

‘Targets and Overwork: Neoliberalism and the Maximisation of Profitability from the Workplace’.

Abstract

Drawing on 25 qualitative interviews, this paper attends to and critiques neoliberalism to demonstrate how management’s enforcement of targets and the expectancy to overwork in various workplaces corrodes the relationship between managers and employees. First, the paper briefly charts how the shift from post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism to neoliberalism in the global north placed renewed emphasis on **maximising** profitability, and what this meant for working methods and innovations that managers now use to make an organisation more efficient. This is often regarded as ‘management practices’. It then connects management practices to the political economy and therefore sheds further empirical light on how management practices under neoliberalism impact adversely on workers, generating psychological distress, instability, pressure and a negative working environment. The paper closes with a discussion of how managers potentially perform an ideological function, directing workers’ attention away from neoliberalism and cementing capitalist realism; the negative ideological belief that there is no alternative to the current political economy.

Keywords: Targets; overwork; neoliberalism; managers; political economy

Introduction

This paper uses original qualitative data from workers in the North East of England with various job roles including postal delivery, supermarket cashiers and teaching assistants, to explore employees’ experience of management practices under neoliberalism. Throughout the

neoliberal era, market principles have seeped further into social life (Jessop 2018), particularly public and private sector organisations, increasing the emphasis on maximising profitability (Streeck 2016; Whitehead & Crawshaw 2014; Whitehead 2018). In this way, managers are compelled to extract more profit from workplaces by imposing unrealistic targets and pressure to overwork. When we refer to ‘overwork’, we are talking about longer working hours (Murray, 2020), ‘or the effort that employees put into their jobs while they are employed’ (Burchell 2002: 78) often for no additional pay. **Therefore**, this article documents how management’s imposition of targets and expectancy to overwork engender psychological distress, worry, and increased pressure amongst employees (Lloyd 2018 2020). As we shall see, it also has a tendency to mask heightened exploitation which negatively impacts on workers’ wellbeing.

Although employee control has been a managerial concern throughout capitalism (Beynon 1973; Braverman 1974; Fleming & Sturdy 2011; Moore & Joyce 2020; Mulholland & Stewart, 2013; Thompson & Brock 2010), the emphasis on performance management and maximising profitability has recently intensified and this negatively impacts on the working environment (Lloyd 2020; Moore 2018; Whitehead 2015; Williams & Beck, 2018). Indeed, ‘overworking’, that is, where workers are working longer hours for no additional pay, has also increased in recent years (Aronson & Keister 2019; McBride & Lucio 2020) and is considered to be an international issue (Shafer et al. 2018). For example, in their research on women working for Walmart, Mayer & Noisueux (2015: 15) indicate that they add to debates on how ‘neoliberal market globalization in the global north normalises overwork from which the employer profits while often pushing employees to the edge of exhaustion’. Therefore, this paper adds to a range of scholarly literature that links overwork to neoliberalism (for example: Fagan 2004; Fisher 2009; Lloyd 2018 2020; Mayer & Noiseux 2015; Moore & Joyce 2020 Mulholland & Stewart 2013).

This article is organised as follows. First, in order to understand the primacy to maximising profitability amongst firms in the current labour market, we briefly explore the shift from post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism to embedded neoliberalism with a focus on literature from the global north (Fine & Saad-Filho 2017; Jessop, 2019; Streeck, 2016). Next, the paper outlines the literature on management practices such as targets and pressure to overwork. These debates provide the platform for our empirical findings. It then highlights the research project that underpins this paper. **Thereafter**, the findings section is divided into (a) targets, (b) overwork and (c) managers' ideological function. This final section explores managers' potential ideological performance from employees' perspective under neoliberalism, that is, to act as a 'neoliberal tool' (Hanlon 2018: 300) and direct dissatisfaction away from neoliberal capitalism to solidify what Fisher (2009 2018) refers to as *capitalist realism*. This is the negative ideological belief that there are no alternatives to the present political economy; all that remains is to individualistically and cynically adapt to current working conditions because of the sense of political impotence generated by neoliberalism. We also respond to Lloyd's (2020) call for researchers to connect management practices to neoliberalism. This article **thus** attends to and critiques neoliberal political economy by **shedding** further empirical light on management practices under neoliberalism and their potential cementation of capitalist realism. First, the paper turns to the shift to neoliberalism and its renewed emphasis on augmenting profitability.

Neoliberalism

Post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism in the global north was engendered by the 1929 Great Depression, the First and Second World Wars and a rise in support for alternative ideologies to laissez faire capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century, including totalitarianism and communism (Harvey 2005; Hobsbawm 1994; Judt 2010; Marquand 1988).

Subsequently, many states in the global north such as in England played an active role in mitigating the market's tendency to generate inequalities through welfare provision, full employment and widespread nationalisation of public utilities (Hobsbawm 1994; Judt 2010; Marquand 1988). Although decaying housing, poverty and slum-like conditions existed in some of England's most deprived communities (see Coates & Silburn, 1973), employment opportunities for industrial workers, in particular, often contained sizable gains in incomes and economic security (Telford & Lloyd 2020; Winlow & Hall 2013). As capital's attempts to erode industrial employees' working conditions - such as wages - were often halted by collective resistance and demands for better pay, economic inequality dwindled for the first time in history (Streeck, 2016; Winlow & Hall 2013). This period resuscitated capitalism; however, it was unable to address its structural issues in the 1970s (Fine & Saad-Filho 2017; Jessop, 2019). The evolution of neoliberalism in the late twentieth century enabled capital to further enhance its power and control over workers (Jessop 2019).

As post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism collapsed due to various structural crises such as a global oil crisis, Harvey (2005 2011) suggests neoliberalism emerged in the global north as a counterrevolution to restore power, wealth and control to the upper classes. Neoliberal ideology therefore encourages marketisation, the commodification of public services, competitive individualism, repression of workers' wages and freedom for capital to maximise surplus value (Harvey 2005, 2011; Jessop 2019; Slobodian 2018). Withering market impediments to profit maximisation including trade unions, capital controls and full employment have been core elements of the restoration. This was clear in England with former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who enacted the 'big bang' deregulation of the financial industry, weakened trade unions through emerging victorious from the 1984-1985 miners' strike and privatised various state assets including British Gas and British Airways

(Viven 2011; Whitehead 2015). As we will reveal, the abandonment of full employment and dwindling trade union power awarded managers more power and control over their workforces (Mulholland & Stewart 2013).

While the notion that deregulated free markets characterise neoliberalism is prevalent in the literature, there is a discrepancy between neoliberal ideology and reality (Lloyd 2020; Mercille & Murphy 2019). Mitchell & Fazi (2017) cast the free market as a neoliberal myth; ideologically masking the state's role in creating conditions for capital accumulation and their **close ties to the world's richest members of society**. Likewise, Mercille & Murphy (2019) claim neoliberalism utilises both market mechanisms and non-market instruments - such as state actors - to facilitate corporate wealth, power and profit maximisation. Others argue that it is inadequate to view neoliberalism in dualistic terms - state vs market - rather, governments play an active role in both facilitating profit production and intervening to protect capital and therefore ensuring neoliberalism's hegemony (Fine & Saad-Filho 2017; Jessop 2019).

Displaying both resilience and an ability to absorb crises, **governments** have used **neoliberalism's** internal contradictions to facilitate its expansion (Jessop, 2019; Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Winlow & Hall 2013). This was evident post 2008 financial crisis with the onset of austerity (Telford & Wistow 2020), **which further intensified stagnating wages**, privatization and economic inequality (Streeck 2016). As we demonstrate in this paper, this also led to amplified exploitation in workplaces (Bloodworth 2019; Lloyd 2018 2020; Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Moore 2018; Southwood 2011). While living standards have declined, the wealth of the rich increased to a level unseen since the Victorian age (Dorling, 2014). By consolidating competition, individualism and profitability, market forces further permeated organisations and labour markets (Whitehead & Crawshaw 2014). According to Lloyd (2020), Southwood (2011)

and Whitehead (2018), this constitutive context has impacted on management practices, thus restructuring the working environment and consequently damaging worker's wellbeing.

Emphasising 'opportunity', 'meritocracy', 'hard work' and 'individual success' (Jessop, 2018), neoliberalism's ideological mantras assert that workers now possess more freedom to climb the social structure (Streeck, 2016; Winlow & Hall 2013). However, many employees, **such** as those in this research study, **are subject to** management practices such as targets and heightened pressure to overwork, **thus** enhancing capital's control over workers (Brannan 2015; Lloyd 2020). Such restructuring is clear in numerous **workplaces**, including **within** the National Health Service (Davies et al 2015), criminal justice agencies (Deering & Feilzer 2015), higher education (Fisher 2009) and the service economy (Lloyd 2018; Moore & Joyce 2020). As our findings reveal, these changes are prevalent in numerous job roles and often generate psychological distress, uncertainty and instability for employees. We now turn to current debates on neoliberal labour market trends in the global north, specifically contemporary management practices, performance indicators such as targets as well as overwork. This provides the bedrock for our empirical findings outlined thereafter.

Management practices, targets and overwork

While much employment under post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism was standardised, with many employees working full time 9-5, the advent of the neoliberal era radically changed this (Fagan 2004; Piasna 2015). Increased competition for jobs, the abandonment of full employment and increased targets, among other structural changes, has awarded managers additional space to further exploit the workforce, often compelling **employees** to overwork (Fagan 2004; Lloyd 2018; Piasna 2015). Indeed, Burchell et al. (2002) noted that up to 60% of respondents in their survey research on working conditions under neoliberalism reported

overworking. Whilst Shafer et al. (2018) regard overworking as a global phenomenon, Murray (2020) notes that Greece is the only country in Europe where workers work longer hours than employees in Britain. For Murray (2020: 12), such overworking is generating ‘stress, burnout and exhaustion’ amongst workers and this is delineated in the empirical studies outlined below.

Holt & Hvid (2014) utilise observations and 33 interviews with workers at two outlets in the food industry. They found that the performance of employees was closely monitored by managers to ensure the companies augmented profit; failure to satisfy performance indicators resulted in the potential for workers to be fired in the near future (also see Bloodworth 2019; Southwood 2011). Simultaneously, however, employees reported increased productivity even if it intensified stress levels and eroded breaktime with co-workers. Similarly, Moore & Joyce (2020) document how performance devices were worn by workers at Tesco warehouses. Like Newsome et al (2013), they suggest this gave employees an expected timeframe to stock the shelves and thus increased their productivity, since workers were given higher ‘points’ for beating the clock.

Relatedly, Lloyd (2018), Mayer & Noisieux (2015) and Piasna (2015) note that many employees work longer hours under neoliberalism in comparison to the post-war Keynesian welfare state epoch. Like Carter et al. (2014), Moore & Joyce (2020) and Mulholland & Stewart (2013), Lloyd (2018) suggests that employees who work long and unsociable hours often experience psychological discomfort including stress. Likewise, Bloodworth (2019) and Williams (2018) note that targets are prevalent at the lower end of the labour market. The former temporarily worked at Amazon and claimed performance indicators sped up the production process, negatively impacted on workers’ wellbeing, and provided data for

managers to discipline the workforce. In fact, Bloodworth reports that many Amazon workers are fearful of taking a toilet break because it could impact on their ability to meet targets.

Carter et al. (2014) conducted empirical work at six HMRC processing centres that were subjected to a 'lean' restructuring. They ascertained that front line managers believed they had lost their autonomy whilst their pressure levels had increased. As was also discerned in Southwood's (2011) and Williams's (2008) research, management's use of targets proliferated which served to corrode the relationship between managers and workers, since it increased hostilities and friction. Conversely, Shafer et al. (2018) stress that the number of hours people work has increased under neoliberalism, particularly amongst men in professional roles. As Fisher (2009), Murray (2020) and Winlow & Hall (2013) also outline, Shafer et al. (2018) suggest overworking often erodes time to spend with partners, thereby diminishing relationship quality and increasing stress levels.

In a similar vein, work on employment conditions in the public and private sector ascertained that targets heightened productivity which generated pressure and stress (Carter et al. 2013; Laaser 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, worker autonomy similarly eroded whilst the relationship between managers and employees deteriorated (Carter et al. 2013; Laaser 2016). **Relatedly**, Lloyd (2020) and Williams & Beck (2018) contend that a managerial focus on performance management has recently intensified. They claim performance management is about surveying employees and increasing their workload, which acts 'as a mechanism for removing underperformers' (Williams & Beck 2018: 34) and generates friction amongst workers.

Nonetheless, Moore (2018) conducted empirical work on tracking devices, suggesting they individualise and atomise workers. Although Williams (2008) claims they offer capital more workplace control, Moore (2018) notes that many workers resist these conditions and voice their concerns. However, tracking employees occasionally served to generate a workplace atmosphere of ‘anxiety, burnout and overwork’ (p.56). On the other hand, Stilova & Trichkova (2020) employ data from the European Social Survey and draw upon logistic regression modelling to examine work-life balance. They ascertained that balancing private life and employment hinges upon educational attainment, ethnic minority status and the welfare regime **under which one works**. However, Mulholland & Stewart (2013) interviewed workers, shop stewards and managers at a grocery warehouse where unionisation was absent. Electronic tagging meant workers were ‘never free from the gaze of management’ (Mulholland & Stewart, 2013: 544) which generated stress and pressure. While many employees worked long hours, some also believed that managers treated workers in a punitive and condescending manner.

Utilising panel data from the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal study, Wheatley (2017) suggests managers possess power in workplace organisations as they allocate employee hours; subjectively decide what constitutes job quality; and reward employees for good workforce performance. However, Fisher (2009), Hanlon (2018), Lloyd (2017) and Whitehead (2015) assert that managers possess power only because workers do not recognise that they are in fact powerless. In their view, neoliberalism’s emphasis on boosting profitability potentially filters down the social structure and reconfigures managers’ behaviours. In effect, they are cogs in neoliberalism’s internal machinery who often lack autonomy (Mulholland & Stewart, 2013). **Therefore**, and as our paper argues, managers do not occupy a position of real power since their practices are potentially shaped by broader forces – neoliberalism and the augmentation of profit.

As mentioned, the relations between managers and employees have been a central antagonism within the literature throughout capitalism (Beynon 1973; Braverman 1974; Moore & Joyce 2020). However, for Whitehead & Crawshaw (2014) and Whitehead (2018), neoliberalism's renewed emphasis on maximising profitability has reconfigured many organisations around market logic of competition, individualism and profit at all costs. According to Hanlon (2018), Lloyd (2020) and Southwood (2011), this impacts on management ethos and working conditions. Our paper therefore builds upon the aforementioned literature on management practices, targets, overwork and the technological monitoring of employees under neoliberalism by shedding further empirical light on how this damages workers' wellbeing. In this way, it demonstrates how management practices may *potentially* now serve to cement capitalist realism (Fisher 2009 2018); the negative ideological belief that there are no alternatives to the current political economy. Indeed, the next section outlines the research project's methodology that forms the paper's core before documenting the empirical findings.

Methodology

Empirical data presented in this article is from a broader qualitative research project that examined social class and its interactions with both the contemporary labour market and political dissatisfaction in the North East of England. Throughout the twentieth century industrial work characterised the North East's economy (Lloyd 2018 Telford & Lloyd 2020). Indeed, it was not uncommon for some employees to spend their working lives at one industrial employer, despite the fact that work was readily available in the local area (Shildrick et al 2012; Warren, 2018). However, since the 1980s the economy has shifted from production to services. Employment opportunities are thus often characterised by poor working conditions such as non-unionisation and inadequate pay (Shildrick et al 2012; Warren, 2018). Relatedly, a joblessness to insecure employment cycle is also common in many areas. As we will see,

managers utilise this **particular** background condition to aid worker compliance and control, thus potentially entrenching capitalist realism.

Indeed, the project investigated the participants' employment histories and current working practices. Research questions included a) what is the nature of local employment conditions; b) in what ways do workers voice their concerns about these conditions; and c) how do managers intensify or alleviate today's employment conditions. Interviews were conducted with 13 females and 12 males (N=25) and were 40-90 minutes in duration. Fourteen respondents were recruited through utilising five gatekeepers. The rest of the participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Although the scope of all research projects is constrained by time, data saturation is an important tool for determining sample size (Bowen 2008) and the lead researcher regularly heard similar stories about employment conditions in the interviews. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, cafes and pubs. The interviews were semi-structured, enabling the lead researcher to probe pre-conceived ideas but remain open to **explore** emergent findings. The local town centre and deprived neighbourhoods were regularly identified by participants as comprising an aspect of the locale's economic decline. Ethnographic descriptions were therefore carried out and this substantiated the interview data by placing sentiments within a wider societal context (Briggs & Monge Gamero 2017; Raymen 2018).

Data collection for the project was conducted between 2018-2019. 15 participants were aged between 40-60; four were aged 18-20 and one was aged 35. Five respondents had retired, three within the last 12 months at the time of the interviews. Their last job roles included a secretary, council worker and postal delivery, among others. The variegated age range was **enabled** by snowball sampling and it allowed for reflections on employment conditions from both older

aged and younger aged respondents. Participants currently working occupied various occupations including bartending, stock replenishment in supermarkets and retail, primary school teaching assistants, postal delivery, and various self-employed individuals. Evidently, these diverse occupational roles cut across labour market sectors and therefore utilising data from a variety of occupations enables a wider analysis of labour market trends, specifically management practices, targets and overwork. Although traditional class demarcations have blurred (Bourdieu 1979; Savage 2015; Standing 2011), the participants share a core structuring reality which is the need to sell their labour and subjection to capitalist exploitation. Consequently, they are identified as the working class.

Conducting qualitative research which bordered on ethnographic is a fluid process and the researcher often encountered obstacles. Occasionally, the research project's 'snowball failed to roll' (Geddes et al. 2018: 352). Several participants cancelled interviews; did not show up; and research contacts would often suggest that they did not know any other potential interviewees. Consequently, it was time consuming and often generated frustration. Following Braun & Clarke (2006), the project used thematic data analysis. Recurring codes were highlighted with a coloured pen and pasted into a separate Microsoft Word document. Although a messy and long-winded process, the core codes and themes were identified. Transcripts were also read several times to ensure robustness.

This project contains a core limitation. As the sample is largely confined to the participants' contact group, snowball sampling lacks generalizability (Telford & Lloyd 2020). Nonetheless, Telford & Lloyd (2020) stress that qualitative research does not seek universal applicability but analytical generalizability. In this respect, empirical findings can be corroborated or problematised by other research under similar conditions. The towns in the North East of

England, workplaces and participants have been pseudonymized to protect their identity. The next sections shed empirical light on management practices under neoliberalism, including targets and pressure to overwork. It closes with a discussion of how managers *potentially* serve to consolidate capitalist realism, that is, the belief that there are no alternatives to neoliberalism and therefore targets and overwork.

Targets

In recent years, neoliberal ideology has further **congealed in society** and this has **intensified the corrosion of** working conditions (Bloodworth 2019; Fisher 2009; Moore 2018; Whitehead 2015). Although our participants occupied diverse job roles, increased pressure, stress and expectations attached to targets was commonplace. Such demands were often perceived by employees as unreasonable because they paid little regard to their workload or wellbeing. Occasionally, meeting targets was outside the control of employees, as Isabel, 40, a retail worker, demonstrated: “When I worked there [jewellery store] it was dead, we didn’t hit any targets or owt like that. Nobody was coming in”. Ben, 52, a postal delivery worker, offers views on targets, pressure and managers:

“There is a lot more targets and pressure from managers. We are always short of staff, but they won’t take anybody on. It is bad. About ten of us are retiring soon, all that experience. If they don’t take any young people on, how will they get the knowledge? They need to employ people in High Town; jobs here are not many. I’ve got two lads – one is at college and one who is 12. I worry about what they are going to do, how are they going to get a job?”.

Fisher (2009) and Lloyd (2018) suggest that heightened competition under neoliberalism possibly compels managers to enforce unscrupulous practices to sustain the company's marketplace position and outcompete others. Indeed, witness how Ben notices the impact of company downsizing or restructuring – another tactic often enacted by managers which is prominent under neoliberalism (Carter et al. 2014). As many workers are compelled to be efficient and do more with less (Streeck 2016), targets amplify their psychic unease (Bloodworth 2019; Carter et al. 2014). Lloyd (2020) argues that targets seek to boost profits for employers by negating the economic and social interests of employees and we see this in Ben's narrative. Importantly, Ben observes that the focus on augmenting profitability **neglects** the employment needs of the local population and erodes future job opportunities. This worry about future employment was shared by Adam, 52, self-employed: “Say, I want to work here or there, there just doesn't seem to be the jobs that they used to be”.

In this way, Lloyd (2020) contends that companies' quest for efficiency often generates inefficiencies. Whilst Adam notes the lack of employment pathways, Ben points out that a sizable number of postal workers are retiring soon. Therefore, capital's attempts to diminish workforce expenditure under neoliberalism cultivates an inefficiency and deficiency in the future, chiefly the lack of transmission of knowledge and competencies to future employees. On one hand, the pressure to adhere to targets and failure to take on more workers postpones problems, while on the other it generates immediate and damaging effects. **This was** exemplified by Karen, a 36-year-old teacher:

“The workload is way too high, the *targets* are way too high, a bit of a nightmare. You have to have evidence, assessments, it is all based on numbers. It isn't based on if the children are happy or making progress”.

Note how the application of targets takes Karen away from her principle goal – actually teaching the children. Intensifying worker ‘productivity’ under neoliberalism through the use of performance management creates unreasonable expectations, instability and uncertainty (Newsome et al. 2013). Targets were often discussed as part of a wider auditing framework, increasing administrative tasks and eroding time to do the job. While Wheatley (2017) notes that managers decide what constitutes job quality, Fisher (2018) and Streeck (2016) suggest overworking people is not about quality but *controlling workers*. Jess, a teaching assistant, highlights how:

“A teacher is coming back from maternity leave, part time. They [managers] said oh it is good that she’s coming back part time because if she wasn’t, I’d have to see about redundancies. Extra work, and more and more paperwork. It’s not worth it [teaching], not for the salary it isn’t”.

Observe how Jess stresses that there is not enough money and resources available, a narrative mirrored in McBride & Lucio’s (2020) study. Indeed, this was echoed by 16 participants in our research, such as by Katie, 42, a part-time agency nurse: “It has changed a lot - funding, money. A lack of staff. A friend who was there for 22 years has left to do her teaching assistance training, she said I just can’t do it anymore, there is no staff”. Similarly, Marie, 45, works at a primary school and asserted that she went:

“Part time because of the workload. It isn’t necessarily what you are putting into the lessons, it is the recording of the assessments; planning; conversations you have with parents have to be recorded; the paperwork and admin. More *targets* to meet”.

Fisher (2009) suggests those working in education under neoliberalism are often tasked with a ‘battery of bureaucratic procedures’ (p.42), increasing stress levels and overwork. Indeed, this is clear in our study as the sentiments above demonstrate. Importantly, Marie also mentions how tracking through targets and therefore performance management have intensified in recent years (Moore 2018; Williams & Beck 2018). While she was able to go part-time and therefore downsize her workload, most respondents continued to endure long working hours. The next section **discusses** management’s expectancy to overwork and how it negatively impacted on employees.

Overwork

According to Harvey (2005 2011), power and control has continued to shift back to capital **throughout neoliberalism** as working conditions have **continuously worsened**. Central to this has been the speeding up of the production process; work intensification and therefore longer working hours (Burchell et al 2002; Moore 2018; Mayer & Noisieux 2015; Moore & Joyce 2020; Mulholland & Stewart 2013; Wolff 2010). Indeed, scholars have noted how overworking masks heightened exploitation (Fisher 2018; Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Streeck 2016) and in our study the expectancy to overwork also blended into an expectancy to do paid overtime. While it is occasionally **packaged** as a mechanism to obtain more money, it covers up capital’s desire to reduce labour costs by not employing more permanent staff. For example, falling real-term wages over the last forty years (Harvey 2011; Streeck 2016; Wolff 2010) means workers, particularly those that are part-time and hourly paid, are obliged to work overtime to obtain sufficient income. This was corroborated in our study, since some participants worked long hours to ‘help’ managers, even if it was not a reciprocal relationship. Matty, 54, a part-time postal worker, explains:

“You’re just a number, you’re only as good as your last overtime, seriously. I hate to say it, it’s awful, but it’s true. Just a bum on a seat. I used to do a lot of overtime until last year. I used to bail them [managers] out, the latest I stayed out delivering one time was half ten at night, nine o clock mostly.. They [managers] take the piss out of us. I like to do the job properly, but last year they put me in the van doing deliveries over Christmas for several weeks on rounds that I didn’t know, and it was getting later and later with the dark nights. The manager didn’t care, so I rang him up and said you can stick this up your arse now because I don’t know the walk, take me off this round and put me back onto my normal shift, and I haven’t done any overtime since”.

Whilst full employment was achieved in the post-war Keynesian welfare state period in some countries in the global north (Judt 2010), neoliberalism contains a reserve army of labour for employers to draw upon when required (Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Winlow & Hall 2013). Accordingly, Matty’s manager knows that he can be easily replaced if he refuses overtime. In consequence, he treats him with a lack of respect and recognition. Withering time to socialise with others (Shafer et al. 2018), working longer hours means many participants’ ability to plan ahead becomes problematic. Offering a similar narrative about overwork is Michelle, 40. She suggests her employment with special educational needs children is “highly stressful. I had four and a half years where I didn’t have a day off. It was only when I had a terrible flu, and I couldn’t get out of bed that I did”. Like all the other respondents, Matty and Michelle express dissatisfaction with working conditions and display the potential for resistance (Moore 2018; Moore & Joyce 2020; Stewart et al. 2020). Nonetheless, capital’s quest for surplus and efficiency also creates another inefficiency: the refusal to employ more permanent staff often means overtime workers possess no knowledge of delivery rounds, while residents receive their

post late in the evening. Relatedly, Archie is retired and previously worked for a mail courier.

He said:

“All of a sudden, a lot of changes came in. Some of them were alright, some of them were not. I liked to talk to people on my round, take my time and enjoy the customers. It got to a stage where *you had to be fast*; you had to get on with the job; you couldn't talk to people - that upset me. I spoke to customers for years, then all of a sudden; I can't speak to you anymore. They would come out and I couldn't talk. It all became about the money, *last ten years*, big changes. Talking to a lot of friends who are still there, there are a lot more changes to come. They say you did right to get out when you did”.

Note the recent speed up in the production process and capital's attempts to augment profit through generating an expectancy to engage in overwork; like it is something that is normalised and bound to the job. Similarly, James, 52, a former supermarket cashier, claimed that the demands of work today mean: “A lot of people are too busy”. Indeed, Fleming (2019) suggests that many employees under neoliberalism have had the boundary between their private life and work diminished, generating a *mandatory* hard work ethic. Cederstrom & Fleming (2012) stress that overworking engenders pressure, psychological distress and anxiety amongst employees (also see Aronson & Keister 2019). Such conditions lead Fisher (2018) to claim neoliberalism has produced a ‘privatization of stress’ (p.461). As individualism has intensified in workplaces, it could be argued that the focus is on the labourer to adapt, work harder and adhere to capital's demands, not the reconfiguration of working conditions **such as a decreased emphasis on** targets and overwork. Julia, 50, a primary school teacher, also exemplifies both the expectancy to overwork and workplace pressure:

“This [work] is just never ending. With my old job you were home, and your life was yours. Now, I never stop – weekends, evenings. It is so time consuming, and they [managers] expect more from you, more paperwork, more hoops to jump through”.

Echoing this is Sherley, 49, a teaching assistant:

“Their [teachers] workload is astronomical - you couldn't get me to be a teacher if you paid me a million pounds”.

Crary (2014) contends that working life under neoliberalism is non-stop, 24/7. Unstable labour market conditions tethered in the workplace to targets and overwork; but possibly generated by neoliberalism's emphasis on enlarging surplus value mean time spent away from working is time perceived to be wasted. Crary (2014) claims the only remaining obstacle to profit production is sleep, but people are sleeping less under neoliberalism. For example, Crary states that in the post-war period, people slept for an average of eight hours, but in the early 2000s it is between six and seven. According to Fisher (2009) and Lloyd (2020), as management's enforcement of targets and overwork has intensified, capital has intruded into areas of life previously untouched, and we see further empirical evidence of this in our research.

The previous two sections have demonstrated how management's imposition of targets and expectancy to overwork potentially **serve to enlarge surplus value** and engender psychological unease and anxiety amongst employees. Secondly, they show how the **relationship** between employees and managers within various work settings has been corroded because power has shifted back to capital (Harvey 2005 2011; Lloyd 2018; Telford & Wistow 2020; Whitehead 2018). We now close with an examination of managers' potential ideological performance

under neoliberalism, that is, **cementing** unequal workplace relations, generating workforce divisions and crystallising *capitalist realism* (Fisher 2009 2018; Hanlon 2018).

Managers' ideological function

As documented in the preceding finding's sections, the emphasis on boosting profitability corrodes the relationship between managers and employees (Beynon 1973; Braverman 1974; Fleming & Sturdy 2011; Moore & Joyce 2020; Thompson & Brock 2010). Indeed, managers were principally viewed negatively, deteriorating the workplace environment and generating divisions amongst co-workers (Hanlon 2018). Pointing to managers as a source of workers' dissatisfaction was a regular refrain in the interviews. This directed attention away from neoliberal capitalism and its drive to accumulate profit which possibly shapes organisational and management practices (Hanlon 2018; Lloyd 2020; Moore 2018; Whitehead & Crawshaw 2014; Whitehead 2015). Kev, 47, recently left his employment because of a poor relationship with his managers which negatively affected his mental health:

“Managers are jumped up little pric*s who haven't got a clue what they're talking about, but you have to be passive not aggressive like they are to you. Play them at their own game. They will try to goad a reaction out of you, I can mention a couple of managers who are masters at it, you just have to be clever at it and see what they're doing and play them at their own game. There is nothing more annoying for a manager than somebody who is cleverer than them, they hate it. But I'm not a slave to them anymore, I work for myself and what a difference. It was them which was dragging me down, giving me my mental problems”.

Demands from managers were perceived to be disconnected from the reality of working life, generating frustrations amongst employees. From Kev's perspective, managers turn the workplace into a hostile and individualised battle, and he attempted to outcompete them with enhanced intellect. Relatedly, Mark, 18, a part-time bar worker, notes how: "I have been there the longest, yet I feel like because I am the youngest, they [managers] think they can take the pi*s, do you know what I mean?" As managers are focussed **on controlling workers**, (Holt & Hvid 2014; Thompson & Brock 2010; Williams & Beck 2018), it might be argued that they conceal the cause of workers' dissatisfaction – neoliberal capitalism. This potentially naturalises targets and the expectancy to overwork while the system endures as life's core background force. Other managers, however, overtly remind workers of neoliberalism's debilitating labour market conditions. Katie says:

"My husband is on like a contract thing, it was only to start off for a couple of months. He finds it boring, awful, like a concentration camp he said. He works at 3pm till 11 at night and it is a production line - he gets one twenty-minute break. The managers look down at them and make snide remarks, but they know they've got them there because there are no other jobs. *Before*, you would be able to say oh fu*k you mate, I'm off, but they know *you can't do that anymore*".

Deprived of autonomy, Katie's husband's experience of work is regimented and monotonous. Although managers often only earn slightly more than some employees and their position is also rather precarious (Lloyd 2018), from Katie's viewpoint managers are patronizing and therefore consolidate a negative workplace atmosphere (Mulholland & Stewart 2013; Williams & Beck, 2018). As labour markets in England under neoliberalism are intensely competitive (Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Raymen 2018; Streeck 2016), employees often do not have the ability

to easily ascertain alternative employment. As Katie notes, managers utilise this as a yardstick to ensure worker compliance. Jess, 60, retired, offers views that were mirrored across the sample and points to how this is tethered to the current political economy:

“People cannot just get up and get another job these days, which you used to be able to do - go back 50 years it was easy. You could go to work and think you know what, I don’t like this job, I’ll go get another one. It is *absolutely unimaginable* now, you used to be treated properly at work”.

Similarly, Mia, 54, asserts:

“You could walk from one job and into another, whereas it isn’t like that now unfortunately”.

As previously mentioned, full employment was ‘the cardinal social objective’ (Judt 2010: 358) of the British state in the post-war Keynesian welfare state era. Whilst we believe that it is important to avoid what Stewart et al (2020: 1) cast as a ‘rose-tinted view’ of this period, some evidence suggests that the perceived ability to move from one job to another was idealised; but a partial reality in some sectors like manufacturing (Lloyd 2013; Telford & Lloyd 2020; Warren 2018; Winlow & Hall 2013). However, a degree of unemployment under neoliberalism is considered normal (Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Streeck 2016). As Jess and Mia highlight, alternative employment opportunities are thus circumscribed. In this way, it could be argued that neoliberalism has impacted on management’s practices (Hanlon 2018; Lloyd 2018; Moore 2018); Fisher (2009 2018) stresses that work managers are now a physical manifestation of *capitalist realism*’s negative ideology.

Essentially, this is a historically contingent belief that there are no political economic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and its **degrading** working conditions; the only realistic response is to adapt in the workplace and compete. Whereas some industrial workers once possessed an institutional bargaining tool, many employees' collective power has dissipated under neoliberalism (Mitchell & Fazi 2017; Streeck 2016; Winlow & Hall 2013). Accordingly, as Mulholland & Stewart (2013: 553) highlight, managers use 'adverse labour market conditions' to solidify unreasonable levels of productivity. For Fisher (2018), managers take advantage of this background condition to **elicit** workers' obedience and their belief that this is just how things are. It could potentially be argued that this fulfils an important ideological function under neoliberalism by eliciting worker compliance and therefore maximising profitability (Fisher 2009 2018). Indeed, Matty notes how:

"The loyalty in work has gone, you're just a number, a statistic. There's no loyalty there, there's too much pressure in work now - the pressure is phenomenal. Amy [Matty's partner] went to work here, the pressure was horrendous, it was horrendous there. Not taking ya breaks, working less for dinner, working over for nothing at the end of the day, coming home late. You shouldn't have to do that in life, bringing work home with ya, and that's the same for every person I talk to now. My manager just speaks to me like sh*t. Pressure, pressure, pressure. My mate round the corner just got a job, so much pressure from managers. *It's not always been like that*".

A sense of powerlessness and impotence generated by management's imposition of capitalist realism is palpable. Fisher (2018) notes that it generates certain attitudes **including** resignation **and fatalism**, and we see this in the narratives above. It also works by potentially naturalising workplace conditions of targets, overwork and pressure (Fisher 2009 2018). It could therefore

be argued that it engenders a certain psychological state amongst many employees, that is, ‘there is no escape’ (Fisher, 2018: 642) from the current political economy. Working under pressurising conditions (Crary 2014; Lloyd 2020), many respondents spoke about a stultifying workplace environment. Such conditions meant some participants expressed a desire to leave their employment. But as alternative opportunities are restricted (Warren 2018) they encountered a structural feeling of *inertia* and continued to endure psychic angst, pressure and an atmosphere of negativity. **While this is** often imposed in the workplace by managers, **it is** generated by neoliberalism and its drive to accumulate profit at all costs (Fisher 2018).

Whitehead (2018) argues that neoliberalism contains a ‘Praetorian Guard of fearful competition, privatisation and marketisation’ (p.33). Mitchell & Fazi (2017) and Streeck (2016) contend that forty years of neoliberalism in the global north has ensured that these market forces have seeped further into the labour market and organisations. Rewiring management’s ethos around neoliberal ideology (Hanlon 2018), techniques that maximise profit such as targets and the expectancy to overwork was commonplace. This negatively impacted upon workers, dwindling their autonomy and power. At the same time, overworking *potentially* served to control employees through psychic distress, economic insecurity and worry (Fisher 2018; Streeck 2016). Ultimately, from the employees’ perspective management’s implementation of targets and assumption to overwork corroded their relationship, impacted adversely on the workplace environment and potentially cemented capitalist realism.

Conclusion

This article **has examined** how management’s imposition of targets and expectancy to overwork under neoliberalism impacted on workers’ wellbeing in diverse job roles in the North

East of England. While post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism in the global north often **awarded industrial workers' increases in pay and unionisation** (Hobsbawm 1994; Judt 2010; Marquand 1988), shifting to neoliberalism enabled market logic to further permeate organisations (Whitehead & Crawshaw 2014; Whitehead 2015), thereby possibly rewiring management practices to the detriment of workers (Lloyd 2020). It could be argued that neoliberalism has therefore impacted on management practices, which changes the nature and experience of workplace conditions and consequently workplace cultures (Fisher 2018; Fleming & Sturdy 2011; Hanlon 2018; Lloyd 2020; Mayer & Noisieux 2015; Moore 2018) as targets, stress, pressure and overwork were commonplace.

Indeed, a core facet to observe is that as power and control has shifted back to capital under neoliberalism (Harvey 2005 2011; Wolff 2010), this paper has shed further empirical light on how the exploitation of workers and the corrosion of working conditions has intensified (Bloodworth 2019; Fisher 2009; Lloyd 2018; Mitchell & Fazi 2017). Our empirical findings therefore point to negative experiences (see Southwood 2011; Lloyd 2020) of management practices under neoliberalism (Fleming & Sturdy 2011; Moore 2018; Moore & Joyce 2020). However, like other researchers we argue that both managers and employees embody small cogs turning for their worth in the otherwise powerful machinery of neoliberal capitalism (Fisher 2009 2018; Lloyd 2018). In effect, their working lives are potentially shaped by broader forces – neoliberalism and the augmentation of profit. In this way, managers *potentially* serve to cement the negative ideology of capitalist realism, that is, neoliberalism is the only viable political economy; there are no alternatives to the ideological status quo and therefore targets and overwork. **Nevertheless, political economic changes can address these issues, deflating the palpable discontent expressed in this study's workplaces and thereby shifting them away from the 'ideological atmosphere of capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2018: 527)**

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