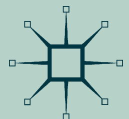
Edited by
Beverley Clack & Michele Paule

INTERROGATING THE NEOLIBERAL LIFECYCLE

The Limits of Success



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Beverley Clack · Michele Paule
Editors

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The Limits of Success

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-030-00769-0 ISBN 978-3-030-00770-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00770-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018956047

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Cover designed by Akihiro Nakayama

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

We dedicate this collection to the memory of Margaret Waterhouse, known to many on line as Mags Newsome. A friend and comrade who showed in her life that the isolated individual is not everything, and that we are, in fact, stronger together.

Acknowledgements

Obviously, we would like to thank the contributors for their insights and generous working with us on this project. No project is ever just the work of those who write it, but also depends on the contributions of those who inspire and support us. Our role as Labour Party councillors and members of Oxford Labour CLP has provided soul-saving ballast when we have despaired of living and working in these neoliberal times. We are particularly grateful for the comradeship of Ann Black, Anneliese Dodds, Bob Price, Mike Rowley, Andrew Smith, Ed Turner, and Sian Taylor. We are also very much aware, as we sit writing and discussing this project, of our colleagues and UNISON comrades at Oxford Brookes University who create the conditions that make it possible for us to do so.

Thanks, too, to friends and family who have supported us during the writing and editing process. We are particularly indebted to the support and patience of Linet Arthur, Sue Bell, Julia Blanchard, Clare Buntic, Alan Clack, Ann Clack, Brian Clack, Sarah Claridge, Ros Crook, Bill Gibson, Robert Lindsey, Mags Waterhouse, Noelle Norton, Jannette Pollard, Katherine Salahi, and Mary Sweeney.

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1

Introduction: Welcome to the Neoliberal Life Cycle!

Beverley Clack and Michele Paule

To present an interdisciplinary collection with 'neoliberal' in the title is, in the twenty-first century academy, a risky business. The risk lies in the term's ubiquity. Writers across social, cultural and economic fields seem to agree that the use of 'neoliberal' has become too lazy, too vague and too readily used to denounce (Peck 2013); too frequently undefined and unevenly employed (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009); too 'overblown' and in need of being 'severely circumscribed' (Dean 2014, p. 150). We have organised the essays in this collection around its banner precisely because of, rather than in spite of, this tendency to ubiquity.

Our rationale is threefold: first, while we recognise the change in the discursive deployment of 'neoliberalism' from a specific political term describing a coherent ideology and policy stance to the more generic

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© The Author(s) 2019
B. Clack and M. Paule (eds.), *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00770-6_1

description of fundamental and widespread forms of social reorganisation, like Stuart Hall (2011), we nonetheless acknowledge its usefulness in capturing the manifold ways in which neoliberalism is a hegemonic project in process. The term's very ubiquity, as Hall argues (p. 10), provides a focus for both criticality of and resistance to those processes which erode the structures that have existed to mitigate inequalities, to reinforce community, and to foster well-being, in order to replace them with market services and an emphasis on personal responsibility.

Second, the essays in this collection offer insights into some of the 'messy actualities' described by Wendy Larner as arising from the study of 'specific neoliberal projects', rather than from accounts of particular epochs or unifying theories (2000, p. 14). Larner suggests that more useful avenues are opened up for the investigation of the ways in which our social structures are being reorganised if we keep insights from the many diverse interpretations in mind. Her summary of three key interpretations of neoliberalism—as policy, as ideology and as governmentality—not only usefully captures the challenges of neoliberalism's complexities, but shows how individual interpretations deployed alone can limit understanding of how power is played out, and of how strategies for well-being are envisaged.

Third, the term 'neoliberal' has moved from being something encountered only in academic circles, to a diagnostic term shaping the agendas of new political manifestos. No longer solely a term used in the academy, it is now a regular feature of broader public political discourse. It is telling that the UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn felt his audience would understand him if he included it in his conference speech to the Party in September 2017. 'And now is the time that we developed a new model of economic management to replace the failed dogmas of neoliberalism', he declared. As the word is becoming more well-used, the danger is that it can become something of an un-interrogated shorthand for things and attitudes the user does not like. Political writing in the public domain has followed the academy's lead in expressing misgivings—for example, Nathan J. Robinson, the editor of the online *Current Affairs* magazine, bans his contributors from using it because he feels it is imprecise and over-used, while at the same time acknowledging that

the term captures some very real tendencies in policy and social experience (Robinson 2018). In the UK, a right-leaning group within the Labour Party complains that 'Neoliberal has become a catch-all for anyone with whom you disagree' (*The Progressive* 2015).

Yet the genie, it seems, is out of the bottle and cannot be put back. 'Neoliberalism' has passed out of the ownership of the academy and the policy pundit into more public and popular domains. It is employed in the broadsheet and tabloid press; in schools (Frank 2018); in social media hashtags; in grass-roots movements such as 'Occupy', and as a provocation on mainstream political TV shows such as BBC's *Question Time*. While it could be argued that the term itself is only likely to be understood or deployed by a small number of politically engaged people, its associated concepts—those of self-responsibility, individualism, aspiration and economic citizenship—can be and are more readily translated into popular and institutional discourses. This collection explores the ways in which these concepts have been taken up in a variety of settings and practices and, importantly, internalised by subjects themselves. Jason Read (2009, p. 27) highlights Foucault's recognition that 'neoliberalism is not just a manner of governing states and individuals, but is intimately tied to the lives of the individual, to a particular manner of living'. It is aspects of this 'manner of living' that our contributors explore.

To consider the life cycle is to focus on the experience of the individual subject in societies dominated by neoliberal categories. If the thinkers of the European Enlightenment defined the self as rational, autonomous and capable of choice, the last forty years have seen these 'choices' shaped through the activities of consumer capitalism. According to Foucault (2008), while Enlightenment rational choice was always located in an economic setting in which the idea of exchange and barter are naturalised, the shift under neoliberalism is one which sees exchange and barter replaced by competition, the conditions for which are artificial and must be fostered by the state (Oksala 2013). Rather than exchanging labour for goods, under neoliberalism the worker develops their individual human capital, which is invested for revenue (Read 2009). The image of the competitive human subject

arises from the concerns of politicians to create a free-market economy, where the focus is on entrepreneurial activity, private enterprise and the shaping of all activities—health and education included—through the lens of the economic.

The sociologist David Harvey provides a neat summary of the concerns which shape neoliberal subjectivity:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2005, p. 2)

This is never simply about a discrete economic project that leaves the individual largely unaffected. Rather, 'the financialisation of everything', as Wendy Brown (2015, p. 28) describes the neoliberal economic project, requires something more. As the scope of the free market is extended to all areas of life, it is not just the public sphere that is changed. Public services adopt the model of business, but so too is human subjectivity reimagined. An entrepreneurial economic model requires the individual *themselves* to be shaped as an entrepreneur, not simply in the workplace, but in every area of their life.[1] Brown captures what this means for the individual's experience of their world rather neatly:

> Neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not the issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus. (2015, p. 31)

Here, we start to get a sense of why an exploration of the life cycle is an important way of both exposing and challenging some of the key tropes of neoliberalism.

[1] See Lemke (2001, p. 199) for exploration of the 'entrepreneurial self'.

Work, University and Success

To think of the life cycle suggests reflection on those aspects of life we share as embodied human beings: birth, childhood, adulthood, ageing, death. However, for the economic citizen of neoliberalism, the human individual is always and everywhere defined through their ability to take part in (or not take part in) the world of work. It is important at this juncture to pay attention to the role 'success' plays in shaping this neoliberal life cycle, for to do so enables understanding of the preeminent role that is given to work in shaping the individual's experience. Moreover, while all individuals are constrained to be economically productive in order to enjoy full citizenship, it is university attendance that has become a key marker in the development of the success narrative; for this reason, two chapters are designated to discussing the shape of the neoliberal university. Under New Labour, targets for university attendance were expanded to 50% of the population (BBC 2002), and in 2017 the director of the right-wing Higher Education Policy Institute recommended that the Conservative government expand this to 75% (Hillman 2017). From being optional for the middle classes (and, under 'meritocratic' education systems, for a few 'bright' working-class young people deemed capable of transcending their home culture), university is now seen as an essential passport to economic security in an economically precarious world. That this security is far from assured, commentators like Guy Standing (2011, 2014) have highlighted. Nonetheless, the impetus persists and anxieties associated with university become yet more focused among the population that does attend. Students are more aware of the significance of the 2:1/2:2 divide for career and earnings, with achieving upper second-class honours (or a 2.1) in the UK system an increasing focus of online forum sites such as The Student Room and students news sites such as *The Tab*. The mainstream press participates and feeds such anxieties—for example, *The Independent* (2013) offers 'Something for the "slackers" to focus on: A 2:1 degree is worth around £80k more to you than a 2:2', and *The Telegraph* (2015) ups the ante, declaring that 'a 2.1 is no longer enough'. The sad irony is that never has it been harder for young people to study consistently or to enjoy the security

that a university education once promised. The model of success held out under neoliberalism views not going to university, not as a choice, but as a sign of one's personal failure. As the chapters in this collection explore, the obsession with success does not end with university, but extends through working life and beyond into constructions of successful ageing and indeed, into dying.

When we step back from the idea that the good life as the successful life, there is a realisation of just how peculiar it is to shape all human life and experience through this lens. Success under neoliberalism centres on economic success, but it is also about enshrining competitiveness in the development of the self as opposed to others. In other words, the successful self is achieved at the cost of the failing other. This, then, explains the power of making work—in both public and private life—the marker for the good life. A work-orientated account of human experience thus shapes the neoliberal life cycle as represented in this collection: schooling (as preparation for work); higher education and training (as preparation for work); work (as an adaptable worker); illness (as that which stops one working); dying and death (as life after work). Work is both the arena for shaping identity and also the principle way of achieving the 'successful' life.

We might have expected the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 to challenge the faith in free-market economics as the bringer of the good life. Nothing could be further from the truth, and, while there is doubtless more academic engagement with the ideology of neoliberalism, the years following the crisis suggest a retrenchment of the very ideas that would seem to have been exposed by that event as incapable of delivering a good life for all. As Mitchell Dean (2014, p. 157) observes, rather than thinking of the 2008 crash as a 'hinge between epochs', instead we need to locate it within a series of crises, for neoliberalism, he argues, thrives on crisis. And, indeed, in the name of 'necessary' austerity, the years since 2008 have seen more privatisation, more cutting of public services, more targets, more monitoring, more of the same. What does it feel like to inhabit such a context? Philip Mirowski's interrogation of the use of crises (in his perceptively titled 'Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste' (2014)) includes a chapter entitled 'Everyday Neoliberalism', where he considers the lived experience of neoliberalism.

Living Neoliberalism

The move to lived experience opens up a curious aspect of the colonising power of neoliberalism. This is not simply about a set of external structures felt in social institutions, but is lived out in the individual's experience. UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's claim that 'There is No Alternative' (the so-called TINA doctrine) reflects the power of neoliberalism, not just to shape economics and institutions, but also (and most importantly) to shape self-understanding. While coming under pressure in recent years—through Donald Trump's election as US President on an anti-globalisation agenda in November 2016; through the UK's decision to leave the European Union Brexit in 2016; through Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the UK Labour Party from 2015—there remains a feeling that Market economics is somehow the 'natural' way of shaping our understanding of ourselves and our engagement with our world.

That neoliberalism feels natural goes some way to explaining why we have chosen an investigation of the life cycle to critique and challenge the hegemony of neoliberal thinking. Neoliberalism is effective precisely because of its ability to shape and construct every aspect of life, and this is revealed through interrogation of what it feels like to live out one's life against the beliefs it makes as natural to us as the air we breathe. Yet experience is never unfiltered, and considering the four stages of neoliberal life—schooling, university and work, death—reveals how the ideals and practices of unfettered Market economics require a specific kind of individual.

It can be more difficult to trace this political shaping of identity than it might be if we were considering accounts of what happens to the individual under totalitarian regimes.[2] Unlike the obviously oppressive structures of a totalitarian society, the apparently benign claims of a 'liberal' society make it difficult to acknowledge the way it limits experience. Who would not like to be considered adaptable, able to live

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[2]See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick's, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

anywhere, be anything, shape one's life as one might choose? Yet here is the shadow side of the success the neoliberal is expected to seek, for what is masked in the language of the entrepreneurial self is the inevitability that for some to succeed, others must fail. Failure is constructed as failure of the individual; the contention that the Market is the objective arbiter of all value suggests that there is no systemic failure, only the failure of the individual to be a self-activating subject. Addressing economic inequality is ignored in favour of promoting strategies designed to create equality of opportunity.[3] Small wonder that neoliberal economics encourages a politics of identity that can be used to sidestep the urgency of addressing problems of class. If we are 'all middle class now', to quote a phrase of former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, there is no need to consider the various ways in which economic inequality impacts upon the individual's ability to succeed. 'Level the playing field' and the forces of competition will bring about a meritocratic society where the brightest and the best will rise inexorably to the top.[4] Fail to achieve in this Brave New World and the response is likely to be: 'it's not the System, stupid, it's you'. According to the neoliberal state, there is no ideology shaping experience that could be a fault. The Market is not a system, just a fact of life, and if you are good enough, nothing can impede your rise.[5]

That successive governments have felt the need to address insufficient social mobility suggests that this meritocratic story is not all it seems.[6] How strange, then, that there is relatively little public criticism of the ideology which lies beneath claims of the mobile subject, unconstrained by social class or economic misfortune. Here, we arrive at another aspect of neoliberalism that suggests something of its tenaciousness.

[3]For the shift from addressing economic inequality, see Rose (1999). For an account of what this means for educational practice, see Ecclestone and Hayes (2008).

[4]For an account of the tensions in the neoliberal account of competition, see Davies (2014).

[5]Catherine Rottenberg (2013) makes a similar observation on her work on neoliberal feminisms.

[6]At the time of writing, the UK's Conservative Government is having problems appointing someone to the role of 'Social Mobility Tsar'. There is a suggestion that the role might disappear, or at the very least be occupied by someone less likely to make critical comments of government policy (*The Independent*, 1 April 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-uk-poor-help-social-mobility-commission-head-benefits-cut-support-a8280341.html).

Contrary to claims of the ubiquity of the term as a mode of critique, in practice neoliberalism operates largely as something unacknowledged. This is not 'socialism', not even 'capitalism'. Its supporters do not claim it. Critics of its ideals might not even name the thing that they are criticising. If the rational 'liberal' subject can identify her oppression and resist it, the 'neoliberal subject' is constrained, not just by narratives of her own empowerment, but also by the question of how to resist (Harris and Dobson 2015, p. 148). How to resist that which does not present as an ideology but as something that is 'natural', the obvious end point of a series of less successful political experiments? (Fukuyama 2012)

The problem is doubtless exacerbated by the diversity of views on the sources of neoliberalism. Is it the fruit of a conspiracy to challenge the post-war consensus surrounding the Keynsian interventionist state, focused around Friedrich von Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society that clustered around him in the late 1940s? For Hayek and the members of the Society, the aim was to press for the importance of the individual and free-market economics: a persistent lobbying that came to fruition in the 1970s as politicians looked for new ideas to solve a series of devastating political and economic crises. Or was the advent of neoliberal economics a more haphazard affair, a consensus that emerged in response to the crisis in Keynianism of 1970s? In some ways, its source is unimportant.[7] What matters is the totalising nature of its adoption. Anyone daring to challenge its doctrines is dismissed as naive, impractical, utopian.[8] There is only one way of structuring society and it is neoliberal. What is it like to inhabit a society that holds to the inherency of the values it perpetuates: freedom of the Market, globalisation, prioritising business and financialisation?

[7]For an account of its rise, along with discussion of the different ways of formulating this, see Mirowski (2014, pp. 27–88).

[8]The 'anti-work' movement have grasped the radicalism that inspires such criticisms. 'The most promising way forward lies in reclaiming modernity and attacking the neoliberal common sense that conditions everything from the most esoteric policy discussions to the most vivid emotional states. This counter-hegemonic project can only be achieved by imagining better worlds—and in moving beyond defensive struggles' (Srnicek and Williams 2016, p. 175).

Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' encapsulates the vast range of ways in which the 'procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics' (2009, p. 108) of governmental power operate on us; they are internalised and re-enacted by our own volition, on ourselves and on one another—'the conduct of conduct' with all its directive and reflexive implications. This analysis offers a helpful way of considering what enables neoliberalism to become such a totalising way of thinking. It is not just its manifestation in political philosophy and policy implementation that enables it to appear the only show in town. It is also something that shapes the way in which citizens conceive of themselves *as selves*, not just as citizens in relationship to the state. It enables us moreover to accept responsibility for the consequences of the actions it enjoins (Dean 2010, p. 48). However, as Gill and Scharff (2011, p. 8) note, what can be lacking in writing about neoliberalism 'is the emphasis placed by Foucault on the "mentality" part of governmentality' which in his later work emerges as a concern with the relationship between the techniques of government and the technologies of the self. Judith Butler's *Psychic Life of Power* (1997) goes some way to addressing this omission, describing the 'agonising form' (p. 1) of power; in creating our sense of self, it gives us no place from which to dismantle it. Nikolas Rose points us towards an interrogation of 'governmentality' that can open up such spaces, suggesting a 'family' of questions that such an interrogation must involve. This ends with him asking,

> what do your studies of governmentality make amenable to *our* thought and action, in the sense of us being able to count its cost and think of it being made otherwise? (1999, p. 20)

Interrogation of the points at which regimes of government meet acquiescence or resistance illuminates the 'the counter-conducts that can reveal and embody possibilities for doing things otherwise' (Dean 2010, p. 49) and also the unequal distribution of resources for constructing the successful self (Scharff 2016, p. 110).

The language of success and failure plays a particular role in shaping neoliberal subjectivity. The entrepreneurial subject is an achieving subject. In one's achievements is the possibility of the meaningful life.

Making achievement the hallmark of the well-lived life opens up a binary account of individuals. There are winners, and there are losers. There are those who have acquired the skills necessary for the successful life, and there are those who have failed to do so.[9] It also suggests only one model of the flourishing life: that based on the qualities usually associated with the aspirational middle class. And so, the life cycle is shaped by the progressive narrative of middle-class success—school is followed by university; one's career/work shapes the scope of one's life; and death, standing at the end of all success, has to be shaped as something which could be overcome. The aim of this volume is to interpret that narrative, and to show how, at each of these life stages, the neoliberal account is not just inadequate, but also dangerous for the formation of the self and the possibility of a flourishing life.

The Collection

The papers in this collection provide snapshots of possible citizen life cycle stages shaped by neoliberalism. It is of necessity limited. This is not an attempt to capture the experience of a universalised individual as they pass from 'cradle to grave' in a single neoliberalised state. Rather, the aim is to offer reflections from those whose work leads them to consider the shaping of specific life stages in particular contexts. The contexts presented here are drawn from the developed world; a volume considering the effect of neoliberalism on the life cycle in the developing world, which is also being shaped by the neoliberal paradigm, would be most valuable.[10] Likewise, the role of work in shaping the life cycle has informed the various approaches offered here, meaning other kinds of life cycles engendered by the neoliberalisation of policies and institutions—for example, the criminal justice system or family life—do not feature.

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[9]For an account of 'the failures', see Walker (2014).

[10]For discussion of the different forms neoliberal takes in different geographical places, see Harvey (2005).

Four sections detail the stages of the neoliberal life cycle: childhood and the preparation for work; university and the skilling of workers; work; death and the limits of work. Rather than summarise the contents of each chapter, let us identify some key threads running through the chapters of this volume.

This is an interdisciplinary volume. Contributors come from a range of fields: philosophy, theology, sociology, criminology, gerontology, anthropology, education, regional government, psychology and psychotherapy. Unlike some academic attempts to understand this phenomenon, it is worth noting that, while the majority of contributors are academics, this volume also includes the insights of practitioners from a range of backgrounds. The original seminar series was held to bring different perspectives across various disciplines, the philosophical and the empirical, practitioners and academics into dialogue. As a result, this volume offers a series of different lenses through which to view the effects of neoliberalism. There is no one way of accounting for its success as an organising paradigm, nor is there one way for understanding its shortcomings. The variety of perspectives offered here enables an account of the neoliberal life cycle that resonates not merely with the concerns of academics, but with the experience of all, whether they realise it or not.

Interrogating the neoliberal structuring of the life cycle philosophically shapes the approach taken in the chapters offers by Beverley Clack, Susan Crozier and Susan Pickard. Clack and Pickard are concerned with the shaping of subjectivity when confronted with death and mortality. Crozier, an influential blogger on failure, challenges the narratives of success that shape the life cycle and suggests ways of embracing the possibilities for individuals when they do not achieve within the parameters set up neoliberal self-responsibility and competitive success.

This interrogation can be read through a critical policy analysis, the approach taken in the chapters by Bob Brecher, Louise Grisoni and Sonia Ruiz, and Louise Livesey. Brecher uses mimesis to expose that which is taken for granted, creating a 'Modest Proposal' that mouths back at managers in the neoliberal university the emptiness of their words. Grisoni and Ruiz offer detailed analysis of the uses of austerity to revivify conservative and entrenched inequalities. Looking at gendered

aspects of the neoliberal economic subject model in a failing economy, they find, as Larner (2000) suggests, that its shortcomings prompt alternative collective modes of 'successful' living. Livesey dismantles the underpinning tenets of the neoliberalism as they are applied to higher education and reveals how unwanted voices and bodies are silenced and excluded in the policies and practices of the university.

The critique of the neoliberal life cycle can be read through more deliberate reflection on lived experience, as suggested by the chapters offered by Patrick Alexander, Jason Danely, Philippa Donald, and Michele Paule. Paule and Alexander, academics with backgrounds as teachers, explore gendered aspects of success and failure. Paule explores the limits of the 'successful girl' (Ringrose 2012) subject position and the gendered nature of competitive subjectivity in schools in the UK, while Alexander identifies the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011, p. 21) of the discourses which shape the aspirations of failing boys in the USA. The claim, that 'you can be whoever you want to be', ignores social inequality, making failure a terrible burden to be borne by the young. Danely considers the effect of a similar relentless optimism on the lives of the elderly and their carers in Japan. Donald, a practicing psychotherapist, explores the problem of shaping therapeutic treatments economically and treating structural social problems as individual pathologies.

Contributors reveal, then, different aspects of the social conditions of neoliberalism: the privileges, inequalities and constraints that its own account of itself elides. Engaging with the ubiquity of neoliberal forms and its lived experience in neoliberal societies, the contributors to this volume critique the neoliberal paradigm as it is lived. This is a timely exercise. David Harvey's comment at the end of his history of neoliberalism is one we wholeheartedly endorse: 'there is a far, far nobler prospect of freedom to be won than that which neoliberalism preaches' (Harvey 2005, p. 206). The political shocks of 2016, the emergence of new forms of nationalism, and increased xenophobia demand that we take seriously the discontents of neoliberalism, but that we also offer alternatives which allow for better ways of supporting the flourishing of all. The essays here illuminate the dissatisfactions of neoliberalism, and in doing so draw attention to the possibility of better ways of living.

Acknowledgements The papers in this volume came out of an interdisciplinary seminar series held at Oxford Brookes University 2014–2015, and an accompanying extended social media discussion. We are grateful to the contributors, from the research group at Brookes, and those that brought their papers and perspectives to the conversation from other institutions, professional fields, nations and continents. Thanks to Heather Mendick and Kate Reynolds and also to the University for supporting this project.

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Part I

Childhood, Youth, and Schooling

2

Personal Moral Autonomy, Responsibility and Choice: Do We Know What Our Cultural Discourses Are Doing to Young People's Mental Health?

Philippa Donald

In this chapter, I look at how neoliberal ideas and practices and their implications for selfhood inform how we understand mental health and mental illness and, in particular, how this affects how we view the mental health of children and adolescents. My position is that the account of selfhood, choice and rationality that underpins the neoliberal position is both profoundly unsatisfactory and damaging when it comes to understanding why children and young people have mental health difficulties and that, if we want to address the frightening state of young people's mental health and our treatment, we need to articulate these difficulties and focus on developing the alternatives that are available to us.

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B. Clack and M. Paule (eds.), *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00770-6_2