

Research article

Living life to the full? Temporary employment and youth biographies in the wake of the 2008 Recession

Laura Cartwright*

University of Leeds

Abstract

Young people have made up a significant proportion of temporary workers in the labour market for some time. However, during the 2008 recession and for some time after, many were compelled to undertake such contracts in the absence of stable alternatives. Young peoples' engagement with paid work is fundamental in helping them achieve biographical goals and ambitions, whether these are related to employment or personal interests.

This paper presents qualitative data obtained through interviews with a number of young temporary workers in 2012 and demonstrates both how 'temping' is experienced and how such work impacts upon personal lives and aspirations for the future. Contributing to existing debates on changing youth transitions, it illustrates how engagement with temporary work can be *enabling* for those with short-term goals but conversely, *disabling* for those who seek the long-term commitments typically associated with reaching adulthood. More worryingly, it reveals how such work can trap young people in a meaningless 'perpetual present' of suspended adulthood, leading to feelings of powerlessness and pessimism about the future.

Keywords: Youth transitions; temporary employment; precarity; recession.

Introduction

The changing nature of youth transitions, the demise of traditional pathways of social reproduction and the complexities of navigating between 'childhood' and 'adulthood' in the contemporary context has been the focus of a growing volume of sociological research (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Roberts, 2009; MacDonald, 2011; Woodman and Wyn, 2014). Traditional benchmarks of reaching adulthood, getting married, buying a house and starting a family now take place much later in life as the pathway from 'learning to earning' and the financial stability and economic independence that were typically associated with participation in the labour market, have become more elusive. Despite transitioning to adulthood in a socio-economic context that is fundamentally different from their parents', one notable continuity is that young people's engagement with paid employment 'remains pivotal to much else' (MacDonald, 2011: 428) with early

labour market experiences having an impact upon career prospects and life biographies for many years to come (Shildrick et al., 2012).

Large numbers of young people now delay formal labour market entry in favour of continuing into the expanded higher education system, most recent figures demonstrate that the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) now stands at 50 per cent (Department for Education, 2018: 1). But perhaps of more significance for young people has been the reconfiguration of the labour market around neoliberal principles of flexibility, deregulation and market-responsiveness which have handed greater power to employers. Since the Global Financial Crisis took hold, there has been much attention given to the resultant growth in 'zero-hours' and 'bogus' self-employment contracts as more nascent forms of insecure work, but the growth of agency and temporary work has been largely overlooked (Judge and Tomlinson, 2016). Research shows that even before the 2008 recession, young people made up a significant proportion of such workers (EFILWC, 2007), but as the global economic downturn gained pace, and with youth unemployment peaking at a high of 22% in the last quarter of 2011 (ONS, 2011: 10), many young people were compelled to take such roles in the absence of permanent alternatives (TUC, 2013).

The tendency of Government(s) to problematise youth unemployment, particularly during times of economic instability, ignores the complexity of youth transitions. Many young people will typically experience movement 'around different economic statuses' (unemployed/training/education/ employed) at different times, as well as undertaking different 'types' of work (permanent/temporary/contract etc.) (MacDonald, 2013) with socio-economic background and education still highly structuring such transitions. The policy focus on simply getting people into work, without examining how the quality and security of that employment can impact upon individual lives, raises a number of important questions. Firstly, how are young people adjusting to a working life arranged around a series of projects which are unpredictable and constantly changing? Is it the case that they feel alienated and frustrated in work? Or are they grateful for simply having a job? What are their personal aspirations for the future and how do their current work experiences affect these plans? Do young workers feel in control of their unfolding biographies or does employment insecurity have wider ramifications on their personal lives?

Whilst there is a growing volume of research into both youth transitions and precarious work, there is currently little qualitative analysis of the particular subjective experiences of young temporary workers, and how they evaluate their current work in relation to their own biographical plans and ambitions. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap, beginning by examining the growth of precarious work as well as the importance of work to individual biographies. It presents qualitative data obtained through interviews with a number of young temporary workers in 2012. Demonstrating how 'temping' is experienced by this particular group of young people and its impact upon their personal lives and aspirations for the future, it argues that such employment can be enabling or disabling for young people, depending upon individual goals and ambitions at a given point in time. Moreover, it demonstrates how such work can compel young people to inhabit a 'perpetual present', characterised by feelings of anxiety and inadequacy.

The growth of Precarious Work

Standing's 2011 book *The Precariat* argued that labour market change associated with neoliberal agendas has created a new 'class' of workers characterised by a complete absence of forms of job security that were pursued and largely achieved with industrial

citizenship. He argues that members of the precariat fundamentally 'lack control over their labour' (Standing, 2011: 9) in a way that leaves them feeling alienated, lacking self-esteem and financially vulnerable. It is important to state here that undertaking work which is deemed 'precarious' (such as short-term or contractual) does not automatically mean someone is considered to be part of the 'precariat'. Indeed, critics argue that the emergence of a politicised 'class' of precarious workers fails to account for the heterogeneity of employees who are increasingly finding themselves undertaking such work (Lawlor, 2013), and that defining precarious work on such limited terms fails to 'capture real changes in the experience of work' (Shildrick et al., 2012: 21). The notion of 'precarity' therefore extends much further than simply the contractual status of one's employment and refers more directly to 'the detrimental effect of labour-market insecurity' on people's individual lives' (Antonucci, 2018: 888).

The apparent growth of 'non-standard' forms of work such as temporary, casual, zero-hours and 'bogus' self-employment contracts, and the political and economic significance of such work as evidence of the labour market further embedding 'precarity' continues to be fiercely debated (see Fevre, 2007; Doogan, 2011, Standing, 2011). However, since the Financial Crisis, discussion on the 'precariat' has grown as new job creation has largely centred around the expansion of insecure and short-term contracts and labour management policies that allowed employers greater flexibility (Brinkley, 2015; ILO, 2012; TUC, 2013). Despite an overall fall in rates of temporary employment between 1997 and 2008 (IPPR, 2010) there has been a marked increase in the number of 'involuntary' temporary workers, that is those who are temping because they could not secure a permanent role, and this increase began before the UK went into recession, growing from 263,289 in 2005 to 654,820 in 2013, an increase of 149 per cent (TUC, 2013: unpaginated). A 2016 report by the Resolution Foundation found that 60 per cent of temporary agency workers would prefer a permanent job, almost a quarter had been 'temping' for at least two years and that for many, temporary work is 'nothing like the nimble, modern way of working that it is sometimes presented to be' (Judge and Tomlinson, 2016: 8).

Existing studies demonstrate that today's young people are weaving an unstable path through the labour market, faced with wage stagnation, lack of opportunities for progression, the entrenchment of insecure work and the absence of collective representation, and there is increasing evidence of a widening generational pay gap (TUC, 2018). It is not surprising that young people make up a significant proportion of temporary workers, are more likely to be in such work involuntarily and are more likely to become trapped in such roles over the long-term, which often has a detrimental impact on future employment prospects (MacDonald, 2009; IPPR, 2010). Despite being 'more qualified than ever' (Stuth and Jahn, 2019: 1) and ostensibly valuing secure, full-time work (Crofts et al., 2015) it is becoming increasingly common for young people to transition from formal education into low-paid, insecure work. More significantly, rather than being a stepping-stone of progression, studies show that early engagement with precarious work increases the likelihood of young people becoming 'trapped' in low-paid, insecure work over the longer term (D'Arcy and Rahman, 2019; Shildrick et al., 2012).

The effects of insecure work on people's personal lives is an emerging area of research with much existing literature focusing on negative effects on well-being and mental health (Benach et al., 2013; Ferrante et al., 2019; Rönnblad et al., 2019). But for young people, the effects of precarious work on personal lives is far more complex. Transitioning straight from the relative security and predictability of formal education into precarious work can be problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, young people often lack the financial security of accumulated savings from time in employment and are frequently servicing large student debts or overdrafts at a time when living costs are continuing to rise, leaving them financially vulnerable. Second, this financial insecurity

frustrates attempts to achieve 'adult' milestones such as getting married, buying a home or starting a family, ambitions which are still very much in evidence amongst young people (Davis and Cartwright, 2019; Cosslett, 2015). Lastly, this inability to achieve perceived 'life goals' can induce feelings of failure, depression and pessimism about the future (Willems, 2017).

The importance of 'work' to individual biographies

Mooney, (2004: 2) argues, 'Work is often central to our life story, to our personal biography. It is a mark of who we are, how we are defined and seen by others: a key element in our identity'. It is important not to overstate the meaning and significance that all individuals attach to work, for those undertaking the most menial and repetitive of jobs on checkouts and in call centres may well find work 'as a means of self-preservation rather than self-expression' (Frayne, 2015: 18). Yet despite this, well paid and secure work can facilitate meaning by enabling individuals to obtain fulfilment and satisfaction if not from paid work, then in other areas of their lives such as through leisure, hobbies, personal interests and relationships. The problem with precarious work is that too often it is unrewarding and its failure to provide security prevents individuals from seeking fulfilment in other areas of their lives (Standing, 2011).

In his theory of alienation Marx outlines the detachment of individuals from what they produce and the work they perform. As Frayne (2015) argues, work offers a potential opportunity for creativity and satisfaction, but is often organised in such a way that this is actively prevented. Seaman (1959) in his own analysis of alienation identified two factors which are of particular relevance to precarious work: powerlessness and isolation. He defines powerlessness as 'the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes' (1959: 784). For those who are desperately seeking secure employment and the biographical stability it can provide, the compulsion to engage in precarious and unstable work creates a feeling of having little control over one's life-course. In addition, the isolating and highly individualised experience of precarious work, particularly for temporary workers who are frequently changing assignments, leaves little time for collectivity and camaraderie. They may physically work alongside colleagues and co-workers but their contractual status as 'temporary' renders them as both an outsider and of a perceived lower status.

Marx argued that the alienated worker 'feels himself at home only, during his leisure time', with work acting simply as a means to satisfy other needs outside employment. In the contemporary context, work is simply endured to fund a 'leisure identity' which seeks meaning outside work through processes of culture and consumption (Winlow and Hall, 2006). However, feeling alienated from one's work can create feelings of detachment and dissatisfaction that can 'generalise out' (Seaman, 1967: 274) into other areas of an individual's life. More traditional biographical milestones such as buying a home, getting married and starting a family require 'enduring commitment, solidity, financial security and trust in the future' (Bone, 2019: 1218) which is not afforded by short-term, temporary work. Most people need a 'sustaining life narrative' (Sennett, 2006: 5) on which past experience is valued, and future hopes, expectations and ambitions can be built and achieved. An individual who summarily adapts to living with chronic insecurity, relentless change and the short-termism that characterises life as a precarious worker is, Sennett argues, 'an unusual sort of human being' (2006: 5).

Young people make active choices in their present based on an anticipated and imagined future. For those that seek the flexibility that precarious work provides, it can help them to achieve a short-term goal or bring about a 'desired change in circumstance'

(Bone, 2019: 1232), such as funding a period of travel abroad or further study. For those young people who hold longer-term personal ambitions which ultimately require financial and biographical security, precarious work may actively prevent such a change in circumstance, forcing them to inhabit what Bone (2019) calls a 'continuous present', where the perceived security of the future is routinely deferred and perpetually out of reach. Crucially, this present, emptied out of meaning and characterised by feelings of disaffection and alienation in work *alongside* feelings of powerlessness, can ultimately lead to a fading of belief in the future as 'a point which can orientate action and thus retrospectively confer meaning on the present' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 421).

Methods and Data Collection

The study utilised a case study approach focused on the experiences of twenty young temporary workers within one recruitment agency. What age constitutes being 'young' is debatable (Barber, 2007); however, the focus of this study was on people aged between 18 and 30 years old as existing research suggests that it is those born after 1979 that have grown up under the effects of neoliberal policy and have experienced its impact throughout the majority of their lives (Howker and Malik, 2010). There were some initial difficulties in obtaining access to potential participants; many agency managers were suspicious of the motives of the research and were not happy with the requirement of participant confidentiality. Eventually a breakthrough came with a recruitment agency in York. Interviews took place in a private room provided by the recruitment agency as this was convenient for the participants. They were voice recorded (with consent), transcribed and coded into a thematic framework based on the groups of questions asked during the interview.

Interviews were conducted between January and April 2012. At this time York's economy was still performing well despite the recession, boasting both a highly qualified population and a lower unemployment rate than both the regional and national average (Centre for Cities, 2012: 3; ONS Nomis, 2014: unpaginated). The temporary recruitment agency in which the research was conducted was established in 1998 with offices across Yorkshire. Whilst they advertised temporary and permanent recruitment for roles across a wide range of industries, they appeared to place candidates primarily in sales, customer service, administration and technical support positions. The participants were all working in what would have been considered 'entry level' sales, administrative, and support roles, and they stemmed from a variety of social and educational backgrounds. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant during transcription to maintain anonymity and to protect their confidentiality.

'It gets you by' – Experiences of temporary work

This section explores the participants' experiences of temporary work and their subjective evaluations of what it is like to be 'a temp'. Amongst the research participants there was an evident distinction between those who were actively choosing to be in temporary employment because it assisted them with achieving a specific short-term goal, and those who were involuntarily in temporary work because they were unable to secure permanent employment. It was apparent that the function that temporary work played in their lives ultimately shaped their views and experiences of it, with those who saw it as a 'stepping-stone' or a 'stop-gap' better able to cope with the negative aspects of temping, such as carrying out mundane tasks and having to be available for work at a moment's notice:

“Oh it’s so boring! It’s awful...it’s real basic admin stuff... But I don’t mind... Well it suits me at the moment. The only reason I’m temping is cos I don’t wanna get a permanent job cos I don’t wanna be tied to the UK. I want to go off and do more travelling...so it suits to be earning a little bit of money.” (Lisa, 23)

“I’m still planning to go travelling... There are bad things about it (temping)... It gets you by. I don’t enjoy every minute of it but generally it’s cos I’m working towards a goal, so as long as you’re working towards a goal in your life then it’s not so bad.” (Danny, 27)

Lisa had recently graduated from university and was saving to go travelling. Thoughts of embarking upon a professional career were many years in the future and she felt confident that ‘one day I will be perfectly capable of earning a decent salary when I put my mind to it’. Temporary work evidently suited her immediate objectives. Danny, who had secured the stability of a permanent job until he was made redundant as a result of the recession, had decided he would like to travel to Australia and see if he can find work there, not convinced of his prospects in the UK given his inability to find permanent work so far. For both of these young people, their immediate objectives were short-term and so temporary work was assisting them in achieving such goals.

Conversely, for those who were seeking a permanent ‘career’ the experiences of temping were far less positive. It is worth pointing out here that the idea of a ‘job’, described in functional and instrumental terms as a way of simply providing an income, was frequently juxtaposed with that of a ‘career’, which was described as providing fulfilling employment which utilises skills and provides opportunities for advancement. For those temps who were working towards what could be described as more ‘youthful’ life goals (further study and travel) a temporary ‘job’ provided a useful opportunity. For those seeking the anticipated security (and status) of a ‘career’, temporary work was viewed far more negatively:

“When you are seriously thinking about getting a permanent career and things, the thought of doing just temporary work where you’re not important, you have no responsibilities, you’re doing boring work and it is simply temporary for a low wage as well, it is a bit depressing... it does come to a point where you really just want to find something permanent and I hate the feeling now...I really want something where I have a role and a responsibility, I’m just sick of being the temp, basically.” (Jennifer, 25)

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful....no its awful, I absolutely hate it, I mean with a ...serious passion, I mean I dread going to there in the morning.... the work itself is very dull, just monotonous... it’s demoralising at times.” (Jeremy, 25)

Both Jennifer and Jeremy were amongst some of the most ambitious of the sample: both educated to postgraduate level and frequently articulating the importance of displaying a strong work ethic in any role they undertook, they felt disheartened and demoralised by both the mundaneness of temporary work and the lack of opportunities for progression.

Not having a designated role or responsibility within a placement was also linked to reinforcing feelings of being ‘just a temp’ and an outsider who doesn’t have a specific place within the team:

“I was very much just the person who was creating the invoices, I wasn’t really part of the team... it was just that feeling of being ‘the temp’. It was fine but I personally

really hate it! I think when you're a temp, my experience is... you're always a little bit left out so to speak so you never feel completely, completely there." (Jennifer, 25)

"I get frustrated that I'm...I wanna say 'just a temp'... my boss would take the piss out of me cos I was 'just a temp', just jovially, I mean, there was no malice it was just like a 'oh don't talk to Gavin, he's just a temp' completely fine with it, it wasn't a horrible thing but that's kind of stuck with me." (Gavin, 24)

It was evident that even where co-workers and colleagues had been welcoming and friendly, the temporary workers found it difficult to try and fit in and establish good working relationships, particularly for those who were frequently being moved into a succession of new and different roles. Southwood (2011: 66) argues that this 'vague, underlying sense of not-belonging' and of being an outsider is often carried around by temporary workers, alongside a sense of inferiority at their short-term status. The notion of being 'just a temp' extends much further than feelings of informal exclusion. The contractual status of a temporary agency employee as a 'worker' dictates that they are ineligible for many of the rights conferred on a directly recruited 'employee'. Despite the Agency Workers Directive coming into force in 2011, temporary agency workers are still not entitled to claim redundancy pay or unfair dismissal, and only qualify for the same rights as employees after a 12 week period, (DWP, 2020). Companies can therefore legitimately hire temp workers on shorter contracts in order to avoid the effect of this legislation. Even when placed on longer temping assignments, the difficulty in establishing durable relationships of trust and mutuality with co-workers, and a disinclination to join labour organisations such as trade unions, means that temporary workers who find themselves being treated unfairly can find themselves dealing with such issues alone, unaware of their rights and risking a lawful termination of contract simply for 'speaking out'. Jess (25) recounts a previous temporary assignment within the NHS, in which she was routinely threatened with the termination of her contract in order to keep her compliant:

"Because I'm a temp, (my manager said) if they say 'jump' I have to say 'how high' otherwise they'll just replace me with someone else and cut my hours and just really were very threatening... I was worried that at any moment...you always have that thing when you're temping that at any moment it could be said that 'we don't want you anymore, we don't need you anymore!'" (Jess, 25)

Research undertaken by the Resolution Foundation in 2018 found that temporary workers are at a distinct disadvantage due to the 'triangular' nature of the employment relationship (Judge, 2018). If workers complain about their placement to the agency, (or indeed, raise concerns about the agency itself) they could jeopardise future work assignments. In some cases this can leave temporary workers vulnerable to the worst excesses of 'employer power' (Hutton, 1995: 105), with little choice to find alternative employment, particularly during times of recession.

Evidently, overall experiences of temporary work were not positive for many of the participants. Yet most of them agreed that on the rare occasions where they were able to utilise their skills, knowledge and experience, this helped to provide a small degree of satisfaction. Rather than mentally 'detaching' from the work they undertook, they relished opportunities to demonstrate what they were capable of and took pride in carrying additional responsibilities in order that they could display a strong work ethic:

"What I liked about it was that I had some level of responsibility there, I had an actual role to do... if you're temping and fortunate enough to have a role rather

than just doing basic data input or something then that's a better experience cos at least if you have a role, you're respected... rather than being someone who's thrown crap to do here and there." (Jennifer, 25)

"Initially, I felt very frustrated, very bored... I think my work ethic to an extent shone through and they gave me more and more responsibility and y'know, little things to just make you feel wanted which perhaps in the grand scheme of things don't mean very much but at the time mean quite a lot." (Jeremy, 25)

Given the turbulence of the labour market at the time of the research there was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a large amount of gratitude for simply being in employment and having a job. The stoical attitude of 'take what you can get' resounded throughout this group, and they frequently juxtaposed the monotony of temporary work with the far worse fate of unemployment:

"Even though I don't like the job I've currently got... I still treat it with the respect it's due. It's better to have a job than being one of the one million NEET's sat at home doing nothing... you've got to be grateful for what you've been given..." (Jeremy, 25)

"Cos I was out of work for three months I really appreciate it... I'd rather be there than at home doing nowt." (Rose, 18)

Despite their often negative experiences of temping, the participants possessed a strong work ethic and an immense gratitude for having some form of employment, even when the quality of work on offer was mostly poor quality and low paid. Examined through the concept of alienation, although the participants certainly articulated the dissatisfaction and monotony of the tasks they performed, as well as the isolating nature of being a contractual 'outsider', their experience of work was not marked by detachment and superficial cooperation but instead, a resolute commitment to always give 100 per cent. The effects of this on the personal lives and ambitions of the participants is explored further in the next section.

Future orientations – the importance of security

One of the most fundamental issues facing the young temporary workers in this study, particularly those who were seeking to achieve long-term objectives such as buying a house and having a family, was the insecurity of income and low pay associated with precarious work. Thirteen of the participants had attended university, and as a result had accumulated a significant amount of debt in the form of their student loan and/or overdrafts. Not taking into consideration repayments on student loan debt (which for many of the graduates was simply sat accruing interest as they were not earning enough to reach the repayment threshold), even the participants who had not attended university spoke of owing money to bank loans, credit cards, overdrafts and to family members. Student loan debt was widely considered something to worry about 'in the future' due to the absence of a time limit attached to repayment. Conversely, more immediately repayable debts such as credit cards, personal loans and overdrafts caused the temporary workers a greater deal of anxiety. Despite 'clear evidence that the majority of young people are striving to actively take care of their personal finances' (Money Advice Trust, 2016: 2), the participants spoke of the necessity to borrow in order to meet basic living costs. Easy access to credit during times of financial hardship and a reduction in state support due to the national 'austerity' agenda has left them struggling to repay debts and dealing with the anxieties that accompany indebtedness:

"I do feel a bit under pressure with the career development loan, to make sure that's paid and everything... at the moment cos I'm getting paid weekly it's a bit of a juggle to get everything going at the same time and it always ends up with one week where I've literally got no money." (Beth, 23)

Even for those who were not servicing large debts, the low pay and irregularity of income that characterises precarious work meant that it was becoming impossible for some of the participants to be self-sufficient. Stuart (23) who at the time lived with his girlfriend worried that if he didn't manage to find a secure job soon, he might have had to move back in with his parents, something he was desperate to avoid:

"It's not so much the living costs it's just the lack of income, I mean.... I have learned to live on very little, do your shopping at Aldi and spend only £20 a week on food... I don't want to have to go back to my parents for money, I want to be self-sufficient." (Stuart, 23)

Having to move back in with parents was something a number of the participants had done already to save money. For those (usually) younger temps who were saving money for travelling or undertaking further study, such a decision was seen as a necessary step given the not-insignificant costs of renting. However, for those older temps, and certainly those who were in long-term relationships, having to live with parents was seen as a frustrating step backwards, and compounded feelings that home ownership would forever be beyond their reach. Home ownership was frequently cited as an aspiration by the participants, and it was felt that owning a home would provide 'stability, security, financial strength and the ability to plan ahead, in a way that renting cannot readily achieve' (Redfern, 2016: 11). The increased trading of homes as investments in a process of capital accumulation has pushed the cost of a home well beyond affordability, the average deposit required for a first-time buyer now standing at £44,635 (English Housing Survey, 2019: 12):

"I hate paying £600 a month rent to pay off someone else's mortgage, I'd far rather have a 100% mortgage and use it to pay off my...even if I'm paying it off for the rest of my life, at least I know that I'm paying my own...I hate it. I really really do... I just wish that we could afford to be paying for our own. Its' security and stability." (Nick, 28)

Whilst gaining a foot on the property ladder remained out of reach, the other traditional benchmarks of 'adulthood', getting married and having children, were also being increasingly postponed until a time when they felt more secure. Recent figures demonstrate that the average age for (first-time) marriage for men and women in the UK has been increasing over the past forty years, with the average man now getting married at 33 (up from 24 in 1970) and women at age 31 (up from 22 in 1970) (ONS, 2019a: 5). Similarly, the age of first-time mothers has gradually risen from around 24 in 1969, to 29 in 2017 (ONS, 2019b: 5). Many of the participants cited the absence of financial security as the main reason for 'putting off' such traditional milestones.

"Getting married, late twenties I guess and then starting a family, sort of, thirty cos I'd wanna make sure I was in a job and secure and making sure I can provide all I can provide cos otherwise if I hadn't done all that I wouldn't feel like I could... If I was still temping in my late twenties I guess I probably would put it off actually." (Rose, 18)

The long-term aspirations of the participants were fairly similar and relatively modest; there was no desire to obtain high levels of wealth nor did they have grand ambitions to 'change the world'. All of the temps hoped for the same things their parents probably did, job security, a home of their own and overall, a decent standard of living for themselves and their family. However, the temps felt that what would happen in the future represented an 'unknown', but more significantly they felt it was largely out of their control. For those involuntary temps, who were currently struggling to obtain permanent employment, they clearly felt that despite their determination, they currently had little command over the direction of their lives.

"The reality of it is things change, y'know, I could lose my job tomorrow, the landlord could turn around and say, 'right I want the house back, you've got two months then move out'...when I think ahead I think 'well I'm not gonna place me bets on the horses just yet'... that's something I've learnt to do over the years...you've got to have that mind frame." (Dave, 25)

"I try not to think about it (the future)... my focus at the moment, my goal is to get a job in heritage and that's all consuming. And once that falls into place then...then I feel I can think about other things but until I've got that job that I want, the career I've wanted, planned for, then I'm not really letting myself plan more ahead." (Phoebe, 28)

It was evident that the future represented an unknown quantity in which 'everything is possible and nothing can be foreseen or controlled' (Beck, 2000: 77). For some of the participants, the cumulative effect of feeling both apprehensive about what the future may bring, and powerless to steer or direct one's life course through the events that may follow, was leading to feelings of pessimism and despondency. Steve (29) embarked on a career after finishing university but had been made redundant as a result of the recession, and was temping whilst seeking permanent work. He was desperate to obtain a secure job but despite his best efforts, at the time of the interview he had been temping for 18 months:

"I think there are some interesting psychological effects of temping on people. I think if you can't get a full-time job and you resort, well resorts the wrong word but you fall back on temping then it can create a bit of a non-progressive line where you reach a stalemate... I think some people can get stuck temping when it should be a temporary solution more than a long-term thing. When I think of the future I don't see stability... at the minute I certainly don't see a bright future." (Steve, 29)

Similarly, Ross (25) had graduated from university and was studying for a PGCE when he went through some personal problems as a result of a relationship break-up. He subsequently failed his final exam and was asked to leave the course. Ross was very ambitious and said that since leaving his PGCE six months ago, he had applied for roughly 100 vacancies:

"I applied for stuff I was massively overqualified for, like basic admin stuff and reception work and I applied for IT support stuff, just anything I thought I could do, without having to be trained from scratch if that makes sense... most of the places didn't even respond which is crap... literally I didn't get offered a single interview." (Ross, 25)

At the time Ross was on a three-month temporary contract and was unsure whether it would be extended. It was clear that he felt a strong sense of failure for the direction

his career had taken; the current lack of control he had over his labour had translated into feelings of individual hopelessness as he described his disappointment with his current role and his anxieties about the future;

"I wasn't able to teach, and I felt like that was a really respected profession, and something that I really enjoyed where I could have a real impact on the lives of others and I get to my job now and I don't have that ability to be proud of what I do..."

...I think the next ten years are not gonna be great, economically for the whole country and probably including me in that... I don't see that as being pessimistic or optimistic I think that's just as realistic as I can comprehend... I wouldn't say that I was happy...I dunno. I feel like, if I stopped existing, it would have no detrimental effect on anything really, other than my parents being sad. I don't think my life has as much value as it could do, I don't think I'm living my life to the full." (Ross, 25)

In contrast to the stereotypical notion of 'idealistic youth', it appears that young people today feel increasingly negative and pessimistic about their future prospects and with good reason. Recent studies (Crawford and Sturrock, 2019; Shrimpton et al., 2017) have demonstrated that intergenerational progress - the idea that each successive generation should experience higher living standards than their predecessors at the same age - is dramatically declining. Such reports found that 'there is widespread pessimism about young people's lives compared to those of their parents' (Shrimpton et al., 2017: 4), with only 23 per cent of those surveyed feeling that today's young will experience improved prospects (2017: 4). Insecure work, unaffordable housing and debt are trapping many young people in a perpetual present that is emptied of meaning because it is overwhelmingly defined in relation to an unknown and seemingly unreachable future.

Conclusion

Adulthood generally involves 'family, savings, community, realising ambitions and ideas, stability and even having children' (Howker and Malik, 2010: 12). For this to be possible, young people need to achieve independence, self-sufficiency and an ability to map out a coherent narrative for themselves where the past provides a signpost towards the future, hard work is valued and rewarded, and there is a sense of forward biographical motion towards personal goals and ambitions. Paid work remains pivotal in providing the security and stability that allows individuals to work towards their aspirations, whether these are connected to a career or are achieved outside employment.

The data in this study highlight a number of main findings. Firstly, it is clear that youth trajectories for many in the labour market are very much characterised by a number of complex and turbulent steps which do not follow a clear or linear pathway. Even those older temps who had begun to establish a career and had experienced spells of secure, full-time work had found themselves made redundant in the recession and were effectively sent back to the low-paid, menial and insecure work that they may have undertaken in their late teens/early twenties. Moreover, unaffordable housing and debt repayments meant that they had yet to accrue the financial security to weather economic storms such as recessions; and some (though not all) were at risk of social exclusion and descending into financial hardship, even if they were currently clinging on by their fingertips (Winlow and Hall, 2006). One of the limitations of this study is that it provides only a snapshot of individual biographies at a particular point in time. It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to follow up how the work and career

trajectories of the participants had unfolded. With the austerity response greatly shaping the UK economy and labour market in the post-recession years, and with uncertainty continuing around Brexit and more recently around the COVID 19 pandemic, it would be interesting to see how these wider structural events have played out on individual lives.

Second, the study demonstrates that temporary employment can be beneficial and a positive experience for young people if they are working towards short-term goals such as funding further study or saving money to go travelling. It is the element of choice that is critical here: for those who actively seek out temporary work because of the flexibility it provides, it offers a way of earning money that also keeps the realities of the labour market somewhat 'at arms length'. However, it was interesting that those participants who were actively choosing temporary work were unaware that they were temping alongside former travellers and postgrads who had been in their somewhat more optimistic position several years earlier, but had been compelled to re-enter the temporary labour market due to the recession.

Thirdly, the research clearly demonstrated that for those young people who were working towards long-term ambitions such as career-building or were seeking significant commitments in their personal lives such as getting married, buying a home or starting a family, temporary work constrained their ability to reach such goals. There was little opportunity in such work for career development, it was often monotonous and low-paid, and the absence of financial security meant that the participants were prevented from reaching those (still widely desired) biographical milestones of adulthood. The absence of meaning and fulfilment in work alongside the curtailment of planned life goals led to a feeling of pervasive insecurity which was clearly beginning to take its toll on the mental health and wellbeing of some of the group.

This leads to the final and most significant finding. The data conveyed a strong sense of powerlessness amongst many of the temporary workers. Those who were frustrated in their attempts to work towards personal goals and ambitions felt trapped in a situation in which they had little control over the direction of their lives, but were also robbed of the hope that the situation would improve. Young people need to have an orientation towards a meaningful future, particularly when the present appears to be devalued and characterised by simply 'getting by'. Temporary work can be a useful stepping-stone for short-term objectives, but it is no substitute for the secure and stable employment that is necessary for individuals, families and communities to thrive. As the intergenerational contract collapses, policymakers must reframe the discussion away from rising employment rates to address how precarious work can impact upon young lives. If not, we may be storing up a plethora of social and economic problems in our young people to be unveiled in the years to come.

*Correspondence address: Dr Laura Cartwright. Email: L.Cartwright@leeds.ac.uk

References

- Antonucci, L. (2018) Not all experiences of precarious work lead to precarity: the case study of young people at university and their welfare mixes. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21, 7, 888-904.
- Barber, B. (2007) *Consumed – How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. London & New York: Norton.
- Beck, U. (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.
- Benach, J., Vives, A., Amable, M., Ferrer, M., Moncada, S., Llorens, C., Muntaner, C. and Benavides, F. (2013) Employment Precariousness and Poor Mental Health:

p. 125. Research article - Living life to the full? Temporary employment and youth biographies in the wake of the 2008 Recession

- Evidence from Spain on a New Social Determinant of Health. *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, 2013, Article ID 978656.
- Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (2007) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Bone, K. (2019) 'I don't want to be a vagrant for the rest of my life': young peoples' experiences of precarious work as a 'continuous present'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22, 9, 1218–1237.
- Brinkley, D. (2015) *Tracking the Labour Market Recovery*. London: Trades Union Congress (TUC). [online]. Available from: 'https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Tracking_The_Labour_Market_Recovery_Touchstone_Extra_2015_WIP2.pdf' [Accessed: 12/11/ 2019]
- Centre for Cities (2012) *European Comparator City Report – York..* London: Centre for Cities [online]. Available from: <http://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/12-02-16-European-comparator-city-report-York.pdf> [Accessed: 06/09/ 2019]
- Coslett, R. (2015) 'Babies? An impossible dream': the millennials priced out of parenthood. *The Guardian*, [online] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/nov/14/babies-an-impossible-dream-the-millennials-priced-out-of-parenthood> [Accessed: 11/09/ 2019]
- Crawford, R. and Sturrock, D. (2019) *Should generations differ in their wealth accumulation?* IFS Working Paper W19/27 Institute for Fiscal Studies [online] Available from: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/WP201928-Should-generations-differ-in-their-wealth-accumulation.pdf> [Accessed: 12/11/ 2019]
- Crofts, J., Cuervo, H., Wyn, J., Smith, G. and Woodman, D. (2015) *Life Patterns Ten years following Generation Y*. Melbourne: Youth Research Centre. [online] Available from: https://education.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1624532/LifePatterns_10YearFollowingGenY_FINAL_webversion.pdf [Accessed: 05/03/2020]
- D'Arcy, C. and Rahman, F. (2019) *Atypical approaches: Options to support workers with insecure incomes*. Resolution Foundation [online]. Available from: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/01/Atypical-approaches-report.pdf> [Accessed: 12/02/2020]
- Davis, M. and Cartwright, L. (2019) Deferred Lives: Money, debt and the financialized futures of young temporary workers. In: Featherstone, M. (eds) *The Sociology of Debt*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Department for Education (2018) Participation Rates In Higher Education: Academic Years 2006/2007 – 2016/2017 (Provisional). [online]. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/744087/Main_text_participation_rates_in_higher_education_2006_to_2017.pdf [Accessed: 12/11/2019]
- DWP (2020) *Your rights as an Agency Worker* [online]. London: Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/agency-workers-your-rights/print> [Accessed: 15/07/2020]
- Doogan, K. (2001) Insecurity and Long-term Employment. *Work, Employment and Society*, 15, 3, 419-441.
- English Housing Survey (2019) *English Housing Survey – Headline Report 2017-18*. London: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. [online] Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/834603/2017-18_EHS_Headline_Report.pdf [Accessed 31/10/2019]
- European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC) (2007) *Temporary agency workers in the European Union* [online]. Available from: http://eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_files/ewco/reports/TN0408TR01/TN0408TR01.pdf [Accessed: 12/11/2019]

- Ferrante, G., Fasanelli, F., Gigantesco, A., Ferracin, E., Contoli, B., Costa, G., Gargiulo, L., Marra, M., Masocco, M., Minardi, V., Violani, C., Zengarini, N., D'Errico, A. and Ricceri, F. (2019) Is the association between precarious employment and mental health mediated by economic difficulties in males? Results from two Italian studies. *BMC Public Health*, 19, 869.
- Fevre, R. (2007) Employment insecurity and social theory: the power of nightmares. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21, 3, 517 – 535.
- Frayne, D. (2015) *The Refusal of Work*. London: Zed Books.
- Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (1997) *Young People and Social Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Howker, E. and Malik, S. (2010) *The Jilted Generation – How Britain has Bankrupted its Youth*. London: Icon Books.
- Hutton, W. (1995) *The State We're In (Revised Edition)*. London: Vintage.
- ILO (2012) *World of Work Report – Better Jobs for a Better Economy* [online]. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/-publ/documents/publication/wcms_179453.pdf [Accessed: 11/09/2019]
- IPPR (2010) *Trends in Part-time and Temporary Work* [online]. Available from: <https://www.ippr.org/files/uploadedFiles/pressreleases/Part-time%20and%20temporary%20work%20technical%20briefing.pdf> [Accessed: 03/03/2020]
- Judge, L. (2018) *The good, the bad and the ugly: The experience of agency workers and the policy response*. London: Resolution Foundation. Available from: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2018/11/The-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly.pdf> [Accessed: 07/10/2019]
- Judge, L. and Tomlinson, D. (2016) *Secret agents: Agency workers in the new world of work*. London: Resolution Foundation [online] Available from: <https://www.unboundphilanthropy.org/sites/default/files/Secret-Agents.pdf> [Accessed: 03/03/2020]
- Lawlor, C. (2013) Book Review Symposium – The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class by Guy Standing. *Global Discourse*, 3, 3-4, 536–553.
- Macdonald, R. (2009) Precarious Work: Risk, Choice and Poverty Traps. In: Furlong, A. (ed) *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood – New Perspectives and Agendas*. Oxon: Routledge: 167-175.
- MacDonald, R. (2011) Youth transitions, unemployment and underemployment: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? *Journal of Sociology*, 47, 4, 427-444.
- MacDonald, R. (2013) Underemployment and precarity: The new condition of youth? [online]. Available from: <https://elmmagazine.eu/issue-1-2013/underemployment-and-precari-the-new-condition-of-youth> [Accessed: 21 November]
- Money Advice Trust and National DebtLine (2016) *Borrowed Years – a spotlight briefing on young people, credit and debt* [online]. Available from: <http://www.moneyadvicetrust.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Research%20and%20Reports/Borrowed%20Years%2c%20Young%20people%20credit%20and%20debt%2c%20Aug%202016.pdf> [Accessed: 24/10/2019]
- Mooney, G. (2004) Exploring the Dynamics of Work, Personal Lives and Social Policy. In: Mooney, G. (ed.) *Work: Personal Lives and Social Policy*. Bristol and Milton Keynes: Policy and OU Press.
- ONS (2011) Labour Market Statistics – November 2011. *Statistical Bulletin*. [online] Available from: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_241735.pdf [Accessed: 24/11/2019]
- ONS (2019a) *Marriages in England and Wales 2016* [online]. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2016> [Accessed: 05/11/2019]

- ONS (2019b) *Birth characteristics in England and Wales: 2017* [online]. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthcharacteristicsinenglandandwales/2017> [Accessed: 05/11/2019]
- ONS Nomis – Labour Market Statistics (2014) Labour Market Profile - York, North Yorkshire and East Riding [online]. Available from: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185568/report.aspx> [Accessed: 06/09/2019]
- Redfern, P.(2016) *The Redfern Review into the Decline of Home Ownership. Report commissioned by John Healey MP* [online]. Available from: https://britainthinks.com/pdfs/TW082_RR_online_PDF.pdf [Accessed: 04/12/2019]
- Rönblad, T., Grönholm, E., Jonsson, J., Koranyi, I., Orellana, C., Kreshpaj, B., Chen, L., Stockfelt, L. and Bodin, T. (2019) 'Precarious employment and mental health: a systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies'. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 45, 5, 429-443.
- Roberts, K. (2009) *Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West*. London: Palgrave.
- Seeman, M. (1959) On the Meaning of Alienation. *American Sociological Review*, 24, 6, 83–791.
- Seeman, M. (1967) On the Personal Consequences of Alienation in Work. *American Sociological Review*, 32, 2, 273-285.
- Sennett, R. (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. Newhaven and London: Yale University Press.
- Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., Webster, C. and Garthwaite, K. (2012) *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in 'low-pay, No-pay' Britain*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Shrimpton, H., Skinner, G. and Hall, S. (2017) *The Millennial Bug – Public attitudes on the living standards of different generations*. Resolution Foundation and the Intergenerational Commission. [online] Available from: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2017/09/The-Millennial-Bug.pdf> [Accessed: 12/11/2019]
- Southwood, I. (2011) *Non-stop Inertia*. Hants: Zero Books.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat - The New Dangerous Classes*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Stuth, S. and Jahn, K. (2019) Young, successful, precarious? Precariousness at the entry stage of employment careers in Germany. *Journal of Youth Studies* [online] Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13676261.2019.1636945?needAccess=true> [Accessed: 12/02/2020]
- TUC (2013) *Involuntary temporary jobs driving rising employment*. [online] Available from: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/economic-issues/labour-market/labour-market-and-economic-reports/involuntary-temporary-jobs-driving> [Accessed: 14/11/2019]
- TUC (2018) *Stuck at the start: Young workers' experiences of pay and progression*. TUC Report. [online] Available from: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Stuck%20at%20the%20start-%20young%20workers%20progress%20and%20pay.pdf> [Accessed: 02/03/2020]
- Willets, D. (2017) Inequalities across the generations: A longitudinal perspective. *Closer Conference*. 1st and 2nd November 2017 British Library Knowledge Centre. London. Resolution Foundation. [online] Available from: <https://www.closer.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Keynote-presentation-Inequalities-across-the-generations.pdf> [Accessed: 27/11/2019]
- Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2006) *Violent Night – Urban Leisure and Contemporary Culture*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishing.
- Woodman, D. and Wyn, J. (2014) *Youth and Generation – Rethinking change and inequality in the lives of young people*. London: Sage.