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Title: Resistance in loss: Neoliberal work subjectivities, lost futures, and young women's alternative becomings

Preferred streams: Identities and employee relations; Critique and contestation at work

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Extended abstract

Embedded as we were (and are) in a longitudinal study of how young women develop aspirations, and increasingly paying attention to how their imagined futures are ridden with uncertainties, precarities, inequalities, climate crises, and biodiversity loss, we became aware of a strange figure appearing in their accounts; namely that of a lost future. At times in glimpses, at others more articulated, a strange elusive presence emerged of loss yet to come. To us, this prompted questions about what it means to live with this kind of loss. How might it condition subjectivity and aspiration? And, inspired by Judith Butler, how could it become the condition for new and other forms of agencies and becomings?

This study draws on interview data from a three-year longitudinal study exploring the aspirations of 16 young women. We engage with the ongoing discussions in this journal about neoliberal female work subjectivities (e.g., Baker and Kelan, 2019; Carr and Kelan, 2021; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017), and we contribute to this literature by building on

Butler's (2003, 2004, 2016, 2020) writings on loss and vulnerability to explore experiences of loss and how these may contest or resist formations of neoliberal work identity.

Rich studies have examined work subjectivities, documenting how individuals within neoliberal orders are incited to become entrepreneurial in their pursuit of self-improvement (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Scharff, 2016). Several scholars have detailed the gendered effects of neoliberal discourses that place a normative pressure on women, for whom success is articulated as depending on psychic self-work and ability to continually enhance self-esteem, self-assurance, self-respect, and self-confidence (Baker and Kelan, 2019; Bröckling, 2005). This intensified 'psychological turn within neoliberalism' (Gill and Orgad, 2018: 490) elides structural inequalities by encouraging women to internalise and overcome social-structural conditions (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). To nuance and complicate accounts of neoliberal power, scholars have drawn on Judith Butler's work to offer understandings of subjectivity and resistance as performed in moment-to-moment iterations (Harding et al., 2017; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021). Resistance is here understood as emerging in energetic interplay with control, the two being in constant tension and contradiction (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Cutcher et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2017). Any determinism can thus be replaced by uncertainty, doubt, and competing self-relationships, as different features of the psyche are given conflicting positions within a relation of ambivalence (Butler, 1997).

In this paper, we build on how scholars of work and organisation have made use of Butler's writings to explore subjectivity as composite and complex processes involving both control and resistance. Adding to this literature, we develop a framework apt to study everyday experiences of loss as interruptions to subjective coherence that might open possibilities for alternative aspirational becomings.

The empirical analysis reveals how neoliberal tenets of individual responsibility, self-competition, and constant self-improvement are lived by young women even before they enter the labour market, in ways that, amongst else, invoke fears of disappointment and worries about future livelihood. However, the analysis also unfolds diverse experiences of loss, in which we argue that informants experienced an undoing that could potentially engender alternative performances of subjectivity-in-relation. For example, informants described encounters with loss related to planetary crises. Through these encounters, individual futures could no longer be held separate from the natural environment and from the conditions of other people. We suggest that as futures became entangled, illusions of mastery faltered, and informants were sometimes moved towards an ethical-political consideration that perhaps makes for a different kind of subjectivity, affirming rather than denying the ways in which the subject is invariably acted on and acting (Butler, 1997, 2004, 2016). Hence, while neoliberal orders still held sway over informants' identity formations, experiences of loss seemed to enable a different way of performing subjectivity and inhabiting future investments; a way of bearing the subject's irresolvable ambivalence that is undefined yet intimately felt in experiences of loss.

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