The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism in the Academy

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Informed by Foucault’s writings about governmentality, subjectification and technologies of selfhood, this paper explores the experiences of academic workers in the neoliberal University. It touches on issues of precariousness, work intensification, surveillance and performativity cultures, arguing that academics have become constituted as ideal neoliberal subjects – individualised, atomised, hardworking, self-disciplining and self-monitoring, and responsibilised. It looks at what I have called (borrowing Sennett and Cobb’s phrase) the ‘hidden injuries’ or the ‘psychic life’ (Butler) of neoliberal academia, and their associated affects of shame, insecurity, exhaustion, illness, anxiety and fear of being ‘found out’. It argues that naming these experiences and understanding them as structural or socially produced is an important precursor to resisting toxic academia and to championing Universities as more open, generous and collegial spaces.