

## 9 Resetting Minds and Souls:

# Language, Employability and the Making of Neoliberal Subjects

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### Introduction

Scholars of language and power have recently noted that, in many industrialized societies, current social, cultural and economic changes have affected the theories that inform the state management of populations (Heller and McElhinny, 2018). Certainly, the regimentation of society is still mediated by a bureaucratic, patriarchal and patronizing state apparatus which relies on complex systems of classification and knowledge and which disciplines people through coercive techniques of societal control (Duchêne and Humbert, 2017; Vigouroux, 2017). However, commentators argue that the *disciplining society* is gradually being replaced by a neoliberal rationality that governs people through acts of freedom, flexibilization and competitiveness which affects the ways inequality is produced, rationalized, and justified by authorities of all sorts (Dardot and Laval, 2003; Fraser, 2004).

These shifts and continuities in the regulation of populations become particularly clear when we look at the ways welfare states currently govern poverty and unemployment. For example, in the UK, where Alfonso is currently based, Jobcentres (the government-funded agencies that comprise both the employment services and the social security offices) have historically played a key role in defining and quantifying the ‘problem’ of the ‘unemployed’, and managing and controlling the ‘poor’. Jobcentres are not only places where people get access to labor. Along with older institutions such as the ‘Workhouse’, which

between the Middle Ages and the Victorian times provided work and accommodation to the 'poor', or the more recent 'poor laws' and benefits systems (e.g. the 'Beveridge' model) managing poverty and unemployment in UK, Jobcentres are part of a larger disciplining apparatus that contributes to the normalization of what is often thought of as an unruly, immoral section of the populace, and in certain cases, a latent revolutionary threat to civil society (Driwer, 2004; Fowler, 2007).

The restructuration of the British welfare state since the end of the 1970s has involved a redefinition of the ways state authorities apprehend citizens and unemployed subjects in particular (Harris, 2004). While for many decades access to social benefits was seen as a constitutional right, since the 1970s labor experts (in the service of the Thatcher regime and the governments following Thatcher) have claimed that unemployed subjects should no longer be passive recipients of benefits (Spicker, 2018). The authorities role thus became one of guiding unemployed subjects in the process of actively engaging in a job-hunting practice and showing flexibility in terms of their willingness to take a wider variety of jobs over a greater geographical dispersion (Bristow, 2014). Of course, this was not entirely new: unemployment benefits have never been given for free. Willingness to work has historically been a precondition of receiving benefits. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for example, the 'dole', a payment that was made to unemployed workers, was already subjected to rigid means tests and 'able' people were ineligible as they could ostensibly take care of themselves (Fraser, 2009). What was changing, however, was how unemployed subjects were expected to understand their selves as well as the forms of expertise that underpinned and regulated the processes informing their (re)integration into work.

One of the implications of these changing theories was, at first, a terminological one. In the early 1980s, the administrative category of 'the unemployed' was replaced by the category of 'job seekers' —a term which stressed the need for a more active and self-

responsible job search on the part of the unemployed individual. Furthermore, these changes affected the spatial configuration of Jobcentres. Counters and queues were replaced by self-service notice boards providing information about employment opportunities and requiring the unemployed to literally *seek* employment by physically moving from board to board, within both the structured space of the self-service section and the wider economic structure of the market (Bristow, 2014). Recently, these changes have also led to the implementation of a series of employability programs asking unemployed individuals to invest in upgrading their human capital through lifelong learning and personal development programs. These employability programs are not necessarily provided by the Jobcentres themselves. Along with current changes in public administration in which models of public-private partnerships dominate the provision of public welfare, employability programs nowadays in the UK are outsourced to local charities and social organizations.

In this chapter, we present an ethnographic documentation of an employment program provided by Community Links, a charity located in East London that targets young people considered at risk of poverty and delinquency. We take this employability program as a starting point to generate a critical understanding of the ways in which these programs operate on the ground and thus contribute to the governmentality of poverty and unemployed subjects in London. Our analysis will draw on ethnographic data jointly collected by Alfonso and Vivian between Spring and Fall 2017 during a research project on language and employability conducted in Newham, East London. This ethnographic data set includes observational data of training activities as well as observations of practices that occur outside the framework of the employability program. It also involves formal and informal conversations with unemployed trainings participants, program coaches, trainers and counselors, as well as program funders.

The ethnographic account put forward in this chapter claims that the management of populations by all sorts of authorities cannot be theorized without a consideration of the ways in which governmentality is *done* on the ground and how it has real-time effects for people (Broeckling, 2015; Rose, 1999). We particularly assume that an ethnographic documentation of the communicative practices observed during the training activities enables us to study government not as an institution, nor as a mode of reasoning, but rather as a set of activities operating at the intersection between what Michel Foucault calls “technologies of power which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends and domination”, and “technologies of the self which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts conduct and way of being so as to transform their selves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection and immortality” (Foucault 1988a, p. 18).

Drawing on these assumptions, this paper then argues that the investigated employability program strives to disrupt poverty and unemployment through a set of disciplining techniques that target the individuals’ minds and their understanding of their selves. We will show that, while these techniques are anchored, both institutionally and ideologically, in larger histories of knowledge about, and discipline of, ‘poverty’ and the ‘poor’, the type of self that training participants are asked to become is informed by a neoliberal rationality that extends market principles to every domain of social life. We will particularly show that the investigated program is emblematic for a form of neoliberal governmentality that asks the participating subject to engage in a never-ending practice of self-improvement, self-management and self-monitoring, which requires them to understand their selves in terms of quality, competitiveness and freedom. At the same time, we will argue that, far from being a closed, totalizing, functional theory determining the actions of individuals and their understanding of their selves, the complex set of ideas informing this

training program do not determine the actions or thinking of the participating subjects. This neoliberal rationality is rather mobilized, rationalized and dialectically engaged with on the ground by (some of) the unemployed subject who problematize and challenge the program and contest its inability to promote their access to jobs and socioeconomic inclusion.

Based on our findings, and inspired by current scholarship on language and governmentality (Dlaske et al. 2016; Martin-Rojo, 2018; Urla, 2012), we will further show that language plays a key role for the everyday *doing* of the type of neoliberal governmentality documented in this paper. We will demonstrate that *language* is the medium through which a neoliberal rationality is circulated by different sorts of individuals and actors, which penetrates and colonializes every sphere of social life and interpellates individuals as neoliberal subjects. Secondly, we will explain that it is through language, i.e. practices of reflexivity and introspection mediated through writing, speaking and thinking about oneself, that individuals come to understand themselves as specific self-projects that need to be constantly monitored, analyzed and managed. Thirdly, we show that language, i.e. oral or textualized communicative and behavioral instructions which mobilize idealized and morally marked figures of personhood, serves as a guiding principle for individuals to exert control over their own and other's bodies and minds and to guide them in their attempts to meet the demands of employers as well as of those individuals and actors managing benefits and distributing resources. Finally, we claim that it is through language, i.e. through one's communicative ability to enact a specific subjectivity, that one gets to be recognized as a desirable worker. In sum, we will show that language is both object and medium of governmentality and is therefore at the core of a biopolitical practice that creates compliance for professional precarity, poverty and unemployment through the management of young people's bodies, including their emotions and minds.

This chapter is structured as follows: firstly, we will present Community Links and its training program and discuss the rationales that underpin the provided training activities. Secondly, we will analyze the techniques and forms of expertise mobilized by instructors and coaches to guide young people in their management of their selves. We also present the tensions and conflicts that these training activities cause, and the strategies mobilized by coaches to prevent participating individuals from questioning the ability of this employment program to help them access jobs.

### **Governing unemployment**

Community Links was funded in the 1970s and since then has worked with different groups of people understood to be affected by poverty and homelessness in the borough of Newham, which is categorized as one of the most economically deprived and racially diverse areas of the UK (City of London Corporation, 2015). The charity provides services in the domains of ‘Advice’, ‘Health’ and ‘Youth and ‘Employment’ and has as its main goal to “support people in coming together, overcoming barriers, building purpose and making the most of the place they live in.” The employment program in which we conducted research is part of the organizational section ‘Youth and Employment’. The program lasts for ten weeks (six hours, three times a week) and is run three times a year in order to be financially profitable. Indeed, this training program is sponsored by an American investment bank and is emblematic of the current transformations of the management of unemployment and poverty in the city of London. The public-private co-operations between Jobcentres and other organizations previously mentioned do not simply involve processes of outsourcing of vocational training activities to organizations such as Community Links. Employability programmes provided by charities such as Community Links are frequently sponsored by corporate investors who benefit from these cooperations in terms of tax breaks and positive publicity. These partnerships are not only of financial nature. Often, such as in the case of the

investigated employability program, the corporate actors who fund, or co-fund, these programs are involved in the formulation of the training objectives, and are also in charge of providing specific training activities to the enrolled participants.

The specific employability program in which we were able to conduct fieldwork is meant to contribute to disrupting poverty in East London and to create opportunities for the local unemployed youth. As noted by the charity's management, what all the training participants have in common is that they live in situations of social and economic precarity: some are homeless or have a criminal record; many of them were enrolled by the Jobcentre located in Newham; others were recruited in the community centers of East London; and others still were recruited in prisons or institutions dealing with juvenile crime. Most of the participants were born in London, are 'native speakers' of English, and are 'second generation immigrants' with parents from Nigeria, Bangladesh, Guinea, Somalia, Sudan, and Turkish Cyprus. In spite of their differences, in terms of linguistic background and educational and professional trajectory, all participants are categorized as NEETs. 'NEET' is a category used by the British authorities (and other Western countries) to refer to young people between 16 and 24 that are 'not in employment, education or training'. The employment program provided by Community Links is then seen as a means to subject these young people to specific techniques (group activities as well as one-to-one advisory sessions) that are meant to keep them off the streets, and eventually facilitate their integration into the labor market. The programs' themes and topics cover the following domains:

Qualities and Skills

Dreams and Goals

Facing Barriers

Leadership and Teamwork

Workplace Ethics and Valuing Diversity

CV Skills

Interview Training

Presentation Skills

This list of topics reflects Community Links' focus on practices of self-management and emotional styling. Communication and literacy, self-presentation, resilience and motivation, emotions and personal traits, as well as multiculturalism, empathy, respect and values are at the core of each training activity. Less attention is dedicated to the acquisition and development of specific work skills required for specific professions. This focus on the management of participants' attitude and affective status is emblematic of a shift in the ways professional education is nowadays designed and conducted (see Allan, 2013 or Bell, 2017 for an analysis of the ways these processes occur in other contexts). While vocational schools continue to provide workers with professional knowledge and technical skills, the list of topics characterizing the curriculum of the training program provided by Community Links represents a type of professional training scheme that responds to the labor market's need for flexibility (Del Percio and Van Hoof, 2017; Flubacher, Duchêne and Coray, 2017). Since professional knowledge and practice can be learned on the job and that under current configurations of labor, workers can no longer assume that they will be employed in the same profession throughout their professional lives, what professional education needs to focus on is the development of the workers' capacity to adapt themselves (physically and mentally) to different professional situations and to the unpredictability of the labor market. This also involves the socialization of workers into a professional habitus that subjects the self to a practice of constant self-monitoring and self-improvement (see Boutet, 2001; or Dlaske, 2016 for similar lines of arguments).

In the case of the employability program documented at Community Links, the necessity to produce flexible workers for a changing labor market intersects with the need to



manage the supposed mental vulnerability of East London's impoverished population addressed by this program. The young individuals targeted by the Community Links training program are seen by public authorities as an 'at-risk' group. The fact that these young people live in areas assumed to be problematic, have no occupation, nor involved in any productive activity is said to negatively affect their mental health, which in the long term, leads to situations of delinquency. This employability training was then meant to provide them with the entire package of life skills necessary to be successful in a flexibilized and precarious labor market and, at the same time, help them develop resilience and mental strength.

Indeed, when we were first shown the locations in which the training activities would take place, we quickly noted the motivational slogans and phrases with which the walls of the room in the second floor of Community Links main building were adorned: "Do something today that your future self will thank you for" or "You can have results or excuses. Not both." or "If you don't find the time, if you don't do the work, you don't get the results." or "Old ways won't open new doors." Natasha, the employability coach providing the training, explained to us that these slogans are meant to encourage participants to work on themselves. These individuals, she argues, are often passive, depressed and demotivated. They suffer from mental illness, have low self-esteem and lack self-confidence. In many cases, she continued, they feel betrayed by society and public institutions and tend to victimize themselves. This employability training wants them to take responsibility for their own lives and futures. We need to reset their minds and souls, she explained.

It was not the first time that program participants were presented to us as vulnerable and mentally unstable. A couple of weeks before the start of the training activities, Alfonso had met the management of Community Links and the team of professional coaches responsible for providing employability trainings to young people. Alfonso had only recently taken over his position as a lecturer in London after different jobs in other European

countries. He was not accustomed with the local discourses on youth unemployment. He kept using the word ‘unemployed’ when talking about training participants and their training participants: What is the social and professional background of the unemployed registered in the program? How do you usually recruit these unemployed young people? What do these unemployed individuals expect from the training program? What are the possibilities of these unemployed youngsters being integrated in the job market? After the end of the meeting, one of the managers of the program noted that it would be wise to avoid the term ‘unemployed’ when addressing training participants, especially when they are present. Many of them feel frustrated and are depressed, he explained. Some are on medication. The term ‘unemployed’ has negative connotations, which could negatively affect their minds and motivation, and its use could present an obstacle and thus be counterproductive. Use positive terms, the manager advised, such as ‘professionals’ or just ‘participants’. Call them by their own name so that they feel personally addressed.

These concerns about the young people’s emotional vulnerability that manifest themselves in both Natasha’s and the manager’s discourse about the training participants are interdiscursively related to a longer history of knowledge linking poverty and social marginality to emotional deviance and mental instability (Foucault 1988, 2003), which is mobilized in the sphere of employability programs through powerful expert reports and briefings on youth unemployment (Smith, 1990). More particularly, the communicative practices documented at Community Links are interlinked with a body of expertise produced both in academic and policy-making circles that argues that the only way of challenging the systemic causes of poverty and unemployment is by fostering resilient selves, i.e. producing minds that are able to cope with, adapt themselves to, and navigate flexible labor regimes (Siraj et al., 2014; Powell, 2018). We will demonstrate in the next sections that these forms of expertise about the self do not directly act upon the unemployed subjects, but rather they are

mediated by a whole set of disciplining techniques that target people's minds and their understanding of their selves. We will document how these techniques operated on the ground. We will investigate the effects of these techniques and reflect on how, why and with what consequences these techniques were sometimes endorsed, or sometimes challenged by participants themselves.

### **Disciplining subjects**

In one of the first training sessions documented, Natasha asked participants to prepare a list of their personal qualities and to hierarchize these qualities according to their value on the labor market. She explained that participants should also think about their weaknesses and those personal traits that might be an obstacle for their professional integration. Ursula, 23-year-old, homeless woman who was sitting next to Alfonso wrote down in her notebook the following list of qualities: "organized", "honest", "reliable", "adaptable", "enthusiastic", "team player", "resilient" and "good at communication". For personal weakness she noted: "punctuality", "education", "work experience" and "race". She underlined with her pen the word "race", looked at Alfonso and whispered in his ear that while public authorities like to highlight the fact that London is such a multicultural city, race continues to be a feature complicating people's access to employment. Ursula was not new to this type of exercise. She had already attended several of these programs since her access to unemployment benefits was dependent upon her attendance. Each training session, Ursula explained to us, is based on the same type of activities, the same expectations. After a while you become good at anticipating instructors' questions and at giving the expected answers.

Ursula's way of responding to the expectations of instructors and counselors is a coping strategy shared by many unemployed people who we have met during our fieldwork and who have learned that being able to benefit from the British benefits system depends on

their ability to enact what Bonnie Urciuoli calls a skills discourse (2008), i.e. a mode of speaking that aligns people's subjectivities with principles of quality, competitiveness, flexibility and entrepreneurialism. It would be wrong, however, to assume that job seekers such as Ursula naively buy into this skills discourse. As we will show in the next paragraphs and sections, we would rather consider this discourse as an unequally distributed communicative resource (or a register) that some of the individuals we met have acquired in the many training session attended and which they have learned to strategically mobilize in order to be seen as particularly motivated and therefore deserving state support.

Now, given Ursula's ability to enact this skills discourse, we were not surprised when during the following discussion that participants had with Natasha (the instructor) about what employers would look for when interviewing candidates, Ursula correctly suggested that being "reliable", "flexible" and "enthusiastic" is often more important than having a good education and lot of work experience. Natasha confirmed that studies had shown that recruiters consider candidates' education and professional experience as less important than their moral integrity and passion at work. Therefore, everybody could get a job, she said, if only people would learn to know who they are, recognize their own qualities, highlight their weaknesses, and convincingly sell their strengths during job interviews.

This idea – that everyone can manage and control their life in accordance to their needs and desires – is emblematic of the (neo)liberal rationales informing these training programs. According to Dardot and Laval (2013), it is this assumption that makes people work on themselves, invest in training and lifelong learning, speculate about their futures, calculate their gains and losses and accept the precarization of their lives and working bodies. We will come back to this point later. For the moment, let us just mention that, while this rhetoric of hope visibly seemed to give some relief to the tense faces of the participants in the room, we remember Ursula starting to laugh nervously. We noted that she would react with

this laugh every time she did not seem to agree with someone's reflections. In a later conversation, Ursula explained to us that this way of speaking by the instructors is a means to create a positive climate. Instructors usually tend to downplay the hopeless situations which people like her are in and make participants believe that their future is dependent on their willingness to work hard. Ursula noted that in her case, working hard had not helped and that after months of employability trainings, she still slept in one of the city's hostels for homeless women.

Ursula was not the only one contesting this rhetoric. Other participants, who had initially been registered in this training, stopped attending the program after the first couple of sessions. Along with Ursula, in their feedback to the charity justifying their dropping-out of the program, they claimed that this type of optimistic rhetoric and the proposed activities (especially the self-management practices) were not what they had expected. Rather, what they needed was concrete, hands-on support in terms of CV writing, interview training and guidance about navigating London's labor market and the complex network of offices, organizations and agencies that support job seekers in their attempts to find employment. What distinguished Ursula from these other participants who had left the program before its termination (this is at least how Ursula herself rationalized it), was that Ursula had learned to take the program for what it was: a space giving her access to free lunch for ten weeks and the chance to build an important network with other individuals in her same life situation; an opportunity to show that she was ready to work on herself; and, ultimately, an obligation imposed by the officer at the local job center.

The invitation for participants to work on themselves was a leitmotif running through all of the training activities. In a further training activity, participants were asked to define specific goals in terms of personal development. Natasha reminded us that hard work, discipline and perseverance were the precondition for professional success. Personal

guidance and development methods from management and business could help us in this process, she noted. The goals that we defined for ourselves needed to be constantly monitored in order to progress in our development, Natasha added. SMART, she explained, is one of these models. It helps us make sure that our personal goals do not end up alongside our New Year's resolutions. Natasha projected a slide on the board with a table and explained that SMART was an acronym giving specific criteria to guide us in the setting of our goals: "S" stands for "Specific", she clarified and noted "what exactly do I want to achieve and why?" "M", Natasha added, "means measurable, how can I measure my progress and how can I know when I have achieved my goals?" Further, "A" stands for "achievable", are my goals realistic? "R", she continued, "is relevant, is this a worthwhile goal at the stage I am at?" And finally, "T" means, "time-bound", "when am I going to work on this goal? And how long will I give myself to achieve it?" She then noted that later developments of the model had added two steps to the guide transforming "SMART" into "SMARTER": the "E" standing for "evaluation", stressing the need for the achievement of objectives to be constantly checked and reevaluated. Finally, "R" she continued, is "Review" and stands for "Reflection about the goals achieved and eventual adjustments of the goals that one has set."

Natasha explained to the participants that the SMART model had been developed by an American consultant, George Doran, who, already back in the early 1980s, had realized that failures in project management, employee performance management and personal development are caused by unrealistic expectations and insufficient monitoring of decisions, personnel and work processes. Natasha further noted that success, both organizational and personal, depends on peoples' capacity to be rational, to subdivide larger objectives and aims into smaller, more achievable ones and to constantly monitor progress. Therefore, Natasha argued, the best way to keep track of one's progress is to write it down, to clearly define the specificity of one's goals, to explain how one would measure its progress, to describe the

criteria one would use to assess whether an objective would have been achieved, to explicitly label the relevance of this, and to state the timeframe within which a specific goal must be achieved. In other words, managing oneself is, according to Natasha, an essentially communicative process, it is linked to specific textual practices that allow individuals to reflect on themselves and to monitor or adjust their life projects and ambitions.

This identification of people's minds as a site of regulation echoes with contemporary changes in the theories of human resources management and the psychology of work. To be sure, as Gramsci (1997) and Foucault (1975) argue, the body of the worker as well as her/his morality has always been subjected to forms of strict control and rationalization in order to maximize its productivity. However, historians of work show that the current reconceptualization of 'employees' as 'human resources' and 'organizational assets' have radically affected the ways managers think, plan and control workers and work processes (Cameron, 2000: Taylor, 2011). Indeed, considering the worker as a 'resource' increasingly implies the recognition and consequent exploitation not just of the physical, but also of the creative, emotional, and interpersonal component. As a consequence, scholars note (see. e.g. Nankervis et.al 2011) that the regulatory emphasis is on the 'intellectual capital' of the worker, on his or her 'emotional intelligence' and 'personal commitment' as well as on his or her intrinsic will to contribute to the success of the company they are working for (Tubey et al., 2015).

During our fieldwork at Community Links, we were able to document how these theories of human management gradually penetrate the everyday work routines of charity workers such as Natasha. When talking to her about the preparation of her classes and the training activities, Natasha noted that she was trained in social work and had no expertise in managing unemployed young people. When appointed by Community Links, she was meant to work with the young children of the neighborhoods' community center, but she had had to

replace the colleague originally in charge of this employability training who had left. As she explained, there is not much time for her to rationalize what exactly she is doing: it is not her job to develop sophisticated market theories and models for the activation of unemployed young people. Her job, she adds, is to apply these theories and models that, as she explains, she usually finds in textbooks and on the internet and that give her a useful perspective from which she can understand the situation of her training participants.

In spite of the apparent improvised nature of her training activities, a look at the literature on the making of neoliberal subjects allows us to say that the activities, knowledge and techniques that Natasha mobilizes during her program are similar to what is going on in other training and business contexts (see e.g. Urciuoli's chapter in this volume). Scholars (see e.g. Aubrey, 2000) have shown that models similar to SMART are used in business meetings, team building or personal development sessions involving managers and individuals in leading positions managing projects and personnel. However, while these skills could be seen as realistic and useful in a context where people have to learn how to manage processes and people, in this specific case, the activities with which participants are asked to engage are completely decontextualized from the potential work practices and workplaces. At this stage of their professional career, the individuals Natasha is working with will more likely apply for manual, so-called non- or low-skilled jobs and occupy subordinated positions within their work settings. They will not manage processes, projects or personnel. So, we can argue, the disciplining techniques that they are asked to engage with are exclusively directed to their own selves and serve the inculcation of principles of quality and self-discipline that become an ethics encompassing not only participants professional lives, but their entire personae and domains of living.

Along with Natasha's instructions and her request that participants apply the SMART model to their own personae and life projects, participants diligently started to verbalize their



goals and objectives. Even Ursula, who usually had a skeptical attitude towards the suggestions made by Natasha, seemed to appreciate the utility of this guide. She quickly identified a goal that, as she explained, was part of her larger attempt to find employment. She called it “learning to listen”. She explained to us that her job advisors had often told her that she had to learn to listen to instructions. “Listening”, Ursula explained, was therefore relevant for getting, and especially keeping, a job. She thought that this objective was specific enough and achievable; she would give herself until the end of the training program to achieve this goal. She was, however, unsure about how to measure her progress in “listening” and decided that as a linguist, it would be Alfonso’s job to come up with ideas about how to define whether or not she was making any progress. Alfonso could not come up with any meaningful way of measuring her progression in listening and following instructions, but promised her that he would ask one of his colleagues who measures listening skills.

Now, the list of qualities presented, as well as the business model of change, were all part of a larger set of training activities which submit participants to an auditing practice that, through language, i.e. communicatively mediated practices of introspection and reflexivity as well as self-analysis, self-surveillance and self-management, enables them to keep control of their projects and ambitions as if they were a business. While more established models of societal governmentality assume that power and control are exercised by a bureaucratic system that governmentalizes bodies and minds as well as peoples’ emotions and dreams, i.e. that subjects individuals to a coercive regime of knowledge and discipline, these trainings give us access to an alternative, perhaps more subtle, but not less efficient practice of neoliberal governmentality that posits the unemployed self as agent of his or her own disciplining and regulation and capitalizes on an individual’s wish to be free, both socially and economically. In spite of these differences, what these modes of societal control have in common is a practice of rationalization of, and reasoning about, the self and society. Indeed,

both modes of governmentality are informed and mediated by a body of knowledge that both theorizes the self and, at the same time, serves its surveillance and disciplining. This knowledge then acts as a mediating principle for how instructors get to construct and understand unemployed young people, as well for how these young people understand and regulate themselves.

Along with what we have already argued in this section, in what follows we will demonstrate that the presented mode of societal control does not always, or not only, target people's minds and rationality, but also operates through techniques that affect people through their souls, aspirations and dreams, i.e. forms of affect that create the condition for people's acceptance of the disciplining of their subjectivity. In particular, we produce an account of the circumstances under which *hope* becomes a key resource for making sure that, in spite of the difficulties they encounter on the job market, these individuals keep believing that a better life is possible.

### **Fostering hope**

At the end of the program, after ten weeks of training activities in Community Links locations, the American investment bank that sponsored this employability program had invited the training participants for a round of mock interviews at their headquarters in London's financial center. On the morning of the interviews, when we arrived at the underground station where Natasha had asked us to meet, a small group had already been waiting. They were nervously rehearsing the answers that they had prepared as if before an important exam. Indeed, in the training sessions preceding the mock interviews Natasha provided each participant with some questions that, according to her, could be asked by the interviewer. What are your strengths? What is your biggest achievement? List some of your skills and qualities. Where do you see yourself in five years' time? Tell me a time when you

dealt with a difficult person, how did you handle the situation? What does ‘equality and diversity’ mean to you? Describe yourself in one word.

The questions were a way for participants to learn to do what Natasha called ‘selling yourself’, i.e. to enact a type of persona considered to be particularly desirable by potential employers. Scholars (e.g. Gershon, 2017) have recently argued that that this marketing rhetoric used by job counselors, coaches and human resource managers is emblematic for a type of capitalism that interpellates individuals as brands, i.e. as sets of signs pointing to specific feelings and desires, that need to be managed and monitored in order to attain, maintain and, if possible, improve value on specific markets. According to this logic, Natasha asks her interlocutors to learn to think about and see themselves as valuable labor power that, in order to become tradable, needs to be packaged in specific ways (Del Percio, 2017; Lorente, 2017). In this specific case, the young participants are asked to see themselves through the lens of a set of questions that point to a type of worker that is considered to be particularly desirable. As we have seen in the previous section, this worker is a highly reflexive one, one that understand him or herself through principles of quality and self-development, one that is self-conscious and can rationalize his/her strengths and weaknesses, one that can manage emotions and challenges and one that has life projects and is able to project him or herself into a future. At the same time, for Natasha, this set of questions is, again, a powerful discursive resource enabling participants to anticipate the type of conversation they will be exposed to, to know the register they are expected to enact and to make sure that they meet the communicative demands of this specific speech event. So, if these questions do exert control over the type of person participants are expected to be and point to modern ideologies of personhood sustaining gender, class and racial differences (Heller and McElhinny, 2017), these questions are also seen as way to provide young people with the necessary communicative resources to do well during the interview and to

emancipate themselves from their position of subalternity occupied in London's society (also see Roberts, 2013 for a similar line of reasoning).

All participants had been asked to select a real job offer for which they wanted to be interviewed. Some participants had chosen to apply for the type of position occupied by their parents: plumbers, bricklayers, mechanics, carpenters. Others 'applied' for apprenticeships available in the neighborhood in which they were living in either security services or in retail. Others still just took the first advert they had found on one of the many online job boards. Natasha then sent the job offers and candidates' CVs to Jannette, a marketing officer who was responsible for the management of the program at the bank. Jannette in turn allocated every candidate to a volunteer from the bank who had agreed to conduct the interview.

Of course, this interview at the investment bank was just an exercise, a simulation of an actual job opportunity. At the same time, the lines between fantasy and reality were intentionally kept blurred. Participants were real job seekers, being interviewed for real positions, in real offices, by professionals in suits asking real questions. Candidates were also requested to dress formally as if it were a real job interview. Many of them had to borrow clothes from friends or parents. Others asked the social services to provide funds so that they could buy a shirt or a jacket, still others found some trousers in a local charity shop. Becoming a real job candidate was not just about learning to speak and behave in a way that their instructor considered to be professional; they also had to *look* like professionals. The fantasy was also kept alive because, just once, the simulation had turned into a reality; a candidate in a previous cohort had succeeded to convince the interviewer about her qualities and managed to secure a real position in administration. This could happen again, Natasha, kept repeating. If you work hard, you will succeed. This was another leitmotif running through the entire training program. Along with larger discourses on employability and professional integration produced by policy makers, employers and educators (see e.g. Yeung

and Flubacher, 2016), Natasha's discourse was underpinned by an idea that professional inclusion and socioeconomic independence is a choice, which depends on participants' willingness to work on themselves and adapt their behavior to the expectation of their employers.

Aamiina, one of the young women attending the training, had started to believe in this promise. She had chosen to apply for an apprenticeship as an accountant. Her parents came to London from Somalia and had always dreamt of a better life for their daughter; this is perhaps why she was the only one who really believed in social mobility. Aamiina had not dared to talk openly about her hopes, but told Vivian in confidence that given her good grades at school and since, as she said, a bank needs accountants, this could be her chance. Along with what she had learned during the training program, she had prepared the interview in detail: she carefully read the advert, analyzed the job offer, selected the relevant information, studied the companies' website as well as its mission and values, identified the qualities and skills expected of an accountant, adapted her CV to the expectations of the job offer and tried to anticipate the questions that the interviewer might ask.

We arrived at the headquarters of the investment bank around 9:30, one and half-hours after we had left the station in the outskirts of London. The building of the investment bank was one of the fancy new buildings hosting the city's international banking industry. After having received a visitor's badge, a security officer accompanied us to the second floor where we were asked to take seats in luxurious leather armchairs. While waiting for Jannette, we were able to observe the division of work within this particular work place. Security officers and porters were all black men. The cleaners were women and spoke Spanish. Receptionists and secretaries were white women in short skirts, most of them in their late twenties or early thirties. Some of them seemed a bit older and based on the exchanges we could overhear from our seats, we assumed that they probably occupied positions of authority

within the secretarial team. For the rest, there were a lot of white men in suits, and some Asians with British accents. The bank and its organization of work seemed to us to perfectly mirror the hierarchies and differences structuring London's society. While observing these professionals from our leather seats we wondered what the training participants waiting for Jannette would think about the hierarchies and differences in this workspace.

“Can we touch this?” Fadouma, one of the participants, asked Alfonso as she pointed to an art catalogue placed on one of the side tables. The sculptures, pictures and art installations in the corridors made everyone feel more uncomfortable than we had expected. “Shh, don't speak so loudly”, cautioned Mary. Amir had made a comment on another participant's blazer; it was too large. It was by observing this group of young people that Alfonso was prompted to think about Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). This entire employability program was an attempt to promote these young people's socialization into a professional habitus that, once internalized, is imagined to give these people access to employment. The work they were asked to do on their selves, the clothes they had to buy, the scripting of their answers, all this was done in order to enable them to be recognized by potential employers as good, morally integral middle-class people (see McRobbies, 2005 for similar observations in other contexts). However, as Bourdieu (1991; also see Park, 2017) explains, their sense of insecurity and corresponding high level of self-surveillance and censorship, were an indication of the fact that the habitus is not just about the way one speaks, nor about peoples' tastes and behaviors, but also about the sense of ones' place in society. You could see from these young peoples' behavior that this was not a place where they felt they belonged.

Jannette greeted us and explained that the interviews would begin. The ritual was the same for all participants: One after the other, the candidates were received by an employee of the bank (all white, smiling and good-looking) and, after a formal introduction, participants

were escorted into the offices where the interviews took place. Aamiina was called last. She had been waiting in her armchair and nervously read the job offer again and again; she had printed it out for the occasion. The first candidates had already come back from their interviews. “Yes, he was amazing, so self-confident, he is perfect for this position”, concluded one interviewer before leaving. Another: “She was so well-prepared, really no negatives, I would have taken her.” Yet another: “He really knows what he wants. So determined. Wow! Of course he would get the job.”

Aamiina was interviewed by one of the senior managers of the bank. We were told that he had worked as a journalist before for an American broadcaster and that after some studies in financial law he had started a career in this investment bank. Aamiina wore an elegant, dark suit with a blouse. She had borrowed her clothes from her cousin who worked for a fashion retailer on Oxford Street in London. Twenty-three minutes later we saw her come out of the interview office with the senior manager. We tried to guess from her look whether or not he had made her an offer. “Welcome to the firm” he smiled, while referencing a famous film of the 1990s. The fantasy again. No real offer. Aamiina was quiet. “Yes, it went well”, her look revealed that she had expected more.

For a moment we had all believed that the fantasy could become true. What we had forgotten, or just suppressed in a moment of over enthusiasm, is that being able to capitalize on a professional habitus acquired, for example, through a training program such as the one we had documented, is not dependent on how good someone is at enacting that specific habitus, but rather on the interlocutors’ ability and willingness to exchange a successful performance with some form of reward, material or symbolic (Bourdieu, 1977). What was very clear was that for the bank officers the interviews were an exercise, there was no job waiting for any of these young people, despite the high expectation within the group of participants. For the bank this event was a means to demonstrate to stakeholders and partners

that it is committed to social change in London and that it collaborates with local charities on projects and activities that are meant to empower the local impoverished population.

Therefore, Aamiina's performance could not be rewarded in any form, even though we were sure that she had done a great job at communicating her professional qualities.

Now, what became clear for us when discussing our observations at the bank with Natasha and other managers at Community Links was that, even if the dream of getting employed by a bank in central London remained a fantasy for all participants, this event at the bank was important in order to continue fostering feelings of hope within the group of participants. As we mentioned previously (also see for this Dardot and Laval, 2013 as well as Martín-Rojo, in this volume), hope and desire (for success and self-improvement) are at the core of every project of self-discipline, and create the condition for the perpetuation of the belief in the principles of quality, self-management and constant self-development that individuals are asked to orient to as key in achieving self-fulfillment, freedom and happiness.

Indeed, the objective of these mock interviews, Natasha clarified, had never been to offer anybody a job, even if some of them had believed that this could happen. Her insistence on the opportunity that this event could represent for the participants was for her a way to motivate them, to make them clear that even for someone living in East London, working in one of the glamorous banks in the city center could become a possibility. Losing hope for a better future, Natasha explained, would mean Community Links losing these individuals and risking that their lack of guidance would lead them to search for help on the streets and in the informal job market. What needs to be added to this is that losing these participants would also mean losing funding from the investment bank who had linked their financial support (and thus the jobs at the charity that were made possible through this funding) to a predetermined number of participants attending the trainings. In other words, while this mock interview was a means for training participants to expose themselves to a realistic interview



situation and to receive useful feedback on their CVs, these interviews were also anchored in a larger attempt to control their minds and lives through the management of their affect (McElhinny, 2010), i.e. through an institutional practice exerting power through the disciplining of individuals' feelings and by making sure that individuals keep believing in the emancipating potential of employability programs and in the neoliberal project of equality and inclusion that these programs stand for.

### **Complex governmentalities**

The intention of this chapter was to produce an ethnographic account of the ways in which poverty and unemployment are managed in London, UK. We have taken the concept of neoliberal governmentality as a starting point to make sense of the multiple activities and processes through which different types of actors exert control over a group of young people who are categorized as socially and emotionally vulnerable and as representing a risk factor for themselves, as well as for society at large. We have, in particular, analyzed the ways in which these young individuals are encouraged to engage in a set of disciplining practices that ask them to bring their minds and souls into alignment with principles of quality and self-development and that require them to buy into the promise that social and economic mobility is solely dependent on their willingness to engage in a constant process of self-improvement and self-control.

We have argued that the techniques mobilized by coaches in employability trainings are powerful because they are anchored in a whole set of authoritative assumptions about the self, society and the (labor) market that naturalize the type of disciplining work that individuals are asked to do on their selves and that, at the same time, erase the structures of power and inequality that these processes of self-disciplining and self-regulation contribute to sustaining. We have also suggested that these trainings are persuasive because not only do

they interpellate individuals as rational subjects, but they also invest in hope and in individuals' capacity to be affected and dream about a better future. Indeed, we have explained that individuals' hope, aspirations and desires for socioeconomic independence and professional inclusion is strategically used to create consent for the disciplining of peoples' subjectivities and the request of a life-long self-development and self-improvement process with which these young people are confronted. Finally, we have noted that this mode of doing governmentality is powerful since it bears the traces of older, but not less persuasive, discourses of progress, inclusion, equality, emancipation and change that for many decades have framed the material support provided by local charities such as Community Links to the local population and that are now being used to convince young people that social and economic inclusion can be fostered through reflexivity, self-management and resilience.

There are clear continuities between the disciplining practices documented in this employability program and the trainings and classes for transnational workers that have developed on the base of the sociolinguistic work done in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s by scholars such as e.g. John Gumperz (1982; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991; Gumperz, Jupp & Roberts, 1979), Celia Roberts (1975; 2011, 2013; Roberts & Campbell, 2007) and Srikant Saranghi (Saranghi & Roberts, 1999). These scholars showed that, in order to facilitate migrants' access to resources such as social benefits and jobs, individuals needed to be socialized into specific registers that enable them to meet the institutionalized communicative scripts of gatekeeping organizations. Along with what happened in the counseling and interview situations documented in the groundbreaking work of these researchers, the young people we were able to follow were asked to present and understand themselves through institutionally scripted modes of speech. They were asked to conform to the cultural, professional and institutional expectations of their interlocutors and use a highly marked language that allows them to be recognized as professional personae.

What was different, however, was the training program's obsession with people's conduct and with their relationship with their own selves. What our ethnography showed is that being a good job candidate is no longer (or not only) about being able to speak like a professional. What these individuals are required to do is to comply with a neoliberal ethic that turns their selves into an enterprise that needs to be constantly managed and governed according to principles of quality and competitiveness. Language then represents only *one* aspect of a multifaceted and complex total persona that needs to be monitored and subjected to a practice of constant development and improvement for the benefit of both the individual and for society at large.

Now, while scholars in language and neoliberalism have stressed the inevitability and all-encompassing nature of neoliberalism, in this paper we have tried to demonstrate that, as every other activity, neoliberal governmentality is never totalizing, but is rather invested, resisted, challenged (with more or less success) by different people with different positions and with different interests. In this respect, we have pointed to the fact that the British State invests in a neoliberal rationality to manage poverty and unemployment, but this is a historically contingent process that is subject to change and transformation. We have presented the story of Natasha who, on the one hand, draws on neoliberal models and theories as guiding principles for her work, but who, at the same time, is not fully convinced of the effectiveness of these models and thus does not fully commit to these principles as binding life ethics. Finally, we have pointed to young people's (unequal) capacity to enact specific neoliberal subjectivities in order to navigate benefit systems and to the moralized demands of employers, social services officers and coaches. We have shown how, at the same time, some of these young individuals are able to question this neoliberal rationality since it does not hold its promise of empowerment, freedom and emancipation. Indeed, one year after the end

of the program, none of the participants were able to capitalize on the skills acquired during this training and secure formal employment.

The next step for us now is to get a better sense of how individuals such as Ursula, one of the young women presented in this study, are able to navigate these complex systems of control and inclusion/exclusion (see Vigouroux, 2013 for similar questions in the South African context), to challenge the histories of subalternization that position them at the margins of London's society, and to start imagining alternative futures for themselves and their families. This will require an alternative type of ethnographic inquiry, one that shifts its attention to the ways individuals invest in process of self-organization, solidarity and resistance (Greber, 2004; Narotzky and Besnier, 2014) as well as an analysis of the discourses, relations of power and terrain of subjectivities in which subordinated actors are enmeshed, make sense of their lives and enact processes of resistance and subversion (Urta and Helepololei, 2014).

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