The Postfeminist Fantasy of Female Job Seekers

By Ruth Abrams

Table of Contents

List of tables and figures

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Abstract

Job seeking in a contemporary UK labour market is complex and demanding. The distribution of middle-skilled labour is decreasing, as is access to social security such as welfare provision during prolonged periods of seeking work. Women in particular are at risk of displacement within current labour market conditions and are more likely to experience underemployment and feelings of underutilisation. Running parallel to this are cultural narratives that encourage work to be a source of heightened meaning, purpose and passion. This indicates a tension worth exploring in relation to how female job seekers navigate a UK labour market post higher education.

Using unstructured interviews and narrative enquiry, a total of 38 interviews are analysed using the voice-centred relational method. Everyday job seeking practices and ideals are articulated through a logics approach including: the social logics of individual effort; the political logics of female success; and the fantasmatic logics of getting it right. Findings suggest that participants remain gripped by job seeking practices and ideals characteristic of a postfeminist ideology. They strive to become ideal (as determined by a postfeminist ideology), working women and prior to securing employment, job seeking itself becomes the work undertaken. This necessitates that they are entirely accountable and responsible for their job seeking and that their success depends on them undertaking extensive self-work and being unwaveringly confident, positive and proactive. However, participant accounts of guilt, self-doubt and anxiety associated with job seeking suggests that a postfeminist ideology relating to getting it 'right', female success and individual effort in this context needs to be challenged.

By exploring the enactment of a postfeminist ideology in the context of job seeking, participants' burdens are highlighted. This has implications for how the female job seeker is both conceptualised and supported. This thesis calls on policy makers and job seekers themselves to account for contextual factors such as labour market conditions and to critically engage with taken for granted postfeminist assumptions of what an ideal working woman is.

This could help to alleviate the burdens experienced by female job seekers and mitigate the harm which they may cause.

Chapter One

1. Introduction: Understanding the job seeking context

Everyday stories about job seeking are bound up with cultural narratives about work and what it means to be a working woman in a neoliberal, postfeminist labour market. This thesis explores the social construction of job seeking by showing the ways in which localised job seeking narratives reproduce dominant societal stories. To do this it is necessary to consider the context in which job seekers find themselves. Therefore, this introduction begins with a description of job seeking, contextualising it within a UK labour market and discussing how this pertains specifically to women. The disciplines and perspectives from which this thesis draws upon are then situated. This involves an outline of critical management scholarship (CMS) and its relationship, or lack of, to the discipline of work psychology, which is where most of the job seeking literature is located. Following this, the research aims and novel contributions, along with a structural overview of this thesis are presented.

1.1 Job seeking in a 21st century labour market

The time it takes for a job seeker to secure work may vary from between six to 12 months (Lim et al., 2016). During the job seeking process, seekers invest a significant amount of time and energy scouring job advertisements, compiling CVs, completing job applications, networking and attending interviews or assessments (Boswell et al, 2012). These efforts may not immediately secure success. In fact, job seekers may be ignored by potential employers without any justification or feedback (Lim et al, 2016). Approximately 98% of job seekers face rejection as part of an application process without necessarily knowing why (Ababneh et al., 2014; Glassdoor, 2017). Job seekers are called upon to form strategic moves, geared towards self-marketing and self-positioning in a bid to 'fit' into the expectations of those

recruiting for particular roles (Handley, 2017). As such job seeking requires a careful crafting and creation of a job seeking 'self', the construction and impact of which has not been critically explored in a 21st century labour market.

The job seeking plight works against a backdrop of a labour market driven by capitalist demands. For example, career trends suggest an increased need for individuals to manage their own career success (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017). Indeed, 40% of the total economy is represented by part-time, self-employed or platform economy workers managing their own careers (OECD, 2019). Greater numbers of women are opting for self-employment (Shapiro et al, 2008) which, whilst offering a degree of flexibility, may limit access and rights to maternity pay and pension support from employers.

Running parallel to this is the incitement to find meaning in our work, to love our jobs and to search for work that does not feel like work (Bailey and Madden, 2015; Bailey et al, 2016). The concept of the job seeker in academic literature has not necessarily kept pace with changes happening in the labour market and societal discourses of aspiration. This comes at a time when middle-skilled jobs are decreasing (OECD, 2019) and in-work realities reflect a sufferance of endless tasks under the inescapable managerial pretence of worker 'autonomy' and a ground-hog day ritual of meaninglessness (Fleming, 2015). The inescapable 24/7 work devices, the precariousness of the job market and the blurring of work and non-work time are now commonplace (Fleming, 2015).

Out of work realities may also involve increased precariousness, prolonged job seeking and potential periods of unemployment (Rubery et al, 2016; 2018). Restrictions on welfare provision mean less social protection for those who are out of work for prolonged periods (OECD, 2019) and whilst unemployment rates have decreased, this decrease is likely affected by the increase of women and older people into the workforce which has coincided with a

rise in low-skilled jobs (OECD, 2019). Presently there exists a labour market which has low unemployment rates but a prevalence of underemployment and underutilisation, mainly affecting women (Sengenberger, 2011; ILO, 2019; OECD, 2019). Moreover, with the acceleration of technology including AI and automation, there are concerns that this may increasingly displace workers, particularly women, because of the nature of jobs undertaken by women (ILO, 2018). Some even suggest that the elimination of work could be an eventual possibility (Frayne, 2015). To date, research into the impact of labour market conditions suggest that levels of underemployment can be linked to a rise in anxiety and depression (Bell and Blanchflower, 2018), conditions which also affect more women than men (Albert, 2015; Remes et al, 2016). There is also a growing body of literature that suggests insecure work is also a threat to one's health (see Kim and von dem Knesebeck 2015 for a systematic comparison). Women in particular deal with job seeking barriers and rejection differently to men (Escott, 2012; Brands and Fernandez-Mateo, 2017) and this has also been suggested as affecting their health and wellbeing, particularly if there is a strong desire to work (Escott, 2012).

These demands present a conflicting picture. On the one hand women are highly visible in the labour market. However, the way in which they are visible may be problematic for a number of contextual reasons articulated more fully in chapter three. This thesis is now positioned at the borders of two disciplines- CMS and work psychology- in order to address the need to consider the social construction of job seeking in context.

1.2 Writing at the intersection of critical management studies and work psychology

This section begins with an overview of critical management studies before discussing the discipline of work psychology. It then discusses the specific positioning of this thesis as an endeavour to write at the intersection of these two bodies of knowledge and show what this

can do for the conceptualisation and study of job seeking in contemporary labour market conditions.

1.3 Critical management studies

In its most simplistic form, critical management studies (CMS) refers to a research community and body of work that is undertaken from a non-mainstream, critical perspective (Alvesson et al., 2011). CMS uses critical theory as its theoretical foundation which is a branch of social science seeking to critique modern day practices such as capitalism and offer alternative perspectives and ways of being (Kazi and Inderman, 2014). Critical theory itself originates from The Frankfurt School, an interdisciplinary group of intellectuals who collectivised during the early 1920s in a bid to challenge the rise of capitalism and fascism (Alvesson et al, 2011). Influential scholars during this time included Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse, Habermas and Honneth. Since the early 1990's, drawing inspiration from critical theory, CMS has provided a rich body of thought that specifically focuses on critiquing the growing emphasis of right-wing business practices within management and organisations (Grey and Wilmott, 2005). As a progressive discipline it now spans theoretical plurality such as feminist, post-colonial and psychoanalytical approaches, often making it a fragmented and divided field to work within (Alvesson et al., 2011).

The reason for this critique is a desire for alternative perspectives and this persists well into the 21st century as we witness the rise in questionable organisational practices. This includes challenging for example, an increase in unethical business practice, individualism, privatisation, consumerism and the depletion of natural resources. This occurs at a time when we also witness a decreased experience of (but not desire for) meaning, purpose and security at work (Sennet, 2006) as well as the dismantling of equality and social welfare provision such as social housing, healthcare and unemployment benefits (Roper et al., 2010). These are

all methods of organising that influence a society's way of governing itself and at times may have negative consequences on individuals working with or against these particular social norms. Thus the purpose of engaging with CMS is to point out, question, challenge and reconsider taken for granted ways of doing and being, in order to undo harmful practices of organising and transform oppressive social relations. However, CMS has yet to really influence the discipline of work psychology (Gerard, 2016; Bal and Doci, 2018). Given that work psychology is primarily concerned with the behavioural aspects of organisations and work within modern societies (Carpintero, 2017), this poses an interesting question of why not?

1.4 Work psychology

As a discipline, work psychology has remained consistently mainstream, focusing primarily on the scientific management of personalities at work, selection and assessment, psychometrics and the prediction of performance at work (Islam and Zyphur, 2009). Work psychology as a discipline originated at the start of the 20th century and has its foundations in the exploration of behavioural and mental processes amongst individuals at work (Carpintero, 2017). This exploration continued throughout the 20th century, having a particular influence during both World War One and Two. For example, selection and assessment practices such as personality measures were used to select individuals deemed 'appropriate' for front line versus officer level roles. The discipline has a dark history, with some examples being linked to the eugenics movement. However, work psychology is also responsible for the increasing awareness around issues regarding wellbeing at work and worker satisfaction. As such it is a complex terrain of ideas, interventions and theories that have both helped and hindered the worker's cause. Comprehensive discussions about the history of work psychology can be found in Hollway (1991), Koppes Bryan and Vinchur (2012) and Carpintero (2017).

Work psychology as a term is used to encapsulate other forms of organisational behaviour such as industrial psychology and organisational psychology. This term is used in this thesis to reflect the shift from organisational (i.e. a collective unity) to more individualised forms of organising work to acknowledge the (d)evolution of labour markets under neoliberalism, thus taking a critical stance to work psychology.

1.5 Critical work psychology

Mainstream work psychology has been accused of, "setting up a blueprint for a character regime that workers are required to live up to" (Bubna-Litic, 2013, p. 601), positioning some individuals as being more capable of certain work than others. Other critiques, as outlined by McDonald and Bubna-Litic (2012; 2017) include the disciplining effects of the normative values work psychology espouses, the dominant positivist epistemology which marginalises experiential (and other) forms of knowledge, the privileging of individual differences over societal, historical or contextual factors and an overall lack of reflexivity on the part of work psychology researchers.

At present, the only in-roads made within critical work psychology to date include those calling for its expansion. This includes a manifesto presenting ten recommendations to support the future of work and organisational psychology as a discipline (Bal et al., 2018) or articles detailing the necessity of a critical approach to work psychology (Steffy and Grimes, 1992; Islam and Zyphur, 2009; McDonald and Bubna-Litic, 2012; 2017; Bal and Doci, 2018). From these articles, the following differences between mainstream work psychology and critical alternatives can be reflected upon:

Table 1. Comparison of perspectives

Mainstream work psychology	**Critical alternatives**
Observable variables of human nature	Agentic potential of human nature
Defined characteristics that result in patterns of predictable behaviour	Flexible, undefined or ambiguous ways of behaving
Decontextualised	Contextualised within a socio-political climate
Traits-based	Ideological/ power dynamics
Individual tendencies	Multi-faceted layers (e.g. macro, meso and micro perspectives
Objective, positivist	Socially constructed

Ways forward may include re-contextualising the subject in both their social and political climate. This may, for example include understanding some of the more pervasive aspects of neoliberalism such as those operating at an unconscious level (McDonald and Bubna-Litic, 2017). Exploring certain ideals positioned as natural, such as competition or individualism, within a neoliberal climate may act as one way of providing insight into the behaviour of individuals in and out of work. Indeed, Islam and Zyphur (2009) suggest that researchers could consider exploring the level of everyday practices and how ideologies are embedded as natural or taken for granted. In doing so the object of study is, "constituted within a social-discursive nexus" (Islam and Zyphur, 2009, p. 21) thus meeting the aims of critical research and offering a way of applying this to work psychology.

Whilst both Islam and Zyphur (2009) and Bal and Doci (2018) demonstrate what a critical work psychology perspective might look like, a perspective which partly inspired the approach taken in this thesis, there is limited methodological insight as to how one might *do* critical work psychology research. Thus, empirical work remains firmly within the territory of CMS. CMS may therefore act as a foundation for how to conduct research critically, predominantly because of its established history of both epistemologically and methodologically positioning critical research on work, management and organisations (McDonald and Bubna-Litic, 2017).

Taking a critical perspective requires a deep engagement with what it means to *do* science. The value of science is largely dependent on how it is conceptualised and this can vary as a result of a particular standpoint. The nature of a critical study is to challenge objectivist claims that science is value-free and neutral, being inherently relativist in nature (Grey and Wilmott, 2005). That is not to dismiss attempts at objectivity but instead to question and inquire about the forces that drive particular choices about research and the methods by which research is legitimised (or not) in order to promote greater transparency in relation to the research process. This is the approach taken within this thesis to critique the scholarship on job seeking within mainstream work psychology and carve out a new way of acknowledging the job seeker via critical work psychology.

1.6 Research aims

This thesis combines a critical approach to work psychology literature to provide a critique of job seeking and what it means within a UK labour market. From a CMS perspective, only a handful of studies inquire critically into the experiences of job seeking. Studies in this field explore job seeker interactions with recruiters (Bergstrom and Knights, 2006); welfare implications and interventions (Boland, 2015; Sharone, 2007); older job seekers (Riach,

2007), and career coaching (Fogde, 2011). Conversely, literature regarding job seeking within work psychology upholds an homogenous view of the job seeker and the job seeking process, as will be indicated in the literature review to follow (chapter two). There has as such, been little attention directed towards critically reflecting on what it means to actively find work during the grey space of job seeking and what this means for the construction of the temporary job seeking self. Given the changing structures of work within a neoliberal labour market and the demands these place upon our personhood, the implications of seeking work and being a job seeker are vital to study. To do so is to highlight and consider the way in which we as a society position ourselves in relation to work as well as respond to its demands. The aims of this thesis are:

- To identify the 'what' of job seeking as undertaken by female job seekers in the context of a UK labour market. The purpose of this is to explore what taken for granted assumptions (e.g. ideals and practices) are inherent within job seeking.
- To describe the 'how' of job seeking in relation to it being instituted and internalised by female job seekers. The purpose of this is to reflect on how female job seekers discuss and are affected by their job seeking.
- To explain the 'why' of job seeking in relation to its institution and internalisation by female job seekers. The purpose of this is to explain why their job seeking is resistant to change.

1.7 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of eight remaining chapters. The following chapter is the literature review. This is followed by a chapter detailing the theoretical framework of this thesis and a methodology chapter detailing the research design. The findings of this thesis are spread across three chapters, concluding with a fourth chapter discussing both the relevance of the

findings in relation to other literature and their implications. Chapter nine concludes this thesis. Each chapter is outlined in more detail below.

Chapter Two: This chapter describes the literature in regards to how we have come to *know* the job seeker in mainstream work psychology. Namely this considers how the job seeker has been conceptualised and in what ways they have been studied.

Chapter Three: This chapter contextualises the job seeker in relation to current cultural ideals. It explores three key concepts, neoliberalism, postfeminism and fantasy, as a way of informing the theoretical foundation of this thesis. The relationship these concepts have to job seekers and the UK labour market are discussed.

Chapter Four: This chapter describes the methodological approach taken in this thesis. This includes a description of qualitative research and its epistemological and ontological premises. It also includes a description of the data collection methods used (unstructured interviews), the approach to data analysis (narrative enquiry) and the way in which data is subsequently articulated using the logics of critical explanation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). This chapter discusses the implications of the research design in terms of knowledge generation and provides the context to each participant in this study.

Chapter Five, six and seven: These chapters provide empirical evidence. Chapter five outlines the social practices of job seeking, naming the taken for granted assumptions associated with the 'what' of job seeking. Chapter Six discusses how job seekers come to institute and internalise job seeking, and outlines the affective implications of this in relation to their job search. Chapter Seven discusses why job seekers institute and internalise job seeking and become gripped by their practices and ideals.

Chapter Eight: This chapter justifies the naming of particular job seeking logics in relation to the three data chapters by detailing further literature to support these findings.

Chapter Nine: This chapter closes the entire thesis by synthesising previous discussions and proposing avenues for future research.

Chapter Two

2. Literature Review: Conceptualising the job seeker

2.1 Introduction

This chapter details how the 'job seeker' has come to be understood and in what ways they have been studied, within work psychology literature. This is done through a systematic, narrative review of job seeking literature found in mainstream work psychology. This approach enables a demonstration of both the breadth and depth of searches undertaken into mainstream work psychology literature. Whilst not typically found within a critical perspective or narrative review process (Cronin et al., 2008), taking a systematic approach for this section has enabled sense-making of a number of patterns both across and within work psychology literature. This provides transparency, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the work psychology literature on job seeking and shows how literature has been selected.

This chapter articulates how mainstream work psychology literature currently positions the job seeker. In doing so, a number of taken for granted assumptions about job seeking are demonstrated. This literature review responds to the question: How have we come to understand the job seeker within mainstream work psychology literature? This chapter concludes by presenting a rationale for the necessity to consider alternative theoretical perspectives through which to view the job seeker.

2.2 Defining the boundaries of this review

This literature review is concerned with: (1) job seeking practices (behaviours, actions, emotions) as defined within mainstream work psychology and (2) job seeking as described from the job seeker (rather than organisational) perspective. Identifying these topics of interest prior to beginning a literature review helped to generate both search terms and

appropriate databases to use in order to produce a focused literature review (Cronin et al, 2008). To support this process literature was included or excluded based on the following reasons:

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
Studies that focus on: (1) perspective of the job seeker prior to engagement in recruitment; (2) have job seeking as the primary focus of study; and (3) emphasise behaviours, actions or emotions.	Articles focusing on: unemployment exclusively; selection and assessment procedures/ methods/ validation measures; recruitment; organisational attractiveness (e.g. policies/ messaging, mediums)
English language only (language of the researcher)	Journals regarding occupational health; therapy; counselling or rehabilitation
High income countries (to reflect the context in which subsequent data collection occurs)	Low to middle income countries

For the purposes of this review, literature has been included because of its ability to explain the concept 'job seeker' within mainstream work psychology literature. Literature of interest therefore focuses on job seeking behaviours, actions and emotions solely from the perspective of the seeker. The job seeker's perspective is exclusively focused on in order to understand how this has been positioned to date within mainstream work psychology literature, but also so as not to privilege the organisational voice over that of the individual (Doci and Bal, 2018). Whilst there is a large body of work established in work psychology

about recruitment processes and selection and assessment procedures, literature about job seeking generally falls outside of these traditional and dominant areas. Therefore, literature regarding recruitment interactions (i.e. the number/ types of job applicants applying for positions, the applicant pool, attracting applicants, and applicant reactions (e.g. Breaugh, 2008; 2013; McCarthy et al., 2017)) along with selection processes (selecting applicants to interview/ test, job offers) has been excluded. This decision was made namely because literature regarding recruitment is often undertaken from the organisational perspective whereas job search literature generally considers the seeker perspective (Acikgoz, 2019).

The following search string was used for its ability to provide breadth to the search: Job seek* OR Job applic* OR Job hunt* OR Job search*. All terms were used according to the principles of each database and the wild card (asterix) was used to capture studies using for example job seeking, job seek or job seeker(s). Three major social science databases (ABI/Inform, Scopus and PsychInfo) were used to obtain articles specific to the field of work psychology, organisational psychology, industrial psychology and organisational theory. These databases were selected in consultation with an information specialist based at the university's library and chosen because of their ability to capture a wide range of contexts in which work psychology and job seeker may appear together. Articles were initially screened by article title and abstract, with a date range between 2000 and 2019. However, during screening it was considered more pertinent to include articles that reflected a labour market and research environment impacted by both the financial crisis and social media advancements. Therefore only articles post 2007 were kept. This selection process is outlined in the diagram in appendix one.

Twenty-seven articles are included in this review, details about which can be found in appendix two. These articles were coded using NVivo 12 and clustered into themes capable of responding to the research question. Key concepts such as definitions, the stages of job

seeking and the use of personal resources within job seeking literature are discussed. Methodological approaches are explored, as is who the 'typical' job seeker is.

2.3 Key concepts in job search literature

A number of studies within the job search field draw on the seminal work of Kanfer et al, (2001). Since the publication of this meta-analytic review, scholars have used several key concepts in similar ways, which has generated a degree of consistency and understanding within mainstream work psychology. These concepts include the terms: job search intensity, job search effort, job search self-efficacy and job search itself.

Job search is defined as goal directed activities that are undertaken in response to a discrepancy between employment goal and current state (Kanfer et al., 2001). In this respect job search is perceived as self-regulated patterns of activity (Sun et al., 2013), that utilise several competencies of an individual such as attributes, skills, traits and characteristics (Lyons et al., 2013). It is perceived as complex in nature (Van Hooft and De Jong, 2009), often requiring the management of emotions and motivation (Turban et al., 2009).

Job search effort refers to the overall effort spent looking for a job. Job search effort is said to be impacted by time pressures (the sense of urgency behind one's job search), the level of uncertainty it holds, and the social comparisons made in relation to peers' job search efforts (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2013). Job search intensity refers to the frequency of this effort (i.e. behaviours such as information gathering and subsequent action). Job search self-efficacy refers to the sense of personal agency or success perceived by an individual when undertaking job search activities, with low job search self-efficacy reflecting a belief that, "one lacks job search skill" (Sun et al., 2013, p. 773).

Typically referring to one or more of these concepts, job search literature tends to measure job seeking in one of three ways, namely by: (1) considering the antecedents of job seeking

behaviours and the extent to which these are consequently linked to employment goals; (2) exploring 'actual' behaviours such as job search intensity or effort in relation to, for example, personality measures, self-efficacy, self-esteem, financial strain and/or social support; or (3) looking at outcomes such as employment status, duration of search or number of interviews in relation to job search behaviours (Acikgoz, 2019). Distinctions between specific phases or aspects of the job search such as behaviours or strategies frequently determine the area of study (see Barbulescu, 2015 for an example of how behaviours change during different stages of the job search, or see Van Hooft and Noordzij, 2009 for an example of a study focusing on job search behaviours and reemployment). Whilst this has fostered a degree of consensus within job search scholarship, it has become particularly narrow in what it measures. This may have limited a more diverse approach to how job searching can be conceptualised.

Addressing this and specifically calling for diversification, Acigoz (2019) provides a narrative overview of both employee recruitment and job seeker literature. In doing so Acigoz (2019) proposes an integrative model of job search and employee recruitment in a bid to combine both perspectives for future research. This integrative model emphasises the longitudinal nature of the job seeking process and the need to take a multi-perspective approach in order to account for less linear experiences. Manroop (2017) and Manroop and Richardson (2016) also make the case for broadening job search scholarship in order to better understand job seeking behaviours, suggesting both a multidisciplinary approach (Manroop and Richardson, 2016) and a multiparadigmatic approach (Manroop, 2016). To date however there remains very little diversification within the job search literature, particularly with respect to labour market considerations.

2.4 The process of job seeking

Several papers included in this review make explicit the notion that job seeking is a process, one comprised of a series of stages or phases (Van Hoye et al., 2009; Von Walter et al., 2012; Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2013; Barbulescu, 2015). Both Barbulescu (2015) and Lopez-Kidwell et al, (2013) undertake research that views job seeking as a series of different stages including (1) selecting jobs to apply for; (2) submitting applications or CVs; and (3) preparing for interviews. Each stage may be fuelled by varying degrees of urgency (the setting of explicit or implicit deadlines upon their job search) but is crucially seen as,

> *"A fluid, evolving process characterized by numerous changes often requiring job seekers to make corresponding adjustments"* (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2013, p. 1655)

These adjustments may include changes to the intensity of the job search (Sun et al., 2013) or the use of different tactics such as goal-directed preparation (e.g. information gathering) or activity (e.g. applications) (Turban et al., 2009; Van Hoye et al., 2009). Assumptions within the literature suggest that job seeking behaviours, when done 'correctly', act as a funnel, directing a job seeker's attention towards selecting appropriate employment for themselves. Success is contingent on how well a job seeker has acquired information not only to provide them with the skills to compile a cover letter and CV but also to compile it in a way that reflects the 'right' knowledge or understanding of the job on offer and/or of the organisation at hand (see for example Barbulescu, 2015 and Born et al., 2018). Indeed, as De Battisti et al, (2016, p. 818) suggest,

> *"…it is more important to apply for the right job than to apply often"*

Whilst job search literature does not generally consider broader contextual factors such as labour market forces, there are also a number of different ways job search studies are framed. For example, Ali et al, (2016) explore the impact of rudeness and discourteous treatment on

the self-regulatory processes underlying job searching. Van Hoye et al, (2009) and Barbulescu, (2015) consider the role of social networks and its impact during and on the outcomes of the job search process, and Van Hooft and De Jong, (2009) consider job seeking amongst individuals looking for temporary work. Job seeking has also been considered through the lens of: mature job seekers (Zacher and Bock, 2014); age-stereotypes (Lyons et al., 2014); gender (Sallop and Kirby, 2007; Taylor et al., 2012; Barbulescu and Bidwell, 2013; Hogue et al., 2019); job search strategies amongst underemployed immigrants (Guerrero and Rothstein, 2012) and unemployed individuals (Creed et al., 2009; De Battisti et al., 2016; Helmes and Fudge, 2017). Other literature considers job search within a particular framework (e.g. temporal, Von Walter et al., 2012), theoretical perspective (e.g. social cognitive theory, Zikic and Saks, 2009) or measure (e.g. self-efficacy, Fort et al., 2011; intervention effectiveness, Liu et al., 2014; job search effort, Lopez-Kidwell, 2013; process dynamics, Sun et al, 2013; personality, Turban et al, 2009; goal orientation, Van Hooft and Noordzij, 2009).

Whilst many of these studies position themselves as considerate of environmental or contextual factors acting upon the job search (such as for example Van Hooft and Noordzij's 2009 paper exploring job seeking for temporary work), overall they tend to consider job seekers as highly agentic in their pursuit of work with choice and autonomy over the external labour market conditions. Job seekers are referred to as 'active agents' or 'proactive agents', capable of adaptation and self-management (Zikic and Saks, 2009; Born et al., 2018). Also observed in the literature are papers that discuss job seeking as goal-directed and self-regulated. Examples of this include,

> *"The job search process is a dynamic, self-regulated process in which individuals need to manage their emotions, motivation, and thoughts while engaging in goal-directed behaviors"* (Turban et al., 2009, p.554)

and,

> *"Job seeking involves the expenditure of time, effort, and resources on activities such as preparing a resume, reading job advertisements, and contacting employers"* (Creed et al., 2009, p.806)

Whilst not a misleading description, this framing of job seeking positions a job seeker as acting in isolation rather than part of a wider socio-economic system, placing the onus of responsibility (e.g. personal resources, self-regulation) on the job seeker. Critiques from within the job search literature tend to focus on the need to consider: how certain behaviours may change across different stages of the job search process (Lopez-Kidwell et al., 2013) or how the field can improve the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of job search interventions (Liu et al, 2014). As such, job search literature appears to remain intent on positioning the job search as sequential and linear. For example, Guerrero and Rothstein in their study exploring the job search strategies of underemployed immigrants suggest that,

> *"Job search intensity leads to number of job interviews, which leads to number of job offers, and in turn, leads to lower levels of underemployment"* (Guerrero and Rothstein, 2012, p. 339)

When job seeking is also acknowledged as stressful, draining and emotionally exhausting (Liu et al, 2014), it may, according to work psychology require the use and reliance upon an individual's personal resources.

2.5 Personal resources in job search literature

Job seeking literature tends to suggest that high levels of self-efficacy have the ability to influence job seeking positively (Fort et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2013; Ali et al., 2016). Moreover, positive management of emotions and mood may lead to greater chances of

reemployment or employment success (Creed et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013). Stress, uncertainty, negativity and anxiety tend to be conceptualised as states that are disruptive to job seeking and in need of being managed (Creed et al., 2009; Turban et al., 2009; Zikic and Saks, 2009; De Battisti et al., 2013; Lyons et al., 2013). Ways to address any discrepancy in self-efficacy have been related to improving one's job seeking clarity (Zikic and Saks, 2009), self-exploration through professional networks (Barbulescu, 2015) or being taught specific job seeking skills (Turban et al., 2009; Van Hooft and Noordzij, 2009; Liu et al., 2014).

This framing seemingly borrows from the positive psychology movement suggesting that individuals who perceived themselves as successful will achieve greater levels of success, thus in the same vein, those who perceive themselves as employable will achieve greater levels of employability (Turban et al., 2009; De Battisti et al., 2016). It is therefore not a surprise to see several articles proposing confidence building and employability training as solutions to enhance job seeker's capabilities (Liu et al., 2014). Also significant is the literature that indicates the benefits of enlisting social support in the form of peer networks, career counsellors/ job club/interventions and extended social networks (Van Hoye et al., 2009; Guerrero and Rothstein, 2012; Liu et al., 2014; Barbulescu, 2015). Job search literature considers that individuals who are capable of networking more, particularly with those perceived as being of 'higher status' (e.g. in both occupation and/or education) are more likely to have greater employment success (Van Hoye et al., 2009).

In their study exploring psychological distress amongst Australian welfare receiving job seekers, Helmes and Fudge (2017) discuss the compulsory participation in actively seeking work if claiming welfare, in a bid to encourage self-sufficiency. Yet participation in wider job search interventions may also create psychological distress if welfare and support are connected to compulsory activities. Whilst these links are not yet clear, active welfare policies have not previously worked well in the UK (Helmes and Fudge, 2017). This points to

the permeation of the job search beyond just the individual, normalising it as a practice that roots the individual as responsible not just to themselves but also to society in relation to finding employment. Indeed, Zacher and Bock (2014, p. 1094) position the individual job seeker as a societal burden, through which intervention (such as training programmes and coaching) can help alleviate their economic pressure and improve job seeker wellbeing. Literature positioning personal resources as 'useful' within the job search context may provide a normalising discourse to how one should 'do' job seeking. In doing so and without a critical lens, it masks both the access one has or doesn't have to these resources and the impact of using personal resources in the context of job seeking.

2.6 The job seeker in work psychology

Of the 27 studies identified in this review, empirical populations within each study are generally mixed. Two studies focus specifically on age-related dispositions i.e. older or mature adults (Lyons et al., 2013; Zacher and Bock, 2014). Other studies include heterogeneous groups including both employed and unemployed individuals as part of the same study, other still focus specifically on unemployed but active job seekers. Some studies make use of student populations, using either MBA students or those in their final year, about to embark on job seeking, whereas others draw on those using job support centres or recruitment platforms. In the empirical papers included in this study (n=23), all job seekers were deemed as 'active', meaning they were using specific behaviours (i.e. information seeking, networking) in order to attain a new form of employment, as opposed to those not actively seeking work but potentially open to opportunities (passive job seekers) (Acikgoz, 2019). Studies generally had an equal gender split between those identifying as male and as female.

This description is provided as a means of giving a general overview of who the typical job seeker is depicted as. Of note are the four studies specifically concerning gender, which largely indicate the dominance of social norms, gender socialisation and stereotyping in relation to the role this plays in influencing the type of jobs sought. More specifically, Taylor et al, (2012) suggest that black women may be affected more so in their job search because of either witnessing or holding perceptions about the negative stereotyping of black men in a UK labour market. Sallop and Kirby (2007), Barbulescu and Bidwell (2013) and Hogue et al, (2019) all suggest that female job seekers place greater emphasis on finding work that provides a degree of work-life balance and an element of self-consistency to their identity. This small body of literature demonstrates that gendered norms may operate during job seeking, particularly affecting women seeking work. They suggest that even at the start of their careers women are seeking work-life balance because of roles they may take up later in their lives, namely the role of primary care-giver. In this respect, little to no space is given to the ways in which work practices may evolve to support women and men in expanding, shifting or challenging their traditional roles.

2.7 Methodological approaches in job search literature

Of the 27 papers identified in this review, 23 were empirical and the remaining four were conceptual papers (Acikgoz, 2019; Manroop and Richardson, 2016; Manroop, 2017) and a special issue introduction (Born et al, 2018). All of the empirical papers used statistical data. Whilst each study is nuanced in its data collection methods (i.e. ranging from experimental methods, paper and pen questionnaires or online surveys) and duration (one-off, time-lagged, longitudinal), what this reflects is the dominance of quantitative methods and positivist epistemology within the job search literature. Causal relationships between variables capable of predicting job search success are the presiding approach to job search literature. This does

not however incorporate an understanding of institutional factors or the lived experiences of job seekers (Manroop, 2017). This naturally has a bearing on the type of theory used to frame each study and the extent to which findings themselves can or even are intended to be situated in a wider discourse or context.

That said, one paper found through citation tracking take a qualitative approach, explores the, "contextual milieu" in which job search takes place for both unemployed and employed job seekers" (Wanberg et al., 2012, p. 889). Interviewing 72 employed, unemployed and partially employed white collar workers, Wanberg et al, (2012) suggest that employed and unemployed job seekers experience the same difficulties, proposing a series of job search demands that job seekers can learn from, adapt and become resilient to. Whilst the qualitative nature of this paper provides insight to show how job seeking experiences may be similar for anyone seeking work, a number of contextual variables capable of predicting causal relationships with job seeking outcomes are still presented. Therefore, a positivist approach remains present, even in experiential data, limiting an understanding of the affective impact of job seeker responses to their search.

The intention here is to critique the dominance of a quantitative approach to exploring job seeking, and highlight that this way of seeing the world produces only one type of knowledge about job seeking. Ways of knowing are diverse and so viewing job seeking through this one lens limits other forms of legitimate knowledge such as qualitative experience or theoretical heterogeneity (Hollway, 2001). The dominance of positivism and quantitative methodology has long been a critique of scholars on the margins of mainstream work psychology (Cassell and Symon, 2006; Weiss and Rupp, 2011; Pratt and Bonaccio, 2016). In the context of exploring job seeking, this inevitably neglects the interactive meaning-making that occurs between an individual and their social worlds (Manroop, 2017). Taking a quantified approach to exploring job seeking also presents simplistic solutions to structural issues such as

confidence building or resilience training for job seekers. This may inadvertently support a neoliberal agenda by training job seekers to search in the 'right way'. Indeed, as Chandler and Reid suggest,

> *"The resilient subject is one that has been taught, and accepted, the lessons concerning the danger of autonomy and the need to be 'capacity-built' in order to make the 'right choices' in development of sustainable responses to threats and dangers posed by its environment"* (Chandler and Reid, 2016, p. 5)

Quantification of qualitative experiences thus masks the psychological work individuals are expected to undertake to make themselves hireable.

2.8 A note on excluded papers

Worthy of some acknowledgment is the literature excluded from this review. Papers were grouped into exclusion reasons including: country (27 papers); unable to access (7 papers); not job seeker's perspective (351 papers); not about job seeking (631 papers); pre 2007 (30 papers); recruitment interactions and messaging (157 papers); rehab (57 papers); and unemployment (8 papers). This review specifically sought literature reflective of a similar context to which the study would be carried out in, namely high income, western settings (e.g. UK, Australia, USA, Canada and some European countries such as Germany, Netherlands). This excluded 27 studies, primarily from Eastern contexts such as China, India, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Iran for example. In doing so, a potentially alternative view on job seekers has been omitted. However this also highlights the relatively small number of studies conducted outside of a western context, as identified by this particular search strategy. This may be indicative of a North American/ Eurocentric view held within work psychology and the limited inclusion of other cultures and countries that may perceive work and employment, differently.

Similarly the experiences of able-bodied job seekers and those without mental illness have been inadvertently prioritised because of excluding papers (57) from journals outside the discipline of work psychology such as counselling, rehabilitation, occupational health and occupational therapy. Of the 27 papers included in this review, none explored the perspectives of disabled persons. This may reflect another limitation on the part of work psychology to include these voices, diversifying the experiences of both workers and job seekers.

The field appears to consistently prioritise the organisational voice, as can be observed in the number of papers excluded that discussed job seeking from the organisational perspective (157 papers on recruitment and 351 on the recruiter/ organisational perspective). This may reflect the traditional view within work psychology whereby the organisation is privileged above the individual (Doci and Bal, 2018).

2.9 The neoliberal pulse of mainstream job search literature

The mainstream job search literature reflects one of the ways in which ideological work practices can influence both a field of knowledge and a way of being. Ideology in this sense refers to what is silenced but upheld as natural (Bal and Doci, 2018). This will be discussed in more detail in chapter three. As Doci and Bal (2018) suggest, as researchers we have a responsibility to study both the adoption of dominant work practices and also how the research we do adopts particular assumptions associated with the workplace. Ways in which this comes through in the job seeking literature includes firstly the positioning of the job seeker as capable of rational self-regulation, self-management and adaptability. This can be seen in the specific reference to emotion-control and individual responsibility for job seeking behaviours. Secondly, the self-regulated job seeker appears as decontexualised and disassociated from external job market forces and the narrative implications of this. Instead

the job seeker is positioned as a free, proactive agent who can self-improve by networking and learning the skills of job seeking through intervention as a way of overcoming labour market discrepancies. Thirdly, scholars researching job search rely on positivist methods which position quantification as a dominant approach over and above exploring the qualitative experiences of job seekers themselves.

Whilst the job search literature within work psychology presents a degree of consensus to key concepts and ways of doing job search research, several taken for granted assumptions about how to conceptualise job seeking are also upheld within this paradigm. For example there is generally the assumption that any work is better than no work, with unemployment being positioned as both bad for one's health and a burden on society (see for example the opening paragraphs of Van Hoye et al., 2009: Van Hooft and Noordzij, 2009 or Zacher and Bock, 2014). However, commonplace now is less security in the workplace (i.e. prioritisation of temporary work over permanent contracts) and more transactional interactions regarding labour and remuneration (Standing, 2011). As such, some individuals are more likely to be exposed to poor working conditions (e.g. low pay, temporary work, few development opportunities) that are not necessarily better for their health whilst at the same time experiencing a limited safety net in the absence of work (Bal and Doci, 2018).

There is also the assumption that individuals act rationally (even during periods of uncertainty or stress) and are capable of identifying and using their personal resources to their own advantage. Yet these assumptions mask the potential inequalities associated with this outlook, failing to consider for example how one might have access certain resources and networks or not. Who and what may be marginalised by this outlook remains obscured, favoured instead by the focus on individual behaviours or personality traits within the job search literature. This supports a survival of the fittest mentality to job seeking relegating those unsuccessful as not possessing the 'right' traits or competencies and therefore in need

of ‘intervention’. The fact that there are no apparent critiques to this view, or consideration of how it might impact on job seekers seems pertinent in a time of rising inequalities and work insecurities. As such, work psychology literature on job seeking seems particularly susceptible to being influenced by a neoliberal ideology, a concept (and its implications) which will be articulated in more depth momentarily, in chapter three.

2.10 Why studying the job seeker is necessary

Dominant within mainstream work psychology literature are positivist approaches to exploring job seeking through quantitative means and with a neoliberal undertow, positioning job seekers as rational subjects, capable of self-management and linear progression through a labour market. Job seekers are positioned as autonomous subjects and literature pushes the notion that the harder one works to find work, the more likely one will be to secure work. This is reflective of a highly neoliberal ideology within work psychology. Yet, at any given time, job seekers are likely to be submitting numerous applications and potentially engaging in interviews with different companies, or follow up interviews with the same company (Boswell et al., 2012). It may, for some, involve short term contracts, part time work and zero hours working as well as reflect certain gendered expectations about what type of work is ‘right’. As such, individuals may experience frequent or prolonged occurrences of job seeking and difficulties in obtaining work.

What remains absent from the current body of literature concerning job seekers is (1) a deeper critique of the type of labour market individuals are applying within; (2) qualitative perspectives; and (3) theoretical diversity. Scholars within the field even suggest that in order to understand job seeking this diversity is necessary not just in terms of theory but also in terms of moment to moment,

> *"Because the dynamics of job search is a virtually untapped area of examination, it is important to translate and develop theoretical frameworks that are suitable for capturing what happens in job search over both long (e.g., week to week and month to month) and short periods (e.g., day to day)"* (Wanberg et al., 2010, p. 789)

For the remainder of this thesis the same definition of job search as conceptualised in both this review and previous work is used. This is done to demonstrate how a critique can be provided from the same starting point. In this respect job seeking is referred to as an activity that encompasses any individual (e.g. employed, unemployed or underemployed) seeking work in an attempt to bridge the gap between their current position or status to one which is desired or different (Kanfer et al., 2001). In this respect, job seeking remains considered as a multi-faceted, iterative process that takes place prior to any contact with recruitment processes.

In all other aspects this thesis departs from traditional work psychology views on the job seeker. Primarily it intends to make visible the social norms currently masked within job seeking literature by placing job seekers within our current socio-economic climate by exploring the impact of job seeking narratives through the individual social worlds of job seekers themselves. This is done more explicitly in the next section by providing alternative theoretical frameworks through which to situate the job seeker. As Manroop (2017) and Manroop and Richardson (2016) suggest, this calls for an opening of disciplines and paradigms.

2.11 Conclusion

In this chapter an overview of how mainstream work psychology literature positions the job seeker is provided. In this frame of reference, the job seeker is described as rational and enterprising and the job search as an iterative process requiring individual effort, intention

and dedication. Work psychology as a discipline has the opportunity to expand its current conceptualising of job seekers by drawing from other disciplines to enrich and make contemporary its way of thinking about job seeking. In the following chapter the job seeker is contextualised in their living history by drawing on the concepts of neoliberalism and postfeminism. This is done in order to develop an alternative reading of the mainstream work psychology perspective outlined in this chapter to show what might influence and impact upon a job seeker in a 21st century labour market.

Chapter Three

3. Theoretical Framework: A (neoliberal) postfeminist ideology

3.1 Introduction

This thesis takes a social constructionist approach to exploring job seekers, reflecting the social interplay of individuals and their environment, which in this case is a 21st century, UK labour market. The social constructionist approach will be articulated in more detail in chapter four. However, it requires accounting for language in context. In doing so, both the explicit sense-making capabilities of individuals, as well as their implicit influences such as ideas formed on the basis of shared ideals and everyday practices can be articulated. To support this process this thesis draws on three key concepts: neoliberalism, postfeminism and fantasy. These concepts form the theoretical foundation of this thesis, enabling job seeking to be conceptualised as an affective experience and as a result of shared language and ideals. Ideals in this thesis are taken to mean culturally and socially constructed characteristics or values associated with a particular role or way of being that can be used to account for performance (Adamson and Kelan, 2019).

Exploring job seeking in this way goes beyond ascribing meaning to governance (as seen amongst Foucaultian scholars of job seeking, for example, Barratt, 2003; Fogde, 2011; Boland 2016; 2018), or to a series of variables as outlined in the previous chapter. Consideration therefore, of the taken for granted aspects of what it means to be a job seeker, as constructed by job seekers themselves, enables an opportunity to critically identify, describe and explain the implications of the what, how and why of job seeking in a 21st century, UK labour market context.

3.2 Neoliberalism: What is it and why does it matter

Neoliberalism is both a political and economic concept, with a variety of associated meanings (Choat, 2019). It is largely viewed as a response to liberate the economy from post-war embedded liberalism which at the time sought to provide full employment, welfare and regulation but saw a declining rate of profit (Harvey, 2005; Choat, 2019). Neoliberalism as a political and economic project became widely drawn on in the UK under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s through a system of profit maximisation and deregulation. It was then followed by the New Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997, whereby greater emphasis was placed on consumerism and individual choice as opposed to state regulation and intervention (Standing, 2011). Following the financial crisis in 2007, an already flourishing neoliberal system came to bear much more strongly on the individual, with social norms beginning to dictate the necessity for personal responsibility over what were once state issues such as employment security. This included the reduction of government intervention in societal aspects such as employment protections, labour agreements and social support (Choat, 2019).

Since 2007, various neoliberal policies including the implementation of extreme austerity measures, the roll out of universal credit, government cuts on social services, education and healthcare, has left little doubt that personal economic security is entirely incumbent on the individual (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Locating principle tenants of neoliberalism can help articulate how this operates. For example, neoliberalism can be understood as a set of practices typified by ideals including individualisation, choice and competition both within and between individuals (Dardot and Laval, 2013). This manifests in practice of free markets, free trade, deregulation and little to no state intervention in order to maximise profit making as a marker of successful human welfare (Harvey, 2005).

The recent use of neoliberalism as a practice has therefore had significant implications for the way lives are lived out. This has led to neoliberalism being seen as a discursive construct capable of shaping and reinforcing behaviours, identities and values. As such it is now a term widely used within critical studies across a range of disciplines and can signal a form of governmentality or an ideology (Flew, 2014; Bal and Doci, 2018).

In Western society, the job market can be said to operate within a neoliberal ideology, whereby ideal ways of being that support maximisation of individualisation, choice, competition, growth and development in a globalised market abound (Standing, 2011; Flew, 2014; Bal and Doci, 2018). As mentioned in chapter two, ideology represents that which is silenced but upheld as natural (Bal and Doci, 2018). It can be described as a, "process of production of ideals, values and beliefs in social life" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 28). Viewing neoliberalism as an ideology differs from viewing it as a form of governmentality. The neoliberal subject as viewed in self-governing terms is often associated with the work of Foucault and accounts for structures of power without necessarily considering affectivity[1] (Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Musilek et al., 2020).

Previous debates regarding neoliberalism have often centred on the notion of the self as an enterprising or entrepreneurial subject under neoliberalism, positing the self as a business or project (Grey, 1994; McNay, 2009; Scharff, 2016). However, when viewed as an ideology, there is scope to consider not just what but also how and why neoliberalism shapes a subject's[2] moral sensibility (Fleming, 2015) and offers a structure for feelings (Williams,

[1] The term affect is one that is often contested. Affect, as used in this thesis is defined as an "umbrella category" for the organising of "feelings of existence" including emotion (Anderson, 2015, p. 736). This thesis upholds the view that separation of affect and emotion is unhelpful (Schmitz and Ahmed, 2014). Affect as an umbrella term demonstrates, "the way in which feeling is negotiated in the public sphere" (Gorton, 2007, p. 334.) and therefore, as Williams (1961) suggests, becomes structured.

[2] For clarity, this thesis uses the term subject to mean, marked by an identity which is impossible to fully suture together (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). This is an ontological feature which can be empirically identified in moments of disruption to how an individual typically goes about their life.

1961). Therefore, using the term ideology can enable a multifaceted analysis of the subject, neoliberalism and affect. This is significant because not only is a subject encouraged to constantly engage in the neoliberal practice of 'self as project' (Grey, 1994) but it is also shaped to form affective attachments to work such as viewing it as akin to a romantic relationship (McRobbie, 2016; Pagis, 2020). The incitement to find meaning, passion, fulfilment and even love in relation to one's job reflects the lesser explored affective role work also plays within a neoliberal ideology.

This thesis uses the notion of ideology as described by Glynos and Howarth (2007). These authors suggest that for ideology to operate, an individual must subscribe to, and identify with the practices (behaviours, actions and emotions) and ideals (characteristics and values) associated with striving to meet it. In subscribing to these practices and ideals, the individual is likely to be absorbed by and complicit in ideological features in a way that conceals and denies alternative ways of existing. This is described by Glynos and Howarth (2007) as operating within an ideological dimension.

This thesis is concerned with the ideological grip of neoliberalism at the level of the everyday, namely how perceptions of individualisation, choice and competition manifest and form gendered expressions through everyday practices in the context of job seeking. Therefore, viewing neoliberalism as an ideological set of ideals capable of informing ways of being is appropriate. However, identifying the impact of ideology can be particularly challenging because of its implicit nature. The way in which this thesis does this will be articulated in the next chapter, through the methodology. For now, this section has introduced neoliberalism and its significance in order to provide background. What follows is a greater explication of the effects of neoliberalism upon job seekers, extending aspects identified and discussed in chapter two, section 2.9.

3.3 The job seeker within a neoliberal labour market

Within a neoliberal ideology, employment is perceived as a personal responsibility. Emphasis is frequently placed on practices such as mobility, individualisation of career goals, expertise and networking (Roper et al., 2010). Neoliberalism works by providing a moral naturalization to these pursuits, creating an environment that provides the opportunity to better one's self in the name of competition (against both self and other) (Vasterling, 2010). This promotes the idea that success (and failure) is contingent upon individual choice, self-investment and self-interest (Davies, 2016).

Neoliberal practices mentioned previously include commodification and deregulation, a resulting outcome of which places increasing emphasis on profitability and privatisation, at the expense of secure working practices. For example, there has been an increase in destabilised working practices and precarity in the form of short-term contracts and zero hours working (Doci and Bal, 2018). By the time an individual reaches the age of 30, they will have experienced approximately ten different employers (Standing, 2011). The ILO (2018) currently predicts long periods of unemployment for many individuals. As such, one example of how neoliberal ideology effects job seekers is through the practice of transient, unpredictable career paths, against a backdrop of ideals celebrating individual effort and entrepreneurial go-getting, instilling the neoliberal ideals of individualisation, choice and competition.

Another example of neoliberal ideology within the UK labour market is typified in the concept of job seeking itself. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) came into play in the UK in the mid-1990s and were intended to intervene in widespread unemployment by providing support to the unemployed beyond what was previously only financial welfare. This new type of support was established to provide a pathway for those seeking work to be connected with labour market opportunities by enhancing their job seeking practices (Boland

and Griffin, 2015; 2018). Enhancement of job seeking practices included interventions intended to cultivate 'good' job seekers. Advice such as the management of negative emotions; CV guidance encouraging the reinvention or discovery of skills and aptitudes; and well-rehearsed interview performance skills about how to sell oneself became the norm (Boland, 2016). Consequently, a particular vision of work was established, one that firmly established the idea that personal success through individual effort could be achieved through 'good' job seeking. As Boland (2016) points out, the unemployed were no longer categorised as static but instead termed as transitional individuals actively seeking work, i.e. job seekers. This can be clearly observed in changes to the welfare policy 'Pathways to work', where the term 'unemployment benefit' was replaced with 'job seekers allowance' in 1996 (Boland, 2016).

This shift in language and rhetoric from unemployed to job seekers (job seeking) also demonised the concept of unemployment and its implied associated negative behaviours, attitudes and affects. In doing so it canonized the concept of the job seeker and its implied associated positive behaviours, attitudes and affects. The lazy and morally dubious benefit claimant was and still is pitted against the hard-working and morally righteous job seeker as a way of promoting 'good' versus 'bad' neoliberal ideals (Coote and Lyall, 2013; Frayne, 2015). Media representation such as Channel 4s 'Benefits Street' further reinforce these stereotypically negative associations (Frayne, 2015), producing a moral imperative to finding work, reflective of neoliberal ideals to both compete and choose wisely.

The idea that there could be any benefit to being unemployed is removed with this change in language. The replacement of 'benefit' with 'allowance' suggests that if the job seeker meets a specific set of criteria, they will be *allowed* a specified amount of money but in order to do so they must earn it. In order to earn their allowance, job seekers must first present evidence (e.g. how many employers they have contacted) for having actively sought work, reporting

into job centres at specific time intervals (Petrongolo, 2008). With active job seeking framed as contingent upon individual willingness and effort, those without work are conversely associated with laziness and dependency. Structural inequalities that individuals may encounter during their job search are masked by neoliberal ideology. This is witnessed in the removal of state support for full employment as well as an active discouragement of alternatives ways to 'do' work such as opting out of linear career pathways for a period of respite or self-discovery (Frayne, 2015).

This shift in language combined with the need to earn one's allowance, makes job seeking itself a form of work. This work is marked with setbacks, failures and obstacles that an individual must overcome (Sharone, 2007; 2013), with little to no financial, state or employer support. Failure to overcome these setbacks according to Sharone (2007) and his study on 162 job seekers using American job centre support, creates an environment for self-blame. This paves the way for job search interventions, often implemented by job centres but also universities and career counsellors, aimed not at financial support but psychological self-work such as self-improvement to enhance hireability. As Fogde (2011) discusses in her Foucaultian study on white collar job seekers, the pursuit of betterment holds the job seeker personally accountable for both their successes and their failures.

Neoliberal ideals of competition and choice mean that individuals are less likely to remain loyal to their organisations if they believe they can do better elsewhere. Thus in the current UK labour market it is not only the unemployed but also the employed who work as job seekers (ILO, 2018). Exploring the relationship between a neoliberal ideology and the labour market is of significance to researchers exploring issues regarding contemporary work practices because of the disruption it causes to the structural distribution of work across the labour market and the way in which work is affectively positioned within it. Rarely however are the effects of neoliberalism explored at an individual level. As Gill and Scharff (2011)

suggest, this demonstrates a neglect of the everyday lived experience within a neoliberal ideology and the psychosocial effects of neoliberal ideals and practices. This is an important aspect to explore further because of how it shapes who we are and what we become.

3.4 Female job seekers within a neoliberal labour market

Whilst a neoliberal labour market affects both men and women, current narratives emphasise progress in women's rights and equality, viewing women as subjects able to reap the rewards of equal opportunities within both education and work (McRobbie, 2009). This inclusion, rather than exclusion of women has had specific implications for the workplace. For example, developments over the past 40 years have seen rising employment rates for women in the UK (ONS, 2013). Employment law and policy changes since the 1970s, such as the Equal pay Act (1970), the Sex discrimination Act (1975) and lone parent income support (2008) have all worked to facilitate women's access to work[3]. Within a neoliberal ideology, this assumes women are ideal subjects, positioning them as both willing and capable of 'having it all' as a result of previous developments from the field of feminism (Harris, 2004; Gill and Scharff, 2011).

Despite this, women still experience various forms of underemployment (ILO, 2018). They are disproportionately represented in part-time or zero-hour contracts as well as sectors of work such as care and hospitality which means they may not have access to equally distributed work opportunities (ILO, 2019). Furthermore in England, London (the location of this study) is a city where women's employment rates are the lowest, with female graduates more likely to work in lower skilled occupations and earn less than their male counterparts. Women do not reap the same benefits as men for their education. Only 17% of men are either

[3] A more in-depth, historic overview of feminist developments in relation to employment and gender equality can be found in the work of Calas and Smirich, (1996) and Calas, Smirich and Holvino, (2014).

unemployed or outside the labour market compared to 41% of women with higher education (ILO, 2019). This comes despite rhetoric that encourages women away from low paying, gendered jobs such as care work or hairdressing (McRobbie, 2009). Women are also disproportionately affected by the rise of automation because they tend to perform more routine task-based work across a variety of sectors and occupations (IMF, 2018). Lastly, even though family-friendly policies have been established, new mothers are still more likely to miss out on work-place autonomy, participation in managerial or leadership roles and higher wages (ILO, 2019). There remains the repeated call for family friendly policies in order to close the leadership gaps (IMF, 2018; ILO, 2019).

Whilst women may be positioned as able to access workplace opportunities, the above description presents a very different, specifically female reality in existence within the current neoliberal ideology. To overcome this discrepancy women are encouraged to 'Lean In' in order to access a seat at the table (Sandberg, 2013). A lack of confidence or 'presence' is frequently cited as a reason for women not reaching high status positions (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill and Orgad, 2018). To address inequalities, women are encouraged to believe in themselves by working on the way they look and act in order to secure positions within the workplace. This individual psychological and physical work is taken, largely without contestation, to be a key solution to overcoming barriers to female success in the workplace (Orgad, 2017).

In a study exploring female freelance musicians, Scharff, (2016) identifies that when women are required to constantly work at self-improvement (as demanded by a neoliberal labour market) in order to be competitive and work ready, self-critique, self-doubt and anxiety become heightened. Furthermore, Hall and O'Shea, (2013), have noted a rise in individual anxiety, stress, depression and feelings of insecurity occurring in parallel to increased individualised competition. The centralising of individual competition and constant self-work

means that wider, structural labour market issues remain largely unseen or unrecognised by female job seekers and therefore go unchallenged. Instead, self-work premised on female empowerment now appears to be the dominant discourse amongst women. Not only are women led to believe that gender equality has been achieved but they are now encouraged to maximise upon this through empowered actions that rely exclusively on individual effort. Female empowerment in a neoliberal ideology is thus interpreted by women as encouraging them to act as "autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (Gill, 2007, p. 153). This idea is described by feminist academics as 'postfeminism' (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; 2015; Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017; Gill and Scharff, 2017), a concept which will now be examined further.

3.5 Postfeminist ideology

Postfeminism is a term most frequently used in the study of culture, media and gender (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2017; Gill et al., 2017). Whilst it is challenging to pin down a clear definition, the relationship 'post' has to feminism can be understood in four overarching but different ways. One understanding is closely associated to postmodernism or postcolonialism and represents the belief that we have moved beyond feminism and the need to articulate differences based on gender (Brooks, 1997; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017). The second understanding of postfeminism is as an historical perspective i.e. post second-wave feminism. In this sense postfeminism is intended to represent progress, which is why it is sometimes linked to third wave feminism (Hollows, 2000; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014). When understood in this way it firmly operates within rather than against feminist values. The third understanding of postfeminism is antifeminist i.e. the belief that feminist gains may have made the lives of women harder or stripped away their ability to perform and be happy in traditional feminine roles (Whelehan, 2000; Gill and Scharff, 2011).

The fourth and arguably most widely used understanding of postfeminism in scholarship is as a sensibility characterising cultural life (Gill, 2017) and as a discursive formation (Lewis et al., 2017). Credit is given to the earlier feminist movements for gains in women's rights and equality, but also dismissed as no longer necessary (Lewis, 2014). In this respect 'post' signals the liberation and arrival of women in society expressed, circulated and reproduced through values including: individualism, choice and empowerment; the re-emphasis of natural sexual differences; the shift from objectification to voluntary subjectification; self-surveillance (in the form of monitoring and discipline) and the retreat to home as choice rather than obligation (Gill, 2007; 2017; Lewis et al., 2017; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Gender inequalities are regarded as being: in the past; confined to other countries; the status quo and/or to position women as the 'advantaged' sex (Gill et al., 2017). It is this fourth understanding of postfeminism which is explored further and used hereafter.

An important feature of postfeminism is a turn away from broader societal and political understandings and critiques towards an embracing of neoliberal ideals of individualisation, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2017). Personal success is decontextualised from the political and societal and attributed solely to individual qualities and behaviours such as appropriate decision making, attire and self-reflection (Gill, 2009). This however, requires an exhausting and indefinite period of self-discipline, self-improvement and constant self-assessment (i.e. self-work) through the management of personal assets against elusive benchmarks (McRobbie, 2015). For example, this can be most prominently witnessed in the discursive formations regarding motherhood. Postfeminism regards motherhood as either a choice to be legitimately dismissed in favour of an aspirational career; as an aspirational alternative to career (Lewis, 2014; Sorensen, 2017) or as an aspirational addition to career as part of a 'superwoman' act (Rottenberg, 2018). However, aspiring to these ideals and enacting their

associated practices may leave women vulnerable to feelings of failures if they are unable to successfully meet the demands associated with each one (Orgad, 2019).

The term neoliberal feminism has been used by some academics (see for example, Rottenberg, 2014;2018). However, postfeminism is much more widely used especially within UK and they are largely regarded to be synonymous (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Postfeminism undermines, by ignoring, broader feminist goals of political and societal understanding, critique and change because these goals are not valid or recognised in the neoliberal ideology within which feminism is situated. It could therefore be argued that the collective outlook of feminism is incompatible with neoliberalism's individualism. Consequently, the relationship between the two terms suggests that postfeminism emerges as a modified, neoliberal version of feminism (Lewis et al., 2017).

The connection between neoliberalism and postfeminism strongly influences ideas of femininity in contemporary western societies (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). As the postfeminist discourse is immersed within the broader economic imperative of a neoliberal ideology, postfeminism itself can therefore also be considered an ideology (Ronen, 2018). Viewing postfeminism as a distinct ideology can help to more explicitly bridge the gap between the discursive acts of feminism and neoliberalism. Therefore for clarity this thesis upholds Ronen's (2018) description of postfeminism as an ideology. This is because postfeminism translates longstanding structural problems concerning women, such as their place within work, which collective feminist action sought to address, into individualised problems to be overcome through neoliberal ideals of individual behaviours, attitudes and emotions (Cairns and Johnston, 2015), which are then attributed to female empowerment.

Postfeminism is criticised by some for upholding white, middle class, heterosexual values and remaining ignorant to both class and race (for example, Butler, 2013). Others maintain

that is has value by being able to transcend both class and race (Scharff, 2016). Importantly for this thesis, because postfeminism is concerned largely with affect (i.e. feelings and emotions) and ideals, it provides a useful vantage point to study this empirically across a variety of contexts including job seeking. When postfeminism is taken as a critical object of study, it is driven by an interest to study the way in which contemporary feminism is shaped by neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). In this respect and like Litosseliti et al, (2019), it is used as an analytical tool, rather than being the author's stance, to explore the ways in which women navigate work in a UK labour market.

3.6 Postfeminism at work

The term postfeminism and what it espouses has rarely had much empirical explication in the field of work or organisation studies (Lewis, 2014). Research by Kauppinen, (2013) in her critical analysis of the women's magazine Cosmopolitan, notes that readers are encouraged to adapt themselves to the entrepreneurial mould of the current world of work without critique. This is echoed in the work of Ahl and Marlow, (2019) who show how postfeminist assumptions have come to influence policy discourse regarding the expansion of female entrepreneurship. Their findings demonstrate the postfeminist assumptions underpinning policy designed to enhance female entrepreneurship including: framing the enactment of personal potential as a way of harnessing both self-fulfilment and economic contributions; recognising barriers to reaching this potential but urging them to be overcome through individual means; stating women hold self-perceptions of lacking ability; addressing these self-perceptions through specific training encouraging self-reflection; and finally, positioning entrepreneurialism as a way of achieving work-life balance. Arguably there may be some that ask what is problematic about this. However, it is how and why postfeminism responsibilitises female success as individualised that is contentious.

Adamson and Kelan, (2019) in their analysis of autobiographical texts of celebrity businesswomen indicate that the individual responsibility for success is demanded in the form of confidence, control and courage, resulting in a cultural ideal of the 'female hero'. According to Adamson and Kelan's (2019) findings, women are required to actively participate in the construction of their own 'balanced' confidence as a way of getting ahead in business but with little to no advice on how to do this; manage gendered barriers such as balancing work and childcare through extensive control of both themselves and external situations; and exercise courage as a way of dismantling barriers to their success in the workplace. This, as Adamson and Kelan, (2019) suggest, sets a powerful cultural scene for the ideal female role model albeit not one that reflects female emancipation because inequalities are internalised individually, as opposed to being overcome collectively.

Swan's (2017) analysis of coaching websites aimed at businesswomen indicates how these sites act as powerful reproducers of postfeminist tropes. Carefully cultivated content is replete with ideals indicating the need to achieve work-life balance, careful grooming and positivity as key ways of 'having it all'. This, as Swan (2017) suggests results in a form of 'hyperactive femininity' (p. 291) geared towards individualised self-work designed to hide challenges, insecurities and barriers beyond individual control.

Empirically, Ronen's (2018) study of 40 interviews with product designers in the United States shows how the postfeminist ideology obfuscates and propagates gender inequality at work by celebrating essentialized gender differences which confer competitive advantage but simultaneously deny feminine devaluation which accompany these differences. Another empirical example is Baker and Brewis, (2020), whose study of female accountants highlights self-blame as their response to failing to become the ideal worker. This demonstrates that an ideology which upholds self-empowerment and personal responsibility as the only vehicles to success can entertain no other response to failure.

Whilst these studies explore postfeminism within the workplace, what is missing is how women navigate their route into the workplace in the first place, such as through job seeking. Therefore this thesis uses a postfeminist ideology to identify, describe and explain the practices (behaviours, actions and emotions) and ideals (characteristics and values) associated with job seeking, as they pertain to female job seekers in a UK labour market.

3.7 Fantasy

An important aim of this thesis is not only to describe what job seeking is, as undertaken by female job seekers and how they institute and internalise their job seeking, but importantly to explain why they do so. To help explain why, the concept of fantasy, as described by Glynos and Howarth (2007) is useful. A fantasy can be characterised as: (1) it appears impossible or at least improbable to attain; (2) it resists full public disclosure (meaning it can almost, but not fully be articulated) and; (3) it promises 'fullness' to come once obstacles are overcome and it threatens disaster if those obstacles are insurmountable (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Thus, fantasy is always comprised of an ideal, an obstacle to the realisation of the ideal and a sense of enjoyment linked to the transgression of the ideal (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; see chapter four section 4.19 for a full explication of how the term enjoyment is used in relation to fantasy in this thesis).

Fantasy acts as the driving force to creating a narrative structure to an idealised situation and is often comprised of both a beatific side and a horrific side (Glynos, 2008a; b). It functions to fill a narrative gap which occurs between a subject's reality and their self-perception of their ideal image. In doing so, fantasy and its related functions result in the concealment of alternative narrative and affective opportunities to active social practices. This makes practices and their associated ideals continue unchallenged because they appear incontestable and natural.

In the case of the ideal working woman espoused within a postfeminist ideology (i.e. one who is personally responsible for and empowered by their own success), evidence suggests that attainment of this 'fullness' is rare. This is because the marginalisation of women through either underemployment or underutilisation remains present in a neoliberal labour market (ILO, 2019), it just exists alongside ideals for women to be more ambitious (McRobbie, 2015; 2016). In spite of or perhaps even because of this, many women still strive to overcome individualised obstacles in order to reach promised fullness (i.e. success or fulfilment through work). However, what this success or fulfilment is or entails remains resistant to full public disclosure (i.e. clear articulation) and is always future-orientated. Thus the ideal working woman espoused by a postfeminist ideology can be considered fantasy.

There is great significance in acknowledging the role of fantasy within the study of work because of the affective force and emotional reactions it imbues (Cederstrom and Spicer, 2014; Arnaud and Vidaillet, 2017). Fantasy has largely been associated with the field of psychoanalysis, an understanding that has been taken up by management and organisational scholars (see for example the work of Glynos, 2008b; Bloom and Cederström, 2009; Driver, 2009; Bloom, 2016). In this thesis, the term fantasy is used in relation to the everyday construction of "what might be", as it pertains to wishes and desires shaped by wider cultural forces (Orgad, 2017). As Orgad (2017) demonstrates, fantasy in this vein is capable of both attracting and impeding women. In her study into an American TV show, The Good Wife. Orgad (2017) juxtaposes accounts of women who have left careers after having children and suggests that the fantasy of successfully combining motherhood and career, as portrayed by cultural references in The Good Wife, shapes a women's sense of self in both the context of motherhood and work. It does this by offering something to believe in that is also of cultural value.

Further examples of fantasy used in a similar way include the work of both Cairns (2013) and Radway (1984). Cairns (2013) in her study into the impact of neoliberal educational discourses on young people suggests that the idealisation of the self-reliant, future-oriented subject propagates an internalisation of neoliberal uncertainty which young people manage affectively. To help them do so, they construct fantasies of future mobility in relation to ideals about the good job, the good home and good education. According to Radway (1984) and her study of why women read romance, fantasy plays a key role in driving attachments and motivations. She suggests that fantasy offers an escape from reality, a way of drawing attention away from present surroundings, particularly so if situations are too onerous or overwhelming.

Fantasy in this thesis is used in the same way as Orgad (2017), Cairns (2013) and Radway (1984) describe, to explain why female job seekers uphold, perpetuate, propagate job seeking ideals demanded by a postfeminist ideology, despite their failure. In this thesis fantasy is theoretically underpinned by the role it plays in relation to ideology, as articulated by Glynos and Howarth (2007), which will be further explained in chapter four. It is used as a concept capable of showing why the ideals of a postfeminist ideology are both persuasive and believable to women in the context of job seeking, supporting the enactment of behaviours and affects by concealing viable alternatives (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). In order to more fully articulate why fantasy grips female job seekers and show how this has been located at an empirical level, section 4.19 in chapter four will discuss this in more depth.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter the theoretical foundation integral to this thesis has been presented. The concepts of neoliberalism, postfeminism and fantasy enable an exploration and understanding of (1) what job seeking is, as undertaken by female job seekers; (2) how they institute and

internalise their job seeking and; (3) why they institute and internalise their job seeking –and why this becomes resistant to change. Neoliberalism has been discussed as an ideology comprising ideals including individualism, choice and competition (Standing, 2011; Flew, 2014; Bal and Doci, 2018). Postfeminism is presented as both a cultural sensibility (Gill, 2007; 2017; Gill et al., 2017) and a discursive formation (Lewis et al., 2017). However, it is also an ideology when seen as a version of feminism immersed within and modified by the economic imperatives of a neoliberalism (Ronen, 2018).

Evidence suggests that women are a group specifically underemployed and underutilised within a UK labour market (ILO, 2019; OECD, 2019). Yet a postfeminist ideology espouses that it is possible to achieve the promise of fullness (i.e. success or fulfilment through work) once obstacles are overcome through individual efforts (McRobbie, 2015) such as by 'leaning-in' (Sandberg, 2013). What this fullness actually is or means, resists disclosure or clear articulation and is always future oriented, thus a postfeminist ideology and what it espouses can be considered a fantasy.

In a climate where prolonged periods of job seeking may become the norm (Rubery et al., 2018), ideas about the what, how and why of job seeking arise, and the impact this has on the job seeker, become increasingly important. This thesis seeks to explore the extent to which a postfeminist ideology is experienced by the individual job seeker. In the following chapter the methodology used to articulate this is described.

Chapter Four

4. Methodology: Doing critical work psychology research

4.1 Introduction

This chapter identifies and discusses the methodological approach to exploring the what, how and why of job seeking as narrated by female job seekers during their search. The study's research aims and questions are established in relation to the subsequent research design. This chapter outlines the necessity of taking an inductive, qualitative approach, drawing on the principles of narrative enquiry to explore the journey of job seekers through a series of unstructured interviews. Consideration of participant sample size, theoretical saturation and researcher reflexivity are addressed, as is how data is analysed and articulated.

4.2 Research aims and questions

Identified in chapters two and three were two different ways to conceptualise what it means to be a job seeker in a UK based labour market. Chapter two described the mainstream job search literature, demonstrating the way in which this body of knowledge both masks and also reproduces neoliberal job seeking ideals (e.g. self-regulation, emotion control, behaviour interventions to self-improve). Whilst helpful in terms of articulating one domain of knowledge, this has been done at the neglect of the contextual and gendered practices of job seeking and their associated narratives. Indeed, some scholars have suggested the need for a multi-paradigmatic, multidisciplinary approach to address this neglect (Manroop, 2017; Manroop and Richardson, 2016). Therefore, chapter three provided a more critical reading to the mainstream work psychology literature by contextualising the job seeker within a postfeminist ideology.

Making visible the ways in which job seekers position themselves during job seeking may account for the taken for granted ways associated with how to *be* a job seeker and *do* job seeking, as well as the impact of this within a job search context. Three overarching aims therefore inform this thesis. The first aim is to explore what is understood by job seeking as undertaken by female job seekers in the context of a UK labour market. The purpose of this is to explore the iterative process between practices of job seeking and the taken for granted assumptions (i.e. ideals) they rely on. The second aim is to understand how job seeking becomes instituted and internalised within the narratives of job seekers. The third aim is to understand why job seeking is instituted and internalised, resisting any notion of change. As such, the following research questions have been constructed:

1. What is understood by job seeking as undertaken by female job seekers in a UK labour market?
2. How is job seeking instituted and internalised by female job seekers in a UK labour market?
3. Why is job seeking instituted and internalised by female job seekers in a UK labour market?

Based on these research questions, taking an interpretative, qualitative stance to how individuals make sense of their experiences through conversation is the focus of this research. Qualitative research typically makes use of words and language to explore and understand the meanings and social aspects of research participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, in order to understand this process, shifting between individual, cultural and societal perspectives is an important aspect of this research and therefore requires a research design capable of facilitating this. This chapter now provides an explanation and justification of the research approach underpinning this thesis in relation research design, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this approach.

4.3 Research Design

A research design acts as a guiding framework to aid decision making regarding data collect and analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Research questions and assumptions influence a research design through the development of a strategy about how best to explore a given phenomenon. The methodology selected by a researcher may therefore act as a 'net', bringing together a specific set of 'epistemological, ontological and methodological premises' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 22), based on specific beliefs and practices that inform and influence how research is undertaken (Kuhn, 1962). These beliefs can be broadly categorised into approaching data in a qualitative or quantitative manner with each approach holding independent assumptions regarding ontology (assumptions about reality) and epistemology (views on scientific knowledge) (Shaw and Frost, 2015). Inevitably the researcher's views in terms of epistemological and ontological assumptions will underpin the research design.

4.4 Epistemological and ontological assumptions

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge in relation to both what and how we can know (Coyle, 2016). Epistemological assumptions are inextricably linked to our assumptions about the nature of reality (ontological assumptions). Ontology concerns discussions around whether an external reality exists separate from humans, or whether it is a product or reflection of our own perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Consequently, both epistemological and ontological assumptions inform the approach a researcher will take towards a given phenomenon.

Objective viewpoints typically observe the world from a position of positivism whereby the relationship between the world and individual perception directly correspond (Coyle, 2016). This forms a more traditional outlook to knowledge in that assumptions maintain that there is an objective reality that can be accounted for through the deductive testing of theories and hypotheses. In this respect, the fixed nature or existence of 'fact' is taken as given and in order for this to occur, a researcher's ontological outlook would be referred to as a positivist stance whereby the belief systems of this perspective relies on an objective reality existing separately from an observer. Generally, within this paradigm a quantitative approach is favoured to assume a position of neutrality and objective measurement through deductive reasoning and hypotheses testing. In this context, socio-cultural or contextual factors are reduced to variables which can be accounted for in order to explore phenomena objectively and often forms the more dominant approach found within research.

Maintaining a view on an objective reality can also be upheld through a (critical) realist perspective whereby researchers position themselves as identifying knowledge about reality, but through the perspectives of their participants and the language they use to describe this reality (Bhaskar, 1975). Both positivism and realism hold realist ontologies and accept that epistemological knowledge can be neutral, objective and ultimately discoverable (Crotty, 1998).

This is however just one perspective within research and although dominant, particularly within the sciences, alternative ways of conducting research exist. These alternatives can account for perspectives that take a more contextualised, subjective approach to research. Generally speaking subjective research values individual meaning-making, experiential information and suggests that frameworks for understanding the world are constructed actively, by individuals, based on their own histories (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This perspective is referred to as relativism and refers to an idea about the world as being situated

in relation to the ways in which individuals come to know it (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In this vein, knowledge about the world is viewed as being socially constructed and therefore can be challenged, disputed and changed, as opposed to taken for granted or 'fact'. A relativist, social constructionist approach to research considers the social processes, language, culture and contexts to be of great significance (Coyle, 2016).

It is important to note that a social constructionist perspective does not necessarily advocate that there is no reality, but that the reality being discussed has its origins in a particular standpoint, largely influenced by cultural and social contexts (Gergen, 2009). Furthermore, the way individuals come to understand themselves and the world they inhabit, is a result of the social processes as well as historic and cultural contexts which informs a social constructionist perspective (Coyle, 2016). It is precisely these social contexts that this thesis is interested in. The research questions constructed are based on the ontological assumption of relativism which reflects the view that reality revolves around, and is built upon, social interactions between individuals (Berger and Luckman, 1967).

The theories that inform this thesis also reflect a similar stance, prioritising the construction and implication of language as constituting an individual's reality, giving structure to both that which can, and cannot be articulated. Given that this thesis takes a social constructionist outlook, taking an inductive, qualitative approach to identify versions of reality is an appropriate approach that will now be further explained.

4.5 Research approach

Defining a qualitative study's design from the outset can be challenging because of its inherently inductive and exploratory nature (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Yet it is precisely because of these features that facilitates novel or unanticipated findings (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). Thus, whilst a framework might be in place, it is always

positioned flexibly. Despite this, there are particular methods and methodologies that lend themselves more favourably to a qualitative stance because of their ability to access the worlds of research participants and provide rich data (Tolich and Davidson, 2003). For example, semi-structured or unstructured interviews are more likely to be appropriate than a large survey because of the ability to obtain specific, experiential depth, an aspect which might be obscured through survey data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The purpose of qualitative research is to deliberately work with smaller groups of participants in order to understand phenomena in depth (Golafshani, 2003).

As a result of the research questions guiding this thesis, perceptions, factors of influence and their impact are the focus of this research. In particular this thesis aims to establish the culturally and relationally constructed realities of job seekers by paying attention to the personal resources individuals draw on as a way of constituting and making sense of who they are. As such, narrative enquiry is an appropriate methodological approach to take (Smith, 2016). Narratives aid the construction of personal stories that help to situate a sense of self as well as provide an active form of framing to make sense of experiences (Smith, 2016). What follows is an overview of the methodological approach to narrative enquiry taken in this thesis.

4.6 Narrative enquiry

A narrative perspective takes the view that we, as humans, are active meaning-makers and that narratives are used to communicate ways of life as well as aid in the sense making of who we are. In this respect, narratives act as resources that help in the constitution of our sense of self and form frames of reference around particular experiences. They act to stabilise and order people's stories in a linear, coherent and monological way (Boje, 2011). Narratives are inherently social and temporal, being constructed over a period of time, for a particular

audience (Elliott, 2005). Their framing has been described as a representational blueprint of the world, often being a result of a particular overarching or pervasive outlook at a particular time in history (Cajete, 2000; Lyotard, 1984).

Narratives are abstract in nature, often featuring a beginning, middle and end (Boje, 2011). Crucially they are retrospective and fixed. As a method of disputing, challenging or upholding linear narratives, people engage in localised narratives known as petis recits (Lyotard, 1984) or living stories (Boje, 2011). Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) employ the term 'small stories' to helpfully capture this more everyday, mundane aspect of narrative interactions. They describe small stories as being about the everyday aspects of life such as:

> "…very recent ('this morning', 'last night') or still unfolding events thus immediately reworking slices of experience and arising out of a need to share what has just happened or seemingly uninteresting titbits. They can be about small incidents that may (or may not) have actually happened, mentioned to back up or elaborate on an argumentative point occurring in an ongoing conversation. Small stories can even be about – colloquially speaking – '*nothing*'; and as such indirectly reflect something about the interactional engagement between the interactants, while for outsiders, the interaction is literally '*about nothing*'" (p.5).

Subsequently, stories differ from narratives in that stories may be constructed from the culturally and relationally available narratives but they form individual tales which aid both personal and interpersonal understandings (Coyle, 2016). In this respect, everyday stories unfold in the present and are often connected to a web of other stories, rarely having a clear beginning and always operating in a state of becoming (Boje, 2011). Exploring localised narratives in the form of small, everyday stories enables researchers to capture experiences that are dispersed, multi-faceted and polyvalent.

Whilst narratives and stories have been used across centuries, in a research context, this began in the 1960s in a turn away from dominant forms of positivism (Lal et al., 2012). Taking a narrative approach to research can be beneficial if a researcher is interested in the following: temporal nature of lived experience, process and change, representations of self and the active nature of both researcher and participant (Elliott, 2005). These four aspects are all pertinent to this thesis and therefore make narrative enquiry an appropriate methodological approach. However for the sake of clarity, this thesis is predominantly interested in the small stories of participants, because of what this demonstrates at the level of the everyday.

There are many different ways a researcher can approach narrative enquiry. Yet rarely are there well-defined parameters (Squire et al., 2014). Overarching, narrative researchers are often driven by a desire to understand social change. As such they often seek ways of exploring the ways in which stories work, who tells them, who for and what do they do for and to individuals. Yet given that there are so many different types of narratives, it often becomes about the ontological lines of thoughts that decide any given approach. Mainstream narratology would define narratives as recounts or events presented in a coherent sequence and clearly connected. Event-centred narratives tend to be about specific events and feature a core narrative i.e. an objective reality of what happened (Andrews et al., 2015). Alternatives to this tend to focus on experience-centred narratives. Narratives that emphasise experience do not seek an objective experience but view narratology as a sense making process that is co-constructed, multiple in meaning and produced in an interpersonal context (Andrews et al., 2015).

Experience-centred narratives draw on a smaller sample (typically between 8-15 participants), feature a theoretical framework and can sometimes draw on multiple interviews with the same participants (Andrews et al., 2015). The emphasis on co-construction occurs in what can be termed active narrative interviewing whereby the research interview is

undertaken as a normal conversation (Andrews et al., 2015). The practice of interviewing to generate narratives differs significantly from mainstream interview practice. As such narrative interviewing is said to be more akin to practices of ethnography (Riessman, 2008). Rather than creating a dynamic of interviewer and respondent, in a narrative context there are two participants who generate meaning together (Mishler, 1999; Riessman, 2008). This process can at times generate longer turn taking, tangents, incoherencies, unexpected accounts, high levels of anxiety (on the part of the researcher) and ultimately a shift towards more disparate power dynamics (Riessman, 2008).

The process of identifying narratives in two dimensional form (i.e. transcriptions) can take a number of different processes. Riessman (2008) outlines these as thematic, structural, dialogical/performance and visual. However these distinctions can be somewhat misleading by the suggestion that boundaries can be placed between what is said, how it is said and to whom. Arguably, these distinctions become somewhat blurred during analysis and, in actuality narratives are always socially situated, concern identity performances and are a combination of both content and form (Mishler, 1999).

Table 3. Overview of narrative approaches to data

Narrative Type	Properties
Thematic (what is told)	Events, cognitions, the contents of speech i.e. the what not the how, a de-emphasis on the audience, makes use of prior theory for interpretation
Structural (how it is told)	Emphasises content as well as narrative structure e.g. the use of spoken language, genres, storylines and units of discourse
Dialogic/ Performance (the context and audience)	Considers the purpose of talk i.e. for whom, in what context, emphasises the presence of an audience and all talk as interpersonally co-constructed and polyphonic (multi-voiced), see language as non-neutral
Visual (visual images)	Stories with images or stories about images, often produced alongside written or spoken text, images can take various forms such as photographs, media or performance art

Table adapted from Riessman (2008)

4.7 Positioning narratives in this thesis

Narratives create spaces through which power can be enacted and they also create opportunities for sense making practices (Tamboukou, 2015). In this sense, narratives produce both an objectification and subjectification of the self and encourage polymorphous meaning in how the narrative is constructed. Therefore, in this thesis, narratives are approached both in terms of what is told, how it is told and why (Riessman, 2008; Tamboukou, 2015). Understanding narratives in this way means that everyday stories can be explored in relation to what the narrative does for and to people through the language both implicit and explicit.

Identifying narratives is not about finding an objective reality or a coherent sequence of events (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Instead it is about understanding the ways in which participants' localised narratives (i.e. small stories) bring into being particular systems of thought and how they are used (or not) (Tamboukou, 2015). This approach to narrative views discourse and discursive acts as embedded within and inextricably bound to the stories individuals tell (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010). Thus there is an inseparable interconnectedness between discourse and narratives. Narration produces or creates an underlying process of realisation, being emergent, endless, repetitive and unstable (Tamboukou, 2015). Seeing narratives in this way emphasises narratives as the event themselves. As such, analysis of narratives is not about illumination but about production both at a social and material level (Doolin, 2003). Narratives in this respect act as a function in how a discourse is formed, refuted or reproduced. Given that job seeking is not typically an immediate process and is a combination of both material and social practices, using a mode of analysis capable of accounting for modes of production was deemed necessary. Therefore narrative analysis is used to account for discourse in both action and materiality. This thesis takes the view that the narrative produced is the discursive practice (Tamboukou, 2015).

4.8 Theoretical sampling

In narrative enquiry, purposive sampling is advocated as a way of identifying relevant phenomenon in relation to the research questions (Riessman, 2008). This may include the creation of specific inclusion criteria in order to identify individuals who have rich stories to share, about a particular event or phenomena. Furthermore, unlike quantitative sampling, which can rely on power calculations in order to address the identification of appropriate sample sizes, qualitative investigation relies instead on the principle of theoretical saturation (Malterud et al, 2015). However, in narrative enquiry it is difficult to identify clear guidelines on participant samples, potentially as a result of the relational nature of storied data.

In order to determine a useful participant sample size, the work of Malterud et al, (2015) is drawn on, specifically the concept of information power. Information power considers the principle that if a sample holds a large volume of rich information, then a smaller number of participants are needed. Information power should be considered in relation to the study's aim, the specificity of the sample, the relevance and use of theory, the quality of the dialogue and the analysis strategy. In relation to this thesis, whilst the study's aims are relatively broad, emphasis is placed on an in-depth analysis of narratives, which warrants fewer participants (Malterud et al, 2015). Therefore, this study relies on a smaller sample size that holds information rich data, determined by the fact that those asked to participate are actively engaged in the process of job seeking. Specifically, a total of 15 participants inform this research, all of whom engaged in one to three research conversations. A data set of 38 interviews, all between 60-90 minutes long, comprise this thesis. All the individuals participating in this study self-identified as women, had graduated from higher education within the last two years and were actively seeking work (i.e. sending out weekly applications and engaging in other job seeking related activities) within a UK labour market context at the time of interview. All research conversations were in English, this being the language in

common however for six participants, English was not their first language. Data collection occurred between June 2017 and May 2018, a time period planned to purposively identify individuals who had finished their higher education courses earlier in the year and had therefore begun to actively seek work.

4.9 Recruitment

Participants were sought because of their status as an active job seeker. A number of different professional networks were drawn on to invite participation in this study. These networks included: university lecturers and in-house employability teams both at Kingston University and four other UK based universities. Professional networks were asked to send out an information sheet (see appendix three) about the study to students within their networks. This generated a response from six participants. A further six participants were recruited through alternative professional networks. For example, a request for participants via LinkedIn garnered three participants. This study was also shared by peers within their own social circles. This also provided three participants. A final three participants were recruited during a CV building workshop held at Kingston University in which an announcement was made by the author about this study. All participants were given at least 24 hours between receiving an information sheet and signing the consent form (see appendix five) to consider their participation in the study.

4.10 Data collection

As a key aspect of this research is to identify the rich landscape of job seeker narratives by questioning how they construct these experiences, choosing a method of data collection that will enable active participation is crucial. Data collection in narrative enquiry most commonly takes the form of interviews (Riessman, 2008). As this study is built on the premise of social construction, utilising an interview approach enables participants to actively

engage in how they produce their understandings of the social world as well as demonstrate how they engage in active sense making (Elliott, 2005). In this respect, interviews are an interpretive interaction between both participant and interviewer (Harris, 2003). Whilst interviewing participants can be time-consuming, they aid a flexible approach to data collection. Yet this is unlikely to be the case if structured interviews are used as their prescriptive nature does not lend itself to the desired aims of eliciting active interpretation and narrative production (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The two most predominant interview styles associated with qualitative research are unstructured and semi-structured (Bryman and Bell, 2015). A semi-structured approach uses an interview script as a way of loosely structuring the conversation, often acting as a flexible guide to aid the researcher (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The unstructured interview may make use of some prompts or aides but generally makes use of a single question asked by the interviewer. In the context of wanting to elicit participant narratives, it is important that the interview has the natural flow of a conversation and enables participants to discuss experiences in light of what is most important or pertinent to them. Therefore, utilising an unstructured approach to interviewing participants is appropriate because it will enhance the multiple perspectives of participants by limiting my involvement as the researcher (Fontana and Frey, 2005). It may also be the case that a narrative generated by the participant reflects unconscious logics, bringing to the fore taken for granted assumptions (Hollway, 2001). For this thesis, this was also a reflexive choice: I have previously been a job seeker and have had my own experiences which I did not wish to limit the nature of questions asked.

4.11 Multiple, conversational interviews

Although the content of the participant interviews remains unstructured, there are other principles that narrative enquiry makes use of when collecting data, which provides some

contextual structure to the interviews. Returning to the field or participant sample group can be a part of the narrative process (Lal et al., 2012). Indeed, both Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and Seidman (1998) advocate multiple interviews with participants. Therefore, for this thesis and where participant situations allowed, up to three interviews were conducted with each participant. The focus of these interviews is outlined below and has been adapted from Seidman (1998) and contextualised in relation to this research:

> Interview One: A focus on the recent history of the job seeker. This is to elicit an account of relevant life features leading up to their job seeking through the opening question, "Tell me a bit about where your life is up to at the moment in relation to thinking about jobs and finishing your studies".
>
> Interview Two: A focus on present experiences of the participants. This is to elicit living stories that detail their experiences as they unfold, for example, experiences of job hunting, attending interviews, dealing with rejections. To initiative conversation in this context, the opening question will begin, "Tell me a bit about your recent job seeking experiences".
>
> Interview Three: A focus on the reflections of recent experiences. This is to elicit the retrospective sense making processes involved when a participant looks back on their experiences. This interview will come after a participant has received and accepted a job offer and will involve the following opening question, "Tell me a bit about how you've found the job seeking process up until now".

4.12 Interviews over time

Originally this research had intended to plot changes over specific time points (i.e. applying a framework to map change across interviews one, two and three). Reflexively speaking, I had entered into to this research with the assumption, like the participants of this study, that job

seeking would be linear, having a clear start, middle and end. This was, however not the case and so approaching the data in this way became contradictory. I noticed that across the time period of six months, participant narratives would broadly stay the same but involve frequent repetition. This has been commented on by Bamberg (2011, p. 16) in that through the process of constant change, repetition (in this case the functional tasks of job seeking), "has the potential of resulting in a sense of constancy and sameness". The framework I was using at the time prevented this detail from coming through because in looking for change I was viewing time, like the participants of this study, through the dominant lens of linearity and causality. The alternative to this is to view time as momentary, rather than longitudinally. Thus, half way through this study I began to see the conversations with participants as continuous, rather than as a start, middle and end (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988).

Structuring interviews at specific time points might have been beneficial in one sense. For example, agreeing specific points with participants up front may have provided greater clarity for both myself and the participants. Crucially however was the arbitrary creation of a relevant time point in which to engage with participants based on very little. Whilst this may have prompted participants to engage in specific narrative work by having a structured time to discuss their experiences it may also have created a potential for significant moments or changes in narratives to be lost. This was the major concern in identifying an appropriate methodological approach: to be able to account for experience. Therefore, I decided that by deliberately not prescribing specific time points ahead of the study, this would enable and allow for any natural dynamics involved in the process of job seeking such as duration and frequency which may support the conceptual development of phases or rhythms of human action.

Data collection and subsequent analysis therefore intended to demonstrate the continuity, repetitiveness and on-goingness of participant stories (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015, p.

106). As such, determining the time points at which to conduct interviews required flexibility and consideration in relation to the research aims and purpose (Corden and Millar, 2007). This research could not be designed in a way that allowed for a determination of specific time points up front. This was because job attainment amongst participants occurred at different rates and so a degree of flexibility to interviewing was required. All data collection was however conducted over a six-month period (between June 2017 and May 2018), a time frame which was made clear to participants from the outset of the study to provide a boundary and limit to their involvement, regarding of their job seeking outcome.

Interviews with each participant typically occurred in relation to a significant external event e.g. a job interview, or a socially constructed period of time between myself and the participant. Therefore, in a sense, an aspect of this approach borrows from ethnography which was helpful in ensuring qualitative rigour. Aspects of ethnography have helped to account for the messy reality of participants spoken to in this study. Given that ethnography seeks to account for individuals in their own setting as naturally as possible, data collection is inherently flexible, intuitive and unstructured. As a result, pre-fixed or pre-arranged interference from the researcher is perceived as being an imposition on what participants say or do (Hammersley, 1990). Naturally the involvement of a researcher will always be in some way imposed however this impact can be softened by allowing situations to unfold organically and dictated by the participant.

It is also important however to distinguish how and why this thesis is not ethnography. Ethnography simply put is:

> "the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in

> a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally" (Brewer, 2012, p. 10).

This thesis has its departure away from ethnography as I, the researcher, have not been involved directly in participant's settings, nor have I undertaken the activities myself. Moreover, there was no 'setting' as such within which I could observe participants. Whilst there would have been immense value in involving myself in this process, it may have been detrimental to the relationships I formed during this project, potentially being invasive and unnecessary. Furthermore, I decided not to engage in the process myself because it would have been misleading to apply for jobs which I had no intention of undertaking. However, this unstructured space of being a job seeker is not unknown or unfamiliar to me. I came with background knowledge and personal experience which were crucial to reflect upon as part of the practice of reflexivity.

4.13 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the role of researcher in the positioning, collection and analysis of research including their interpretative framework, subsequent commitments to theory and personal experiences (Coyle, 2016). Good qualitative research accounts for this role, in order to make explicit, that which might be unknown to others, for example the background and experiences of the researcher. The purpose of this is to make all aspects of the analytical process as transparent as possible, so that others are able to understand firstly the role of the research and secondly the perspective or interpretation taken.

A key aspect involved in reflexivity is the ability to be reflective; to look back and learn from experiences, in order to challenge assumptions, illusions and taken for granted ways of being (Bolton, 2010). This can be both personally and socially unsettling, however it informs a socially and ethically responsible practice to research. The practice of both reflection and

reflexivity is not a straightforward process and it can often be unclear what requires reflecting upon (Bolton, 2010). Conversely a researcher may find that the process becomes indulgent or confessional. Yet in order to enhance reflexivity, the practice must be rooted in both the personal and the private, as well as the political and the social. Practically, this may involve an on-going diary or log during the research process, as well as peer discussions amongst those both within and outside of a researcher's field of networks. This is so as to draw out fundamental assumptions about the world and ultimately examine them. Aspects of reflexivity can either be interwoven throughout the entire research piece, or can be bracketed as an aside from the research process.

4.14 Reflexivity and data generation

From the outset of this research project it is important to note that by focusing on narrative construction as a concept is to inevitably consider the relational and dynamic nature of interaction. Arguably in identifying how individuals construct themselves is likely to be shaped by the context within which they are speaking. This points to the growing awareness of the role of researcher, particularly in an interview context, where the interviewer becomes not just an audience, but also an actor in the construction of the participant's story (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Elliott, 2005). During this research I personally kept a log of all my thoughts, feelings and reflections after each participant interview. I also kept a log of reflections I had during the data analysis process.

In appendix four I provide an account of my own personal experiences. I do so to illuminate both the way I may have been able to build rapport with participants of this study, as well as the way in which my motivations may have caused me to 'see' things as particularly pertinent. What follows next and in order to reflexively situate each participant of this study, is a characterisation and breakdown of the contexts in which participants were interviewed.

4.15 List of Characters, character contexts and interview timings

Between June 2017 and May 2018 I collected data from 15 women and I was able to speak with most of them three times across a six-month time span. However, this was not possible with all participants, some of whom provided one or two interviews. I therefore use this section to provide a brief summary on each participant including their individual contexts, description of interactions and a time line of each research interview. The purpose of this section is to provide a personalised narrative to each participant, situating each person within the chronology of their research meetings. All research conversations came to an end for the following reasons: the participant got a job (Louise, Jennifer and Clare); the participant's circumstances changed e.g. relocation, self-employed (Anita and Alisha); the participant stopped replying (Sarah and Amal) or the third meeting fell within the six-month time point (Kristina, Michaela, Helen, Meera, Barbara, Larissa, Ramona and Maggie).

Louise (26, job seeking on a fixed term contract, three interviews remotely)

After discussing my PhD one evening over dinner with an old school friend of mine, she mentioned that her younger sister, Louise had been struggling to find work in the North of England. She offered to contact Louise on my behalf, to see if she'd be interested in volunteering for my study. A few days later, my friend passed me Louise's email address. I promptly contacted her with information about my study and we exchange a few emails back and forth about the difficulties she had been experiencing finding a job to replace her fixed term contract. Whilst Louise and I knew of one another prior to this research, we had never had a conversation. Due to Louise's location we planned to have our research conversations over the phone. This was in April 2017. It then took a further two months to find a suitable time to speak to Louise. Our first call took place on a Saturday morning in June 2017.

I was surprised at how open Louise was when we first spoke. On our call I only really had to ask one question (shall we start with what you've been up to in relation to your job search?) and it was as if the flood gates had opened. Louise had been trying to secure work in the education sector having recently completed her teacher training. She was currently on a fixed term contract that was due to end in September 2017 and Louise expressed a number of concerns about running out of time. At the end of our call we decided to leave the next research conversation date open. Louise asked me to contact her whenever I wanted to speak and I suggested that if anything in her situation changed she was also welcome to contact me.

I followed up with Louise at the end of August 2017 by sending a short email asking how she was. She informed me, via email, that she was putting her job searching on hold for a few months as a result of her fixed term contract being extended until January 2018. Louise admitted to being unclear about the finer details of this arrangement so we decided to leave a conversation until later in the year. We then had another email exchange mid-October where Louise told me that she had been offered two days a week contract work with her current employer from January to July 2018. This had financial implications for Louise and she suggested speaking once she had met with colleagues in regards to any arrangements they might be able to make for the remaining three days. By this point Louise had resumed job seeking again.

It was subsequently very difficult to get a second call with Louise. When we eventually spoke in December 2017. She only had half an hour to speak but was willing to update me on the past six months. Since we last spoke Louise had attended two further job interviews and we talked about some of her experiences and her feelings towards her new work contract. Due to Louise's extended contract we decided to pick up again in the spring of 2018. She told me she'd still be applying for jobs and hoped she'd have some positive news to share with me by the time we next spoke.

I emailed Louise early February 2018 and we arranged to speak at the end of February to conclude our research together. In this call she shared with me her success of finally managing to secure a permanent work contract starting in September 2018. After her gruelling search her job offer came from her current place of work- they'd managed to find money in the budget to employ her full-time.

Clare (22, job seeking without employment, three interviews remotely)

Clare responded to a participant call out I did via student networks. She had recently finished her undergraduate degree in a business related course and after living locally for her studies, had just moved back into her family home, a small coastal town in the south west of England. I'd offered to meet her locally but she didn't want to take up too my time with travel so we decided to do our calls over Skype. We had our first call mid-June 2017.

Our first call was very stilted. Clare shared with me that she was particularly nervous about an upcoming interview the following day and I realised as our call went on that perhaps my line of questioning was making her more anxious about how her interview might go tomorrow. I asked if she'd prefer to speak at a later point, perhaps in a few weeks or even months from now. She said she'd be happy to talk again after her interview in a few days' time and told me she'd email me.

Clare emailed me two days after our first call wanting to speak again- she'd had her interview and wanted to tell me about it. We arranged another Skype call for the following day during which Clare appeared more relaxed. We discussed her perception of the interview (not what she expected being far more informal than she'd anticipated) and also her subsequent feelings (worry over saying the wrong thing in her interview and of not selling herself well enough). We talked through some of the reasons for her concerns and ended the conversation with Clare stating she'd let me know the outcome either way.

My final call with Clare took place a month following her interview. She emailed me mid-July 2017 to tell me she had some good news- she'd got the job at the only place she'd interviewed at. During my third conversation with Clare whilst being pleased and excited to start her new role, she also discussed her worries about starting her new job, such as being apprehensive about socialising with new colleagues over lunch or in an after work environment. We ended our final conversation with me wishing her luck and Clare being both excited and nervous about what was to come.

Helen (28, job seeking as a freelancer, three interviews)

Helen was a recently graduated Creative MA student who had contacted me about the research following a participant call out through professional networks. Our first meeting happened in late August 2017. For Helen, English was a second language. Our first research conversation highlighted a range of tactics Helen was employing on her job hunt and the personae she was attempting to portray. Helen showed a genuine interest in my PhD stating how valuable it could be for other people. We agreed to pick up again in a couple of months.

I emailed Helen at the end of October 2017 to see how she was getting on. She'd recently had a short break at home with her family and was planning to get back to her job searching but in the meantime she had been busy involving herself in numerous side-projects all aimed at enhancing her CV. We agreed to leave our next meeting for another month or so and decided to meet early December 2017. At our second meeting Helen arrived promptly and took out a notebook where she had written down all the things she'd been up to since we last spoke (late August 2017). She seemed to 'confess' to only having sent off one job application but then 'justified' this by telling me about all the other things she'd been up to in her attempts to get a job.

Her notebook interested me because it had nothing else in it, it looked brand new with all her notes on the first couple of pages. I asked if it had been bought for the purpose of documenting her job seeking- yes was her answer- she wanted to be able to tell me exactly what she'd done. It was also interesting that she felt the need to bring this to our meeting. I could understand on the one hand that she'd written it down to remind herself but on the other hand, I felt slightly uncomfortable knowing that she may have felt the need to come and report back to me.

Following this conversation, we agreed to keep in touch via email but to speak again in person around March 2018 because she wanted time to send out more job applications. I followed this up several months down the line and we had our final meeting in mid-May 2018. By this point Helen hadn't secured permanent work like she'd wanted to. She'd been able to generate some freelance gigs based on her previous line of work but she expressed fatigue and disappointment. She'd been busy networking, building her portfolio, engaging with trends online, looking on job boards and sending out applications. The weight of responsibility seemed heavy and whilst being able to acknowledge this about herself, she couldn't let go of her own expectations for her life. This was sad to see and we spoke at length about this. Since the research conversations ended I have received several emails from Helen, one of which was asking for her interview transcripts. Helen wanted to reflect more deeply on how she spoke about herself and what she could do to work on this in a more positive way.

Sarah (25, job seeking without work, two interviews)

Sarah contacted me following a participant call out made by a colleague of mine. Sarah had just completed a social sciences Masters and was intent on finding a job in the next few months. We decided to meet mid-September 2017 at a mutually familiar location. We got a

coffee in the library space of the building we met in. Whilst being a very quiet place, at times I could barely hear Sarah as we were talking; she was incredibly softly spoken.

That said we ended up talking for over an hour which surprised me as the time flew by- we could easily have carried on chatting about career conundrums, the decisions she was trying to make and her cynicism towards the corporate workplace. We decided that we'd keep in touch through email and over the next two weeks Sarah emailed me to update me on her progress. She'd sent off several applications and had been invited to two different interviews so we arranged to meet again following the outcome of the first interview which ended up being mid-October 2017. During this conversation we discussed similar topics, with me listening to Sarah going back and forth between decisions she felt she needed to be making at this stage in her life such as what career she wanted, the current relationships in her life and how they were influencing her decisions and ultimately the discomfort this brought.

Following our second meeting I contacted Sarah mid-November to see how she was getting on. By mid-December 2017 I'd still not had a reply so decided to wait until the New Year before following up again. I never received a reply back from Sarah and interpreted her silence the only way I could, with respect, given that there are multiple, possible reasons that cannot be determined. It could have been one way of her reclaiming her autonomy over her own sense-making process, refusing to narrate and consequently disrupting the relationship towards the questioning by withholding stories (Butler, 2005). Perhaps something in the process of accounting or storying herself in such a liminal time made her feel the need to keep private her experiences, something I respected and stopped pursuing.

Barbara (40, job seeking whilst facing redundancy)

Barbara emailed me directly after seeing a participant call out a colleague had done on my behalf via LinkedIn. Barbara admitted that she'd recently been through the job seeking

process and whilst she had secured herself a job she wanted to share her experiences over the last few months. For Barbara, our conversation was therefore retrospective. This was a slightly different context compared to the majority of other participants. However, I was keen to hear Barbara's reflections and we agreed to meet at the end of September 2017.

During this conversation Barbara shared with me her struggles of job seeking for over a year on and off. Reaching out to me through my research appeared to be an opportunity to give voice to her experiences. Barbara's context for finding a new job was driven by the redundancy process at her workplace and her concerns around this; with two young children she wanted to ensure a degree of financial safety by seeking out alternative opportunities. At the end of our conversation we mutually decided to keep our interaction to just the one meeting give that her situation was now beyond the scope of the research.

Michaela (35, job seeking whilst employed, three interviews)

Michaela and I were introduced to one another during an event and Michaela offered to be a participant in my research given she was just coming to the end of her PhD and was starting to apply for work. Michaela was already employed at the time of her job seeking but felt that, now that she'd finished her PhD, she wanted to find a more challenging role. After a few emails back and forth to set up our initial meeting, we arranged early November 2017 as our starting point.

English was a second language for Michaela. Our first conversation started very factually with Michaela talking very pragmatically about exactly what she wanted from her next move. About ten minutes into our conversation and the tone shifted. Whilst Michaela kept talking about her expectations of the job market, she also began talking about more personal aspects, such as having to think about decisions about her relationship and whether to have a family. These points in our conversation became quite emotional for her.

I emailed Michaela a few days after our first conversation just to check she was ok. A few emails back and forth and she's told me that she has a telephone interview early Dec and that she'll keep me posted on this. I emailed Michaela mid-January to wish her Happy New Year. She informed me that she had some interviews coming up and that mid-February 2018 might be a good time to meet again. We ended up meeting towards the end of February. A lot of this second conversation would loop back around to the completion of her PhD, a monumental experience which Michaela described as being an anti-climax, tainted by concerns about what next. She'd had several unsuccessful job interviews and this appeared to have knocked her confidence about how easy it might be to find a job.

After our second conversation I followed up with Michaela early May 2018 and we arranged for our last meeting to happen towards the end of May. During this conversation we spoke quite broadly about the meaning of work, of being a woman at work and the role universal basic income might provide. About a month after this final meeting I received an email from Michaela stating that she had been offered a job in the North of England- she had already relocated and told me how happy she was with this new adventure.

Larissa (35, job seeking whilst employed, three interviews)

Larissa contacted me following a participant call out on LinkedIn. Whilst previously being colleagues during 2014-2016 on our MSc together, we had not spoken since 2016. Since our Masters had finished, Larissa had been looking for work, trying to progress up the elusive career ladder and was keen to share her experiences. We first met early October 2017. English is a second language for Larissa.

Prior to this first conversation Larissa had already sent copious amounts of application forms- she pulled up a spreadsheet, a log of all her attempts. I sensed that she might have moved through some darker times in her job search. During our conversation Larissa talked openly

about having psychotherapy, some of which was connected to feeling stuck in her career and failing at her job search. Larissa was intent on building contacts, saying that in the UK networking and establishing connections was crucial to being successful.

I followed up with Larissa in November 2017. She had no news on the job front but said she was keen to meet and share with me her recent reflections on work and her desire to become an inspirational woman to others. We planned our next meeting for one evening in January.

For this second conversation Larissa was keen to know how I'd got funding for my PhD because it was now something she was considering given her job search wasn't going the way she had intended it to go. This to me was the whole reason why I had decided to engage in active conversations, so that the people I spoke to could ask me questions too, rather than feeling like a respondent all the time. This was a research conversation with many tangents such as for example Larissa sharing her recent book reads with me (which were all related to work).

Larissa and I had our final conversation in April 2018. Larissa appeared to have let go of a lot of options she had been weighing up and had begun using a recruitment agency to help her with her job seeking. She had been for several job interviews and had a few more in the pipeline. It felt a lot like Larissa was trying to centralise her narrative in this conversation, an active way of making sense of who she was becoming in the process of talking it out loud to me. She was intent on not leaving anything out and so whereas before our conversation had gone back and forth, this last interaction was filled with longer monologues, her narrating and synthesising her thoughts.

Since the research ended Larissa informed me that she was offered a job towards the end of 2018.

Anita (22, job seeking whilst on zero-hours contract, two interviews)

Anita contacted me following a participant call out on LinkedIn. She had just finished her MSc and was looking for a job. Anita was in the UK on a Tier 4 student visa (from India) and so required sponsorship with any job offer. This was time-bound, expiring in February 2018. In the meantime, she was also juggling two zero-hours contract jobs (an admin assistant and a retail assistant) giving her a total of 20 hours of work a week.

Anita and I first met late September 2017 and she was highly reflective during our conversations, often surprising herself at the thoughts, feelings and emotions that arose during our time together. This was a really interesting thing to observe, how her speech was making her reflect back upon herself. But she also felt comfortable shifting from talking to asking and again like Larissa, asked about my PhD frequently.

I followed up with Anita at the end of October 2017 to see how she was getting on. Her response was somewhat disheartened as she informed me that she'd had no luck yet. We had attempted to arrange a meeting but her rota was tricky to navigate as she her hours often came through on an ad hoc basis. As Anita could only stay in the country until February we arranged to meet late November 2017. However closer to the time Anita cancelled this meeting due to illness. I emailed Anita in the new year and we arranged a time to meet towards the end of January 2018 just a few days before her via expired and her flight back to India was due.

Anita had been saving up some encounters to share with me, hoping for a positive outcome but not experiencing any. I felt particularly sad on Anita's behalf. She had been working hard to stay in the UK and her desire to do so was palpable. She expressed great reluctance to go back home and she seemed to be feeling great displacement as a result. During the remainder of this conversation Anita talked through her attachment to the idea of work and what she felt

it would bring when she finally obtained the work she was longing for. We decided to keep in touch over email- I was keen to hear how things worked out for her but unfortunately since moving back to India I have not heard anything further from Anita.

Jennifer (37, job seeking whilst employed, three interviews)

Like Larissa, Jennifer was a peer from my MSc course which ended in 2016. I bumped into Jennifer at an event in early 2017. We got talking about my research and she told me then that she'd spent a while job searching and had just landed a new job- she was really keen to share her experiences. We exchanged numbers however in amongst the start of her new job and my research not fully underway we lost touch. After making a call out on LinkedIn (Sept 2017) Jennifer contacted me saying that after only a few months in her latest job she was again looking for work. We met in late October 2017.

Jennifer was unhappy in her current role and so had been looking for work again. She was using an agency as well as doing her own searching. Our conversation ambled through a few processes that she'd experienced over the past few months of job seeking but Jennifer seemed resigned to this just being the way of work. For her, job seeking did not seem necessarily negative, just that it was part and parcel- we were all job seekers, some more frequently than others.

Jennifer and I met only a month after our first conversation because in this space of time she was offered a job and decided to accept it. We decided to meet to talk about the interview itself and how she was feeling now that she had secured a job. During this second conversation with Jennifer I really noticed the perils of conducting an unstructured interview. It very much felt like just a chat and I really wasn't sure what I was gleaning. However, this may also have been reflective of how an individual's mind-set shifts when they have a job offer- they feel able to talk about other things, to see with more clarity. Jennifer seemed to be

in a very different space from when we last met. Jennifer also talked about the emotional aspects of job hunting- the physical relief she felt after getting the job and being able to get back to her normal routines.

I was keen to hear how Jennifer would feel once she'd started her new job so we agreed to speak again around mid-February 2018, approximately three months into her new job. What I found interesting during this conversation was how quickly Jennifer had distanced herself from 'being' a job seeker to 'being' someone who loved their job. Her way of reflecting on her time as a job seeker was very much in the past, the stressful life experience appeared to have been all but forgotten, put to bed. Jennifer talked about feeling secure enough in her work to book a holiday and consider moving house.

A few months following this conversation Jennifer sent me an email with a link to an article about job seeking. We shared a few emails back and forth, during which time she told me that she was job seeking again. Things had not worked out at her new place of work.

Maggie (22, job seeking without employment, three interviews)

Maggie volunteered to be part of my study after I made an announcement during a CV workshop run at the university. Via email, we arranged to meet for coffee on campus in early October 2017. Maggie was originally from New York and had been job seeking in the UK. Maggie wasn't looking for a career as such given that her ambitions were going to take her back to America but it was interesting hearing her experiences of navigating a British labour market.

Since early October 2017 Maggie and I exchanged a few emails back and forth. By the time we met a second time (late November 2017) she'd had two job interviews both for zero-hours contract jobs. During our second conversation Maggie talked a lot about needing to remain

positive and how desirable that looked to employers when you were a job seeking. Much of her conversation referred to image and playing the job seeking 'game'.

My third meeting with Maggie was very similar and I began to realise that whilst she had been seeking work in the UK, her main goal was to resume her life back in America. Most of her experiences were localised to an American context and so I wanted to use her stories with caution because of the cultural and contextual implications.

Alisha (34, job seeking whilst on universal basic income, two interviews)

Alisha also responded to a participant call out via professional networks. We decided to meet one Monday night, late October 2017. Alisha had just finished her MSc and left a zero-hours contract position. When we met at 6pm, Alisha has been sitting in Pret since 2pm. This seemed to have been her office for the day and she'd tucked herself into the smallest corner she could find. Alisha was a single mother of three young boys, living in rented accommodation. During this conversation Alisha spoke about the pressure of mounting debt, the reality of having to feed her children, pay for school clothes, after-school activities and deal with everyday bureaucracy that hinders her entitlement to child care benefits.

I feel like I only really catch a glimpse of the real Alisha towards the end of our conversation when she discusses to wanting to write a book. When I ask about what her whole demeanour changed. Her book, she says, is going to be about her life, about the encounters she's had and how she's made it through them. It is essentially, in her words, a book about resilience.

We have our second conversation on the phone- it is nearing Christmas 2017 and Alisha has been busy trying to get everything sorted for her children. Alisha shared her struggles over the past six weeks in trying to secure benefits. But she also talked about how she'd decided to start her own company. I question her about her decision- I am puzzled because in our first conversation she said that being self-employed would never be a possibility for her, the

insecurity making it too difficult to manage with a family. Now it seemed she wants her work to fit around her life. Alisha seems excited and as we end the call I wish her luck with her endeavour. We decide to end our research conversations at this point.

Kristina (26, job seeking without employment, three interviews)

Like Maggie, I met Kristina during a careers workshop hosted by the university. Kristina was one of three people to respond to the information sheet with interest. She was also the sister of another participant in this study and so had heard about the research I was doing. Kristina and I met early November 2017. She told me she was worried that she hadn't really done 'enough' to talk about it in detail. We spoke about this and it evolved into discussing her job searching and her associated insecurities.

Following our first conversation Kristina had been planning to spend her time applying for jobs so I emailed her about four weeks after our first conversation. She replied straight away offering to meet and update me so we decided to meet mid-December 2017. Kristina had been worried again about meeting up with me. We talked around this and discussed her feelings of guilt, about how she constantly felt as if she was not doing enough to get a job. Kristina was quick to not dwell on these feelings, bringing herself back up emotionally to being happy and cheerful but she did express concerns about going back to her family for Christmas and having to talk more about her job seeking with people she felt might judge her for not doing enough.

I emailed Kristina mid-January to wish her happy new year. I did not receive a reply this time round which was unusual- Kristina had always been quick to reply. I did not want to push this, thinking that perhaps she was working through some of her feelings associated with her job seeking. By early March I decided to email once more to offer a final meeting to Kristina. This time I heard back from her and we arranged to meet early April 2018. Kristina shared

with me her current thinking about taking on part time rather than full time work, or looking into other options because her finances would not be able to sustain her for much longer. We left this conversation with Kristina saying she would let me know the outcome, even if we were not due to meet again. Several months after our meetings had finished Kristina emailed me to tell me that she had landed a job in a company she was really interested in. She felt that the wait had been worth it and was looking forward to the structure and socialising of work.

Ramona (20, job seeking without employment, three interviews)

Ramona volunteered to participate in my study following an announcement I did during a careers workshop hosted by the university. We first met mid-October 2017 and at the time Ramona was trying to figure out whether to apply for a Masters, go travelling or start on the career ladder after her degree. She was also looking for part time work to do alongside her full time degree to ensure her CV 'looked good'. It was, at times, tricky to keep up with all the things Ramona wanted to achieve and straight after our meeting she was dashing off to a meeting with someone else and then had a full day of university work ahead of her.

I followed up with Ramona mid-November 2017. She had been invited to interview for two part time jobs and was waiting on feedback following them. We agreed to meet early December 2017 because by this point she told me she would have attended several networking events and may have heard back about the other interviews. During this interaction Ramona seemed more distracted than before. I asked her how the conversation was making her feel. She said it made her feel stressed. I asked if she wanted to stop but she said it was fine, she liked talking about these things but it was just making her think. We spoke more about this, pulling about some of her ideas about success, having a career, doing things the 'right' way.

Following this conversation, I reflected on Ramona's behaviour and wondered if her desire to achieve had been one of the reasons for her involvement in this study- getting involved is just what she does, finding it difficult to turn away from any potential 'opportunity' to put herself out there. I felt slightly strange about continuing to interview her and decide to email her to ask if she felt ok with continuing. The response was a fully committed yes but she also told me of some upcoming deadlines for her work. I suggested we have our last conversation in March 2018 when the bulk of her work would be done.

I emailed Ramona mid-January 2018 to wish her happy new year. She told me she'd done a lot of thinking since we last met and wanted to tell me about it so we agreed to meet on 9th February 2018. During this last conversation it seemed as though Ramona's job seeking attempts had been firmly put on hold because she'd decided to focus on applying for a Masters. Ramona seemed excited about this prospect having identified the course she wanted to attend but also felt nervous about living up to the expectations she had associated with what someone needs to be like to do a Master's degree. As Ramona was putting on her jacket to leave she told me that she had really enjoyed our conversations, that they had been nice for her and something she was glad to have done. I was touched by this and thanked her for being a participant of mine. A few months later Ramona emailed me to tell me that she had been accepted onto the course she wanted and could not wait to see where it would take her.

Meera (22, job seeking whilst on universal basic income, three interviews)

Like Clare, Meera was a student who volunteered after I did an announcement via student networks. She had recently finished her MSc degree in a business related course and we arranged to meet mid-November 2017.

During our first conversation Meera talked about her experiences of welfare support. She talked about the stress she was under from the job centre- being on a form of universal basic

income was exacerbating her feelings of pressure whilst job seeking. Meera was looking for a junior level job closely related to her field of studies but she was also exploring other options as back up.

Following this meeting Meera kept in regular touch and sent me two emails updating me on her progress. She attended two different interviews and received negative outcomes from both so I suggested we meet late December to discuss. Meera talked about these interview experiences in a positive light- these were her first experiences of professional job interviews so the process had been intimidating for her but had given her things to learn from. Meera mentioned the term flexibility a lot during this meeting, and the idea of eventually wanting to own her own business. In her mind this flexibility offered her an escape from job seekers allowance. We ended this conversation with a view to speak again in a couple of months (i.e. March) to give her time to keep searching.

Meera emailed me in early January to let me know that she was applying for several jobs, one of which was with an agency which would offer job flexibility and ad hoc hours. I suggested we meet when she'd heard the outcomes of her most recent job applications/interviews. We ended up meeting early May. By this point Meera was waiting for the paperwork to come through for her agency work. She planned to use this as an opportunity to explore her 'back-up' job, coming off job seekers allowance in the process but still continue looking for a job that linked more clearly to her field of study.

Amal (24, job seeking with a zero-hours contract, one interview)

I was introduced to Amal in the PhD office of a university campus in London by a colleague who knew about my research. Amal shared her email with me and asked for more information about the research. We subsequently arranged to meet late November 2017. Amal told me that as well as looking for a full time job, she was also looking for temporary

work because she had just been offered some work experience abroad which would look good on her CV so she needed to make some quick money for. Shortly after our initial conversation Amal emailed me to let me know that she'd got a temporary job looking after children to help fund her work experience. We agreed to speak when she got back from her trip.

I emailed Amal early March 2018 knowing that she would have been back from her work experience for a few weeks. She replied saying that she was only back in the country for a few days before flying to visit family members in Europe. She suggested meeting early May, however no dates were forthcoming and I never heard anything further from her. Like Sarah I respected Amal decision to remain silent and didn't follow this up.

Table 4. Participant Characteristics

Name of interviewee	Age at time of interviews (2017-18)	Ethnicity	No of research interviews
Louise	26	White British	3
Clare	22	White British	3
Helen	28	Other White	3
Sarah	25	White British	2
Barbara	40	Asian Chinese	1
Michaela	35	Other White	3
Larissa	35	Other White	3
Anita	22	Asian Indian	2
Jennifer	37	White British	3
Maggie	22	Mixed, Chinese/ Caucasian	3
Alisha	34	Mixed race	2
Kristina	26	Other White	3
Ramona	20	Iranian	3
Meera	22	Asian Indian	3
Amal	24	Mixed- Black African/ Arab	1

4.16 Transcription

The process of recording and transcribing data is thought to facilitate thorough and iterative examinations of what people discuss (Bryman and Bell, 2015). I used Windows Media software on my laptop to transcribe all interviews into MS Word. Transcriptions were all verbatim with the aim of retaining participant stories in-tact.

4.17 Data analysis

Narrative analysis is cautious of over-coding data in that coding produces chunks of data, rather than contextually relevant stories (Smith, 2016). As the emphasis in narrative analysis is on storied data, the process of identifying relevant stories is more pertinent and can reflect on the thematic content, the structure, the interactional elements and/or the performative aspects of participants' stories (Riessman, 2008). There is no one universal way to undertake narrative analysis. Boje (2001) alone identifies eight distinct ways to analyse stories including deconstruction, grand narrative identification, microstoria, story networking, intertextuality, causality, plot and theme analysis.

When exploring narratives, particularly in relation to a sense of self, Bamberg (1997) proposes asking three questions of the data: (1) How are characters positioned in relation to one another within reported events? (2) How does the speaker position him/herself to the audience? (3) How do narrators position themselves in relation to themselves? Asking these types of questions can help to guide analysis and this approach can also provide a lens through which to examine the polyphonic layers present within narratives. This may however, place more emphasis on producing accounts that are highly individualised and without broader cultural context. This research is interested in the localised narratives and small stories that reflect individual, mundane experiences of repetition (Bamberg, 2011), as well as the broader cultural and social norms that influence the way in which job seekers

construct their practice. Therefore, using an analytical method known as the voice centred relational method (VCRM, Brown and Gillingham, 1992) was employed because of its ability to aid analytical depth and provide a framework for data management.

VCRM is a method of analysis developed in relation to narratives and originated in 1982 when it was first devised by Gilligan in order to hear the voices of women in a study regarding female development and psychology. As a result, VCRM has commonly been used because of its ability to account for relational, societal and cultural narratives, frequently working within a relativist ontology (Paliadelis and Cruickshank, 2008). Brown and Gilligan (1992) in their development of VCRM advocate four different readings of the data in line with the principles identified in the table below. By analysing data using Brown and Gilligan (1992), it is thought that this guiding framework is well placed to account for the micro and macro narratives and performances that form the job seeker's journey.

Table 5. VCRM data analysis template

Reading Number	Purpose	Questions to ask of the data
1	Identifying overall story	What are the main events? Who are the main characters? Are there any sub-plots? Are there any reoccurrences of words, metaphors and contradictions? What are my personal responses both intellectually and emotionally?
2	Identifying the 'I' voice	What instances of I, we or you exist? Does this change/shift? How does the participant feel, speak and experience themselves? Does this change? What roles are the participants playing?
3	Relationships and social networks	How does the participant talk about interpersonal relationships? What are the significant relationships? How are people positioned within relationships? How do they expect to act?
4	Cultural contexts and social structures	How do participants account for their experiences in relation to social, political, cultural and structural contexts? Are any normative ideologies expressed? Use of moral terms, constraints or enablers? What is unspoken or taken for granted?

(Table adapted from Brown and Gilligan, 1992 and Mauthner and Doucet, 1998)

4.18 Undertaking data analysis

In this section a detailed and reflexive account of the analytical process taken in this thesis is provided. This is done to demonstrate both transparency and rigour of the process, as well as to show the non-linearity of qualitative data analysis.

In June 2017 I began the transcribing process. This started as soon as data collection commenced. I then began data analysis in early April 2018, initially with the reading of each interview with participants. I filed each data set into folders based on the point at which the interviews had occurred e.g. the first set of interviews were labelled tranche one, the second set tranche two and the last, tranche three. I printed off copies of the transcriptions and at the same time uploaded the first 15 interviews into Nvivo 11, a tool to provide some semblance of organisation to well over 413 pages of text.

I read each transcription three times. The first reading included using the printed out version of each transcript and note taking in the margins. This note taking was done to begin the phase of identifying overall stories, the different 'I' positions, any dominant cultural/ social references and any significant relationships. The second reading was more systematic in that I began to annotate the transcripts more coherently onto the word document of the transcription, giving labels to, for example an overall story such as 'feeling a personal responsibility for finding work' or 'objectification of work'. In addition to this I summarised key ideas based on each transcription into another, separate word document, which I labelled data summaries. Lastly I undertook a third reading whilst transferring my word document notes into Nvivo 11. Using my data summary and all my other notes, I began to group meaningful chunks of data into broader ideas and themes.

The grouping of tranche one produced five different iterations of 25 broader, potential themes. Tranche two produced a sixth iteration and tranche three produced a further two

more iterations on the themes representing the data. At this point of analysis, I had a total of 31 broad themes. Following this and using the report generating capability of Nvivo 11, I generated the data grouped into each theme and downloaded this into an excel sheet. This iterative analysis continued from April 2018 until August 2019 in a process of refinement. It was only at this point did I feel able to make the analysis more succinct in relation to data theorising. This entailed a further few more iterations of analysis, as I re-read all the quotes of each theme in relation to each other to determine their relationship to theory by reflecting on the similarities, differences, repetition and whether or not certain themes could be collapsed or re-configured.

Then came the question of articulation. In order to account for job seeking as narrated by job seekers, I latterly framed the data analysis using Glynos and Howarth (2007) logics of critical explanation approach. Further details about this approach can be found below, in section 4.19. In order to do this, I reflected upon what, in the data and literature was being situated as a problem, and what was being presented as possible solutions. Based on this I then started to cluster particular themes in relation to how they appeared capable of articulating what, how and why responses to the original research questions. Both thinking about problems and their related solutions, as well as identifying narratives relevant to the what, how and why of job seeking required an iterative process back to previous literature identified in the literature review, and theoretical framing chapters. I have justified these interpretations within the discussion chapter. Empirical evidence is illustrated with pseudonymised participant quotes and supported by literature.

4.19 Articulation of data analysis

To help articulate the what, how and why of job seeking within a postfeminist ideology, the logics of critical explanation is used (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The logics approach and the work outlined by Glynos and Howarth (2007) is compatible with a social constructionist approach because it also sees reality as discursively constructed and capable of producing multiple meanings. This thesis draws in a focused way from the work of Glynos and Howarth to articulate job seeking as narrated by female job seekers and contribute to theory regarding postfeminism. This approach will now be articulated in order to explain how the empirical data found in chapters five to seven have been structured.

4.19.1 Taking a logics approach to job seeking

Individuals can be said to operate is social systems that shape ideal ways of being including behaviours, actions, emotions and values. When these are disrupted by an experience that they cannot fit into their pre-existing discursive representations (such as the repeated failure to secure the ideal or dream job), an opportunity presents itself. This opportunity can either be to contest and change everyday social relations, ideals and practices, or accept and absorb them (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). When there is a sense of possibility that an experience that disrupts discursive representations can be absorbed or subsumed by a higher order process this is known as ‘empirical contingency’. Empirical contingency lets social and political practices related to the experience remain irrefutable and stable (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). When there is a sense of impossibility associated with a disruptive experience, this is known as ‘radical contingency’. This allows subjects to acknowledge that social and political practices related to their experience are refutable, inherently unstable and therefore capable of mobilisation.

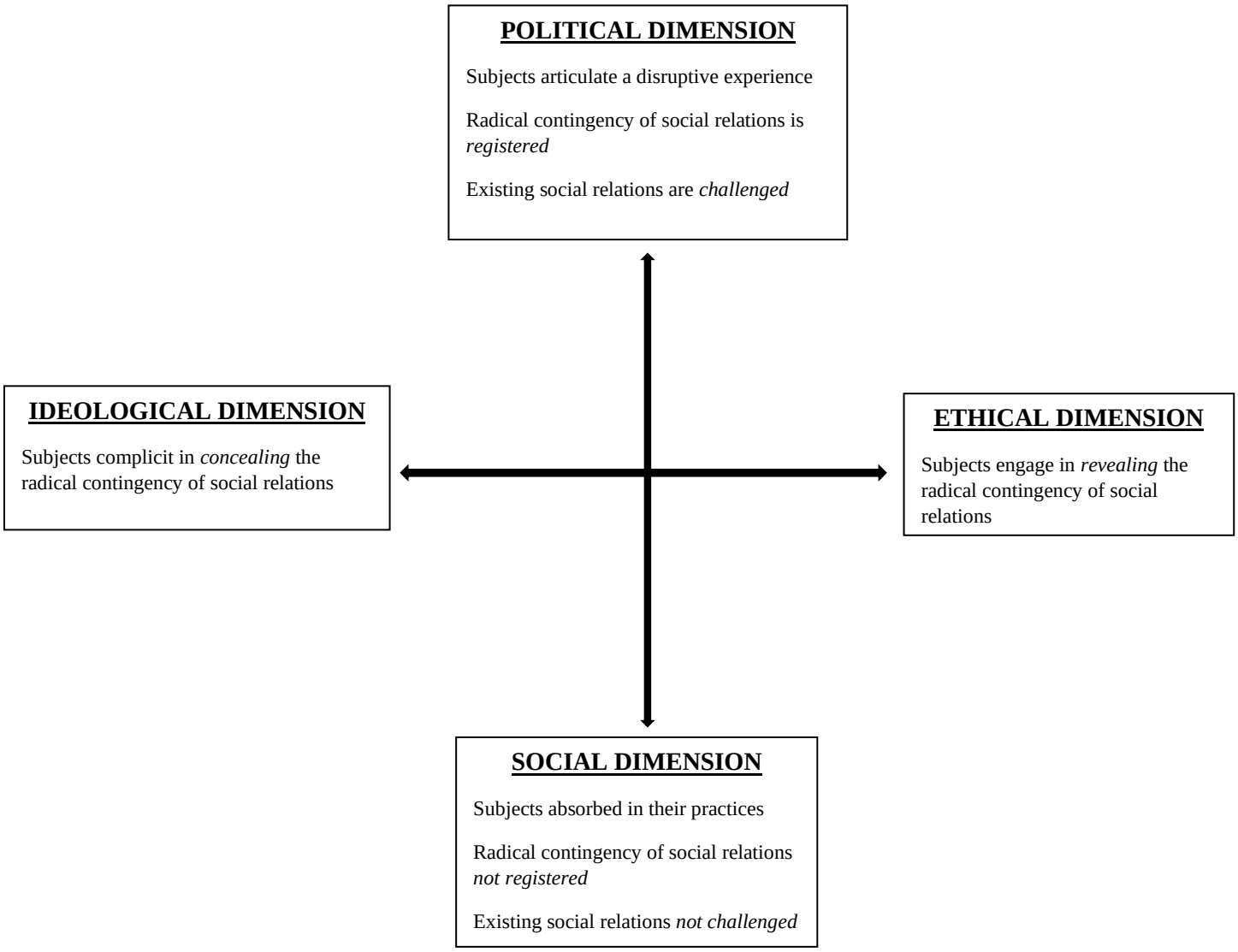
Both empirical and radical contingency require engagement from an individual in order to operate. This engagement, according to Glynos and Howarth (2007) sits within a social, political, ideological and ethical dimension. These dimensions can best be described as operating on two continuums; the ideological-ethical and the social-political and are concerned with the radical contingency of social relations.

The social-political continuum concerns the extent to which the radical contingency of social relations is registered and challenged. The political dimension refers to subjects being able to articulate their experiences of disruption, register the radical contingency of social relations and therefore contest and challenge existing social relations. Conversely, the social dimension refers to subjects being absorbed in their practices, thus not registering the radical contingency of social relations and therefore not challenging existing social relations.

The ideological-ethical continuum concerns the extent to which subjects are active in concealing or revealing the radical contingency of social relations. The ideological dimension refers to subjects being complicit in concealing the radical contingency of social relations whereas the ethical dimension refers to subjects engaging in revealing it (see Figure 1. for a summary).

These dimensions are embedded at the material level through everyday practices, as opposed to being present in the conscious. The identification of practices acts as a heuristic device to aid the concrete, empirical analysis of these dimensions in a broader, more overarching way. To identify practices at an empirical level, the idea of logics need to be considered. A logic can be described as the glue that holds certain practices together. It is the underpinning essence of what makes it all "tick" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, p. 135) and can be separated out into social, political and fantasmatic, which will now be explained in more detail.

Figure 1. Summary of Logics approach (Adapted from Glynos and Howard, 2007, p. 115)



Social logics

Social logics are most usefully thought of as the rules that characterise a particular social practice, referring to how the political dimension is enacted and in what context. Social practices are defined as continuous, routinised forms of human and societal reproduction; repetitive activities which usually do not involve self-conscious reflexivity (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). By making a social practice visible and identifying its informal rules, the researcher can recover its logic, through the meaning and function of the practice (Glynos, 2008). For example, Bal and Doci (2018) use a logics approach to explore a neoliberal

ideology in work. They explore the decline of collective labour agreements (i.e. the practice) and thus the day to day, largely unconscious, enactment of the logic of individualisation as a feature of neoliberal ideology (the political dimension). Social logics show how taken for granted ways of being form the social norms of a particular period of time.

Political logics

Political logics enable the researcher to understand how social practices have been instituted or are being challenged, allowing further analysis of them. Political practices aim to transform or maintain existing social practices in the name of an ideal. Although social and political practices interact with and inform each other, the difference is that political practices have a distinctively public import (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) such as for example, the ideals espoused within a neoliberal ideology. Political logics therefore show the 'how' of a particular time frame, enabling the emphasis on narratives that affect individuals at a broad level. For example, Bal and Doci (2018) suggest that individualism and competition are the political practices of a neoliberal ideology at work because they naturalise work practices and reinforce their relevance.

Fantasmatic logics

Fantasmatic logics explain why social practices and their associated ideals grip subjects and thus why they may be resistant to change. They structure reality in ways that make social practices appear 'natural', giving political practices momentum and are therefore linked with the ideological dimension. Fantasmatic logics involve a narrative of fullness to come (e.g. the potential for success or fulfilment through work) if certain obstacles can be overcome (beatific dimension of fantasy) or disaster if those obstacles are unassailable (horrific dimension of fantasy). This closes the narrative gap caused by a disruptive experience *before*

it can become the source of new political practices (i.e. *before* the radical contingency of social relations can be registered and existing social relations can be challenged). Drawing again on the work of Bal and Doci (2018) fantasmatic logics include the fantasies of freedom, meritocracy and growth to explain why workers remain gripped by their working practices.

Fantasmatic logics draws on the idea of fantasy (see chapter three) which is defined by its function of (narrative) closure and is predicated on the psychoanalytical term jouissance, a French term, the translation of which does not accurately depict its meaning but is loosely referred to as enjoyment (Glynos, 2008a;b). Enjoyment here is not synonymous with pleasure because in this case it refers to that which is often, but not always, consciously experienced as suffering. For example, the guilt experienced through transgressing an official ideal is a form of experiencing enjoyment because of what it offers a subject (e.g. vindication or validation).

Fantasy is specifically understood as the frame which structures a subject's enjoyment of closure. There are many feelings associated with fantasy's promise of fullness or the threat of disaster such as excitement and anxiety. However, it is the enjoyment of closure of those narrative gaps, caused by the disruptive experience in the first place, by fantasy which explains why subjects remain gripped by it. This mode of enjoyment of closure is embodied in social practices and not reducible to conscious apprehension and therefore not readily or easily articulated (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). This is often why fantasy remains future orientated and resistant to full public disclosure.

4.20 Justification of a logics approach

Following both conservative policies introduced in the 1980s and the 2007 financial crash, along with technological advancements, there has been increasing diversification of work and how to work (e.g. gigs, zero hours, multiple contracts), either through necessity or intention, which shapes job seeking practices (ILO, 2018). Workers are concerned with the what and

the how of work but appear to be less reflective or analytical of why they engage with work practices in certain ways in relation to broader contextual and structural conditions. For example, many workers still aspire to have linear careers (career ladders, a dream job, progression) despite an increasingly fragmented labour market (Roper et al., 2010). Over time workers enact and become habituated, even attached to ways of working and job seeking that are difficult to change, even when they are harmful, particularly if they are not brought forth consciously and made available for public disclosure and discussion. This is where the logics framework that Glynos and Howarth provide becomes useful.

The logics framework enables an empirical insight into a given ideology, making visible the taken for granted assumptions associated with it (i.e. its ideals and practices). Emphasising spaces where ideals can be challenged or refuted (or not), can demonstrate how ideals often compete and conflict, by enabling internalised practices and their meanings to be revealed and identified (Glynos and Speed, 2012; Bal and Doci, 2018).

The logics approach is ultimately a framework that can be used to identify, describe and explain what, how and why subjects engage with the world. For example, social logics enable the identification of what repetitive, routinised job seeking practices subjects are engaging in. By identifying these practices, their meaning and function can be understood. Political logics enable the description of how job seeking practices have emerged and become instituted and internalised or are being contested. They enable the postfeminist ideals of work and job seeking which underpin the political practices to be made visible. These practices are conceptualised, constructed and disseminated in the public domain (e.g. through Government or media messaging) to influence how society understands and practices work. Fantasmatic logics enable an explanation of why job seeking practices grip job seekers. It exposes the (unwitting) complicity of job seekers in concealing possible alternative ways of working and job seeking. It does this by demonstrating how a postfeminist ideology is a fantasy which

functions to close job seekers' narrative gaps caused by disruptive experiences and procures a mode of enjoyment of closure. Narrative gaps are repaired and consequently affective satisfaction is achieved, hence those same job seeking practices which caused the experienced disruption to discursive representations continue uncontested and unchallenged, and to some extent strengthened.

In summary, using the logics approach is capable of informing a critique of postfeminist ideology, specifically regarding how they navigate a UK labour market that suggests they are ideal subjects but presents a different reality. Exposing and contesting this dominant ideology and way of being as only one of many possibilities may help to relieve women of the burdens of compulsively enacting such ideals and alleviate the harm which may be caused as a result. These are ideas that are reflected in the following three findings chapters. Participant accounts are articulated in their everyday storied representations, to show the interactive function of narrating experience (Bamberg, 2016) and to emphasise its repetitiveness (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015.

4.21 Quality criteria

Qualitative research sometimes suffers from the misconception that it is not reliable in two ways. Firstly it is frequently impossible to replicate and therefore validate (Bryman and Bell, 2011) and secondly that the close involvement of the researcher may heavily influence the subsequent interpretation (Willig, 2001). Yet these arguments regarding reliability, validity and researcher subjectivity often stem from the more dominant quantitative paradigm and subsequently do not translate as easily into qualitative critique (Golafshani, 2003). As a result, qualitative researchers have sought to develop quality criteria as a means of enhancing the rigour with which qualitative research is undertaken. Yardley, (2000) notes criteria such as transparency and coherence; commitment and rigour; context-sensitivity; significance and

impact may be more relevant when assessing the quality of work. Yet on-going debate exists in regards to the relevance and appropriateness of quality criterion given that qualitative work is contextual and therefore difficult to judge against homogenous guidelines (Hammersley, 2007). Therefore, rather than identifying a list of quality criteria, this research has made a commitment to rigour, transparency, worthiness and ethics through an iterative and continual process of reflexive engagement and transparent writing.

4.22 Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by Kingston University Research Committee on 11th September 2017 (FREC 17 26). Two interviews were conducted prior to this approval as pilots and were subsequently included in data analysis.

4.23 Informed consent

Participants of this study were invited to engage in a series of three conversations of approximately 60 minutes throughout their job seeking process. All interviews, with written consent, were audio-recorded and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed of their ability to terminate the interview at any point, if they felt uncomfortable or no longer wished to continue. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and given the option of continuing with the next question. Participants were given the option of terminating the interview if necessary. Interviews were conducted via face-to-face in a public space however three interviews took place via skype and four via phone.

4.24 Confidentiality and anonymity

All interview recordings and transcripts have been kept and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. This level of protection was subsequently updated in light of GDPR. Participant numbers were given to all participants in order to protect their identity. All personal information such as email addresses, names, demographic factors has been kept confidential by a password protected computer and the only person with access to the data has been the author. All of the information collected from this study will be destroyed at the end of thesis confirmation.

4.25 Dissemination of results

All participants were made aware that their conversations and participation in this research are part of a PhD study. They were informed that even if parts of this study are disseminated publicly, such as within academic journals, they would not be identifiable. All efforts have been made to minimise identification.

4.26 Conclusion

This chapter provides the research methodology framework and reasoning for an inductive qualitative approach to exploring job seeking as narrated by UK based, female job seekers. Taking a relativist, social constructionist perspective the methodological approach draws on the term information power, utilising a small sample size of 15 individuals in their first year of job seeking to detail the experiences of the participant sample. Multiple interviews (up to three) occurred over the period of job seeking and recruitment interactions. Narrative enquiry informs the approach to data, drawing on the everyday stories of participants as they pertain to the articulation of job seeking. Data was analysed thematically using VCRM as a guiding framework. Job seeking, its practices and associated ideals are represented through the localised narratives of job seekers and framed by the logics approach (Glynos and Howarth,

2007). Reflexivity has been accounted for in this section and a detailed characterisation of each participant has been provided. In the next chapter the thesis findings are presented. Three chapters outline the social, political and fantasmatic logics of job seeking.

Chapter Five

5. Findings Part One: Introducing the 'what' of job seeking

In the previous chapter the methodological approach of this thesis was described. In the next three chapters the empirical data generated by this approach is provided. These three chapters are structured by the logics approach described in chapter four and lay out the findings of this thesis in relation to the what, how and why of job seeking. Empirical data is represented using participant quotes that reflect everyday small stories (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). These everyday stories reflect the on-going, repetitive talk that may be perceived as 'nothing' but reflect culturally and socially embedded narratives (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). Participant quotes have been selected using the voice centred relational method (VCRM, Brown and Gillingham, 1992), which helped to develop the narrative themes that follow. Chapter five responds to research question 1. Chapter six responds to research question 2. Lastly, Chapter seven responds to research question 3.

1. What is understood by job seeking as undertaken by female job seekers in a UK labour market?
2. How is job seeking instituted and internalised by female job seekers in a UK labour market?
3. Why is job seeking instituted and internalised by female job seekers in a UK labour market?

In this chapter the 'what' of job seeking as narrated by female job seekers is explored. This chapter identifies the job seeking practices that participants engage in and describes what female job seekers understand job seeking to be. In doing so the postfeminist ideals which underpin these job seeking practices are revealed. Findings indicate that female job seekers

undertake extensive psychological self-work as ideals associated with a postfeminist ideology. Examples of these practices are now provided.

5.1 The strategic planning of self-investment and subsequent self-monitoring

Job seeking, for some participants, was a very strategic process that centred on the belief that in discovering their dream job, individual success would be achieved. This was something assumed to be uncovered through meticulous planning and careful decision-making. These 'tools' were used by participants in order to eliminate or identify certain jobs in a process of constant evaluation and monitoring. There appeared to be a single-mindedness to the job seeking process with participants intentionally seeking work that would provide them with opportunities to move up the career ladder or help them to acquire a new set of skills. This is illustrated by Sarah, a recently graduated Masters student who had previously worked in the charity sector for a number of years. Sarah demonstrates this by undertaking unpaid internships.

> *"I did like internships where you don't get paid any money and you're really grateful and they pay for your travel and your lunch (pulls face) and you're basically doing an office job." (Sarah)*

In the extract below Sarah refers to her job search as a selfish process because of the way in which she believes she is directing it.

> *"My approach to the job is more selfish in a more, selfish in terms of like I'm not, I don't want to do the best I can in my job so the company will really like me and promote me although obviously I'll do the best I can, I'm not so invested in the organisation, I'm more invested in myself and gaining experience so that I can do something that I actually want to do." (Sarah)*

This '*selfish', 'invested'*-ness can be more accurately defined as self-invested-ness or self-investment and underpins Sarah's job seeking practices. Previous literature emphasises self-investment as a necessity for success within a neoliberal paradigm (McNay, 2009; Chandler and Reid, 2016; Rottenberg, 2014). For example, being loyal to one company does not reward in the same way it used to (i.e. with secure work, career progression and/or appropriate remuneration) and there is a greater likelihood of experiencing more precarious forms of work (ILO, 2018). Sarah, however, appears to believe that her self-investment is a personal choice she has made about how to conduct herself during her job seeking, rather than see it as a choice-less necessity. It thus creates an illusion of control; she 'decides' what experience is the 'right' type of experience and justifies accepting any job as an opportunity for self-investment in the name of planning and aligning herself with what she *really* wants to do (which remains unspoken).

For other participants, extensive planning and decision-making held the assumption that through finding a job, various other strands of their life would subsequently be resolved. This can be seen in Michaela's narrative. A recently graduated PhD student, Michaela was already employed during the research conversations. However, since the completion of her PhD she felt the need to invest in her future by finding a new job in order to progress her career. In the extract below we are witness to the numerous strands of thought which Michaela feels the need to tie together through the attainment of her next job.

> *"I'm making like really tough decisions about umm, I've been with my boyfriend for ten years and so we kind of, we've been on and off and its I guess it's a big decision time for us, do we want to move forwards and get married and you know, I'm 35 maybe I should have kids now, or... if I get a job somewhere like, umm, in academia it's very difficult that if you really want to live in a particular place you have to be prepared to move so that can be a big change for me, moving somewhere else say*

Leeds or all over the country or even outside the UK you know, I may end up going somewhere far you know... I guess it's umm, a big decision time so I need to think about all these things." (Michaela)

Here we see Michaela attempting to form a success strategy by making plans and decisions about where she wants to live, whether or not she wants to have a family, and whether or not this will be with the current partner she has. Self-investment, and, additionally, self-monitoring underpin these planning and decision-making job seeking practices as they relate to her securing hypothetical future work. Michaela gives the impression that this can all be decided upon by taking the time to carefully consider 'all of these things' but most significantly, be resolved when she finds her next job. This suggests an ability to rationalise her job seeking strategy when in fact all of these factors are beyond her control because they are ultimately unknowable. In her attempts to regain a degree of control over her situation, Michaela's strategy is to plan multiple, sometimes competing, hypothetical scenarios of what 'could be' depending on what job she gets.

"I was telling my mum we were laughing about it and I thought about planning and I actually created like a document with scenario 1, 2, 3 and 4 I've got 4 different scenarios of what will happen if this happens and this doesn't with my job situation and living and all that and it's all about getting a job somewhere, that's at the centre of it." (Michaela)

Michaela's carefully planned out scenarios may show an attempt at trying to create a sense of order where there is none. Ultimately, she is not sure what her next job will be, if she will still be with her partner and where she will live. Whilst Michaela acknowledges that she is in secure employment, which is seen as a positive, she still longs to change her situation as if a new job can offer her resolution. This appears to be underpinned by a belief that a new job

will make all her other decisions fall into place without her actually having to make big decisions such as where to live, whether to have a family and deal with whatever they might present. In this respect a new job is positioned as a way of sorting out one's life, of having control over other, uncontrollable features of life (Fotaki, 2010). Extensive self-monitoring and self-investment may imbue the job search with a heightened sense of meaning. This can further be seen in Michaela's extract where she recounts her attempts at containing her excitement whilst also trying to managing her desire to plan a new life with each application or job interview.

> *"R: I was already looking at properties and renting a flat in Leeds if I was to get a job and I looked at other flights to [participant's native home] if I wanted to visit my family so I was already thinking, you know, what if.*
>
> *I: That's such a tricky one as well isn't it, because then it becomes slightly more of an emotional investment*
>
> *R: Yea, yea, and then I thought like so many times to myself oh you're so silly, you haven't even got the job offer and you're already thinking about the future but I guess I'm a bit of a planner, I like to have a plan." (Michaela)*

There is a normalcy about having to plan around a potential relocation for a job, therefore, looking into the logistics of this is a necessary step to understanding whether a relocation for work is feasible. However, in a later conversation with Michaela, she appears to backtrack on her desire to plan, suggesting that now that she's had more time to experience job seeking, she's able to acknowledge the lack of control she has.

> *"Maybe it's not a good thing to try and build your life around security, maybe its ok to realise that not everything is secure in life that umm, you know things can change from day to day you know, there's so many things you can't influence in life, rather*

than like having this massive dreams you know, being all upset and unhappy and depressed about not achieving those dreams, you have to take it day by day and see what happens and that's a good way to be, you don't want to have everything planned in your life, you want some spontaneity." (Michaela)

Whilst Michaela appears to have let go of her need to plan and seek security through that, what this has been replaced with is an acceptance of and self-monitoring for precarity. Here we can see how in the absence of securing work, what it means to find a new job has been replaced with that of a carefree job seeker at peace with spontaneity. What appears to make this meaningful to Michaela is that in renouncing her original goal of job security, she is able to remain committed and (self) invested in getting her life sorted which appears to appease her growing sense of anxiety.

What is evident in this section is the way female job seekers engage in self- monitoring and self-investment as part of their job seeking practices. This is significant because women have been positioned as ideal subjects within a neoliberal labour market, having both access and being willing to advance themselves through work. Thus they may be subjected to practices that encourage a much greater level of psychological self-work than that required of men (Gill and Scharf, 2011; Adamson, 2017; Gill et al., 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2015; 2018). This implies that women may be more susceptible to, or even a target of, gendered forms of neoliberalism required within a postfeminist ideology.

5.2 Self-improvement and self-fulfilment through CV enhancing experiences

Rarely were participants' job seeking practices contained to just searching on job boards or sending out CVs. Many participants spoke of the different ways in which they were going about their job seeking for example, researching organisations, comparing different job roles, researching average salaries, reading online company reviews, looking up personnel profiles,

as well as trend watching and engaging in topical debates within their field. Additionally, several participants engaged in 'CV enhancing experiences' such as networking, work experience or volunteer activities. Participants were imbued with a sense of needing to do as much as possible, sometimes in a bid to develop their USP, other times as a need to compensate for the sense of perceived laziness experienced during job seeking. In the extract below, Ramona, an undergraduate completing her end of year dissertation, discusses how, with a sense of urgency, she is trying to do as much networking, attending CV building sessions, and anything else, as she can.

> *"I'm actually trying to grasp onto anything I can and I'm like oh I'll do this session and obviously things that give me great contacts and some stuff to put on my CV, so I'm sort of trying to do as much as I can." (Ramona)*

Self-improvement underpins Ramona's job seeking practices. She exhausts all practices that may help her to self-improve, which is revealed in her use of the word 'grasp'. Yet self-improvement that is undertaken in order to attain the 'right' job is an elusive and ill-defined idea (this is a finding explored in more detail in chapter seven). Therefore, the sense of urgency and desperation Ramona feels (to do as much as she can) may be associated with the absence of knowing what the right thing to do is.

Ramona's job seeking practices involve not only improving her CV but also going to the gym and studying as much as possible, all of which were underpinned by self-improvement and additionally, self-fulfilment.

> *"…trying to be the best that I can be, it makes me fill my potential and it makes me feel better knowing that I've done as much studying as I could, I've done like, my, I don't know, I've gone to the gym, I've done my work and I've basically done everything, like I've not left anything out, it makes me feel like…" (Ramona)*

Self-improvement leading to self-fulfilment is an ideal whereby, "the value of a person is constructed on the basis of applying oneself as a productive subject in all spheres of life" (Adamson, 2017 p. 317). This is exactly what Ramona appears to be demonstrating.

Helen's job seeking practices are also underpinned by self-improvement but she feels a sense of pressure in relation to the time she has available and the standards which she perceives are demanded of her.

> *"…they [employers] expect you to have a couple of years work experience and I'm thinking like yes but when, I only have one life, with 24 hours, how do I get work experience, be amazing at that and study and be amazing at that, it's just so tough." (Helen)*

Ramona shares a similar sense of mounting pressure and confusion about how to keep self-improving to achieve success.

> *"…even though its stressing me out, in the back of my mind I keep thinking masters, jobs, things like that and I still don't know much about it but, I think I'm trying, I'm searching everywhere so, careers events, open days, things like that so, so I don't know what else I can possibly do…I'm quite full up! Genuinely I wake up at 5.30 in the morning." (Ramona)*

Ramona focuses all of her attention on what else she can do more of, likely because she is not sure what else to do on top of what she is already doing. Instead she is clutching at straws. The distress Ramona and Helen associate with self-improvement may be because they both identify with a desire to 'produce' (Driver, 2019). This need, as discussed in Driver's work on future narratives of the retired self, suggests that when individuals are faced with a break in their careers, they still attempt to construct an identity around work-related ideals in a way that strengthens the desire to work.

Another job seeking practice underpinned by self-improvement is that of repeatedly attending job interviews, as participants regarded these as opportunities to get better at job seeking. This positive framing of what may be considered the negative aspect of failing to secure work can be seen in the extract below where Jennifer, a frequent job changer, discusses how the experience of many interviews has improved her ability to articulate herself.

> *"I actually think that having so many interviews has helped me to umm, like get my patter so umm, especially around the projects I've done and be able to explain them in a clear and succinct way whereas when I first started interviewing I was probably saying much too much and way too quickly." (Jennifer)*

Attending multiple interviews is regarded by Jennifer as having helped her to improve the skills she needs to create a coherent and connected version of the working self she wants to enact during subsequent interviews.

Jennifer, Helen and Ramona give the impression that job seeking is a project that one can always maximise upon in a constant pursuit of doing more towards improving one's abilities, an ideal that transcends instrumental use of one's time, reflecting the neoliberal (and postfeminist) ideal of the self as a project (Grey, 1994; McNay, 2009; Scharff, 2016). Focusing on self-improvement in relation to job seeking also represents the perception of moving forwards (i.e. progressing by undertaking instrumental activities related to job seeking) which possibly makes the reality of repetition easier to bear. By always doing more to improve themselves, job seekers seem to believe that they will both find the ideal job as well as transcend this instrumental function and fulfil their potential (which as yet remains undefined by participants and a finding which will be returned to in chapter seven). However, in reality increasingly active and inefficient job seeking practices may well lead to feelings of

exhaustion and fatigue, aspects that also demonstrate the affective implications (a finding which will be returned to in chapter six).

5.3 Careful documentation of self-reflection and self-discovery

Related to self-improvement are self-reflection and self-discovery. For example, the process of job seeking made participants reflect deeply on both past decisions and future desires. In the absence of securing employment, some participants regarded job seeking practices as learning processes underpinned by opportunities for self-reflection and self-discovery rather than a series of dead-ends. This is evident in Kristina's narrative below.

> *"I always thought oh my god its six months and it feels like nothing achieved but I had to work personally on myself to like, there is still a process happening, it's not that you don't work on yourself or anything." (Kristina)*

Whilst Kristina appears to feel a degree of panic at the amount of time that has passed during her job search, she is able to justify this to both herself and me because the self-reflective work she has done mitigates the time spent out of employment.

For Larissa, her self-reflection and self-discovery also occurred over the time spent job seeking. Over a period of six months Larissa tried to use this time to discover herself in a truthful, authentic way. She does this, as demonstrated below by writing out and documenting the things she likes to do.

> *"So my first step was Ok, let me write down the things I like to do, what do I like to do, and then I wrote oh I like to investigate, I like to, a couple of things, and I said Ok, now I need to see the jobs that I want to apply and where is my skills, where is the gap in my skills, you know, if you think around these things, err, in terms of, we need to have experience. Otherwise you don't have a chance." (Larissa)*

Larissa then goes on to outline further steps involved in her process of self-discovery such as mapping her skills and interests onto a range of different jobs, plugging the gaps in her skills by reading books and watching videos on YouTube.

> *"So I started to read about HR analytics to see where my skill gaps are and then I found out I need to improve my excel, umm skills because I have basic skills so but I didn't want to invest in another course, mainly because I didn't want to compromise myself financially but I was looking and I was watching videos on YouTube, trying to work with the data that I have already to see what to do." (Larissa)*

In this respect, Larissa engages in instrumental practices (she documents her likes and dislikes) but she also gets to know herself by extensively self-reflecting on her abilities and what she perceives as being the most important aspects of herself. Yet she speaks only in value creation terms- 'skill gaps', 'excel', 'course', 'read', 'improve', 'looking'. These are not the likes or dislikes spoken as a human being but those spoken by a job seeker intent on demonstrating her economic value as a desirable candidate. This can also be seen in Michaela, who explains self-discovery through job seeking as a process of ever-evolving self-reflection.

> *"I guess when you're self-reflecting in relation to looking for jobs, you're also looking at right, I tick these boxes but I still don't tick the other boxes and I still need to develop other areas. So I guess I'm looking for jobs, if I compare myself to other applicants who have maybe got more experience, they are probably in a stronger position and I guess I reflect on what I still need to do." (Michaela)*

Each job application or interview 'speaks' to job seekers in a way that addresses their ability, calling upon them to develop or better themselves for next time round. This also connects to earlier themes of self-investment and self-improvement because participants appear to use

their self-reflection and related self-discovery as ways to invest back in and improve upon the self. This is discussed explicitly by Ramona who seeks to harness her reflections in order to 'fix' herself.

> *"I actually am genuinely concerned that I keep going through some of the stages but maybe it's like the interview or, I'm not too sure and I'm actually wondering now and I want to fix that." (Ramona)*

Participants discussed wanting to modify and fix themselves for each job application, as if the reflections and discoveries one makes about one's self can then be off-set against the absence of discoveries in the form of jobs to apply for. This can only be done however in instances where participants demonstrate a willingness and openness to reflect.

> *"I think it's err, it's the way, how you err...reflect about yourself. But I'm saying that it's not everyone who is prepared for that, not everyone is aware or wants it. There's always a desire behind all of this effort you know, there is something that I desire that I am putting all of my efforts towards." (Larissa)*

Self-reflection and self-discovery seem to conceal feelings of failure when employment has not been secured by offering participants a vague sense that they are still succeeding because they are developing themselves. This emphasises the neoliberal ideal of personal responsibility but also demonstrates the particularly postfeminist demand to always be better (Riley et al., 2019).

5.4 Self-orientation, self-assessment and self-comparison in online searching

Another job seeking practice underpinned by self-work can be seen in conversation with Clare, a recently graduated BSc student with limited work experience. Clare had a particular approach to her job seeking in that she narrowed down her job search based on geography,

searching only within her locality and contacting companies that fell within a particular radius. Clare also discussed how her strategy included looking up company personnel and watching company videos assessing herself against the type of people she imagined each company employed.

> *"I've been going on Google maps and seeing where I'm happy to drive to and typing in accountancies and seeing all the ones that pop up and then clicking on their website and seeing who they are and who the people working there are and seeing if I like them because there's some that are just really creepy old men and I'm not going to apply to that one thank you. I do judge them on looks which is probably naughty…" (Clare)*

In this extract we can see the same careful planning and self-investment exhibited by Sarah and Michaela in section 5.1: Clare wants to find a convenient location, does not want to work with certain types of people and makes judgements about companies. Her online searching is underpinned by careful self-assessment, which she uses as a way to orient herself to hypothetically fit into whichever company she decides to apply for; no job description required. Clare weighs herself up (self-orientating and self-assessing) in relation to watching videos of previous trainees, looking at organisational cues and reading promotional material to determine whether she can see herself within a particular organisation.

Other online searching practices included using LinkedIn. This practice was not only underpinned by self-orientation and self-assessment but also self-comparison. For example, Barbara used LinkedIn as part of her job search, comparing herself to her friends.

> *"I'm a bit obsessed with kind of looking at old friends or colleagues on LinkedIn and seeing how incredibly successful they are." (Barbara)*

Barbara implicitly suggests that in relation to her friends, she feels unsuccessful (demonstrating self-orientation and self-assessment). She does not appear to include herself as one of the successful ones amongst her friends but instead isolates herself through self-comparison against elusive benchmarks (McRobbie, 2015). This may be because she is job seeking at a time in her life when she did not expect to be. One may also get a sense after listening to Barbara that she may feel a degree of shame at not being as successful as her friends. By trawling friends' online profiles and assessing herself in relation to their perceived success, she is benchmarking herself and inadvertently punishing herself for not being as successful as her friends.

In the example of Clare and Barbara, deploying boundaries around the type of company to apply to, or a perceived goal of success is a strategy akin to the self-regulation noted by McRobbie (2015) in her 'Notes on the Perfect' article. McRobbie suggests that in pursuit of 'the perfect' (the perfect being an extension of aspiration and in this case refers to finding a job capable of providing self-fulfilment), women's self-assessment nearly always involves elusive benchmarks (p. 9). She refers to a 'neoliberal spreadsheet', used to benchmark the self (p.10) in a calculated weighting up of assets versus loss. Ultimately by engaging in online job seeking practices both Clare and Barbara are undertaking guess work as a way to assess and orient themselves towards the labour market. As previously mentioned, the elusiveness (i.e. guesswork) associated with these practices will be discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

5.5 Self-dissolution, self-transformation and the perfect proxy self

The job seeking practice of writing and re-writing CVs, either individually or supported by a careers counsellor or industry professional was common among participants. This was often due to participants reaching a point of confusion in their job seeking (*"I was really confused*

like, (confused about which bit?), like how do you get a job, like, what's the exact steps", Meera). Meera, for example, accessed the careers guidance service as part of a range of support services offered to her by the job centre.

> *"One of the people I went to see said, when I'm applying for every single job, I have to change it every single time because she said every job is different so look at their thing and basically merge their thing with your thing and you'll have something and be more likely to be shortlisted. So like now it seems like I have to do a lot more just to get into a job, even just to get shortlisted." (Meera)*

Meera's articulation, or rather in-articulation of what is expected of job seekers, (*look at their thing [job description] and basically merge their thing [job description] with your thing [CV or application] and you'll have something)*, suggests that (successful) CV writing needs to be tailored to each prospective employer. Curriculum vitae, (which, when translated from the Latin means the course of one's life), act as a written representation of the participants' selves. The practice of CV writing, reviewing it against a prospective employer and then re-writing it accordingly can therefore be characterised by repeated self-dissolution and self-transformation. This can be witnessed in Larissa. Larissa felt strongly that her CV was a direct representation of her and felt ashamed of both it and herself due to her lack of experience. To help dissolve her old CV and transform it into a new one, she sought external assistance.

> *"…when I started to apply for jobs I started to get a lot of no's, no's, no's, no's. I didn't pass the first stage so I thought there's something wrong. So, I started to, to think ok, I need people in the field that are working to review my CV. Then I started to ask, you know for different people to review my CV but, to be honest I was a bit of you know, ashamed you know to review my CV. I was ashamed that I didn't have enough*

experience, I couldn't have a strong CV. It was really difficult for me as a person." (Larissa)

For other participants, such as Ramona, writing about their work-related experiences and seeing themselves represented in their CV made them feel good about themselves.

"I didn't have the confidence that I could do well this year but then as I've been putting all the CV and personal statements together, it highlights the good things about you and I sort of realised oh actually I'm not that bad." (Ramona)

It is interesting here to note that Ramona thinks of herself as bad until she has documented experiences that directly connect to her work experience (see also section 5.3 and the practice of documentation, underpinned by self-reflection and self-discovery).

Ramona and Larissa both seem to regard their CVs as a proxy self and a site for both transformation and a representation of their entire beings. This representation, for many participants came in the form of wanting to show their true, authentic selves in their CVs, profiles and applications. The aspiration to represent an authentic self again requires both self-dissolution and self-transformation. In the extract below, Anita discusses the practice of adapting and updating her CV to represent this.

"Update it and I think truthfully update it, not just based on a job role I would or like change it based on who I think might be looking on profile like oh this recruiter will be looking on my profile today but truthfully, and I think through reading different job profiles I do get to know oh I do have this and that and it gives me a chance to update it because it means like to move away from the stereotypical words and add in what is really going to…" (Anita)

Larissa's extract also exemplifies this.

> *"I want to put someone who is true, my true soul out there, not pretending." (Larissa)*

Larissa's use of the word soul is interesting here because the soul of a person represents life, feeling, thought and action- essentially everything about a person both in life and death. Her CV is one way in which she feels able to put her true self out there and this is done by dissolving and transforming what she perceives as irrelevant aspects of her self.

In using the CV in this way participants embody a degree of transformative adaptability (Gill and Kanai, 2018); adapting their CVs to transform themselves as 'truthfully' as possible. The double-bind is that job seekers want to show and find their 'true' selves in the jobs they apply for, but to be successful they must tailor this to each prospective employer without fully knowing what this entails (i.e. a 'right' self). We can see a clear example of this in Clare, who is primed to dissolve her previous job seeking self in order to transform into whatever she may subsequently be required to be.

> *"I could be what I had told them I was by the time I get into the job so (laughs)." (Clare)*

Unlike Ramona, Larissa, Anita and Clare, Meera seems to acknowledge the separation between herself and her CV. However, adapting it continues to be one of her job seeking practices despite some cynicism "*these people don't even know me"* (see chapter seven for further details on cynicism).

> *"You need to think of a way, even in my CV to phrase it in a way so that it seems I'm still into finance and the business psychology was helping me towards that." (Meera)*

Meera also suggests that self-dissolution and self-transformation (leading to successfully securing employment) only come with job seeking knowledge and experience ("*once you get*

experience, you get it but until then it's like very, it's confusing"). Even failing to secure work can therefore provide job seekers with invaluable knowledge and experience to transform themselves for subsequent applications. However, the extent to which repeated failure is experienced may depend on the initial levels of knowledge and experience a job seeker has when they begin their search. This has previously been presented as a classed issue (Allen, 2013).

The job seeking practice of adapting one's CV is not only underpinned by self-dissolution and self-transformation but also necessarily other forms of self-work including self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-improvement (see 5.2). This is in keeping with both neoliberal and postfeminist cultural discourses regarding self-help, coaching and therapy which suggest that one's mind, body, emotions, career and lives can be transformed, repeatedly for the better (Swan, 2017; Riley et al., 2019).

5.6 Self-empowerment and self-fulfilment through work

Job seeking practices and the various forms of self-work which underpin them can also be associated with self-empowerment and self-fulfilment. This is demonstrated in the following narratives where participants attempt to articulate what it is they are striving for and what they are doing in order to get there. Participants had high expectations and hopes of what work could provide, for example: purpose, passion, impact, joy, happiness and love were all associated with work. Regardless of (un)employment status, work was elevated to a status capable of fulfilling both materialistic, financial needs and existential desire. For example, Louise talked about her aspiration to find the 'good job'.

> *"I: What do you mean by good job?*
>
> *R: Sort of a job where there's career prospects, opportunity for development, I use financial stability or an actual wage that isn't you know, sort of in the £17,000 mark*

where you can see yourself actually being able to afford to save to buy a house. (Louise)

Louise feels empowered to seek out a good job and she relates this reasonably clearly to being contingent upon salary. However the broader meaning of 'good' remains elusive despite further questioning. In a similar example Kristina discusses wanting to get back into work more generally before she makes it big, demonstrating an attempt to bring about self-empowerment through her job seeking practices, but also work towards the long-term aspiration of attaining self-fulfilment through work.

"I just want to get into work again and I really miss work, it's been too long and yea, I don't know, maybe I will make the big career here but who knows. I mean I want to find a good one which I'm feeling happy about it but it's, I just want to get a step into the labour market and then I can still search around again." (Kristina)

Meera refers to the job she *wants* as existing as part of a long-term aspiration for self-fulfilment but appears willing to accept an interim solution as a self-empowered act in order to get there.

"It's good in the meantime until I can get the job I want."

Anita also exemplifies the self-empowered job seeker. Having recently completed her Masters she was job seeking whilst working two, zero-hours contracts and also trying to secure a UK work visa. By her own admittance, Anita felt that only by working in the UK would she be fulfilled. Work in the UK would afford her confidence, happiness, career prospects, return on educational investment and status.

"R: It's more than a necessity, its, I really really want to do it.

I: What do you think it all holds for you?

R: I'd be more confident, I think the one thing I lack right now is umm, not being fully

happy where I am, doing a part time job not related to my field left me feeling very incomplete in terms of what I've come here to do so the one thing that would change for sure is that I would be mentally happy I think. Where I'm getting my return on my investment and my education and when I know I'm progressing, when I know I am moving from where I start in the job. It would just make me a lot more proud of myself. That's one thing that would change. I just feel that umm, I, when you really want something you don't see left or right but I mean I'm trying to look at it positively and it should work out for the best." (Anita)

Anita's pursuit of work has become a central theme in her life. All her attention is focused on how to harness enthusiastic participation; the anticipation of fulfilment through securing work is her reward for doing everything 'right' (Ahmed, 2010). Anita enacts self-empowerment to maintain her high expectations but as with Louise she struggles to articulate what this actually means.

"Sometimes this aiming for the sky, is it a bad thing? I feel, is it really setting your expectations too high, that nothing will ever match it or something? But then do you, I feel like do you really need to lower it down or is that going to reflect on how you progress?" (Anita)

What is brought to a head in this section is the idea that participants' job seeking practices are underpinned by their desire to seek self-fulfilment (and thus success) through work (and what this may offer, such as financial stability) and that this may be associated with a long-term job search. However, they also struggle to articulate what attainment of for example the good job, or self-fulfilment through work actually means. This is a finding which will be returned to in chapter seven. In the meantime, job seekers appear willing to accept jobs that are less than ideal in an act of perceived self-empowerment, reflective of the postfeminist ideal that

demands women lean-in to their careers in order to attain success (Gill et al., 2017; Rottenberg, 2017).

5.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, what is understood by the term job seeking to female job seekers has been identified. This includes a detailed description of job seeking practices and what underpins them. Practices include: extensive planning and decision-making; constantly refining CVs; networking and maintaining visibility (physical and online) to proactively create opportunities; extensively researching prospective employers; and applying for multiple positions. These practices are underpinned by extensive self-work including self: investment; improvement; orientation; comparison; regulation; assessment; monitoring; reflection; discovery; dissolution; transformation; empowerment and fulfilment. These reflect the ideals associated with a postfeminist ideology that resist clear articulation, a finding that will be returned to in chapter seven.

What is shown in the next chapter are examples of *how* job seeking is accepted rather than contested and thereby instituted and internalised.

Chapter Six

6. Findings Part Two: Introducing the 'how' of job seeking

This chapter explores how job seeking is instituted and internalised by female job seekers by showing examples of where participants could contest and change job seeking practices (and what underpins them) but instead they accept and internalise them. In the following chapter the accounts selected demonstrate firstly that participants accept seeing themselves as active and responsible job seekers, as opposed to unemployed helps them overcome the problem of unemployment (Sharone, 2007; Boland, 2016; Boland and Griffin, 2018). Secondly, narratives demonstrate that participants accept accountability, positivity and confidence as solutions to the problem of female underutilisation and underemployment in the UK labour market (McRobbie, 2015; Gill and Orgad, 2018; ILO, 2019). Negative affect associated with job seeking is used as an opportunity for further self-development either individually or through interpersonal interactions, reflecting how women accept the postfeminist ideals associated with female success such as through the demand to take up space in the workplace (Orgad, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018; Gill and Orgad, 2018).

6.1 Being a job seeker (not being unemployed)

Meera was one of two job seekers on job seekers allowance. Receiving welfare from the job centre forces Meera to give an account of herself, justifying her activities in a way that requires extensive self-monitoring (capturing evidence in the spaces between her job centre meetings). Here she describes having to report into the job centre and prove how she has spent her time looking for work.

> *"I was job hunting because I have to pay my rent and since I don't have a job yet, I was like I had to go on job seekers and literally I go every two weeks and they just*

literally ask me like how, they just look for proof on where I've searched and things like that. They can be really, really difficult and the one I have is not that bad so he does ask for proof and I just show him all the email application confirmations that I get through." (Meera)

Meera discusses how the narrative of finding work is positioned by the job centre as being one of 'any job is better than no job'. This still positions unemployment as an unacceptable option, rendering a job seeker powerless to say no to whatever they might be offered. Work becomes the centralising concept, with job seeking activity existing on a continuum; at one end is well paid labour, at the other is labour that is constructed as work but remains unpaid (for example, the average job seeker's allowance is between £57.90-£73.10 per week falling well below UK minimum wage at the time of writing). For Meera, the job centre has an authority over her; she can only obtain her 'allowance' when she has proved herself. Thus she institutes these values, internalising them in an attempt to stave off the pressure and stress it creates.

"It's a lot of pressure and they don't understand, they literally want you to get any job and you're like I've done four years (of study) I don't want to, he was like literally, get a retail job and in my head I was thinking no, I don't want that but I can't the rules are you, can't say no so, I just had to put it off for a while somehow and I told him I was attending all these things for finding a job but he was like under universal credit you have to find any job, even if it's retail so that was the biggest pressure." (Meera)

Meera appears to concede that it is better to play along rather than resist. This may also be exacerbated by both the fear of being judged as a liar and being forced into a job she does not want to do. In this respect the language of job seeking is prescriptive, encouraging job seekers to take any job (Boland, 2016).

"I hate going back, I'm just like oh god, I still haven't found a job and you feel like they might think you're lying even though it's true that you haven't found a job. I feel like they might not believe what I'm saying, like they doubt you or they're going to force me to do a retailing job and even if you say to them I don't want to do that they'll say you don't have much of a choice. I don't know, I don't want to do that so it's stressful." (Meera)

Despite the distress Meera experiences as a result of the pressure and monitoring applied by the job centre, the process of accountability positions it as her individual unwillingness (such as resisting taking on a retail role after four years of higher education), rather than unevenly distributed job opportunities or an unequal labour market to blame for her continued unemployment. Meera feels obliged to align herself with the view that any job is better than no job because of the way in which unemployment is positioned as a problem that can be solved by holding those looking for work, accountable for their actions and choices. This becomes internalised precisely because job seekers are conditioned to accept accountability at the same time as being primed to accept guilt for the absence of work in their lives. Whilst Meera battles not to be 'forced' into a retail job after four years of studying at university, after six months of job seeking she decided to take on a zero hours contract unrelated to her university degree. Undertaking this work, according to Meera, allows her to not feel beholden to the job centre, removing the pressure to keep returning and giving her the space to keep looking for the job she wants.

"Depending on how much I earn I'll either come off completely, which I hope, or umm, if it's like if I'm not paid the amount then they give the part that's left but I wouldn't have to keep going so that would be a big thing. I guess it's good in the meantime until I can get the job I want."

The role of personal responsibility is reflected again, not just for identifying a suitable job but for then maintaining a quest for desirable work *("it's good in the meantime until I can get the job I want"), (*see also section 5.6 which refers to this as self-empowerment, a postfeminist ideal). Therefore, being seen as an 'active' job seeker rather than 'passively' unemployed has an inevitable effect upon a sense of self. This reflects the power of neoliberal ideals that position individuals with a strong work ethic as hardworking, diligent, upstanding citizens, against those for example, not in work, to be "morally dubious" (Frayne, 2015, p.99) and shows how they form a gendered enactment of job seeking.

Participants who were not claiming job seekers' allowance similarly accepted that they were active job seekers (and rejected notions that they were unemployed) thus instituting and internalising job seeking. For some participants being unemployed was perceived as something awful, the flip side of what they were aspiring to achieve. Unemployment was associated with perceptions of laziness and a sloth-like unwillingness to obtain work. As witnessed in Amal's account it refers to perceptions that in the absence of work, job seekers will be seen as a lazy individual.

> *"I: And how does that make you feel?*
>
> *R: Umm, if that happens then I feel I'm too lazy and even if I know I'm not, still I feel it." (Amal)*

Amal's reference to feeling lazy when she's not working reflects the negative perception towards being identified as unemployed. In the extract below Helen also discusses her resistance to the term 'unemployment'. This was a term she would never refer to herself as, for fear of being associated with the connotations of not working.

> *"I: What is it about, why do you avoid saying you're unemployed?*
>
> *R: I don't know (laughs). Ahh I know why, umm, it just came to me because I think*

many people connect or probably this is also what I think that people do, and that's connect unemployment with being lazy so you're unemployed because you're too lazy to send out applications or whatever, I think that's one of the reasons." (Helen)

Helen's narrative about unemployment suggests that unemployment is a deliberate act of refusal: one is unemployed by choice, or by fault. Either way, being labelled as unemployed is seen as a stigma to be avoided. Instead Helen phrases her current situation as one that is actively seeking, emphasising the privileging of work above everything else (Baker and Brewis, 2020) and the self as the project through which to achieve this (Grey, 1994).

"I would also not say that. I'm not saying that to my friends. I'm saying I'm still looking for my long-term position (laughs). And I'm also, yea, because I don't like that word, unemployed." (Helen)

Kristina, a recently graduated Masters student, busied herself with the 'work' of job seeking. She seems to accept the routinised and repetitive practices, sounding quite frenetic, even exhausted but nonetheless committed, in the hope of securing work.

"I've sent out so many applications maybe, yea, it was also my CV so I started working on that again because I thought ok, I cannot just do the same thing again and again so I started to re-write it and worked on my cover letter again and again just to, yea, try to change something which could kind of change something in the process." (Kristina)

It is interesting to note the contradiction here in Kristina's words. She states that she can't do 'the same thing again and again' (i.e. send out more applications) which alludes to the potential for her to contest this practice (sensing perhaps that it is not working or is not right). However, she immediately states that she is re-writing her CV and cover letter 'again and again' thus accepting the practice (underpinned by self-dissolution and self-transformation, as

discussed in chapter five) and concealing possible alternatives. Kristina discusses her reasons for doing this as one of hope in regards to influencing the outcome of her as-yet unsuccessful job search. In the extract below we see her job seeking become increasingly compulsive and she seems less likely to contest it.

> *"I just searched through websites umm, and read all like the job adverts which I was interested in and I felt like there, I lost lots of time because I was reading and reading and I was like yea but I don't have this and that skill…the more applications I send out, the better I felt because it was like ok, my CV is out there (laughs), just, now I need a bit of luck umm, yea, I mean last week the guilt came back (laughs) but its, its, yea…I think the weeks I didn't send so many CVs out was the week when I didn't feel that good." (Kristina)*

Kristina's unquestioning compulsion to do more of the same in terms of her job seeking leads to feelings of guilt when she perceives that she has not done enough. The question of what qualifies as enough eludes an answer, perhaps only being answerable by securing employment. Until then Kristina along with the other participants seem to allay their guilt by doing ever more of the same in terms of job seeking practices in the hope of doing enough, rather than questioning what they are doing and engaging in alternative practices. Participants do not contest the notions that they have unlimited capacity to seek work and to continuously self-improve. As identified in section 5.2, participants such as Ramona enter into a cycle of both needing and wanting to do more, rather than question this compulsion.

> *"…even though its stressing me out, in the back of my mind I keep thinking masters, jobs, things like that and I still don't know much about it but, I think I'm trying, I'm searching everywhere so, careers events, open days, things like that so, so I don't*

know what else I can possibly do…I'm quite full up! Genuinely I wake up at 5.30 in the morning." (Ramona)

Here we get a sense of Ramona's anxiety associated with job seeking which is found in many participants' narratives. This appears linked to their guilt and the idea that they have not done enough, because they have not secured (the right) work, but more significantly it alludes to the idea that they may never get there (find their dream job), never having done enough. This anxiety appears to cement participants complicity in and dedication to perfecting job seeking rather than providing an opportunity to question this way of doing job seeking. Job seekers in this respect become both masters of and submissive to the practices of finding work (Davies, 2006), and, as demonstrated in chapter five (5.6) may encourage them to accept less than ideal options. For example, Larissa, (via email) exemplifies this acceptance (of being a job seeker), seeing it as work and choosing it as a legitimate alternative to paid employment in order to secure a better position.

"I'm writing just to share some news with you that if you want you can add to your research. I have decided to resign from my position at [company]. I was unhappy and feeling very miserable and after much thought and conversation with husband, I thought I'd have free time to search for another position and [give] exclusive dedication to my job search." (Extract taken from an email exchange, with permission, June, 2018)

Driven by the ideal of finding work where she can be happy, or happier Larisa rejects the notion that she will become unemployed and does not even mention it. Instead she upholds the idea that job seeking is a valid and even virtuous form of work, worthy of dedicating oneself to.

These findings demonstrate how job seeking is instituted and internalised by female job seekers. By being active job seekers, participants willingly absorb the work of job seeking, demonstrating dedication and compliance. As such they accept rather than contest the idea of being a job seeker and not unemployed. It appears that participants equate being an active job seeker with being 'good' and being unemployed with being 'bad'. Participants accept the relentless, all-consuming job seeking practices identified in chapter five because these practices and the self-work underpinning them appear to make them feel good about themselves or at least allay negative feelings. By focusing on calculated attitudes and feelings in this way, managing one's time carefully, remaining attached to the idea of work and relentlessly seeking it, participants continue to be 'good neoliberal subject(s)' (Adamson, 2017, p321).

6.2 Relational and self surveillance

This section now shows how participants accept the notion of female success and its associated demands for individual effort as a way to address the problem of female underutilisation and underemployment. In doing so this section describes how participants further institute and internalise job seeking. This can be seen in participants' engagement in relational and self surveillance as they, without prompting, justify how they spend their time. Relational surveillance is a concept borrowed from Gill (2007; 2017) and reflects the intense scrutiny women inflict upon each other's behaviours and bodies (Gill, 2017). For example, participants such as Kristina felt the need to explain to others why they are still searching for work and in doing so made attempts to assuage feelings of guilt if they are 'caught' doing activities not related to job seeking.

"...I feel weird telling people I'm still job hunting but then they see I'm going out or meeting friends and I feel, it's just me, I'm really bad with those things but I feel like they may be judging me." (Kristina)

Kristina does not explain what she feels judged for but she appears to develop a sense of guilt when participating in leisure activities during what 'should' be treated as a work day. Kristina's narrative suggests that she accepts that work (job seeking) has priority over everything else and implicitly that success is measured through work rather than friends or leisure. We can also see this in Michaela's narrative. Employed at the time she was interviewed, Michaela discusses how elements of her life need to be put on hold in order to prioritise work.

"I think I'm just waiting for that change of job to do those things which is maybe the wrong attitude because I don't know when it's going to happen but I'm postponing joining a badminton club and I'm postponing doing more travelling and postponing meeting friends more you know so I'm postponing all these things until my job situation is sorted and it's probably the wrong way to do it but umm, I just feel like I can't do anything else now until I sort out my job situation." (Michaela)

Despite already being in a secure, employed position and thus (presumably) able to meet the demands of rent, bills and other financial responsibilities, Michaela still accepts that job seeking takes priority over leisure activities. There is a sense of virtuousness and self-investment in postponing non-work related aspects of her life (chapter five) and also a sense of anticipation of what may come as a result. Both Kristina and Michaela seem to feel accountable for their job seeking. Unlike Meera they were not claiming job seekers allowance so are not required to justify their job seeking activities. However, they feel like they do, both

to themselves and to unspecified others, absorbing the demand to not only be an active and focused job seeker but to be visible in their efforts.

Feelings of excitement, hope, anticipation and guilt are experienced by participants as they attempt to prioritise the pursuit of work over other activities. We can see this in Alisha's narrative where she justifies her time spent being unemployed as full of exciting and hopeful job seeking practices, but specifically practices that mean she can be seen to be 'leaning-in'.

> *"In the time that I've had off, so say from the beginning of November, umm, umm, yea beginning of November until now I've been able to umm, go and see like business advisors and go to lots of different seminars and really understand who I am and what I am and that the fact of the matter is I am a... a market for myself basically so you know now I'm beginning to look into sole trading, I'm a brand, so look at myself in that respect and what brand umm, that I am and what I've got to offer."(Alisha)*

Alisha seems to fully embrace a postfeminist ideology, feeling empowered to appropriate her very being by turning herself into a brand, unquestioningly accepting responsibility for her own success (Scharff, 2016) and making herself visible in doing so. Sarah also appears to internalise the need to get ahead despite it making her feel bad.

> *"I also feel guilty doing that because I don't want to pretend to an organisation that I'm passionate about a job and leave after two months." (Sarah)*

Some participants used social media as a form of relational surveillance to organise and navigate feelings about their job seeking practices. Helen discusses what she thinks people looking at her online profile might be thinking of her.

> *"Obviously social media also feeds into this but if you like at my [social media] profile you'll think I'm not struggling because you don't see the struggle or the job search and the people from back home just see what you're doing like oh she went to*

a rugby game or she went here but you know, you get the picture, they're thinking well, you should get a job first and spend some time on the job search instead of doing all these things. I should be the only one who really has an opinion on this but that's very tough. But I'm thinking, because they don't have to live your life right?" (Helen)

Initially it seems that Helen is contesting the dominant way of doing job seeking- she has engaged in leisure time when she 'should' have been job seeking. However, she also appears to be justifying her leisure time as she feels guilty for not prioritising job seeking. She externalises her own self-judgement of this guilt onto her social media friends, who as far as we are aware have not offered such judgements, evident in her show of hollow defiance (Gill and Kanai, 2018). Therefore, looking more carefully it seems that she is indeed accepting the demand to be a job seeker (not unemployed). This is witnessed below where she discusses her continued engagement with job seeking practices.

"…I started making a list of my achievements (laughs) because I'm always thinking ok I haven't done enough I haven't done enough and it stresses me out but if I sit down and write down what I've done it's like oh. So each month I've done one thing and that helps and also because if I'm, I started writing more blog posts and I had the ideas and had written stuff already and I just had rewritten it so many times I got sick of it because I want it to be perfect but then I just probably should... I really learned a lot.

In the last research conversation with Helen she talks candidly about the strong-hold of her assumptions and the role of the 'watcher'.

"R: The problem with perception is, even though people might be aware, and even though I'm aware that I'm making assumptions, I still do it, like, it's just human, we

can't stop it and even though you know, it still happens so it's very tough to change that…

I: Yes, it's like you can't step out of it, or like you have these two roles, the experiencing role and the watching role

R: Right! Right the watching role. That watching one is very mean (laughs)." (Helen)

It is interesting to note that Helen speaks about her watching self as external, as something watching over her, and to whom she feels accountable to, to show how she is manifesting success in her job search. Other participants' presumptions of external scrutiny and feelings of being watched during their job search demonstrate how they too accept rather than contest the personal responsibility associated with female success established within a postfeminist ideology, instituting and internalising job seeking as a way to attain it.

Several participants used their research interviews as a form of relational surveillance. They used the interviews as a therapeutic or coaching process, despite not being intended, offered nor positioned as such, nor being conducted in a therapeutic setting. Therapy or coaching suggests the need for something to be worked on, through or fixed (Swan, 2017) but it also offers a space to talk, process and speak aloud. Participants used their time during interviews in this way, reflecting aloud on both positive and negative elements of their job seeking, in particular what they were doing right and wrong. These interactions could have been opportunities for revealing and contesting aspects of the job seeking process which may have been seen by participants as being problematic. However, these conversations became further opportunities for job seekers to accept and internalise the dominant way of doing job seeking, as can be seen in Jennifer's narrative.

"It's quite nice actually, it's kind of like coaching, I get to think about all the things that were going around in my head and the things not going so well and you know,

just talk about them, it's good. Especially at the beginning because I was really annoyed and angry and then I kind of mellowed a little bit I think and then it was just like, I knew it was going to take time" (laughs) (Jennifer)

Rather than use her anger and annoyance to justify contesting her way of job seeking, Jennifer appears to contest the validity of her anger.

Other participants used the research interviews to alleviate guilt by seeking approval and reassurance from me. This can be seen in Alisha whose narrative suggests that in seeking approval for her actions, she accepts the postfeminist ideals of self-work by wanting to come to the research interview with something to report back on or use it as a point in time to have achieved something by in relation to her job search.

"This is quite helpful for me too, its therapeutic in the sense that I get to talk about, not that I like to talk about myself but I get to talk about where I'm at and when you highlight it, oh it's only been six weeks it's like oh, wow, that is progress even though I don't feel it so yes, and I hope to have a lot more umm, you know, a lot more done when we next speak but also be able to feedback where I'm at with certain projects." (Alisha)

Some participants seemed to have an awareness that this guilt was unfounded and perhaps reflected their internal narrative. For example, in the extract below Louise discusses what people might be thinking of her, but does so in a way that reflects her own sense of shame.

"People sort of ask, you know, how was it, how did you get on and so having to tell them all that I haven't got another job and I always worry that people are thinking oh she must be rubbish, why can't she get a job which I know isn't true but people do think things so that kind of thing I found quite hard." (Louise)

Louise's feelings of guilt and shame appear to be in relation to what she perceives as her personal failures. These failures are relative to what she has perceived as success. Her narrative therefore shows an acceptance of a preconceived idea about what success should look like. Feelings of shame and guilt related to these perceived personal failures are further internalised and compounded by participants as time goes by if they have not been able to secure employment, as we see in Barbara's narrative.

> *"They'd go, oh how was the interview? So again it was them thinking why is she going for all these interviews and never getting them, what's wrong with her and I think that's why I stopped telling people really." (Barbara)*

What can be reflected upon in this section is that the institution of job seeking and its internalisation is not done in isolation. Participants engage in forms of relational surveillance to monitor and judge their job seeking. Their accounts show that they accept the postfeminist ideology and its associated ideals that female success can be achieved through individual effort. This is identified through their positive affect such as excitement and anticipation when they feel that their efforts have been successful at bringing them closer to this goal and conversely through negative affect such as guilt, anxiety and shame when they feel that their efforts have failed. Job seekers use the action of making themselves heard or not heard, in some cases using social interactions (i.e. relational surveillance) as a way of validating their actions.

6.3 Synthetic Positivity

As discussed in chapter three a key feature of a postfeminist ideology, particularly in relation to female success are ideals that demand women act a certain way in order to attain success. Demonstrating positivity or a positive mind set is one such way (Swan, 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2018). The following section shows that in their interviews, participants strived to remain

positive about their job seeking and to believe that things would turn out well ‘in the end’. They dismissed feelings of downheartedness, low confidence and low mood as momentary lapses in focus, putting them down to being insignificant and trivial moments. Frequently participants would reframe negative experiences as being necessary to their personal journey and ultimate success. The prospect of employment and anticipated fullness to come that it promised seemed to act as a light at the end of a long tunnel beset by many hardships to endure and obstacles to overcome. Although it appears that the prospect of success generates some positivity, more importantly in this section, it appears that participants believe that their success is *determined by* their positivity.

In the extracts below both Sarah and Larissa initially express feelings of disappointment and self-doubt. Larissa even describes her experiences as traumatic. Yet both women strive to end their accounts positively.

> *“You’re like questioning yourself all the time. I feel like I’m doing that at the moment and it’s not very nice and I feel very downhearted about the whole thing and yea, but hopefully it will be all for the good.” (Sarah)*

> *“I think I was a bit traumatised with the amount of applications I've applied for in the past two years and have been denied most of them. I know that I didn't have enough experience and nowadays I have more experience to show but even basic jobs like admin I didn’t get so, yes I'm concerned and traumatised by that. But as people say behind one success there are a lot of failures.” (Larissa)*

Although Larissa was employed whereas Sarah was not at the time of interviewing, they both strive to overcome negativity associated with the fear of failure at not securing employment, as if this might determine their subsequent job seeking outcomes. In doing so they accept and

then subsequently enact the postfeminist ideal of exhibiting positivity, in the hope that it will secure success.

Alisha was a particularly positive participant during her initial research interview. Having recently finished her Master's degree she had entered the job market with a resolved attitude of positivity.

> *"I'm optimistic, I'm not pessimistic about it, I know somethings coming I just don't know when or where and I'm just trying to apply myself to whatever, umm yea so just some days I have my up days like yes I can do it, why not me kind of thing you know but other days it's like oh no, everyone's better than me." (Alisha)*

Alisha makes it appear as if this positive outlook is her default mode. However, the fact that she is having to try and 'apply herself to whatever' and also pick herself up on her down days suggests it requires effort. The last part of her narrative betrays some negativity, which, like Sarah's downheartedness and Larissa's trauma, may reflect deeper feelings of insecurity, instability and low moods caused by job seeking. These feelings may be detrimental to a job seeker's mental health, which may be compounded if they regard them as a barrier to future success. The 'solution' to overcoming this barrier appears to be to delegitimise and mask negativity with a contrived, forced or synthetic positivity.

We can see an example of where Alisha struggles to mask and overcome her negativity which seems caused by legitimate, material concerns *("literally the rent and food, you know council tax, water bills, electricity, gas, it's never ending")*.

> *"I'm still in debt and you know the bills are coming through and I'm trying not to panic and trying to be you know very positive about things and I've had a huge issue with benefits and stuff like that and you know it's very, it can be at times very*

demoralising and sometimes I think to myself well what's the point, I don't even want to continue, what's the point, I don't even…" (Alisha)

It seems to require considerable effort for Alisha to remain positive under such circumstances and it appears that she might succumb to her negative feelings. However, it is unclear whether she is referring to not wanting to continue with her job seeking, or more concerning, with her life. Despite this, Alisha rallies to overcome her negativity toward the end of her narrative, expressing gratitude instead.

"I'm so sick and tired of all the negativity and I could have given up so many times, so many times and yes I wanted to but umm, I just learned that there's a reason for everything and right now I chose to use that season wisely even though I'm out of work and not doing anything right now. It's about being grateful for where you're at." (Alisha)

In doing so, Alisha demonstrates acceptance of and internalises positivity, overriding the negativity associated with precisely the challenging circumstances that may have enabled her to contest job seeking in this way. There is a cruel irony in Alisha's narrative in that she feels it is the negativity which is problematic and a barrier to her success. She does not appear to have any awareness that overriding or masking negativity with a forced or synthetic positivity may be demanding, ineffective or even harmful. This is significant because it relates to literature regarding affect and inequality (Lazzarato, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018). Alisha appears to generate and draw on her positivity in order to cope with her precariousness, negating broader economic issues. She does not appear to acknowledge the impact of a welfare system under austerity measures, and a neoliberal labour market advocating short term contracts and zero hours working on her situation.

Other participants, such as Kristina, also highlight the necessity of remaining positive during job seeking. However unlike Alisha, Kristina admits that staying positive has been one of the more challenging aspects of her job search.

> *"I'm in a good place now and that's, I think the most important thing, that I'm mentally in a good place (laughs) yea, When I...yea when I finished my masters I didn't think it would be so, so challenging and the most challenging thing is staying positive and being mentally strong. Because I've never had to face this situation." (Kristina)*

Like Kristina, some participants alluded to feeling that they did not have sufficient personal psychological resources like positivity to fall back on because job seeking was either more prolonged than they anticipated or a new experience for them. Other participants discussed needing external support from friends and/or family, which suggests that additional resources beyond the individual might be needed, extending the demands of job seeking beyond the individual. This is supported by a recent survey suggesting that those out of work typically expect family support rather than state support (Taylor, 2019). Without external support, participants such as Alisha felt a need to be psychologically stronger in themselves in order to remain positive and focused.

Generating positivity and shunning negativity are perceived by participants to be within their control, (as stated by Helen: *"I'm not thinking about the bad. I cannot think of the bad parts of it right now")*. A complete denial or refusal of anything but positivity is how some participants approached their job seeking. In the extract below Michaela discusses the need to remain positive as common sense. For her the alternative is unthinkable because it would mean getting down which might prevent her from moving forwards.

"I'm just trying to stay positive because what else can you do, you can't get down, you keep going you know so I'm trying to stay positive and err, and believe in myself that I've got the skills and something to offer and umm, that you know, wherever I end up if in higher education or starting my own business or I dunno, getting married and having kids, things will work out at some point so I'm just trying to stay positive even though you know, my moods change and sometimes I'll be quite negative and feel down but yea, you always lift yourself up." (Michaela)

It appears therefore that to contest having a positive mental attitude, and to not accept, and relentlessly uphold it, may be seen as an obstacle to securing the ideal job, and therefore (female) success. Having anything other than a positive mental attitude in the face of difficulties seems to be viewed by participants as a personal failing and a barrier to success. Thus correcting this failing was regarded as key to successful job seeking, as we can see in Larissa's extract.

"When we're unhappy with ourselves we'll sell ourselves in a negative way. What have you got to sell yourself? Everyone has something good but how do you do this when you feel so insecure? This is the main challenge." (Larissa)

Some participants demonstrated this positive mind-set through displays of humour, laughing or making jokes after comments that discussed perceived failures. This jovial display was often at odds with what participants said. For example, Anita, who also referred to job seeking as traumatic like Larissa, laughs after talking about the volume of rejections she has experienced and jokes about how her feelings are in conflict (sad and funny/ good or bad).

"I'm kind of used to the rejection (laughs). I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, it's more sad than funny (laughs), but err, sorry, I just think that, I'm used to it but it's made me stronger at least like, I think err, how do they say, you bounce back

from trauma, I mean it's not even trauma but it's just a difficult thing and it makes you stronger and maybe there are better opportunities elsewhere." (Anita)

Other participants demonstrated their positive mind-set by disavowing certain feelings such as anger and sadness which were regarded as unhelpful. In Larissa's case, her therapy was a way in which she managed to let go of her anger and feelings of rejection.

"Usually in the past I was very angry with the world you know why they don't accept me, why am I not right? The anger was my energy. It was so concentrated and I think throughout therapy I understand where the anger is coming from and then it was like I forgot or accepted it. I left the anger behind. It's not my concern any more so my energy has swapped to something else." (Larissa)

Finally, Anita seemed to demonstrate her positive mind set through suggestions of equanimity, even immunity to negativity.

"It's like you're failing at something but it's not such a grave situation that will stay with you the rest of your life, it's momentary. Like it's just there for that time and maybe it goes, I don't know if it's made me really, immune to certain situations, and umm, or what, as its really affecting me, I can't really tell if it's really affecting me like I don't even feel bad anymore." (Anita)

By showing that participants accept positivity or a positive mind set as a determinant of personal, and particularly female, success, this section demonstrates how job seeking is instituted and internalised. Participants may struggle to maintain their positivity when job seeking is prolonged and beset by difficulties and failures. Although these difficulties and failures, and the negative feelings caused by them, could offer opportunities to contest the broader structural issues to which they are related, this did not occur in any of the interviews. Instead, participants masked or overruled their negative feelings, which they regarded as an

obstacle to future success, with what appeared to be forced or synthetic positivity. Participants seemed proud and empowered by their personal ability to generate positivity and overrule negativity. However, it seemed increasingly difficult for them to do so as periods of job seeking became extended and related negative experiences increased.

6.4 Climbing up the confidence cliff

Similar to positivity discussed in the previous section, another significant feature of a postfeminist ideology is the enactment of confidence as a determinant of female success. The following section shows that participants strived to remain confident throughout their job seeking. Unsurprisingly, the issue of confidence (or lack of) appeared consistently across many interviews. Participants would often swing between feelings of confidence in themselves and feelings of self-doubt and were often plagued by intrusive thoughts of not being good enough. Self-doubt or crises of confidence were seen as obstacles to success to be overcome so were used as opportunities for self-work. Some participants felt that being sufficiently confident was specifically needed in women and regarded it as a personal undertaking.

> *"I think as women we need to be confident in our skills and sell ourselves and learn, there should be a programme that offers these kind of skills because, selling at the end of the day is everything. If you're amazing and you don't sell yourself you have no chance and if you're not that amazing and you sell yourself well, you'll get the job." (Helen)*

Carefully crafting an image that projected confidence rather than arrogance was something women like Helen felt the need to do, in order to compete on an even platform with men. This turning inwards in order to correct themselves, echoes the mainstream, contentious call

to women to embody confidence in the workplace in order to get ahead or make themselves seen (Hewlett et al., 2010; Patten and Parker, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Coffman, 2014).

> *"I also read some articles about so, if a man and woman apply for the same job, no, if they have the same skills, they'll take the man because he's good at selling himself and that's something I really kind of... I really acknowledged it and I'm really trying not to fall into this trap and it's also um, what I also read about was saying if a man fits 40% of the job profile, he's going to apply but if a woman fits 60%, she won't apply." (Helen)*

Helen accepts this call to climb the confidence cliff as key to overcoming the barrier of gender inequality and thus female success at work. However, this self-managed act of becoming more confident becomes fraught with self-doubt as participants attempt to navigate its meaning. For example, how confident is too confident was a question Anita asked herself.

> *"Sometimes I feel like, am I being too boastful about myself or is it like, do I need to do it that way, it's like you know blowing your own trumpet kind of thing, do I need to, do I have to? But sometimes you do have to if you want to sell yourself that well I think not overdo it and be too stereotypical like umm, I don't know." (Anita)*

In questioning the extent to which she should be confident, Anita accepts the notion that confidence is a legitimate key to her success. Other participants talked about managing the extent to which they should display their confidence during interviews, maintaining conscious awareness of what they were saying or the 'vibes' that they might be giving off. For example, participants discussed regulating themselves so they appeared sufficiently confident but not excessively or desperately so.

When participants such as Anita were unclear about what type of person a prospective employer expected them to be, or the extent to which they could match those expectations, and sufficiently exhibit the desirable traits they began to doubt themselves.

> *"I see a lot of people [employers] wanting people with humour for some reason and I mean like a streak of it here and there is fine but they have that in their job role, the job specifications and I'm like, is that, I mean sometimes I do tend to get a little bit comical with stuff but it's not something I'm like ready to give an answer for and it kind of puts me like, you know do they want, someone who is perfectly ready." (Anita)*

As a solution to not knowing what type of person they are expected to be and an antidote to self-doubt, some participants such as Maggie contrived to be malleable but again in a carefully managed way.

> *"When I go to an interview, I always want to think what do they want from me so that I can be it. The answer is always like, they want somebody to fill this role, they have a role they need filled, I just have to show off that I'm the best for that role, I'm not begging them for a job, they need somebody and I will be that somebody. You know, that's part of the confident thing. Never like, you should never beg for a job, if you have to beg, A it's not worth it if you have to beg, it makes you look desperate and nobody ever wants to hire anyone who looks desperate, desperate is a bad look on everybody and you know if you look more confident people are more likely to hire you. So." (Maggie)*

In all the interviews where experiences of varying levels of confidence and/or self-doubt were discussed, participants never contested the idea that confidence was key to their success. Often when self-doubt was an issue the idea of 'fake it until you make it', a form of forced or faux confidence similar to the idea of synthetic positivity was generated and employed.

"…but you know when people say you have to fake it until you make it and I never understood what they meant, you can't fake your experience I guess but you have to fake the reasons." (Meera)

As in the previous section this became increasingly difficult for participants to sustain (and perhaps increasingly difficult to continue to accept) over time as their confidence became undermined through repeated rejections or failures, as demonstrated by Meera in the extract below.

"The interview is like the only time you can get into the job, like the CV and the interview, that's the only way. You have to learn from your mistakes and some people do just do interviews for practice but I hate interviews, it's so stressful." (Meera)

In a bid to not look desperate, some participants talked about how they aimed to not show how much they cared about the particular job they were interviewing for. This was not necessarily an outward act but more a conning of the self into believing a job interview did not matter as much, in order to remain calm, in control and nonchalant. The only way to seemingly embody a relaxed persona was to plan excessively and have enough practice (and therefore rejections) so that a degree of interview experience had been acquired, or trick themselves into believing they are something they are not. It appears that this confidence ideal encourages women to behave like chameleons, changing their personas to fit into a mould of what they think they should be, whilst at the same time encouraging them to be themselves. This fosters confidence as always existing outside of the self and as something that can be manipulated, appropriated and carefully cultivated for gain only in instances where women have the key to access it (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). This becomes a political tool, much like positivity in that the more individuals engage in these practices, the more frustrated yet indoctrinated they become (Cederstrom and Grassman, 2010), positioning

acceptance as ‘good’ and contestation as ‘bad’, further instituting confidence as both a practice and ideal to be accepted during job seeking.

6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that participants accept ideas of; being active job seekers; female success defined by work; and positivity and confidence as determinants of their success. This demonstrates how job seekers institute and internalise job seeking within a postfeminist ideology. The internalisation of postfeminist ideals involves female job seekers becoming relentlessly proactive, avoiding any associations with unemployment and laziness. Job seekers often feel accountable, responsible and guilty but they do not critically engage with and contest ideas about work and job seeking. Instead they engage in the same routinised, repetitive practices and thoughts. Job seekers do not privatise their search but make themselves highly visible, recruiting others into their processes of self-scrutiny through interpersonal acts such as advice seeking and relational surveillance. Job seekers increasingly experience negative feelings such as guilt, shame and self-doubt associated with rejections and failures over prolonged periods of job seeking. However, participants regard their negative feelings as barriers to future job success and so mask or overrule them by generating and employing synthetic forms of positivity and confidence. Whilst this may serve as short-term coping mechanisms, it appears harmful over the long term due to the sustained effort required.

The next chapter demonstrates *why* job seeking appear to take hold of job seekers in this way and becomes resistant to change.

Chapter Seven

7. Findings Part Three: Introducing the 'why' of job seeking

This chapter examines why job seeking is instituted and internalised by female job seekers by showing from their accounts that success and related ideals within a postfeminist ideology (1) resist full public disclosure (i.e. clear articulation); (2) promises 'fullness' to come if obstacles can be overcome; and (3) threatens disaster if obstacles cannot be overcome (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The ideology and what it espouses can therefore be interpreted as fantasy (see chapter three). This chapter considers fantasy's function of closing the gap between job seekers' realities and images of themselves as ideal working women by exploring experiences that disrupt previously held discursive representations. This chapter shows that participants are unwittingly complicit in upholding of the fantasy and concealing alternatives, so become increasingly gripped by their job search.

7.1 The promise of fullness to come: getting it right

In chapter five many participants could not define what fulfilling one's potential meant (section 5.2); used guesswork to self-orient themselves to organisations (section 5.4); and could not fully articulate what the good job meant (section 5.6). These findings are now returned to because they represent aspects of fantasy, as defined in chapter three, Specifically these findings demonstrate an inability to fully articulate what they are seeking and when it will be recognised.

In the extract below Sarah's description regarding aspirations relating to her job search demonstrates what is meant by an inability to fully articulate what represents fullness.

> *"I want to make my own way in life and be ambitious, be a bit more ambitious than what I have been especially now I've got a master's degree and I've spent all this time doing it,*

I feel like I need to do something with it. I just think I do need to be like, as I said, be more ambitious and try harder to find not just any job but the right one." (Sarah)

Participants often appeared to be ambitious but could not clearly articulate what those ambitions were. This can also be seen in both Kristina's and Larrisa's narratives.

"I think my desire is to become a woman, an influential and professional woman, specialising in my field where I'll be able to be an inspiration for other women." (Larissa)

"There's so many women in work who have like umm, how do you say…they have it in there to do it but then the family is coming in the way and I know that I want a family and I know that I want to have a career, it's always hard to balance it but it's just umm, I want to say for myself that I, that I've done it, that I can do it and then maybe umm, inspire other women to do it." (Kristina)

Although she seems passionate, Kristina does not fully disclose what her ambition actually entails, but rather how she wants to be seen by other woman, as an influential, inspirational, professional specialist. Furthermore, the career ambitions of Sarah, Larissa and Kristina by definition pertain to the future, demonstrating an anticipation of the promise of fullness to come. This desire to work towards a visibly inspirational future self indicates an "idealised other" (Knights and Clarke, 2014, p. 343), which is this case appears to be about becoming the (postfeminist) ideal working woman (see chapter three), something perceived as attainable through their job search. Implicit within these narratives is also the threat of disaster- what if these women cannot or do not become that which they idealise?

For Barbara, who was faced with redundancy, the desire to reach the promised fullness, and mitigate the disaster of not reaching it, meant that overcoming obstacles experienced during her job search dominated her time.

"...it gets a bit all-consuming really, yea, it becomes a bit of an obsession and there was a period of about a few weeks where it was just really depressing, we'd get home that's what it would be all evening, both of us sitting there on our phones looking for jobs, and that's the evening gone" (Barbara)

Although there may be an economic imperative it is not mentioned and Barbara's reasons for being so obsessive or depressed remain undisclosed. Larissa (employed) and Anita's (studying on a student visa) narratives show a similar yet vague obsession.

"I: How often is this on your mind?

R: Every day. It lives with me." (Larissa)

"I hope the obsession is temporary, I just hope this thing of making work everything, making work my everything, I just hope that part is temporary, I think that will go off once I get a job." (Anita)

For Anita and Larissa job seeking seems onerous and exhausting but there is a sense that they will be relieved of the burden once they find work in the future. However, several participants were employed yet still job seeking which suggests that whatever is being sought is perpetually elusive. Participants did not discuss or contest the perpetual elusiveness of this future fullness to come but seemed motivated both by an anticipation of finding it through the sheer force of will (i.e. relentless job seeking practices and extensive self-work, see chapter five, feeling both hope excitement happiness as well as guilt, shame and anxiety, see chapter six) and an anxiety of never finding it.

It appears that some women of this study anticipate finding a guarantee of personal aspirations and interests in work (Anuradha et al., 2014). It is thought to be 'natural' to anticipate that the 'right' type of work will offer enjoyment and potentially seen as distasteful if one does not derive meaning and satisfaction from their job, as Maggie discusses below.

"You know a career should be something you go to work, you do your work and every two weeks you get handed a pay check and you're like oh yea, I get paid to do what I like! It's not necessarily easy but it should be something you enjoy." (Maggie)

What it is that Maggie likes and enjoys, and thus what job would satisfy these conditions, remains unsubstantiated and elusive, despite her being sure of her claims. For other participants, they appear captivated by their own future aspirations but omit the necessary details, criteria or strategies which indicate exactly what they are or how they might achieve them.

"*I want to be able to get that career job, you know, the one that will just fit me, just yea, you know." (Alisha)*

"*I'm apply for organisations that really speak to me and fit with my values." (Jennifer)*

Despite this, job seeking acts as the primary vehicle to attain fullness, one that, as Helen indicates could feasibly continue until attainment is pointed out.

"I'm thinking also, once you achieve that dream, I think like once I'm there someone will have to punch me in the face and be like hey you're there." (Helen)

Other participants felt one way to get it right would be to negotiate their salaries, consistent with mainstream management literature (Kaman and Hartel, 1994; Wade, 2001; Bowles and Babcock, 2012). For example Jennifer felt this was an obstacle to overcome.

"Its only in the last couple of jobs that I've actually negotiated when I've been offered, I've not accepted it and gone back in and tried to negotiate it where I wouldn't have done before and that's because I had a conversation with someone quite a few years ago who said you know you've got to do that because women don't do it and men will do that many times apparently, men will do that quite often when they get offered something they won't

just accept the offer whereas women tend to just accept it and I would say historically I had always accepted the offer." (Jennifer)

For Helen ("*I have to negotiate my salary because all the women, most women don't do it so I have to do it. I want to do it"*), as well as Jennifer it appears that it is more about the act of negotiating and what this says about them as women (which remains undisclosed), rather than the sum of money that holds significance. These strategies however, position women as able to obtain a higher salary if they have the 'right skills' with which to negotiate, also making it easy to get wrong. This presents both aspiration in the promise of fullness to come (to be the woman who successfully negotiates) and anxiety associated with the threat of disaster (to be the woman who does not). This adds an intensity to the job search because participants of this study appear to internalise this ideal, equating any related (job seeking) failure as personalised (Knights and Clarke, 2014), as demonstrated in more detail below.

7.2 The threat of disaster: getting it wrong

The threat of disaster, that participants would not achieve the promised fullness, seemed ever present in their narratives. If getting it right involved overcoming obstacles, then not overcoming them meant getting it wrong. This caused participants to often feel anxious, for example Clare.

"I'm ready in terms of all that stuff but it's just keeping me under control, so my aunty says I'm an ideal candidate and the only person who is going to mess it up is you (laughs). She's sort of right but now I'm worried I'm going to say the wrong words (laughs)." (Clare)

Unfortunately for Clare she regards herself as the obstacle. This links back to the previous section as it is related to her not knowing who, or what the prospective employer is actually

looking for yet still somehow wanting to be, or become it. Again this future orientation and elusiveness are key features of a fantasy.

In the extract below Michaela alludes to the threat of disaster, that perhaps what she is doing and has been doing constitutes getting it wrong.

> *"I've been looking for eight months, since October, and I applied for 8 jobs so somebody else could say well you haven't applied for that many. Umm, some people could say, may say you just need to keep trying and apply for 20 and out of those 20 something will work out, I don't know, I'm just thinking am I being too self-critical or critical of the system, I don't know. But yea I feel a little bit like, you're always comparing yourself to other people and how they live and a lot of my friends who haven't gone through that education system have got a much better life than I have (emotional) you know if you think about it. And they've got flats and houses and kids and...(emotional). It's not just that it's also like does it pay off, to do a PhD because...(emotional) you know the salary is not amazing, the cost of living is high in London and I should have just gone into the private sector."* *(Michaela)*

Michaela positions her friends as already being successful, having reached the promised fullness of the right job and therefore houses and children. By comparison she, by not having achieved those things has failed, despite having just passed her PhD with no corrections. However, these markers of success or failure, and therefore what constitutes getting it right or wrong, remain superficial, unscrutinised and still resist articulation in participant narratives. Michaela's account describes a gap between her reality and her ideal self. However, she maintains that this promise of fullness to come is legitimate and attainable by wistfully indicating what she should have done.

Louise similarly suggests feeling like she was getting it wrong in relation to decisions and achievements.

> *"You're brought up thinking that if you go to university you will get a job and you will be successful and I think when you hit that quarter life crisis you think what am I doing with my life. So that was why I chose to teach because I thought it would give me security and a career but that's not the case. Which is a shame." (Louise)*

Her account suggests that by not getting it right the threat of the disaster, of not achieving the elusive fullness to come, is heightened. Despite feeling like she has not got it right so far, Louise does not indicate that she thinks that the promise is unfounded or that she will abandon her quest. As mentioned previously, this may cause female job seekers to accept less than ideal options, a finding which can now be explained because acceptance helps to mitigate the threat of disaster. For example, both Barbara and Jennifer discuss accepting lower salaries in order to bring the promise of fullness to come closer.

> *"It's more senior, even though it's paying a lot less than [current role. It's for an organisation called [organisation name] so I'm really into [activity that the organisation promotes] and I've been really interested about going into the sport and leisure industry anyway which I knew would mean taking a step back so yea, I thought if its stressful and awful, at least I'll hopefully be passionate and enjoy what I'm doing." (Barbara)*

> *"The substantive role that I took was probably maybe even like a level below what I was actually doing at the time but the opportunities are better." (Jennifer)*

These findings are significant because they represent the contradictions inherent to a postfeminist ideology. Participants appear to grapple with the demands of being liberated,

self-made subjects whilst at the same time experiencing perceptions of failure in relation to what they believe they should be achieving, thus becoming gripped by their job search.

7.3 Having it all, the burden of choice

In the interviews, many participants, unsolicited, brought up the topic of having a family in discussions about career. Whilst this was likely to be influenced by the fact that I as the researcher was a woman in a similar age bracket to the participants in this research (therefore facilitating participants' identification and potential for rapport with me), it could also be that whilst searching for work, participants clearly consider if or when to have a family. Previous notions of female fulfilment or success have often centred around traditional notions of femininity (e.g. having a partner, children and a house, domestic bliss) (Walkerdine and Ringrose, 2006). However, it seems that in current labour market conditions and as a result of previous feminist gains, women now feel able to freely choose their fulfilment by either: having a career (rejecting having a family); having a family instead of a career (giving up one's career); or having both a career and family (see chapter three for further detail).

This thesis does not dispute that any of these options are viable or attainable. Rather it seeks to show that in the context of job seeking, striving towards their attainment within a postfeminist ideology acts as fantasy solely because participant narratives remain fixated on the promise fullness to come whilst also resisting articulation about what that fullness means to them specifically. It also seems that for many women this 'choice' is burdensome rather than liberating, relating to section 7.1 and 7.2 in that they must make the right choice. Here however, the stakes are higher due to the finality of having or not having a family. This is encapsulated in Michaela's narrative below.

> *"I think there is a choice, I mean at the same time it's like you know...having children, being married, having a husband is not the only way to live, I've always thought that, I've*

always been quite liberal in my thinking about who I am and what I want to do with my life and getting married and having children is not the only way. I can imagine just having a life where you know I have a partner and a good job and I'm doing what makes me happy, doing something that gives meaning to me in my life and not just necessarily having children so I can see alternatives umm... but at the same time I guess it's umm will I regret it you know.

I: Which aspect?

R: Maybe not having kids. (Participant became very emotional at this point).

I: Would you like to take a break?

R: (shakes head)

I: Yes, it can be really tough. (R: nods head). It's kind of the expectations? Do you feel there are expectations on you?

R: Mmm definitely from like my mum, umm, so umm, yes, my boyfriend is kind of, umm he's umm, I think he would like to have children but he's not that keen on it now either so it's kind of both of us are a bit like umm, yea (laughs) we're not rushing into it but at the same time we both know we should probably think about it now? So umm, yea and I feel the pressure from my mum definitely, she just thinks, I mean she had four kids, her life has been her kids and for her that's really, she thinks, she really thinks that if I don't have children I'm not going to be happy." (Michaela)

Michaela's narrative is focused around what she believes will or will not make her happy which can be understood as the promise of fullness to come or threat of disaster. This exists in relation to having or not having children but again what this happiness entails remains vague. Despite Michaela's self-confessed liberal thinking, it appears that she still feels constrained by ideals about what is assumed to make a woman happy (i.e. children). The

burden of this choice has been brought to the fore during her job search and appears to make her emotional and tearful.

For other participants, taking time out of a career to raise a family was viewed as an intentional 'opting out', a deliberate positioning of work as secondary and therefore relinquishing the need to be successful in their career.

> *"Potentially it's easier for your job to not be your life if you're a woman because you can like, take leave and look after your family. It's much more acceptable to do that than if you're a man, whereas if you're a man you are going to work for like 50 years of your life, I don't know, a long time. It's different. I guess you could say that's both good and bad but men should have an opt out button and women shouldn't have to use that button and I think in some ways they [women] do get it slightly easier. When I think about my career, in my head I see myself taking time out or going part time and looking after my family so I'm kind of seeing myself as being like yea I could have reached the top of everything but you know I had a family and like, it's a joke that me and my friends joke about sometimes just planning to like set the opt out button and just have a few kids and yea I could have but I chose to have a family, I could have been more successful than him but…" (Sarah)*

Sarah's narrative can be regarded as fantasy as she is describing a future promise of fullness to come through opting out and having a family *("When I think about my career I see myself…")*. She also appears to be seeking to mitigate the threat of disaster, of not achieving the promise of fullness through work by opting out ahead of time, which interestingly she regards as a fortunate option available only women ("*I could have been more successful…*"). Her narrative does not specify any details of what these future plans entail but she feels that her present job seeking will help to overcome any future unknowns. This idea of opting out

has been used previously by researchers in the field of gender studies to represent the 'choice' women have made to leave the workplace and opt for full-time mothering (Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharf, 2011; Sorensen, 2017). There still exists a cultural imperative to have children (Ravn and Lie, 2013) and in this respect, motherhood is positioned as a legitimate 'natural choice' (Sorensen, 2017).

This can be seen particularly amongst the younger women's narratives whereby there appears to be a strong social conditioning amongst these participants that 'good mothering' requires being there for the child, giving up work to do so. For example, several participants felt their careers would eventually be interrupted by family duties. Younger women in particular (mid-twenties, without children) discussed feeling the need to do everything now when things were still possible. They seemed to perceive that having a family was inevitable but would present barriers to future career aspirations which they may be able to mitigate through their job seeking efforts, by working harder before they became mothers. This fuelled their job seeking with feelings of injustice, frustration and a sense of urgency, as seen in both Amal's and Helen's narratives below.

> *"I think because what it is, when you're young you can do everything that you want but in the future there's this mentality that you have your own family and kids are the most important things but then now that I'm young and I can do everything possible, why should I just stay home not doing it or wasting time on other things?" (Amal)*

> *"I've seen how hard it is to get back to the position where you were and I've also, I mean I know people, I have many friends that actually just started a family and they're a lot older than I am and it's just interesting to see what they tell you and also how people put you in this box, you're a woman, you have kids now, you're not taken seriously anymore." (Helen)*

Helen and Amal's job seeking in the present, what they do and how they do it, demonstrates their attempts to pre-empt perceived future obstacles in order to mitigate future disaster regarding career success and family life. Their job search is seen as a way to prepare now, to secure fullness to come in the future.

For participants navigating the job market with children, such as Barbara and Alisha, their job seeking became about overcoming obstacles related to caregiving responsibilities such as distance from home and their ability to collect children from childcare *("it's just an added psychological burden and it makes things very hard", Barbara)*. The emotional weighing up and constant evaluation of potential roles compounded feelings that perhaps the wrong choice had been made, making them further away from fullness than they might otherwise have been, as seen in Alisha's narrative below.

> *"Most people I've spoken to that have been in my situation, they will stay out of work, they have multiple children and they stay out of work. Sometimes they might have a partner to help them but they stay out of work because one of the main things is that childcare doesn't make sense. It's like what am I working for, I don't even get to enjoy or see, save, whatever. Over the years I have felt a bit penalised for having children." (Alisha)*

This thesis acknowledges that for some women the economic imperative to work alongside childcare responsibilities negates notions of choice. However, in this study where women experienced difficulties, the burden of feeling like they may have made the wrong choice compounded feelings of self-blame anxiety and shame as they turned inwards (see chapter six). Alisha expresses a degree of regret and exasperation. She also alludes to other choices, of either not having children to focus on career or opting out of career to have children might have been more effective in delivering the promise of fulfilment. Despite this sense of regret,

Alisha's narrative still can be regarded as fantasy is it upholds the idea of a promise of future fullness (work, family, or both). It seems she might see her career as an obstacle to fulfilment through motherhood as well as vice versa but the complexity of this resists full public disclosure.

Whilst many participants remain acutely aware of the difficulties in having both a career and a family, they remain committed to striving to have it all. This produces a site for entanglement whereby women become trapped by what they 'should' aspire to and what is feasibly possible for them. This manifests in their job search, gripping them by on the one hand asking them to take up their space in the workplace in an empowered manner (Budgeon, 2011) but on the other presenting obstacles and the threat of disaster if they cannot or do not. In the extract below, Larissa shares her reflections on the impossibility but very real need to figure out how to do this.

> *"Don't you think it's hard though, being a woman, I mean I'm 35, ok and I have a couple of years if I want to decide whether to have children or not. If I decide to have children its one year, two years where I have to stop my career. And my career is not even close to where I want. It's not my first priority but there is a time in life when you reach and you can't keep postponing but it's a decision for life. So this is something that you know, I'm still thinking about. It's definitely a part of it. And the financial side always worries me, it's really hard and my husband he's not as career focused as me and I'm the primary, the person who brings in the most and he would give me support in whatever I chose and he will be there for me but I cannot count on his finances to support me. It's really hard, I really don't know how." (Larissa)*

Larissa's narrative is, as with many other participants, future oriented and alludes to the high stakes nature of the decision she will have to make. It is interesting to note that she makes no

reference to maternity leave packages within organisations or the type of state support she might expect to receive that could help to inform her job search. The implicit assumptions seem to be that in order to consider having a family, she must be self-sufficient. This degree of self-reliance is perceived as the only resource she will be able to draw on if she decides to have a family and a career (Sorensen, 2017). Gendered notions of success and narratives about child rearing are significant because these narratives may be interpreted as a demonstration of individualised solutions to labour market issues. They also again reflect the fantasmatic underpinning that points towards fullness to come, navigation of obstacles and mitigation of disaster that manifest and grip participants during their job search. Participants strive for what they want whilst navigating obstacles associated with both individualised success and traditional femininity (Walkerdine and Ringrose, 2006). At no point do participants engage in contestation of the right or wrong way of doing job seeking and becoming the ideal working woman. They seek instead to unite the two ideals through their job search or run the risk of experiencing deep shame.

7.4 Being aware but doing it anyway: cynicism

At times, participants seemed aware that the promise of fullness to come was elusive or even bogus, or that the obstacles to getting there were actually insurmountable. They showed this by being quite cynical, as demonstrated by Maggie, Louise and Meera below.

> *"It's the you know, millennial middle class ideal, when we finally get a middle class job we'll be able to take a deep breath. And it never happens." (Maggie)*

> *"Or the things you again are programmed into believing that that's what you have to do" (Louise)*

> *"……but why is it stressful these people don't even know me?" (Meera)*

This represents what Fleming and Spicer (2003) refer to as cynical enlightenment whereby individuals dis-identify with the prescribed roles and practices yet still enact them. In being aware of their practices and being cynical about them, they appear to perceive themselves as uniquely knowledgeable about and therefore immune to obstacles presented during job seeking. This is exemplified by Anita who in spite of her awareness remains a committed job seeker.

> *"I think none of the balls are in my court it's like female, international, and (laughs) I don't know, and visa and these are things which I can't change, that's the worst part of it its things which I am stuck with." (Anita)*

This cynicism appears to allow participants to carry on doing what they are doing, even if it is ineffective or harmful, by talking about it in a way, or acting, as if they are not doing the same as everyone else. In this respect they indulge in the fantasy of being unique individuals (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), a finding which will be explored further in chapter eight. In these three narratives, participants remain gripped by their job seeking despite their cynicism. It can therefore be seen that a postfeminist ideology does not have to colonize participants' minds in their entirety as long as it can colonize their discursive practices.

Overall, it can be seen from participants' narratives that their job seeking is predicated on a (postfeminist) fantasy because what they describe resists full public disclosure (clear articulation) and promises fullness to come, or threatens disaster (i.e. the attainment of success or fulfilment through work). Whether they articulate anticipation and excitement or difficulties, regrets and sadness or even cynicism, participants continue to engage in the same job seeking practices underpinned by the same notions of fullness to come which remain undisclosed. This can be attributed to the fantasy functioning to smooth over experiences so they are not contested, procuring an enjoyment of closure or satisfaction within

dissatisfaction (jouissance). This structured enjoyment-and-suffering occurs as participants engage in capitalising on perceived postfeminist inadequacies, career goals, aspirations and ways of living (Ahl and Marlow 2019). The difficulties and negative affect associated with the threat of disaster coexist with the anticipation and positive affect associated with the promise of fullness to come in this fantasy and closes the narrative gaps, concealing possible alternatives. Participants, through upholding their different versions of this postfeminist fantasy, are complicit in concealing possible alternatives and their only option is to work harder, identify and correct their mistakes, and endeavour to get it right within existing social relations, thereby becoming increasingly gripped by the fantasy and their job seeking.

7.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, why job seeking is instituted and internalised by female job seekers has been examined and explained through the role and function of fantasy. Female job seekers' accounts relating to fullness frequently resist full disclosure and promise future attainment if obstacles can be overcome (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), therefore reflecting engagement with fantasy (see chapter three). Fantasy procures an enjoyment of closure, smoothing over the narrative gap between a participants' reality and image of themselves as an ideal working woman. This occurs even when participants are cynical about job seeking because their cynicism allows them to indulge in the fantasy that they can uniquely recognise the illegitimacy of or impossibility of reaching the promised fullness yet continue their job seeking as if they do not.

7.6 Concluding the findings

These three chapters have provided empirical data that identifies, describes and explains the what, how and why of job seeking as narrated by female job seekers. Chapter five identified job seeking practices and the self-work that underpins them. Chapter six described how job seekers institute and internalise job seeking as described in chapter five. Chapter seven explained why job seekers institute and internalise job seeking in this way. In the next chapter these findings are synthesised more explicitly in relation to postfeminism and fantasy. The contributions these findings make to the understanding of job seeking within a postfeminist ideology are also articulated.

Chapter Eight

8. Discussion: Situating the postfeminist job seeker

In the previous three chapters, empirical evidence furnished an understanding of job seeking, as constructed by female job seekers during their process of finding work in a UK labour market. These findings were interpreted through the ideals of a postfeminist ideology to explain the what, how and why of job seeking. Findings were situated within Glynos and Howarth's (2007) logics of critical explanation to empirically account for the social, political and fantasmatic logics of job seeking.

In this chapter the empirical evidence from chapters five to seven will be supported by theory in order to both synthesise and discuss how job seekers of this study construct their job search. This is done firstly by considering job seeking at a localised level, situating the individual practices of job seeking more explicitly within their social and political logics, then secondly by examining job seeking at a general level. Here the meaning of the ideal working woman within the context of a postfeminist ideology will be explored.

This chapter contributes to the contextualisation of the job seeker by rooting the seeker and their practices within a postfeminist ideology where previously the job seeker has been decontextualised, particularly by mainstream work psychology literature and societal narratives. This has involved using the concepts neoliberalism and postfeminism alongside empirical evidence in the context of job seeking, to show how practices and ideals are lived out at the level of the everyday (Scharff, 2016). In doing so the type of organisational subjects women are asked to become is revealed (Lewis, 2014).

8.1 The neoliberal, postfeminist woman at work

This section re-articulates what neoliberal, postfeminist ideals are valued in relation to both work and women in a UK labour market. It then shows how and why these ideals have been normalised by job seekers, informing, structuring and guiding their pursuit of work.

8.1.1 Neoliberalism and its associated ideals

Work within a neoliberal ideology requires individuals to be personally responsible and freely choosing. This is encouraged alongside locating meaning and passion in work whilst ignoring the wider context of a labour market that is increasingly insecure both in terms of distributed work opportunities and welfare support (McNay, 2009; Standing, 2011; Fleming, 2015; Boland, 2016). The positioning of job seeking within these neoliberal ideals is demonstrated in the mainstream job search literature regarding the regulation of job seeker behaviours and emotions (see chapter two for reference).

Within these neoliberal ideals, job seeking is naturalised as both an individual moral and economic endeavour, and a form of work in and of itself (Sharone, 2007; 2013; see also quotes from Larissa who gave up her full-time job in order to dedicate herself more fully to her job search). This renders welfare support as largely unnecessary because the job seeker is perceived (by self and others) as working and therefore generating or having the potential to generate economic value. As demonstrated in chapter two, three and across participant accounts in this thesis, job seeking within these ideals necessitates self-regulation and self-improvement, both as means to an end and ends in themselves, simply because the ideals deny alternative notions of collective action and structural/societal change. Such behaviours are seen as laudable and thus worthy of self-help intervention (See Liu et al, 2014 for an example of mainstream work psychology; see Boland, 2016 for a critical perspective).

Based on the above articulations, finding work can be positioned as both an affective experience and as a physical necessity to provide for one's self. This is typified in the way job seekers internalise job seeking ideals, such as finding the 'right job' in the 'right way' but do not necessarily access welfare support and avoid identifying as unemployed. A neoliberal ideology presents this way of job seeking as the only option available but one that is particularly gendered.

8.1.2 Postfeminist ideology and its associated ideals

Within a neoliberal ideology, job seekers are required to be fully accountable for their job seeking through acts of self-improvement, self-scrutiny, self-transformation, all harnessed through self-reliance. Women in particular are susceptible to participate in job seeking in this way because they are positioned as able to 'have it all'. They are assumed to be subjects with equal access to labour market opportunities, opportunities which can be secured through individual effort. This positioning is best explored through a postfeminist ideology which offers a more accurate and useful concept through which to understand the experiences of female job seekers. As discussed in chapter three, postfeminism as used in this thesis is understood firstly as a sensibility of cultural life (Gill, 2017; Gill et al., 2017) and as a discursive formation (Lewis et al., 2017).

Postfeminism is immersed within a neoliberal ideology, making feminist understandings and critiques of broader societal and political issues and subsequent actions to bring about their change invalid and incompatible. Whilst this could provide opportunities for postfeminism to be the site of a critique of neoliberal ideals, what appears to emerge is a neoliberal feminism with these crucial broader issues removed and reframed as personal (Rottenberg, 2014; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). Postfeminism can therefore be seen as the perfect handmaiden to neoliberalism (Fraser, 2013) and understood as an ideology in itself, where any female

concerns and issues are bound to exist within the domain of the individual, including work and the requisite search for it (Ronen, 2018).

Whilst postfeminism is not a term that has been applied to the field of work extensively, literature critical of a postfeminist culture and its associated ideals suggests that women are encouraged to become the best versions of themselves, leaving nothing untouched (for examples of postfeminist discourses see Brady, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Huffington, 2014; Trump, 2017). For critiques of this discourse see McRobbie, 2009; 2015; Gill et al., 2017). Understanding postfeminism as an ideology usefully connects a neoliberal economic imperative to feminism (Ronen, 2018), and helps to illuminate what, how and why fundamental issues concerning gender equality are depoliticised, decontextualised, and consequently, personalised.

8.1.3 The role of fantasy

Ideology requires an engagement with everyday practices as a taken for granted way of living (ideological dimension). Whilst ideology can be rejected, this requires extensive critical engagement from an individual and often a radical shift in their social relations (ethical dimension). The mode of engagement with either the ideological or ethical dimension of life can often be negotiated in moments of disruption (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). This stronghold can be attributed to the fantasies (i.e. the imagined results of what a new job will bring them) which in this context are fostered by a postfeminist ideology in relation to supposedly 'liberated' aspirations of betterment and the good life. Fantasy used in this vein is defined as that which helps to conceal any possible alternatives by emphasising what might be instead. Empirical evidence which indicates the presence of a fantasy can be identified by asking whether it resists full public disclosure (i.e. clear articulation) (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

8.2 Revisiting the logics of critical explanation

As noted above, ideology engages a moral sensibility to encourage on-going participation in its practices, in spite of their exploitative dynamics (Fleming, 2015). Job seeking and its associated practices, as evidenced across chapters five to seven, are the observable ways in which participants strive towards the ideals. The focus of this chapter is to explore the logics (that which underpins practices) of these job seeking practices in more depth. It therefore begins by briefly revisiting the logics approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

Social logics

Social logics are understood as that which underpins social practices, enabling the researcher to recover the meaning and purpose of these practices (Glynos and Howarth). In this thesis this refers to examining *what* comprises job seeking.

Political logics

Political logics refers to *how* social practices are instituted and internalised or contested, transformed and de-instituted (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). In this thesis, this entails exploring how job seeking practices are instituted and internalised by job seekers, through affective qualities such as confidence, self-empowerment, hope and excitement as well as guilt, shame, anxiety and self-blame.

Fantasmatic logics

Fantasmatic logics explain *why* social and political practices are instituted and internalised or contested, transformed and de-instituted (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). These logics help to show which fantasies are threaded through social and political practices to sustain their natural character and constrain contestation. Fantasmatic logics help to articulate what fullness-to-come is promised (i.e. what might be), once an obstacle is overcome (Glynos and

Howarth, 2007, p. 147). In this thesis this entails exploring why job seeking is instituted and internalised, and why it is resistant to change. In other words, why it 'grips' job seekers.

The following section explores a postfeminist ideology empirically through its associated practices and logics in the context of job seeking. This thesis suggests that we can witness how and why participants use fantasy in the context of job seeking to repeatedly work upon themselves both in terms of the material aspects of, for example, CV crafting and interview skills, through to the more insidious, affective demands such as remaining upbeat, ambitious, confident and self-reliant throughout their job search. This places them as highly responsive to a neoliberal labour market, which they are essential to but marginalised by (McRobbie, 2011). This draws on the everyday understanding of fantasy to help articulate why they do this, seeing fantasy as that which emphasises a focus on what might be, through the involvement of wishes and dreams as shaped by wider cultural forces (Orgad, 2017; Cairns, 2013; Radway, 1984).

8.3 The social logics of individual effort

Findings from this study demonstrate what job seeking practices women engage in within a UK labour market. In this thesis, job seeking practices include: extensive planning and decision-making; constantly refining CVs; networking and maintaining visibility (physical and online) to proactively create opportunities; extensively researching prospective employers; and applying for multiple positions. These practices suggest that female job seekers seek personal success through individual effort which is underpinned by extensive self-work including: self-orientation, self-investment, self-comparison, self-monitoring, self-regulation, self-assessment, self-reflection, self-discovery, self-improvement, self-dissolution, self- transformation, self-empowerment and self-fulfilment. This suggests that whilst women

can now participate in the workplace as a result of feminist gains, ideals associated with succeeding remain highly demanding.

Finding from this study indicate that the key purpose of female job seekers' practices is that of self-work (working on the self) (Gill and Scharf, 2011; Adamson, 2017; Gill et al, 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2015; 2018). There is Sarah for example, whose unpaid internships are underpinned by self-investment; Michaela, whose contingency planning is underpinned by self-investment and self-monitoring; Barbara, whose use of LinkedIn is underpinned by self-assessment and self-comparison; Ramona, whose attending of CV writing workshops and networking events are characterised by self-improvement; and Clare whose practice of researching prospective employers is characterised by self-orientating, self-assessing and self-transforming. This extensive self-work is an ideal propagated by neoliberalism, as previously mentioned, and one that women might be particularly vulnerable to (Adamson, 2017), demonstrating the gendered enactment of neoliberalism (i.e. postfeminism).

Participants allude to their job seeking practices helping them find personally fulfilling work. Indeed, in a study on retail workers and the necessity of looking good and sounding right for the job, Williams and Connell (2010) suggest that potential employees deeply identify with activities they perceive will help them attain their desired job, such as purchasing items from organisations they wish to work at or networking with store employees. Although job seeking practices themselves can be regarded as instrumental, their meaning transcends this function. This is important when practices such as networking and CV writing result in a (instrumental) failure to secure fulfilling employment, which they often do within the current job market, because they still offer success, or at least perceived success, in the (psychological) domain of self; from self-knowledge to self-fulfilment.

Job seeking practices were often accompanied by a sense of urgency or of time running out. These findings accord with Scharff's (2016) study looking at the neoliberal subjectivities of being a female, freelance classical musician. Similar to female job seekers, freelancers operate in a state of constant activity in order to secure their next job, whilst at the same time feeling a distinct lack of time. This entrepreneurialism requires self-regulation and is pertinent to this thesis as participants can be regarded as freelance workers in the sense that job seeking is their freelance (albeit unpaid) work. Self-regulation as noted by McRobbie (2015) involves self-orientation, interrogation, assessment and comparison.

These findings suggest that female job seekers are able to access opportunities primarily through job seeking practices which are underpinned by self-work. This is not unlike the make-over paradigm witnessed amongst women whereby self-work (e.g. transformation) is heralded as a personal, aspirational practice (Riley et al., 2016) and reinvention possible if advice or expertise is followed (Gill, 2007). This is a pertinent finding given that women are now discussed in relation to their role as ideal neoliberal subjects who are active participants in the labour market as well as consumers in the economy (Adamson, 2017). This self-work carries with it an association to empowerment. However, it does not necessarily create the appropriate conditions for participants to reify this because it negates structural issues and actual inequalities (McRobbie, 2004). Instead, the emphasis on taking control through self-work confuses the notion of feminist ideals, making postfeminism challenging to critique (McRobbie, 2015; Gill and Kanai, 2018; Adamson and Kelan, 2019). For example, whilst a postfeminist ideology emphasises the freedom women have to choose their work, this 'freedom' is constrained by the necessity to get job seeking practices 'right' to achieve fulfilment (success) through the 'right' job. Additionally, whilst female participation in the labour market has increased, this has often been in relation to pink collar work, lower-wage sectors, casualisation and increased flexibility rather than 'ideal' employment (Dalingwater,

2018). Failing to get job seeking 'right' causes disruptive experiences. Yet it is these experiences which may present opportunities for participants to exam their job seeking practices and what they mean, in order to consider possible alternatives.

8.4 The political logics of female success

It is important to view the above discussion in relation to the political logics, which focus on how the social logics of job seeking (i.e. practices and their underpinning ideals) have become instituted and internalised. This is done by examining the extent to which they are contested and challenged or accepted. Incorporating this perspective helps to extend views beyond the rational, self-enterprising neoliberal subject to regard a subject driven by affect. How a postfeminist ideology is instituted and internalised through job seeking can be identified by exploring the cultural imperatives discussed by women during their job search. In chapter six, political practices, or the 'how' of job seeking was positioned in relation to two 'problems'; the neoliberal problem of unemployment, and the postfeminist problem of female underemployment and underutilisation.

In today's neoliberal labour market, individuals looking for work construct themselves as professional workers, as opposed to unemployed (Sharone, 2007; Boland, 2016; Boland and Griffin, 2018). This is due to the negative associations with unemployment of laziness, unwillingness, failure, guilt and shame and the converse positive associations with job seeking of willingness, success, virtuousness and pride. This move from perceptions of a passive role to a relentlessly active role has arisen as part of a deliberate shift in policy from 1996 which replaced the language and concept of unemployment benefit with that of job seeker's allowance (Boland and Griffin, 2015). This reframing of unemployment to job seeking and the complicity of job seekers to regard job seeking as work results in job seekers

remaining on a continuum of employment and renders the concept of unemployment obsolete.

The purpose of the policy change, to reduce the number of claimants without necessarily tackling structural issues to solve the problem of unemployment (Petrongolo, 2008), is clearly highlighted in this study where only two of the eight participants eligible for job seekers' allowance were actually accessing it (Alisha and Meera). Participants' acceptance of this shift in policy, language and rhetoric conceived of and cultivated since the mid-1990s (Boland 2015; Boland and Griffin, 2015; 2018), that they are job seekers rather than unemployed, demonstrates how job seeking practices have become instituted and internalised. It is not only structurally more difficult to access this welfare allowance but also psychologically, as the extent to which one *allows* oneself to do so is largely contingent on self-perceptions of individual job seeking effort and worthiness.

For participants in this study, the demands of being a relentlessly (pro)active job seeker frame feelings of empowerment or "taking charge" (Gill and Kanai, 2018, p. 320). The intensification of paid work and visibility of women in the neoliberal workplace has created an individualised responsibility for women in particular to take charge of balancing paid work with the desire for motherhood, fair remuneration, and/or recognition within the workplace. These exertions of autonomy are deemed as necessary for the accomplishment of oneself as a viable subject (Davies, 2006). Women are called upon to become masters of their own ships, honing and readying their entire selves for the 'right' type of female success.

Findings from this study suggest that employed, underemployed and unemployed job seekers all institute and internalise this idea of taking charge of their job seeking by accepting routinised job seeking practices as 'work'. This includes, as demonstrated in chapter six, relentlessly networking, researching employers, writing and re-writing their CVs, and

applying for positions) and becoming the ideal job seeker: one who is relentlessly proactive. They appear to internalise a postfeminist ideology, shouldering the responsibility of finding work as both natural and justified (Dalingwater, 2018) which necessitates emotional and behavioural self-management in the form of keeping a positive mental attitude and presenting a confident persona. This is highly reflective of findings from both Swan (2017) and Adamson and Kelan (2019) who both suggest positivity and confidence are key in cultural representations of female success.

Participants accept rather than contest positivity and confidence as affective resources, positioned as 'natural' or inherent but still capable of being further developed, which help to shape job seeking practices. This affective dimension encourages individuals to internalise a can-do attitude and a positive self-image despite experiencing inequalities, challenging conditions or failures (Gill and Kanai, 2018). A carefully cultivated air of confidence in particular has been positioned as a powerful postfeminist sentiment for women to harness in order to achieve success (Gill and Orgad, 2015; Orgad, 2017; Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). However, accepting these as affective resources and undertaking associated 'work' to harness or build up on them (e.g. through positivity and confidence building workshops) is depoliticising because it maintains and reinforces individual responsibility (Scharff, 2016) and a personal requirement to get it 'right' (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). It also suggests that women can sustain and cultivate this positive affect indefinitely whatever their circumstances.

Negative affect is also a feature frequently discussed in relation to how participants feel about their job seeking practices including: personal failure, stress, worry, anxiety, shame, guilt and self-blame. For example, Larissa talks about how she feels both shame and guilt at not having acquired the right set of skills so far. Louise talks worriedly and anxiously about her career choices including the need to make the 'right' choice and the sense of foreboding associated

with making the ‘wrong’ choice. Meera talks about the stress of trying to align her studies and job choice. These feelings are all associated with neoliberal, but particularly postfeminist ideals such as personal responsibility, choice, individualism and empowerment (Chandler and Reid, 2016; Bal and Deci, 2018). Guilt, anxiety and self-blame are the most plausible if not the only possible affective responses to perceptions of personal failure. They are not used as opportunities to interrogate, contest and challenge the job seeking practices or neoliberal ideal which led to them. Instead they are accepted and internalised in a further turning inwards where they are used as opportunities for self-reflection and further self-development through which the self is mined and harvested for reflective insights that can then be put forth again (McRobbie, 2015).

Acceptance of practices which encourage an inward reflection causes women to misrecognise their wider external context and ignore structural conditions of the labour market, thus maintaining the institution of postfeminist ideals. External factors are discussed only in relation to using peers, friends and family to enable participants to externalise feelings for the purpose of scrutiny, corroboration, validation or contradiction before re-internalising them in an act of further act of self-work. This represents a form of female relational surveillance, (Riley et al., 2016; Gill, 2017). However, rather than this relational surveillance being bodily, as is often the case in regards to women, it re-directs the female gaze away from the body, transforming the process of relational surveillance into a tool to monitor hearts and minds instead.

Self-regulation of one’s feelings necessitates that women constantly temper negative affect such as feelings of failure, guilt, anxiety and self-blame with synthetic versions of positivity and confidence. This creates opportunities for successful self-work or self-development which can offset the failure to secure (the right) employment. This further embeds and internalises a gendered neoliberalism (through a postfeminist ideology) of the conjoined

notions of personal responsibility and state absolution (McRobbie, 2009; Riley et al., 2016). Acceptance of job seeking practices and the postfeminist ideal of (individualised) female success (which incorporates positivity and confidence) despite experiences such as personal failures and anxiety, guilt, and self-blame explains how job seeking remains instituted and internalised. Why it remains so, and why it is not contested, and therefore deinstituted, can be explained by understanding the role and function of fantasy.

8.5 The fantasmatic logics of getting it right

As previously discussed, participants strive to attain work which is both well paid and also provides them with purpose, passion, impact, joy, and even love. In order to achieve this end participants employ what they believe to be the 'right' job seeking practices (which also become ends in and of themselves). As demonstrated, these practices are underpinned by extensive psychological self-work (self-knowing, orientating, interrogating, comparing, monitoring, regulating, assessing, improving, accepting, dissolving, transforming, empowering and fulfilling). This results in both positive and negative affect including feelings of hope, anticipation, positivity and confidence, alongside those of anxiety, guilt, shame and self-blame.

It can be seen from this that these female job seekers, within a postfeminist ideology are primed to believe that their success is attainable, as long as they are personally willing and able (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017). Examples of this are witnessed in Anita, Sarah and Michaela who feel work can offer them something that they do not yet perceive themselves as having but feel as if they should have. However, these observations do not yet explain *why* the aforementioned job seeking practices become instituted, internalised and resistant to change. This is relevant because these practices may be harmful to those who practice them.

To help explain the institution and internalisation of job seeking and hence its resistance to change we return to the idea of fantasy. A postfeminist ideology and what it espouses (e.g. becoming the ideal working woman, fulfilment, self-made success) can be regarded as a fantasy because (1) it appears impossible or at least improbable for most women to attain (ONS, 2013; ILO, 2019); (2) it resists full public disclosure (participants could not articulate what they meant by the 'right' job); and (3) it promises fullness to come (the beatific) or what might be (Orgad, 2017; Cairns, 2015; Radway, 1984) including: purpose, passion, impact, joy, happiness and love at work. However, this can only be achieved if named or implied obstacles are overcome, such as being overwhelmed by choice; making the wrong choices, not making the right choices, not trying hard enough, not cultivating the right persona or missing opportunities. Conversely it threatens disaster if those obstacles cannot be overcome i.e. the horrific (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

This third feature is wherein lies the function of the fantasy. When participants failed to secure the right type of job or perceived that they did not get their job seeking 'right', a narrative gap was created between their present selves and the postfeminist ideal working woman. This experience, one of disruption to their existing discursive representations, provided the opportunity for participants to interrogate and contest both their job seeking practices (the social dimension) and the validity of the postfeminist ideal of a working or job seeking woman (the political dimension) to which they subscribe. As the findings indicate, participants engaged in neither. This is because the fantasy of fullness to come closes the gap so it is no longer noticeable, and they move on. This was evident in the way participants became gripped by their job seeking despite, in some cases being cynical about it. Cynicism, although only a minor feature of the findings is important to consider here because of the way it colonises job seekers discursive practices (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Through their cynicism these participants allow themselves to indulge in the fantasy that they are uniquely

able to recognise the illegitimacy of, or the impossibility of reaching the promised fullness but continue job seeking as if they do not, what is termed enlightened false consciousness (Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

The narrative gap-closing function of fantasy procures a particular mode of enjoyment (jouissance). As previously discussed, the simultaneous anticipation of fullness to come and horror that fullness will never come causes participants to experience both positive and negative affect including feelings of confidence, empowerment, joy and happiness as well as anxiety, guilt, shame, self-blame and unhappiness. These paradoxical affective states provide what Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 151) refer to as an 'enjoyment of closure'. Thus their experience is not marked by either positive or negative feelings (which could provide an opportunity to contest job seeking), but rather it is marked by both, and in this, an enjoyment of closure or satisfaction in dissatisfaction is produced. The possibility of change thus remains concealed and participants remain gripped by their job search.

Augmenting fantasy's narrative gap-closing and enjoyment of closure function is the participants' complicity in appropriating experiences of failure and negative affect as 'opportunities' for further self-transformation. Around this phenomenon an entire industry has arisen which offers interventions and support such as resilience, assertiveness and self-confidence training (Lewis et al., 2017) as well as aesthetic transformative interventions within what is known as the make-over paradigm (Gill, 2007; Swan, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018; Riley et al., 2019). The make-over paradigm seeks to position self-transformational practices as aspirational and attributed to personal choice and self-determination, harnessing the theme of 'pleasing oneself' (Gill, 2007). Whereas the make-over paradigm typically refers to bodily practices such as beauty treatments and surgical enhancements, findings from this thesis demonstrate that it is not just the body that can be transformed but also the mind (Riley et al., 2017).

The fantasy ensures that participants do not contest their job seeking practices or the (postfeminist) ideal working woman. Indeed, this is demonstrated by the fact that the idea of getting it 'right' eludes definition and disclosure. This makes it a perpetually unidentifiable ideal, despite repeated references to it by participants in this study. Instead they accept and become increasingly gripped by both practices and ideals, more deeply instituting and internalising them. Examples provided across chapters five to seven include: (1) continuing to pursue, (without being able to disclose what is meant by), the right job; (2) avoiding the language and concept of unemployment and using language associated with the active job seeker; (3) avoiding accessing state financial support; (4) aspiring to adopt the 'right' persona and job seeking strategies including negotiating their own salaries; (5) and striving to have and do it all by being entirely self-reliant.

Findings suggest that participants accept and further internalise job seeking and instituted postfeminist ideals which may be working against rather than for them. They adopt previous feminist gains such as empowerment which were achieved collectively but attempt to propagate and extend these gains individually (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). For example, when participants glimpse feeling discriminated in the labour market, their response is to cultivate self-reliance and overcome it by themselves. This is seen in the case of Anita who requires a visa in order to fulfil her dreams of working in the UK and feels that by remaining relentlessly focused on this goal (Anita admits to feeling obsessive) she will achieve it. Postfeminist ideals that barriers are personal rather than structural are internalised and can be thus exploited (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Iteratively, the postfeminist fantasy becomes ever more dominant and participants try ever harder to realise it.

The fantasy conceals the job seeking practices and (political) ideal of the working woman and explains why alternative ways of being or doing remain invisible and inaccessible. This helps to explain why there is no resistance at a social practice level because women themselves

reinforce the apparently natural character of the social practices (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). A postfeminist ideology therefore provides conditions for, but not the reality of becoming the ideal neoliberal, but particularly postfeminist subject. This incompatibility gains momentum when there are seemingly women who appear to have overcome barriers and found complete fulfilment in work, visible in both the media portrayal of successful women (see Orgad and her study into The Good Wife, 2017, and Adamson and Kelan and their study into celebrity businesswomen's autobiographies, 2019) and in some cases the peer networks of participants themselves.

These findings are pertinent because they reflect the entanglement of neoliberalism and postfeminism. For example, women are empowered to construct their self-made femininity through autonomous self-determination (Gill and Scharf, 2013; Allen, 2014; Negra and Tasker, 2014; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017). This ideal has been particularly prevalent in encouraging women to 'lean in' to their careers (Sandberg, 2013). However, it reinforces perceptions of personal failure when their dream jobs elude them. As such participants strive for fulfilment and success in the belief that they are doing so as liberated and empowered women when in fact they are reproducing rather than contesting these ideals within a postfeminist ideology and therefore inadvertently eliminating choice and propagating (self) oppression and disempowerment.

8.6 Reflections on contesting a postfeminist ideology

Until now discussion on postfeminist ideology has been used to exclusively articulate the interplay of the social, political and fantasmatic logics and female job seeking narratives. This thesis does not intend to make visible the reasons why women may or may not be able to access work in a UK labour market because of their gender. Instead it is about exploring the practices of job seeking and their associated narratives as they pertain to female job seekers.

Had participants explicitly discussed their gender as significant to their job search, then this would have naturally changed the focus of this thesis. The fact that this was not central to any discussion but only circled around, for example by participants bringing up the issue of care-giving, does however indicate another fantasy- one that suggests that in order to become the ideal working woman one must actively dismiss gender as a factor in one's ability to access opportunities (Gill et al, 2017).

This shaping, but denial of gender emphasises the challenges inherent to contesting ideological practices (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). To make this more explicit a reflexive turn is made. In doing so I now, "look critically at [my] own back yard" (Gill, 2016, p.41) and state the difficulties in separating myself from my work (Gill, 2009). This is where I, as Harding (2014) indicates, "come up against myself" (p.5), because I recognise that I too am a site for conflicting postfeminist ideals (Brown, 2017). I have come to absorb ideals that dismiss gender and it has only been towards the end of this thesis that I have felt the weight of this, grappling with untangling the grip of postfeminism whilst still working within its context myself.

Being this "inseparable instrument" of my research (Liu, 2018, p. 22) has meant that my own choices within context have shaped my (in)ability to contest postfeminist ideals and their associated practices. This point only seeks to confirm findings from this thesis by highlighting the difficulties of contesting a dominant ideology at the level of the individual. Whilst I have pointed to the significance of gender in the introduction of this thesis, particularly in terms of why women may experience job seeking differently (for example, they are at greater risk of underemployment, displacement, lower pay and less autonomy at work), I have placed emphasis on their overcoming of these structural issues by reading for narratives that specifically operate within rather than outside neoliberalism and postfeminism.

In writing and living this thesis however, the effects of exploring these incompatible ideals, whilst not evident in my thesis, have over time evolved on a personal level, allowing me to situate my own internal critique into an external context. This has enabled a form of engagement with postfeminism as a cultural sensibility and discursive formation (Gill, 2017; Lewis et al., 2017), rather than 'truth'. This has only become apparent in completing and being transformed by this work. To what extent this has been an ethical or ideological engagement remains to be seen. [4]On the one hand this transformational act could be read as a form of self-reinvention, a desire to still be better than what came before or to become perfect (McRobbie, 2015). On the other hand, in being confronted by this transformational act, I have been exposed to the nature and function of the fantasy and am now cognisant of the, as yet, unclosed gaps caused by my own experiences and thus the possibility of thinking about, and doing work differently.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed what, how and why female job seekers institute and internalise job seeking as situated within a postfeminist ideology. The social logics of individual effort have been identified, and the political logics of female success have been described. In striving to be the 'right' type of job seeker, participants of this study repeatedly mask and perpetuate the extensive psychological self-work required under a postfeminist ideology. This self-work is masked largely because of the affective experiences participants have, including both positive

[4] Not only was the writing of my thesis a disruptive experience, but so too was my PhD viva. I had positioned my thesis as an endeavour associated entirely with individuality and self-made feminine success. Thus my viva held the promise of fullness to come and also immense threat. The sense of disruption experienced after my viva was due to the request for a resubmission- an example of disaster. In the examiners request for a resubmission, I experienced a disrupted sense of self; a failure to become the ideal PhD student and a failure to become the ideal working woman. I have been forced to grapple with feelings of failure, shame, deep anxiety but also hope. This has since presented the opportunity for radical contingency whereby I have been confronted with the possibility that my PhD had become an exercise in perfection. In revising the work, I have been granted an opportunity for authentic engagement with the ethical, rather than ideological dimension of work, not only associated with the process of re-writing, but also with the idea of success and failure.

and negative feelings associated with their job seeking practices. Fantasy explains why job seekers become gripped by the job seeking process, as they strive to overcome obstacles or get their job seeking right in order to become the ideal working woman. This closes off any possibility of alternative ways of job seeking and being a working woman. By revealing the self-work that a postfeminist ideology demands, a depiction of the type of subjects women are asked to become is made visible (Lewis, 2014; Adamson, 2017). Consequently, it can be seen that women's striving to enact postfeminist ideals associated with job seeking reproduces rather than contests existing harmful demands. In doing so female job seekers inadvertently eliminate choice and propagate feminine self-oppression and disempowerment. In the next chapter the key contributions and implications of these findings are discussed. Avenues for continued research are also presented and this thesis is concluded in its entirety.

Chapter Nine

9. Conclusions and implications: Calling out the postfeminist subject

In the previous chapter the findings of this thesis were articulated and justified in light of both empirical evidence and academic literature. This chapter concludes this thesis by discussing the thesis limitations and the key contributions made. It ends by discussing the implications of the findings in a broader societal sense both in terms of ways forward for individuals but also ways forward for future research and policy developments.

9.1 Thesis summary

Chapter one provided an overview to job seeking in a UK labour market. It highlighted the tensions a job seeker may experience such as insecurity or difficulties in securing work against a backdrop of an endeavour perceived by society as holding high value. It then discussed the possibilities of working at the intersection of two bodies of knowledge, that of CMS and mainstream work psychology. It introduced the need to take a critical perspective to address some of the lesser attended to aspects of how a job seeker is conceptualised in mainstream work psychology.

Chapter two presented a systematic, narrative literature review of mainstream work psychology literature on the job seeker. This chapter demonstrated the neoliberal pulse that runs through this body of knowledge by articulating the taken for granted assumptions of the job search literature including the effort-reward relationship of causality, the need to offer psychological intervention and for job seekers to manage their behaviours and emotions in order to secure work.

In chapter three a contextualisation of the job seeker in a 21st century labour market was articulated. This included an in-depth discussion of three key concepts that may influence a

job seeker's experience: neoliberalism, postfeminism and fantasy. These concepts therefore provided the theoretical framing of this thesis, demonstrating an alternative way to view a contemporary job seeker's quest.

In chapter four a qualitative approach to the study of job seekers was described. This included a description of the data collection method (unstructured interviews); the data analysis approach (voice-centred relational method) and the way data was articulated using the logics of critical explanation framework (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

Chapters five, six and seven articulated the major findings of this thesis. The social practices of job seeking as narrated by participants of this study during their job search were described. This emphasised various tensions and contradictions inherent to job seeking, largely due to the ideals participants attempted to enact during their job search. Chapter six identified how job seekers institute and internalise job seeking and its associated postfeminist ideals. This demonstrated how personal qualities such as accountability and responsibility; affects including guilt and positivity; and behaviours, namely confidence are harnessed by the job seeker as part of a transformational process. Lastly chapter seven explained the role of fantasy in gripping female job seekers, depoliticising the acts undertaken during job seeking.

In chapter eight these findings were discussed more explicitly in relation to a postfeminist ideology. This chapter described the social logics of individual effort; identified the political logics of female success; and explained the role of fantasy in relation to getting it right.

This final chapter now discusses the limitations, key contributions and wider implications of this thesis.

9.2 Limitations

It is important to note that this study explored the experiences of female job seekers, between the ages of 20 to 40. Participants were all highly educated, possessing as a minimum a Bachelor's degree and seeking white-collar (knowledge) work. Whilst they came from different socio-economic backgrounds, circumstances and ethnicities, this group likely negotiated their positions differently compared to other generations, men, or those with different educational histories such as those without degrees or those with vocational qualifications. From the outset of this study, participant calls were open, addressing both men and women. Only female job seekers volunteered to participate. This difficulty in recruiting men into social science research has been noted by previous scholars (Culley et al., 2013; De Lacey, 2014), having a number of different reasons including the research topic itself. One can speculate that men may not have volunteered for this study because they may not have thought it of relevance to them. Given that subsequently this study became exclusively about female job seekers, a number of different organisations working with women from different backgrounds were contacted in attempts to obtain a broader range of narratives. These organisations included local, further education colleges, The Girls Network, The Princes Trust, The Young Women's Trust and several local housing charities. Whilst several of these organisations agreed to distribute information about this study internally via, for example closed Facebook support groups, there were no willing volunteers.

According to Allen (2014) in her study exploring neoliberal, postfeminist labour market negotiations amongst young women suggests that social class may shape how women respond to labour market conditions but that aspirations about work remain consistently similar across class divides. A keen aspiration to work is also reflected in Escott's (2012) study exploring young women's marginalisation in ten different geographical locations in England. Whilst those with fewer qualifications may be less likely to secure employment

(Escott, 2012), what is pertinent here is that job seeking practices and their associated narratives are capable of cutting across employment status, race and class.

9.3 Key contributions of this thesis

This thesis identifies, describes and explains the what, how and why of job seeking as enacted in the context of a postfeminist ideology. Whilst some of the participants involved in this study were unemployed, this thesis is not about unemployment. Whilst all of the participants in this study were female job seekers, it is not about access (or not) to equal opportunities in a UK labour market. The novel contributions of this research include the following:

The empirical work of this thesis contributes directly to discussions about gendered forms of neoliberalism and its effects. It provides empirical evidence for what, how and why postfeminist ideals are enacted within a job seeking context. Job seeking practices are sustained by postfeminist ideals that elude to the idea that female job seekers will eventually attain success and fulfilment of the ideal working woman if they do everything 'right' on their quest to secure work. In order to manifest this reality, female job seekers are called upon to undertake psychological self-work in order to become self-made. As discussed in chapter eight, this demonstrates that women seeking work within the current labour market do so believing that they are empowered, freely choosing subjects whilst also using these as benchmarks of their personal failure. This shows the power of selectively drawing on and co-opting feminist ideals (McRobbie, 2004) whereby legitimate feminist gains are transformed into digestible versions in a neoliberal labour market. These empirical findings furnish the concept of postfeminism with evidence to demonstrate that: (1) it is a concept that is far from being 'over' (Riley et al., 2017); (2) that it is necessary to explore postfeminist ideals and their impact in the context of work, of which only a handful of empirical studies can be

attributed (see chapter three); and (3) it is necessary to continue to view postfeminism in light of, or in relation to neoliberalism.

At a theoretical level this thesis furthers an understanding of postfeminism beyond the what and the how to also reflect why its associated ideals become instituted and internalised. By considering the theoretical role of fantasy, why postfeminist ideology grips female job seekers and why this resists change has been articulated. This contributes to an expansion of the way postfeminism is currently being theorised within scholarship including CMS. Indeed, Riley et al (2017) discuss the necessity to connect postfeminism with other critical concepts in order to develop analysis. Using the term fantasy as it pertains to 'what might be' extends views on postfeminism to show that women are gripped by ideals and their associated practices because of the fullness to come promised by the prospect of self-made success and personal fulfilment and the threat associated with not becoming the ideal working woman. These ideals become incontestable precisely because fantasy closes off alternative ways of being, making women unable to escape them and instead making them complicit in their own postfeminist enactment.

Lastly, this thesis makes a multi-disciplinary contribution to work psychology by re-conceptualising the job seeker. As discussed in chapter one, developing a critical perspective to work psychology includes consideration of the social and political climate workers find themselves in, such as for example, aspects of neoliberalism and its demands (McDonald and Bubna-Litic, 2017). By exploring the narratives of job seekers, ideals associated with neoliberalism and postfeminism such as individualism, choice and empowerment have been contextualised and located in the practices of job seeking. This has been done by using the logics of critical explanation approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) to articulate the enactment of a postfeminist ideology at the level of the everyday. This approach is capable of supporting work psychology as a discipline to remain vigilant to neoliberal agendas, rather

than being complicit in them. In this respect, different conversations about job seeking could take place within a student curriculum that involve consideration of contextual factors such as neoliberal, postfeminist agendas to help stimulate alternative narratives regarding work and job seeking.

9.4 Implications: Job seeking as a site of struggle

This thesis demonstrates the burden of job seeking within a postfeminist ideology in that a binary narrative of success or failure regarding the ideal working woman is produced. The working woman has always been problematic because of its historical relationship with masculine norms and patriarchal forms of working (Acker, 1992; Williams, 2000; Connell and Wood, 2005; Baker and Brewis, 2020). As Shapiro et al, (2008) indicate, "women's career moves have always been seen as deviant" (p. 316). However, within a postfeminism ideology, rather than women striving to achieve a masculinised form of work, new structures of organising appear to operate.

Firstly, this involves the positioning of women against other women by suggesting that some women appear able to have and do it all, overcoming inequality and becoming the 'perfect worker' (Baker and Brewis, 2020), whereas others by implication, fail. Secondly it encourages persistent scrutiny of women in their 'choices' about work and what this says about the ways in which they 'chose' to live their lives. Thirdly it involves the positioning of women as endlessly competing against themselves. In this respect the context of job seeking creates forms of competition that do not sit between traditional masculine and feminine divides but between new forms of femininity that require women to always be better than that which they already are (McRobbie, 2015).

The climate of betterment propagated within a postfeminist ideology, coupled with the fantasy of 'what could be' during job seeking, appears to promote and encourage female job

seekers to continue to do more and more towards their search. In doing more towards their search they become exposed to more experiences (i.e. more job interviews, more networking opportunities, more applications to send) during which their dreams of what work may offer them become both seemingly attainable and threatened. The challenge job seekers face in this respect is that they enter into affective narratives whereby each action produces feelings of inadequacy that are internalised in order to be worked upon. By demonstrating the enactment of postfeminist ideals within the context of a neoliberal labour market, awareness of the burdens experienced by female job seekers becomes sharpened through the illumination of the extensive psychological self-work required in order to secure the 'right' job in the 'right' way.

Job seeking in a postfeminist ideology suggests that participants uphold a set of ideals at a time filled with guilt, shame and self-doubt. This inevitably creates tension and fatigue. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, it is no wonder then that underemployment increases levels of anxiety and depression, and it is no wonder that more women than men experience this. These factors make women particularly vulnerable to the demands of a postfeminist ideology. In attempting to carve out new forms of empowered femininity on their own, female job seekers may end up feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, unsupported and alone.

Participant experiences are structured by the postfeminist ideals that call upon individuals to work harder, be better, all the while presenting a structure driven purely by profit making as opposed to human flourishing. Job seekers are required to orient a hypothetical employed self at the same time as constantly reinventing a present job seeking self. They struggle to attain doing what they want against a backdrop of doing what they should. By articulating this through the social, political and fantasmatic logics approach used in this thesis, these findings may demonstrate to other job seekers that their struggles are not unique nor are they isolated

but are indeed situated within a particular context designed to be highly persuasive and appealing.

9.5 Ways forward for future research

Drawing out the narratives in this study presents an opportunity for acknowledgment. Questions can be raised about the relationships and conditions of the ideal working woman, to make plausible alternative ways of seeing, being or intervening, shifting the struggle away from ideology to one of ethics (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Glynos, 2008). Evidently from this thesis, this is a shift that cannot be done by the job seeker alone. Indeed, reflexively examining the conditions of a neoliberal, and in this case postfeminist, existence is hard, precisely because of the way in which these particular discourses dismantle resistance (Davies, 2006).

Ethical engagement with the construction of job seeking could branch out into a number of different routes. For example, at a macro level questions could be raised about how society can discursively reconfigure the notion of the working woman. Answers may come from an observation of societies, cultures, groups or individuals who have successfully rejected a neoliberal or postfeminist ideology of work. Similarly, a reconfiguring of work or a sourcing of alternative conceptualisations to the current meanings and centrality of work within a neoliberal regime may prove fruitful, so too may attempts to decouple an affective narrative about the pursuit of meaningful or purposeful work and individual morality. Challenging ideas about failure, inadequacy, guilt and self-blame under a postfeminist ideology may also present alternative ways of doing and being, providing a method for job seekers to re-appropriate the term ‘unemployment’.

On a micro level, findings from this thesis may encourage different conversations to occur between job seekers and their social networks. It may also encourage or inspire different

approaches between job seekers and career counsellors, guidance services, recruiters and employers that are as yet unknown and waiting to be conceptualised. Contextualising work within its political climate may better support those entering the labour market for the first time or those already working within it to notice how certain ideals come to pass.

Each one of these strands offers a potential way to support or at least begin to think differently about job seeking and job seekers. However, there is also a need for adequate policy solutions to be proposed, above and beyond the realm of the psychological. This is particularly important for longer periods of unemployment, insecure work or in attempts to reject dominant, linear forms of doing work (Shapiro et al, 2008). Discursively un-doing work meanings such as the problem of unemployment and the problem of female success will not be enough to address the reality of a labour market providing reduced opportunities for adequate, distributed and varied employment. This is pertinent when considering previous research that suggests women are more likely to give up their job seeking efforts sooner than men if they encounter repeated barriers (Escott, 2012) or are less likely to apply for similar positions they have previously been rejected for (Brands and Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). It also has implications for women who are marginalised differently by the labour market because of their geographical location, caring responsibilities, race, disability, work experience and qualifications (Escott, 2012), possibly requiring differences in approaches across the country.

9.6 Conclusion

To conclude, a postfeminist ideology presents new ways of organising for women seeking work which may be potentially harmful, particularly if meanings about work cannot be divorced from the affects which they provoke. Naming these new forms of (post) feminine organising may go some way in making explicit that which has previously been left unspoken and provide context to what has previously been decontextualised. In this sense this thesis acts as calling out, rather than calling upon the subjects women are being asked to become. In doing so it is hoped that this thesis may act as a moment of disruption for readers, revealing the possibility of seeing postfeminist ideology as just one way of informing job seeking.

I would like to now end this thesis by taking this opportunity to thank you, as my reader for reading to the end of my thesis.

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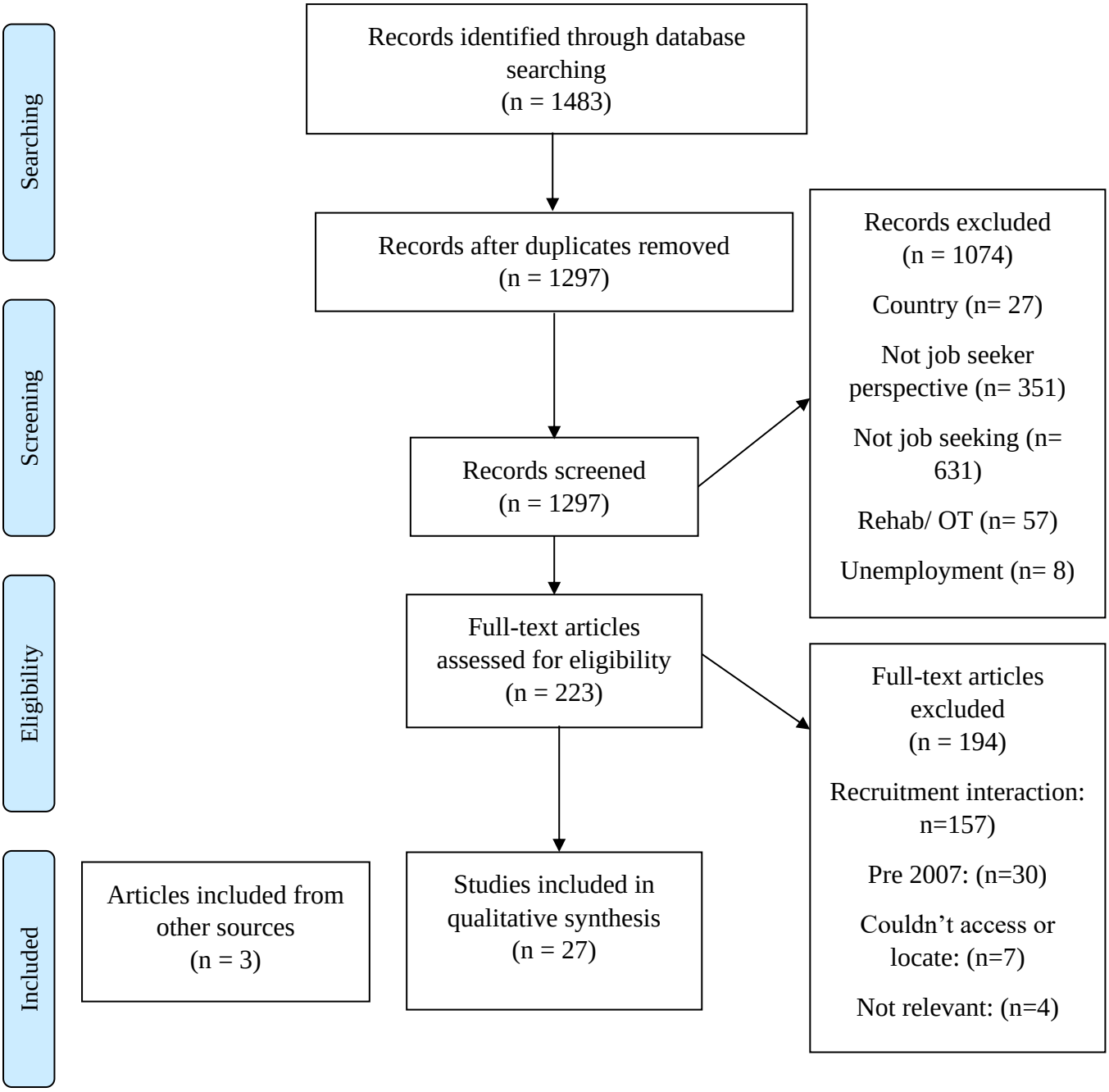
Appendices

Appendix One: PRISMA Diagram (adapted from Moher et al, 2009)



Appendix Two: Table of descriptive characteristics of literature and themes

Author	Title	Date	Summary	Theories	Methods	Sample	Type	Journal
Job search behaviours								
Acikgoz.	Employee recruitment and job search: Towards a multi-level integration	2019	Aim: To provide a narrative overview of both employee recruitment and job seeker literature. Key findings: It proposes an integrative model of job search and employee recruitment in a bid to combine both perspectives for future research, emphasising the longitudinal nature of the process by which	Attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) framework (Schneider, 1987)	NA	NA	Conceptual	Human Resource Management Review

			individuals gain employment and the need to take a multi-perspective approach.					
Ali et al.	The long road to employment: Incivility experienced by job seekers.	2016	Aim: To address how job seekers' experiences of rude and discourteous treatment-incivility-can adversely affect self-regulatory processes underlying job searching. Key findings: Evidence suggests that the negative effect of incivility on job search self-efficacy and subsequent job search behaviors are stronger for individuals low, rather than high, in avoid-	Social-cognitive model Goal Orientation literature	x3 studies Questionnaires Statistical analysis	Graduating undergraduate job seekers (83 participants, majority white, female)	Empirical	Journal of Applied Psychology

			performance goal orientation.					
Barbulescu	The strength of many kinds of ties: Unpacking the role of social contacts across stages of the job search process	2015	Aim: To explore the strength of ties/ social networks at different points in the job seeking process Key Findings: Deciding the types of jobs for which to apply, submitting job applications, and preparing for interviews. Contacts spread across different occupations are conducive to applying to more types of jobs, yet it is contacts who are more focused across	Social networks/ social contacts literature	x3 Questionnaires (longitudinal data) Statistical analysis	226 participants in an MBA programme, actively job seeking	Empirical	Organization Science

			occupations that are beneficial for being invited to more interviews-relative to the number of job types applied for-and for converting the interviews into offers. Contacts with lower relationship depth with the job seeker are more helpful for getting invited to interviews, whereas contacts who have more frequent interactions with the job seeker are more helpful for converting interviews into offers.					

Fort et al.	Self-efficacy, goals, and job search behaviors	2011	Aim: To examine the relationship between job search self-efficacy, employment goals, job search planning, job search behaviours and effort allocated to job search. Key findings: Employment goals did not mediate the path between self-efficacy, job search planning, job search behaviors and effort allocated to job search. Instead, self-efficacy directly influenced job search	Job search self-efficacy, job search planning, job search behaviours and effort literature	Surveys Statistical analysis	100 participants (54 men) Active job seekers	Empirical	Career Development International

			planning and job search behaviours.					
Guerrero and Rothstein	Antecedents of underemployment: Job search of skilled immigrants in Canada.	2012	Aim: To investigate factors that skilled immigrants can improve in order to have better job search outcomes, in particular to avoid underemployment. Key findings: Language fluency and cultural knowledge were positively related to both job search clarity and job search self-efficacy. Social support was only related to job search self-efficacy. Job search clarity was related to job	Job search literature	Surveys Statistical analysis	357 participants (52% women) using an online job seeking platform	Empirical	Applied Psychology: An International Review

			search intensity. Job search intensity was related to the number of interviews, which in turn, was related to the number of job offers.					
Van Hoye et al.	Networking as a job search behaviour: A social network perspective.	2009	Aim: To investigate whether the structure and composition of job seekers' social network determined their networking behaviour and moderated its relationship with job search and employment outcomes. Key findings: Networking explained incremental variance in	Social network theory	Longitudinal Survey data Statistical analysis	1,177 unemployed Flemish job seekers	Empirical	Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology

			job offers beyond job seekers' use of print advertising, the internet, and public employment services, but not in employment outcomes. Some evidence was found indicating that networking might be more effective for job seekers whose social network contains weaker and higher-status ties.					
Liu et al	Effectiveness of job search interventions: A meta-analytic review.	2014	Aim: To examine the effectiveness of job search interventions in facilitating job search success (i.e.,	Behavioural learning theory, theory of planned behaviour, social	Meta- analysis	47 experimentally or quasi experimentally evaluated job	Meta-analysis	Psychological bulletin

			obtaining employment). Key findings: Those participating in job search interventions are more likely to get work. Interventions that teach job search related skills also increase chances of finding work. Best at helping younger/ older/ short term job seekers	cognitive theory, and coping theory		search interventions		
Lopez-Kidwell et al.	What matters when: A multistage model and empirical examination of job search effort	2013	Aim: To develop a multistage perspective on job search effort with active job seekers within a job search goal life span. Key findings: Job seekers shift their focus among	Self-regulation, social comparison theory, control theory, and the attentional focus model	Longitudinal Survey data Statistical analysis	Study 1: 61 MBA students (61% male, 92% white) Study 2: 75 undergrad	Empirical	Academy of Management Journal

			intrapersonal or sociocontextual factors as a means of regulating their effort levels throughout their job search.			students (68% women)		
Sun et al.	Dynamics of the job search process: Developing and testing a mediated moderation model.	2013	Aim: To develop a model explaining how within-person changes in job search efficacy and chronic regulatory focus interactively affect the number of job interview offers. Key findings: job search efficacy fluctuates throughout the job search process, and affects job search effort and	Self-regulation	Job seekers provided monthly reports of their job search activities over a period of 8 months.	184 graduating students (97 women)	Empirical	Journal of Applied Psychology

			outcomes differently, depending on the job seekers' regulatory focus.					
Turban et al.	EFFECTS OF CONSCIENTIOUSNESS AND EXTRAVERSION ON NEW LABOR MARKET ENTRANTS' JOB SEARCH: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF METACOGNITIVE ACTIVITIES AND POSITIVE EMOTIONS	2009	Aim: To test a model of Conscientiousness and Extraversion and their influence on metacognitive activities during job seeking. Key findings: Extraversion related to positive emotions, conscientiousness and extraversion both influence metacognitive activities, metacognitive activities and positive	Job search literature, personality factors	Longitudinal data x3 Surveys Statistical analysis	232 job applicants (52% women)	Empirical	Personnel Psychology

			emotions influence job search outcomes.					
Van Hooft and De Jong	Predicting job seeking for temporary employment using the theory of planned behaviour: The moderating role of individualism and collectivism.	2009	Aim: To examine the role of behavioural, normative, and control beliefs and individualism/collectivism in the context of job seeking for temporary employment. Key findings: Job search intention is related to job search behaviour. Sense of security, work–life balance, and status were related to intentions to seek temporary	Theory of planned behaviour	Longitudinal data x2 Surveys Statistical analysis	138 temporary workers (77% women)	Empirical	Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology

			employment. People low on collectivism were more strongly motivated by their personal attitudes about job seeking and less by perceptions of social pressure than people high on collectivism.					
van Hooft and Noordzij	The effects of goal orientation on job search and reemployment: A field experiment among unemployed job seekers.	2009	Aim: To test the hypothesis that situational goal orientation affects the job search process, characterized by job search intentions, job search behavior, and reemployment status. Key findings: Workshopa	Goal-orientation theory	x3 field experiments (workshops on effective job seeking)	109 unemployed job seekers (52% women)	Empirical	Journal of Applied Psychology

			on setting learning goals led to more intentions to engage in job seeking and higher reemployment probabilities than workshops on setting performance goals or setting no specific goals.					
Zacher and Bock	Mature age job seekers: the role of proactivity	2014	Aim: To examine mature age (40-60) job seekers' proactive personality as a moderator of the relationship between age and job search intensity and to examine job search self-efficacy as a mediator of this	Proactivity theory, personality, job search literature	Survey Statistical analysis	188 job seekers (unemployed, 76 women, average age 55)	Empirical	Journal of Managerial Psychology

			moderation effect. Key findings: age negatively affects job search intensity. Proactive personality positively impacts job search intensity and moderated the relationship between age and job search intensity.					
Zikic and Saks.	Job search and social cognitive theory: The role of career-relevant activities	2009	Aim: To explain, using social cognitive theory, the relationships between career-relevant activities, self-regulatory variables, variables from the Theory of Planned Behaviour and job search intensity.	Social-cognitive theory Job search literature	x2 surveys Statistical analysis	795 participants (359 unemployed and 333 employed job seekers. 70% women)	Empirical	Journal of vocational behavior

			Key findings: Career-relevant activities were positively related to job search self-efficacy and job search clarity. Job search self-efficacy, job search attitude, and subjective norm were positively related to job search intention, and job search intention predicted job search intensity.					
Attraction and Fit								
Born et al.	Applicants' role as (pro) active agents in the recruitment and selection process: A	2018	Introduction to a special issue on applicants as proactive agents	NA	NA	5 papers	Special Issue Introduction	Journal of Personnel Psychology

	frequently overlooked perspective.							
von Walter et al.	The effect of applicant-employee fit and temporal construal on employer attraction and pursuit intentions.	2012	Aim: To examine how different time perspectives (during job seeking) affect the relationship between applicant–employee fit and employer attraction Key findings: Applicant–employee fit is an abstract, high-level attribute that exerts a greater influence on an individual's employer attraction and intentions when that individual holds a distant	Construal level theory (CLT), value theory	Study 1: adapted personality test, exposure to employee testimonials from fictional organisation Statistical analysis Study 2: Hypothetical job advert evaluation	Study 1: 97 students (52% women) Study 2: 226 Unemployed job seekers (50% women)	Empirical	Journal of Occupational and Organizationa l Psychology

			time perspective relative to a near time perspective. High fit/average pay employer was evaluated more favourably at high levels of temporal distance, whereas a high fit/above-average employer was evaluated equally favourably across different levels of temporal distance. More simply- fit supports future decisions, pay influences immediate decisions					

Gender								
Barbulescu and Bidwell	Do women choose different jobs from men? Mechanisms of application segregation in the market for managerial workers	2013	Aim: To understand how and why men and women apply to different jobs by describing those application decisions. To explain the factors that might lead to gender differences in job applications. Key findings: Decisions about which jobs to apply	Gender role socialisation	Survey Statistical analysis	MBA students (1,331 students, of whom 278 were women)	Empirical	Organization Science

			to are generally shaped by three distinct factors: preferences for specific rewards, such as money or flexibility; identification with certain jobs, such that individuals are more likely to apply to jobs that are consistent with other valuable identities that they hold; and expectations that an application will succeed. Women require different work-life balance and opt for self-consistency suggesting that roles and beliefs shape how they					

			identify with jobs and the nature of jobs they apply for.					
Hogue et al.	Fit and Congruency: How Women and Men Self-Select into Gender-Congruent Jobs	2019	Aim: To use the person-job fit and the role congruity perspective of social role theory to explore job pursuit intentions. Key findings: At different points in their careers women and men choose to pursue gender-congruent jobs. For students, the choice was	Person-job fit Role congruence Job pursuit intentions	Survey Statistical analysis	Sample 1: 522 undergraduates, mainly white women Sample 2: 174 employed adults, mainly women	Empirical	Journal of Personnel Psychology

			mediated by value placed on the job's associated gender-congruent outcomes, but for working adults it was not.					
Sallop and Kirby	The Role of Gender and Work Experience on Career and Work Force Diversity Expectations	2007	Aim: To explore the effects of gender and work experience on salary expectations, career characteristics, job search methods and intensity, internship participation, expected hours required and willingness to work, and sensitivity to gender issues. Key findings: Female students place greater	Job search intensity literature	Survey Statistical analysis	Graduating business students (105 males and 73 females)	Empirical	Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management

			importance on work life balance and cultural fit within the organization and are more aware of, and sensitive to, gender issues.					
Taylor et al.	Ethnic and gender differences in the labour market perceptions of post-higher education job seekers: 'Double jeopardy' or 'ethnic prominence'?	2012	Aim: To explore the ethnic and gender differences in perceptions of graduate job acquisition difficulty among U.K. post-higher education job seekers. Key findings: (1) the perceptions of the black women may reflect knowledge of Black male disadvantage, or negative stereotyping with respect	Double jeopardy hypothesis	Survey Statistical analysis	Graduates and final year students (800)	Empirical	Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology

			to employment in the U.K. graduate labor market; and (2) the double jeopardy hypothesis, for some female graduates may have negative effects on their job seeking endeavors.					
Job seeking and unemployment								
Creed et al.	Goal orientation, self-regulation strategies, and job-seeking intensity in unemployed adults.	2009	Aim: To test the predictors of job-seeking intensity and whether self-regulation mediated between goal orientation and job-seeking intensity, as well as test predictors of reemployment	Human capital Goal orientation Self-regulation/ job-seeking intensity	x2 studies Surveys Statistical analysis	277/ 155 Unemployed adults	Empirical	Journal of Applied Psychology

			outcomes and whether job-seeking intensity mediated the relationship between antecedent variables and the reemployment outcomes. Key findings: Learning goal orientation and self-regulation predicted job-seeking intensity, and self-regulation mediated between learning goal orientation and job-seeking intensity. Job-seeking intensity did not mediate the relationship among human capital, goal orientation, and self-					

			regulation variables and reemployment outcomes.					
De Battisti et al.	Perceived employability and reemployment: Do job search strategies and psychological distress matter?	2016	Aim: To investigate the relationships among perceived employability (PE), job search strategies, psychological distress (PD), and reemployment. Key findings: PE led to focused job search strategy and the focused strategy increased the likelihood of reemployment. The	Perceived employability literature	Survey Statistical analysis	136 unemployed people	Empirical	Journal of Occupational and Organizationa l Psychology

			hypothesized negative correlation between PE and PD was not confirmed. Higher levels of distress attributed to job loss were positively associated with a haphazard job search strategy.					
Helmes and Fudge	Psychological distress among australian welfare recipient job seekers.	2017	Aim: To estimate the frequency of psychological distress amongst unemployed adults population to identify characteristics associated with an increased risk of distress. Key findings: Forty-five per cent of the sample	Psychological distress literature	Survey Statistical analysis	519 income support job seekers aged 15-64 years	Empirical	Australian Journal of Psychology

			met the clinical criteria for psychological distress and were deemed likely to have a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 4th ed., (DSM-IV) diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety. Several risk factors for psychological distress were identified, including being aged between 40 and 54 years, being female, and being classed as long-term unemployed.					

Lyons et al.	Strategies of job seekers related to age-related stereotypes	2014	Aim: To identify how perceptions of age-related bias are connected to age-related identity management strategies of unemployed job seekers. Key findings: Older job seekers reported greater perceptions of age-related bias in employment settings, and perceptions of bias related to engaging in attempts to counteract stereotypes, mislead or miscue about one's age, and avoid age-related discussions in job searching. Individuals	Age related bias literature Identity management	Survey Statistical analysis	129 unemployed adults	Empirical	Journal of Managerial Psychology

			who were less anxious about their job search were less likely to mislead about age or avoid the topic of age, whereas individuals with higher job-search self-efficacy were more likely to acknowledge their age during their job search. Older job seekers higher in emotion control were more likely to acknowledge their age.					
Citation Tracking								

Manroop	A multiparadigm approach to job search scholarship	2017	Aim: To explore different ways in which job search literature can be perceived by using a multiparadigmatic perspective. Findings: Applies interpretivism, critical management theory, and postmodernism perspectives to analyze job search. Demonstrates that a holistic and comprehensive view of the job search literature can be undertaken.	Multiparadigmatic (interpretivism, critical management theory and postmodernism)	Narrative review	Literature from work psychology, critical management theory	Conceptual	Organizational Psychology Review

Manroop and Richardson	Job Search: A Multidisciplinary Review and Research Agenda	2016	Aim: To review literature on job seeking from economics, sociology and industrial/ organisational psychology and make a case for integration by proposing a multidisciplinary approach to understanding job-seeking behaviors.	Multidisciplinary (labour economics, sociology, industrial/organisational psychology	Narrative review	Literature from economics, sociology and industrial/ organisational psychology	Conceptual	International Journal of Management Reviews
Wanberg et al	Navigating the black hole: Explicating layers of job search context and adaptational responses	2012	Aim: To explore the contextual mechanisms of job searching from a qualitative perspective Findings: Development of a process model to portray the mechanisms (managing mood and	Context, mechanisms and outcome configurations	Semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis (688 pages of text analysed)	72 white collar workers (employed, unemployed and partically employed)	Empirical	Personnel Psychology

			motivation, feedback/help seeking, and selfreflection/ learning) through which these context-related demands are related to several important job search outcomes.					

Appendix Three: Participant information sheet

Kingston Business School
Faculty of Business and Law
www.kingston.ac.uk

Kingston Hill
Kingston-upon-Thames
KT2 7LB
UK

Dear ,

As part of my PhD research I'm exploring the experiences of job applicants in a UK labour market. I understand that this might be something you're about to enter into in terms of job seeking, attending interviews or networking for jobs.

I would very much welcome talking to you about this and so I wanted to share a bit more information about what my research entails, to see if you might be interested in speaking with me. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way.

In order to help, I have attached an information sheet to this email. It is intended to provide you with all the information you need however please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Also attached to this email is a consent form. If you agree to participate in this study, please return this form to me once you've read the information sheet (email redacted)

If you have any questions about this study, please do contact me.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Warm regards,

Ruth

Study: The experiences of job seekers

What is the purpose of the study?

I am an organisational psychology researcher based at Kingston University, and as part of my PhD I am conducting a study into the experiences of job seekers throughout the recruitment process. I am keen to hear your views and experiences as someone who is currently embarking on the process of job seeking.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to participate. There will be no adverse consequences if you decide not to participate.

What happens if I decide to take part?

If you agree to participate in this study, I would like to invite you to have a series of conversations with me about your experiences. These conversations will run as follows:
(1) Before you've begun the job seeking process
(2) Once you have started job-seeking and are beginning to get some results/feedback from potential employers and,
(3) To conclude, a final conversation when you've accepted a job offer.
These conversations will happen at a time and place convenient to you. They are likely to take an hour of your time. They can happen if you find getting an interview challenging, or if you get a job offer straight away.

Will my taking part be kept confidential?

Yes, all information you give me will be kept confidential. With your permission I will record our conversations, just so I can analyse these as part of my research. Any information you share with me in our conversations will be anonymised and stored confidentially under password-protected files. No details will be released that allows others to recognise you have participated in this project.

What will happen to the results of the study?

I will use the information you give me to develop an understanding of the experiences individuals face when they have participated in face-to-face recruitment interviews. This is forming part of my PhD study.

Incentives

As a thank you for participating in this research, I am offering to review CV's and job applications throughout the duration of your involvement in this study. If this is something you would like me to do, please mention this when we speak.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research

Appendix Four: Reflexive account, published in FWSA Newsletter, January 2019

I am the embodiment: writing reflexively during a PhD

I frequently grapple with whether I'm transferring my experiences of the world of work onto the participants of my PhD thesis. My thesis is about female job seekers and the personal reflections associated with this are particularly challenging; I am not an "inseparable instrument"[1] from my research. Borrowing inspiration from autoethnography allows me to write about these challenges in a more reflexive, personal way. It allows me to write freely. In this manner, ideas arise unbidden but ready for subsequent examination.

And so, this brings me to October, 2018. Here I am again, considering yet another job search. But this time, rather than seeking to position myself as a qualitative researcher, or trying to find the next role that will show (show who and why?) that I've learned and developed myself, I'm instead looking at roles that will force me to do the opposite. To start over, self-regenerate again. I've been trawling job boards for (stress free?) roles such as barista, waitress, book-seller. Naively.

I'm acutely aware of the irony that whilst studying job seekers I'm also seeking, searching, longing and desiring for work. In this vein work is given a heightened status, a conduit for something unknown, indescribable, an unrealised dream. Yet a dream is something fleeting. It doesn't have any security. Is that what work ultimately is, fleeting, ever changing, warping? The physical sensations I get when I go onto the internet to look for a new job are; excitement (perhaps this will be the 'one'), trepidation (what if I can't get another job?), hope (this could change my life) but ultimately one of utter desolation- here I am again. I have learned how to centre my life on little else and so, to be job seeking again means you haven't 'made it' (made what?) yet.

These reflections have been formed by listening to the women of my research also seeking work. We are all women of a generation; living the everyday entanglement of postfeminist neoliberalism[2]. We are subjects born to work. It has been institutionally embedded that we are here to work. School was all about getting good grades in order to get a job. University was about getting the rubber stamp to get a good job. a good job was only the next step to get a better job. Striving for perfection, all the while being told we can have it all[3]. We were leaning in long ago.

Borrowing from autoethnography to write reflexively lets me pause. It forces me to be honest. It encourages me to think about the 'why' by situating my personal experiences within a context- the social and the political[4]. It has brought me to a postfeminist framework and to questions about the type of organisational subjects we are being asked to become[5]. Autoethnographic reflexivity allows me to write differently; as a process of becoming beyond the academic mould and normalisations[6].

It lets my research participants speak through me. It makes me feel like a writer.

Ruth Abrams, Kingston University London

Notes:

1 Liu, H. (2018). An embarrassment of riches: The seduction of postfeminism in the academy. *Organization.* Available from: DOI: 10.1177/1350508418763980.

2 Gill, R. and Scharff, C. (2011). *New Femininities. Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity.* Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.

3 McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the Perfect. Competitive femininity in Neoliberal Times. *Australian Feminist Studies,* 30(83), pp. 3-20.

4 van Amsterdam, N. (2015). Othering the "Leaky Body": An Autoethnographic Story about Expressing Breast Milk in the Workplace. *Culture and Organization*, 21(3), pp. 269–87.

5 Lewis, P. (2014). Postfeminism, femininities and organization studies: exploring a new agenda. *Organization Studies*. Available: doi.org/10.1177/0170840614539315.

6 Weatherall, R. (2018) 'Writing the doctoral thesis differently', *Management Learning.* Available from: DOI: 10.1177/1350507618799867.

Appendix Five: Consent form

Kingston Business School
Faculty of Business and Law
www.kingston.ac.uk

Kingston Hill
Kingston-upon-Thames
KT2 7LB
UK

Participant Consent Form
Re: *The experiences of job seekers*

Name	(enter details here)
Telephone number	
Email address	
In order for this research to be of a robust nature, I'm requesting information on your demographics. All information will remain anonymous and will not be used for any other purpose than for this project	
Age	
Sex	
Ethnicity	
Highest qualification	
Type of positions applying for	
Industry/ Sector	

- I agree to participate in the above study.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw my participation at any stage.
- I understand that my interviews will be recorded.
- I understand that all information will be treated in confidence, anonymised, and destroyed at the end of the study.

SIGNED:
.....DATED:.....

(If returning electronically, please indicate 'YES' below, to indicate that returning email is proof of consent and hard-copy signature is not required).

My return of this form by email is proof of my consent (please delete as appropriate):
YES/NO

END