from the delivery of soft skills training (Fixsen & Ridge, 2018). Professional social media giant LinkedIn (2018) boasts over 562 million users worldwide, with student membership growing. The platform offers a site where commodified, employable individuals can showcase themselves, and it also promotes and receives revenue from soft skills training (Petrone, 2018). Thus, its members are engaged in the cyclical and competitive development of self in order to remain employable.

In a similar vein to Foucault's entrepreneur, Thomas Lemke (cited in Read, 2009, p. 30) coined the phrase "companies of one." This relentless development of the self takes place in competition with others. It invokes a playing field of winners and losers. Certain skills and ways of being are privileged over others, with social and collective concerns accorded less importance than individual achievement (Grummell & Murray, 2015; Rooney & Rawlinson, 2016).

The employable subject becomes, and remains, a productive economic participant. In the process, social and political citizenship is legitimised (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). According to the Tertiary Strategy 2014-2019, the New Zealand Government (2014, p. 7) has tasked tertiary education with "improved economic outcomes" in order to develop individuals as "confident, creative, and culturally enriched good citizens." Here, good citizenship is explicitly linked with economic performance, while existing inequalities are submerged. The term "culturally enriched" is so vague as to be entirely meaningless. By explicitly identifying confidence and creativity as personal attributes of the *good* citizen, the rhetoric moves within the realm of emotional regulation (Fixsen & Ridge, 2018). The inference is that if one lacks confidence and/or creativity, one is not a good citizen. Thus, individuals are nudged towards the required neoliberal subjectivity (Cromby & Willis, 2013).

If economic participation is a requisite of good citizenship, those who are not economically productive are potentially at fault or deficit. As Read (2009) discusses, while formal governmental regulation declines under neoliberalism,

areas for intervention and scope for governance expand. Good citizens are not only self-regulating, but also function as regulatory interventions within the social sphere (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). If we circle back to Lorey's (2015) precarity, those who are perceived as less than "just tolerable" are susceptible to moral blame from those within the zone of the tolerable (Cairns, 2013; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). It is not the conditions that are questioned, but the individual.

While attribution of fault to others for perceived non-achievement may be externally manifested, there is an internal affective dimension also. As mentioned above, the employability discourse, situated within a neoliberal framework, has an air of moral rightness about it. It has become normalised. Within this discourse, all are on an equal footing and we have ostensibly forsaken differentiation based on class, ethnicity, gender, health and sexuality. In spite of this rhetoric, however, the evidence demonstrates that lived experiences are still mediated through these lenses (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Rooney & Rawlinson, 2016). For those who may experience structural inequalities, the performative act of employability within this fantasy realm of (in)equality results in the internalisation of fear, shame and guilt (Cairns, 2013; Costea, Amiridis, & Crump, 2012; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017).

In an analysis of graduate recruitment programme advertising, Costea et al. (2012) drew on the work of Georg Simmel to further explore the affective subjectivity of graduates within the discourse of employability. In their conclusions, they identify not only the affective orientation but also the temporal dislocation within this discourse. The language of recruitment advertising reflects a future-focused potentiality for a subject who is continually faced with failure, representing a "tragic self-seeking journey" (Costea, Amiridis, & Crump, 2012, p. 35). This self-in-the-making, employable subject, is a linear project without a destination endpoint. Employability is implacably future-focused. It becomes a Sisyphean endeavour, an endless cycle in which the self is its own "do-it-yourself (DIY)" project, striving for a future that does not exist (Beck, cited in Kelly, 2001, p. 26).

The employability agenda also has geographical or spatial implications. It requires mobile workers, ready to participate in a globalised labour market. However, the term globalisation has become a site of semantic satiation, one that masks both ideology and real-world practices (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). Economic growth has not contributed positively to either equitable access to resources or improved sustainability for most of the globe (Alexander, 2018). Employment is not universally accessible or experienced, even when knowledge, skills, qualifications and capabilities are commensurate. This remains the case within a global context, where being competitive requires mobility and thereby affords the potential for new forms of disadvantage and alienation (Tomlinson, 2012). Mobility has acquired the status of a personal attribute, one that is a necessary component of self-preparation for labour engagement – yet mobility across borders is a site of privilege, not something that is widely and freely available (Alexander, 2018).

As with temporal dislocation, mobility, or the striving to become mobile, is also experienced affectively. The multiple interpretations and importance of geographical spaces are overlooked by the catchphrase of mobility. For those who are able to be mobile, familial, geographical and social connections are rendered invisible in the act of mobility, as is the impact of labour market changes and loss of local work opportunities (Cairns, 2013; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Various dislocations that are engendered through mobility may, in lived experience, become internalised as ambivalence and discomfort (Cairns, 2013).

In summary, in this reflection I have explored some of the inclusions and exclusions within the discourse of employability and work-readiness. I have identified key features of the neoliberal employable subject. Specifically, I have identified the self-regulating, self-in-progress *homo economicus*, situated in a context that privileges the individual over the collective, within a competitive market.

I initially set out to identify lacunae or spaces where we might transform, or at least question, our understanding of how the discourse of employability is enacted as lived experience. Included in this discourse is a normalisation of citizenship that requires economic participation and an infinite quest to improve the self in order to achieve, at the expense of others.

A growing body of research examining the underbelly of the neoliberal employability agenda has informed this reflection. The employer-driven approach to determining the attributes graduates require to be work-ready identifies a gap in which learners' voices are not heard. I suggest that the most important lacuna is this very void. We need to hear the voices of our learners and graduates.

Given that capabilities are defined and driven by the employability agenda, I suggest that another space for exploration would critique and challenge this agenda, and the old and new inequalities it engenders. If higher education exists to churn out economically productive subjects, let it be clear in its communication of "pedagogies of consequence," as Unterhalter (2010, p. 95) terms it. Higher education could reclaim the role of conscience and critic and ruffle the feathers of the hegemony.

Imagine – yes, imagine – what might happen if our students radically questioned the agenda that has become so 'logical' and immutable. Imagine if we could work with learners and others to collectively challenge inequitable access to resources and life experiences, including paid labour. Imagine if we were willing to hear that there are other ways of being and doing, other lived experiences, that carry meaning and value. Imagine.

We are not preparing our graduates for Wonderland. Can we accept the challenge to prepare them to speak their truth in a world where all is not as it appears?

> *"Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone. Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. "I don't see any wine," she remarked. "There isn't any," said the March Hare. "Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," said Alice angrily.*
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> (Carroll, 1999, p. 109).

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