THE
WORK CURE

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON WORK AND WELLNESS

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The Work Cure: critical essays on work and wellness

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Putting therapy to work

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An article for Open Democracy by Izzy Koksal (2012) has an image at the top depicting a bright-red sheet of paper. On the paper, in large bold type, is a quote from Oprah Winfrey:

> The greatest discovery of all time is that a person can change his future by merely changing his attitude.

One might normally expect to find a quote like this taped on the walls of a high-powered business seminar – perhaps one of Tony Robbins' legendary gatherings on 'Unleashing the Power Within' or 'Life and Wealth Mastery'. These are the kinds of words an entrepreneur might pay a lot of money to hear on the way to the top, as an affirmation of their power to exert influence on the world. It's not the kind of quote you would be pleased to hear if you were unemployed – as Izzy Koksal was – and attending a mandatory, two-day training session on 'Finding and Getting a Job'.

Koksal's article explains that she saw this quote in a class run by A4e – one of several for-profit 'welfare providers' hired by the state to deliver work preparation courses to unemployed people. Koksal's attendance was a condition of her unemployment benefit: 'I was coerced into attending by my job centre advisor,' she explains. She goes on to describe the session:

> For two days I sat with 10 other unemployed people being told that we needed to 'talk, breathe, eat, shit belief in yourself' and being compared

to iPhones.[1] The experience was like being in some sort of strange comedy sketch that just went on and on and at times bordered on feeling like a cult… The main point, which was hammered home time and again, was that, if we believed we could get a job, then it would happen. It was simply our mindset that was the barrier and [the trainer] seemed intent on us all having mini epiphanies there and then.

Izzy reacts to the situation as many undoubtedly do, with annoyance about the trainer's emphasis on personal responsibility. Her article discusses the economic fact of unemployment and the variance in rates of unemployment across demographic lines. She recalls with dismay the trainer's interaction with a 60-year-old man called James:

James had found himself unemployed for the first time in his life at the age of 60. He had worked in retail but, despite his experience, he could not find work now because of his age… His agent had confirmed to him that it was his age that meant he wasn't getting past an interview and had suggested to him that he start lying about his age. But our trainer did not accept that age discrimination and a saturated job market were the issues here; rather, it was the barrier that James had created in his mind about his age. 'We are a product. If we're not talking and bigging up that product, then we can't expect anyone to buy that product... Age is not a barrier, the only barrier is *here* [pointing to his head]. We create it.'

Indignant, Izzy decides to jump to James' defence, explaining the need for broader social and economic understandings of unemployment: 'We need to look at the bigger picture and not focus on the individual.' And it is here that Izzy's article delivers its punchline. The A4e trainer suggests that Izzy's reluctance to accept his brand of personal transformation is simply a sign of her *own* obstructive negativity:

He turned it all back onto me – 'You've got all these hooks on you… it's your way of being… you need to shift the way you look at it. You've got all this anger and frustration and that's stopping you from getting a job. It comes across in your CV.'

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1. Unemployed people are presumably like iPhones that lack the best apps and the latest upgrades. The purpose of the session is to help install these upgrades.

Becoming a productivity ninja

In 2015, when this book was still just an idea, I decided to attend a number of employee 'wellness' programmes. These were organised by human resources representatives in the university where I was employed on a short-term contract, to fill gaps in the department's teaching schedule. The most memorable session I attended was called 'How to be a Productivity Ninja'. A quick web search showed that the two-hour session had cost the university more than £2,000. The company's website promised that the session would teach me techniques to de-clutter my mind, identify my main productivity and wellbeing challenges and develop a 'second brain' to manage projects and actions. Sitting in the back row of the lecture hall, I looked down on a neatly-organised display of 'Ninja'-branded books, pamphlets, stickers and business cards, and waited for the session to begin. A well-dressed and pleasant orator introduced himself and the session began.

First, we were psyched up with images of inspirational public figures: a picture of Malala Yousafzai (the young Pakistani activist who was shot in the face for defending women's right to education) and another of the visionary business mogul Elon Musk (who was, ironically, under media scrutiny at the time over alleged inhumane working conditions in his car factory). There seemed to me to be a harmless absurdity to all of this, not particularly worthy of comment – but stay with me. Things took a more troubling twist when the audience were invited to give their own suggestions about how to feel well and succeed in the workplace. What struck me the most was how effectively the language that our coach used served to regulate, almost by sleight of hand, the parameters of the discussion. The idea was quickly established, for example, that increasing worker wellbeing and increasing productivity are always twin objectives and a win-win for workers and businesses. This was presented as basic common sense, taking off the table any notion that the health of the worker and the goals of the organisation might be in conflict.

Also off the table was any notion that the organisation was responsible for change. Our coach's many references to the importance of 'resilience' placed the responsibility for change on each of us, as individuals. Resilience means adjusting to the existing conditions rather than trying to change them, and there were several more linguistic tricks like this one. References to 'work' and 'the workplace', for example, were always kept at the most general level, avoiding the more fraught territory of addressing *our* work in *our* workplace. Indeed, I am regularly struck by the remarkable way wellbeing experts claim to be able to enter a workplace and tackle its stress problem without

any contextual knowledge of who the staff are, the nature of their jobs, their contractual conditions or what their organisational culture is like. The task put before us was to immediately set about resolving our stress issues without any prior reflection on the nature or origin of our troubles. Even the word 'stress' – used to signify 'the problem', as opposed to a symptom of some other problem – seemed to foreclose any opportunity to speak about the organisation.

With this narrow universe of discourse delineated, both the coach and audience members proceeded to talk about the only thing left to us: those advertised tips, tricks and life hacks, to be implemented by the individual worker. We could use self-affirmations and relaxation techniques in order to find our calm. We could install the Bhuddify mindfulness app. We could wear headphones to prevent talkative colleagues from approaching and distracting us. Tips were grouped into categories such as 'Weapon-savviness', 'Zen-like calm' and 'Stealth and camouflage'. In the latter category were suggestions such as finding places to hide from colleagues in order to get work done, or simply switching off your email. A fellow participant whispered to their neighbour that she would probably be sacked if she did these things. And there, I thought, was a point that needed to be heard. All of these tips and suggestions seemed to presume a high level of autonomy among workers who really had very little control over their workloads and daily routines. The empowerment for sale here was a superficial one, with no foot in reality. From my seat in the back row, I fantasised about shouting this out at the top of my voice, but in a room charged with positivity, jokes and the excitement of free pens, who wants to be the misery guts dragging reality back into the room?

Healing the unemployed

How is it that Izzy Koksal, like thousands of others, found herself forced to sit in a room and receive behavioural advice from a self-styled psychologist? To understand, it is necessary to think back over the history of an approach to welfare provision known broadly as 'workfare'. This approach, now adopted by almost every mature welfare state across the globe, combines an ethical emphasis on the importance of participating in paid employment with efforts to 'make work pay', often by making benefits less generous and increasingly conditional on an ever-expanding list of requirements. In the UK, workfare can be traced back to New Labour's 'New Deal', which marked a point where encouraging or coercing people into employment would be adopted as a key function of the state (Lødemel & Trickey, 2000). The aim was to increase labour market participation among a variety of groups, including young and

long-term unemployed people, disabled people and lone parents (Department of Social Security, 1998).

Iterations on this approach would continue in the UK following the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2010. David Cameron's branding of his Conservatives as a party 'for the hardworking people' dovetailed with the government's commitment to reducing public sector spending, resulting in a brutal series of welfare cuts. Welfare reforms would, from this point onwards, take on a more punitive character. People's entitlement to support would be conditional on a tougher and more developed set of requirements, with a wider use of sanctions (financial punishments in the form of benefit freezes) for claimants who failed to comply with the rules (Etherington & Daguerre, 2015). There would also be much tighter restrictions on access to disability benefits. The government would hire the private company Atos to withdraw disability benefits from thousands of people, via its Work Capability Assessment (Butler, 2015). Claimants of unemployment benefits (or Jobseeker's Allowance) would also now be required to sign a 'claimant commitment', forcing them to agree that their right to benefits would be conditional on participation in an expanding range of job search, training and work preparation activities, including mandatory unpaid labour and job-focused training. Unemployment would become a job in itself.

As we will see throughout this book, these shifts have been justified at the official level by the idea that *employment is good for people's health and wellbeing* – an idea that has been echoed by a number of major psychology organisations, mental health charities and influential academics. It is also an idea that is now having very real consequences for social policy. In two key documents – a Green Paper and a White Paper, both entitled *Improving Lives* (Department for Work & Pensions/Department of Health, 2016; 2017) – the Conservative government has set out its goal to promote employment as a 'health outcome', and 'join up work and health' through an integration of health and employment services. At the time of writing (in late 2018), this process is still underway, but many initiatives have already been established. There are courses like the one Izzy Koksal attended, aiming to adjust the psychology of unemployed people. There is the major, state-funded psychotherapy programme known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT), which offers an amalgam of cognitive behavioural therapy and job coaching, the primary aim of which is to set its patients on the path back to employment. There are also proposals to put 'work and health champions' into hospitals and surgeries in order to encourage doctors to refer patients to job centre advisors, and a policy of forcing disabled people to take

part in mandatory conversations about their employment ambitions as a condition of their benefits.

Attempting to grasp this legacy of policy reform, a landmark article by Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn (2015) suggests that, although these reforms slot into a well-established tradition of workfare, they are worthy of fresh critical attention because of their explicit attempt to modify people's attitudes and personalities. There are a number of things that Friedli and Stearn find troubling about this development. The first is the lack of consent involved. Given that submission to workfare interventions is often a mandatory condition of benefit claims, people are being required to submit to psychological reform under the threat of poverty and destitution. What is also troubling is the narrowness of the 'ideal human' being promoted. The entitlement of a person to set their own health and recovery goals and to work autonomously towards them is being abandoned. In its place is the dogma that *employment* represents the highest sign of good health and character. The right kind of person is a person who accepts this proposition and seeks to embody the characteristics of a good worker: the ideals of confidence, optimism, positivity, gratitude and aspiration, borrowed from positive psychology. Izzy Koksal's earlier reference to the jobseeker as being like an iPhone is pertinent, given the similarities between jobseeking and the commercial world of sales and product development. Becoming employable means coming up with new ways to brand and sell yourself, and there is no room here to ask critical questions about what happens to people who cannot work, how work should be defined, or whether there might be other, competing ideas of health, virtue and the good life. There is also no space to ask how we should value people whose efforts and contributions take place outside the market economy.

Friedli and Stearn have helpfully articulated these problems in the concept of 'psycho-compulsion', a term that is now regularly used by activists and one that will appear regularly throughout this book. As a concept, psycho-compulsion describes moves to modify the attitudes and personalities of people who deviate from the ideal of the hard-working citizen. But it also captures a broader side effect of such interventions: the erasure of political and economic explanations for prevalent social problems. This is especially true for unemployment, which is being recast in the public imagination in terms of a moral and mental deficit in individuals.

Unemployment can be properly understood in terms of what the political theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams refer to as the rising and falling of capitalism's 'surplus population' (2016) – a group of people who are without employment because their labour has not been deemed useful for

generating private profits. When economies grow, workers are drawn from the surplus population into employment, and if the demand for labour stalls for any reason, or wages begin to cut too much into profits, people are 'let go' from their jobs and the surplus population once again swells. Overlaid onto these cycles of boom and bust are other trends. Innovations in productivity, including the introduction of automated technologies, have complex effects on the labour market, creating new kinds of work for some people but also radically reducing the need for human labour in industries where it is feasible and cheaper to replace workers with machines. Those labourers who are displaced by automated technologies are sometimes known as the victims of 'technological unemployment'. What is euphemistically known as today's 'flexible' labour market, characterised by more temporary and precarious forms of work, has also served to make periods of unemployment a normal part of life for a growing number of people.

We can also observe Marx's suggestion that capitalism *requires* a section of the population to be unemployed. What he famously referred to as the 'reserve army of labour' is required to stand in the wings of the labour market, ready to be activated in times of economic growth and fluctuating demand. Capitalism's surplus population also benefits private interests by helping to keep job competition high, and hence wages low, and workers under control. The point to take from all of this is that unemployment is a *structural feature of capitalist societies*. It is part of our political-economic world. How frustrating, then, that unemployment is so often presented to us as a behavioural or psychological issue.

The Welfare Conditionality Project (2018) – a major study conducted between 2013 and 2018 – drew a degree of public attention to the problems with workfare reforms. It found that the reforms were not only largely ineffectual in terms of boosting employment, but that they had indeed been actively harmful and were linked to a sense of social disengagement, a rise in poverty and destitution, a take-up of survival crimes and an exacerbation of ill health and impairments.[2] News stories abound of people with severe conditions like brain damage, lost limbs, blindness and terminal cancer being

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2. Findings about the ineffectual nature of welfare reforms should be no cause for surprise. Given the importance of a reserve army of labour for the smooth functioning of capitalism, the purpose of welfare reform is perhaps more accurately understood as an effort to discipline unemployed people, rather than maximise employment. As Srnicek and Williams argue (2016: 101), the goal is to turn as many people as possible into eligible workers and – through a combination of imposed austerity and ideological drills about the importance of employment – to stop unemployed people from developing alternative priorities or turning away from the market.

found 'fit for work' by the government; the website Calum's List[3] began to document deaths believed to be the result of welfare reforms. It is no longer a secret that many disabled people live in perpetual terror of being found 'fit for work' and losing their benefits. Indeed, in November 2018, the United Nations rapporteur Philip Alston released a report in which he roundly condemned UK welfare reforms:

> In the area of poverty-related policy, the evidence points to the conclusion that the driving force has not been economic but rather a commitment to achieving radical social re-engineering... The government has made no secret of its determination to change the value system to focus more on individual responsibility, to place major limits on government support, and to pursue a single-minded, and some have claimed simple-minded, focus on getting people into employment at all costs. (Alston, 2018)

Alston's enquiry concluded that welfare cuts and conditionality had caused widespread and unnecessary harm. In a spoken statement, he added that the 'state does not have your back any longer'. It was refreshing to hear this official confirmation of what anti-workfare groups like the Mental Health Resistance Network and Disabled People Against Cuts had been saying all along: that welfare reforms have done a much better job at punishing people than improving their lives.

Healing the worker

If one of the key goals of this book is to critique a legacy of policy reforms treating worklessness as a psychological deficit, another goal is to trace a link between this problem and certain current trends in workplaces. Here we can point to another structural or endemic issue: not unemployment but the *distress* experienced by workers due to the way labour is organised in capitalist societies. As I write this, statistics published by the UK Health and Safety Executive reveal that, for the first time, more than half the work days lost in the UK are due to work-related stress, anxiety or depression (HSE, 2018) – a fact that has prompted the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, Frances O'Grady, to officially name the problem an epidemic (Wilson, 2018).[4]

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3. See http://calumslist.org

4. Some 15.4 million working days were lost in 2017/18 as a result of work-related stress, anxiety or depression, with findings suggesting that workers in education and social work are the most at risk (Wilson, 2018).

Although this book does not claim to provide anything like a comprehensive theory of distress, or even work-related distress, there are many toxic trends we can think about. We might reflect on the armies of Amazon warehouse workers, reduced to machines as they respond to orders from hand-held devices, under strict time constraints and surveillance. We might consider those legions of cheap domestic labourers forced to work long hours, mistreated by unscrupulous employers (Chamberlain, 2013). Or we could consider the masses of workers who staff today's call centres, forced to present with a happy persona, even when the work itself is often repetitive and deadening (Woodcock, 2017).

In his book, *Bullshit Jobs: a theory,* David Graeber (2018) describes in detail the misery that people endure when forced to perform jobs that – by the worker's own admission – have no discernible benefit to society (or perhaps even harm society in some small way). Graeber shines a light on workers hired simply to make superiors look good, manipulate the public's needs, correct errors that could easily be avoided, collect data that nobody uses or supervise workers who could just as well be left alone. He explores the emotional scars of people who are faced with the prospect of wasting their lives on meaningless activities and the pretence of busyness, finding that even workers in relatively cushy circumstances, with good pay and a low level of supervision, feel tortured by the useless nature of their work.

We can also think about the misery of insecurity, as the assault on basic worker protections like a living wage, guaranteed hours, sick leave and secure contracts leaves many people in a perpetual state of anxiety about making plans and meeting needs. An analysis of the Labour Force Survey from the last quarter of 2017 found that one in nine workers (or 3.8 million people) in the UK are employed in insecure jobs – a category that includes temporary workers (like agency workers, casual workers, seasonal workers and so on), workers whose main job is on a zero-hours contract, and self-employed workers earning less than the National Living Wage (Trades Union Congress, 2018). The Conservative government's popular catchphrase that 'work is the best route out of poverty' has completely ignored the vast problem of in-work poverty.[5] For many people, this material insecurity manifests as a kind of ambient dread, constantly playing on the nerves. Anxiety becomes an ordinary part of daily life and thinking about the future becomes difficult. Indeed, the list of work-related troubles

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5. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that two in three children in poverty in the UK are actually from a household where at least one person is in employment (2018).

goes on, and chapters in this book will revisit these themes, and others, in more detail.

The drive for 'workplace wellness' has no doubt partly come about due to a growing awareness of the economic costs of problems like stress and low morale. Misery costs money, whether in the form of worker disinvestment, rising absences, slowing productivity or soured customer interactions. Estimates from Gallup suggest that employee disengagement costs the US economy $550 billion a year (cited in Davies, 2015: 106). Startling figures like these have put pressure on managers to square up to the challenge of how to deal with employees who experience disengagement, a lack of motivation or low-level mental health problems. In his eye-opening book *The Happiness Industry* (2015), Will Davies describes the work of mental health fixers who now earn their living by intervening in the day-to-day miseries of employment. There is clearly a significant market demand for services like the 'Productivity Ninjas' session described above, which promise to fix a workplace's wellbeing problem and boost productivity in the process. Initiatives range from call-centre 'buzz sessions', designed to gee up workers at the start of the day, to motivational talks and calming lunchtime meditations (all discussed in this book), and also a great many things not discussed here, from team-building away days to fitness initiatives and puppy therapies. Will Davies has described the sometimes odd mishmash of ideas involved in workplace wellness initiatives:

> The psychology of motivation blends into the physiology of
> health, drawing occasionally on insights from sports coaches and
> nutritionists, to which is added a cocktail of neuroscientific rumours
> and Bhuddist meditation practices. Various notions of 'fitness',
> 'happiness', 'productivity' and 'success' bleed into one another, with little
> explanation of how or why. (Davies, 2015: 112)

The main problem with these initiatives, of course, is that they are a poor substitute for real organisational change. Like those workfare initiatives targeted at unemployed people, workplace wellness initiatives are also taking a structural problem and suggesting it can and should be solved through individual self-work. As we will see, they may also contain an element of psycho-compulsion, imposing the same normalising ideas of the model person found in work-preparation programmes: a person who is hardworking, happy, healthy and, above all else, productive.

Although the idea that happy and more psychologically invested workers are good for profit is now widely accepted in management circles (Davies,

2015: 120–123), the first chapter in this book will warn against exaggerating the link between happiness and productivity. As Ivor Southwood notes (Chapter 1), it is also important to recognise the way in which productivity thrives on neglect – a disregard for the human threshold for things like repetition, meaninglessness, heteronomy and toil. From Southwood's perspective, workplace wellness initiatives are not simply implemented to boost happiness and hence productivity; they are perhaps better thought of as one element in a broader set of management technologies (including more traditional disciplinary measures like surveillance, punishments, strict targets and micromanagement) designed to keep the worker at a 'biting point', where productivity can be wrung at the expense of health but without the situation spilling over into outright sickness or work refusal. The value of Southwood's contribution is its insight that it is a manageable, low-level misery, as opposed to happiness *per se*, that keeps the wheels of many organisations turning. And many organisations are not shy about admitting the economic value of neglect. Consider an advert for the company Fiverr (an online platform for freelancers), which celebrates those 'doers' who 'eat a coffee for lunch' and choose sleep deprivation as their 'drug of choice' (Tolentino, 2017). Or Lyft (an on-demand transport company), which publicly applauded a pregnant employee who kept taxiing customers even after her waters broke and she went into labour (Menegus, 2016). It is barely a secret that neglect is what often keeps the wheels of work turning, and some even wear the ability to withstand such neglect as a badge of honour.

To draw these themes together, the essays in this book cover a range of social domains, from the job centre to the therapy room and, indeed, the workplace itself. No matter what the focus is, however, each chapter deals in its own way with what we might think of as the marriage of work discipline and therapeutic practice. Its instances will be elaborated and criticised and forms of resistance and social alternatives will be considered. We will see how the work ethic has spilled over into therapeutic practice, as is evident in the UK's IAPT programme, and we will also see examples where the flow has gone the other way, as therapeutic practice spills into matters of work, whether it is deployed to rehabilitate unemployed people or to heal unhappy employees. In the remainder of this introduction, I will set the context for the discussions ahead by looking broadly at the role and symptoms of therapeutic culture in capitalist societies. My aim is to provide something of a roadmap of themes and ideas that are explored in more detail in the chapters that follow.