

Investigating selfhood under neoliberalism (Doctoral course; 7,5 ECTS credits)

Course directors and examiners

Karin Berglund, Professor in business with specialisation in entrepreneurship (kab@sbs.su.se)
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Swedish title

Undersökningar av 'jaget' i den nyliberala eran.

Course Coordinator

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Course faculty

The course runs on a part time basis and is taught by Karin Berglund and Anna Wettermark.
Guest lecturers may be invited.

Background

Contemporary society is imbued by an 'entrepreneurial logic' that invites all individuals, whether self-identifying as entrepreneurs or not, to become active, responsible, rational and yet compassionate, contributing to society while managing their lives as 'entrepreneur of themselves', and assuming responsibility for a range of issues that traditionally has been catered for by the public sector or the state. Through this expanded interpretation, entrepreneurial selfhood – or responsabilization - has become a concept spanning issues from personal development to sustainable change and social inclusion. Implicitly, entrepreneurial or responsabilized selfhood has come to guide human activity, not only in relation to business-making and making business, but also to life itself. In a societal context with neoliberal tendencies, the individual is called upon as an entrepreneurial self, who simultaneously calls upon others to become entrepreneurial. An entrepreneurial approach or 'mindset' tends to be presented as a more desirable option than other kinds of human activity, and thus influences how we understand ourselves and others. In this course, the entrepreneurial self is introduced as an analytical lens to develop a sociological understanding of desirable selfhood under neoliberalism.

Learning objectives

The course strives to familiarize doctoral students with ideological, in particular neoliberal, tendencies in society that sculpture the subjectivities that are possible for individuals to assume in organizational and societal life. The aim is to introduce to students the concept of ‘the entrepreneurial self’ (and affiliated theoretical concepts) and for students to use these concepts to develop a sociologically founded understanding of human agency on individual, organizational and societal levels. On successful completion of the course, students are expected to be able to:

- Demonstrate comprehension of the entrepreneurial self and affiliated concepts, including an understanding of their ontological and epistemological basis, and how these concepts are enacted on individual, organizational and societal levels.
- Empirically trace how new forms of individuality/selfhood and subjectivity unfold in their own research project/setting, as an expansion of an entrepreneurial logic, and to formulate a research question that relates to the emergence of entrepreneurial subjectivities.
- Demonstrate ability to meaningfully and reflectively apply the entrepreneurial self, and affiliated concepts, as an analytical lens in their research.

Participants

The number of participants is restricted to 10 - 15 students.

Content

The course “Investigating selfhood under neoliberalism” provides students with a broad introduction to theories on entrepreneurial agency in general, and entrepreneurial selfhood in particular, based on an understanding of social sciences. It explains different ways of comprehending the concept of “the entrepreneurial self” along with its affiliated concepts, such as neoliberalism, governmentality, power, subjectivity, gender and resistance to shed light on how these concepts can be used as an analytical approach in research on organizations and entrepreneurship.

Teaching and learning activities

The course starts by outlining and discussing core concepts, theories and approaches for understanding selfhood under neoliberalism. During following teaching and learning activities/seminars, more specific aspects related to mundane practices of enacting entrepreneurial selfhood, power, gender, resistance and ethics are elaborated and reflected on. Readings and students’ interpretations are then discussed interactively between students and course faculty.

Students prepare for these seminars by studying the literature in advance and then discussing it during class. The course consists of the following examination activities:

1. In the beginning of the course, students are to write a reflection paper (1500 words) based on the main course literature.

2. Mid-course, students are to prepare a presentation where they present the empirical terrain of their PhD projects and share how they, initially, discern tendencies of entrepreneurial selves/entrepreneurial selfhood in this terrain. In this assignment, students are also to hand in a description (1500 words) of their empirical material and formulate a research problem based on the course literature, to be further analysed in the third assignment.
3. At the end of the course students write and present their course paper (4000 – 6000 words), where they, based on previous work, conduct an analysis of entrepreneurial self/ neoliberal in their PhD projects and answer the research problem formulated in assignment 2. The final meeting of the course consists of an online seminar, devoted to discussions between students and faculty of the literature, students' application of the literature in their research projects, and feedback on students' course papers.

Schedule and tentative dates

Online: Wednesday the 19th of February, 13 – 15, introduction to the course, assignment of literature, discussion of relevance of the course for participants' research projects.

Online: Tuesday the 8th of April (9 – 12 and 13-15), two lectures and one seminar.

- Selfhood under neoliberalism. Presentation and discussion of key concepts of the course – e.g. “the entrepreneurial self” - followed by a seminar.

On campus: themes of everyday mundane practices, power, gender and ethics are assigned to three days on Campus in May, 5th of May (12-17), 6th of May (9-17) and the 7th of May (9 – 15) 2025. In total four seminars are held based on the themes above and scientific articles related to these themes. Articles are partly chosen by students.

- PhD students' oral and written presentations tracing entrepreneurial selves in different organizational and social terrains

Online: Tuesday the 10th of June 9 - 17

- Final course seminar where course papers are reviewed and discussed.

Examination

The course is examined through active participation in seminars, two reflection papers and a final course paper related to the doctoral student's thesis project.

Students' performance on the course is assessed individually and graded according to a two-level scale (Pass or Fail). In order to pass the course, students must have participated in all but one of the course lectures and seminars (the final meeting is compulsory), and have handed in all assignments.

Readings

The main course literature tentatively consists of:

Braedley, S. & Luxton, M. (red.) *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*. Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Bröckling, U. (2016). *The entrepreneurial self: Fabricating a new type of subject*.

Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford University Press. Selected parts.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. OUP Oxford.

Han, B. C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*. Verso Books.

A number of scientific articles.

Students are also invited to suggest additional articles relevant to their research field to complement the course literature.