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If everyone’s going for the same jobs as long as you’re a little bit better than them it doesn’t matter where they’re from: Banal capitalism in managing employment status during the financial crisis in the UK.

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Abstract

Discursive social psychologists have examined the centrality of ideology in our lives. In particular, they have pointed to the ways in which we construct, orient to and enact specific ideologies in making sense of the wider world and happenings in the world. Prominently, researchers have shown that these processes happen in rather banal ways. Here we examine one instance of such construction, orientation and enactment of ideology. We examine interview accounts with those looking for work in the UK during the recent financial crisis (2008-2011). Using discourse analysis we show that participants make sense of the context, their employability status and prospects for employment through banal versions of how-things-are. In particular we show that participants orient to (1) jobs as simply present, (2) effort as the main criterion for finding work and (3) competition for work as readily observable. In so doing participants construct, orient to and enact a banal capitalistic worldview in making sense of their employment concerns. These findings echo other studies in discursive social psychology, which similarly point to the everyday enactment of ideologies. The implications of such findings on financial crisis and its relations are discussed.
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Social psychologists, in particular, discursive social psychologists (Billig, 1995a; Edley & Wetherell, 1996; Gibson, 2009; van Dijk, 2000; Wetherell, 2003b) have examined issues of ideology in the form of offering insights into how such ideology gets its life in specific practices or takes the form of ‘practiced ideology’ (Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987, p. 60). In many ways, this approach reflects the ‘turn to language’ in social psychology that focuses solely on empirical studies of situated discursive phenomenon (Gergen, 1988; Potter, 1996).

**Discursive research on everyday enactments of ideology**

Billig (1995) shows how nationalism is produced in situated everyday discursive acts, such as the consistently constant use of deictic referents like ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘here’ in news stories and other communications. He argues that these practices routinely remind us that we belong or do not belong to a particular nation. Paradoxically, however, owing to their constant presence they remain unnoticed. Billig calls this ‘banal nationalism’ for its mundane, everyday character that is just taken-for-granted (however see: Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997; Skey, 2009 for a critique).

Taking a similar approach, Gibson (2009) shows how employment related ideologies about ‘worker’ and indeed about ‘citizens’ are worked up and used by posters on a news website. He shows that participants employ an *effortfulness* repertoire, meaning, treating ‘making an effort’ (p. 404) as central to finding work, in deliberating over legitimate entitlement for employment, support from government and good citizenship. Indeed, such an idea on employment was used in other contexts as well. Augoustinos, Tuffin and Every (2005) showed that their sample of white undergraduate students in Australia justified opposition to affirmative action for Aborigines by
invoking liberal-egalitarian values of merit and equality for all. Participants, in this study treated effort, merit or hard work as the only criterion to assess employability. McVittie, McKinlay and Widdicombe (2003) show that similar repertoires are at work in managing implications that organizations discriminate against older workers. These studies show that situated accounts enact, constitute and construct specific ideologies.

One of the earliest studies in discourse analysis (Wetherell et al., 1987), examined how final year university students discussed their employment chances. The researchers argue that these discussions embedded an ideological affinity with the liberal-egalitarian principles of equality for all, while acknowledging practical difficulties with the implementation of such. In an analysis of similar discussions by participants from a similar cohort, Moreau and Leathwood (2006) argue that such an ideology emphasizes a focus on the individual looking for work, while overlooking wider social inequalities (also see Cole, 2007b). The focus on individual attributes reflects a broader change in the society’s values and orientations to work, which value employment or rather devalue unemployment for its limited possibilities to allow consumerism (Cole, 2007a). Tomlinson (2007) shows that graduates looking for work routinely construct employability-related identities for themselves. At times, however, these identities may take problematic contours due to perceived labour market attributes (Tomlinson, 2008), such as those of favouring graduates with additional career management qualities (Bridgositck, 2009). Boden and Nedeva (2010) argue that such aspects of graduate employment reflect state interventions in labour markets. These interventions favour particular sorts of universities, graduates and practices that enhance social inequalities and injustices.

These prevalent discourses around employability also point at the manufacturing of particular sorts of citizens (Rose, 1999), such as those who work hard and participate in paid work.
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(Gibson, 2009). The practices around employability are embedded in, reflect and produce particular sorts of ideologies. Indeed, discourse analysts emphasise the constituting and constructing (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996) aspect of discourse in accomplishing specific situated actions. Here, we examine discursive practices of those looking for work. In particular, we examine how those looking for work orient to the context and their efforts in finding work. To do so we offer a discursive analysis of interviews with those looking for work during the financial crisis in the UK.

**Unemployment**

The recent financial crisis started in mid-2008 in the UK (British Broadcasting Company, 2009; The Guardian, 2012a; The Guardian, 2012b). During this period, unemployment in the UK rose to its highest levels in 17 years to almost 2.7 million at the end of 2011 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). The first blow of the crisis in late 2007, directly led to job losses. The subsequent global financial crisis saw a sharp rise in unemployment to 5% or 1.6 million. In 2009 unemployment rose to around 2.5 million when the effects of the crisis were strenuously felt, from where it reached its highest (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2012).

As the research discussed above shows employability and how those looking for work perceive their employability is enmeshed in wider ideological stances. We aim to examine such ideological stances and the construction and/or orientation to such stances through a discursive analysis of interviews with those looking for work.
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Method

Data and participants

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author in English between June 2011 and September 2011 outside a local Job Centre Plus in a Scottish city, with UK citizens looking for work. The data analysed are transcripts of these interviews. The interviews started with a discussion of the interviewee’s perceptions of available employment opportunities, and their attempts to find employment. This was followed by questions addressing aspects of the financial crisis, which led onto a discussion of immigration. The interviews were transcribed in accordance with an abbreviated version of the Jeffersonian system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 2004). It is now increasingly common to adopt this level of transcription in discourse analysis (Gibson & Condor, 2009; McKinlay & McVittie, 2007). Transcripts so produced were thoroughly read, re-read and coded for those stretches of talk that involved discussion of interviewees’ accounts on finding work.

Analysis

These data were analysed using discourse analysis (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter & Edwards, 2001), which treats discourse as a topic of study in its own right. The analysis of researcher-led interview data has been a topic of contention among discourse analysts. The present analysis takes into account that interviews are highly specialized forms of interaction with unique properties (Condor, 2010; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). A way to incorporate these properties into

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1 At the time of the interviews JobCentre Plus was a UK government agency under the Department for Work and Pensions. It provided services to those looking for work, to help develop skills necessary for work and those seeking benefits or welfare services. (Gov.uk, 2014)
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the analysis and produce social psychologically relevant analyses is to treat the interviews as unique ‘speech events’ (Kirkwood, McKinlay, & McVittie, 2012; Talmy, 2011) where participants engage in specific actions.

This sort of analytic focus also involves an examination of the resources that participants use in producing these accounts and participating in these actions. To enable such an examination the analysis follows techniques employed and demonstrated in Billig (1995a), Wetherell (1998; 2003a) and Gibson (2009). Common to these approaches is the focus on elements that participants orient to and use as if these are true, common and simply given. In employing this approach we aim to show how it is that participants orient to employment in their accounts of finding work during the crisis.

Results

The findings are arranged in three sections, which show how participants enact, constitute and construct jobs, effort in finding jobs and competition for jobs, respectively, as banal.

Jobs as simply present: ‘the opportunity’s there’:

Here, two extracts are examined to demonstrate how interviewees treat ‘jobs’ as entities that simply exist. The first of these is from the transcript of an interview conducted with P1, who had been searching for work for 2 months at the time of the interview. The interaction shown below follows a discussion of his efforts in searching for work:
Extract 1

1 Int: yea? (.) and do you think it’s got to do with the financial situation (.) that
2 you know the recession
3 P1: well definitely Yeah↑ cos
4 Int: yea
5 P1: people ↑don’t wanna let go of staff and when people get jobs they are not as
6 easy as it used to be going from job to job<
7 Int: yea
8 P1: >they maybe wanna stick in a job< because they don’t know how long that
9 job’s gonna be there::<

P1’s account involves repeated references to ‘job[s]’ (lines 5, 6, and 9). Such reference is made in ways that treats jobs to simply exist. This goes beyond the mere use of this lexical item in the account. Rather, P1 enacts the simple, banal existence of jobs through treating these as entities that one can ‘get’ (line 5), that one can simply shift from one to another or that one can ‘stick’ (line 8) with. Moreover, P1 uses the deictic pointer ‘there’ (line 9) in referring to these jobs. In these ways, P1’s account enacts, constitutes and constructs the banality of jobs being ‘there’ as part of some readily recognisable landscape.

Of note also is the orientation to the financial crisis in this account. P1 readily agrees to the interviewer’s introduction of the ‘financial situation’ (line 1) or the ‘recession’ (line 2) as relevant to this efforts in finding work. However, the descriptions on how it may affect his employability make relevant the role of certain unnamed employers and employees rather than the
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availability or non-availability of jobs: ‘people don’t wanna let go of sta:ff’ (line 5) and ‘when people get jobs’ (line 5).

In so doing, P1 enacts the banality of jobs simply existing, in that this is never brought into question. It is notable that the interviewer contributes to the production of this account through affirmative minimal continuers. In these ways, participants jointly produce an account that treats ‘jobs’ as readymade givens. Potter calls this ‘out-thereness’ (Potter, 1996), in referring to a practice where speakers construct specific versions of the world via working up some objects, events, or agents as ‘facts’ that are simply available for observation, as objects that are part of the external world open to sensory perception or as objects that are accessible upon some effort (Potter, Wetherell, & Chitty, 1991). Here, we see that participants not only treat ‘jobs’ as simply existing but employ such treatment in producing an account on issues with finding work.

We see something similar in Extract 2. This was taken from the transcript of the interview conducted with P2, who had been looking for work for 9 months at the time of the interview. The interaction shown below comes after a discussion of her employment circumstances:

\[\text{Extract 2}\]

1 Int: and. do=you think. it it’s got to do with th the financial recession that
2 
3 (1.1)
4 P2: think so a:ye
5 Int: yea (.) yea
6 (2.7)
7 P2: >I think< yes and no:
Here P2 is reluctant to ascribe any blame to the financial crisis. Similar to P1 she treats jobs to simply exist and locates the blame for problems in finding work on those looking for work.

The interviewer’s question deserves some attention for its way of introducing ‘the financial recession’ (line 1). It is introduced as a readymade given, and also as some context that, at least, both the interviewer and the interviewee experience bodily: ‘the financial recession that we’re in’ (lines 1-2). This in a way buys the interviewee’s participation in the production of an account on the financial recession and its effects on being able to find work. However P2 does not readily attribute problems in finding work to the recession. Initially, P2 agrees that the financial recession may have an effect on chances for finding work. Subsequently, she amends this to an ambivalent response at line 7: ‘>i think< yes and no:’ (line 7). Her reasons for this involve describing how-things-are and the actions of those who are looking for work.

The description is prefaced with a problematic evaluation, namely that ‘times are tough’ (line 9), which directly attends to the business being accomplished here – to account for the interviewee’s status as someone looking for work during the financial crisis. Of particular note in that description is that ‘opportunities’ (line 10) are treated as just being ‘there’ (line 10). Moreover, this sort of description allows for the claim on actions of those looking for work: ‘it’s just whether
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or not (0.8) you’re taking the opportunities’ (lines 9-10). In this way, she enacts the banality of jobs just being part of how-things-are.

In a repeat/closure of this accounting practice she modifies the description on the opportunities to ‘sometimes’ (line 12), which is hearable as a reference to the financial crisis and its outcomes. However, she again locates the blame for problems in finding work to those looking for work and their actions: ‘just don’t go for them’ (line 12). This way of accounting serves to constitute the banality of jobs just being there, in that the problems with finding work come to be seen as outcomes of those looking for work rather than other antecedents that may change the availability of jobs. This latter never comes into question.

Noteworthy here is also the description on those looking for work, which is that they ‘just don’t go for them’ (line 12). The banality of absence of effort on part of those looking for work forms a composite part in accounting for problems in finding work. It is this issue that we turn to in the subsequent section. There we examine three extracts where interviewees treat one way of obtaining these jobs as simply given, namely that of putting in the effort.

Effort as the main way to find work: ‘if you were tryin hard enough yourself you would get tha job’

Three extracts are examined where participants enact the banality of putting in the effort in being able to find work. Gibson (2009) shows how discussions on welfare and employment pervasively embed the ‘effortfulness repertoire’ (p. 397). He makes the point that making effort relevant has the outcome of favouring a particular form of citizen and governance, namely those who conduct themselves in proper ways such as putting in the effort in finding and keeping a paid job. Here, we not only see participants treating effort as central but also that for them discussions on
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immigration and its effect on employment include banal inclusion of treating effort to be the way to find work. Indeed in the following extract we see that it is this idea of a ‘good citizen’ that is mobilized in rebuking some others who blame immigrants for problems in finding work. This was taken from the transcript of the interview with P3, who had been looking for work for a month at the time of the interview. The interaction shown here follows a discussion of problems with finding work in the recession:

Extract 3

1 Int: em:: do you think immigration has got anything to do: with employment
2 P3: personally NO
3 Int: right
4 P3: I knew [muffled]
5 Int: yea, yea
6 P3: I feel people use it. >as an excuse<
7 Int: yea]
8 P3: [B]ut these people are >coming over< here and they’re working hard
9 for the jobs that they are getting
10 Int: (yea)
11 P3: and then there’s people that live here that AREn’t trying that hard and
12 then they’re not (. ) giving them to >these people<
13 Int: (yea)
14 P3: and then they’re blaming them for being here bu
15 Int: (yea)
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16 P3: if you were tryin hard enough yourself you would get tha job
17 Int: (yea)
18 P3: you’re not puttin in the effort and they are and that’s why they’re gettin
19 it and not you

P3 denies any effect of immigration on employment for locals\(^2\). This denial is sourced to the banality of effort in finding work while denying the role of any other factor when it comes to being able to find work.

P3’s denial is offered as a subjective viewpoint: ‘personally NO’ (line 2). Doing so signals an account designed to show that there may well be others who hold alternative viewpoints. At line 6, he does precisely that – introduces certain others who do hold this view: ‘I feel people use it as an excuse’. This works as a category descriptor – “those who use this as an excuse” – because his subsequent account offers details on this category by way of contrast with another category. The contrast is grounded in the banal references that treat obtaining work to be an outcome of effort and hard work. Specifically, he foregrounds merit based criteria such as ‘working hard’ (line 11), ‘trying hard’ (line 16) and ‘puttin in the effort’ (line 18) in being able to find work.

Firstly, P3 describes immigrants as those who ‘are coming over here’ (line 8) and are ‘working hard for the jobs that they are getting’ (lines 8-9). Secondly, he contrasts immigrants with others described as those ‘that live here’ (line 11). He goes onto offer details on these others in the form of a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990): they are not ‘trying that hard’ (line 11), ‘then they’re not giving them [jobs] to these people’ (lines 11-12), and ‘then they’re blaming them for

\(^2\) Here, ‘UK citizens’ is one choice as is ‘Scottish citizens’. To elide this problematic ‘locals’ was chosen. Also see Abell, Condor and Stevenson (2006) for a discussion on the limits of a straightforward nationalistic reading of talk by those in England or Scotland. Also see Condor (2000) for a discussion on the importance of contextualizing nationalistic talk in the UK.
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being here’ (line 14). The listing offers a problematic evaluation of these others. Specifically, it treats these others as lazy, and their actions towards immigrants as unjustified. Such a contrast treats immigrants, who work hard, as deserving of their jobs and the others to be wrong because of the effort put in by the former and the lack of it on the part of the latter. This way of doing a contrast constitutes this way of obtaining work as unquestionably central, in that the evaluation inherent in the contrast turns on this characteristic of “effort as the main way to find work”.

Discursive researchers (Augoustinos et al., 2005) show that the use of meritocratic arguments has a unique rhetorical advantage, namely that arguments such as this are treated as rather common-place. Billig (1988) and Wetherell and Potter (1992), argue that these common-places are routinely left unquestioned, treated as rhetorically self-sufficient and, precisely because of their “common-place” nature, are treated as a stand-in for truth.

Here we see P3 treating effort in finding work as self-evident to the extent that he offers this as a redress to those looking for work and blaming immigrants. At lines 16-19, he voices this as if he were speaking to those complaining about immigrants looking for work: ‘if you were tryin hard enough yourself you would get tha job (yea) you’re not puttin in the effort and they are and that’s why they’re gettin it and not you’ (lines 17-20). This hearable reproach embeds the rhetorical common-place that anyone is able to obtain work if one only tries hard enough. In these ways, P3 enacts, constitutes and constructs the banality of “effortfulness” (Gibson, 2009, p. 397).

Similar to the argument made by Gibson (2009), here we see the construction of particular sorts of people looking for work. On the one hand we have ‘immigrants who work hard’ and on the other ‘locals who do not put in the effort’. While these categories are obviously extremely well suited to the business at hand (LeCouter, Rapley, & Augoustinos, 2001; Stokoe, 2009), that is of not being seen as anti-immigrant, they also have a political significance (Suchman, 1994). The
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offering of a favourable category of immigrants and an unfavourable category of ‘locals’ not only goes against the routine trend (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003; Edwards, 2003; Ipsos MORI, 2011a; Ipsos MORI, 2011b; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), but it also selects a particular sort of immigrant, namely one who works hard. In a way it replaces a nationalism dependent categorization for a production based form of categorization: it reifies effort-making individuals.

In the following extract, we see that P4 refrains from blaming immigrants for problems in finding work. P4 had been searching for work for about 7 months at the time of the interview. Prior to the interaction shown below the participant had rejected claims that immigration has an impact on employment.

Extract 4

1 Int: i mean=your employment opportunities you don do you think they have changed because of (.) immigration.
2
3 P4: no. not at all (.). I think the recession was gonna happen anyway
4 Int: yea
5 P4: may=maybe if there were less people here from other countries there would be:
6
7 Int: yea
8 P4: more space for jobs but. (.). then again< people would >still not put in no effort and probably not get them anyway< so
9
10 Int: yea
11 P4: just because they are comin here and tryin for the jobs doesn’t mean we should blame them (.). I don’t think it makes a difference now
12
P4 enacts the banality of effort in being able to find work in making claims on how immigration may affect chances of finding work for locals. He offers this as the last argument that seals the case in an enacted debate on that issue.

P4 foregrounds ‘the recession’ (line 3) as an essential part of how-things-are. In particular, he works up ‘the recession’ as an inevitable occurrence that ‘was gonna happen anyway’ (line 3). This is similar to what we saw in Extracts 1 and 2, in that participants do not blame the financial crisis. Rather, as we will see at lines 5-12, it is those who are looking for work that court the blame.

Initially, he describes potential state of affairs where immigration may have led to employment problems. This description makes relevant the number of ‘people from other countries’ (line 5), who are ‘here’ (line 5) and the effects of this, namely not having ‘more space for jobs’ (cf. Charteris-Black, 2006) (line 8). The description also includes banal references to the nation (Billig, 1995a) – ‘here’ (line 5) – and an equally banal reference to immigrants and the effect of their presence on chances for finding work. This juxtaposition is interesting to note as it introduces the distinction between employment-seekers who are ‘here’ (that is locals) and those who come here ‘from other countries’ (line 5): immigrants. Noteworthy here is that immigrants are described in singular terms without ascribing any specific characteristics. This however changes in his subsequent description.

Subsequently, P4 contrasts this possibility with another where immigration would not change the chances for finding work for those who are here. This contrast turns on treating effort in being able to find work as an indisputable description of how-things-are. Similar to the above extract such use constitutes this to be a rather simple, unquestioned and common-place practice.
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P4’s reasons why immigration would not affect locals’ chances for finding work are that those locals ‘would still not put in no effort and probably not get them anyway’ (lines 8-9). Effort in being able to find work is treated as the final criterion, indicated by the discourse marker ‘anyway’ (line 9) (cf. Park, 2010). Moreover, P4 enacts the banality of effort in being able to find work in describing immigrants’ activities: ‘just because they are comin here and tryin for the jobs’ (line 11). In particular this forms part of his rebuke against accusing immigrants of causing problems for locals: ‘doesn’t mean we should blame them’ (lines 11-12).

The above two accounts involved participants enacting, constituting and constructing effort in being able to find work as rather banal. These practices mirror the principles of meritocracy (Augoustinos et al., 2005) where merit is proclaimed to be the sole criterion for employment, education and/or obtaining support. Here these practices ran parallel to the practice of rejecting the role of other factors in problems with finding work, such as immigrants and the financial crisis. Together these locate the responsibility for finding work in those looking for work, specifically in the effort of those looking for work. Such practices contribute to the production of a particular sort of person and a particular sort of employment worldview where each individual is responsible for obtaining work through effort and no other factor. Moreover, that those that do attribute problems to other aspects invite rebuke or are treated as lazy.

In the following section we show how interviewees enact, constitute and construct competition for jobs as readily observable. There, interviewees are reluctant to attribute problems with finding work to such competition. Rather effort by those looking for work is treated as the trump card to surmount such competition.
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**Competition for work as readily observable: ‘there’s just so many people looking for work’**

Three extracts are examined to demonstrate how interviewees orient to the banality of competition for jobs. The discussions involve managing the links between immigration and issues in finding work. In the first of these the interviewee introduces competition for work as a readily recognisable part of how-things-are. This is from the transcript of an interview with P5, who had been searching for work for the last 9 months at the time of the interview. Prior to the interaction shown below, the interviewee had been discussing her problems in finding employment:

**Extract 5**

```
1  Int:  and d’you think it’s: why do you think that is?
2    (1.1)
3  P5:  i think there there’s just so many people looking for work↓ and like (.)
4    ehm: (0.7 ) all like (.) everyone from different countries trying to get jobs
5      and stu:ff
6  Int:  yea
```

P5’s description of how-things-are includes those looking for work in competition among themselves for jobs that just exist. Such a simple description constitutes the banality of jobs, those looking for work and the competition among themselves for those jobs.

At line 1, the interviewer invites P5 to offer reasons for an earlier claim that recession has indeed made it hard to find work (not shown here). She does so by describing two features of the extant state of affairs regarding employment. The first of these involves making relevant the
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category “those looking for work” via ascribing the activity of ‘looking for work’ (line 3) to ‘so many people’ (line 3). This ascription is done in ways to show that large numbers of people looking for work is readily noticeable, simply ‘out-there’ for observation and part of how-things-are, by the marker ‘there’s just’ (line 3). P5 does not orient to a requirement to offer details on these jobs either, rather they are treated as simply existing in ways similar to the earlier extracts.

For the second feature, another set of people are described as looking for jobs as well. Specific descriptors about this set of people allow for the inference that they are immigrants: ‘everyone from different countries trying to get jobs and stu:ff’ (lines 4-5) (cf. Lynn & Lea, 2003). Noteworthy here is the use of the lexical item ‘and stu:ff’ (line 5), which treats the activity of ‘trying to get jobs’ (line 4) to be one among a set of other activities that are, in turn, rounded off through the very use of this item (cf. Garfinkel, 1967). This treats those activities as expected, unsurprising and characteristic of immigrants. More importantly, the existence of immigrants who are looking for jobs is treated as common-place through the use of extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986): ‘all like’ (line 4) and ‘everyone’ (line 4). In these ways, P5 enacts a banal version of immigrants looking for work: ‘looking for work’ (line 3). Together these versions constitute and construct competition in finding work to be simply observable in serving as an account for why it is harder to find work in the recession. The interviewer, after a discussion on other aspects, takes up the topic of immigration explicitly:
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Extract 6

1 Int: a:nd >do you think< immigration has got something to do w:ith (0.3)
2 employment
3 P5: a:hm in a way yea beca:use >obviously these people are trying to get jobs
4 that< (0.3) ↑like >scottish people< would’ve
5 Int: yea
6 P5: but (.) then again they take up (.) >they take jobs that we won’t<
7 Int: yea
8 P5: ehm:: yea (.) a bit of both really

For P5 the links between employment chances for Scottish citizens and immigration, the subject of discussion here, inherently turn on there being competition between immigrants and Scottish citizens looking for work.

In response to the interviewer’s question on the possible links between immigration and ‘employment’ (line 2), P5 offers a hedged agreement: ‘a:hm in a way yea’ (line 3) that is unpacked in the form of a debate. Central to this enacted debate is treating competition between immigrants and Scottish citizens as part of how-things-are.

Initially, P5 treats it ‘obviously’ (line 3) to be the case that ‘these people’ (line 3) are competing with ‘Scottish people’ (line 4): ‘trying to get jobs’ (line 3). Now, the jobs in question are described in a peculiar way: ‘jobs that Scottish people would’ve’ (line 4) gone for. This is the first time in these extracts that we see a unique description of jobs, instead of the routine just ‘jobs’. This serves a specific function here, which is that it shows that the effect of immigration on
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employment originates in the competition for these kinds of jobs – jobs that Scottish citizens would have taken.

Subsequently, she offers a counter argument to the inference offered above. This again involves ascribing a similar activity to immigrants, namely that ‘they take jobs’ (line 6). However, the description of jobs offered here negates the inference that immigration affects employment chances for Scottish citizens. The description is that these are ‘jobs that we won’t’ (line 6) take. Here, the unshaken assumption is that there is competition between immigrants and Scottish citizens, but there are jobs that the latter would not take up, which allows for dismissing claims that there may be an effect.

The management of claims on the links between immigration and the chances of finding work for Scottish citizens constitutes and constructs competition among those looking for work as banal. The banality of this is rather central to how P5 enacts a debate on the links between immigration and the chances of employment for Scottish citizens.

We see a similar use of the banality of competition for jobs between immigrants and locals in the next extract. Here, P7 uses the banality of merit in being able to find work as trumping over concerns of competition. P7 had been looking for work for the last 2 months at the time of the interview. Prior to the discussion shown below, the participants had discussed the role of immigration in mediating the chances of finding work in the UK.

*Extract 7*

1  Int: and how do you think it affects the chances of employment (1.4) >for you<

2  P7:

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4 i don’t think i don’t think it it i don’t know if i don’t think it affects it too
5 Int: much you know (.) if you’ve got experience then it shouldn’t matter where
6 P7: you’re from
7 yes
  so: yea if everyone’s going for the same jobs as long as you’re a little bit
    better than them it doesn’t matter where they’re from

P7’s response shows that the only way immigration may affect the chances of employment for locals is by competition for jobs. In this way, his account constitutes the banality of competition, even in denying its effects, and constructs a specific version of this competition, namely that it can be managed if one possesses sufficient merit.

At line 1, the interviewer’s question on P7’s views on the association between immigration and employment invites an account for how it is that immigration might affect P7’s ‘chances of employment’ (line 1). The interviewer embeds the claim that P7 earlier had made a claim to that effect but had just not cleared it up.

To this, P7 displays trouble in coming up with a straightforward account as indicated by the repetition and hedge: ‘I don’t think I don’t think it it I don’t know if’ (line 2). This is unsurprising because the notion embedded in the interviewer’s question, namely that immigration affects his chances of finding work, can be taken to have problematic implications. It is this latter possibility that P7 goes on to address at lines 2-7, in that P7 orients to the possibility that there is competition between immigrants and locals.

Initially, he manages the claim that immigration causes problems in finding work to the extent of almost denying it: ‘I don’t think it affects it too much you know’ (lines 2-3). The reason
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given for this is that the ‘experience’ (line 3) of those looking for work should be the only criterion for getting work. Of note here is the use of the modal ‘shouldn’t’ (line 3) applied to the act of taking into account the place of origin of those looking for work. On the one hand the use such a meritocratic argument serves to establish his credentials as not being prejudiced (Augoustinos et al., 2005). On the other hand, more relevantly for us, it constructs a specific version of the world, which is that the mainstay of employment and employability is solely merit.

At lines 6-7 he closes his account by a stronger version of this world. Noteworthy here is that this offered as a conclusion, as a final way of deciding the links between immigration and employment and the way out of this quandary, namely by being in possession of this ‘merit’, as indicated by the use ‘so’ (line 6). Moreover, using an ‘if…then’ formulation treats the act of offering this version to be in the service of demonstrating a point, namely that ‘merit’ or ability is the sole decider to gain employment.

The version offered involves describing a background of employment landscape: ‘everyone’s going for the same jobs’ (line 6). P7’s description of those looking for work, in using the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) ‘everyone’ (line 6), treats it to be rather common in the current times that agents look ‘for the same jobs’ (line 6). Such a description readily offers the inference that those looking for work are competing against each other for these ‘same jobs’ (line 6).

It is in this context that P7 embeds his claims on meritocracy-in-action in finding work. Specifically, he offers a vague merit descriptor, namely that of being ‘a little bit better than them’ (lines 6-7), as the main criterion for being able to obtain work. Noteworthy again is the unproblematic deployment of others looking for work through the pronoun ‘them’ (line 7). Clearly, the outcome then is to locate the responsibility for being able to find work with those
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looking for work. P7 expressly does not attribute problems with finding work to the competition. In these ways, P7’s account enacts, constitutes and constructs a banal picture of how-things-are: there are jobs, those looking for work compete amongst themselves, and merit is the main criterion for being able to obtain work.

Discussion

The findings showed that the accounts of those looking for work in UK during the financial crisis enacted, constituted and constructed a banal version of how-things-are. This version is that there are jobs, those looking for work have to work hard to obtain those jobs and there is competition for these jobs, which can be triumphed again by working hard. This version embeds, reflects and constructs ‘banal capitalism’ (Gibson, forthcoming), in that for participants in these accounts the existence of jobs as entities, that those looking for jobs have to put in effort to obtain them and that those looking for jobs compete with each other is simply true. This feature is strongly demonstrated in being used to manage implications that the interviewee was complaining about immigrants or was anti-immigrant. The banality of this capitalistic ideology was enacted, constituted and constructed through such ways.

The findings also show that participants were reluctant to account for problems with employment to the financial crisis or indeed immigration. To an extent, this can be explained through the centrality of meritocracy and individualism (Augoustinos et al., 2005) here. This is the practice of locating the responsibility for finding work in those looking for work. Specific attributes of the individual looking for work are treated as the only rightful criteria, such as effort, hard work or merit, or indeed as P7 claims ‘a bit better’ than others. Doing so, leaves little room for complaints about the recession or indeed competition because of immigration or otherwise.
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Moreover, those presented as doing so are treated as lazy and are rebuked for their lack of effort in finding work. Now, it is by no means suggested that those who do blame immigrants are right, but that the reason for rebuking those who do blame is seated in a capitalistic framework where a single individual is responsible for her/his employment, earning and upkeep.

As Gibson (2009) argues, this further works to favour a particular sort of citizen, namely one who works hard or puts in the effort. Marx and Engles (Marx & Engels, 1969) cautioned that capitalism would end up treating the worker as a commodity. Here we see that looking for work is being constituted in an essentialist way, namely that of being a hard worker or an ‘effortful citizen’ (Gibson, 2009, p. 394). Reflexively, this works to construct the particular ideology of capitalism, namely that those looking for work or those in work have to work hard to deserve their employment.

Analyses of talk around issues of employment and employability have shown that the ways in which those looking for work orient to employment opportunities and their employability reflects wider societal values, practices and ideologies (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). The findings here show that participants build up such wider societal values, practices and ideologies, in that the banality of jobs, effort in finding work, and competition for these jobs among those looking for work is worked up in the interview talk. While participants engage in actions of accounting for their (un)employment status, managing making claims on immigration for such status and presenting oneself as not blaming immigrants, these actions enact, constitute and construct banal capitalism. Banal capitalism forms an unnoticed and unquestioned background on which these actions get accomplished.

This background was treated to be simply true and readily recognisable. For instance, in Extracts 1 and 2, interviewees treat ‘jobs’ to simply be ‘there’ as part of this background in a rather
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routine matter, in that it is the ‘just-thisness’ (Garfinkel, 1967) of there being jobs that the interviewees include in their accounts. In a similar way we see interviewees introducing one criterion for being able to obtain work, namely that of employment-seekers’ effort. Interviewees’ treat effort as the only way to obtain work as a rather obvious fact. It is as-if these practices naturally suggested themselves to the participants.

It is also of little surprise that participants should do so, in that academics (Fumagalli & Mezzadra, 2010; Marazzi, 2011) and philosophers (Žižek, 2013), social commentators (Davie, 2012; Lapavitsas, 2009; Peters, 2013), and indeed activists by participating in social movements like the ‘Occupy movement’, ‘the 99% movement’ or the ‘Movimiento 15-M’ (Goodman, 2012), have all in one way or another questioned, challenged and faulted capitalism for the financial crisis. One severe outcome of the financial crisis and one very important reason for angst among people is the high unemployment rate. Here we have shown social psychological insights into how it is that those looking for work oriented to the reasons for their difficulties or on the possibilities for employment, namely that of orienting to capitalism as rather banal.

Clearly the findings here mirror the thesis of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995a), specifically they do so in three ways. First, the findings here show that capitalism is enacted, constituted and constructed in rather banal ways in situated interactions. The specific similarity is that in both cases, the ideology being produced goes unnoticed. Second, Billig contrasts this form of nationalism with the more explicit outbursts of nationalistic fervour – the ‘hot nationalism’ (Benwell & Dodd, 2011; Bishop & Jaworski, 2003). While the findings here demonstrate banal capitalism, it can well be argued that the financial crisis itself is an instantiation of ‘hot capitalism’, in that this event was an outburst of capitalism with severe consequences for many around the world. Third, one of the critiques of Billig’s thesis is that it treats nationalism to be overly
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pervasive leaving little room for challenge (Jones & Merriman, 2009; Reicher et al., 1997; Skey, 2009). Billig’s (1995b) response is that social movements form one direct challenge to such taken-for-granted assumptions of nationalism. In a similar way, while capitalism may well be treated as rather banal, social movements like the ‘Occupy movement’, the ‘99% movement’ and the ‘Movimeinto 15-M’ (Goodman, 2012) all challenge this taken-for-granted ideology that jobs simply exist, that effort is the only way to get these jobs and that one does and has to compete with others looking for work.
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