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### Libertarian paternalism: policy and everyday translations of the rational and the emotional

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## Libertarian paternalism: policy and everyday translations of the rational and the emotional

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Following the financial collapse in 2008 many commentators went onto pronounce the end of neoliberalism as a credible system for managing welfare state capitalism. The narrow economic belief in individuals as rational utility maximizers (the linchpin of neoliberal governance) was proved to be uncomfortably inaccurate. In light of these claims, British governments and think tanks have published various research and policy documents promoting the use of soft forms of state power to ‘nudge’ citizens into behaving responsibly and rationally. Through an analysis of key policy documents and academic texts, I examine the repertoires and formulations informing this emerging governmental rationality (‘libertarian paternalism’) and draw together these perspectives to explore their effects in terms of framing policy understandings of the rational and the emotional. I conclude the article by utilizing a discursive psychology approach with the aim to problematize existing policy (mis)understandings of emotion as automated and unreflexive.

**Keywords:** soft paternalism; neuroeconomics; emotion; politics; consumerism

### The death of neoliberalism?

Until quite recently many commentators viewed neoliberalism as the dominant economic, political and intellectual framework shaping welfare state capitalism (Peck 2004, Brown 2005, Harvey 2005). Predicated on the ontology of markets, the efficacy of deregulation and a cutthroat rejection of command-and-control economies, neoliberalism has successfully captured the imagination of governments on the left and right since the late 1970s/1980s. Since this time governments seeking to displace public, noncommercial powers and resources in favor of market-driven reform have adopted neoliberal discourse as its key legitimating narrative. Popularized through the slogan ‘there is no alternative,’ neoliberalism stems from the insistence that public and private institutional arrangements and transactions are better organized through the prism of market calculation, when the intervention of state control and regulation is kept to a minimum (‘the minimalist state’). The period 1980–present has subsequently been one in which social class has been eviscerated by its critics as a ‘zombie’ category (Beck 2001) and contrary to the ‘reality’ of really existing postmodern, consumer-driven, cosmopolitan societies. Alongside this populist forms of political representation have frustrated traditional party politics (Laclau 2005) and facilitated the rise of moderate, ‘progressive’ governments who are obsessed with marketization, consumerism and administration over politics (best captured through

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New Labour's mantra 'what matters is what works'). Through making the market ubiquitous and the consumer sovereign, neoliberal discourse thus carves out a privileged space for the standard economic assumption that all individuals are rational utility maximizers with 'well-informed preferences which they can perceive, rank and compare easily' (Dunleavy 1991, p. 3). The articulation of the figure of the 'citizen-consumer' in many government texts and speeches (Clarke *et al.* 2007) has come to signify the cooption and translation of these economic theories into a policy and political reality.

Following the financial meltdown in 2008, however, a torrent of criticism was leveled against the narrow economic assumption that the self-interests of lending institutions such as mortgage companies necessarily lead them to act responsibly. Huge investments in 'sub-prime' mortgages at the time (loans made available to people who do not qualify for market interest rates) produced a devaluation of US real estate pricing so severe that financial institutions collapsed, investor confidence receded, credit tightened and international trade declined. The global capitalist system was brought to its knees (only to be later revived by taxpaying publics). As we shall see, the financial meltdown was represented as a crisis both at the level of markets – a 'crisis of neoliberalism' (Beder 2009) – and as a crisis stemming from the pathological behavior of erratic and impulsive individuals, in other words, a crisis of individual rationality (Davies 2012).

Addressing a Senate Committee in October 2008, Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, conceded 'I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interests of organizations, specifically banks and others, were such as that they were best capable of protecting their own shareholders and their equity in the firms' (Greenspan cited in Clark and Treanor 2008). In the UK Shadow Chancellor George Osborne together with behavioral economist Richard Thaler (2010) offered up a similar diagnosis, arguing that 'the crisis has finally put to rest the assumption, which underpinned Labour's entire system of financial regulation, that individual behaviour is always entirely rational.' Other commentators even went so far as to pronounce the end of neoliberalism. Will Hutton (2008) declared in *The Observer* that the policy responses to the financial crisis reflected a Keynesian style 'managed capitalism' while Peter Wilby writing in the *New Statesman* (2009) passionately argued: '[t]he promises of neoliberalism are revealed for what they were: a sham. An ideology that seduced most of the population is broken.' But is neoliberalism broken or is the situation more complex than this? Is neoliberalism undergoing a process of translation or reconfiguration, for example? And if so, what are the political forces and articulating practices underpinning these chains of connection and strategies of colonization? In response to these issues I explore the governmentality of libertarian paternalism as a continuation of neoliberalism by other means. More specifically, I explain the effects of libertarian paternalism in terms of informing and shaping policy translations of the rational and the emotional.

### **The birth of libertarian paternalism**

As a model for financial planning and regulation, neoliberalism today appears less dominant. Following the financial crisis, the coalition government introduced huge restrictions on welfare spending and the financial sector of the economy to comply with the proposed austerity measures needed to tackle the recession, and even nationalized certain financial intermediaries. But as a political and intellectual project that suffered little reprisal subsequent to the crisis, other than a wag of the finger at bankers, neoliberalism is certainly far from finished. In the realm of welfare it is business as usual. Choice and competition endure as framings for steering public sector organization and summoning active citizens.

And then there is the nature of public accountability itself. Mechanisms of corporate, contract and consumer accountability predominate over an increasingly deregulated, deprofessionalized public sector. The sum effect of these processes is an audit culture driven by managerial conceptions of performativity, efficiency and value for money (see Jones 2010). Undercutting these trends, however, are recent government policy and research documents alluding to a shift towards a postneoliberal policy consensus, one that undermines rather than lionizes a neoclassical economic view of the individual as *homo economicus*. The umbrella term used to capture this emerging policy consensus is ‘libertarian paternalism.’ Libertarian (or soft) paternalism is a style of welfare and economic policy making first imagined by Colin Camerer and Samuel Issacharoff (see Camerer *et al.* 2003) and later made popular by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein through the now familiar nomenclature of ‘nudge’ (see Thaler and Sunstein 2008).

Predicated on the belief that not all individuals share the capacity to calculate the expected benefits and costs of their actions, the philosophy of libertarian paternalism sets out to rewrite the neoliberal narrative on individual behavior by insisting that individuals need to be educated into making decisions that best reflect their welfare and self-interest (see Epstein 2006, Loewenstein and Haisley 2008). At the heart of the concept of ‘nudge’ is the idea that individuals (citizens, consumers, employees, clients, etc.) often behave irrationally. On this understanding people typically fail to optimize the utility of their decision-making in ways that are commensurate with rational outcomes (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). In recent times the British coalition government has flagged this issue through mobilizing insights from behavioral psychology, neurobiology, neuroeconomics, social cognition and preference theory, among other disciplines, to inform policy development and practice. In 2010 the coalition government set up a specialist unit within the Cabinet Office (better known as the ‘Nudge Unit’) by way of demonstrating its commitment to the application of ‘nudge’ tactics to its repertoire of policy technologies (see Cabinet Office 2011). To this end, it has coopted the publication of various policy and research texts promoting the use of soft forms of state power to nudge citizens into behaving responsibly and rationally (see Darnton 2008, Knott *et al.* 2008, GCN 2009, Dolan *et al.* 2010).

In fact, the earliest adoption of light hand regulation in the UK can be traced to a 2004 Cabinet Office report in which the authors (Halpern *et al.* 2004) outlined the potential of using soft compulsion methods to influence behavior change across policy sites as diverse as employment, health, crime and education (also see DEFRA 2007). Crucially, the report outlines methods by which ‘government acting as a more effective “persuader” can be squared with an agenda of enhanced personal responsibility – helping people to help themselves’ (Halpern *et al.* 2004, p. 4). Later in 2005 the practice of nudging reared its head again in a report on pensions written by Lord Turner (DWP 2006). Observing that most individuals lack the time and capacity required to fully comprehend the information on pensions, Lord Turner proposed the introduction of a favorable default option (the ‘automatic opt-in’) to ensure all workers are enrolled on the National Pensions Saving Scheme (NPSS). In the case of the automatic opt-in, individuals are perceived to be locked into behaviors characterized by myopia (or short-termism) that undermine the long-term practice of calculating the potential costs and benefits of different actions (Loewenstein 1996). Automatically enrolling employees on pension schemes is therefore legitimated on the grounds that it promotes the welfare of those people who might ordinarily lack the foresight and utility to correctly judge the long-term benefits offered by pensions.

Nudging thus forms part of a broad range of governmental practices aimed at inducing better self-care and self-responsibility. It can refer to ‘any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options’

(Thaler and Sunstein 2008, p. 6). Specific examples of nudging also include the deployment of emotional registers (or ‘warm words’) in environmental campaign material (Ereaut and Segnit 2006), presumably to create better ethical citizens. Others include the creation of specially designed spatial environments that make use of social marketing techniques including product placement to induce responsible and healthy eating (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). As Dolan *et al.* (2010) explain: ‘[b]ehaviour change is often seen as government intruding into issues that should be the domain of personal responsibility. However, it is possible for government just to supply the trigger or support for individuals to take greater personal responsibility’ (p. 10). Libertarian paternalism thus seeks to produce ‘policies that maintain or increase freedom of choice’ (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, p. 5) while at the same time generating a greater role for the state in shaping the impulsive behaviors of presumably less rational individuals. Before moving on to a discussion of the implications of these ideas and practices for policy and popular understandings of emotion, I want to briefly explore the relationship between libertarian paternalism and neoliberalism since it is, I want to argue, a complimentary and mutually transformative one.

### **Embedding neoliberalism**

As Thaler and Sunstein explain, ‘[a] choice architect has the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions’ (2008, p. 3). A choice architect therefore is someone who makes solid the practice of nudging citizens (consumers, clients, or even employees) into making choices that best reflect their welfare and self-interest. This usually takes place through making available information, advice and guidance that might otherwise enable (‘empower’) citizens to make rational decisions. Although not formally recognized as ‘choice architects,’ local authorities across the UK since 2006 have appointed individuals to assist parents with the handling and preparation of their school choice (what are collectively known as ‘choice advisers’) (DCSF 2006). In many ways school choice represents the policy translation of neoliberal ideas in the field of education policy development and practice (Wilkins 2010). Introduced through the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), school choice assigns obligations and responsibilities to parents as consumers with the freedom to exit their local school system. Parents may therefore select a school for their child on the basis of personal preference, taste, or the perceived needs of the child, rather than be forced to accept the school place allocated to their child by the local authority (the standard school allocation procedure practiced until 1988). Echoing public choice perspectives at the time (Downs 1967, Niskanen 1973) – the central idea being that ‘economic theories of decision-making can be applied to non-market choices’ (Finlayson 2003, p. 29) – school choice articulates a conception of parents as rational utility maximizers. It reflects attempts to naturalize a narrow rational, utilitarian view of parents as self-interested, calculating and competitive subjects. When we consider that the role of libertarian paternalism is to develop culturally-attuned forms of welfare policy making – ‘the integration of cultural, regulatory and individual change’, according to Dolan *et al.* (2010, p. 13) – ‘choice advisers’ can be viewed as agents linking parents with preferred neoliberal forms of user engagement in the realm of education.

The inability or unwillingness of parents to choose a school for their child has therefore not been overlooked by governments. Rather it has been a focus of policy intervention since New Labour set out to create service users who are ‘better-informed customers’ (Ministers of State 2004, para. 3.4.3). Specifically designed to target and nudge those parents who ‘find the system difficult to understand and therefore difficult to operate in the best interests of the child’, or who are simply ‘unable or unwilling to engage with the process’

(DCSF 2006, p. 2), choice advisers work to ensure parents adjust to politically mandated norms through inducing their active enlistment as informed and discriminating subjects. Specifically, people who take control of existing educational opportunities and plan for the future welfare of their child. Libertarian paternalism thus is suggestive of a logic of governing in which market values are not simply extended and disseminated to all institutions and social action (Brown 2005) but which are also embedded through a process of socializing individuals to adapt to the risks and demands late capitalism generates. From this perspective, libertarian paternalism performs a valuable function in reconstituting the viability and survival of neoliberal ideas and practices. It works to ensure the state continues to act as a ‘commodifying agent,’ ‘recalibrating institutions [and individuals] in an attempt to make them homological with the firm and amenable to the processes of the “market form”’ (Ball 2009, p. 97). This, I want to argue, has serious implications for policy translations of emotion since the dominant discourse of libertarian paternalism relegates emotion to something automated and unreflexive. In what follows I will sketch out the repertoires and formulations underpinning this idea of emotion before concluding the article with an outline a discursive psychology approach to emotion. Such an approach is pertinent to problematizing existing policy (mis)understandings of emotional thinking and feeling.

### **Emotion as lack (or tact)**

As I have already demonstrated, libertarian paternalism belies the dominant economic assumption that social actors are entirely rational and even, in some cases, cognizant of their own preferences (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Echoing an advanced liberal or neoliberal approach to welfare governance, it supports a view of human behavior as defined by the pursuit and satisfaction of preferences, *but* refutes the idea that those preferences are always deliberative, rational and logically consistent. Viewed from this perspective, libertarian paternalism (while imposing little or no cost on the sovereign character of the fully rational consumer) is, notionally, anti-Hayekian. The insistence that less rational individuals need to be nudged to ensure they act in their own self-interest disrupts any notion of the self as a central controlling agency of psychic and moral life. To be more precise, it undermines the ontological privilege traditionally ascribed to market conceptions of freedom and behavior by classical liberalism (Gray 1995). Within classical liberalism, individuals are defined as moral and calculating agents best placed to make judgments about their own welfare and consumption patterns. But human response is flawed by nature, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) claim, because it is predetermined by systematic biases which are psychologically ingrained. For Thaler and Sunstein, careful planning of the physical environment is one way in which unconscious decision-making can be compensated for. Using the example of door handles, Thaler and Sunstein observe: ‘[f]lat plates say “push me” and big handles say “pull me”, so don’t expect people to push big handles! This is a failure of architecture to accommodate basic principles of human psychology’ (2008, p. 90).

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) also consider emotion to constitute a barrier preventing individuals from fully maximizing their potential as rational utility maximizers. This is an idea which has gained scientific credibility in neurobiology studies and the study of brain processes. From the perspective of neurobiology, emotional responses are triggered by the anterior insula region of the brain. This is a part of brain judged to be ‘ancient’ compared to the prefrontal region of the brain thought to modulate or restrain irrational drives (Lowenstein 1996, Gazzaniga 1998, Shiv *et al.* 2005). The suggestion here is that physiology dictates human response and individuals by nature are slaves to visceral drives



(you are irrational because of your brain chemistry or lack of control over it, which needs nudging towards more rational ends) (Damasio 1994, Le Doux 1996). Cast in the role of physiological dupes, neurobiology positions humans as predictably err and therefore failing to maximize the utility of their decision-making in rationally superior ways. Similarly, for Thaler and Sunstein there are limits that prevent humans from making consistently rational decisions. These limits include time, cognitive or computational ability, availability of information and emotional drives stemming from the dynamics of unconscious brain processes. To illustrate this point, Thaler and Sunstein distinguish between two types of behavior which they align with properties of an ‘Automatic System’ and a ‘Reflective System’ (2008, p. 21). The former highlights behaviors judged to be rapid, instinctual and ‘unconscious’ (2008, p. 21) (e.g., beyond contemplation) while the latter characterizes behaviors considered to be rule-bound, deductive and logical.

One of the dangers here is that government identified ‘bad behaviors’ – what Dolan *et al.* (2010, p. 12) pinpoint as ‘people vandalising cars, stealing our possessions, and threatening our children’ – run the risk of becoming discretely politicized *at the same moment* they are depoliticized through the ‘neutral’ language of evidence-based science. This is not to say that such behaviors are morally defensible. They are not and should be treated as serious crimes. But the presentation of neuroscience-based explanations of ‘bad behaviors’ as manifestations of an inbuilt, automated, bodily response – in other words, something purely neurologically instantiated – is problematic. For one thing, it raises political, ethical and epistemological concerns relating to the status or validity of knowledge – what constitutes knowledge – and the authority of ‘experts.’ Consider for example the deprofessionalization of education and teaching in England since the 1980s. Schools are no longer driven by the expertise of professionals – practitioners for example. Rather they are governed at a distance by a narrow rational, technical conception of good governance that relies on target-setting, testing and external inspection. Knowledge is power; or better still, those who decide what constitutes knowledge get to exercise the most power. To discuss these issues at length would be to engage in topics that unfortunately extend beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it is to say, there is a large literature spanning diverse disciplines across the social, health and political sciences that draw attention to similar issues around the impact of evidence-based practice on the work performed by professionals, practitioners and policy-makers in the public services, from education (Clegg 2005) and health (Wall 2008) to social care (Webb 2001).

Implicit therefore to the governmental program of libertarian paternalism is the bifurcation of the rational and the emotional. A corollary of this is that particular sites, relations and practices become the target of government intervention. As Pykett (2012, p. 222) observes, ‘[p]eople who are not expert in managing their emotions, by implication, need the government to manage their emotions for them – by affective arrangements, support for mental short-cuts and education and training for the more reflexive aspects of the brain.’ In this framing emotion is thought to occlude the successful performance of a rational position because it is judged to result from the irrational desire for immediate (as opposed to deferred, more rational forms of) gratification (Loewenstein 1996). Striving for a maximum position therefore entails the suspension or moderation of emotion to complement the performance of its supposed opposite: rational forms of behavior (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, p. 22; also see Brafman and Brafman 2009, Gladwell 2005). In fact, the history of Western thought is replete with examples of this dualist thinking. Plato imagined the body to be inhabited by a human soul or psyche composed of reason but who was constantly battling the wild and erratic temptations elicited through emotional impulses, for example (see Lyons 1980). As Edwards (1999, p. 272) highlights, contemporary forms

Table 1.

Emotional	Rational
Intuitive	Deliberative
Subjective	Objective
Feelings	Thoughts
Unconscious	Conscious
Body	Mind
Visceral	Cerebral
Predetermined	Dynamic
Deception	Reason

of professional and lay psychology continue to shore up similar definitions of emotion as ‘natural bodily experiences and expressions, older than language, irrational and subjective, unconscious rather than deliberative, genuine rather than artificial, feelings rather than thoughts’. These tendencies sometimes give rise to static and fixed ideas about the motivations or unconscious desires underpinning the lived experience of emotional and rational behavior. As illustrated in Table 1, cognitive psychology and neurobiology approaches typically generate dichotomies to classify and counterpose the emotional and the rational (also see Thaler and Sunstein 2008, p. 21).

Pykett (2012) offers a similar observation when she describes how soft forms of state power legitimate and reproduce a view of emotion as bodily dependent or elements in the formation of intuitive and embodied responses far removed from rational modes of reflection and deduction. A corollary of this, Pykett warns, is that libertarian paternalism is likely to further entrench gender inequalities since emotion is often gendered as a feminized practice. Challenging this ‘false dualism’, Pykett calls attention instead to the ways in which emotion can be understood to be recursively generated and rendered culturally intelligible through contexts which are locally indexed and culturally mediated. Such an approach is important for relocating the ‘social’ in our analyses of emotion (see Harré 1986) and, potentially, disentangling the false conflation of emotion with unreflexive and irrational modes of communication and decision making.

In a similar critical vein, I want to conclude this article by deploying elements of a discursive psychology approach with the aim of problematizing any straightforward definition of emotion as unreflexive and automated. Unlike psychoanalytic theory, which uses methods of free association and transference to trace the interior states and processes framing emotional dynamics (see Frosh 1999, Gough 2004), a discursive psychology approach seeks to demonstrate the ways in which emotion is negotiated and practiced in and through talk and interaction. (In some cases, researchers have creatively pursued conceptual analytic models that combine discursive psychology and psychoanalytic theorizing, sometimes referred to as psychosocial approaches; see Walkerdine *et al.* 2001 and Froggett 2002.) Discursive psychology aims to link the use of emotive discourse to ways of accounting for the self and the sociolinguistic activity of affirming or validating particular constructions of reality (see Wetherell 1998). A useful description of this method is offered by Edwards (1999, p. 278) who suggests that emotion can be analyzed as a ‘way of talking’, as a discourse in use and as a discursive device for positioning the self *through* talk. Using similar recursive logic, Wetherell introduces the concept of ‘affective practice’ to denote ‘a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning-making and with other social and material figurations’ (2012, p. 19). In both instances, emotion can be usefully conceptualized in relational terms as inextricably linked



with the productive power and constraining effects of discursive and semiotic flows and assemblages. In what follows I take up this approach through a brief look at the meaning and practice of school choice and highlight some of the ways in which emotion can be read as functioning as a discourse much in the same way that formal rationality does – it makes available a set of familiar tropes, formulations and repertoires to be used in the negotiation of meanings and practices of personal responsibility.

### **Emotion as sense making**

As highlighted by British media commentary, parents regularly experience ‘stress’ (BBC 2004) when summoned to select a secondary school for their child, and go on to experience even further stress if the child is denied their school preference (Jamieson 2008). For parents who elect to appeal the decision of the school not to grant their child a place, this can mean presenting their case to an independent panel consisting of voluntary members of the public who uphold or dismiss an appeal on the basis of evidence, justice and legislation. To increase the chances of a successful appeal, parents are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the formal staging of the appeal process and its socially approved forms of interaction. This places a strong demand on the professional and lawful conduct of all those involved, including the parent. With money and the right social contacts permitting, some parents may choose to hire professional consultants to prepare and handle the paperwork. They may even solicit the help of friends and family with a background in legal casework and terminology. In any case, the one constant for all parents engaging in the appeal process concerns avoiding expressions or language deemed to be too emotional. As some professional consultants and education commentators observe, parents tend to be highly ‘emotionally involved’ in the appeal process because of the direct impact it has on the welfare of the child (Rooney 2007, p. 60). An unsuccessful appeal can result in the parent being forced to send their child to a different school for example. This gives rise to parental fears and anxieties about what it means to be ‘responsible’ and ‘good’ (see Wilkins 2010 for an examination of these issues). The phenomena of fraudulent school applications (e.g., applications in which the parent has deliberately set out to defraud the local authority of a school place, usually by claiming to live in a house close to their school of choice) (Shepard 2008) illustrates clearly the kinds of lengths to which some parents commit in order to mitigate any potential risk or uncertainty. This growing phenomena is most evident in urban areas where popular schools tend to be oversubscribed, leading one local authority in 2008 to investigate an alleged fraudulent school application using the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) (powers usually reserved for, among other things, uncovering suspected terrorist activity) (Schlesinger 2008). While the appeal process shares some of the uncertainty of the school choice process, parents are told they can improve their chances of a successful appeal by managing their emotion. As ex-chief school inspector Christopher Woodhead warns, it is critical that parents abandon ‘vague emotional arguments’ in order to strengthen their case (Woodhead cited in Blinkhorn and Griffiths 2008). In the same vein, Rooney discourages parents from pursuing ‘emotional attacks’ on schools and to instead ‘stick to the facts’ (2007, p. 38).

In this framing emotion is troubled as something potentially wild and corrupting to the extent that it undermines the requirement that parents engage with logical forms of persuasion (e.g., contemplative and rule-bound). Parents therefore are invited to suppress hot passion in favor of cool reason (another example of how the emotional and the rational are differently legitimated within the constraining effects of discourses and their artifacts).

The process of school choice gives rise to a similar set of tensions and oppositions. For those parents who feel anxious or uncertain about how to navigate the school system, the government website Directgov offers a range of information and advice on choosing a school, from how to discern between different ‘types of school’ to how to evaluate and make use of ‘test results and Ofsted reports’ (see section *choosing a school*). But when discussing the motivations and fantasies underpinning their school choice, some parents willingly engage in speech patterns of subordinating consumerist logics to emotional sensibilities (see Wilkins 2013). Evident in the way some parents narrate their experience of choosing a secondary school, for example, is depreciation and even suspicion of the usefulness of league table data as criteria for judging whether a school is right for their child. This is not to say that all parents refuse the utility of league table data as a basis for their choice. Rather, parents will invariably graft and patch together a plurality of rationalities and vocabularies (citizen *and* consumer, community *and* individual, public *and* private; see Wilkins 2010) on which to base their choice. Parents therefore engage with multiple frameworks of choosing. These frameworks vary from the generic and objectively defined (e.g., government data on schools) to sensations or feelings held to be personal to the parent or experientially bound up with the perceived needs of the child. In terms of describing and validating the usefulness of these combined approaches, parents perform a great deal of communicative care and tact through their speech, juggling seemingly contradictory and conflicting impulses. Choice is a patchwork of social circulating discourses. At the same time, parents often delineate between approaches as sets of separate and incompatible frameworks in terms of the value and utility they make possible.

On the one hand there is the clinical gaze of the consumer whose myopic focus is government-approved assessments of ‘output’ and ‘quality.’ This approach relies on parents engaging with instrumental form of reasoning that make use of what Ball and Vincent (1998, p. 380) describe in their study of school choice as ‘cold knowledge’. It therefore can be closely approximated to a consumer or market orientation to choice. Yet for many parents the reifying mechanisms of the market apparatus fall short of engaging with the ‘needs’ and personality of the child, to the extent that some parents denounce economic rationalizations of choice as impersonal, detached and decontextualized. Against this approach, some mothers engage in forms of emotional labor whereby they descriptively build up an image of their child as distinctive, inimitable and highly personalized. This has the rhetorical effect of producing two opposed frameworks of choosing: one constructed on the basis of the pressures and demands of the market, with its insistence on the calculation and extraction of probabilities, and the other linked with the concrete and lived practice of experientially knowing and engaging with the ‘needs’ of the child. Emotive discourse can therefore be usefully described as ‘purposeful assemblies of versions of reality and cognition’ (Edwards 1999, p. 271). It provides a set of familiar repertoires and formulations to be used in the communicative act of garnering support and legitimation for alternative rationalities and vocabularies not conventionally captured through economic models of decision making. Some parents will deploy elements of an emotive discourse in order to affirm a view of the market apparatus as abstract, generic and alienating, for example. Parents therefore knowingly and reflexively make use of emotion categories and emotion ideas in order to index a notion of responsible parenting through forms of meaning-making not conventionally captured through the clinical practice of economical utility. From this perspective, emotion can be understood to constitute a powerful rhetorical ploy for constructing alternative forms of reasoning based on the social or moral treatment of human need; as part of a cultural or gender repertoire; or as a condition for subverting the apparatus of economic rationalization itself.

## Conclusion

In this article I have charted the rise of libertarian paternalism in the context of British policy discourse and hinted at the ongoing development of neoliberal ideas and practices as embedded within the framework of these emerging governmental rationalities and philosophies. In addition I have sketched how government initiatives aimed at creating better informed consumers reproduce neurobiology understandings of the emotional and the rational as diametrically opposed. Against this approach I have employed a discursive psychology approach in order to problematize existing policy (mis)understandings of the emotional as automated or unreflexive. Of course, this is not the first time experts have sought to mobilize public policy to mitigate the effects of perceived irrational behavior. Lippman (1922) and Bernay (1923), who both sat on US committee on Public Information and shared a deep suspicion of the ‘masses,’ proposed as far as back as the 1920s that social and psychological research should be utilized in the interests of disciplining the chaotic impulses of individuals. Operationalizing an ‘elite/mass view of society,’ McGuigan (2009, pp. 104–105) notes the ways in which these propaganda and market experts sought to ‘manipulate artfully the irrational impulses of ordinary people’ through the availability of new media technologies. This highlights how social marketing, technology and social and psychological research are sometimes assembled in ways that seek to create disciplined subjects who are amenable to systems of governance and governing practices. It also alludes to the power, fear and anxiety underpinning the notion of the irrational and its uneasy relationship with preferred forms of rational or cerebral behavior. But emotion is not necessarily an inbuilt and automated response to objects, relations, or people in the world. It is also generative of new ways of thinking and feeling. Emotion is recruited and entangled with normative practices of meaning making and of positioning the self and others. Policy-makers and practitioners may therefore be well advised to think more critically about what emotive discourse aims to achieve in certain contexts. This means rethinking neurobiology definitions of the emotional and the rational as simply conflicting phenomena, and instead attending to the complex problem of how emotion is not simply the reflex of cognitively impaired subjects, but sometimes reflects active and inventive attempts to generate alternative forms of reasoning, judgment and evaluation.

## Notes on contributor

Andrew Wilkins is Research Fellow in the School of Education at Roehampton University, London. His research links and combines theory and application in areas of social policy, sociology and education. In 2012 Andrew Wilkins was awarded a research grant as part of the ESRC Future Research Leaders scheme. The project, entitled ‘School accountability and stakeholder education’ (SASE), investigates the role of new public management in education.

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