

# “Publish?” “Perish . . . Oh No” An Ethological Interrogation of Sense-Making and Resistance in Word Association as Inquiry

Qualitative Inquiry  
2022, Vol. 28(8-9) 896–905  
© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/10778004221093420  
journals.sagepub.com/home/qix



Mollie Etheridge<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article deliberates the contribution of a methodological “mattering” tool, word association as inquiry. Word association generally involves responding to a word prompt, or series of prompts, with the first word or idea that one can think of. It might be assumed that word association activities yield eclectic and unpredictable reactions. During interviews with 16 U.K.-based academics, however, the idiom “publish or perish” was repeated by eight individuals. This article considers such repetition in view of new materialist and Deleuzian ideas, speculating the influence of prepersonal and affective practice processes on participant responses. By putting three nonrepresentational concepts to work—becoming, sense, and affect—it is argued that word association tasks and the “sense-event” they incur both highlight and interrogate taken-for-granted truths and ways of being. Consequently, this methodological intervention could generate new relations and material effects that render resistance “becoming not impossible”.

## Keywords

qualitative research, methodologies, qualitative research & education, evaluating inquiry, methods of inquiry

## Introduction

To perish is to rot; decay; starve. In modern society, perishing is not something that happens naturally. Perishing is the violent consequence of a political and economic context in which deterioration and starvation are acceptable fates. Within academia there is a phrase, “publish or perish.” This maxim refers to the influence, both real and perceived, of publication output in securing academic employment, promotion, and reputation (De Rond & Miller, 2005; Rawat & Meena, 2014; van Dalen, 2021). It is perhaps hard to picture an academic, with the privilege of knowledge and education, perishing. However, and while “perish” might still be an exaggeration, contemporary higher education (HE) is politically and economically structured in such a way that the alternative to publishing goes beyond professional stagnation. In the United Kingdom, the sector-wide reliance on precarious contracts and low pay functions to literally impoverish those at the beginning of an academic career, as well as those who struggle to maintain research output (Mason & Megoran, 2021). Although the expectation to publish is experienced differently within and between disciplines, the contest for research funding and job security has become so saturated that some critics claim it is no longer a

case of “publish or perish” but rather “publish *and* perish” (Vossen, 2017).

Although conditions within HE offer a useful hook for the analysis at hand, this article’s contribution is methodological and exceeds the disciplinary boundaries of education. Drawing from my PhD research with U.K.-based academic parents and academics desiring parenthood, I now present a new materialist and Deleuzian interrogation of word association (WA) as a form of inquiry. As part of the research, I incorporated two WA tasks into an otherwise normative semi-structured interview. During these tasks, participants were verbally presented with a series of single-word prompts to which they were required to respond with the first phrase or notion that came to mind or mouth. Although it might be assumed that WA activities yield eclectic and unpredictable responses, eight of 16 participants responded to the prompt “publish” with the word

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Cambridge, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Mollie Etheridge, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 8PQ, UK.  
Email: mlb60@cam.ac.uk

“perish” during at least one of the tasks. Using these reactions as a starting place for discussion, I use this article to explore the extent to which WA utilizes language, assemblage and entanglement to work through and beyond the possible and/or sayable. Although working conditions within U.K. HE are not the primary focus of this article, one implication of this methodological intervention could be the development of resistant possibility, with the “sense-event” (Deleuze, 2004 [1969] that WA as inquiry incurs generating new relations and material effects that render resistance “becoming not impossible” (Kuntz, 2020, p. 25).

Indeed, participants’ repetition of the publish or perish idiom was political. Consumer economies rely on the “contagion” of desire, fear and insecurity (Gibbs, 2010). The HE economy, with its emphasis on achieving excellence through competition,<sup>1</sup> certainly relies on the contagion of a sense of precariousness and, in that, also the presumed need to produce output (Allmer, 2018).<sup>2</sup> By examining how a mantra critical of these conditions came to be repeated during interview, this article looks to gain insight into the mechanisms by which so-called “neoliberal”<sup>3</sup> ideals are perpetuated also. To be clear, I do not seek to observe the reliable truth of neoliberalism’s consolidation. To seek as such would be to assume that individuals—academics—merely exist in the world and have ideologies done on to them. In contrast, I recognize how ways of being are produced by continually becoming assemblages<sup>4</sup> that relay “ordinary affects” (Stewart, 2007) and inform potentialities for action, potentialities which in turn, inform the (re)becoming of these assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). I therefore view academics as being of the world; they are both subject and integral to the emergence and contagion of ways of being. Responses to the prompt “publish” hence represent a becoming and, in being as such, are indicative of how even the tiniest of affective spaces can (re)produce not only scope for (in)action but conditions bearing a semblance to ideological perspectives.

I now employ Deleuze’s (2004) notion of “sense” to explore the affects that support and emerge from the WA task, speculating: (a) how and in what ways participants’ repetition of “publish or publish” resulted from variations of “sense” and sense-making, and (b) how “sense” might be utilized so to attend to the new materialist aim of dislodging harmful practice (Davies, 2021). To achieve this, I will first detail my initial research design before reflecting on how WA simultaneously emulates and resists humanist research practice. I then conceptualize the ways in which the functioning of “sense” during WA tasks is both affected and affective at cognitive and prepersonal levels, before considering how “expressive engagement” (Bowden, 2014) with the “sense-event” can unsettle and/or (re)produce the “common sense” (Deleuze, 2004) of existing power dynamics. I therefore close the article by arguing that WA’s contribution rests not with normative forms of research impact but with the “mattering actions” (Buikema & Thiele, 2018) that succeed participation.

## Research Design and Development

I conceived of WA as inquiry during my PhD research into the effects and affects of the transition to parenthood and desired parenthood on U.K.-based academics’ engagement with the norms of contemporary academic labor. My then understanding of WA as method is, however, at odds with how I perceive the method now. Indeed, my original research design was humanist, meaning I sought to prioritize validity and truth (St. Pierre, 2000). Aware that people may have different approaches to articulating their feelings and experiences, I took a multipronged approach to data collection and asked prospective participants to choose between three one-to-one online interview formats: interview with WA elements; interview with body mapping elements; and interview with placard design elements. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to detail the latter two options, WA proved the most popular format, attracting 16 out of 38 participants.<sup>5</sup> Aside from working at PhD level or above, participants were recruited on the basis that they had experienced either the desire for parenthood or the transition to parenthood while undertaking academic study or employment since 2010. The U.K. HE system has undergone substantial policy changes since this date and I wanted to explore how such changes, alongside contemporary maternity practices, affected the transition to or desire for parenthood.

WA involves responding to a word prompt with the first word or idea that comes to mind and/or mouth. This was explained to each participant at the beginning of the interview and was followed by a practice round made up of prompts unrelated to the research subject, such as “dog,” “water,” “hair,” and “run.” Aside from ensuring participants understood the task requirements, I hoped a practice round would facilitate insight into each person’s approach to the activity, adding credence to my interpretations of responses given during the nonpractice rounds. For these rounds, I sought to ensure that the prompts were evocative enough so to yield insightful responses but apolitical enough so not to coerce certain reactions. In identifying the words suitable for the task, I divided the three elements of my research—parenthood, desired parenthood, and academia—into constitutive factors. For parenthood, I therefore took some of the different but necessary aspects of parenting (“child,” “parent,” “care”), although some words were altered depending on the participant’s parenting status (switching “birth” to “adopt” in the case of adoptive parents). During the task, words from the three elements were interspersed as I wanted to ensure that participants could not anticipate or prepare for the next word. In total, 18 prompts were selected. Below is an extract from the first WA task with Amy: In order to preserve anonymity, participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Researcher	Amy
University?	Wall
Writing?	Hard?
Children?	Nice
Academic?	Hard? Sorry, that was the same as before
Mother	Everything
Nurse?	Amazing
Publish?	Perish [both participant and researcher laugh]
Maternity?	Leave
Sleep?	Deprived [laughter and pause] Okay but not currently

I hoped the demand for an immediate answer would mitigate any hesitancy experienced during interview and allow participants to express their “true” feelings. As participants were placed under no expectation of producing recognizable or logical responses, WA might be perceived as a surrealist effort:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton, 1972 [1924])

However, to “know” that participants’ answers reflected the truth of their opinions, I included the same WA task at the beginning and end of the interview, bookending an otherwise normative semi-structured interview concerning the research topic/s. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to reflect on their reactions and offers reasons for their changing or staying the same. Although the question of whether an absence of moral concern is possible is asked later on in this article, participant responses to the WA prompts were hence presented—quite like surrealist works in a gallery—alongside attempts at reasoning with them, lines were intentionally drawn between the thought and the moral and ethical context from which it derived.

### Project Positioning

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that “narrative consists not in communicating what one has seen but in transmitting what one has heard, what someone else said to you” (p. 85). Certainly, my efforts to create a robust research design were thwarted by the impossibility of representing meaning via something as static as language. A significant number of participants struggled to articulate their response to the WA prompts. When asked, a majority (14/16) detailed how their reactions took the shape of not only words but images, sounds, smells, and ideals: “when you said “children” I thought of their hair and its smell and the way that like it tickles when I carry them” (Niamh). George, for example,

sighed and commented: “I don’t know what to say” in response to the word “father” before later describing how he had been struck by the memory of his own father’s face, with whom he had a turbulent relationship. Similarly, Bianca struggled to offer a verbal response to the prompt “writing,” saying the word invoked a feeling of being “torn” by the multiple identities and possibilities that had come to mind.

Although such reactions problematize the validity of WA as inquiry, I have come to believe that the contribution of WA rests not with its (in)ability to capture the truth of things but with its material contribution to future becomings. This belief emerged from a re-reading of the WA interviews in view of new materialist and Deleuzian philosophies. Generally, new materialist thinkers conceive the world, people, and things as being in constant states of emergence (Braidotti, 2002, 2018). Barad’s (2007) ethico-onto-epistemological positioning, for example, holds the matter and meaning within ethics, being and becoming not as disparate elements but as ones perpetually entwined. Although new materialist analysis is fractious and characterized by philosophical disagreements between varying thinkers, including Haraway (1988), Barad (2007), De Landa (2016), and Fox and Alldred (2021), one consequence of an ontology of becoming is that the world, people, and things are neither permanently nor inherently tied to one philosophical or methodological orientation. Implicated in this, a research project that might once have been regarded as conventional may later be reinterpreted or reframed as otherwise. Furthermore, and although outcome and impact cannot result from “valid” observations, research participation and engagement form individual experience. These experiences are then entangled in the becoming of behaviors and perspectives, “mattering actions” (Buikema & Thiele, 2018) that are both affected and affective.

During the first WA task, six participants reacted to “publish” with “perish.” During the second task, two further participants—who had previously offered a different retort—also answered with “perish,” although another two who had initially responded in this manner changed their response to something else. In what remains of this article, I consider how the variable processes informing such mimesis and deviation speak to the affects circulating within U.K. HE and the role of WA in rendering these affects recognizable. Although my examination of fixed interview transcripts cannot account for the open-ended nature of subjectivities, my new materialist position recognizes the contingency of any interpretations made and my application of Deleuze’s “sense” emphasizes the role of intensities that cannot be expressed using verbal terms. This theoretical combination is not without dilemma. Hein (2016) identifies material incompatibilities between the Deleuze and new materialist thinkers, particularly Barad (2007), arguing that while the former prioritizes force and creation, the latter

focuses on entanglement and intra-action. Although Hein discourages qualitative researchers from working simultaneously with these authors, underpinning this discouragement is the assumption that ontological consistency inspires more desirable outcomes. Yet, philosophies of being cannot be wrapped and unwrapped around the world like filters. In a Deleuzian ontology of becoming, for instance, the nature and future of this ontology must, by virtue of its own assertions, be in a constant state of flux. The influence or coexistence of elements from a “philosophy of transcendence” (Hein, 2016 on Barad) cannot be discounted. Ironically, then, it is more consistent to consider ontological perspectives not as separable but rather implicated by and within one another.

### Entangling Concept With Method: “Sense” Making or Making-Sense?

Deleuze’s (2004) “sense” exists as one of four relations within the proposition. The first three relations are denotation, which relates the proposition to particular things and images; manifestation, which links the proposition to desires, beliefs and intentions; and signification, which connects the proposition to general or universally held concepts. In the context of U.K. HE, it might be argued that denotation alludes to specific policies, institutions, and things; manifestation refers to beliefs and hopes surrounding things in HE and within society; and signification links to the use of general concepts, ideas, and even turns of phrases. For Deleuze, these relations are of equal standing. To return to the example of U.K. HE, the manifestation surrounding competitive frameworks not only rests on denotation (the naming of the thing) but is inextricable from popular forms of signification, such as “neoliberal.” Yet, these intrinsic connections take from a fourth nonrepresentational relation called “sense,” which emerges only in and as “sense” itself. Attempts to define this relation therefore pull upon another instance of sense:

sense is always presupposed as soon as I begin to speak; I would not be able to speak without this presupposition. In other words, I would never state the sense of what I am saying. But on the other hand, I can always take the sense of what I say as the object of another proposition whose sense, in turn, I cannot state. (p. 31)

Still, Deleuze draws a distinction between common sense and good sense. The former governs and takes from denotation by identifying the things that the self experiences whereas the latter employs signification so to suppose that which is becoming. These senses are inextricably entwined. With regard to the “publish”—“perish” interaction during interviews, participants’ responses arguably stem from the association of the word “publish” with both,

or either, the common sense of particular publication pressures and the good sense of the “publish or perish” mantra, itself indicative of pressure to publish. Articulations of good and common sense are still underpinned by the general sense, which functions as a “incorporeal, complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event<sup>6</sup> which inheres or subsists in the proposition” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 21). Through evading articulation and representation, this form renders interpretations of interview extracts highly limited; however, Williams (2008) asserts that the word “logic” in *Logic of Sense* refers not to the reasoning with what sense is but to the search for structural patterns that are inherent to and produced by events. Even though there remains “part of the event that we should call non-actualizable, precisely because it belongs to thought and can be accomplished only by thought and in thought” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 228), we can still consider how events ricochet between affective intensities and senses in ways that inspire further events and sense. Thus, I now consider the prepersonal and cognitive processes that occur when WA prompts ricochet against the sense that precedes and succeeds their becoming.

### Sense as Prepersonal

In asking participants to be “summoned by language” (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 3), WA embraces the superficiality of spoken expression. The question of “how did that happen?” (St. Pierre, 2019) was raised by Nina. Upon responded to the prompt “publish” with the word “fun,” Nina clarified: “I don’t know where that came from. I would never usually admit to that.” Similarly, and during the second round, Linda reacted to publish with “perish” before claiming: “I didn’t want to say it again.” The volatility of language makes similarities in participant responses especially curious, and one explanation for these parallels is that participant reactions reflect the impressions of sense, common sense and good sense on faculties of thought—that is, responses given during the WA activity are indicative of participants’ recognition of (a) the objects, things and ideas gestured to by a particular prompt and (b) the relationship of those things to both individual and shared experiences. Upon establishing these connections, the result is the reaching for a “unified, identifiable object” (Snir, 2018, p. 301) that can be communicated about in a “common language” (Snir, 2018). In support of this hypothesis is the change in direction offered by David and Henrietta. Having given the descriptives “hard” and “difficult” following the prompt “publish” during the first task, both reacted with “perish” during the second round. According to the described processes, the intermitting interview discussion, which concerned experiences of academic work and labor, facilitated

this change by refining the scope of ideas and experiences alluded to in the prompt.

The prepersonal identification of opportunities for reaction would also have been driven by a series of affective energies and intensities. In the last three decades, the “turn to affect” (Clough, 2008) in the social and psychological sciences has been inspired by Spinozan interpretations. For Spinoza, psychological and embodied actions result from a myriad of interactions with other bodies and things, including things that only be experienced as energy and/or intensity (De Landa, 2016). Although the exact nature of these interactions depends on the relations that are present or possible, the resulting affect, “defined as the property of the active outcome of an encounter, takes the form of an increase or decrease in the ability of the body and mind alike to act” (Thrift, 2008, p. 178). Applied in the context of my research, participants were therefore navigating intensities emerging from and around the interview environment *as well as* the various senses attached to specific word prompts or interview questions.

That the “publish or perish” maxim was repeated irrespective of participants’ differing conditions speaks to the affective momentum of both this maxim and the conditions it refers to. For Ahmed (2004), this momentum is tautological: “some signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect” (p. 119). As pressure to publish radiates, more pressure is contained within ideas, activities, and phrases related to publication. It might be assumed that this momentum works in reverse: the more the “publish or perish” mantra is used to criticize practice, the more affective the phrase becomes, the more it is consolidated in common sense. Still, performative and competitive cultures within academic work arguably create “conditions of arrival” (Ahmed, 2010) that render such momentum nonthreatening. Even should the mantra provide a feeling of criticism, the good sense attributed to the presumed need to publish dissuades rejection of these conditions: “I’m always looking for the next article . . . I know I shouldn’t but I you know I want to succeed and to do that I have to think about my output” (Georgina). Furthermore, participants in my research explained the phrase in different ways. Even though Gavin and Lisa both offered “perish” as a retort, Gavin described pressure to publish as a “threat” to new scholars and diversity in the profession while Lisa disclosed feeling as though frequent publication should be a “given” for early career researchers.

Participants’ responses to the prompts were often immediately followed by further reactions, particularly in the form of laughter or verbalized gestures, “oh dear” (Nina), “Oh [pause] Okay, sure” (David). Through being asked to explain their reactions, including their reactions to these

reactions, participants were nonetheless embroiled in the circular task of making meaning from sense. Both Deleuze (2004) and Williams (2008) assert that all attempts to reason with sense constitute a “sense-event” in being inevitably underpinned by new and developing pre-personal forms. As we act and react during everyday life and relations, sense-events occur automatically and organically. Still, and in the context of research, I believe sense-events can be purposely and knowingly implemented for the sake of illuminating and reconfiguring the influence of taken-for-granted truths. I recognize the inconsistencies in both mine and Deleuze’s perspectives. For Deleuze (2004), thinking inspires uniformity. As propositions emerge from common sense, any resulting good sense—including criticisms and hopes—will reflect the political and social order from which the common sense was formed. With that said, sense’s nonrepresentational nature holds the development of unpredictable behaviors and senses—“lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—within the realm of possibility. Although it remains unclear how unsettling the sense-event can be if it deals only with the said and the sayable, I will now critically examine the effect of historic meaning-making and intention on pre-personal and known deliberations of sense and affect.

### *Affect as a Social Practice*

Bowden (2014) maintains that some events cannot be understood without recognizing the role of intention. He differentiates between events that are actions and events as mere occurrences: although the latter are passively experienced, the former are actively undertaken. Bowden defends this position by highlighting a contradiction in Deleuzian thought. Namely that, despite calling the “event” impersonal, Deleuze also speaks of the need to “will” the event and take responsibility for its emergence. For Bowden, events are “willed” through forms of “expressive agency” within which “will” is credited should both the actor and others perceive the former’s actions as expressing something about their objective. Notwithstanding the outwardly surrealist inclination of WA, participants in my research felt responsible for “willing” a particular reaction. George and Wendy, for example, spoke about balancing the demand for automatic responses with their desire to be “helpful”:

I felt like I needed to respond quickly because I wanted to say the first thing that came to my head and not have the word put through loads of filters in my brain before it came out so there were times there where it rolled off the tongue and other times there where I felt under pressure and maybe the word that came out [pause] maybe I overthought it more than I would have liked to have done but hopefully I’ve given you something to work with. (George)

I want to say something relevant and, you know, helpful.  
(Wendy)

In these instances, participants acknowledged and sought to mitigate prepersonal potential. Referring to Oswald Drucot's metaphor of the bull in a field, prepersonal theorist, Massumi (2015), likens affect to the unconscious action of running away: "before you have had time to think, you have already sized up the mood of the bull" (p. 194). Affective practice theorists nevertheless criticize this position for portraying individuals as entirely "assailed by events, by smells, the social relations organizing spaces, material objects and global economic forces" (Wetherell, 2008, p. 236). As emerging affects are entangled with narrative and other social and material figurations, resulting patterns of activity signify intent and awareness as much as prepersonal energies (Walkerline, 2016; Wetherell, 2008, 2015). From this position, the decision to run from the bull is inspired by an awareness of the danger being posed, an understanding that draws from previous acts of meaning-making (Baker, 2021). According to affective practice theory, then, participant reactions to the WA prompts mirror patterns of activity that are inseparable from intentional assessments of value and moral orders within the assemblages of the competitive academy: "I was going to say something else but I think 'unfair' fits better. Unfair. The university is unfair" (Olivia).

Massumi (2021 [2002]) maintains that affect and discourse can be cleanly distinguished, that the latter is employed to comprehend the former. However, this argument assumes that affect and meaning have starting points, and so stands in contrast to Wetherell's (2013) perspective that, "any initial bodily hit . . . is always already occurring within an ongoing stream of meaning-making or semiosis. We cannot stop the clock, start it just from some constructed moment of initial impingement" (p. 355). Still, the excessive functions of affect and sense continually prevent, or at least threaten, linear movement between experience, mediation, and action. Consequently, individuals can act in unpredictable ways that deviate from the meanings they knowingly attribute to specific events. During interviews, the sense-event embedded within the WA activity acted as a catalyst for illuminating and then exploring participants' understanding of the space between their reactions and their opinions, including the motivating factors and feelings they might not be aware of:

I do think I was probably taking the immediate response, which was quite negative, but this is not necessarily how I feel about everything . . . It's difficult because you know what the project is about and what you would like to come out of it, and I found it [the WA activity] hard because what I was saying wasn't [pause] it wasn't really what I would have liked to say. (Sandra)

[laughter] oh my god publish or perish. It's everywhere . . . I'm a bit just feeling a bit shocked [pause] like with [responding with] pressure to writing and pressure to academic I didn't realise how [pause] disheartened I must be. It's uncomfortable to sit with actually. (Georgina)

For another participant, Nina, the competing meanings assigned to previously negotiated affects (publication expectations) collided with the affective space of the interview, the result being that she enacted individualized rather than collective patterns of activity. Having disclosed that she would never "normally" admit to finding publishing fun, Nina frames the idea of publishing as enjoyable as a predisposition, a form of "good sense" that informs her prepersonal judgment:

I feel a little embarrassed to have said that but I do find it [publication] fun if I'm being honest but [pause] you're not supposed to encourage that idea when management are already so interested in reviewing output and when for some people that interest is incredibly cruel, especially for those who don't have you know the care opportunities that we do . . . So I do find it fun but it's not just about me and my thoughts on it go beyond the fun of it. (Nina)

This section has considered the varying prepersonal and cognitive processes behind participants' negotiations of the WA task. Although participants' reactions to the prompts were neither consistent nor predictable, what can be said is that each prompt was negotiated by each participant according to a combination of material and psychological affective histories that were unique to them and the moment of interview. Reverberating across historic and current structures of meaning, these affects translated into a combination of seemingly prepersonal and intentional reactions, with the "sense-event" then illuminating to participants just some of the predispositions and structures that had facilitated such reverberations. Building on these observations, the next part of this article considers the extent to which the sense-event can stimulate the reconfiguration of internally held narratives and ideas.

## The Ethological Implications of Word Association as Inquiry

Through engineering "expressive engagement" (Bowden, 2014) with emerging sense-events, I believe WA as inquiry affords participants insight into the internalized ideas that drive their negotiation of everyday affects. Through confronting these ideas, participants can then attempt to make meaning (however superficial) of them—how did they form? How are they maintained?—and even refashion them into something else. This is not to create a separation

between discourse and affect (as Massumi, 2021). Instead, I view participants' reflections as inevitably entangled in the emergence of "mattering actions" that constantly shape the becoming of sociopolitical realities (Buikema & Thiele, 2018). From an ethological position, ethology being the study of "capacities for affecting and being affected" (Deleuze, 1988, pp. 125–126), WA as inquiry thus constitutes a "research machine" that has micropolitical effects on the participants and circulating capacities for action (Fox & Alldred, 2021).

Fox and Alldred (2021) argue that particular effects and/or project outcomes can be orchestrated through the purposeful application of certain research machines. Although the excessive and continual nature of being affected renders predictable outcomes unlikely, my proposed use for WA prioritizes disruptive *potential* as opposed to measurable, quantifiable forms of impact. At the same time, this potential is still orchestrated through WA's reliance on the individualized sense-event, which transfers the responsibility of meaning maker from the researcher to participant. Notwithstanding the possible affects and effects on behavior, such transference, in the context of my research, breaks from disempowering discourses concerning neoliberalization and the lack of "choice" held by contemporary academics (Leathwood & Read, 2013). In recognizing the capabilities possessed by participants, for instance, WA as inquiry follows Walkerdine's (2016) call for more methodological opportunities to work "with" as opposed to "on" participants.

Still, it is unclear *why* WA participants would be unaware of inhibiting forces on their ideas. A commonly held notion in sociological theory is that power operates through social life in ways that iterate the vulnerability of resistance (Butler, 2016). Even though power functions in ways that are consciously experienced, inequitable relations function discreetly across all interactions and discourses (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). There are hence times when power is knowingly *and* unknowingly affective; knowingly and *unknowingly* translated into conduct: "The reigning rationality must be transmitted, but . . . distorted. To do this it must pass through another medium; it must be translated onto an affective register . . . acted out in the everyday, without being thought out" (Massumi, 2015, p. 85). In asking participants to question the origin of seemingly automatic reactions, WA as inquiry disturbs the internalization of inhibiting power dynamics surrounding the topic being investigated. In the following example, Henrietta is made aware of the subtle reorientation of her attitude toward writing,

When I was doing my PhD I would like get so excited about doing research and I probably worked too hard because of that but I don't know if I would have like been so [pause] I'm beat but in a different way now and that way is really just like

downtrodden like writing was exciting like okay stressful but I loved it I used to love it but to say "disappointed" for writing now like something has to have gone wrong and I think [pause] I feel a bit weird about it because actually I do feel disappointed in my writing and feel that really intensely but I also don't know when I started to feel that way. I think that yeah like the pressures and the overtime are destroying my brain and have taken that enjoyment away and I think that maybe I should do something about it (Henrietta)

Rather than transformative, such disruption is likely to be fleeting and temporary as the interview itself: "You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Although this danger perhaps rests with dynamics of power outside of the research assemblage, the reconfiguration of constraining narratives may also be inhibited by participants' ontological disposition, that which gives (il)legitimacy and longevity to ideological structures. Alldred and Fox (2017) argue foundational forms, such as neoliberalism, cannot and do not exist; any becomings that bear a semblance to these forms merely represent the mediations and operations that occur by and through the intra-relations within a given assemblage. Although this might be ontologically consistent with the new materialist orientation from which the pair write, no ontological perspective is universally held.

During the WA interviews, for instance, participant perspectives ranged from viewing competitive—"neoliberal"—policy as inevitable, ("well it is either publish or perish. That's what it is like it's just the way this sector is now" Carys) to something that each individual has a hand in creating ("we all do it like we all have a say but we convince ourselves that we don't but like every choice I make in this job defines what the job is . . . I don't think it has to be this way" George). It is not unreasonable, then, to speculate whether these varying beliefs, which provide guidance on what is and is not possible, influenced the ways in which participants handled and responses to the prompt and the sense-event that followed. By this I mean that a participant who views "neoliberal" structures to be present and/or ineluctable may struggle to see the alternative trajectories for action, continuing to engage with consolidated patterns of activity following and even during the WA activities:

Publish?

Perish [pause] oh no, I said it again. I didn't want to say it again.

Last time you said that it [the response] just came to you instantly. How do you feel this time round?

I don't know [pause] I have been worrying recently. I don't like producing papers when I don't have like [pause] I need to have something to say and at the minute I just don't [pause] I have

been trying to ignore the feeling that I'm not doing what I should and you know it's just got to happen at some point. I will have to do something soon . . . I don't [pause] I don't think the whole nexus of funding issues and uh things that drive like this "publish or perish" culture will be irrelevant anytime soon like I think it's bigger than us now so I guess it [the response] reflects that in some way but I'm not sure. (Linda)

On one hand, the critiques addressed here paint a negative picture. The resistant potential offered by WA as inquiry is contingent on seemingly many things: participants' ontological perspective, the affective space of the interview, a willingness to reflect and continue reflecting even after the interview has taken place. On the other hand, WA is a transgressive form of inquiry that rejects limiting conceptualizations of research "impact." Such "impacts" have tangible and knowable effects and are favored by research councils and funders in ways that tie researchers to methods and concepts that offer measurable, comparable outputs, even when such outputs cannot be guaranteed (Laing et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the difficulty in acquiring funding for research that celebrates its inability to comprehend the extent of its effects, the development and defense of WA may thus inspire resistance through being resistant. The deliberations undertaken in this article certainly foreground a research pathway for these methods. Although the ontological perspectives of my research participants appear to have had a pivotal influence on their negotiations of the WA prompts and the succeeding sense-event, my awareness of this influence emerged only during the analysis of my interviews. In centering and knowingly investigate these perspectives during interviews, future work may rupture inhibiting power dynamics in ways that are more transformative and longstanding than the ones my work ostensibly incurred.

## Thinking Forwards

This article has proposed a methodological mattering tool, WA as inquiry, that puts to work three new materialist concepts: becoming, sense, and affect. This tool has been developed in view of my PhD research interviews with U.K.-based academics, with particular attention paid to separate participants' repetition of the mantra, "publish or perish." Using the emergence of this mantra as a way in, I have conducted an ethological analysis that considers the ways in which the methodological application of language and assemblage can facilitate the interrogation of predispositions that drive intentional and prepersonal behaviors. Although WA as inquiry prioritizes what is *said*, irrespective of how becoming, affect and sense all transcend the linguistic signifier (Braidotti, 2018), WA's application of the sense-event nevertheless acknowledges and encourages participants to also recognize the limits of speech in navigating affect and predisposition. The contribution offered by WA as inquiry therefore rests with the varying

micropolitical effects and "mattering actions" that succeed expressive engagement with the affects circulating throughout the interview. Without insinuating that these actions irrecoverably transform participants' perceptions, the observations made in this paper suggest that WA as inquiry can certainly disrupt the repetition of ways of being.

Although "publish or perish" functions in this article as a hook for analysis, HE—both in the United Kingdom and on a global scale—is operating in and through various crises relating to populism, a rise in authoritarianism, funding reductions, privatization, distrust in academics and the disregard for supposedly non-profitable subjects and disciplines. Irrespective of the widespread criticism of these conditions, it is hard to see a way out; the processes by which knowledges are produced seem, "paradoxically" (Dillabough, 2021), out of the hands of those who produce them. It is for this reason that assemblage, sense, and affect need to be worked not just conceptually but intentionally and materially also. In my research, WA interrupted the reproduction of neoliberal discourses, illuminating the superficiality of such conditions—though these interruptions were themselves fleeting. In any case, future investigations may develop the potential of WA as inquiry by shifting attention from dispositions informing the (re)becomings of neoliberal to the dispositions and structures of meaning informing moments of hesitancy and resistance. By exacerbating these latter moments, such effort could then inspire the development of a different affective space—potentially rendering the unsayable, sayable.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by Harding Distinguished Postgraduate Scholarship at the University of Cambridge.

## ORCID iD

Mollie Etheridge  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0589-9222>

## Notes

1. In the United Kingdom, these forms of competition include but are not necessarily limited to university league tables, student satisfaction scores, the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework.
2. Participants might have felt especially precarious or frustrated with publication pressures at the time of interview. Interviews took place in the weeks leading up to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 submission deadline. At this point in early 2021, the United Kingdom was also undergoing its third national lockdown since the COVID-19



pandemic hit in March 2020. During these lockdown periods, which were repeated on an international scale, in-person teaching at schools and child care provisions were suspended for months at a time. Consequently, woman and primary caregivers across the globe experienced difficulty managing work and domestic spheres, with these groups submitting fewer academic papers between 2020 and 2021 than their often-male counterparts, particularly with regard to publications addressing COVID-19 (Minello et al., 2020; Squazzoni et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2022).

3. Broadly speaking, neoliberal ideology and policy emerge from economic philosophies concerning the role of market capitalism in producing the “best” (Hayek, 1996 [1949], p. 104) product or service. Governments, institutions, and individuals adhering to these philosophies therefore emphasize the significance of competition and personal responsibility in attaining and preserving individual freedom (Flew, 2014). In relation to HE, neoliberal policy has been criticized for framing students as consumers (Bunce et al., 2017), reproducing social and institutional inequalities (R. Brown, 2018) and undermining democratic principles (W. Brown, 2015).
4. Assemblages exist in all scenarios and places. Assemblages can be separated into complementary but differing components, such as bodies, architecture, technologies, and discourses, which function alongside one another to co-produce a series of affective capacities (De Landa, 2016). Incorporated within an assemblage are smaller assemblages, with any assemblage itself incorporated in a larger one. The assemblage of the university, for example, consists of smaller assemblages relating to departments but can also be considered as part of broader ones concerning university groups and the general sector.
5. A range of disciplines were represented in the sample, including medicine, veterinary science, education, history, and psychology.
6. Events begin as the potentialities immanent to structures, with the state of these structures informed by the actualization of these events. Events do interrupt otherwise continuous structures or states of being. Rather, these states are continually reconstituted by the actualization of events; hence “every moment” is one of transformation (Stagoll, 1998, p. 114).

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), 117–139. [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79-117](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117)
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392781>
- Allred, P., & Fox, N. J. (2017). Young bodies, power and resistance: A new materialist perspective. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(9), 1161–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1316362>
- Allmer, T. (2018). Precarious, always-on and flexible: A case study of academics as information workers. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(4), 381–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118783794>
- Baker, M. (2021). Beyond binaries and before becoming: Reconsidering resistance in UK higher education. *PRISM: Casting New Light on Learning, Theory and Practice*, Early View. <https://doi.org/10.24377/PRISM.LJMU.0302201>
- Barad, K. M. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Bowden, S. (2014). “Willing the event”: Expressive agency in Deleuze’s logic of sense. *Critical Horizons*, 15(3), 231–248. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1440991714Z.00000000033>
- Braidotti, R. (2002). *Metamorphoses: Towards a materialist theory of becoming*. Published by Polity Press in association with Blackwell.
- Braidotti, R. (2018). Forward. In V. Bozalek, R. Braidotti, T. Shefer, & M. Zembylas (Eds.), *Socially just pedagogies: Posthumanist, feminist and materialist perspectives in higher education* (pp. xiii–xxvii). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Breton, A. (1972). *Manifestoes of surrealism*. University of Michigan Press.
- Brown, R. (2018). Higher education and inequality. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 22(2), 37–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2017.1375442>
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism’s stealth revolution* (1st ed.). Zone Books.
- Buikema, R., & Thiele, K. (2018). Feminism and feminist studies in neoliberal times: Furthering social justice in higher education curricula. In V. Bozalek, R. Braidotti, T. Shefer, & M. Zembylas (Eds.), *Socially just pedagogies: Posthumanist, feminist and materialist perspectives in higher education* (pp. 31–47). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. E. (2017). The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(11), 1958–1978. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908>
- Butler, J. (2016). Rethinking vulnerability and resistance. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti, & L. Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in resistance* (pp. 12–27). Duke University Press.
- Clough, P. T. (2008). The affective turn: Political economy, bio-media and bodies. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407085156>
- Davies, B. (2021). *Entanglement in the world’s becoming and the doing of new materialist inquiry*. Routledge.
- De Landa, M. (2016). *Assemblage theory*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza, practical philosophy*. City Lights Books.
- Deleuze, G. (2004). *The logic of sense* (Repr). Continuum.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.
- De Rond, M., & Miller, A. N. (2005). Publish or perish: Bane or boon of academic life? *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 14(4), 321–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492605276850>
- Dillabough, J.-A. (2021). *Higher education, violent modernities and the ‘Global Present’: The paradox of politics and new populist imaginaries in HE*. ECER. <https://eera-ecer.de/previous-ecers/ecer-2021-geneva/programme/keynote-speakers/jo-anne-dillabough/>
- Flew, T. (2014). Six theories of neoliberalism. *Thesis Eleven*, 122(1), 49–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513614535965>
- Fox, N. J., & Allred, P. (2021). Doing new materialist data analysis: A Spinozo-Deleuzian ethological toolkit. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1933070>

- Gibbs, A. (2010). After affect: Sympathy, synchrony, and mimetic communication. In M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Eds.), *The affect theory reader* (pp. 186–205). Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/3178066>
- Hayek, F. A. (1996). *Individualism and economic order* (Paperback ed., [Nachdr.]). University of Chicago Press.
- Hein, S. F. (2016). The new materialism in qualitative inquiry: How compatible are the philosophies of Barad and Deleuze? *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 16(2), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616634732>
- Kuntz, A. (2020). Resistance is becoming not possible philosophical inquiry and the challenge of material change. In N. K. Denzin & M. D. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry and the politics of resistance: Possibilities, performances, and praxis*, (pp. 24–39). Routledge.
- Laing, K., Mazzoli Smith, L., & Todd, L. (2018). The impact agenda and critical social research in education: Hitting the target but missing the spot? *Policy Futures in Education*, 16(2), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317742214>
- Leathwood, C., & Read, B. (2013). Research policy and academic performativity: Compliance, contestation and complicity. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(8), 1162–1174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.833025>
- Lilja, M., & Vinthagen, S. (2014). Sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower: Resisting what power with what resistance? *Journal of Political Power*, 7(1), 107–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2014.889403>
- Mason, O., & Megoran, N. (2021). Precarity and dehumanisation in higher education: *Learning and Teaching*, 14(1), 35–59. <https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2021.140103>
- Massumi, B. (2015). *Politics of affect*. Polity.
- Massumi, B. (2021). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation* (Twentieth anniversary edition). Duke University Press.
- Minello, A., Martucci, S., & Manzo, L. K. C. (2020). The pandemic and the academic mothers: Present hardships and future perspectives. *European Societies*, 23(sup 1), S82–S94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1809690>
- Rawat, S., & Meena, S. (2014). Publish or perish: Where are we heading? *Journal of Research in Medical Sciences*, 19(2), 87–89.
- Snir, I. (2018). Making sense in education: Deleuze on thinking against common sense. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(3), 299–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1344537>
- Squazzoni, F., Bravo, G., Grimaldo, F., García-Costa, D., Farjam, M., & Mehmani, B. (2021). Gender gap in journal submissions and peer review during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study on 2329 Elsevier journals. *PLOS ONE*, 16(10), Article e0257919. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257919>
- Stagoll, C. S. (1998). *Deleuze's 'becoming-subject': Difference and the human individual* [Doctoral thesis, University of Warwick]. [http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4288/1/WRAP\\_THESIS\\_Stagoll\\_1998.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4288/1/WRAP_THESIS_Stagoll_1998.pdf)
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390050156422>
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2019). Post qualitative inquiry in an ontology of immanence. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418772634>
- Thrift, N. J. (2008). *Non-representational theory: Space, politics, affect*. Routledge.
- van Dalen, H. P. (2021). How the publish-or-perish principle divides a science: The case of economists. *Scientometrics*, 126(2), 1675–1694. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03786-x>
- Vossen, E. (2017). Publish AND Perish: On publishing, precarity and poverty in academia. *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, 2(2), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.13001/jwcs.v2i2.6095>
- Walkerline, V. (2016). Affective history, working-class communities and self-determination. *The Sociological Review*, 64(4), 699–714. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12435>
- Walters, C., Mehl, G. G., Piraino, P., Jansen, J. D., & Kriger, S. (2022). The impact of the pandemic-enforced lockdown on the scholarly productivity of women academics in South Africa. *Research Policy*, 51(1), Article 104403. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2021.104403>
- Wetherell, M. (2008). Subjectivity or psycho-discursive practices? Investigating complex intersectional identities. *Subjectivity*, 22(1), 73–81. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.7>
- Wetherell, M. (2013). Affect and discourse—What's the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice. *Subjectivity*, 6(4), 349–368. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2013.13>
- Wetherell, M. (2015). Trends in the turn to affect: A social psychological critique. *Body & Society*, 21(2), 139–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X14539020>
- Williams, J. (2008). *Gilles Deleuze's Logic of sense: A critical introduction and guide*. Edinburgh University Press.

## Author Biography

**Mollie Etheridge** is a PhD researcher, facilitator and undergraduate supervisor at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Her PhD explores the effects and affects of the transition to parenthood or desired parenthood on UK-based academics' negotiations of academic labor. Mollie's other research interests relate to affect theory, creative methods and the perinatal experiences of working mothers.