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Neoliberal subjectivity – difference, free choice and individualised responsibility in the life plans of young adults in Switzerland

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Abstract. This paper aims at exploring neoliberalism where it has been internalised and normalised as "neoliberal subjectivity". Based on a Foucauldian discourse perspective, it analyses narrative interviews with young Swiss adults focusing on their life plans and their aspirations for the future from a gender perspective. The analysis documents a pronounced discourse of individualisation. The subjectivity of the interviewees is characterised by ideas of difference, free choice and individualised responsibility for biographical decisions and their consequences. The article uses the example of the interviewees' narratives on reconciling work and family to illustrate how the discourse of individualised responsibility works in detail and in which respects it constitutes "neoliberal subjectivity". This Swiss study reveals how the neoliberal self-concepts of the young adults absolve the state, municipalities and employers of responsibility, transferring it to the individual. Consequently, gendered social inequalities are framed as the sole result of individual preferences and thus privatised.

1 Introduction: tying into the neoliberalism debate

Fuelled by discussions on the global economic crisis, the term neoliberalism has moved to the forefront of academic debates in human geography (e.g. Boeckler and Berndt, 2012). It has been employed to denote a wide range of phenomena involving aspects of deregulation, privatisation and withdrawal of the state from social provision. In his book "A brief history of neoliberalism", Harvey (2005:2) defines neoliberalism in a nutshell as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade."

In the more recent debate, geographers in particular have drawn attention to the fact that it does not suffice to conceptualise neoliberalism as a monolithic hegemonic project (England and Ward, 2007). It is necessary to closely analyse how it is introduced, resisted and challenged in particular contexts. Ong (2007) for instance discusses how neoliberalism articulates itself differently from one particular environment to the next. Furthermore, Peck et al. (2009) illustrate how neoliberalism as a governing logic constantly transforms and reworks itself to address and assimilate criticism, for example criticism that erupted in the course of the recent global economic crisis.

The existing literature has repeatedly pointed out that neoliberal thought is not just embedded in policies and discourses: it also transforms human beings themselves. It is incorporated into subjectivities and shapes how people understand themselves (e.g. Harvey, 2005:3; Smith et al., 2008:3). In this respect, neoliberalism operates as a governing logic that shifts responsibility for social risks or problems such as poverty, unemployment etc. onto the shoulders of individuals (Abelmann et al., 2009:243). It creates human beings who feel solely responsible for the conditions under which they live.

Langley (2006) for example analyses recent transformations of Anglo-American pension systems to show how the inherent individualisation of responsibility and risks creates an "investor subject". Bröckling (2007) discusses the formation of an "entrepreneurial self" as a consequence of neoliberal reforms of the labour market and welfare provision.

Mitchell (2003) looks at how shifts in educational policies and discourses produce "competitive subjects" who focus primarily on individual survival. A number of other studies analyse different aspects of how neoliberal restructuring of education systems (and of academia in particular) impact on academic subjectivities (see e.g. Dowling, 2008; Berg, 2012; Archer, 2008; Abelmann et al., 2009). Feminist approaches draw attention to the fact that neoliberal policies often contribute to exacerbating gendered inequalities, as they disregard care obligations and foster precarious working conditions primarily in feminised occupations (Michalitsch, 2006; Pühl, 2003).

So far, studies on neoliberal subjectification have mostly focused on the neoliberal policies, technologies or discourses that people are confronted with. They then analyse the strategies employed by individuals to adopt or contest them. This paper argues that in many of these accounts neoliberalism still appears to influence individuals from outside, pushing people to (re)act and to develop strategies to deal with the neoliberalising forces they encounter in various contexts. Only rarely is neoliberalism traced to within individuals, i.e. to processes through which it has been internalised into the self-concepts of individuals. Notable exceptions are for example Hörschelmann (2008), who finds a pronounced discourse of self-reliance in the narratives of youths from former East Germany, and Berg (2012), who discloses neoliberal aspects in our subjectivities as critical geographers. However, comparatively few studies have documented how the logic of neoliberalism has become a taken-for-granted part of human beings' understanding of themselves.

This paper aims at analysing neoliberalism to where is has been internalised and normalised as "neoliberal subjectivity" and discusses its effects on gender relations. It does not focus on policies, technologies or practices of contestation, but looks directly at how subjects understand themselves. In order to do this, it analyses the narratives of young Swiss adults about their life plans and their aspirations for the future. The analysis documents a pronounced discourse of individualisation. As will be shown, the subjectivity of the interviewees is characterised by ideas of difference, free choice and individualised responsibility for biographical decisions. The example of narratives on reconciling work and family demands will illustrate how the discourse works in detail and what consequences it has. It documents how the neoliberal subjectivity of the young adults absolves the state, municipalities and employers of responsibility, handing it down to the individual. As a consequence, this neoliberal subjectivity privatises gender relations.

2   Methodology: adopting a Foucauldian discourse perspective

The study presented here did not set out with the intention of analysing neoliberal subjectivities. It started as a project,

which aimed at exploring the life plans of young adults from a gender perspective. The study asked how they picture their employment careers, whether they anticipate having children and how they picture their future families. The main objective was to explore the ways in which young adults' life plans are gendered. Only in the course of analysing the data did it become clear that their narratives convey elements that connect to the neoliberalism debate. The exploration of these links between young adults' life plans, neoliberalism and gender constitute the focus of the present paper. It asks in which respect the young adults' subjectivities can be denoted as "neoliberal" and discusses the implications of their self-concepts for gender relations.

The empirical material analysed consists of 24 narrative interviews with an equal number of women and men aged between 24 and 26. All interviewees were childless and lived in the German-speaking part of Switzerland at the time of the interview. Within this set of predetermined criteria concerning childlessness, age and locality, the sampling aimed for the highest possible variability: interviewees were selected in such a way that the resulting sample comprised persons whose educational, occupational and family backgrounds differed as much as possible from each other. Participants were recruited by means of private networks, via gatekeepers and calls for participation on mailing lists. The interviews lasted between one and a half and three hours. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were then analysed from a Foucauldian discourse perspective. According to Foucault (1972) each society constructs their own regime of truth. How a society speaks and writes about something produces this object of study in a specific way. In other words, the key idea of the approach is to look at how meaning and knowledge are produced through language. Adopting a Foucauldian discourse perspective thus means identifying the norms and conventions that govern a specific issue in a particular place at a particular historical moment (Hall, 2001:72–73). In order to do so, this study analyses what is considered "normal" or "self-evident" when young adults talk about their lives. It asks what is being said and what is not being said in the narratives about their plans for the future (see Waitt, 2010, who discusses discourse analysis as a key tool for geographic research, and Schwiter, 2011a).

If we postulate that all meaning and knowledge should be understood as historically and geographically contingent, this must include the subject. Indeed, Foucault (1972) rejects the idea of stable, autonomous subjects. He conceptualises subjectivity as part of historically contingent regimes of truth. Consequently, he analyses subjects not primarily as authors of discourses, but as products of these (Hall, 2001:79ff). Subjectivity is understood as a specific self-concept that is discursively produced on the basis of what counts as accepted knowledge at a certain point in time. As feminist approaches point out, the subject of our time is immanently gendered. Subjectivity today involves being addressed as

and understanding ourselves as men or women (Maihofer, 1995:109ff; Ludwig, 2010: 44ff). This methodological perspective makes it possible to analyse the particular subjectivities of young Swiss adults as the products of the discourses they coproduce in their narratives.

After documenting the patterns and logics of speech, Foucault (1972) explores the consequences of the specific regime of truth they constitute. He reflects the implications of something being perceived in a certain way and discusses the effects of the discourse he detects. Here, these questions will be pursued with regard to the life plans and subjectivities of young Swiss adults and their impact on gender relations.

The following section documents the patterns found in the interviews. In accordance with the Foucauldian discourse perspective, it concentrates on the phrases and expressions that were found repeatedly in the interviews. It is necessary to point out here that this does not mean that the patterns are visible in all the interviews to the same extent. In order to build a coherent and comprehensible argument in the limited space of this article, the following presentation of results focuses on shared patterns rather than on contradictions within these. This does not imply, however, that such fractures do not exist. As Foucault (1980) argues, "there are no relations of power without resistance."

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the analysis revealed no discernible differences according to gender, urban/rural, educational or class background of the interviewees. This might partly be attributed to the fact that the empirical material consists of a limited number of qualitative interviews. That is, the study did not aim at tracing subtle variations, which might show in large quantitative surveys. While differences might exist with regard to other questions, the discourses presented below appeared consistently across interviews.

3   Results: exploring neoliberal subjectivities

This section first discusses individualised responsibility, which emerged as the key discourse from the analysis. The interviewees' narratives on reconciling work and family then serve as an example, which illustrates how the discourse of individual responsibility works in detail and in which respect it impacts on gender relations.

3.1   Difference, free choice and individualised responsibility

When young adults talk about their life plans, they strongly emphasise that they are different from others. They do not position themselves as part of a group with similar aims and interests – be it their age group, their social milieu, their peer group or any other group they might feel they belong to in some way. They perceive themselves as one of a kind with a unique set of talents, needs and aspirations. One interviewee summarises this idea concisely:

> "Every human being is different. You can never generalise about others from yourself."

This discourse of individualisation appears prominently throughout the interviews. The interviewees stress that human beings are unique. They differ in what they are good at, in what they need in order to be happy and in what they want from life. This means that the subjectivities of the young adults are built on differentiation rather than commonalities.

As a consequence of this perceived otherness, the interviewees find it impossible to follow default life paths. According to them, it is up to each person to design her or his own life plan. Everyone has to forge the path through life that suits one's own self and no one else, they argue. One person illustrates this by saying:

> "I feel inside myself what is right for me."

According to the narratives of the young adults, people are designers and managers of their own biographies. They perceive the future as a multiplicity of biographical options from which each individual chooses based on their own individual preferences. Everyone evaluates biographical options that present themselves and decides which to embrace and which to leave behind. In the narratives of the young adults life paths are therefore constituted as matters of individual choice. Or to put it in other words, the discourse of individualisation addresses people with the demand: "choose your life path". This implicit demand constitutes biographies as projects, which require clever management. In this respect, the narratives closely resemble the neoliberal policies discussed above, which address people as "competitive subjects" (Mitchell, 2003) or as "entrepreneurial selves" (Bröckling, 2007).

For example, the interviewees see themselves as free to choose their professional training, their apprenticeships or their academic subjects. They evaluate their options and plan the next steps in their employment careers. Analogously, they frame the question whether they want to enter long- or short-term relationships or stay single, whether they want to move in with their partners, with friends or live in separate households and whether they want to have children or stay childless as free choice (for a discussion of the limited "choice" in the transition to parenthood see Schwiter, 2011a). As a consequence of the perceived freedom of choice, the interviewees take full responsibility for the implications of their biographical decisions. In this respect, the mantra goes: "your choice – your success or your failure".

This can be illustrated by the example of an interviewee who lost her apprenticeship as a dentist's assistant when her employer went bankrupt. As she was unable to find another dentist practice that would take her on, she "chose" to discontinue her vocational training and take up employment to earn some money instead. In the years that followed, she worked in a number of short-term jobs as sales assistant, at assembly lines, as cleaner and as carer. While it seemed easy to

find employment at the beginning, she noticed after a while that getting jobs without formal training became increasingly difficult. In hindsight she blames herself for not trying harder to pursue her vocational training and get a formal degree. Although it was not her fault that she could not finish her apprenticeship at that time and although she cannot be blamed that her family could not afford to let her continue her education at a full-time school after the abrupt end of her apprenticeship, she frames it as her own "wrong choice". Her narrative centres on her "decision" to take up employment instead of persevering in her attempts to continue her vocational training. She blames only herself for this decision and considers it as the cause of her current difficult employment situation.

As this brief example illustrates, the young adults link the perceived freedom of choice in their biographical options to an individualised responsibility for the consequences of these "choices". They emphasise the autonomy and the responsibility of the individual, which both constitute key aspects of neoliberal governance (Lemke, 2000:32). The following chapter further explores how this discourse of individualised responsibility works in more detail. It takes the example of the anticipated division of labour in the family, which constituted an important theme in the analysis and allows for the illustration of the nexus of neoliberal subjectivity and gender relations.

3.2 Anticipating the division of labour in the family

How do the young adults talk about reconciling the demands of paid employment with child care and housework? How do they anticipate balancing employment and family work? In line with the discourse of individualised responsibility, they emphasise that each couple has to find their own solution. According to the interviewees, preset (gendered) roles which define how a family should be organised no longer exist. As people differ in their needs and preferences, it is considered to be up to them to choose the arrangement that suits their specific situation and their preferences best. When asked how they would want to organise their future families, the interviewees state, for example:

> "In the end it's a personal thing. Each and everyone has to decide for himself what is best in his situation."

> "One has to analyse the specific situation and find the optimum. There are no standard solutions."

> "It will depend on the situation and on my partner's preferences."

> "There are a lot of options. It depends on what I want and on what she wants at that point in time."

The reasoning of the young adults in these examples suggests that couples choose the arrangements that fit their specific situations and their preferences. In framing family arrangements as individually designed, they also perceive any difficulties that arise from these "choices" as individual problems. On the issue of reconciling employment and family work, they argue for instance:

> "Work-family conflicts are conflicts you have with yourself. (...) If you can't reconcile the two, the problem is you."

> "I don't expect any work-family conflicts because I say to myself: you made your bed, now sleep in it. If there is a conflict, it's your job to solve it."

Both quotes assign the responsibility for balancing employment and family commitments to the individual. It is seen as one's personal obligation to find a way of solving any problems that arise from the necessity to align childcare with employment. The reasoning of the young adults on their future work-family arrangements can therefore be read as another example of the discourse of individualised responsibility that underlies their entire narratives.

To recapitulate, it can be stated that – independently of the issue at stake – the interviewees' narratives are based on a subjectivity that understands human beings as unique and different from others. Individuals are constituted as having differing needs, talents and preferences. According to this logic, it is not possible to find standard solutions that fit everybody. Based on their individual preferences, people must define their own life paths. However – as a consequence of their perceived freedom of choice – they feel individually responsible for all implications of their "choices". In sum, the narratives constitute a subject that separates itself from others, designs its own solutions and assumes full individual responsibility for all the decisions taken. In this respect, it mirrors the competitive and entrepreneurial subject constituted by the neoliberal policies discussed above.

3.3 Blind spots in the discourse of free choice and individual responsibility

The discourse of individualisation gives prominence to the principles of difference, free choice and individual responsibility. In the process, other aspects fall out of the picture. The aim of this section is to return to the example of the issue of work-family balance and look at what remains unsaid in this way of speaking. The question is: what is not being mentioned or what stays in the dark when young adults talk about their life plans and the ways in which they plan to organise their future families?

First of all, the discourse masks the influence of institutional settings that support certain family arrangements and not others. The Swiss school system for instance includes a lunch break, in which children are meant to go home and eat

with their families. This design of the school schedule expects at least one parent to be at home over lunchtime. Furthermore, Switzerland provides no legal right to a place in a crèche for children at pre-school age. Especially in more rural areas there might not be any day-care facilities within reach (Fachstelle Kinder und Familien, 2007). Therefore, the choice of "day-care" simply might not be available for many couples. Even in more urban areas the option might not be feasible if opening hours of child care facilities do not correspond to one's working hours. Apart from this, labour in Switzerland is institutionalised according to a full-time work regime of 42 h a week. Many occupations and many employers do not allow for adjusting working hours to reconcile employment and family demands. For this reason, the choice of "part-time work" might simply not be an option.

Secondly, the discourse disregards the fact that not all couples have access to the same amount of financial and other resources. In the example of work-family balance, this for instance means that day-care might be available, but not affordable for everybody. While some Swiss municipalities offer subsidised places in crèches, others do not. And once the fixed number of subsidised slots is taken, families must pay in full (Fachstelle Kinder und Familien, 2007). In other words, while some couples may choose the option of "day-care", others cannot afford it. Furthermore, certain families might be able to draw on the resources of a grandparent, a relative or a neighbour close by who is happy to look after the children regularly. Many, however, do not have these resources at hand.

Finally, although the young adults emphasise choice and argue that preset gendered roles no longer exist, social norms that influence choices concerning work-family balance (see Bühler, 2001; Bühler and Heye, 2005; Nentwich, 2000, 2008) still persist. In Switzerland, mothers are still expected to carry most of the burden of balancing work and childcare (Swiss Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2010; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2003:76). As a consequence, working mothers often face little understanding for their situations (Schwiter, 2011b). The same applies to fathers who want to reduce their working hours to be caregivers (Schwiter, 2009). Thus, if a couple opts for a work-family arrangement that transgresses what is seen as normal and appropriate, they often have to deal with implicit and explicit criticism and face additional obstacles. Their employers, supervisors or co-workers might be unwilling to support them in realising their preferred work-family model.

In sum, what stays hidden in the discourse of individualisation found in the interviews with the young Swiss adults, is that the "choice" a couple has with regards to reconciling work and family (and to their biographical decisions in general) might in many cases not involve much "freedom of choice" at all. It is governed by various institutional and normative restrictions as well as by the resources available.

This argument corresponds to a number of studies that have analysed childcare arrangements in other countries.

Looking at working class neighbourhoods in the suburbs of Vancouver, Pratt (2003) for instance documents the struggles of families to set up reliable and affordable care arrangements for their children. She shows that the resulting arrangements are often based on difficult compromises and remain highly fragile. McDowell et al. (2005:457) compared child care arrangements in different areas of London and conclude that it is much more appropriate to talk of constraints than of choices. In addition, Claassen (2011:57) and others point out that "care choices" might not only be limited by a lack of adequate and affordable childcare facilities and family-friendly working conditions, but also by normative ideals of good mother- and fatherhood and the pressure to conform to them. Constraints are thus not only structural but also normative (McDowell et al., 2005; Daly, 2011).

In the present study, all these institutional, normative and financial obstacles were not mentioned when young adults anticipated organising their families and planning their future life paths. Instead, difficulties that may arise in the course of organising their future families were framed as individual problems. It is the individual who is considered responsible for finding his or her own solutions.

4 Discussion: normalised neoliberal subjectivity?

What are the consequences of the discourse of individualised responsibility that appears prominent in the interviews of the young adults? According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), individualisation denotes the replacement of previous norms, frames of reference and role models by a new compulsion to create and manage one's own biography. Or in other words, it transforms human beings into "homines optionis" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001:5), who have to make biographical decisions on their own and bear the risks arising from them. In the academic discussion of individualisation it is often argued that this individualised responsibility leads people to feel lost, helpless or overwhelmed (see e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001:22ff). Spilker (2010:128) for example concludes that human beings are permanently anxious about what the future might bring. And Lemke (2004:3) speaks of a latent fear of failing which accompanies people at all time.

Looking at the narratives of the young adults, however, there is no evidence of such anxieties. The sample includes only one interviewee who mentions the risk of being left behind and cut off from the labour market due to decisions that might have turned out to be wrong in hindsight. In the other interviews the individual responsibility for forging and managing one's own life path is taken very much for granted. It appears as a direct consequence of being different from others and is seen as a matter of course.

It can therefore be concluded that the ideas of difference, free choice and individualised responsibility that also lie at the core of neoliberal thought are indeed not only embedded

in government policies, technologies, practices and public discourses, but also in the subjectivities of young adults. The young Swiss adults have internalised and normalised them in a way that indeed allows one to denote their subjectivities as "neoliberal".

This study focussed on a sample of young adults from various backgrounds in Switzerland. Compared to older people, young adults might perceive more opportunities in their future and have experienced less institutional, financial or normative obstacles. Furthermore, Swiss youths may have been less affected by neoliberal policies than youths in other countries. Therefore, it is necessary to caution against any over-hasty generalisation to other age groups or other geographic contexts. However, with regard to young adults, a number of studies exist that found comparable results concerning individuals' self-evident assuming of responsibility for biographical decisions and their implications (see e.g. Bradley and Devadason, 2008 on the UK; Hörschelmann, 2008 and Hurrelmann et al., 2002 on Germany; Leccardi, 2006 on Italy; Orrange, 2003 on the US; Abelmann et al., 2009 on South Korea; and for a focus on differences see also Devadason, 2008 who compares British and Swedish youths). These studies have not necessarily interpreted their findings as neoliberal subjectivity and this paper is far from claiming that the subjectivities described in these papers are identical in the different contexts. Notwithstanding, it is legitimate to conclude that it is not solely the narratives of young people from Switzerland that show traces of the individualised, responsible subjectivity that neoliberalism is said to produce: such traces can be found in the narratives of young people who live in other contexts as well.

5   Conclusion: privatising gender relations

What are the gendered implications of the neoliberal subjectivities that this paper documented in the narratives of young adults? Taking up the example of the work-family balance once more, it becomes clear that the interviewees do not see it as the responsibility of the state, of the municipalities or of the employers to provide childcare and working arrangements that allow for reconciling employment and childcare. They see it as entirely up to themselves to find individual solutions.

As long as arranging childcare is still primarily understood as the responsibility of the mother, however, the problem of work-family balance does not affect women and men equally. By conceptualising family arrangements as the free choices of couples, the discourse disregards structural, institutional and financial conditions that result in gendered inequalities. By constituting them entirely as the result of individual preferences, it masks persisting gendered norms. In other words, the neoliberal subjectivity of young adults "privatises" gender relations (see Schwiter, 2011b:242ff).

From a critical perspective on neoliberalism, the key question is therefore: by what means can issues such as work-family balance, but also poverty, unemployment and other (gendered) inequalities be reframed away from individual problems as collective issues? McDowell (2004:145) for example argues that the dominance of what she calls an "individualistic ethos (that) pervades both the labour market and the welfare state, undermining notions of collective welfare" must be broken by consciously developing a "relational view of self". This paper tries to contribute to this endeavour, by making the logic of neoliberal subjectivity visible as a first step that allows for discussing and contesting it.

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