The Affective Life of Neoliberalism: Constructing (Un)Reasonableness on Mumsnet

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Introduction

In this paper we make an argument for taking seriously the affective life of neoliberalism, building from a number of circulating concepts, including the idea of affective atmospheres (Gregg 2018), public moods (Silva 2013; Forkert 2018), and neoliberal feeling rules (Kanai 2019). Earlier work has pointed to the need to take seriously the way in which neoliberalism shapes subjectivity through a plethora of forms of intimate governance (e.g. Brown 2015; Scharff 2016; Barker et al 2018). Here we argue that such governance also operates at the level of emotions and feelings, shaping what is deemed appropriate and even intelligible. In order to explore this concretely, we choose as an empirical example a well-known topic/motif on the hugely popular British parenting website, Mumsnet, in which women post with the question: Am I Being Unreasonable? The question has become so common that it has long since become a widely circulating acronym – AIBU – that has a life well beyond Mumsnet. Here we aim to explore how AIBU is mobilised specifically in relation to *felt inequalities* in heterosexual relationships, particularly those involving parenting, arguing that it is a key site for the expression and governance of feelings, and crucial for exploring the entanglement of the personal and the political.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first, we consider understandings of neoliberalism, with a particular focus upon its everydayness, and its role in governing subjectivity. Next, we consider recent writing on motherhood, digital media and Mumsnet. Finally, we turn to our case study to highlight the importance of extending theorisations of neoliberalism to include its affective dimensions. As we will show through our analysis of AIBU posts, these centre on quotidian issues about care and labour – who takes responsibility for cleaning or nappy-changing, who gets up at night, who makes packed lunches, etc – but they are also suffused with powerful emotions of hurt, disappointment and anger, which is usually expressed by women about their male partner. We will argue that ideas of (un)reasonableness are closely tied to questions of the appropriateness and legitimacy of such feelings and as such are a particularly interesting site for exploring whether and in what ways these feelings are made intelligible. In what ways do these posts operate as forms of intimate governance? Do they open up or close down the possibility to make connections between private frustration and personal suffering and a wider analysis of (gendered, heterosexualised) power relations? Does the question itself represent a 'line of flight' from the dominance of neoliberal feeling rules? Or is 'reasonableness' part of the cage of neoliberal governmentality?

The psychic and affective life of neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is conventionally understood as a macro-political and economic rationality characterised by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back of the state from areas of social and welfare provision, alongside the intensification of other means to surveill and control populations – often through seemingly more neutral forms of audit or measurement in which power is obfuscated. It is important to note that neoliberalism materialises differently in different times and places (Ong 2006; Peck & Tickell 2002) while also recognising that it enrols whole populations into a world order in which "some lives, if not whole groups, are seen as disposable and redundant" (Giroux 2008, p.594). Central to neoliberal rationality is the dissemination of "the model of the market to all domains and activities" to configure "human

beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus"* (Brown 2015, p.31; see also Gilbert 2013, Hall et al 2013). The notion is highly contested both empirically and analytically, with some arguing that it is so broad as to be meaningless – what is *not* neoliberal? asked John Clarke back in 2008 – and others, by contrast, perplexed by its ability to *endure*: to withstand war, global financial crisis and widespread opposition (Crouch 2011; Mirowski 2014). Nevertheless, "post-neoliberalism" is already becoming much debated (Davies & Gane, forthcoming).

In our view, pronouncements of the end or death of neoliberalism are premature. While recognising significant shifts – such as the nationalism of President Trump's "America First" policy and imposition of tariffs on imports – as challenges to notions of the "free market" that have hitherto been central to economic framings of neoliberalism, our interest here is the way that neoliberal ideas have moved *beyond* the sphere of economic discourse and have come to saturate *everyday life*. We suggest they constitute a kind of common sense that shapes the way we live, think and feel about ourselves and each other. Underpinned by ideas of choice, entrepreneurialism, competition and meritocracy, neoliberalism has insinuated itself into "the nooks and crannies of everyday life" (Littler 2018 p.2) to become a hegemonic, quotidian sensibility: the "new normal". Neoliberalism's reach in this everyday sense remains profound, calling into being subjects who are rational, calculating, and self-motivating; subjects who will make sense of their lives through discourses of freedom, responsibility and choice – no matter how constrained they may be (e.g., by poverty or racism).

An important body of work of research in media and cultural studies has contributed to this understanding of neoliberalism, showing how it is located in attempts to remodel and makeover subjectivity. Many media have been involved in this: constructing the individual as an entrepreneurial and responsibilised subject invested in self-transformation (see, e.g. Ouellette and Hay 2008). Research looking at self-help, reality game shows, makeover television and many other genres facilitates our understanding of the media's role in promoting and disseminating neoliberalism (Couldry & Littler 2011; Ouellette 2016; Wilson 2018). Nikolas Rose (2006) argues that lifestyle media shapes neoliberal citizens "who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves, master themselves, care for themselves" (p.150). Early examples of this tradition can be found in feminist cultural studies, such as Estella Ticknell's accounts of the 'magical femininities' that whisk away 'any sort of discussion of the obstacles in the way of aspiring female entrepreneurs' in the 'enterprise fictions' of popular novels; and Janet Newman's account of the enterprising subjectivities that were called into being by advice manuals for working women of the late 1980s, encouraging them to believe that 'if only women work hard enough and manage well enough they can have it all (or nearly)' (Newman 1991: 250; Tincknell 1991: 272).

A second research tradition that helps us think about everyday neoliberalism is focused on neoliberalism's operation at a psychological level – what Wendy Brown calls its 'stealth revolution' across the entire demos, and Lois McNay (2009) refers to as the 'economisation of subjectivity'. More recently, Christina Scharff's work (2016) offers a rich empirical study of neoliberalism as a set of everyday taken-for-granted ideas, beliefs, and discourses that come to make up the subjective landscape of the young female classical musicians she interviewed, highlighting ten distinctive features of the 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' that shaped their mindset. These included referring to the self as a business to be worked on and optimised; being constantly active in the pursuit of their goals; embracing risks; repudiating or minimising injuries or difficulties; and a belief that they had to 'stay positive' whatever happened. What is

striking is the extent to which these ways of talking about themselves were widely shared, profoundly individualised and also – crucially – psychologised.

This stress on the psychological has also been developed in recent work on the 'confidence cult' or self-esteem industry. A number of authors have pointed to the vast proliferation in the early 20th century of injunctions to women to develop self-esteem, self-confidence and body love (Banet-Weiser 2015; Favaro 2017; Gill & Orgad 2015). Advertising, workplaces, global international development programmes, magazines and self-help apps are just some of the sites which enjoin women to 'lean in', 'fake it til you make it', adopt confident 'power poses', and believe that 'confidence is the new sexy' – underscored by the mantra that lack of self-belief rather than the structural inequalities of neoliberal capitalism is what is holding women back.

What this work highlights is that neoliberalism increasingly operates through a *psychological register*. However, while others have stressed the *rational* and *calculating* nature of neoliberal subjectivity, we want to add a different dimension: an interest in the affective life of neoliberalism. This might encompass the qualities and dispositions required to thrive in the current moment – what Anna Bull and Kim Allen (2018) call the "turn to character" in which confidence, resilience and creativity are promoted. A focus upon "positive mental attitude" is increasingly central to contemporary culture. Indeed, as Barbara Ehrenreich has argued "positive thinking… has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy", with Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn demonstrating the precise ways in which this is imposed in the British welfare system, enacting a new form of "deserving poor" who are compelled to be "positive" (Friedli and Stearn 2015). In turn, Jo Littler shows how meritocracy as a key undergirding of neoliberalism works not simply through beliefs or practices but also 'meritocratic feeling' (Littler 2018).

If neoliberal culture requires subjects who work on their characters and psychic dispositions, then, it also works by attempting to shape what and how people are enabled to *feel* – and how their emotional states should be displayed. This is part of a wider entanglement between neoliberal capitalism and feelings that Eva Illouz (2007) has dubbed "emotional capitalism". Others have explored the way that a 'psy complex' (Rose 2006), 'state of esteem' (Cruikshank 1993), 'happiness industry' (Davies 2015) or 'wellness syndrome' (Cederstrom and Spicer 2015) are implicated in contemporary neoliberalism. Elaine Swan (2008) sees the emotionalization of society as connected to both the rise of therapeutic cultures and the intensification of soft capitalism – something we see as intimately tied up with neoliberalism's increasing engagement with feelings. In research on social media that is particularly pertinent to the analysis presented in this chapter, Akane Kanai (2019) discusses the notion of "neoliberal feeling rules" as a way of capturing how young women are allowed to 'be' and to 'feel'. In the tumblr posts she analyses they are incited to deal with difficulties through "humorous, upbeat quips" and in which pain and struggle must be rendered into 'safe, funny, "girl-friendly" anecdotes'. We contend that in such ways neoliberalism not only shapes culture, conduct, and psychic life, but also produces a distinctive 'structure of feeling' (Williams 2001 [1961]) in which people are called on to disavow a whole range of experiences and emotions – including insecurity, neediness, anger and complaint.

Thus far we have indicated some of the ways in which neoliberalism shapes the subjective and emotional life of *individuals*, influencing ways of being and feeling as well as rationalities. In addition, we are interested in how neoliberalism acts upon broader cultures and structures of feeling, producing 'public moods' and 'atmospheres' that are intersubjective and widely shared. An emerging body of research reflects on such questions, theorising affect as social

(Seyfert 2012), shared (Berlant 2011) or public – for example, regarding activism or resistance against sexual harassment as 'dissident acts' rooted in 'public feelings' (Blackman, Gunaratnam & Turner 2018). Sara Ahmed's work asks what emotions *do*, exploring how they 'circulate between bodies' and may 'stick' to some objects and slide over others (Ahmed, 2004). In turn, Imogen Tyler analyses how processes of 'social abjection' operate by mobilising affects such as anger or disgust towards particular groups (Tyler 2013). And on a broader scale still, Kirsten Forkert (2018, p.9) argues that we must see austerity not only as a set of punitive economic measures, but also as a 'public mood' made up of 'long-held prejudices, resentments, moral panics, cultural memories and received ideas'. Within a particular (national) context these can have such a 'strong cultural familiarity that they just instinctively "feel right"' as ways of judging ourselves and others.

All these ideas, we suggest, offer rich resources for thinking about neoliberalism not just as a political or economic phenomenon, but as embedded in everyday living, in our subjectivity and our feelings. It is to the psychic and affective life of neoliberalism in relation to motherhood that we turn next.

Neoliberalism and motherhood

Neoliberal culture has simultaneously found ways to 'work through' maternal subjectivities whilst bringing new and particular pressures to bear on motherhood.

Conventionally gendered patterns of work and family life in their most stereotypical, mid-twentieth century, Fordist, white middle-class form had consisted of the male breadwinner and female caregiver, modulating the Victorian ideal of separately gendered spheres into that of the 'family wage' (Fraser 2016). Second wave feminism offered a seismic challenge to this social order, demanding better and more egalitarian conditions for women at work and at home. Whilst it was multifaceted, containing many different (e.g. radical and liberal) strands, the drive of socialist feminism wanted to 'transform the world so that both men and women could together find our place in the sun', as Lynne Segal puts it: to include both men and women in the public workplace, shorten the working week, and to enable both men and women to become equal caregivers and caretakers of children (Segal 2018; Rowbotham, Segal, Wainwright 1979). This ideal is what Nancy Fraser describes as the 'universal caregiver' model of social and economic reproduction (2016).

With the advent of neoliberal capitalism from the late 1980s, the dominant ideal did indeed become that of the 'two earner family' (Fraser 2016). But instead of a shortened working week and sufficient support structures, neoliberal politics both ripped back systems of welfare support (such as day-care funding and child benefit) – facilitating the privatisation of state structures (e.g. healthcare, water, gas and housing) and making the cost of living far more expensive – and introduced policies of 'liberalisation', which make work far more precarious, so that families are now 'living and working in contingency' (Adkins and Dever 2015). Whilst 'externalising care-work onto families and communities', then, neoliberalism has 'simultaneously diminished their capacity to perform it' (Fraser 2016, p.104).

Combined, these effects have spawned a contemporary 'crisis in social reproduction', one which is differently felt and experienced depending on social location, class and ethnicity. Rich and privileged mothers at the 'top end' of the social scale are frequently held up as ideals to aspire to, through what Angela McRobbie calls the 'pathology of the perfect' (McRobbie 2015). Images of 'yummy mummies' have raised the bar on motherhood as lifestyle option

(Littler 2013) and overwhelmingly present motherhood as a predominantly individualised project. Noting that in Ivanka Trump's book, *Women Who Work* (2017), the nanny appears only once, for instance, Catherine Rottenberg observes how 'narratives of the outsourcing of care are almost completely elided from contemporary mainstream or popular narratives about women, work and family' (Rottenberg 2018, p.165). The romanticisation, re-valorisation and responsibilisation of 'stay at home mothers' has been expansively analysed by Shani Orgad (Orgad 2019) in relation to the 'mommy wars', which built from the 1990s in US media and public discourse in particular, in which working women and stay at home mothers were pitted against each other (Douglas and Michaels 2004).

The current neoliberal settlement therefore either incites 'ideal' mothers to stay at home under what Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2014) call the 'domestic retreatism' model, or more often, to 'lean in' to the norms of the male workplace, as the notorious title of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) book instructed. For Rottenberg, Sheryl Sandberg and Ivanka Trump typify the 'rise of neoliberal feminism and the intensifying and glaring gap between a handful of elite women's success stories and the 99 per cent on the other' (Rottenberg 2018, p.166). For this reason, they have been lambasted by feminist activists because they promote 'individual women's success over social and collective justice while defining success in terms that merely serve to buttress the interests of the male establishment' (Rottenberg 2018, p.166; see also Foster 2016).

Such discourse also indicates how women are still – and far from the second wave socialist feminist imaginary – doing the majority of the domestic labour even whilst leaning in to the workplace. Whilst the extent of what Arlie Hochschild once termed the 'second shift' (of domestic labour when arriving home after paid work) is variable and contested, the recent popularity of a comic strip about the 'mental load' of motherhood and debates on 'the chore wars' indicate that mothers are overwhelmingly positioned in neoliberal culture as the 'foundation parent' (Asher 2011; Emma 2017; Hochschild 2012 [1989]; Jensen in Littler and Winch 2016).

These increased burdens on motherhood across the social scale are intensified by the political and social pressures 'responsibilising' parenthood. In her book, *Parenting the Crisis*, Tracey Jensen tracks the rise of 'parent blame' as structurally concomitant with neoliberal policies dismantling welfare state provision. As she writes, parent blame, and in particular 'mother-blaming', becomes under neoliberalism 'a stigmatising repository for social ills' (Jensen 2018, p.19). Working-class parents are, in other words, subject not only to punitive policies, but vicious moralising discourses blaming solely them for their own poverty and struggle. As Laura Briggs puts it, today 'all politics has become reproductive politics', and it is in the sites of these moralising debates scapegoating the poor, as well as black 'welfare queens' and single parents, that we can understand how neoliberal politics have gained traction (Briggs 2018).

All mothers living under a climate of neoliberal cuts and precarity are incited to feel the pressure of responsibilisation for the 'project' of parenthood. 'Failing' (i.e. less privileged) mothers are incited to feel shame; mothers who might have more resources to get out of this predicament are also vigorously incited into harder work and to adopt a morally-inflected enthusiasm to manage project parenthood. In *Mothering through Precarity*, Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim use their ethnography of women in the 'post-industrial recessionary rust belt' to focus on how mothers' daily lives and emotions are channelled into compensating for neoliberal precarity as well as acting as a conduit for its insistence on individualised entrepreneurialism. They show how both working and middle-class women are encouraged to

optimise their way through precarious circumstances, and a key sphere through which they do this is through '*the digital mundane'*. For mothers, the digital mundane is what they term a 'mamasphere' of churning, always-on content: a network of networks, a contradictory web of advice, encouragement, inspiration and admonishment (Wilson and Yochim 2018, p.16).

As a British site, Mumsnet does not feature in *Mothering Through Precarity*, although many of its contours are recognisable. Shifting the focus to the UK and to our case study, we hold that Mumsnet can also be conceived as a resource and even a foundation to navigate the pressures and burdens that mothers face. The following empirical section traces some of the digital-affective engagements of Mumsnet users — Mumsnetters — by focusing on one of the most notorious forums on the site in which women pose the question 'Am I being unreasonable?'.

Analysing neoliberal (un)reasonableness on Mumsnet

Mumsnet is Britain's most popular parenting website with more than 12 million reported site visitors per month, hosting one of the most active mothering communities in the UK. While online mothering forums are well-known to enable the sharing of parenting support and advice (for example, Madge and O'Connor 2004; Moravec 2011), Mumsnet takes up a distinct position in the virtual parenting sphere. Existing research has highlighted that discussions on Mumsnet transcend parenting-related issues, as the site also generates intense and notably affect-laden debate around general issues. Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson's (2013) and Pedersen and Simon Burnett's (2018) work has drawn attention to the hedonic user interest in entertainment derived from witty and at times aggressive discussion, and the splenetic, argumentative and polarised posting style occurring on Mumsnet. Tracey Jensen has noted that the dominant structure of feeling around Mumsnet's parenting pedagogy and advice is 'soaked with affective antagonism', illustrating 'the imperative to morally author oneself as competent within a climate of doubt and uncertainty' (Jensen 2018, pp. 45-46; 21). Similarly, researchers have explored bursts of maternal anger that challenge constructions of the 'good mother' ideal (Pedersen 2016; Pedersen and Lupton 2018) as well as the workings of humour and play as part of an 'affectively oriented style' that enables women to take up the 'good mother' position in ways that are 'both normative *and* transformative' (Mackenzie 2017, p.14).

These particularly emotionalised aspects of the Mumsnet forum, we argue, come especially to the fore on one of the most liked sub-forums on Mumsnet, where users posting ask Am I Being Unreasonable?, condensed to AIBU. Frequently generating up to 1,000 responding posts within short time periods, it is here that posters and visitors to the AIBU threads seek other users' opinions on a variety of issues. AIBU originates from Mumsnet, but has gained traction on other parenting forums such as the UK BabyCentre, Mumsnet's ever-present rival site Netmums, and in the blogosphere. As David Giles points out in his microanalysis of the linguistic characteristics of one AIBU thread, AIBU is a valuable site for research as it 'requires members to engage directly with one of the most important tasks of online communities: establishing normative values' that enable users 'to set the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable within the community' (2016, p.488).

In the following section, we expand this endeavour in relation to gender and neoliberalism

(rather than Giles's concern with linguistic communication and interaction) by analysing some of the affective dimensions of AIBU posts. Our analysis revolves around the ways in which AIBU is mobilised as a means to gauge the appropriateness and legitimacy of feelings that mothers are incited to suppress, as these feelings respond to pressures that, according to the current neoliberal formation, should be resolved through self-reliance, personal responsibility for 'good' choices and, crucially, a 'positive mental attitude'. Emotions such as anger, frustration, annoyance and irritation, pertaining to the everyday struggles some mothers encounter, are often suppressed and rendered ineligible – 'muted' in Shani Orgad's (2019) powerful terminology. Yet, as we argue, AIBU may carve out a space for the expression and sharing of these feelings.

We therefore explore the extent to which AIBU can serve as a platform for the validation of feelings that might enable users to go beyond the personal and 'to feel and act in solidarity with each other', as Wilson and Yochim (2017, p.29) put it. The data corpus consists of 143 posts, which were posted to the AIBU talk board to 11 different threads (online discussions including an initial post and any replies to it by various users) between March and June 2018. The posts were selected through a process of purposive sampling based on key words including 'work-life (balance)', 'housework', and 'work', but also stemmed words and variants. Existing research suggests that Mumsnet is overwhelmingly used by self-identified females (Mumsnet 2009; Mackenzie 2017; Pedersen and Smithson 2013); however, the anonymous nature of this online environment allows users to post under a chosen pseudonym that does not necessarily indicate a particular gender. While usernames are not revealed when we quote from the forum contributions, grammar and spelling of the original posts are maintained.

Am I being unreasonable to feel undervalued and be outraged?

One of the most notable features of the AIBU forum is the extent of complaint, struggle and suffering articulated with regards to navigating the manifold, day-to-day labours involved in – predominantly heterosexual -family and work life. Numerous threads, titled for instance 'AIBU to feel undervalued?', '[AIBU] To say "ENOUGH!"', '[AIBU] To want a wife?' or '[AIBU] To be fed up with my husband?', are concerned with the deeply gendered dimensions of 'project' parenthood and the everyday 'mental load' associated with motherhood. Accordingly, many mothers recount that they 'do the lion's share' of domestic labour and 'pick up the home slack', frequently expressing the wish that their male partners would 'step up' and 'pull their weight'.

Addressing uneven responsibilities for emotional labour, chores and childrearing, various posters use the AIBU forum to seek confirmation of feelings of frustration in being positioned as the primary caregiver and domestic organiser. For example, one opening poster, who is annoyed that her husband 'never puts family first', states 'I thought I would test the water with you good people to confirm that I am not, in fact, going bonkers, and that my standpoint is reasonable!'. Mumsnet operates as a barometer for feelings that allows one to gather advice on having the 'right emotions': 'Am I right in feeling like this'?; 'I really wanted to see how MNetters [Mumsnetters] would feel about it.' Aiming at gauging a degree of consensus among the community of Mumsnetters, AIBU posters enquire about the appropriateness of their feeling states — is it admissible to have these feelings, is it 'reasonable' to feel this way?

'What is the general opinion on this? Should I be outraged?'; 'Please tell me this is not normal and I'm not overreacting?' Similarly, various posts show the capacity of the forum to let off steam and vent, but also indicate the banal routine of posting that mark it as a daily component of users' lives. As one poster puts it: 'Sorry folks, second post of the day. Having a slightly stressful one!'

By posting on the AIBU forum, many women seek recognition and validation for the multiple labours they perform on a daily basis, and related feelings of exhaustion, tiredness, irritation and burgeoning anger towards their male partners. For example, a poster who started a thread entitled '[AIBU] to want a wife?' lists a whole range of mundane labours that she feels are not reciprocated by her spouse, spanning the planning of meals, doing the laundry, filling the car with petrol, etc. Likewise, another poster announces, 'Ladies, I think I might be on the verge of having a mini-rebellion' by planning to put an end to organising her husband's social family events on top of juggling a job and chores: 'AIBU to say "Enough is enough!" I will continue to try to balance his hours/wage with mine by doing more than a 50% share of the housework, but if he wants to do these extra events, then it's up to him to take on 100% of the work associated therewith?' Other users emphasise the value of enjoying life beyond (house)work: 'I think the last thing I would want when I am in the care home that someone mentioned is to think I spent my life tidying up after another adult. I would weep if that was my life.' 'I am tired of constantly trying to keep on top of the mess he makes. … I have stuff I want to do with my life that isn't working full-time or cleaning.'

While Pedersen and Smithson (2013, p.104) have highlighted the significance of sharing '*real* support and advice' instead of '"fluffy" sympathy' on Mumsnet's discussion forum, in regard to the AIBU sub-forum this observation must be extended to include what Rachel Thomson et al. (2011, p.146) call 'combustible commentary'. The following extracts illustrate this call for, and expectation of, utterly honest feedback and heated debate: 'Would be interested to hear the MN [Mumsnet] view on this. Get your flame throwers ready!' '[I] knew you'd give it to me straight here.' 'I guess that's why I've posted in AIBU as I know I'll get a kicking'.

AIBU also plays a role in nurturing collective feelings of anger, rage and even resistance that can be located on the meso level of the group of posting forum users. Dissatisfaction, irritation and frustration about the complexities of feeling responsible for managing multiple workloads and putting up with gendered divisions of labour under the economically precarious conditions of neoliberal capitalism can turn into eruptions of raging anger in those cases where posters describe their subsistence being threatened through inconsiderate behaviour on the side of the partner who hampers any efforts to 'get by'. In many of these instances, the community of responding posters connects emotionally to assert the reasonableness of feeling 'ragey', offering a glimpse at affective solidarities in the digital 'mamasphere'.

For example, the opening poster of a thread titled 'AIBU to wish he'd stop moaning?' describes a scenario where economic pressures arising from precarious work lead to financial struggles and swingeing cutbacks that affect all family members. The posting mother reports feeling responsible to manage these new insecurities ('it's me that has to take the hit'), but at the same time expresses annoyance at her partner for not feeling equally responsible to cope with the heightened difficulties: 'my life is about to become extremely difficult, im just

trying to get on with it but he's whining about his gaming subscriptions … for fu**s sake you'd think I'd drop kicked him in the face!' Many responding posters provide affirmation and endorsement of the poster's feelings that culminate in outbursts of fury at the poster's partner. Despite the fact that the contributors do not know each other beyond what is being written on the (anonymous) forum, the opening poster's account instigates responders to put themselves in the affective position of the advice seeker, amplifying the explosive emotions: 'I don't know you. I have never met you. But I am actually, f***ing seething angry on your behalf and I feel violent towards your partner for doing this to you'. 'YANBU [you are not being unreasonable] at all! I'd be bloody fuming with him.'

Conclusion: YANBU

In this chapter we have made an argument for considering neoliberalism as a psychological technology, and one intimately involved in modelling and policing the qualities, dispositions and feelings that are deemed appropriate for contemporary society. The emerging body of research we have discussed on the moods, atmospheres and affective tone of neoliberalism highlights an emphasis upon positively taking individual responsibility for dealing with difficult feelings and situations. Here, though, we have examined recent posts to the AIBU forum on Mumsnet to highlight a more ambiguous and ambivalent situation. We have shown that while the site is certainly involved in 'affect policing' and in setting norms, it is also a place of solidarity that may at times redraw the boundaries around what it is 'appropriate' to feel. Although the UK mamasphere often incites its participants to be 'good' emotional neoliberal subjects, it also demonstrates manifest rage at inequalities of gender and precarity. In Mumsnet's AIBU threads, the sharing of those affects weaved into online talk about ordinary, yet grave, predicaments plays an important role in redrawing some of the boundaries of what mothers are allowed and, crucially, *enable* each other to feel. The affective support given and received, we hold, makes AIBU an outlet for emotions deemed inappropriate that goes beyond private utterances of frustration, contributing to validate mothers' reasonableness at being outraged. While not quite connecting personal frustrations and rage to a political critique of gender injustice, it may nevertheless offer support in ways that are emotionally empowering for women declaring loud and clear NO YANBU to feel like this.

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