Beyond Knowledge Capitalism’s Happy Labour Subject

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Abstract
This article unravels the workings of happiness as integral to knowledge capitalism’s ‘emotionality of rule’ from the perspectives of two cohorts of ‘knowledge workers’: digital creatives and academics. It analyses the ways in which the study participants make work a site of personal fulfilment and happiness as they strive to become ‘happy’ labour subjects. Despite their different worklife trajectories, both cohorts appeal to the promise of happy entrepreneurial productivism. This promise attaches workers to the privileges of knowledge work in ways that downplay its costs. However, the dominance of knowledge capitalism’s happy labour subject is challenged by the backgrounded significance of work’s social benefits in their accounts. As such, this article argues that the individualised depoliticisation of contemporary ‘knowledge work’ can be challenged by re-valourising work’s social contributions.

Keywords
academics, affect, digital creatives, ‘emotionality of rule’, emotional labour, happiness, knowledge capitalism, knowledge worker, positive psychology

Introduction
Post-Fordist ‘knowledge economies’ have proliferated since the 1990s based on the view that knowledge is now the most important form of capital (Burton-Jones, 2003; Ehrenreich, 2009; Engelbrecht, 2007). These economies, enthusiastically encouraged by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007, 2011), are characterised by a close alignment of education with the economy and the expansion of a loosely defined category of ‘knowledge workers’. Although knowledge underpins all work, most scholars agree that what distinguishes ‘knowledge workers’ is their high levels of autonomy and discretion in acquiring, applying and transmitting theoretical,
abstract and creative knowledge (Hislop, 2005; Kelloway and Barling, 2000). This work
is also characterised by enthusiastic work engagement, constant innovation and creativ-
ity (Kelloway and Barling, 2000; Schaufeli, 2017).

In contrast with the assumed alienating effects of industrial capitalism’s ‘cold rational-
ity’, post-Fordist ‘knowledge work’ is associated with dispositions of self-fulfilment and
personally rewarding work (Binkley, 2018: 581). Indeed, positive psychology scholarship
and the economics of happiness emphasise the significance of a happy disposition in optim-
ising knowledge work productivity (Ehrenreich, 2009; Salas-Vallina et al., 2018). As such,
happiness is becoming ‘an explanatory variable in advanced KBEs [Knowledge-Based
Economies]’ (Engelbrecht, 2007: 260). It has already acquired the status of ‘a first-order
quantitative measurement’ that informs economic, managerial and public policy, and has
become ‘a conditio sine qua non for workers to navigate the emerging conditions and
requirements of the world of labour’ (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019: 40, 11, emphasis in origi-
nal). This article investigates happiness as an ‘emotionality of rule’ from the perspectives of
two categories of ‘knowledge workers’: digital creatives and academics (Campbell, 2010).

The influence of Anglo-American psychology and economics of happiness acceler-
ated in Ireland during the post-2008 recession when ‘neoliberal “structures of feel-
ing” [came to] seem axiomatic’ (Mulhall, 2016: 36). Based on an in-depth qualitative
study conducted during this recession in one Irish city/regional hub, this article con-
tributes to contemporary sociological debates in four key ways. First, it confirms
mounting evidence that knowledge capitalism’s emotionalities of rule extend into
wider value domains, including personal well-being and happiness (Cabanas and
Illouz, 2019; Illouz, 2019). Second, and somewhat contradictorily, it challenges asses-
sations that knowledge work subsumes all aspects of life (Gray et al., 2017; Hardt and
Negri, 2004; Morini and Fumagalli, 2010) based on evidence of backgrounded orien-
tations towards work as social mission. Third, the article addresses why these work-
ers, contra the findings of others (e.g. Gill, 2014), downplay the costs of extreme
work identification. In conclusion, it suggests that their understated orientations
towards work’s social benefits hold the potential to counter the depoliticising lure of
‘doing what you love’, and to ground collective and emancipatory labour politics.

Beginning with a review of the relevant literature on emotional work/labour and the
imperative to invest in happiness as a productive knowledge work orientation, the article
proceeds to describe the qualitative study on which it is based. The middle sections
address the work orientations of digital creative workers and academics respectively.
Attending to the similarities and differences across these cohorts, the concluding discus-
sion considers the work done by the insistent imperative to become a ‘happy’ labour
subject. It argues that although this imperative attaches workers to the privileges of
knowledge work while downplaying its costs, their under-emphasised references to
work’s social benefits open up spaces for mobilisation against the individualised depo-
liticisation of contemporary knowledge work.

Knowledge Capitalism and the Cultivation of Happy
Workers

Back in the 1980s, Hochschild (1983) launched a whole new strand of scholarship on
emotional labour. She focused on how service workers manage emotional presentation
by suppressing, exaggerating and modulating emotional expression. Because this ‘emotion work’ is exchanged for wages, Hochschild calls it emotional labour and emphasises its alienating effects. Since then many scholars have challenged Hochschild’s position arguing that emotion management can be variously directed at making work meaningful, more enjoyable, less stressful and preventing burnout (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Callahan and McCollum 2002; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). Taking a different angle, Benesch (2018: 62–63) emphasises the ‘agentive potential’ of particular emotions for worker activism.

While these scholars are concerned primarily with the conscious, cognitive and instrumental work done via the management of emotions (understood as authentic internal experience), Massumi (2002) emphasises ‘affect’, conceptualised not as the property of individuals, but as pre-discursive and pre-social forces of desire. Affect can be understood as intensities of experience emanating from and circulating in relations between bodies and environments. So happiness, although articulated as an emotion, or particular quality of experience, and defined as personal, also circulates as affect in the form of extra-subjective vitalities that emerge between bodies and inhabit particular time-spaces (Massumi, 2002: 27–28).

For Hardt and Negri (2004: 108) ‘labour that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response’, that is, ‘immaterial labour’, extends into social relations, popular culture and the production of subjectivity. Thus, affect is incorporated in knowledge economy processes to the extent that work and life become blurred (Hardt and Negri, 2004; Morini and Fumagalli, 2010). Life processes and capacities, including ‘the entire matrix of emotional dispositions that form a self’, are deemed intrinsic to contemporary capital relations and are mobilised as labour (Illouz, 2019: 740). So, while Hochschild examines the management of emotion in specific work settings, these theorists identify an ‘infusion of affective states through economic and social processes’ (Binkley, 2018: 588). From this perspective, the logic of capital has subsumed all aspects of life to the extent that it organises everything, including subjectivity.

From a different perspective, Fleming (2017: 702) argues that ‘human capital theory’, originally developed by theorists such as Becker and Schulz to refer to workers’ investment in education and training, now cultivates workers to see themselves as responsible for their own ‘human capital (including earnings and liabilities)’. Human capital is optimised by developing an instrumental relationship with emotional life. For example, forms of popular psychology, including life coaching, self-help literatures and neuroscientific insights, are mobilised to help foster confidence and well-being (Binkley, 2018). By seeking ‘to appreciate the value of the portfolio of conducts that constitutes them’, Feher (2009: 25) suggests that workers develop a speculative relationship to themselves, not so much for profit gain, but to ‘at least prevent our own depreciation’ (2009: 27). The omnipresent threat of downward mobility propels them to ‘perform a “permanent reform or revolution” of the self to avoid redundancy in a competitive job market’ (Gregg, 2018: 128).

Cabanas and Illouz (2019: 94) see human capital theory as giving way now to ‘happiness-related aspects such as personal strengths, autonomy, self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience’. The ‘[m]aking of “happy workers”’, they argue, ‘has become a first order
concern for many corporations’ in order to meet ‘the emerging economic and organisational demands of neoliberal capitalism’ (2019: 96, 91). The ‘happiness advantage’ associated with boosting productivity and a competitive edge is particularly intense in those ‘jobs in which knowledge is fundamental’ (Achor, 2011; Salas-Vallina et al., 2018: 153–154). It is not just that the work produces a happy disposition, but that such a disposition is deemed ‘an important precursor and determinant of career success’ (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019: 93). The appeal to personal happiness over income as an indicator of self-worth potentially protects against depreciation of the self. Additionally, this anti-materialist focus on subjective well-being diverts attention away from ‘the politics of redistribution making happiness . . . a valid substitute for other measures of fairness’, and providing justificatory discourses for deepening inequality (Illouz, 2019: 745).

Meanwhile new technologies, social media and ‘big data’ integrate positive emotional work orientations in neoliberal management and measurement practices to optimise worker productivity (Davies, 2015; Gregg, 2018). This is further facilitated by the saturation of everyday work and life by ‘happiness monitoring tools’, such that emotions are endlessly surveilled, measured and commercialised (Davies, 2015: 11).

Those societal conditions, including welfare state provisioning, that support well-being and autonomy are undermined by the evaluation of ‘good citizens’ in terms of their efforts to help themselves to become happy, autonomous and productive labour market participants (Binkley, 2018; Gray et al., 2017, 2020). This ‘weaponised well-being’ is imbued with ‘class-inflected assumptions about “good” and “failed” citizens’ with the latter positioned as threatening to the ‘wellbeing of the imagined nation’ (Mulhall, 2016: 30, 36). While criteria of worth may be narrowed to the responsibilised pursuit of personal happiness for the white middle classes, working-class and racialised citizen-workers are increasingly devalued via a politicised affective economy of disgust. And, like happiness, disgust is political (Tyler, 2013: 24).

Turning to the gendered dimensions of the happiness imperative, the persistent expectation that mothers are primarily responsible for their children’s happiness is now accompanied by an obligation to achieve a happy ‘work–family balance’. The (neo)liberal feminist promise of happiness by ‘balancing’ work and family (Slaughter, 2012), and the ‘invocation of happiness as a highly – if not the most highly – valued social good’, are normative expectations for white middle-class women (Rottenberg, 2014: 147). Indeed, liberal feminist cultural mantras that emphasise personal well-being over gender inequalities are proliferating. For example, Facebook CEO, Sandberg’s (2013: 154) bestselling book, Lean in, presents women ‘who are “competent professionals and happy mothers – or [. . .] happy professionals and competent mothers” as its progressive and feminist ideal’. Such mantras re-entrench knowledge capitalism’s existing classed, gendered and racialised definitions of worthwhile work and worthwhile workers (Gray et al., 2017).

This case study of white middle-class workers in a regional city area in Ireland reveals how such mantras become embedded in narratives of work. In doing so, it also highlights the competing if downplayed persistence of alternative work orientations and values. By examining how happiness as a discursive and material form (Campbell, 2010) takes on the job of proposing, supposing and sustaining positive ways of feeling about work, this study seeks out those moments in which its discursive and material workings potentially falter in the face of alternative affective values.
The Study

The pre-crash ‘knowledge economy’ model of economic development prevailed in Ireland even after the 2008 economic crash. Dubbed the ‘Smart Economy’, it was to involve ‘enhancing productivity per person by investing in human capital; [and] incentivising innovation and commercialisation’ (Government of Ireland, 2008: 33). Higher education was to play a central role by shifting ‘from [. . .] a public service ethos to focusing on creating workers for a capitalist knowledge economy’ (Grummell et al., 2009: 194). Government reports emphasised entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity and included: *Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006–2013* (Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 2011), *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy* (Government of Ireland, 2008) and the *Report of the Innovation Taskforce* (Government of Ireland, 2010). Because Dublin is the leading centre of creative and knowledge industries and the site of most studies in this field (Bayliss, 2007; Bontje and Lawton, 2013; James, 2014; Lawton et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2015), this case study is based in a regional city area. In the late 1980s, this regional city shifted its development strategy towards technological and creative industries and engaged the third level sector to facilitate incubator support. Between 2007 and 2011, there was an above average increase in those employed in ‘professional, scientific and technical activities’ in the city (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2012). And, in the five years up to 2016, ICT, Fintech and the creative sectors were among its top six areas of highest employment growth (CSO, 2017).

This article draws on a data subset of 32 in-depth qualitative interviews with digital creative start-uppers and academics (a total of 16 – eight women and eight men in each cohort) from a larger study conducted between 2009 and 2013 in this city/regional hub. Participants were recruited via fliers, e-mail list invitations and snowballing targeted at local digital creative networking groups, selected university departments, enterprise hubs and graduates of relevant university courses. Those in the ‘digital creatives’ cohort had all started their own businesses in areas such as web design, graphic design and internet marketing. To maintain some coherence within the academic sample, invitations went to those in Computer Science and Engineering and in Humanities and Social Sciences; all highly represented disciplinary areas among the digital creatives. The academic sample included seven participants from the latter and nine from the former.

Despite efforts to target a diverse population, participants were mostly white Irish. Of the 16 academics, 10 were white Irish, four were white European Economic Area (EEA) and two were white American; of the 16 digital creatives, 13 were white Irish, two white EEA and one white American. This demographic profile loosely reflects the 2011 Census in which 90.3% of those in the city/region indicated Irish nationality and 2.1% indicating ‘rest of the world’, outside EEA. Participants ranged in age from the mid-20s to the mid-50s. Although the casualisation of employment in the Irish higher education predates the austerity years in which this study was conducted (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015) and intensified following the 2008 economic crisis (Mercille and Murphy, 2017), most academic participants were full-time permanent lecturers with the exception of one woman who worked part-time and one male research assistant. As such, their employment status contrasted with the more precarious status of the digital creative participants.
Interviews, as an ‘especially useful’ method ‘for understanding how people make sense of their work and the issues they believe are important’ (Barley and Kunda, 2001: 84), were used in this study. On receipt of university ethical approval, interviews averaging one-and-a-half hours in length (in some cases two) addressed daily work/life practices, including examples of typical and atypical days, the significance of particular places, times, non-work activities, technology use, as well as reflections on career trajectories and work aspirations. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the confidentiality of participants.

At the fieldnote stage an inductive thematic analysis began by making loose observations and connections. This continued during transcription when initial themes were identified. Individual transcripts were coded and recoded following repeated readings within cohorts and across the dataset to identify key meta-themes. These themes were then reviewed by the research team to clarify and consolidate interpretations and inferences. As worklife practices were narrated in the retrospective context of the interview, they are accounted for at a temporal remove from worklife as ‘lived’. Therefore, the analysis concentrates on workers’ reported actual and desired work orientations. Orientation is understood here as habituated personal aims and priorities (Huta and Waterman, 2014: 1433). The meta-theme relating to work as the repository of potential happiness, and the centrality of a happy disposition for work engagement, are addressed below via the most illustrative accounts. The analysis assumes a discursively constituted worker-self that is formed and reformed through happiness as a contemporary ‘emotionality of rule’. It is concerned less with what emotion or happiness are and more with the work done by happiness in shaping these worklife narratives.

**Digital Creative ‘Start-Ups’: A Route to Personal Happiness?**

Salaried employment might provide pay security and organisational support, but is experienced as constraining, inflexible and unfulfilling for many digital creative start-uppers. Seamus (late 30s and single) describes moving from employment to starting his own business as a route to achieving a happy self:

> I was young, having a good time ( . . .) and I still wasn’t quite happy ( . . .) so I ( . . .) started to analyse it and wanted to work for myself, or to be my own boss ( . . .) I wanted to love my work ( . . .) I think that’s the word, passionate. I feel like I’m passionate about what I’m doing now and I wasn’t in the past, so it doesn’t feel like work ( . . .) I’m just a tech geek (laughter) and just enjoy technology (laughs) ( . . .) I’m just happier doing what I really want to do ( . . .) I do really love it.

To achieve the autonomy of self-employment and enjoy life as a ‘tech geek’, Seamus forfeited the lifestyle of a salaried employee, including owning his own house:

> I wanted to run my own business. I just didn’t feel fulfilled ( . . .) working for other people ( . . .) I decided I’m not going to spend the money on a house, I’m going to invest in business instead ( . . .) I’m not earning anything as much as what I was earning 10 years ago ( . . .) I’m not having
anything like the lifestyle (. . .) but I’m still a lot happier (. . .) I feel like (. . .) I’m really achieving things for myself and not for other people.

The 2018 ad slogan for the gig-economy platform ‘Fiverr’ springs to mind: ‘Nothing like a safe, reliable pay check. To crush your soul.’ Seamus suggests that his passion is crushed by the income security and lifestyle of employee status, while in contrast, self-employment promises autonomy and personal happiness. But there are downsides. He continues: ‘Part of the problem for people like myself is, of course, the problem that we work 24/7 a lot of the time – 365 days a year if you’re an entrepreneur (. . .) that doesn’t exactly chime with your family.’ Although a single man, Seamus speculates that ‘if you wanted to go on a break with your family, are there facilities for you to continue working so that you can be with your family in the evening?’ Seamus’ hypothetical family break would be unimaginable in the absence of connectivity and therefore work. Represented as ‘unalienated’ labour for which he wants to be available, work is indistinguishable from life. Nonetheless, tensions arise. Although ‘it’s a passion, it’s a hobby (. . .) there are times when you would like to be able to separate it from your personal life and you can’t and that is a problem’. Work is not life.

Even though work is all-consuming, it is not simply an individualised happiness project for Seamus. It is also motivated by a wider social mission:

part of the reason I’m in it (. . .) is surely because my nephew is autistic (. . .). I do want to make a living (. . .) [but] I want to (. . .) feel I can make a real difference to education, to children with special needs, to parents, to a lot of different people.

Yet, Seamus’ quest for entrepreneurial autonomy and its promise of personal happiness renders this strong familial and social motivation an afterthought in his account.

Kathy (early 30s, partner, no children) describes a similar journey towards entrepreneurship as a route to self-fulfilment and happiness:

I (. . .) steadily worked myself up into positions where I was earning quite good money (. . .) but recognising that was never [emphasis] going to make me happy (. . .) the inspiration wasn’t there. There wasn’t real passion (. . .) I just feel that if you find something you truly love, you’ll be productive at it because you can be actively engaged and interested in it, and the money will come then afterwards.

Echoing Seamus, Kathy’s ‘projective narrative’ of the happy self ‘develops as it strives to catch up with the best version of itself’ (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019: 139). Work, without passion will not be inspiring and will fall short of Kathy’s projected best version of herself as happy. She expects happiness because she is doing what she loves. And doing what makes her happy ensures productivity and optimises her worker self:

I’ve always been career driven (. . .) years ago, I (. . .) made choices between the guy I was with (. . .) [for] a long, long time and the choice was, am I really going to (. . .) try make a career of it, or am I going to do what makes you happy? And I chose the career (. . .) and that makes me sound so cold, but I know I wouldn’t have been happy any other way. And I tried it for long enough to know that if I’m not happy in my career (. . .) and have that passion for it
then I’m not going to be happy anyway so (. . .) I’m not going to rely on someone, the partner I’m with to make me happy.

It is ‘work’s intimacy’ that prevails when self-identity is invested in work (Gregg, 2011). Kathy’s current partner is self-employed and he ‘just understands (. . .) if I say, look if I can’t make that dinner I promised you I’d be at, that’s okay’. Instead, her efforts go into sustaining her intimacy with work:

After about a year I had really burnt out. I wasn’t being creative (. . .) there was no head space (. . .) to be creative you kind of have to give yourself (. . .) a complete break away (. . .) it’s a thing between doing a job and being inspired (. . .) You need something inspirational in your life (. . .) that (. . .) keeps the passion there.

When passionate work exhausts its potential to deliver inspiration, Kathy returns to her family home for a while. Family is mined for respite and the inspiration necessary to rekindle the work passion that is the precondition of productivity. Although conscious of aspects of work that do not bolster her passion, it is Kathy’s very expectation that work should be something she loves that turns it into a responsibilised self-identity project:

Doing something I love has kind of suffered in the last while (. . .) when I’m actually working on (. . .) my own stuff, stuff that I want to develop in my own name, yeah, it’s work of passion (. . .) but it has been so rare that I get that time.

Work-based ‘passion must be accompanied by an incessant self-branding process’ (Mumby, 2019: 440). When her brand and ‘reputational capital’ slip, so too does Kathy’s love of work so she has to double down on developing ‘her own stuff’, in her ‘own name’ (Jackson, 2004). She takes responsibility for maintaining the market value of her labour via the renewal of work passion and thereby her reputational capital.

‘Doing what you love’ (DWYL) is also a driving value for self-employed web designer, Sara (married, no children):

I do what I do because I love doing it and I’m passionate about doing it well. (. . .) I’m pretty sure I could land a salary job that would probably earn more money (. . .) but I wouldn’t be as happy.

Sara’s work commitment is also motivated by supporting her husband’s pursuit of work-based happiness:

My husband runs (. . .) a political website (. . .) and he’s been working on that for about 18 months. But it’s unpaid (. . .) he’s doing what he is doing because he loves doing it and I’m working 18 hours a day because I love what I do and because somebody has to be earning an income in our household (. . .). He definitely feels very strongly about working at what you love to do (. . .) he’s doing it because he loves it.

Both Sara and her husband work towards maximising their potential for happiness to the extent that happiness acts as ‘a regimen, a daily undertaking’ through which they govern
themselves as agentic enterprising subjects (Binkley, 2011: 391). Later in Sara’s account, she indicates that their work-based lifestyles would be impossible without networked connectivity, a grocery delivery service and the help of a cleaner.

Noel (late 20s and single) states: ‘you need extreme self-motivation to do it and you need to love what you’re doing’. But he has to work on himself to meet these emotional conventions: ‘I almost made a conscious decision to make myself unemployable (…) so that I could never go back.’ When the ‘emotional conventions’ of entrepreneurial work are not in order, they ‘must be brought up to consciousness for repair . . . or checkup’ (Hochschild, 1983: 58). But Noel must reckon with the downsides of self-employed entrepreneurship: ‘Although I love the flexibility of working for myself, if I mean if I want to go for lunch with someone, I can do that (…) [but] I never do because I’m always worried about work.’ When passion eludes digital creative workers, as in Noel’s case, it is often interpreted as a ‘sign of flawed will and dysfunctional psyches, and even as marks of failed biographies’ (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019: 71).

A dissonance also arises between the emotionalities of rule in digital creative start-up work and personal work orientation for some of the mothers. For example, Betty (married with two young children) recently started an online parenting magazine which she saw as a way of combining ‘work with minding my own children’. However, she struggles with the cultural imperative to love her work: ‘it’s expected [that] it’s such a passion within you, it’s almost like you’re not working, you’re doing a hobby (…) sometimes (…) I ask myself, Jesus, am I going to be writing about kids forever?’ Later, Betty highlights the work involved in appearing happy when a friend commented on her blog: ‘she said (…) “I was (…) saying to myself she can’t be this chirpy the whole time, I know her, she’s not this chirpy the whole time!” – and I said (…) “You write as if you were.”’

Like Hochschild’s (1983) flight attendants, Betty feigns ‘chirpiness’ – a form of surface acting that suppresses any less positive feelings about work and her inability to invest in its feeling rules. Failing to project a happy disposition would depreciate the value of her product.

Echoing many others, Peggy asserts that her previous employed position with a large salary was simply satisfaction with a job well done; it ‘wouldn’t have been a passion’. Since starting her own business: ‘even the people that fall in front of me are the right people (…) it’s almost like it has a life of its own’. But this is only part of the story for Peggy:

I think [I am] happy when [everything is] balanced (…). It does take work. It really does take work to keep it balanced (…) once it’s on a balance, it works really, really well for everybody not just for me and [family] but even just for work, or for the business.

The omnipresence of work has to be ‘balanced’ against Peggy’s relationship with family members and colleagues. By achieving such balance, she suggests that the business benefits too. Yet, there is a sense from her interview that these moments of ‘balance’ and their potential delivery of happiness are few and far between.

Lily’s (married with three young children) passion for work is closely linked to its social impact:
I love working and I love working creatively but I wanted, firstly to do something that was more meaningful to me personally rather than purely driven by commercial (hesitates) (. . .) motives (. . .) through the learning needs of my son (. . .) I hit upon (. . .) the perfect solution which was working on something that was meaningful but also creative.

The meaningfulness of developing a product that will meet her son’s learning needs inspires Lily’s work creativity, but this work relies on her ‘most valuable asset’ which is ‘a really, really fantastic child minder’. It was ‘heart breaking’ when her daughter was unhappy in the creche. This ‘huge emotional pressure’ is lifted by having a child minder based in her home. She now has the ‘emotional freedom to know that they’re perfectly happy (. . .) that is a huge stress release’. Via this privatised employment relationship, the child minder becomes an ‘asset’ that enables Lily’s work and family happiness.

The ideal of the happy entrepreneurial digital creative meets its limits when workers experience burnout, are ambivalent about self-employment or are unable or unwilling to align with the emotionality of the happy worker self. Its limits also surface in the anxious efforts of mothers to ‘balance’ work and family. The above accounts describe the myriad ways in which these workers attempt to free themselves from dependence and constraints in all their forms to meet the ideal of the autonomous, productive and happy worker-citizen. Yet, they also mention but give little weight to their work efforts in the service of society and benefitting others. I return to this tension in the concluding discussion.

**Academia: A Happenstance Passion or Vocation?**

The route into academia is shaped less by a personal quest for autonomy and happiness and more by a narrative of agreeable happenstance. Work for the academics is seen primarily as a passionate vocation that also enables a flexible ‘way of life’. Vocation is not understood in these accounts solely as service to others; it is also driven by ‘a sense of passion’ and the modern ‘inner drive towards self-fulfilment or personal happiness’ (Duffy and Dik, 2013: 429). This pattern is evident in Elaine’s (part-time lecturer, mid-30s with one child) account:

> It wasn’t something that I planned, but I had done an MSc here at [the university] (. . .) and they asked me to come back (. . .) and I found out I loved it (. . .) particularly the teaching and (. . .) working with students (. . .) and I love it.

Elaine finds combining work with mothering ‘challenging (. . .) frenetic (. . .) busy and high energy’. The flexibility enabled by some aspects of academic work makes this lifestyle possible:

> If I get a call from the school to say my daughter’s sick (. . .) to know that I can go home and my office can come with me (. . .) and I can still effectively work and do what’s required of me (. . . so) you know what’s been going on when you get in the next day.

Like Elaine, Cathal (mid-40s, three children) describes his journey into academia as a chance happening:
I am absolutely lucky in programming, I am just good at it (. . .) [after travelling globally working for international companies and an international bank, he] came back and did a Master’s part-time in the evening (. . .) [I] was then offered the scholarship for full-time PhD (. . .). So, I gave up this nice job with a big bank and lots of money, everything that your mother wanted stuff, to go back to academia (. . .) to be a PhD student.

As for digital creative entrepreneur, Seamus, Cathal chooses doing what he loves in academia over a higher income in international banking. The down sides of long hours are similarly justified: ‘I recognise that it’s unhealthy (. . .) but at the same time, is it unhealthy to be doing what you love all the time?’ Although Cathal’s children sometimes do their homework in a university restaurant after school, they do not interfere in his work availability: ‘if I have to walk through the corridor, I’ll see the two kids down there (. . .) doing their homework and when I am finished (. . .) we can go home’.

Jenny (late 30s, single, no children) is one of the few participants who sought out academia as a career path rather than the precarity of work as a composer:

I am a composer and there are a variety of paths a composer of new and experimental music can take, but the strongest path is to become an academic, which supports you [to] (. . .) do your experimental music within the academic domain. I’m just lucky in that I also really do enjoy working with students and I really enjoy teaching.

Academia is an all-consuming vocation for Jenny and provides opportunities for both self-expression through music and a teaching relationship with students.

I live my work. I see what I do as a vocation not a job. I do it at home, I do it in the office, even if I’m travelling (. . .) I’m constantly working. And when I’m not working on specifically class-orientated or academic work, I’m composing (. . .) That’s why I say it’s more of a vocation.

As for Cathal and many others, doing what she loves is the ‘very instrument’ of Jenny’s ‘self-making’ as a passionately engaged worker (Butler, 2015: x). Like Jenny, Gabriel (single, no children) finds it ‘very difficult’ to say when he’s working and when he’s not ‘because most of the time what you teach, it’s what you love (. . .) people say, all you get loads of holiday (. . .) but, it’s a constant engagement of your mental energy’.

Shannon (early 50s, two adult children) moved from a company role in IT when a new university opened in her Eastern European city in order to combine work and family:

They asked me to teach part-time (. . .) I started enjoying preparing lectures and (. . .) they offered me a position full time (. . .) I loved software development, but because family circumstances, so two little kids (. . .) I accepted it (. . .) I needed to get a PhD to get a permanent job, so that was a delight (. . .) it was exciting, an exciting time. I’m glad I did [it].

Despite entering the profession to facilitate family demands, Shannon now strongly identifies with work and focuses on ‘pet projects’ linked to the community. She suggests that you cannot ‘completely disconnect work from your other life (. . .). I don’t think it works.’ She sees her work as a public service – ‘a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self’ (Bailey and Madden, 2016: 55).
Kate’s (mid-30s, married, one child) journey into academia began when offered teaching hours during her Master’s programme: ‘I got a six-month contract post when somebody was on sabbatical (…) and I’ve been working since.’ As a relatively young lecturer, Kate is keen to let her students know that ‘I’m actively making efforts to teach more effectively but that I don’t always get it right’ (Kate). Like the academics participating in Byrne and MacDonagh’s (2017: 196) study of higher education in Ireland, Kate goes ‘to great lengths to prepare for lectures and teach in ways that would be most effective for students’. But it is difficult to combine these high work performance standards with mothering. For example, when her daughter became ill at the creche, this created:

a lot of extra stress in my life (…) I hadn’t had sleep for about a week and I had to tell the class, ‘I am really tired. I have had no sleep. (…) I felt they would just think I was disinterested and not motivated.

The ‘unregulated and long hours’ expected in academic work are based on the assumption that academics are ‘unencumbered by caring’ (Lynch, 2010: 63). And as Kate’s account makes clear, much gendered work goes into accommodating this pervasive assumption and expectations of an autonomous enthusiastic work orientation.

In contrast, Claus (mid-30s, single, no children) distances himself from any expectation of combining work and family demands:

if you want to have a balance in your life, work–life balance they call it (…) maybe I actually don’t want to pay attention to my family, I want to work. Is it advantage or disadvantage? Depends what priority you put on life.

This individualised expectation of an unencumbered choice of priorities can be juxtaposed with the struggle evident in the accounts of mothers above. Claus is one of those who sought out academia as a preferred career: ‘I didn’t imagine another option [than becoming an academic]. This was what I wanted to do’ (Claus).

The accounts of academic contributors echo Tokumitsu’s (2015: 5) assertion that the ‘DWYL [“do what you love”] doctrine is embedded in academia’ (p. 5). Even for mothers, it is their own work performance rather than the gendered inequalities of caring and contemporary academic life that dominate the accounts (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015; O’Connor, 2014). For others, such as Claus, Cathal, Jenny and Gabriel, the ‘constant mental energy’ and sustained enthusiasm required by academic work is lived primarily as a matter of individual choice and priority.

Only one of the accounts challenges the intensification of academic work and this is in response to the backlash against public sector workers following the 2008 economic crash. Philip (late 30s, married with two early-teenage children) echoes many of the academic accounts by stating: ‘my job is a vocation’ and emphasising his investment in doing what he loves:

if you’re not engaged by it, if you’re not enjoying it (…) if there’s even the slightest resentment in your mind about being there, you might as well just turn off the machine and walk away because unless you are totally open and totally engaged there will be no progress, there will be nothing interesting.
Yet, later in his account the tone changes. He observes:

the creeping increase in workload and productivity (…) you’re now online and dealing with emails at 10, 11 o’clock at night (…). I have reflected on that, particularly in the culture (…) where we’re being paid less for what we do (…) [the idea that] public servants (…) are not really appreciated for the work that they do (…) it has made me reflect more (…). There are times when I have specifically said, ‘no actually that email will wait until tomorrow morning’.

The idea of work as a labour of love permeates these accounts, combining personal fulfilment with values of public service through education. For mothers, the flexibility afforded by academic work is embraced. At the same time, this flexibility requires an anxious juggling of work performance and their children’s well-being. Constant work availability is justified in terms of work as a ‘labour of love’, but also on the basis that academic work is vocational. However, the blending of passionate and vocational work orientations is overtly re-evaluated in Philip’s account in response to what he sees as the recent public denigration of public service work. At a time when other-directedness and social mission are publicly discredited, it is not surprising that the individualised narrative of the happy labour subject trumps social mission across these cohorts of workers.

Concluding Discussion

Post-Fordist knowledge economies promote the ideal of personal happiness through optimisation of the work persona, primarily for ‘knowledge workers’. This happiness is not located outside work as a buffer against capitalism’s dehumanising logic, as in industrial capitalism, but in fulsome economic participation. Such idealised notions of the hyper-productive worker-citizen pursuing happiness by doing what they love dominate the accounts discussed above. As such, this case study echoes scholarship in other knowledge economies and supports the view that Ireland’s increasingly individualistic work culture valorises work as a site of happiness (Mulhall, 2016; Ramamoorthy and Flood, 2002). The ideal of the happy ‘knowledge worker’ contributes to a backgrounding of knowledge work’s social contributions and undermines the emergence of a critical labour politics in these sectors. For example, values of social mission and vocation as well as appeals to the social benefits of work are evident but downplayed. Nonetheless, these backgrounded work orientations potentially challenge values of happy entrepreneurial productivism and offer one of the few avenues towards the politicisation of knowledge capitalism’s work arrangements.

For the digital creatives, a passionate relationship to work as a source of happiness is a sign of having actively chosen the right career trajectory. In contrast, for most of the academics, coming upon academia as a site of passion is described as fortunate happenstance. Nonetheless, both see a passionate and happy work orientation as a necessary condition of productivity and self-fulfilment. Self-fulfilment and productivity are linked insofar as the pursuit of personal happiness is framed more as an aspect of personal resource maximisation than of self-authenticity. Happiness takes on the quality of a ‘work ethic’ that assumes the ability to mobilise emotional life in the service of heightened work engagement. It is presented as a key medium of agency and the cultivation of
an individualised work identity. As an ‘emotionality of rule’ (Campbell, 2010), the promise of happiness attaches these workers to their relative privilege, including the accumulation of reputational capital and customisation of working arrangements. For example, work’s flexibility in enabling life, caring and work to be creatively combined is embraced as a privilege by both cohorts. Although such personalised work projects suggest a relationship to work that is ‘outside capital’, Binkley (2018) argues that happiness provides the vehicle through which they actually carry on the work of capital. Particular emotional potentials, such as enthusiasm for work and the passionate pursuit of reputational capital, are maximised and reproduce the economic, political and cultural valorisation of individualism, freedom and creativity (Binkley, 2011).

Although Courtois and O’Keefe (2015), Gill (2014) and others highlight the progressive casualisation of academic employment to the point of mirroring the precarious working conditions of creatives, most of our academic participants had tenure. This might help explain their focus on vocational aspects of the work rather than rising precariousness in the sector. Their accounts also suggest that although entrepreneurial outcomes have become the order of the day in Irish higher education, the competitive and individualised reputational metrics of academic capitalism have not completely displaced vocational values (Byrne and MacDonagh, 2017).

Contra findings in other studies (e.g. Gill, 2014), both cohorts of workers downplay the tensions and injuries of extreme levels of work investment. Yet, they do note that the happy labour subject has to be worked at: ‘if you’re not enjoying it (…) you might as well just turn off the machine and walk away’ (Philip, academic); ‘you have to work at it’ (Noel, digital creative). Most of the mothers attempt to achieve both work and family happiness and this ‘really does take work’ (Peggy, digital creative). When the dominant narrative is of the happy worker-citizen and of work as a labour of love, to dwell on the personal costs would be to question the very grounds of this personalised attachment to work. By failing to ‘adopt a positive outlook or behaviours alleged conducive to happiness’, these workers would also risk being positioned ‘as obstructive, detrimental to productivity or workplace morale’ (Frawley, 2015: 64). They would be breaking the feeling rules of knowledge capitalism.

The invitation to competitively develop personal potential through work privileges personal autonomy and happiness over work’s contribution towards the welfare of others. A focus on work’s social benefits is in danger of interpretation as a failure of personal freedom (Binkley, 2011). So, the entrepreneurial drive to maximise personal freedom and emotional life, so central to knowledge workers’ human capital, is always potentially devalued by recognition of dependency and social membership. This is most evident in the accounts of mothers who struggle to sustain their own happy self-enterprising work orientations which also rely on ensuring the happiness of their children and families. Wilson and Yochim (2015: 677) suggest that this work perpetuates these mothers’ deep attachments ‘to “lives that just don’t work” […] even as they claim newfound freedoms and happiness realized through their always-increasing labours’. Their happy worker selves are constantly imperilled by the relentless tweaking of ‘personalized strategies to heighten their capacities in the service of optimizing their families’ prospects for happiness’ (Wilson and Yochim, 2015: 676).
In this case study, caring is never described as a happy endeavour. Rather it is articulated as a gendered responsibility that is mostly burdensome. While outsourcing it potentially enables the emotional freedom to sustain the happy worker/mother self, this must be carefully managed to ensure the children’s happiness. The work of childcare itself is never described as promising happiness, or as offering a career trajectory. Work arrangements under knowledge capitalism reward highly educated labour sectors by promoting the promise of autonomy and happiness ‘to only a privileged few’ (Dawson, 2005: 228). They divide work ‘into two opposing classes: that which is lovable (creative, intellectual, socially prestigious) and that which is not (repetitive, unintellectual, undistinguished)’ (Tokumitsu, 2015: 4). Those located outside the proper worker self, such as carers, are excluded from the potential to accrue and attach value to themselves (Skeggs, 2014).

Although a happy orientation might be expected in marginalised sectors, a trajectory of personalised self-fulfilment through the work is not. Contemporary capitalist emotionalities of rule publicly valorise happy work orientations especially for those in the ‘knowledge sectors’ discussed above. These emotionalities of rule are implicated, therefore in (re)formations of class, gender and racial categories. The beneficiaries must constantly prove and appreciate their entitlement and classed privileges. Work’s downsides, when framed as personal failings, are privatised, personalised and depoliticised. To speak of them would be to contribute to one’s own devaluation and diminish one’s labour value. Cronin (2015) suggests that in Ireland (as in other advanced economies), governance through happiness involves substituting therapeutic responses for the political and economic causes of rising inequalities, including overwork for some and underwork for others.

Tensions between work as vocation and passionate project surface in the academics’ accounts, while the threat of potential career failure haunts the passionate work attachment of many digital creatives. Gill (2014: 25) argues that to mobilise labour politics in these sectors, a ‘psychosocial understanding’ of the ways in which power operates through these ‘new labouring subjectivities’ is required. However, echoing Cronin, I think this tactic potentially reinforces the therapeutic and depoliticising effects of contemporary emotionalities of rule, including the promise of flexibility, self-fulfilment and personal happiness.

Instead, this case study points towards evidence of knowledge work as a social mission (ranging from setting up a business to meet the needs of children with special needs to providing a positive academic learning experience for students) and how this downplayed work orientation might act as a potential starting point for challenging the depoliticisation of knowledge work. Although work as social mission is actively backgrounded in contemporary ‘more than capitalist [knowledge] economies’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006), this work orientation could be mined for a new labour agenda. Even if overshadowed by imperatives of the happy and productive worker self, the view that all values can be reduced to value (Skeggs, 2014) is countered at those moments when social mission is appealed to. We might ask, for example, how orientations towards work as a social project, public contribution or social mission, might be publicly revalorised. How might the impulse towards academic and creative work as social contribution and public service form a basis for forging a critical politics of labour? Instead of getting caught up in reacting to contemporary deployments of happiness as an ‘emotionality of rule’, and its role
in attaching knowledge workers to their relative privilege, an emancipatory project based on work’s social benefits potentially shifts the politics of labour in knowledge economies onto more collective and emancipatory grounds.

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Notes

1. The overall data set totalled 56 participants, including ICT managers and regional development agency actors.
2. Data were also collected via shadowing, time-space diaries and social network platform mapping.

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