



## Between disconcertment and joy: using emotions to navigate academia as PhD researchers

Leah Molyneux, A. Moore & L. Maclachlan

To cite this article: Leah Molyneux, A. Moore & L. Maclachlan (05 Jun 2026): Between disconcertment and joy: using emotions to navigate academia as PhD researchers, Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, DOI: [10.1080/01596306.2026.2683433](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2026.2683433)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2026.2683433>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Jun 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 59



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Between disconcertment and joy: using emotions to navigate academia as PhD researchers

Leah Molyneux <sup>a</sup>, A. Moore <sup>b</sup> and L. Maclachlan <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of Humanities and Social Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK; <sup>c</sup>University of Bristol Law School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

### ABSTRACT

Higher Education in the UK is facing sector-wide cuts, redundancies and uncertainty. It is a fearful landscape to enter as PhD researchers. As we contend with the instability of a sector which we hoped to make our career home, we reflect on the challenges and emotions that arose during our doctoral training. This timely article draws upon the PhD experience of three women working within Sociology in the UK, utilising 'gut feelings' to explore the conditions and processes that constitute the neoliberal academy. Specifically, we focus on the emotions of disconcertment and joy to examine our 'emotional voices' as PhD researchers (Askins & Blazek, 2017, p. 1093). On the surface, these emotions seem to reflect an affective binary of our experiences. We—the three authors of this article—argue that through embracing and being attuned to disconcertment, we were free to engage in joy as active resistance within the neoliberal academy. In writing this article about our collective affective experiences we hope to encourage other PhD researchers and members of Higher Education to take emotions seriously as a resource for navigating and understanding neoliberal life.

### KEYWORDS

PhD research; neoliberalism; emotions; academia

### Introduction

As budding academics observing the machinery of higher education, we quickly learned that our integration into this world requires not only the mastery of a discipline, but also a careful, often frustrating navigation of its inherent complexities, precarity, and politics. This article draws upon the PhD experience of three women working within Sociology in the UK. We began our PhDs in late 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a digital induction into our course. The typical vibrant immersion of first year was replaced by a remote, fragmented connection to our cohort and supervisors. Chatting regularly over Zoom, we quickly became close confidants, learning to navigate the challenges of academia together. Entering academia at this time, we faced the marketisation of higher education that creates feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, strike action that immersed us in the political throws of university life and the exacerbated solitude of the pandemic that forced everything online. We were experiencing the 'academic jungle', a place where 'neoliberal values and processes permeate academic life' (Res-Sisters, 2017, p. 268).

The article represents an attentiveness to the emotions that arose during our PhD process and how they illuminate the everyday experiences of the neoliberal academy. Academic discussion around affect and emotion often attempts to distinguish between these concepts (Wetherell, 2013). However, for the purposes of this article, affect and emotion will be used interchangeably as, in life, they 'stick' together; they are part of the same whole (Ahmed, 2014). If we attempt to separate affect and emotion in this work, we risk tying ourselves in knots around the theoretical distinctions and definitions of these concepts and 'losing our capacity for description' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 210). Instead, we embrace the messy intertwining of affect and emotion and emphasise how they exist in relation to each other rather than focusing on their intellectual division. Thus, we seek to understand how we experienced emotions and affects as a collective condition. As Anderson (2016, p. 735) argues, 'collective affects are part of the sites, networks, and flows of neoliberalism', therefore, to understand neoliberalism, we must 'learn to understand neoliberalism's affective spaces'.

**CONTACT** Leah Molyneux  Leah.molyneux2@liverpool.ac.uk

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Neoliberalism as a term, captures how the free market has become the mechanism by which we 'evaluate and assess everything' (James, 2015, p. 9). The prioritisation of these values has meant that whatever fails to achieve success through the market is deemed to be a waste of resources and attention. What follows is not a totalising account of neoliberalism and its affects. We recognise that neoliberalism is not singular and can be full of contradictions and tensions (Anderson, 2016). Rather, our aim is to articulate and synthesise our PhD experiences which were shrouded in emotion and pressed upon by neoliberalism.

The affective background in which we entered the academy included fears and fragilities around the University and College Union (UCU) strike action that took place in 2021, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic. The UCU strike action (2019-2023) that affected us personally, known as the 'Four Fights' was a response to pay, equality, casualisation and workloads (UCU, 2020). Consequently, our 'angle of arrival' (Ahmed, 2010) into the academy was not neutral, and these fears and fragilities were quickly felt. Affective feelings and judgements are based on the 'angle' of arrival. This in turn, 'affects what happens and how things move along' (Ahmed, 2008, p. 126). Therefore, we came to understand and be reflexive of the precarious academic positions that we and others held, and the inequalities, risks that are part of academic labour (Res-Sisters, 2017). However, being part of a heavily unionised department gave us the language to understand our position. Importantly, we came to appreciate the significance of solidarity and community in the face of uncertainty. Therefore, it was important for us to begin to unpack these multiple, conflicting emotions and the complex affective atmosphere.

### ***Engaging with emotions***

Emotions help us to establish and understand our politics about and around the academy (Askins & Blazek, 2017). While the value in understanding academic life through emotions has previously been highlighted (Askins & Swanson, 2019; Barclay, 2021; Bloch, 2012), emotions are often still seen as peripheral or contested within the academy. Building on the work of Askins and Blazek (2017), this paper interrogates how particular emotional experiences we had over the course of our PhD are inherently political and how the emotions surrounding these events helped us to understand and contest the politics of academia. These experiences are both situated in the wider neoliberal dynamics of academia and provide deeper and richer insights into the realities of navigating this as PhD researchers.

Zembylas (2024, p. 172) argues for more nuanced discussions around the intersections of emotion and affect with neoliberalism, cautioning us to avoid the 'monolithic notion of "neoliberal subjects" in academia'. Scholarship about the impact of neoliberalism on the emotional worlds of academics tends to focus on the affective scripts or forms of governance which we must adhere to (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Gilbert, 2013; Valero, Jørgensen, & Brunila, 2019). For Zembylas, this focus has led to a series of interconnected issues being subsumed into a framing that hides the nuances and complexities of these experiences. Instead Zembylas (2024, pp. 176-177) suggests that we pay attention to 'how any of a range of affective and embodied practices are produced through techniques embedded in both macro- and micro-level neoliberal processes' and 'how specific affects and emotions contribute to conditions and processes that constitute actually existing neoliberalisms'. Through centring our emotions and how they intersect within the neoliberal academy here, we propose gut feelings as an alternative approach for navigating and understanding the connection between the PhD process, emotions and neoliberal academia.

There are many important reflective accounts of the role emotions play in academia more broadly, and the challenging nature of precarious academia has received increased coverage in mainstream media outlets (Askins & Blazek, 2017; Bondi, 2013; Fitzpatrick & Longley, 2014; Humble, 2012). It is still, however, relatively rare for the 'emotional voices' of those in precarious positions to be heard within academia (Askins & Blazek, 2017, p. 1093). The emotional toll of increasing workloads, expectations around successes and fears of failure which fall on PhD candidates are well discussed in the corners of universities and in our shared workspaces, yet it is often absent from more formalised forms of academic discourse such as peer reviewed research (Askins & Blazek, 2017, p. 1100). While there is an increasing body of literature focusing on challenges for early career researchers, much of it does not focus on emotions and the PhD experience explicitly. Most PhD researchers may leave before acquiring the label of 'early career researcher'. In fact, many PhD students feel 'mpa#lsquo;poorlyequipped' to encounter the challenges of the programme (Hunter & Devine, 2016, p. 35); the combination of emotional exhaustion, feelings of exclusion and a perceived lack of departmental

support can lead to unfinished study. Globally, 30–50 per cent of PhD candidates do not complete their course (Firth, 2022). The expectations of absolute tenacity or determination to stick it out can also take an emotional toll. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a space for our ‘emotional voices’ (Askins & Blazek, 2017, p. 1093) and to explore how these voices connect with our precarious position as PhD researchers.

In this paper, we focus on the emotions of disconcertment and joy; paying particular attention to how these emotions are acutely entwined with our PhD experiences and what these emotions tell us about the neoliberal academy. We begin by mapping the approach we used to capture our emotions. Thus building on the work of Zembylas (2024) and Ahmed (2014) we implement ‘gut feelings’ as a tool to unearth emotions that tell us more about the conditions and processes that constitute neoliberalisms. Specifically, we explore how disconcertment arose in response to our precarious position within the university; liminal space is crucial here. Afterwards, we turn to our experiences of joy within the academy. We suggest that this joy is not purely a feel-good emotion, but also plays a role in neoliberalisation, by enabling and emboldening resistance in these conditions. This article is the first to be attentive to the active role that emotions play in constituting the neoliberal academy for PhD researchers. We argue that emotions offer a richer understanding of how the academy operates under neoliberal conditions.

### *The value of gut feelings*

This paper aims to create a more textured understanding of the role of neoliberalism in the PhD experience. We explore this through centring our emotional experiences as a lens through which to unpack and understand how the particular emotions identified were implicated in academic neoliberal processes. For feminists, affect generates questions about how the world works (Åhäll, 2018). For example, Ahmed (2017, p. 22) has used emotion and affect to discuss the corporeal experience of becoming a feminist; it ‘begins with an intensity’, and is something you ‘register’ in your body. Within this paper we follow Ahmed (2014, 2017) and Verran (1999, 2001, 2023) in considering what our emotions do and tell us about academic spaces and neoliberal policies. Specifically, we focus on our ‘gut feelings’ around these processes. Emotions are not hegemonic or all encompassing. We often feel multiple, sometimes conflicting emotions at any one time. Gut feelings should be taken seriously as sources of information in the research process (Ahmed, 2014; Hansal & Gunderson, 2020). Building on previous work from the first author (Molyneux, 2024), we suggest that gut feelings provide crucial points of information. Gut feelings give us access to central tenets of our experiences and facilitate an unpacking of ‘why this response in this context’ (de Coning, 2023, p. 5). Within this paper, we engage with disconcertment and joy, two specific gut feelings which were collectively experienced and expressed during the process of doing our PhDs. To elucidate these emotions, our discussion is centred around two key events: firstly, disconcertment via the contestation of PGR office space and secondly, joy through the creation of a PhD collective space.

We captured our gut feelings of disconcertment and joy through ongoing reflective discussions and sense-making processes. We began with a writing exercise in which we retrospectively recorded our thoughts and feelings around these events. We also went back through our WhatsApp exchanges which captured our emotions around the events at the time. We were continuously returning to two key events: the contestation of office space and the creation of an interdisciplinary PhD collective group. Feminist new materialist, Karen Barad (2007, p. 89) proposes that ‘knowing is a material practice of engagement as a part of the world in its differential becoming’. The office space and the PhD collective represented two key interventions which had material impacts within our PhD cohort; the former, reconfiguring the physical space within which we work, and the latter, facilitating a space for us to meet with other PhD students to share our experiences, ideas and worries. However, thinking with Barad, we do not simply assert that the materiality of these events shaped our PhD experience, but also vice versa. We shape and are shaped by the wider neoliberal academy.

Being attentive to our gut feelings here represents a willingness to contend with the uncomfortable, messy and conflicting emotions that we usually shove down or erase, in order to evoke an objective or stoic academic persona. We are trained to overlook the gut in favour of the mind (Boem, Greslehner, Konsman, & Chiu, 2023). Our reflexive discussions allowed us to re-connect with our initial feelings around these events without judgement. In this sense, returning to these interventions allowed care-full reimagining of our experiences and the emotions tied to these experiences that were hard to articulate.

By working to articulate our gut feelings, we were able to generate new ideas about our PhD experience in the neoliberal academy. Thus, these exercises allowed us to connect the personal and the political, to generate theories from the everyday, in the feminist tradition (Res-Sisters, 2017). Through our discussions we started to ask, why did these specific emotions appear collectively in these moments? These conversations represented a visceral need to dig deeper. As authors of this article, we decided to follow these two interventions as they presented a material, collective juxtaposition between the disconcertment of feeling pushed out, and the joy of creating a space to belong within the academy.

In recent years, office space has garnered significant attention, as researchers engage with the politics and materiality of work spaces (Migliore, Rossi-Lamastra, & Tagliaro, 2025; Promsaka Na Sakonnakron & Burford, 2020). In the context of our department, the PGR office space was a point of continuous contention, involving debates with office administrators about how the space should be used, what defines a frequent user, and how to fairly allocate desk space. During our studies, the PGR office was relocated to a much smaller office, as part of a university-wide project on space saving. As a result, most of our cohort could not have their own desk. Our discussion of doctoral office space is particularly timely, in the context of rapidly rising numbers of students undertaking PhD study (Sarrico, 2022). Thus, in line with the works of Verran (2001, p. 36), we 'privilege the disconcertment', taking seriously the uncomfortable, difficult to articulate feelings of being pushed out of this space.

Following this, we explore joy through the creation of an interdisciplinary PhD student works in progress collective. Whilst we (the three authors) had built our own small support network with each other and with others in Sociology, we knew from broader conversations that our feelings of disconcertment were not limited to our department. As a result, we worked together to build a group of PhD students from various disciplines across the university, including Politics, Geography, Sociology, Music and Management Studies. We named the group, the Social Justice Works in Progress, united by the drive for social change. The group would meet bi-weekly, offering space to present ideas, talk through chapter structures and express general concerns and woes of the PhD, providing peer feedback and support, strengthening the PhD community.

These emotions were understood and experienced as being part of the neoliberal university and seen as a way to provide a deeper understanding of these processes. This is not to say that neoliberalism was the only or perhaps even the root cause of these emotions. Rather what we are suggesting here, is that the broader context of the discourse around the COVID-19 pandemic and Higher Education in the UK at this time (particularly the UCU strike action known as the 'Four Fights') gave our emotional experience a particular resonance in this affective backdrop. These wider neoliberal conditions, framing and terminology, influenced our emotions in a particular way, and in a way that cannot be neatly separated from these experiences, and our emotions around it.

To summarise, our gut feelings are a direct response to the affective atmospheres we worked in. In this paper, we use these gut feelings as a tool by which to deepen our understanding of our positionality in the academy. While affect can be felt individually (a bodily capacity), in this article we understand affect and emotion as a collective condition (Anderson, 2014). Therefore, in writing this article together we found solace in the 'mosaic of voices' (Behar, 2003, p. XV) that draw on similar tensions, fears and fragilities (See Res-Sisters, 2017). We also hope that this article offers refuge to PhD researchers with similar experiences.

### **Disconcertment**

As aforementioned, we began our PhDs at the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Any ideas or expectations we had about a PhD community were quickly dispelled, as we began the initial stages of our PhD from our own isolated homes. As local and national lockdowns began to ease, we enquired about the possibility of working on campus and were offered a desk in the sterile and spacious ground floor office of our school's new building. Over time, more of our PhD cohort appeared in the shared office space and along with the rest of the world, we started to emerge ourselves in the 'new normal'.

Our new office space was vast. Long lines of desks lined the wall on the right-hand side, and large dividers, stacked between desks, meant that you could sometimes walk into the office and not realise anyone else was there. It often seemed that you were only greeted by a barrage of computer screens. As we learned to navigate this office layout and to physically take up space within the university, we also slowly started to build a postgraduate research community. This newfound sense of community and belonging within the academy

was particularly poignant and important due to the historic absence of community in our PhD experience to that point.

One day, an unfamiliar member of staff came into our office and, without explanation, began measuring up the walls with a tape measure. They started placing paper on the walls with words such as 'WHITEBOARD' written on. When we asked what this was for, we were met with blank stares. Through whispers and corridor conversations, we realised that we were being displaced and that our workspace would be turned into offices for professional services staff due to new university regulations around the number of days that professional service staff could work from home. Finding out this way, as staff sized up our space for their next project, we felt disregarded as an afterthought, not deserving of transparent communication or respect. Here we identify our gut feeling around this incident as one of 'disconcertment' (Verran, 1999, 2001; Verran, Estallega, & Sánchez Criado, 2023). Verran et al. (2023, p. 44) state, 'to feel disconcerted is to feel put-out, to experience a feeling of not being quite up with, and certainly not on top of, what is happening around you and in some sense to you'. This notion is typically intended to be used within the context of ethnographic fieldwork, however, we felt this emotion served as an effective entry point to attend to the tensions around being moved from our office.

Disconcertment captures how being disregarded in this way made us feel. We had started to build our community here. To learn that we wouldn't have as much space in the new office we were to be allocated felt like a complete setback. It was not so much about the physical move of space. Of course, we understand that the purpose and utility of spaces may shift and change as the university does. Instead, it was the unempathetic management tactics through which this change was communicated to us. For example, the university had, as we were led to understand, been monitoring our use of the space without our knowledge. To be fair, this monitoring was noted at the end of a long email several months prior, but the terms and conditions of how or by whom we were being monitored were unclear. We were not provided with clear information in order to provide any sort of informed consent. The new office space was smaller, meaning that not everyone who previously had a permanent desk in our office would be granted one in this new office space. The University first said that they would assign the desks based on their monitoring of our usage. It is worth noting here that we still have no information on the methods by which we were monitored and have not been privy to any results of the monitoring. We were therefore left to wonder who would be lucky enough to make it onto their 'permanent desk' list. This inevitably meant that some students would be privileged over others, creating an imbalance among PhD students. Due to our angle of arrival into the academy, this was experienced as a material manifestation of being disregarded by the University.

We started the process of writing a collective letter to express our disapproval, not only with the movement into an office with drastically reduced desk space, but also the manner in which this situation was approached. We felt sidelined; we were a nuisance to be boxed off elsewhere. Expressing our collective disconcertment in a letter helped to further cultivate our PhD collegiality, we were in a stronger position to challenge the decision to move us out of the space where we had finally begun to establish ourselves within the academy. Ultimately, their decision was final. We were asked to move out before the Christmas break, to return to our new smaller office in the new year. The offering from our management was that 10 desks would be for permanent users of the office space, while 4 desks in the centre would be used as hot desks for those who were considered temporary users, further solidifying our precarious position. Use of the hot desk space was to be booked with the management team at least 24 h in advance, which created an extra layer of planning, subsequently defeating the notion of a hot desk. We decided through group discussions who would be assigned a permanent desk, with the collective agreement that if anyone without a permanent desk could ask in the group chat on the day, if any permanent or hot desk spaces were available. This helped to bypass the unnecessary rigmarole and kept the organisation of the space in our hands. Through organising together around this move, our collegiate bond grew, and those who were afforded permanent desks felt a duty to make frequent use of the space we had. Reflecting on this time, now post PhD, we are able to see how this downsizing reflected something much bigger than just office space politics. It is well established in the literature that part of how the academy operates is through exclusion processes, ensuring that some academics are made to feel like outsiders (Res-Sisters, 2017). Through focusing on our feeling of disconcertment, we identify how central this emotion is to the experience of neoliberalism, particularly for PhD researchers who are in a precarious and liminal space. Our collective reaction illuminated the deeper tensions and disconcertment associated with being a PhD scholar. While we embodied this in a more

literal form through the moving of office space, it is arguably a position in which many PhD researchers find themselves. We experienced disconcertment in our financially precarious positions. Our streams of income came with time-limited terms and the unreliable alternative sources of income, such as additional teaching. We occupied a liminal position between staff and students in our department, which can also be understood as being out of place. Our students labelled us as staff, and the staff labelled us as students. We were left to float in between, not quite sure where to locate or orientate ourselves. Our liminal positionality here informed our experience of being physically displaced from our office. Disconcertment, as our gut feeling around this incident and as a lens of analysis, demonstrates how our emotional experience interacts with other aspects of neoliberalism, such as our financial precarity, to create a uniquely heightened experience of being in limbo.

Ironically, the new, smaller office allowed us to become closer as a collective, as we worked together responding to emails from management and made a point to come in to use the space as often as we could. We were conscious of the fact that this space was no longer a space for all, as those without a permanent desk were required to float in and out. But we enjoyed the new feeling of navigating this process together; '... this disconcertment, source of both clear delight and confused misery, must be privileged and nurtured, valued and expanded upon' (Verran, 2001, p. 5).

Sharing and exploring our emotions in this way, we were able to build our little community of PhD researchers, as we started to discuss the idea of developing a work in progress (WiP) session. Privileging our disconcertment, shining a light on the loneliness, our out of placeness, our worries, our tensions, is to 'attend to [an] ontology of ourselves as present knowers of present knowns' (Verran et al., 2023, p. 44). We wanted to create a space for everyone, dedicated to collective sharing of our emotions, where we could discuss our concerns and fears, as well as celebrate our successes and sound out new ideas and theories we were working on. Not only acknowledging, but embracing this tension, adopting it as our guide to navigate the problems central to the PhD process, we were able to use disconcertment as a worldmaking practice in creating the PhD Social Justice Work in Progress.

### **Joy**

We had previously been invited to attend our departmental Work in Progress meetings. These are sessions where colleagues are invited to present papers which they are currently working on for informal feedback from the department. Although PhD researchers have the option to present in these meetings, staff presentations are prioritised. Due to this prioritisation, it felt necessary to create a space which was controlled and organised by us as PhD researchers and in which our work, ideas, and concerns were centred. To address this, we set up an Interdisciplinary Social Justice Group for PhD researchers and to foster connectivity, solidarity and mutual understanding. Building this group primarily occurred through bi-weekly WiP meetings where PhD students could present their work for informal support and feedback. Colleagues came from several academic departments such as Politics, Geography, Sociology, Music and Management Studies; brought together through our motivation to engage with social justice issues. This physical coming together allowed us to talk about both our research and other elements of life in the academy such as pedagogy, experiences with supervisors and working practices within different departments. The space we created collectively, provided alternative ways of knowing, being and feeling in the neoliberal academy. Some sessions focused on speaking with intention about our experiences, such as getting teaching opportunities within different departments or rates of pay. Other sessions focused more on care, asking attendees to reflect on what they were struggling with at that moment. In this way, we embodied and created a sense of joy around these sessions.

Sociology, as a discipline, has a tendency to focus on negative experiences. Cieslik (2015, p. 425) notes that some sociological research treats happiness with scepticism and suspicion. This is perhaps not surprising when sociology is often conceptualised as the study of social inequalities. Yet these experiences form only part of our emotional lives. In their work on transgender joy, Shuster and Westbrook (2024) urge scholars to pay attention to joyful aspects of our social world. Emotions surrounding life as 'neoliberal subjects' are not wholly negative or wholly rejected. Instead, our personal experience of this environment has been a complex web of overwhelm, disconnect, contentment, despair excitement, and sometimes even joy. This is not to suggest that neoliberalism is a positive thing or that people can purely feel their way out of these

realities through performing according to the standards of affective neoliberalism. Instead, we attend to the ways our experiences were multidimensional. Similar to the emphasis on hope as a vital tool in sustaining collective organising (Ahmed, 2017; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017), here, we suggest that joy was a central emotion to our responding to and resisting neoliberalisation within the academy.

Joy can be an energising tool that enables us to imagine and create alternative experiences (Westbrook & Shuster, 2023). It was joyful to share intellectual ideas, centre creativity, and provide care for each other. Through creating this space, we found a different experience of the academy but one which was nevertheless a response to neoliberal pressures. The academy as a physical space was reemerging after the COVID-19 lockdowns, and these sessions took place in and around the series of national strike actions, which we detail above. There is also a more recent sector-wide crisis of redundancies and cuts emboldened by neoliberal management tactics. This context meant that productivity and research outputs were prioritised by the sector over knowledge sharing and caring, which we felt were more important at this time.

We recognise that these forms of reflecting, caring and nurturing take place in many PhD offices across the UK and want to draw attention to the feelings of relief, hope, solidarity and ultimately, joy that is often created in these conversations. Through our WiP group, we created an imagined space that was ours. The structure of the group also meant that this form of care and connection was formalised and prioritised within our academic lives. It was not subject to the terms and conditions of the university, and it could not be taken away from us if we did not use it according to the university's terms. In this sense, we experienced joy as a form of resistance against the neoliberal conditions of constant strike action and shifting office spaces in which we found ourselves. The pockets of joy in this WiP offered respite between the jarring 'shock' waves of neoliberalism (Klein, 2008), which are often felt through a 'constant shaking of workers confidence' (Fraser, Murphy, & Kelly, 2013, p. 48). Our WiP provided a space to build confidence and connection. Unlike the quick shifts described above around our contested office space, joy was experienced in a quiet, subtle, yet constant form during these sessions. Although this experience of joy co-occurred with many negative experiences and emotions, analytically we felt that this 'gut feeling' of joy was important to attend to. If we disregard joy from our experiences of scholarship, we will not understand how to foster it (Shuster & Westbrook, 2024). We needed this 'gut feeling' of joy in order to sustain our engagement with the academy.

As we recognised earlier in this paper, emotions are not experienced in isolation and in a similar way, this process was not entirely removed from or performed 'against' the neoliberal academy. We were all granted scholarships to pursue our PhD research and experienced a form of financial freedom, and therefore the time and freedom to pursue and construct a form of joy, that many of those who undertake PhDs do not experience. Through creating this space, we also added to our workloads and responsibilities and necessarily embodied elements of what academia expected from us (Ablett, Griffiths, & Mahoney, 2019). Our roles in creating and establishing this group formed a line on each of our CVs as we searched for jobs. In this way, we could see our experience of joy as a response to expectations, following the expectation to 'feel the right way' in this regime (Ayata, Churcher, Slaby, Calkins, & Böttger, 2023, p. 333). Yet while we acknowledge this reality, we wish to resist this line of inquiry due to the historic neglect and suspicion of positive emotions within the discipline of sociology (Shuster & Westbrook, 2024). The joy we experienced in these spaces, not only allowed us to move forward with the PhD process, but also brought us moments of genuine enjoyment. Whilst helpful and adaptive in a neoliberal academy, these feelings of joy were also pleasurable in their own right. We must resist the temptation to view our 'gut feelings'—such as joy—which are interwoven with neoliberalism in wholly cynical ways. Similar to how hope sustains collective action, joy sustains continued engagement with the neoliberal university. Joy allows us to continue to work in these conditions, and ultimately facilitates us creating modes of teaching and/or writing that challenge and critique the neoliberal practices under which we must operate. We can see the temptation to view our experiences with neoliberalism in purely negative terms, as yet another tool by which we may be worn down. Joy can be experienced as a form of resistance in this context. Through highlighting this phenomenon, we aim to showcase the processes of neoliberalism in more complex and less binary terms.

## Conclusion

Neoliberalism is inherently about individualised responsibility. Through collectively understanding and processing our gut feelings around our PhD office space and our Social Justice WiP, we put forward a challenge

to this logic of rampant individualism. Emotions are not just the effects or impacts of neoliberal working conditions. There is an ambiguity to affective atmospheres that allows us to reflect on 'how something like an affective quality ... can condition life by giving sites, episodes and encounters a particular feel' (Anderson, 2014, p. 137). Emotions are an important resource for understanding our collective reality. To engage with these collective experiences as purely the impact or the result of neoliberal policy is to miss part of the pervasiveness and opaqueness of neoliberalism that makes it so all encompassing. The neoliberal academy is an emotional academy, which cannot be neatly separated out through cause and effect mechanisms. Specifically, the emphasis on the collective gut feelings is a method through which to decentre and problematise neoliberal insistence on individual lives. Through this paper, we utilised our gut feelings (Molyneux, 2024) to be reflexive of our PhD experience. Focusing on our gut feelings allowed us to understand broader conditions of PhD life in a way that we could not appreciate without a sustained focus on these emotions. Through focusing on emotions, we see that neoliberal processes such as moving offices not only impact our individual emotional experience but also shape our collective emotional realities. This shapes the kinds of conversations we have, and the projects we pursue. Our collective embodied experiences as a site of analysis enabled us to see both with and beyond the emotional impact of these conditions.

The gut feelings of disconcertment and joy reflect how as PhD researchers, we become embroiled in university politics without perhaps fully understanding or appreciating their complexity. There have been profound shifts in higher education and increasing demands placed on those who work in these spaces. Positive emotions, such as joy, which we continue to experience under these working conditions, offer a sense of relief and escapism. Finally, we understand that the PhD process requires emotional labour and can be intellectually lonely. Therefore, we encourage other PhD students to actively engage in their doctoral communities as resistance against the neoliberal individualisation.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend their deep gratitude to the PhD community at the University of Liverpool, and all PhD students who took part in the Social Justice Work in Progress. We would also like to thank Dr. Mike Rowe for offering feedback on early drafts of this article. Finally, to the Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology department staff and students who offered continued support and advice throughout our time as PhD researchers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council; Graduate Teaching Fellowship.

## ORCID

Leah Molyneux  <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-7641-1249>

A. Moore  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9884-0427>

L. Maclachlan  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-4365-4927>

## References

- Ablett, E., Griffiths, H., & Mahoney, K. (2019). (Dis)assembling the neoliberal academic subject: When PhD students construct feminist spaces. In M. Breeze, Y. Taylor, & C. Costa (Eds.), *Time and Space in the Neoliberal University: Futures and fractures in higher education* (pp. 65–91). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-15246-8\_4
- Åhäll, L. (2018). Affect as methodology: Feminism and the politics of emotion1. *International Political Sociology*, 12(1), 36–52. doi:10.1093/ips/olx024
- Ahmed, S. (2008). Multiculturalism and the promise of happiness. *New Formations*, 63, 121–137.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35(3), 571–594. doi:10.1086/648513

- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion (NED - new edition, 2 ed.)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. doi:10.4324/9780203700372
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life (1st ed.)*. North Carolina: Duke University Press. doi:10.1215/9780822373377
- Anderson, B. (2014). *Encountering affect: Capacities, apparatuses, conditions (1st ed.)*. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315579443
- Anderson, B. (2016). Neoliberal affects. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(6), 734–753. doi:10.1177/0309132515613167
- Askins, K., & Blazek, M. (2017). Feeling our way: academia, emotions and a politics of care. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18(8), 1086–1105. doi:10.1080/14649365.2016.1240224
- Askins, K., & Swanson, K. (2019). Holding onto emotions: A call to action in academia. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 33, 100617. doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100617
- Ayata, B., Churcher, M., Slaby, J., Calkins, S., & Böttger, J. (2023). *Affective citizenship: Differential regimes of belonging in plural societies (1st ed., Vol. 1)* (pp. 47–58). London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003303770-4
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. North Carolina: Duke University Press. doi:10.1515/9780822388128
- Barclay, K. (2021). *Academic emotions: feeling the institution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108990707
- Behar, R. (2003). FOREWORD. In D. P. Freedman, & O. Frey (Eds.), *Autobiographical writing across the disciplines* (pp. xiii–xviii). North Carolina: Duke University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctv125jkhj.4
- Bloch, C. (2012). *Passion and paranoia: Emotions and the culture of emotion in academia (1st ed.)*. Oxon: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315599618
- Boem, F., Greslehner, G. P., Konsman, J. P., & Chiu, L. (2023). Minding the gut: extending embodied cognition and perception to the gut complex. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 17, 1172783. doi:10.3389/fnins.2023.1172783
- Bondi, L. (2013). Research and therapy: Generating meaning and feeling gaps. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19(1), 9–19. doi:10.1177/1077800412462978
- Cieslik, M. (2015). Not smiling but frowning': Sociology and the 'problem of happiness. *Sociology*, 49(3), 422–437. doi:10.1177/0038038514543297
- Davies, B., & Bansel, P. (2010). Governmentality and academic work: shaping the hearts and minds of academic workers. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 26(3), 5–20. doi:10.63997/jct.v26i3.250
- de Coning, A. (2023). Seven theses on critical empathy: a methodological framework for 'unsavory' populations. *Qualitative Research*, 23(2), 217–233. doi:10.1177/14687941211019563
- Firth, K. (2022). Thinking about quitting your PhD? Maybe that's the right decision. Times Higher Education. Accessed 11 March. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/thinking-about-quitting-your-phd-maybe-thats-right-decision>.
- Fitzpatrick, K., & Longley, A. (2014). Embodiment and affect in research collaborations. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 12, 49–54. doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2013.08.002
- Fraser, A., Murphy, E., & Kelly, S. (2013). Deepening neoliberalism via austerity and 'reform': The case of Ireland. *Human Geography*, 6(2), 38–53. doi:10.1177/194277861300600204
- Gilbert, J. (2013). What kind of thing is 'neoliberalism'? *New formations*, 80(80), 7–22. doi:10.3898/nEWF.80/81.Introduction.2013
- Hansal, S., & Gunderson, M. (2020). Toward a fannish methodology: Affect as an asset. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 33, doi:10.3983/twc.2020.1747
- Humble, D. (2012). "This isn't getting easier": Valuing emotion in development research. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 5(2), 78–85. doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2011.04.001
- Hunter, K. H., & Devine, K. (2016). Doctoral students' emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 11, 35–61. doi:10.28945/3396
- James, R. (2015). *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. Hampshire: Zero Books.
- Klein, N. (2008). *The shock doctrines: the rise of disaster capitalism / Naomi Klein*. London: Penguin Books.
- Kleres, J., & Wettergren, Å. (2017). Fear, hope, anger, and guilt in climate activism. *Social Movement Studies*, 16(5), 507–519. doi:10.1080/14742837.2017.1344546
- Migliore, A., Rossi-Lamastra, C., & Tagliaro, C. (2025). Home vs office: Does workspace design influence where academics conduct their research? *Research Policy*, 54(7), 105269. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2025.105269
- Molyneux, L. (2024). Masking the inner-killjoy: A critical feminist perspective on police research.
- Promsaka Na Sakonnakron, S., & Burford, J. (2020). Doctoral students' readings of the politics of university office space. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 55(1), 165–180. doi:10.1007/s40841-019-00149-w
- Res-Sisters, T. (2017). 'I'm an early career feminist academic: Get me out of here?' Encountering and resisting the neoliberal academy. In A. Pressland & R. Thwaites (Eds.), *Being an early career feminist academic* (pp. 267–284). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-54325-7\_14
- Sarrico, C. S. (2022). The expansion of doctoral education and the changing nature and purpose of the doctorate. *Higher Education*, 84(6), 1299–1315. doi:10.1007/s10734-022-00946-1
- Shuster, S. M., & Westbrook, L. (2024). Reducing the joy deficit in sociology: A study of transgender joy. *Social Problems*, 71(3), 791–809. doi:10.1093/socpro/spac034

- UCU. (2020). Our Four Fights. Accessed 11 March. [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10715/Our-four-fights/pdf/ucu\\_four-fights-explainer.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10715/Our-four-fights/pdf/ucu_four-fights-explainer.pdf).
- Valero, P., Jørgensen, K. M., & Brunila, K. (2019). Affective subjectivation in the precarious neoliberal academia. In D. Bottrell, & C. Manathunga (Eds.), *Resisting neoliberalism in higher education volume I: Seeing through the cracks* (pp. 135–154). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-95942-9\_7
- Verran, H. (1999). Staying True to the laughter in Nigerian classrooms. *The Sociological Review*, 47(1\_suppl), 136–155. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1999.tb03486.x
- Verran, H. (2001). *Science and an African logic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Verran, H., Estalella, A., & Sánchez Criado, T. (2023). *How to use disconcertment as ethnographic field-device (1st ed., Vol. 1)* (pp. 43–51). London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003253709-5
- Westbrook, L., & Shuster, S. M. (2023). Transgender joy: Flipping the script of marginality. *Contexts*, 22(4), 16–21. doi:10.1177/15365042231210824
- Wetherell, M. (2013). Affect and discourse – What’s the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice. *Subjectivity*, 6(4), 349–368. doi:10.1057/sub.2013.13
- Zembylas, M. (2024). “Neoliberal subjects” and “Neoliberal affects” in academia: Methodological, theoretical and political implications. *Policy Futures in Education*, 22(2), 172–186. doi:10.1177/14782103221135618