

ARTICLE

Living a 'shadow life': The disorientations of losing orientation and agency while waiting through furlough

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Abstract

This paper explores forms of disorientation that affected UK workers furloughed within the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, the work of social and cultural geographers, and the accounts of four furloughed workers drawn from a wider study of 35 participants (see Jones, 2023). The paper details how the loss of a worker's agency through the suspension of their work life led them to feel disorientated. One study participant described the disorientation of furlough as like leading 'a shadow life'. 'Shadow life' articulates how the loss of the furloughed workers' sense of agency through work led them to treat the actions of others as orientation markers. To elucidate this, the paper develops four conceptualisations of disorientation as 'shadow life': 'circumnavigation'—a spatial disorientation; 'vacillation'—a temporal disorientation; 'periphery'—an emotional disorientation; and 'intrusion'—a sensorial disorientation. Through these four conceptualisations of disorientation, I argue that the disorientations of furlough acted as a point of exposure for how engrained work life is for some people. Amidst their disorientation, the study participants created alternative orientation markers, but crucially were able to endure and live through their disorientation. These insights contribute to understandings of the lived experience of furlough, worker agency and wider geographical work that attends to disorientation within contemporary life.

KEYWORDS

agency, disorientation, furlough, interview, waiting, work

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is 14:51 on the 11 February 2021. I am interviewing Chloe¹, a 23-year-old waitress based in London, about her feelings around waiting through furlough. Chloe looks confidently down into the camera as she talks to me on Zoom. As she

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speaks, she uses her hands for emphasis and occasionally moves her fringe out of her eyes. We discuss what it feels like to share her days on furlough with her partner while he works from home.

... the entire experience of being in ... furlough ... it's definitely felt like ... a shadow life, like kind of being in other people's spaces or dipping into, for example, spaces that I wouldn't usually see my partner behaving or acting in. And it's almost like being ... a ghost.

In this paper, I discuss a form of disorientation that manifested when people lost their orientating relations with their work life through being furloughed within the UK government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme during the COVID-19 pandemic. I work with Chloe's term 'shadow life' to argue that some workers disorientated by their disconnection from work life made other people *orientation markers* for how they navigated space and time, their emotions and sensorial experiences. Four conceptualisations of disorientation as 'shadow life' are developed in the paper ('circumnavigation', 'vacillation', 'periphery' and 'intrusion') through the accounts of four people who were part of my wider PhD study of 35 furloughed workers (see Jones, 2023).

The paper builds and expands recent work in geography that attends to disorientation as a way of articulating lives and worlds that become unravelled, dislocated or disrupted (Bissell & Gorman-Murray, 2019; Chann et al., 2024; Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021; Raynor, 2017; Wylie, 2021). As a spatio-temporal-embodied state, disorientation can interrupt people and their relations, and move or halt them in ways they would not prefer. That these disorientations can occur within the contours of everyday life has been of interest to geographers across a range of situations, in the dark (Edensor & Falconer, 2015), in a strange place (Hughes, 2021), living in high-rise accommodation (Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021), separation from loved ones (Bissell & Gorman-Murray, 2019), incarceration (Hemsworth, 2016), living in austerity (Raynor, 2017), the discomfort of nationalism (Clarke, 2021), refugee life (Finlay et al., 2022), displaced communities (Chann et al., 2024) and air travel (Anderson, 2015).

In common with some of these geographers, I find Sara Ahmed's (2006a) elucidation of disorientation compelling through its account of the wonky misalignments of everyday life. Consequently, it is Ahmed's conceptualisation of disorientation that underpins this paper. For Ahmed (2006a), attention to orientation and disorientation is a way of thinking through everyday world-making, particularly how lives are directed and felt through the conditions that surround them, and the limits they encounter. Although Ahmed's work emerges from how non-heterosexual and non-white bodies navigate white heteronormative spaces, she does suggest that her interpretations of orientation and disorientation can be mobilised to account for other people who find themselves in situations where they feel 'oblique' or 'offline' or 'wonky' (Ahmed, 2006a; Ahmed 2006b).

The paper unfolds as follows. Firstly, I attend to ideas of orientation and disorientation within social and cultural geography and Ahmed's (2006a) notions of disorientation to scaffold four conceptualisations of disorientation, as 'shadow life'. I then outline the substantive context of the empirical accounts, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and work life, as the backdrop in which the disorientations of furlough were enacted. Doing so positions the paper as also moving forward discussion of disorientation and non-work life within labour geographies. Thereafter, I discuss the pragmatic research approach of online interviewing within the confines of a pandemic. I then explore spatial, temporal, emotional and sensorial disorientations through the empirical accounts of four furloughed workers. Together, those accounts demonstrate that within the disorienting disconnections from work life, the furloughed subsumed their own needs and used others as orientation markers. The paper concludes by considering ways in which the disorientations of furlough matter beyond the (possibly) singular event experienced by those furloughed during the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. The insight this paper opens of the intimate lives of those furloughed could inform further research within and outside academia that attends to periods of detachment from work such as parental leave, sick leave and retirement. The paper closes with the suggestion that within and beyond work life, 'shadow life' could be a useful conceptualisation for geographers exploring detachment from orientating relations.

2 | GEOGRAPHIES OF DISORIENTATION

2.1 | Feeling orientated

To be spatially orientated, one must forge a relation with a physical reference, such as a compass point (Schmidt di Friedberg, 2018) or symbol on a map (Massey, 2005). And yet, compass points and maps are culturally bound

approximations of space (Massey, 2005), devised to cultivate a sense of certainty amidst otherwise spatial unknowns. Bodily orientation may be felt through one's senses via sensory feedback loops. Whether seeing a landmark (Schmit di Friedberg 2018), hearing a recognised sound (Hemsworth, 2016), smelling an aroma (Xiao et al., 2020), touching surfaces to way find (Edensor & Falconer, 2015) or tasting familiar food (Sou & Webber, 2021), the body has the capacity to create a relation with another body in support of our understanding of feeling orientated. Equally, to feel the surety of orientation in time involves forming a relation with an external point of reference (Fernández Velasco et al., 2021), such as clock hands, a factory whistle or a church bell (May & Thrift, 2001). As references to time, these are also culturally defined and therefore arbitrary (ibid.). Temporal orientation can involve pre-knowledge or remembrance of a space–time (Fernández Velasco et al., 2021), a holding position in the present (Raynor, 2021), as well as the anticipation of future time (Anderson, 2006; Berlant, 2011). Doreen Massey (1994) argues that as space–times are socially constituted, they are a dynamic and constantly shifting 'geometry' of interconnections. These are relations that move in and out of intensity and focus. It could be said that the security of feeling orientated in space and time is made through relations that are always in a state of flux.

Conceptually, feeling orientated is about finding or knowing one's position through the formation of a relation with an external something. Beyond space or time, that external something could be a person, action, object, set of objects or a situation. Being or feeling, for example, task orientated, technology orientated, community orientated or having a sexual orientation are articulations of a relation or set of relations a person is inclined towards and is positioning themselves within (see Bürkner & Lange, 2020; Cram, 2019; Jordhus-Lier, 2013). Work life may be felt as a collection of relations to colleagues, to a salary, to the space of the workplace, and to work tasks (Dutta, 2020; Ettliger, 2004; Warren, 2019). An 'orientation to work' may consequently involve a multiplicity of intersecting relations (Dutta, 2020). These may be felt within and outside the workplace, connecting domestic lives or social ties to work life (Carswell, 2016; Hastings & MacKinnon, 2017). Nonetheless, to have an orientation to one's work life is to feel orientated by something one has a familiar relation with.

2.2 | Feeling disorientated

Disorientation, on the other hand, involves disruption to relations that orientate us. It can be a position in the unfamiliar (Noxolo & Preziuso, 2013) or experiencing something familiar from an unaccustomed angle (Massey, 2005). Alternatively, disorientation can involve a feeling of impasse or feeling one is held in a situation where there is an expectation to move on (Auyero, 2011). It is the surety of position (no matter how spuriously founded) that feeling orientated grants, and that feeling disorientated disallows. In disorientation, an orientating relation may become changed (Anderson, 2015) or unravelled (Bissell & Gorman-Murray, 2019; Raynor, 2017). This does not mean that the relation is lost. A residue of an orientating relation can remain within a person's feelings of disorientation. In their 'geography of disorientation', Noxolo and Preziuso (2013) open the possibility that in a person's movement out of the familiar to the unfamiliar, new orientations can be formed but also relations of 'where they are no longer' can be maintained. Being furloughed does not share the enforced violence of slavery or (on the face of it) the precarity of economic migration discussed by Noxolo and Preziuso, but I draw from them the notion of the folding in of orientations within new disorientations.

Disorientation may involve the disruption of relations formed with the immaterial as well as the material. As affective atmospheres form the emotional 'tone' in a situation (Böhme, 1993), changes in affective atmosphere in a space have the potential to instigate feelings of disorientation. For example, football fans may feel unable to express emotion towards their team and create positive atmospheres when their team moves to a new home stadium (Edensor, 2015). Accumulated spatial orientations and emotional attachments formed over time abruptly become lost and difficult to replicate and re-instate (ibid.). Or a workplace can begin to feel paranoid if its workers come to suspect its closure (Hitchen, 2021), or a street can come to feel insecure if we are made aware that it is a space of previous criminality (Sa'di-Ibraheem, 2020). The prior feelings of having a secure orientation in a space, once removed, can make a place come *to feel* disorientating. Disorientation can therefore be a spatial feeling (see Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021). The examples of the football stadium, workplace or street are also instances of how disorientations may be felt by individuals, transmitted to others, and become collective disorientations. Collective disorientation may be constructed through affective transmissions of socio-biological sets of sensory and chemical responses (like pheromones) in a situation (Brennan, 2004). This can, consequently, connect individuals into a group with shared emotional responses.

Feeling orientated may involve one's proximity to people or groups of people we are well acquainted with and feel comfortable with (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). While disorientation may be felt when those orientating relations to people we are

close to change or end. In the disorientation of a lost relation through bereavement, for example, Avril Maddrell (2016) suggested that grief may cause a bereaved person to retreat into a 'safe space' or reduce their spatial use as familiar spaces come to feel altered without a loved one present. The unwelcome disorientation felt through grief becomes felt as a loss associated with a particular space (*ibid.*). Moreover, absence can act as a catalyst for disorientation through the loss of orientating things as well as spaces and people. An orienting object might be something like an official document connecting an asylum seeker to a state (Darling, 2014). For people such as asylum seekers with minimal possessions, losing an orientating thing can carry more weight when it not only bears a person's future hopes and orientation towards a different life, but is also one of the only things that they possess (*ibid.*). Possessions may act as coalescent points for a person's pasts, presents and futures through their imbue with certain personal meanings (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). As such, possessions may act as orientation markers for a person, and their loss perhaps exacerbates feelings of disorientation. Furthermore, a person could also feel disorientation at the loss of something that they have never had or through expecting something that doesn't arrive, like a delivery that never turns up (Mutter, 2023).

Feeling orientated involves forming a relation with an object, space, temporality, or bodily or emotional feeling. Feeling disorientated involves the disruption of the feeling of surety or stability that feeling orientated offers. As feeling disorientated moves a person out of their normal flows of quotidian life and interrupts bodily orientations, I think it worthwhile to turn to notions of phenomenology or rather disorientation through the queered aspects of phenomenology via Sara Ahmed (2006a, 2006b). A queer phenomenology that accounts for the unevenness and instabilities of experience and their affective resonances may open insight into a situation where bodies are disoriented by the disruption of being held outside the normal flows of quotidian work life, such as being furloughed. In the next section, I outline Ahmed's queer phenomenology and give an overview of recent work in geography that also draws on Ahmed's conceptualisation of disorientation on which this paper builds conceptually.

2.3 | Queer phenomenology

Ahmed's (2006a) concept of queer phenomenology draws on phenomenological ideas and a range of feminist and 'anti-racist' scholarship which also works with phenomenology. Essential reference points for queer phenomenology are phenomenological notions of 'the lived experience of inhabiting a body' and that 'consciousness' is always orientated towards an object. Around notions of orientation and lived experience, Ahmed draws on further phenomenological ideas of the importance of proximities and the significance of recursive actions in the formation of 'bodies and worlds'. Crucially for Ahmed, being orientated is part of the normal flows of quotidian life and so a person may not be aware that they are orientated.

Ahmed's (2006b) point of departure is her queering of phenomenology, or rather bringing to the fore queerness found within phenomenological ideas. For Ahmed (*ibid.*, p. 566), a queer phenomenology attends to queer objects which do not conform and are 'out of line, on a slant, the odd and strange one' and have the potential to retreat. If phenomenology attends to the alignments of bodies in spaces, a queer phenomenology accounts for lived misalignments, and in doing so opens the potential for alternative world views (Ahmed, 2006a). For Ahmed (2006b), queering phenomenology can involve both sexual politics and be a 'political' approach, and as such can account for bodies that find themselves outside the straight lines of normativity and disorientated.

Finding oneself falling out of orientation feels disorientating (Ahmed, 2006a). As an embodied feeling, disorientation 'can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel liveable' (*ibid.*, p. 157). Disorientation can therefore make a person feel thrown, with implications for how that person feels in relation to themselves, to others and to their situation. That thrown feeling can result from an abrupt transition from perceiving the world in one way and then too rapidly having to perceive it another way. Disorientation may be felt violently and suddenly as I have outlined, but it can also ebb and flow in intensity and attention within the backdrop of everyday lives. As a loss of orientation, feeling disorientated can inhibit how bodies perceive and use space, creating feelings of being 'out of place', 'odd' or 'disturbed'. These feelings of disorientation can be transmitted as affective intensities between objects and people. The transmission of disorientation happens when life worlds fail to adhere or hold together, affecting those in the proximity of the disruption or those disrupted.

In order to think through the disorientations of being disconnected from work and waiting through furlough, I draw on Ahmed's above notions of the embodied, spatial, temporal and felt dimensions of disorientation. Recent work in geography that attends to disorientation has also found Ahmed's conceptualisation of disorientation compelling (Bissell & Gorman-Murray, 2019; Dorigon & Nethercote, 2021; Kinkaid, 2020; Schmidt di Friedberg, 2018; Simonsen, 2013;

Turnbull et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2018; Wylie, 2021). In her search for new ways for geographers to consider embodied experience, Kirsten Simonsen (2013) turned to Ahmed's conceptualisation of disorientation as a way of considering how bodily and emotional crises shift felt perceptions of a situation. In particular, Simonsen draws on how disorientated bodies are able to reorientate after a crisis and rethink their situation. However as bodies are not equally involved in the world, the possibility of instigating a reorientation may be enabled unevenly.

Disorientating crises are not necessarily violent or dramatic, and may even involve ambivalent orientations (Turnbull et al., 2022). Born in Northern Ireland with entitlement to dual British and Irish citizenship, as a longstanding resident of England, John Wylie (2021) writes of waiting to feel reorientated within his not so new homeland. His lack of reorientation is not felt as a strain but inhabited as happy ambivalence until the vote in the UK in 2016 to leave the European Union (Brexit). Brexit disorientates his sense of belonging and catalyses him to orientate his citizenship back towards Ireland. Wylie's (2021) evocation of disorientation draws on Ahmed's (2006a) assertion that disoriented bodies are acting defensively when regrouping and reorientating themselves towards stability. Wylie's Irish citizenship is perhaps a return to a once stable position of comfort. Comfort for Ahmed (2006a) is an orientation of feeling at ease with the world.

The disorientation of feeling at home or not at home (Ahmed, 2006a) is echoed by Bissell and Gorman-Murray's (2019) and Louise Dorignon and Megan Nethercote's (2021) work on people holding their domestic lives together. For Bissell and Gorman-Murray (2019), disorientation becomes a series of potential incapacities for 'knowing others, knowing how to proceed, and knowing how to hold a situation together'. Dorignon and Nethercote (2021) draw on this evocation of disorientation to extend the notion that our physical environment can intrinsically be or become disorientating. Both sets of work trace a line through Ami Harbin's (2016) 'Disorientation and Moral Life' to Ahmed's (2006a) 'Queer Phenomenology'. Although disorientation can involve unsettling and problematic events, for Harbin, being disorientated involves a plurality of experiences both positive and negative, like the events of falling in love, parenthood and growing older. Harbin (2016) acknowledges via Ahmed (2006a) that, dependent on context, disorientation can reorientate a person to be open to new opportunities and courses of action. Ultimately for Harbin (2016), leading a moral life involves the ability to identify disorientation in other people and offer them support.

By thinking with Ahmed's (2006a, 2006b) conceptualisation of disorientation, waiting through furlough may be considered a period of disorientation. Events of waiting are commonly encountered both within and outside the flows of quotidian life (Massey, 1992). Even when they are unexpected and unwelcome, they feel like part of the fabric of everyday life (Jones, 2022). And yet acts of waiting detach a person from certain lines of orientation and interrupt a person's everyday rhythms. Ahmed (2006a) conceptualises disorientation as movement away from a known orientation, or as a lack of orientation. To transpose that notion to waiting, a person may be in the flow of everyday life and orientated one way, but then be caught in an act of waiting (whether expected or not) that creates a new orientation. In other words, a person waiting may be (dis)orientated into a new orientation. As a feeling, Ahmed's (2006a) conceptualisation of disorientation accounts for the off kilter and disrupted, felt positively, negatively or ambivalently in differing intensities, capacities, spatialities and temporalities. I make a move here to connect Ahmed's conceptualisation of disorientation to the situation of waiting through furlough, which I characterise as a space-time where furloughed workers orientated towards its end.

3 | CORONAVIRUS JOB RETENTION SCHEME, WORK LIFE AND FURLOUGH

One of the major disruptions created by government social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic was to work life. On 16 March 2020 (Prime Minister's Office and Johnson, 2020), the UK government declared that in order to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, people should stay at home, minimise interactions with others, and that certain workplaces should suspend operation. Non-essential retailers selling goods such as clothes or electronics, service businesses like beauty parlours and estate agencies, and leisure facilities including gyms, casinos and theatres were all required to stop trading.

In light of the potential economic crisis created by the suspension of certain businesses, on 20 March 2020, the UK government announced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (H.M. Treasury and Sunak, 2020). The scheme supported businesses that were unable to operate (or operate to full capacity) to retain their workers' jobs. Workers whose contracted time was paid for through the scheme were 'furloughed'. Businesses could claim up to 80% of an employee's wage for their period of furlough, an amount capped at £2,500 per month per employee (HM Revenue and Customs, 2020). Over its lifespan, from March 2020 to September 2021, the scheme bolstered 1.3 million businesses and 11.6 million jobs, which meant it supported a quarter of the UK workforce at some point during its operation (ONS, 2021a).

3.1 | Who were the furloughed?

The furloughed were not a homogenous group; the scheme encompassed a diverse range of people. Statistically, the furloughed were typically those with lower educational and/or skill attainment than those with a higher education (ONS, 2021b). Demographically, the furloughed were more likely to be aged below 24 years and over 65 years (ONS, 2021a, 2021b). At the start of the pandemic, more women were furloughed than men, but as employment decreased in certain sectors during the pandemic, such as hospitality, by the end of the scheme more men were furloughed than women (ONS, 2021c). However, it should be noted that less than a third were on furlough at the end of the scheme compared with at the beginning (ibid.). Financially, furlough adversely affected those on low or single-household incomes (ONS, 2021a). However, the majority of those furloughed were more likely to be financially worse off at the start of the scheme than at its cessation. This does not of course account for people made unemployed during the scheme. The unequal representation of ethnic groups (ONS, 2022) and the disabled (ONS, 2021a) across employment sectors meant that these groups were more likely to be furloughed (UK Parliament, 2020). With variations among genders, ages, ethnic groups, (dis)abilities and education levels, being furloughed affected a diverse range of people in differing ways. My study (Jones, 2023) attempted to fill in some of the gaps that the abstraction of experience through statistical data had opened by setting out to explore how waiting through furlough was lived and felt by individuals. However, it should be noted that the study participants were not a representative sample of those furloughed, but rather became a representation of particular experiences of being furloughed.

3.2 | Work life

Individuals who were furloughed may have felt the disconnection from work life acutely, as for some, work and work life are integral to the formation of a fulfilling life (Curley, 2019; Hong, 2022; Sharma, 2014). Neoteric scholarship in geography exploring work life has acknowledged that emotional attachment to work can create certain fantasies of how work and work life should be forged (see Cockayne, 2016; Deuchar & Dyson, 2020; Dutta, 2020; Ettlinger, 2004; Pettit, 2024; Thieme, 2018). Within those imaginaries, work becomes a means of finding and affirming oneself by providing personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose (Hong, 2022; Marotta, 2021; Sharma, 2014), while work life becomes an enmeshment of the social being within modes of economic production (Hong, 2022; Richardson, 2018; Zhang, 2024).

For those who try to maintain such fantasies, emotional investment in work life has the potential to direct people in certain ways and affect an individual's physical and mental well-being (Berlin, 2024; Bissell, 2022; Cockayne, 2016; Pettit, 2024). In Daniel Cockayne's (2016) work exploring creative entrepreneurs, for example, the fantasy of a 'good life' through an attachment to certain forms of creative work leads people to seek pleasure in work, forgo a work life balance, and have an acceptance of financial precarity. Attachment to work life is so ingrained in the culture of creative entrepreneurship that notions of life and work become interchangeable. Work becomes life. Life becomes work. As such, certain work cultures may be deemed personally and emotionally exploitative and affect a worker's feelings of 'agency' (Cockayne, 2016; Hochschild, 2012; Jaffe, 2021).

3.3 | Worker agency

Within geography, the concept of 'labour agency' has been used to acknowledge and understand that workers are not just bodies involved in modes of capitalist production, but that workers can have the capacity to inform their working spaces and conditions (see Castree, 2007; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Herod, 1997; Strauss, 2020). A worker's sense of agency is linked to their feeling of autonomy and how constrained they feel by their work and workspace (Hastings & MacKinnon, 2017; Herod, 1997). And yet, an individual worker's agency may be affected by wider social conditions and their class, gender, race, age, ethnicity or location (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Batnitzky & McDowell, 2011; Coe and Jorhaus-Lier 2023; Dutta, 2016). Geographers (Coe and Jorhaus-Lier 2023; Dutta, 2016; Worth, 2016) have noted that a worker may have the capacity to exert agency, but their positionality may inform whether or not they can actually leverage their agency, and the intensity at which that agency can be wielded. Additionally, the agency of a worker may be enabled or curtailed by their relation with their employer, as well as associated employer regulations and employment structures (see Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Worth, 2016).

As work life is intrinsically social, a worker's sense of agency may be felt within an entanglement of 'friendships, solidarities', and 'shared experiences' (Dutta, 2016). Madhumita Dutta (2020) recognises that social bonds may bind a person

to a workplace. In Dutta's account of female workers at a mobile phone factory in Southern India, the workplace becomes a space where attachments are formed to having a workplace identity and to colleagues, in the face of restrictive working conditions. Work life becomes a space–time of solidarity and care where the women form attachments to each other. Unlike Daniel Cockayne's (2016) creative entrepreneurs who are focused on the work and any sense of community is bound to that, Dutta's mobile phone workers are emotionally attached to each other, and the practices of work are an aside.

As attachment to work life may be formed through an emotional connection with the idea of being a certain kind of worker, to work colleagues or to work practices as an articulation of self, then the enforced detachment of furlough was arguably an interruption to these imbricating attachments. The pause in work life may have disrupted a worker's feelings of agency or altered their attachment to their work. Or perhaps the attachment stayed but tantalisingly could not be fulfilled. In its paused state, work life had the potential to become an object of anticipation and optimism for those furloughed, as a future to orientate towards. The present may or may not have been a happy one, indeed for those attached to work and left in a space between work lives, furlough may have become a breach in their sense of (work) self. And yet the future where work life might be reinstated perhaps held a promise of happiness. Objects of happiness may of course be fantasies (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011), but they can stimulate how a life is lived and indeed shape how a person waited through furlough.

4 | ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Statistical data indicate how many people were furloughed across industry sectors (ONS, 2022). They convey the intersectional information of who was furloughed and how many people eventually went back to their pre-furlough jobs or were made redundant (ONS, 2023). Nonetheless, statistical data will not disclose how the experience of furlough was lived and felt by individuals. With that in mind, the study this paper is based on set out to explore how waiting through furlough was experienced by those affected by asking them through online interviews.

The study was conducted within the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical proximity and travel were discouraged by the UK government (Koch & Miles, 2021). An effect of social distancing measures was that screen-based communication had become ubiquitous in everyday interactions due to its capacity to enable real-time communication remotely (Osler & Zahavi, 2022). During the study, it became pragmatic to conduct semi-structured interviews (January–July 2021) with 35 participants using Zoom, as Zoom enabled interpersonal interaction in a manner that was already being widely used. This method was important for the process of making people feel comfortable sharing their potentially intimate insights of being furloughed. I acknowledge that a research interview (no matter how long) is a fleeting exchange. Nevertheless, I agree with Kym Maclaren's (2014) assertion that intimacy formed in a 'brief encounter' with a stranger, can be meaningful. With a focus in the present, this form of encounter has the potential to enable people to be open because they have no shared history. Conversely, those that we are already intimate with have the capacity to 'inhibit' us because we have had joint experiences and a past with them. Filmed semi-structured, one-to-one interviews via Zoom opened the potential to be able to converse with the participants on an intimate level within the confines of a technology that had become normalised in people's everyday interactions (Howlett, 2022). Although having a conversation through mediating technology might have presented a set of additional challenges, luckily during the study, I did not experience WiFi drop out, or participants turning off their screens.

The study participants were recruited via written and filmed callouts on a range of social media, and through the newsletters of six trade unions. The usual work of the study participants was predominantly hospitality, entertainment, charity and non-essential retail. These were the sectors most affected by the UK governmental social distancing restrictions instigated by the pandemic (ONS, 2021a). The 35 participants were geographically spread across the United Kingdom, largely in the North and Southeast of England, mostly female and ethnically white. Some participants were still on furlough, although most had recently returned to work in their pre-furlough job. This made their accounts vivid because they were still waiting through furlough or had only recently moved out of it. They were not statistically representative of those furloughed, but nonetheless, their accounts may be considered representations of certain lived experiences of furlough.

5 | LOSING ORIENTATION: LEADING A 'SHADOW LIFE'

In the next four sections, I will foreground the experiences of four participants from the wider study of 35 workers waiting through furlough. Their accounts are not idiosyncratic, as other study participants (both men and women)²

articulated analogous experiences and disclosed having similar feelings. I selected these four accounts to illustrate how the disorientation of furlough led some workers to create new orientation markers. Orientation markers were proximate or absent people who influenced the experiences of the furloughed workers spatially, temporally, emotionally and sensorially. A consequence of forming the new relation with the other was that the furloughed subordinated their own needs. With this in mind, Chloe's assertion of leading a 'shadow life' was perhaps a pertinent description of her and other workers' experiences of certain disorientations during furlough.

5.1 | Circumnavigation

In the first form of 'shadow life', I explore how an orientation towards an object (in this case, an active homeworker) can influence how we comprehend, inhabit and share space (Ahmed, 2006a). Some study participants shared their domestic space with a home worker and expressed feeling guilt at being paid non-workers. They spent their days orientating around the home worker spatially and *felt* a distance between themselves and the other person, even though in some cases they were in close physical proximity. In the suspension of their own work life, the furloughed worker circumnavigated the productive other and maintained a subordinate spatial relation with them.

I interviewed Abigail, a 32-year-old fine dining chef, on 14 January 2021, when she had already experienced 10 months of being furloughed which had been punctuated by short periods of work when government restrictions temporarily had lifted. She spoke with me on Zoom from a room with newly whitewashed stone walls and fronds of a large houseplant poking out behind her. She was partly lit by an electric light to her left, but was mostly bathed in the grey blue light of dusk that poured through the window to her right. She shared with me that initially she had felt 'lonely' and 'isolated', waiting out her furlough time in a remote cottage in mid Wales while her husband went out to work each day. That changed when, a few months into her furlough, her husband started to work from home. Initially, he set up a home office in a landing space in the middle of their cottage. He worked nine to five, Monday to Friday, his work activity dominated the space and, as a consequence, the rest of their home. Abigail said her husband spent half his time on Zoom calls, which could not be disturbed. The rest of the time he did not want to be distracted by noise as he worked. This meant that Abigail curtailed her spatial use by trying not to walk by him when he was working. He found any noise off-putting, so Abigail did not play talk radio or undertake the DIY activity that she had done freely when she had spent her furlough days alone. Abigail had minimised her daily activity to fit around her husband's working day. She said that she had moved from feeling lonely during the day and wishing someone else was there to feeling acutely aware of her husband's presence. And even though her husband was physically present, she spoke of still feeling alone. When Abigail discussed tiptoeing around her husband when he was working, she made sweeping gestures with her arm away from her body as a 'co-expression' (McNeill, 2005) of the physical distance she tried to shape between herself and her husband. This gesture suggested her circumnavigation of her husband's activity had become not just an approach to how she used space but had also become an embodied feeling.

Pre-furlough, Abigail said she had been work-orientated. She discussed how her work allowed her to be creative. She liked the rhythms of working, the camaraderie of her colleagues, and derived satisfaction when customers enjoyed her food. Furlough had disrupted her orientation to work and to those positive feelings. If 'Feelings ... take the "shape" of the contact we have with objects', as Ahmed (2006a, p. 31) ventures, then Abigail's feelings had changed from having a sense of agency through her attachment to her work life, to feeling no agency when enforcedly detached from work. The loss of Abigail's work orientation and loss of feelings of agency through work had made the activity of her husband come into sharp focus. Abigail made her husband and his working day an orientation marker for how she moved through her days, and in doing so, she had minimised her own needs and spatial use, which, drawing on Maddrell (2016), may have been a manifestation of grief for her absent work life.

5.2 | Vacillation

The disorientated feelings of distance and of feeling lost expressed in the previous section were shared by furloughed workers who found navigating time difficult. In this section, I explore how the process of acclimatising to different or new temporal configurations can be slow for some people (Ahmed, 2006a) and in the period of adjustment, people feel disorientated. For this group of workers, 'shadow life' manifested within a temporal disorientation, a feeling of, what one of the interviewees deemed, having 'too much time'. In the new amorphous temporality of furlough, this group of

furloughed workers detached themselves from decision making and vacillated between indecision and decision, suspended between states of inactivity and activity. This indecisiveness was coloured by the work life of a productive other who either had a presence in their household or was absent, but either way, the furloughed felt acutely aware of their productivity and the temporality of their working day.

On 15 January 2021, I interviewed Alexandra, a 40-year-old optometrist, via Zoom. Alexandra settled on her sofa with teal cushions supporting her head and behind her a dark blue wall populated with framed photographs of her children. Wearing 50's style spectacles, Alexandra discussed her period of furlough with me. She recalled that on the days when her husband left for work, she would sit on her own 'doing nothing'. She struggled to fill her time during the day and felt that her inactivity made her days feel 'very long'. Alexandra told me that pre-furlough she had been an avid reader, but during her furlough had found concentrating difficult. Although she looked at videos on her phone and watched television, she said that she couldn't 'get into things', which was an impasse that she found 'really weird'. Alexandra articulated a tension whereby she felt that she 'should' be doing something and felt unfocused for not doing anything. Throughout her account, I sensed her guilt about being paid for her non-productivity while her husband was still working. And yet when I asked Alexandra why she found it difficult to decide on meaningful tasks to fill her time, initially she said that she didn't know. After some thought she responded, 'I think because there's so much of it now. So much time'. Alexandra had attributed her vacillation to the vastness of furlough time, and yet, her indecision ended when her partner came home from work at the end of the day, and he was once again in her proximity. The presence of Alexandra's partner catalysed her to embark on activity. The shadow cast by the productivity of her husband faded as his working day ceased and both Alexandra and her husband were in a pre-furlough habituated time of leisure; in other words, at a time of the day when pre-furlough there had been no expectation to be productive.

Alexandra said that she enjoyed her work as an optometrist as she liked 'helping people' and 'dealing with their problems and just making them happy'. For Alexandra, work gave her life purpose. Initially Alexandra had felt relieved at being furloughed, as the close proximity required when working with patients and the limited supply of protective equipment had made her job feel unsafe from the SARS-CoV-2 virus. And yet, the suspension of work had removed something that gave her agency and a sense of purpose. When something that a person orientates towards to steady themselves is lost, or moved, or absent, they can become disorientated (Ahmed, 2006a: 15). For Alexandra, that object had been her work life. By Alexandra focusing on her partner's work life and productivity, he became an orientation marker, highlighting her position as a non-worker. Her inability to fill her time during his working hours was conceivably a form of resistance to her new situation as a non-worker. The end of his working day and her subsequent mobilisation into action perhaps signalled a time of equity in both their situations.

5.3 | Periphery

This section explores how the emotions of those who are physically close have the capacity to 'leave an impression' on a person (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 2). Amidst their changed working circumstances, a group of the furloughed workers were living with another whose emotions were foregrounded and prioritised over their own. Whereas in the first version of 'shadow life' the spatial needs of another became a locus for the furloughed, and in the second, the temporalities of another's work life became an orientation marker for the furloughed's time. In this third form of 'shadow life' the heightened emotions of another became an orientation marker for those furloughed. Due to an implicit understanding by the furloughed worker, a proximate person's emotional life took precedence over their own emotional needs. So, in order to not be affected by the other's distress, the furloughed worker chose not to react and stay on the periphery of scenes of heightened emotion. The detachment from the other, through a non-response to their emotions, became folded into the furloughed's own disorientation.

The feeling of stifling or minimising one's own feelings while orientating around another's emotions was experienced by Louise, a 31-year-old stage manager. During her period of furlough, Louise lived with a colleague and his partner, who found the confinement of furlough deeply affecting. Speaking to me on 24 May 2021, Louise compassionately discussed her colleague's partner's feelings of being overwhelmed, which infused the atmosphere of their shared flat during their mutual period of furlough. Louise described having a heightened sense of where her flatmates were in the flat, and of listening before she entered rooms so she could understand what she might be encountering. She would weigh up whether she would be 'walking into a dissociative episode' or 'was everyone fine and just hanging out watching TV'. Louise said that she had become attuned to the flatmate's emotions, which she recognised as 'another energy' that came to inform how she navigated space within the flat. At times, Louise did share in unfolding emotional situations, but at other times chose to remove herself in order to be able to remain in control of her own feelings. Louise withdrew to her bedroom and

felt it inappropriate to share her feelings of distress or struggle with her flatmates because ‘what I was struggling with wasn’t as difficult or important as what she was dealing with’.

Louise had spent years developing her career as a stage manager, which she said was satisfying and felt emotionally invested in. She considered herself to have a high work ethic and had therefore found the abruptness of being furloughed and not working ‘very strange’. She discussed how her lack of agency over her situation felt difficult, and that any engagement with her flatmate’s heightened emotions had the potential to intensify her own disorientated feelings. Louise’s decision to stay on the periphery of the flatmate’s episodes of distress was a move she said towards self-care. This was perhaps a tacit understanding of the potential for disorientation to be transmitted (Ahmed, 2006a). Moreover, Louise had felt it ‘unhelpful’ to share her own disorientated feelings as she had deemed herself to be more resilient than the flatmate. Louise’s withholding of her feelings was an act of care towards not amplifying her flatmate’s disorientation. Louise’s flatmate had become an orientation marker for the intensity around her own feelings of disorientation. By choosing to distance herself from her flatmate’s distress or conversely sometimes opting to get involved, Louise was indicating her own oscillating tolerance for being further disorientated by the emotions of the other.

5.4 | Intrusion

The final empirical section explores the notion that within an unfolding process of orientation, a feeling of ‘disorientation’ can be prompted by the felt presence of others who may be present and proximate, or absent (Ahmed, 2006a). Amidst the disorientation created by being furloughed, some participants in the study became orientated by material and immaterial intrusions enacted by landlords and neighbours. These intrusions manifest as noise, dust, smells and bacteria. Although the intrusions were mostly not physically apparent, they were felt sensorially and disturbed the flows of the furloughed worker’s domestic life. The intrusion or threat of intrusion became an orientation marker for how the furloughed occupied and used the space of their home.

I interviewed Caroline, a 49-year-old charity worker, on 20 February 2021, from the bedroom of a house she was renting from a family friend during her period of furlough. Seated on the floor and leaning back against the side of the bed, Caroline shared with me her feelings of potential intrusion during her continuing period of furlough. Caroline’s landlord occasionally visited the property unannounced and without adhering to government requirements to socially distance or wear a mask while in the proximity of others.

The detachment from work through being furloughed had made Caroline feel ‘very out of control’. In contrast, she had felt that she had ‘controlled’ her domestic situation through scrupulously sanitising the surfaces in her rented home. The unannounced visits by her landlord felt ‘inappropriate and not what you would have wanted, so out of your control’. Disconnected from a workplace she enjoyed, recently divorced, and living in another’s property, the landlord’s visits exacerbated her existing disorientated feelings of being ‘out of place’ (Ahmed, 2006a). Having volunteered for furlough, Caroline had quickly felt ‘dispensable’ and ‘alienated’ from a work life in which she enjoyed a variety of experiences and challenges. The realisation that she was not as valued by her employers as she had previously thought felt destabilising for Caroline. Feeling disorientated ‘can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel liveable’ (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 156). Caroline’s situation of divorce and moving house had already made life feel uncomfortable. Her attachment to work had given Caroline a sense of stability, but being furloughed had suspended and consequently soured that steadying orientation. Additionally, her landlord’s visits, or threat of his visits, made Caroline feel intruded upon, which further exacerbated her existing feelings of disorientation.

In order to feel once more in control of her situation, after he had left, Caroline cleaned the ‘touch points’ that the landlord had interacted with, such as door knobs and the letterbox. The potential to be contaminated by him led Caroline to curtail her spatial use and stop using the living room, even though she was mostly in the house by herself. Ahmed (2006a) proposes that after a disorientation, a reorientation can occur through activity that resets that which has been disrupted. I suggest that Caroline’s cleaning of unseen contamination from her landlord’s visits was an attempt at resetting her space physically, and reorientating herself emotionally, towards gaining some agency within her multiple feelings of disorientation.

5.5 | Shadow lives

At this point, I should also add that the disorientations and new orientation markers experienced by the furloughed workers were not necessarily encountered singularly. For some furloughed workers, the disorientations imbricated, and for others

they became part of a sequence of changing intensities of feeling throughout their period of furlough. Chloe, for example, who said that she felt like she was living a 'shadow life' and had circumnavigated spatially around her partner's work life, had also felt the sensory intrusion of smelling her absent landlord's possessions left in her sublet flat. The landlord's smells had created spaces in her home which she navigated around as they made her feel out of place. Abigail, who had circumnavigated around her home-working partner spatially, had also become detached from her own present and vacillated about how to fill her time until her partner finished his working day. Alexandra, who had found filling her time challenging, had also circumnavigated the emotions of others who were finding furlough emotionally and financially difficult. She felt unable to discuss her own feelings around furlough in the light of other people's situations that she felt were more economically difficult than her own. Caroline, who had felt disorientated sensorially by her landlord's intrusions, had found filling her time challenging until she received daily telephone calls from her sister, whose reported productivity catalysed her into action.

Disorientation in the accounts I have shared, as feeling unable to inhabit a space or to fill one's time or to express one's distress or to live comfortably, points to feeling a loss of agency. Leading a 'shadow life' or subsuming oneself and making the activity of another an orientation marker for one's own actions perhaps exposed the loss of a certain intensity of agency normally maintained through having a work life. In the flows of their usual work life, the furloughed workers may not have realised quite how work had orientated them, as 'when we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated' (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 5). Their orientation to work may have been so permeating that they did not necessarily feel the intensity of their attachment to it until it was suspended. In the context of being furloughed, perhaps feeling disorientated was a point of exposure of the strength of a lost orientation or relation to work, and therefore how deeply work contours some people's lives. Within the wider study, feeling disorientated and living 'a shadow life' was experienced by a range of furloughed workers across ages, genders, ethnicities, locations and professions. Speculatively, the resonances of feeling disorientated during furlough may have affected a significant proportion of the furloughed workforce beyond the study.

And yet, crucially, the disorientations I have outlined were being lived through and were 'liveable' (Harbin, 2016). Feeling disorientated in these instances included the capacity to persevere and endure them. More than that, the disorientations of furlough led several participants in the study, such as Caroline, to rethink work as an orientation or to re-examine their relation with employers, to quiet quit, the strategy of making less effort at work (Hamilton et al., 2023), or to quit altogether. The disorientation of furlough therefore not only exposed workers' engrained relations with their work life, but also opened the possibility to reappraise and reorientate that relation. This, in turn, may have consequences for individual workers, employers, workforces and the UK economy.

6 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Drawing on Sarah Ahmed's (2006a) notions of disorientation, I have proposed that without the surety and the sense of agency that work can provide, non-work life became disorientating for some of those furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Additionally, in lieu of work as an orientation, furloughed workers made other people their new orientation markers. Furlough, through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, was an unusual event, probably never to be repeated in the same way in the UK. Nonetheless, considering the disorientation of non-workers orientating themselves through the actions of others may be productive for geographers reflecting on other forms of detachment from work life. For instance, parental leave, where a worker orientates away from work life and towards their new child, and sick leave, a period of enforced separation from a work place, both have the potential to instigate similar disorientations as being furloughed. The paused work relation potentially changes a worker's sense of identity and agency within their new situation as a non-worker waiting to return to work. Or the cessation of work life through retirement or redundancy could potentially provoke longer term disorientations, some of which may share the temporal, spatial or felt dimensions of the disorientations of furlough. Conversely, thinking with the disorientations of furlough could lead to new understandings of unretirement, the strategy followed by those either reluctant or unable to retire, and so maintain a full or minimised work life post-retirement age (see Kanabar, 2015; Lee, 2022; Platts et al., 2019). The unretired may be exerting a form of resistance to the potential disorientations that non-work life could galvanise (Lee, 2022) and share similar concerns with those in the study who, without a sense of purpose, vacillated about how to fill their downtime. Finally, workers who find themselves in the discontinuities of zero hours contracts, where workers without fixed time contracts wait in unknown durations for work shifts (Smith & McBride, 2022), may share some of the oscillating feelings of an absence of work agency that the furloughed experienced.

The space-time of furlough had surfaced certain feelings, vulnerabilities, habits, expectations, relations and attachments that are often absorbed within the flow of quotidian life. And yet, the disorientations of furlough became, for some

workers, a juncture in which to reflect on (and for some reorientate) their relation with work. The interviews with the furloughed were made in 2021 when the workers were either still furloughed or recently returned to work. This opens potential further inquiry of the long-term resonances of feeling disorientated by being furloughed; particularly, whether the disorientations of furlough changed workers' orientations to their work life irrevocably.

The conceptualisations of the disorientations experienced during furlough as leading a 'shadow life' potentially contribute to previous work in geography that has identified disorientation as an unravelling of relations or an inability to proceed (see Bissell & Gorman-Murray, 2019; Dorignon & Nethercote, 2021; Raynor, 2017; Wylie, 2021). In the accounts of the furloughed workers outlined in the paper, their suspended relation to work life created an inability to continue in their usual quotidian rhythms and, I argue, that they came to feel disorientated by this. Through the accounts of those furloughed as tiptoeing around another spatially or emotionally, or of being acutely aware of another's temporal rhythms or bodily traces, the study demonstrated that they had become differently orientated during their disorientation. These were new orientations, which they may not have willingly chosen but found themselves in relation to in lieu of their own agency. Finally, Chloe's term 'shadow life' may be a productive way to account for disorientations (within and beyond work life) that are felt when an orientating relation is lost or suspended, and people create alternative orientation markers, such as the actions of others, to support how they lead their lives.

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Author elects to not share data due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms. Their ages and job roles are their actual ones.

² Of the 35 participants in the wider study, 29 were female and nine were male. In this small sample, I did not find that the experiences were gendered as the male participants discussed experiences of disorientation analogous to the female participants.

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