Precarious work has been on the rise since the 1970s and has emerged as a core contemporary concern within politics, in the media, and among researchers (Kalleberg 2009). Precarious work practices refers to non-standard employment where work is insecure and unprotected, and the worker thus not able to sustain a steady income to maintain a household. Ever more people across the globe are finding themselves in precarious work where they have very few rights, while employers ‘evade their obligations to provide social security and pensions, maternity and family leave, overtime payments, vacation and holidays, and occupational health and safety’ (Malentacchi 2008).

To represent in the cover design the cross-section of the papers published in this issue of Social Alternatives, a number of concepts were considered. One was a black and white photographic portrait of a worker, as its strong clear lines would have a strong emotional impact on the viewer. As precarious work practices are being experienced across different culture and genders, a design feature of this depiction is that it did not represent any specific gender or culture.

Another idea was a cog. The cog is a classic symbol of the de-humanised industrial process as a form of work. Although belonging to an industrial past age, the cog nonetheless effectively depicts the overwhelming forces impacting workers and their lives. This was powerfully expressed in Fritz Lang’s 1927 movie Metropolis and in Charlie Chaplin’s 1936 movie Hard Times, both commenting on the inhumanity of humans as a cog in the machine of the capitalist industrial process. Images of cogs were also often used in communist imagery, for instance, adopted by the national governments in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic as a symbolic emblem of technological progress: ‘this was both a reference to revolutionary Leninism and to Stalin’s invocation of the new socialist man as a “screw in the machine”’ (Aulich and Sylvestrova 1991: 105).

This idea of a cog seemed fitting for expressing the rise of precarious work practices – the design involved depicting a human figure climbing a cog, referencing the constant motion of perpetual insecurity. However the focus of this issue on precarious work was ‘youth’, so this needed to be considered in the design. The cog and its human figure were set in a modern distressed background to represent specifically youth in precarious work.

References:
Aulich J. and Sylvestrova M. 1999 Political Posters in Central and Eastern Europe, 1945-95: Signs of the Times, Manchester University Press NY.

ISSN: 0155-0306

Why not discuss issues raised in the journal with other readers, or even order subscriptions and back issues.
Visit us at:

Social Alternatives.com

Acknowledgement of Sponsors

Faculty of Arts and Business, University of the Sunshine Coast
School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland
School of Education, University of Queensland
Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Queensland
Social Alternatives

EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

Bronwyn Stevens  University of the Sunshine Coast
Clare Archer-Lean University of the Sunshine Coast
Robert Gilbert University of Queensland
Debra Livingston University of the Sunshine Coast
Julie Matthews University of Adelaide
Marcus Bussey University of the Sunshine Coast
Ginia Brock University of the Sunshine Coast
Victoria Palmer University of Melbourne
Mark Roberts University of Sydney
Graham Maddox University of New England
Cassandra Star Flinders University
George Morgan University of Western Sydney
Elizabeth Eddy

ADVISORY BOARD

Roland Bleiker University of Queensland
Verity Burgmann Monash University
Parlo Singh Griffith University
Kevin P. Clements University of Otago
Vicki Crowley University of South Australia
Geoff Dow University of Queensland
Brien Hallett University of Hawai’i
Ian Lowe Griffith University
Brian Martin University of Wollongong
Philip Mendes Monash University
Rebecca Spence University of New England
Frank Stilwell University of Sydney
Ralph Summy University of Sydney
Sue Thomas Griffith University
Baden Offord Curtin University
Jason Laker San José State University
Elizabeth Webby University of Sydney
Paul Williams Griffith University
John Scott University of Queensland
John Synott University of Sydney
Sue Thomas Griffith University

EDITORIAL CONTACTS

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Lee-anne Bye
Operations Manager
Social Alternatives
Faculty of Arts and Business
Maroochydore DC Qld 4558
lee-anne@socialalternatives.com

GENERAL ENQUIRIES
Julie Matthews
University of Adelaide
julie@socialalternatives.com

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Michael Buki
mcbuky@gmail.com

GENERAL ARTICLES EDITOR
Bronwyn Stevens
University of the Sunshine Coast
bstevens@usc.edu.au

Social Alternatives

Social Alternatives is an independent, quarterly refereed journal which aims to promote public debate, commentary and dialogue about contemporary social, political, economic and environmental issues.

Social Alternatives analyses, critiques and reviews contemporary social issues and problems. The journal seeks to generate insight, knowledge and understanding of our contemporary circumstances in order to determine local, national and global implications. We are committed to the principles of social justice and to creating spaces of dialogue intended to stimulate social alternatives to current conditions. Social Alternatives values the capacity of intellectual and artistic endeavour to prompt imaginative solutions and alternatives and publishes refereed articles, review essays, commentaries and book reviews as well as short stories, poems, images and cartoons.

The journal has grappled with matters of contemporary concern for three decades, publishing articles and themed issues on topics such as peace and conflict, racism, Indigenous rights, social justice, human rights, inequality and the environment. Please show your support by subscribing to the journal. For other enquiries please contact a member of the Editorial Collective.

The Editorial Collective

Editorial decisions are made democratically by the Social Alternatives editorial collective. Each edition involves the work and cooperation of a guest editor, liaison editor (to assist guest editors), general editor, poetry editor, short story editor, book review editor, cover designer and desktop publisher. A liaison editor is responsible for managing the editing and publication process. After contributions are blind refereed, the editorial collective has final control over publication. Where necessary the editorial collective calls on the advisory board to assist with refereeing articles.

Contributions

Social Alternatives accepts work focused on the aims of the journal. The journal also accepts proposals for themed issues from guest editors. Proposals may emerge from workshops, networks or conferences. For specific enquiries about the submission of articles, short stories, poetry or book reviews please contact an editor with appropriate responsibilities.

Submissions of articles, commentaries, reviews and fictional works are subject to double blind peer review and should be emailed to the general article editor. Authors are encouraged to consider and reference papers previously published in Social Alternatives to promote ongoing discussion. Submissions should be double-spaced with page numbers on the bottom right. Academic articles should be approximately 3,000-5,000 words, commentaries and review essays between 800 to 1,500 words, book reviews 800 words, short stories 1,000 words and poetry up to 25 lines. Submissions must include:

• copyright release form
• title page listing contributing authors, contact details, affiliation and short bio of approximately 80 words
• abstract should be a maximum of 150 words
• three - five keywords.

Please use Australian/English spelling and follow Harvard referencing. Submit tables, graphs, pictures and diagrams on separate pages. Remove in-text references identifying authors and replace with [name removed for the review process].

For further information please consult our website:
http://www.socialalternatives.com/ and our Facebook page.
THEME FOR THIS ISSUE: Youth and Precarious Work

Introduction

3 Youth and Precarious Work.................................................................George Morgan

Themed Articles

5 Precarious Work and Reproductive Insecurity.................................Sharni Chan and Dale Tweedie
14 The Obverse and Reverse Sides of Precariousness in Italy: Young highly skilled workers between passions and skill mismatch...........................................................................Annalisa Murgia
22 No Guarantees: Preparing for long-term precarious employment in the Australian film and television industry............................................................................................Pariece Nelligan
28 Stability and Precarity in the Lives and Narratives of Working-class Men in Putin’s Russia......................................................................................................................................Charlie Walker
35 Embodied, Emotional and Ethical Entanglements: Place, class and participation in higher education...........................................Alexandra Coleman
43 Untangling The Narratives of Precarious Work: An auto-ethnography................................................Francesca Sidoti

General Articles

50 Folk Devils Rise Again........................................................................Barry Hindess
57 Norm-based Advocacy and Social Change: An analysis of advocacy efforts to end child marriage..........................Noha Shawki

Short Stories

63 Bonnet Surfing.................................................................................Jane Downing
66 Heat.................................................................................................Ian C Smith

Book Review

68 Holly White and the Incredible Sex Machine.................................Naomi Stekelenburg

Poetry

13 life saver........................................................................................Michele Seminara
13 That house...................................................................................Michele Seminara
21 of course flatness, doubt: a suite of brunswick east poems.........................R. D. Wood
27 working alone..............................................................................Edith Speers
42 the land of milk and honey............................................................Edith Speers
42 Blue Suede Shoes..........................................................................Philip Hammial
49 Choke..............................................................................................Michele Seminara
56 My Mob..........................................................................................David Adès
65 Private Property...........................................................................Chandramohan.S
65 A Fo’c’sle Tale..............................................................................Philip Hammial
69 Always, the Doors........................................................................David Adès
70 Charity..............................................................................................David Adès
70 Turkey.............................................................................................Philip Hammial
It is now commonplace to observe that the transitions from youth to adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Stokes and Wyn 2007) have become more fragmented, and even to question the value of these categories for understanding the life course. In the Fordist era of the mid-twentieth century, working people could base their life plans – including in personal relationships – on the expectation of relatively secure employment contracts with large stable employers. Under such social arrangements, education and work corresponded with distinct and sequential periods of life, and any further training came on-the-job mostly at employers’ expense (Watson et al. 2003). But in contemporary post-industrial societies fewer workers are now employed by large companies/organisations, and in the course of their working lives, children will almost certainly have more jobs than their parents. The short shelf life of skills and occupations means that, as politicians and employers keep telling us, training/education is a lifelong challenge. Among the variety of risks and calculations associated with late modernity (Giddens 1991) is what we might call credential anxiety – deciding whether to invest time and – in an increasing user-pays environment – money in various forms of post-school education/training.

The organisations/institutions that might have provided the foundations for political opposition to precariousness have been eroded. The decline in trade union membership, for example, is well documented; in Australia only 15% of workers are paid-up members (Kelly 2015). But also important is the ideological shift towards neoliberalism, which has undermined the collective institutions of social democracy and made individuals responsible for managing their lives and careers. While, as some commentators have observed (Leadbeater 2000), the new economy has liberated workers from the Fordist script of the job-for-life, the price of this is high. Precariousness and individualisation have accentuated existing social inequalities. In the new economy, social capital assumes greater significance as more ‘fast’ jobs are allocated by word of mouth, rather than through a formal advertisement and selection process. So those with family contacts, who went to the right school and speak and dress in the right way are able to go further.

Those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds lack the networks and the cultural capital required to make it through. With family money, middle-class kids can tread water in precarious labour markets for longer. Their parents can help them with deposits for home loans and they will accommodate them for longer in the family home. The idea of inter-generational inequity recurs frequently in media reports on the distribution of wealth in the West. However, this idea conceals the larger situation; in situations of mass youth precariousness, intergenerational transfers are much more important than ever. The plight of the youthful ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011) is compounded by the geography of the new economy. Despite the growing importance of digital communications, and the promise that relations of propinquity will become less and less important to economic activity, there has ironically been an increasing centralisation of employment opportunities (Sassen 1991) and of the networks through which many such opportunities are allocated. This activity is often located in places where gentrification has made housing so expensive that it is out of reach to all but the professional elite. So in addition to working long hours many young workers have to commute considerable distances from relatively affordable housing to their place of work.

But the most corrosive effect of precariousness is psycho-social. It has undermined the very conditions not only on which we plan for the future but also on how we compose a coherent narrative of self. Those who are tossed around by the vagaries of skittish labour markets will struggle to unite the vocational fragments (Sennett 1998). As secure employment opportunities become scarcer, so competition between aspirants becomes more intense and the rituals through which they demonstrate their worthiness – the résumé, the job interview technique – become increasingly important. The injunction to tell a plausible career narrative has never been more urgent, but also never more difficult. This fragmentary sociality presents a formidable task for those thinking through the prospects of resistance to precarious work; if the bonds between workers in late modernity are becoming increasingly ephemeral then what political and organisational forms can overcome this? How, for example, can social media be used to build alliances amongst the dispersed precariat?

This thematic issue brings together six papers based on qualitative research into the effects of precariousness on young people, most of which are written by early career scholars. Sharni Chan and Dale Tweedie challenge the functionalist view that precarious work is simply a stepping-stone on which inexperienced workers have to tread before obtaining greater employment security. Drawing on interviews with those with professional
Annalisa Murgia writes about the situation in Italy where the residual apparatus of social democratic citizenship has failed the precariat – conferring forms of support associated with Fordist wage labour where the great majority of younger workers are now on the treadmill of *flexploitation* – a succession of insecure contracts and in situations where their considerable qualifications and skills are under-utilised in low-skill, low-status jobs. Her paper highlights the syndrome of credentialism: by which employers come to expect increasing levels of skills and training as threshold qualifications for jobs that were once deemed low-skill.

Pariece Nelligan writes of the situation of marginal creative workers, specifically those who aspire to work in the film industry, but who lack the resources that would provide a springboard for their careers to flourish. Thus, their vocational identities are stillborn and they are forced to reckon with the prospect of amateurism, not through a lack of talent but for a lack of contacts. The precariousness of the day-job subsidised ambition would be familiar to countless young people encouraged to pursue their creative ambitions.

Charlie Walker shows how the shift to market relations in post-Soviet Russia has rendered the jobs and incomes of young workers increasingly precarious. Many young people are reliant on inter-generational transfers/social support, particularly to find housing. Reinforcing Chan and Tweedie’s point, Walker shows that such precariousness works against life planning and in particular, the decision to commit to reproduction and families. He demonstrates that under-employment forces many to seek work in the informal economy in order to survive.

Alexandra Coleman’s paper draws on her research with residents of a socially disadvantaged district of Sydney’s western suburbs to advocate a more nuanced understanding of the reproduction of class relations. She argues that in order to make sense of people’s life choices in relation to education and work, it is important to take account of the affective dimension of experience. While of course structural factors are central to the prospects of social mobility, the influence of, for example, the experience of stigma or of unstable family life, can shape and constrain social outcomes.

Francesca Sidoti reflects upon her own evolving orientation towards precarious work. In an auto-ethnographic piece she demonstrates that while in youth and young adulthood, precarity appears as a natural and quite reasonable arrangement to underwrite her youthful ambition. Later in life, however, she comes to see the value in vocational income stability and how much precarity constrains the ability to make life plans. She advocates a situated and contextual typology of dispositions towards precarity.

Overall, the papers present evidence to demonstrate that across various settings and societies, few young people are willing to become the agile and malleable subjects of late modernity, and in particular to embrace the wild ride of the new economy. In the context of structural precariousness, not only are they unable to plan for the future, they are forced into lives of performative re-invention, perpetually contriving a sense of coherence out of the flux and turbulence that confronts them. This undermines the foundations of liberal democratic citizenship and hinders citizens’ ability to participate as political subjects. If the cornerstones of life – place of residence, source of employment and social networks – are completely unstable, there is little chance to speak with any confidence and certainty. The challenge for those of us seeking to build a more socially just world is to find ways to challenge neoliberal individualisation and reconstitute social bonds and cooperative values – mutual support, loyalty and investment in stable communities of practice and workgroups.

References

Author
George Morgan is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Western Sydney and has published research on various themes: settler colonialism, Islamophobia; minority youth and precarious/creative labour. He has published recent articles in *Sociological Review, Postcolonial Studies, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Journal of Youth Studies*. He is author of *Unsettled Places* (Wakefield, 2006) co-editor with Scott Poynting of *Global Islamophobia* (Ashgate, 2012) and is completing a new book (with Pariece Nelligan) *The Creativity Hoax*. 
Precarious Work and Reproductive Insecurity

SHARNI CHAN AND DALE TWEEDIE

This paper shows how precarious work challenges the narrative of working life, as progressing from unstable and marginalised work in youth labour markets to secure careers. In Australia, precarious work now extends into high-skill and traditionally secure jobs, extending typical experiences of adolescence – financial dependence and a lack of control over one’s life – well into adulthood. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 16 professionals in precarious work, the paper uses the experience of ‘reproductive insecurity’ to show how precarious work can constrain workers’ capacity to make long-term life decisions. Mediating such insecurity requires more than individual action; it requires social infrastructure like housing, finance and childcare that better reflects contemporary rhythms of work. From this perspective, part of the necessary policy response to precarious work is to decouple people’s ability to make meaningful decisions about their life from their fate in the labour market.

Introduction

One common justification of precarious work is that it is merely temporary, that it enables young people, for example, to work part-time while they complete their qualifications, and may facilitate work-family balance, especially for women with young children. However, empirical evidence suggests that precarious work increasingly follows at least some workers from youth into prime working-age. This paper explores what happens when precarious work is not transitory, but coincides with critical points in the life course; how it affects individual capacities to make long-term commitments and decisions as they transition from youth into adulthood.

We draw on in-depth qualitative interviews with 16 precarious workers, between the ages of 25 and 45, who work in professional occupations for which they have the relevant tertiary qualifications. What distinguishes them from ‘typical’ professionals is that they are in precarious employment arrangements, predominately on casual contracts or in freelance work. Such workers are not among the most precarious of all workers. Nonetheless, how precarious employment impacts these workers matters to both social theory (e.g. Beck 1992: 97) and social policy. Tertiary educated and professionally employed workers should be best equipped to successfully navigate the transition from youth to adulthood while precarious employed. If these workers struggle despite their education and social capital, then the impact of precarity on other social groups is likely to be higher. Consequently, the experiences of precariously employed professionals are significant in their own right and as a useful barometer of the capacity of other precarious workers with fewer qualifications and opportunities to flourish when precarious work persists from youth into later life.

Our paper’s main claim is that the combination of precarious work and individualised care regimes can disturb the transition to adulthood. We focus on just one potential marker of ‘adulthood’ – the capacity to make reproductive choices. Reproduction is one critical turning point in the life-course, and also raises the fundamental issue of what policies and employment standards can enable humane social reproduction under contemporary economic conditions. Our subjects’ experiences of what we term ‘reproductive insecurity’ show how precarious work and individualised social policies combine to extend experiences of dependence and adolescence into prime-age – and potentially beyond. We also highlight how reproductive insecurity is in addition to, and in some cases can compound, existing well-documented health risks and impacts of long-term precarious employment.

This paper has five sections. After defining precarious work, we highlight how precarious work cannot be viewed as simply a temporary or transitory state (Section 1). We then introduce the concept of ‘reproductive insecurity’ as indicating the challenge long-term precarious work can pose in the transition from youth to adulthood (Section 2). After introducing our research approach (Section 3), we examine how the professionals we studied understand the relationship between their working conditions, their perspectives on adulthood and their family formation...
decisions (Section 4). The reproductive insecurity that precarious work induces can disrupt the transitions to adulthood. Addressing this insecurity may not require returning to standard employment norms; however, as our final section (Section 5) argues, it does require policies that enable precarious workers to have security in the life course, even in the absence of secure employment.

1. Precarious Work: Definition and Justifications.

The concept of precarious work is contested (see Chan 2013: 364), but we interpret precarious work according to Burgess and Campbell's (1998) multi-dimensional model. Following Standing (1997: 8-9), Burgess and Campbell (1998: 11) distinguish seven main aspects of precarious employment: job insecurity, employment insecurity, work insecurity, income insecurity, working-time insecurity, skill reproduction insecurity, and representational insecurity. Whereas some precarious work research examines subjective measures of employment insecurity (see Green 2009; Murtough and Waite 2000; Wooden and Warren 2004), we categorise work as precarious according to objective features of the employment engagement (see also: Campbell 1996, 2004; Campbell and Brosnan 1999; Conley 2002; Watson et al. 2003). For example, casual work in Australia is insecure on most – if not all – of Burgess and Campbell’s criteria (e.g. Tweedie 2013; Campbell et al. 2009: 62). Our focus on objectively insecure employment like casual work reflects our concern with changes in the job structure that affect both current workers and – unless policy changes are made – the social and economic conditions that future workers will inherit (Watson 2005: 378).

A commonly expressed justification for objectively precarious work like casual employment is that it meets young people's need to balance paid employment with temporary life events, typically study or the unpaid reproductive work required to maintain households (e.g. Business Council of Australia 2012: 7; Adonis 2011; Wooden and Warren 2004). This justification is problematic in its own right, because it is not clear why (vulnerable) young workers should need to trade off legal protections or representation for employment flexibility. However, this justification is also based on the flawed premise that young precarious workers will transition to ‘standard’ employment once their study or household labour is complete. Yet precarious work has grown amongst prime-aged workers (Campbell 2000: 87), with some workers moving from casual jobs in hospitality, retail and on building sites in their youth to long-term precarious employment in professional occupations. For example, Watson’s (2013: 17) analysis of HILDA data shows that for women with bachelor degrees, casual work is a ‘trap’ rather than a means of transitioning into better quality work. On Watson’s (2013: 23) analysis, the poor training and development in casual work – which Burgess and Campbell (1998: 11) term ‘skill reproduction insecurity’ – mean that casual workers are unable to acquire the skills they need to move into less precarious employment.

Understanding the impacts of long-term precarious work is particularly important because there is already well-documented evidence that the detrimental health effects of precarious work tend to accumulate over the life-course. D’Souza et al. (2003: 853) found that Australian professionals in insecure jobs were four times more likely to experience depression and rate poorly on other health scores. Other studies find that insecurity decreased workers’ health regardless of demographic factors (see Quinlan and Mayhew 2001: 5; McDonough 2000). While short periods of stress associated with precarious work may produce minor ailments like headaches, long periods can lead to more extreme and long-lasting physical and mental ailments. Indeed, Heaney et al. (1994: 1431) find that insecurity is a ‘chronic stressor’, which creates stresses that ‘become more potent as the time exposure increases’. Such ailments may curtail future employment possibilities, making workers more likely to remain in precarious employment (Fuller 2009: 233).

While the adverse health impacts of long-term precarity are well documented, the sources and social context of these impacts are under examined. Our analysis examines one aspect of how precarious work influences health over the life-course; namely, how precarity affects workers’ capacity to make long-term decisions at points of transition from youth to adulthood. We take a sociological perspective on this issue by interpreting health at the intersection of subjective self-understanding and social and industrial policy. While a full analysis of this impact would consider multiple interrelated factors, we explore how precarious work impacts people’s capacity to undertake just one key marker of the transition from youth to adulthood: reproductive choice. When work does not provide the standard conditions of adult employment, such as income security and predictable working hours, what capacity do workers have to have children themselves under contemporary social and economic conditions?

2. The Impact of Precarious Work: The Case of ‘Reproductive Insecurity’

Research into fertility amongst professionals notes potential links between professional employment and fertility outcomes. However, these links are typically overshadowed in two inter-related ways. First, the discussion focuses on the opportunity cost of having children for professional careers, such as how caring for children impedes women's career advancement (Armenti 2004: 212) and how having children reduces women's lifetime wages (Avellar and Smock 2003: 604; Budig and England 2001: 219). By contrast, the idea that systematic insecurity
may impede another group of professional women from having children is barely explored. One exception is Bernadi et al. (2008: 291) who suggest that long-term commitments like partnering and child bearing ‘require some job stability or realistic career future prospects and some immediate economic security’. Similarly, Modena and Sabatini’s (2012: 86) analysis of the socio-economic determinants of childbearing in Italy found that precarious work is a ‘significant dissuasive factor in the decision to have children’ (2012: 77). However, Modena and Sabatini (2012) study workers on the labour market fringe, rather than high-skilled professional workers.

Second, the idea that precarious work may discourage family formation is overshadowed by the dominant public discourse of precarious work as facilitating family formation. This discourse often conflates precarious work and part-time work, with proponents arguing that work with ‘flexible’ hours enables women and men to work around caring responsibilities. Yet since precarious workers lack formal legal rights and are less likely to have union representation, they may have less capacity to negotiate flexible hours (see also Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009; Seifert et al. 2007: 300). Thus, there is an under-explored issue of whether precarious working conditions enable people to make long-term decisions like family formation even with the advantages that education and professional status confer. What we term ‘reproductive insecurity’ thus has two aspects: Employment insecurity that could undermine the capacity to either establish families and/or to care for families. Examining reproductive insecurity amongst professionals is one way of exploring what threat precarious work poses to the long-term planning often associated with transitioning from youth to adulthood.

3. Research Approach and Method

Our analysis of how precarious work impacts reproductive decisions is based on interviews with 16 precarious workers, which the first author conducted as part of a broader exploratory study of the experiences of precarious high-skilled workers in professional occupations. The participants – eight women and eight men, aged 25 to 45, were recruited through advertisements in union publications and newsletters and through word of mouth through networks of casuals. Participants were employed on casual contracts, worked as freelancers or identified as self-employed in a major Australian city. One participant was unemployed at the time of interview, and many of the other participants combined multiple jobs and were employed on multiple contract types, for example combining casual work with freelance work, part-time fixed term contracts with casual contracts. Their experience of precarious work was current at the time of the interview and participants had each spent between two and more than ten years in precarious work arrangements. Hence, for many of these workers, the experience of casual work was not a short-term or temporary arrangement, but extended over a substantial portion of their life-course.

All participants have the requisite qualifications for their professional roles, and so are not temporarily in unskilled precarious work in one occupation while trying to break into their chosen profession. Rather, they are working in skilled professions that have also been substantially casualised, which now include, for example, nurses, teachers, academics, community workers, translators, and journalists (see Chan 2013). A minority of participants were balancing precarious work with study, which may appear to reinforce the narrative of precarious work as a transitory stage between youth and adulthood. However, precarious professional workers face particular and constant pressures to study because they continually need to upgrade their qualifications, but lack access to training and development in their jobs often due to their lack of a permanent position. Hence, balancing work and study may be less of a temporary phase than a compulsion, especially for highly credentialed professional work (see Chan 2013). For example, one participant combined precarious employment as a counsellor with her professional psychology training, which mandates intensive practice hours. Another participant is a mature-age student retraining after being retrenched and a series of unsuccessful bouts of self-employment.

While the casual employment category is unique to Australia, it is indicative of how precarious employment can induce reproductive insecurity through exclusion or marginalisation. First, precarious workers in Australia, such as casuals and freelancers, are excluded from parental leave entitlements, either through enterprise agreements that limit parental leave to employees on standard contracts, or through statutory parental leave provisions that require working minimum or regular hours to qualify. Second, precarious work like casual employment provides less protection against discrimination in pregnancy. For example, research by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC 2014) found high rates of pregnancy-related discrimination in Australian workplaces. While the AHRC did not investigate the relationship between precarity and discrimination in pregnancy, we know that precarious workers often have less workplace ‘voice’ (e.g. Pocock et al. 2004: 112), less protection against unfair dismissal, and are more vulnerable to other gender-based discrimination such as workplace sexual harassment regardless of age or skill level (LaMontagne et al., 2009: 177). When pregnancy becomes apparent, precarious workers may be especially vulnerable to losing their employment (Modena and Sabatini 2012: 86) and to discrimination in job interviews (Bettio and Villa 1998). Consequently, women develop
strategies for hiding pregnancy from colleagues, which has been termed the ‘hidden pregnancy phenomenon’ (Armenti 2004: 225). Social movements highlight how precarious women workers are especially vulnerable. For example, the Chain Workers Crew in Italy held a satirical fashion show exhibiting designs to disguise pregnancy from employers (Mattoni 2008: 14).

4. Understanding Precarious Workers’ Experiences

Despite the objective barriers precarious work presents to reproduction, workers in this study have different relations to work and reproduction. Some workers have ruled out having children, while others were uninterested in having children irrespective of their employment conditions. However, for those precarious professional workers who considered having children, the lack of opportunities to ‘transition out’ of precarious work affected their decisions, expectations and options in various ways.

Precarious work and economic stability

For some workers in this study, simply not having children was one way to maintain the ‘flexibility’ their precarious work required. For them, far from precarious work enabling family-friendly hours, their need to adapt to employers’ timetable impeded family formation. Precarious work also influenced precarious workers who had a mixed or ambivalent view of having children in more subtle or indirect ways. For example, Melanie, 38, whose partner is also precariously employed, stated that her parents ‘would love me to have children’. Initially, Melanie described not having children as a personal choice; stating that having children ‘just doesn’t fit with me’. But later, the complexity of managing multiple employment contracts – ‘it’s very complex, it’s a very busy, busy time’ – appears as a reason for delaying having children. Melanie cannot imagine raising a child on top of managing both her and her partner’s hectic and unpredictable work schedules:

You have to coordinate the four contracts I have plus the three contracts that she is working and they don’t often coincide so it’s quite difficult to coordinate extra activities outside your working life ... It’s hard enough to manage your own lives with the type of work that we do to even think about having to manage someone else. (Melanie, 38)

While prior research has explored the tension between the long hours of professionals work and raising children, precarious work creates the additional demand of balancing long hours at times with no employment at others, and with uncertainty about when work will be available. Not having children enables Melanie and her partner to mediate the complexity that the combination of long hours and insecure employment status of precarious professional work can create. She states that she is ‘very lucky we don’t have any children. I think it [the insecurity] would be compounded even further if we had children’. However, while Melanie feels ‘lucky’ that having no children enables her to meet the demands of precarious work, it is not clear that she is satisfied with how precarious work has influenced her ‘choice’. At times, she broaches childlessness with a sense of regret. She states ‘so yeah, it [having children] is not going to be unfortunately’ and again links her decision to her precarious employment: ‘I probably don’t think it has helped the situation that I have been working so sporadically’.

Other professionals in precarious work had not ruled out having children, but were actively delaying childbearing until they had more stable employment:

I mean we haven’t discussed it. And I think the reason we haven’t discussed it, about the timing, is because I don’t have a full-time job. Yeah so you know, if I did get security, in some form – I think that would be the first conversation we would have ... it really is a decision about when she is going to take her time, about her career and her future and what she wants to do but I don’t think she is willing to make that decision until I have full-time work – she has actually said that. I think some form of permanence for me is going to be the key factor. (Elias, 40)

Emma mentions several reasons for delaying parenthood, all of which – in the absence of collective welfare supports – require secure employment:

[To have children] I guess I would need to have a stable housing situation. So not the shitty house where I am now, with the water leaking out on to the path. Being in secure employment. Having a supportive community, so not feeling isolated. Yeah, I guess those are the main elements ... This [decision to have children] is something that Rachel and I have talked about. But financially it is definitely not something that I want at the moment. She talks about how she is 38 now and she talks about how at this age she thought she would have kids, but financially she definitely thinks she can’t afford that ... (Emma)

Emma’s statement illustrates how stable employment is the gateway to economic and social resources that make childbearing manageable. Workers who had not ‘transitioned’ out of precarious work struggled to access these enabling resources:
Am I ever going to be in that situation financially, and stable enough to feel like I could support children? (Emma)

The impact of precarious work on childbearing also ‘trickled-down’ to younger workers’ sense of their future life choices. Craig, like his partner, is under 30 and – as one of the younger study participants – is not certain that he will want his own children in the future. However, he is already cognisant of how precarious work might constrain his choice:

I know that other people doing this casual work really do want to settle down, really do want to have that kind of side of their life, and it’s hard for them to do it. The security of a 9-5 kind of thing is very important if you have a kid. One of the impressions I get from those people is that they really have to plan things quite a lot. (Craig)

Craig’s reflection highlights how precarious work can impact across the life-course in multiple ways: by constraining workers’ actual choices at critical life-junctures, and by shrinking what younger workers view as their available ‘horizon of choice’ for their future life trajectory.

Reproductive insecurity and gender

Although precarious work impacts the childbearing decisions of both men and women in our study, there is evidence that precarious work impacts women disproportionately, and can also impact women in distinct ways by – in some cases – reinforcing entrenched gender norms. In Australia, women are still more likely to be precariously employed than men. One defence of this higher rate is a variant of the ‘transitory workers’ justification; namely, that the part-time hours of some casual jobs enable women to balance work and care. This defence is underpinned by a male-breadwinner model of work and welfare, which assumes that a male primary earner covers the essential household living costs that precarious work does not.

Our study challenges both the idea that precarious work benefits women establishing families, and that precarious work fits in with a conventional male-breadwinner model. Contrary to Modena and Sabatini’s (2012: 89) finding that ‘men’s job precariousness is not a deterrent to discouraging the intention to become a father’, both male and female participants in this study were consciously delaying parenthood. Moreover, since the largest growth in casual work has been among men working full-time hours (Campbell 2000: 87), the presumption that females working precariously are supported by a male breadwinner is increasingly problematic. Indeed, men in the study, such as Elias quoted above, were cognisant that their employment clashed with the role expectations of a male-breadwinner model of work and welfare. James’ family had broken up under the pressure of long-term precarious work:

I did have a family and that ended a couple of years ago. And one of the contributing factors, if not the contributing factor, was the fact that I couldn’t get any stability in terms of work. The price has been paid so to speak. (James, 40)

Other male participants experienced precarious work as a challenge to norms of independence even outside of family expectations:

Suddenly you’re always broke and in debt! So I got into that situation a few times but [my parents] were there to help … but at 40 you sort of think you are not going to need that … I should be fairly self-sufficient by now … I think that there is a sense that we are not. (Elias, 40)

However, while precarious work affects both men and women, there is evidence that it impacts women differently. Standing’s (1997: 8-9) typology of precarious work does not include reproductive insecurity, but he does note that precarious workers are frequently expected to perform more family care work (Standing 2011: 126). For women in high-skilled precarious work, precarious work not only compromises ‘voice’ at work (Pocock et al. 2004: 112), but can also compromise voice or self-determination in the household in gendered ways. One subtle effect stems from how precarious workers report having less ‘bargaining power’ in their relationships because of their financial dependence. As Standing’s (2011: 126) analysis implies, precarious workers can feel ‘pressed to do more care work than they would wish’ because of the lesser financial rewards their formal employment delivers. Both male and female workers reported this phenomenon. However, given the historical gender norm of women performing care roles, there was evidence that gender expectations shaped the way that precarious work influenced the distribution of household labour.

Some women did view precarious work as an ideal way to balance work and family, in line with the dominant discourse. For example, Liz, who balances multiple casual and freelance jobs sub-editing for major newspapers, views her casual work as ideal. However, she also described her highly paid partner as providing a ‘safety net’, and her positive view of how her work enables child rearing reflects a view that motherhood invariably relegates women to inferior working conditions:
Well from that point of view what I do is actually really good. Because it is such a part-time kind of job, I mean it is a two or three day a week job and I often thought with the old editor she definitely would have – I mean obviously they don’t owe me anything – but she would have been fine, we can get someone else to fill in for the first year and we can get you back in the second year for two days. From that point of view, what I do, I’m quite lucky, because I’m already part-time casual. (Liz, 35)

However, for other women, their lack of financial independence due to precarious employment was a more problematic element of their relationships:

When I met my partner, I thought to myself, well, I’m actually in a very unstable situation here because when we thought about marriage and we thought about living together I thought, what am I going to bring to this relationship? (Rita, 40)

If my boyfriend and I were to break up tomorrow, I would be in a whole world of crap, and it would just take one domino for a whole bunch of things ... if one thing were to change in the future, that could raise some pretty serious issues. (Karen, 26)

Although both Rita and Karen’s partners mediate the worst economic impact of precarious work, their precarious employment conditions still affect the balance of their relationship. Some women are less happy to accept this power imbalance:

If I was in a position where I was earning more than my husband, if my earning capacity was greater and I could provide for the family better than he could then I would expect him to take leave. And I don’t think that is asking too much to expect that because, I wouldn’t want to be the only one caring for them. And I think in most cases it is the male that has the higher paying job but if the situation was different I would expect my partner to at least seriously consider that. (Fiona, 32)

The way I see it, it would be me who would care for any children that would come along. It won’t be my husband. It is all about money in the end and it is who is going to bring in the income ... how is anything going to keep afoul? (Rita, 40)

I think it is difficult for me because given that there is this insecurity around my job, my role automatically is to just forego this work, this job that I do have – however tentative it is – and then put all my efforts elsewhere. I fear that I might become resentful as a result of it. (Rita, 40)

Although the power imbalance these workers describe could theoretically apply to men or women, the fact that women articulated these concerns provides indicative evidence that precarious work may reinforce existing gender imbalances in household labour.

Precarious work undermines reproductive work itself

There has been considerable research showing that reproductive work makes women’s already risky attachment to the labour market more risky, because most work with part-time hours is in casual jobs or self-employment. However, the final finding of our analysis of precarious workers’ experiences is that precarious work can also undermine reproductive labour itself. As Maggie points out, precarious professionals are compelled to constantly upgrade their skills as a kind of insurance against an uncertain future (see also Chan 2013; Muhlberger 2009: 9). This need to self-insure through additional work can undermine precarious workers’ capacity to perform the fundamental work of reproductive labour:

I am working 70 hours a week between uni and my job before I even see my children and do all the work I have got to do for them ... So for me, what I would like about a permanent part-time job is roughly knowing what days I am working – with small kids that is really important because I need to know which days I can book them in to afterschool care. And you can’t change these things at the drop of a hat. (Maggie, 40)

This finding that precarity can prevent people who have children from performing care roles is consistent with prior evidence that precarious employment does not reduce work-life conflict for either men or women (Hosking and Western 2008). To the contrary, casual workers in particular have less flexibility than other employees (ABS 2009). Further, parents, particularly mothers, have difficulty in gaining and maintaining childcare places due to working-time and income insecurity (see Seifert et al. 2007: 300; Junor 2004: 291; 2005: 271). Contra the dominant justification of precarious work as enabling family-friendly choice, there is evidence that precarious work, and reproductive insecurity in particular, can decrease workers’ capacity to either establish or care for families.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: Decoupling Work and (Reproductive) Life

By exploring the experiences of precarious professional workers, this paper challenges one dominant justification
for precarious employment as a ‘flexible’ means of meeting workers’ need to balance paid work with key life events like study and child rearing. In this study, precarious work caused many high-skilled workers to delay family formation, shifted the balance of private life, and impaired the capacity of precarious workers to perform fundamental care work for their children. Where prior research has also examined how precarious work can impair family care (e.g. Alexander and Baxter 2005; Bohle et al. 2004), a particular contribution of this study is to show how precarious work can delay family formation, and in this way extend the impact of precarious work earlier into the life-course. As the paper also highlights, these effects are additional to, and in some cases can compound, the well-documented health effects of long-term precarious work. For example, delaying family formation can expose precarious workers to greater risk of health complications in pregnancy (Luke and Brown 2007: 1267), especially since high-skilled workers are already likely to start their families later due to material factors such as the time it takes to gain professional qualification and accreditation and to enter their profession (Wolfinger et al. 2010).

However, the impact of precarious work on key life decisions like child rearing is not solely attributable to employment conditions, but also reflects the broader policy context. For example, Muhlberger (2009: 13) shows that precarious employment conditions do not consistently create reproductive insecurity. His review finds that fertility rates for precarious workers vary across countries and social groups. This international variation in fertility rates suggests that the life-course of precarious workers is significantly influenced by broader social care policies, which include family policies, accessibility of childcare and housing policy. In Australia, work is the primary source of welfare. Therefore, participants in our study who lacked secure jobs were excluded from basic resources and unable to mediate economic risk – harms that widely held norms around financial self-sufficiency tend to compound (Chan 2013).

While precarious work is problematic for multiple reasons, at least this element of precariousness — the lifeline it provides to the economic preconditions of social health and social reproduction — can be mediated by comprehensive collective supports. In the absence of comprehensive collective supports for child rearing, precarious workers must seek welfare through improved employment conditions. When precarious workers could not ‘transition’ to these conditions, what was lost was their ability to have children, or to care for those children, as they would like. However, the link between work, welfare and care is a policy choice. Social policies can support child rearing outside of the employment relation, such as through free and flexible childcare, more accessible public housing, better tenancy protections, and genuinely universal healthcare.

In summary, reproductive insecurity illustrates how precarious work can impair transitions to adulthood by tying the economic preconditions of adult decisions to access to ‘standard’ employment relations. Even highly educated precarious workers in relatively high-status occupations struggled to access basic resources, which does not augur well for precarious workers with less social and cultural capital. Policy that weakens the link between permanent employment and social resources is not a panacea; especially since precarious work impacts gender relations alongside reproductive choice. However, policies that ease workers’ dependence on employment to secure the economic foundation of reproduction could support workers’ capacity to make one critical choice that impacts across the life-course.

References


Burgess, J. and Campbell, I. 1998 ‘The nature and
dimensions of precarious employment in Australia’, 
Labour and Industry; A Journal of the Social and 
Economic Relations of Work, 8, 3: 5-21.

Business Council of Australia (BCA) 2012 
Submission to the Review of the Fair Work Act: 
Employment Security and Alternative Working Arrangements, Business Council of Australia, 
Melbourne.

Campbell, I. 1996 ’The growth of casual employment 
in Australia: Towards an explanation’, in J. Teicher 
(ed.) Non-Standard Employment in Australia and 
New Zealand, NKCIR Monograph no. 9, Melbourne: 
National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, Monash 
University, pp. 43-107.

Campbell, I. 2000. The spreading net: Age and gender 
in the process of casualisation in Australia, Journal 

Campbell, I. 2004 ’Casual work and casualisation: How 
does Australia compare? ’Labour and Industry: A 
journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work, 
15, 2: 85-111.

Campbell, I. and Brosnan, P. 1999 ’Labour market 
deregulation in Australia: The slow combustion 
approach to workplace change’, International Review 

Campbell, I. Whitehouse, G. and Baxter, J. 2009 ’Casual 
employment, part-time employment and the resilience 
of the male-breadwinner model’, in L. Vosko, M. 
MacDonald, and I. Campbell (eds) Gender and the 
Contours of Precarious Employment, Routledge, 
London.

Chan S. 2013 ‘I am King’: Financialisation and the 
paradox of precarious work’, The Economic and 

Conley, H. 2002 A State of insecurity: Temporary work 
in the public services’, Work, Employment and Society, 
16, 4: 725-737.

D’Souza, R. Strazdins, L. Lim, L. Broom, D. and 
Rodgers, B. 2003 ’Work and health in a contemporary 
society: Demands, control, and insecurity’, Journal 
of Epidemiology and Community Health, 57, 11: 
849-854.

Fuller, S. 2009 ’Investigating longitudinal dimensions of 
precarious employment’, in L. Vosko, M. MacDonald 
and I. Campbell (eds) Gender and the Contours of 

Green, F. 2009 ’Subjective employment insecurity around 
the world’, Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy 
and Society, 2, 3: 343-363.

Heaney, C. Israel, B. and House, J. 1994 ’Chronic job 
insecurity among automobile workers: Effects on job 
satisfaction and health’, Social Science and Medicine, 
38, 10: 1431-1437.

Hosking, A. and Western, M. 2008 ’The effects of 
non-standard employment on work–family conflict’, 
Journal of Sociology, 44, 1: 5-27.

Junor, A. 2004 ’Casual university work: Choice, risk, 
inequity and the case for regulation’, The Economic 
and Labour Relations Review, 14, 2: 276-304.

Junor, A. 2005 ’Professionals, practitioners, peripheral 
product-deliverers: Contested definitions of contingent 
TAPE teaching’, Paper presented at the Reworking 
Work Conference (AIRANZ).

LaMontagne, A. Smith, P. Louie, A. Quinlan, M. Shoveller, 
J. and Ostry, A. 2009 ’Unwanted sexual advances at 
work: Variations by employment arrangement in a 
sample of working Australians’, Australian and New 

complications and adverse outcomes with increasing 
maternal age’, Human Reproduction, 22, 5: 1264-

1272.

Mattoni, A. 2008 ’Serpica Naro and the others: The 
media social experience in Italian struggles against 
precarity’, Journal of Multidisciplinary International 

McDonough, P. 2000 ’Job insecurity and health’, 
International Journal of Health Services, 30, 3: 453-
476.

Modena, F. and Sabatini, F. 2012 ’I would if I could: 
Precarious employment and childhood intentions in Italy’, Review of Economics of the Household, 10, 
1:77-97.

Mühlberger, U. 2009. The social effects of precarious 
images/papers_berkeley/Muhlberger.pdf (accessed 
21/02/2014).

Murtough, G. and Waite, M. 2000 ’The growth of non-
traditional employment: Are jobs becoming more precarious?’, Productivity Commission Discussion 
Paper No. 1635, Government of the Commonwealth 
of Australia, Canberra.

Pocock, B. Presser, R. and Bridge, K. 2004 Only a 
Casual, University of Adelaide, Adelaide.

Quinlan, M. and Mayhew, C. 2001 ’Evidence versus 
ideology: Lifting the blindfold on OHS in precarious 
employment’, Working Paper, University of New South 
Wales, Sydney.

Selfert, A. Messing, K. Riel, J. and Chatigny, C. 2007 ’ 
Precarious employment conditions affect work 
content in education and social work: Results of work 
analyses’, International Journal of Law and 
Psychiatry, 30, 4–5: 299-310.

Standing, G. 1997 ’Globalization, labour flexibility and 
insecurity: The era of market regulation’, European 
Journal of Industrial Relations, 3, 1: 7-37.

Standing, G. 2011 The Precariat: The New Dangerous 
Class, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Tweedle, D. 2013. ’Precarious work and Australian labour 
norms’, The Economic and Labour Relations Review, 
24, 3: 297-315.

Vosko, L. MacDonald, M. and Campbell, I. 2009 
Gender and the Concept of Precarious Employment, 
Routledge, New York.

Watson, I. 2005 ’Contented workers in inferior jobs? Re-
assessing casual employment in Australia, Journal of 
Industrial Relations, 47, 4: 371-392.

Watson, I. 2013 ’Bridges or traps? Casualisation and 
labour market transitions in Australia’, Journal of 
Industrial Relations, 55, 1: 6-37.

Watson, I. Buchanan, J Campbell, I. and Briggs, C. 2003 
Fragmented Futures: New Challenges in Working 
Life, Federation Press, Annandale.

Wollinger, N. Goulden, M. and Mason, M. 2010 ’Alone 
in the Ivory Tower’, Journal of Family Issues, 31, 12: 
1652-1670.

employment and job satisfaction: Evidence from the 
HILDA survey’, Journal of Industrial Relations, 46, 
3: 275-297.

Authors
A sociologist/social policy researcher, Sharni Chan’s 
recent experience includes studies of the community 
sector workforce, ’sham’ contracting in construction, 
and wage rates among electrical apprentices. Her PhD 
examines how professionals mediate insecure work. 
Experienced in various social policy areas, including 
housing, family support, child protection and community 
services, Sharni has worked at the Social Policy 
Research Centre (UNSW) and the Workplace Research
Centre (USYD), and is currently a researcher for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Dale Tweedie is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Macquarie University, Sydney. He researches in two main areas: workplace organisation and governance; and business and professional ethics. His work research is particularly concerned with how individual workers cope with contemporary workplace demands, such as precarious employment, workplace surveillance and performance measurement. Dale’s research has been published in journals including Human Relations; Work, Employment and Society; Critical Horizons; and, the Journal of Business Ethics.

That house
the one where the screams come from
that house is our house now.

We're the ones the neighbours talk about/not to; it's our normalcy which has rent under pressure; it's our truth erupting spectacularly into the day.

At night, when I descend to her room, I go with dread, anger, resistance, swallowing myself down and down until I don't feel those things anymore.

That house is ours.

That heaving house is ours,
tumid with the sickness of minds untempered innocents left shivering in their pyjamas at the front door as they gaze, defiantly, back at the kind lady who pauses — just long enough — to make sure.

Michele Seminara, Manly Vale, NSW

life saver
on the just built deck
no furniture yet
the kids and I crash
on a beanbag and dog bed
kitsch Hawaiian music scoring the scene
as the youngest dances hula
in inflatable green
and the rest of us bray unhinged with relief
that our world has not quite ended

Michele Seminara, Manly Vale, NSW
The Obverse and Reverse Sides of Precariousness in Italy: Young highly skilled workers between passions and skill mismatch

ANNALISA MURGIA

In recent decades, a number of EU member states have registered a large rise in the use of temporary employment. Young people are far more likely than other groups to be employed in precarious and insecure jobs independently of their education and skills. This phenomenon will be explored through a transversal analysis of qualitative data collected in two different research projects, conducted in Italy, and focused on the biographical and professional trajectories of young people with a master or doctorate degree. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the precarious working conditions and of the misalignment between educational levels and the lack of high-skilled occupations, the article discusses the multiple sides of precariousness experienced by young high-qualified workers, involved in so-called knowledge-based activities, and employed in jobs either consistent with their education or markedly distant from it.

Introduction

Much recent scholarly debate has focused on how processes of deregulation and flexibilisation are transforming traditional work arrangements (Arum and Muller 2004; Kalleberg 2009). In recent decades, an increasing variety of atypical employment relationships – such as part-time work, fixed-term contracts, temp-agency work and self-employment (without employees) – has eroded the ‘standard employment relationship’ traditionally embodied in a (male) employee on an open-ended and full-time contract who enjoys the full protection of labour law and the welfare system such as minimum wages or collective agreements, working time legislation, a redundancy fund, social security (Walthéry and Vielle 2004; Castel 2009). Inspection of the European labour markets shows that this process has followed a skill-centred strategy in Central and North European countries and an age-targeted strategy in the Mediterranean ones. Consequently, in Southern Europe the phenomenon of over-qualification among young people is considerable and their educational level does not provide a guarantee against unemployment and/or precarious employment (Samek Lodovici and Semenza 2012; Murgia and Poggio 2014). The main outcome has been the creation of strongly segmented insider/outsider labour markets, between highly protected jobs (traditional work positions) and highly flexible jobs (internships, short-term contracts, solo self-employment). This segmentation drives the growth of new forms of social inequality, especially in the Bismarckian Central and Southern European welfare states (Blossfeld et al. 2005; Häusermann and Schwander 2012).

This article discusses the particular case of Italy, which is distinguished by being one of the European countries that records the worst results both for young people who obtain a university degree and the rate of youth unemployment. In order to gain deeper understanding of the precarious working conditions and of the misalignment between educational levels and the lack of high-skilled occupations, the precariousness experienced by young highly-educated workers in Italy is presented. As discussed in Armano and Murgia (2013), precariousness should be conceptualised solely, or even necessarily, in relation to temporary jobs, but as a process which is shaping contemporary forms of subjectivity as a whole. Work precariousness is particularly evident in temporary, discontinuous, and uncertain employment relations, characterising a structural condition tied to work and the employment contract. However, a conceptual shift is necessary to bring a focus upon ‘social precariousness’, a term which better describes an experiential state that permeates the entire lives of individuals (Murgia 2010).

This article addresses the above issues as follows. First, the general framework of the Italian context is described. Second, the methodological approach is briefly presented. Then, the analysis of the collected narratives is presented, which focuses on everyday working lives on the one hand, and on future expectations on the other. The conclusion discusses existing work/employment conditions and the multiple facets of precariousness which seem to deny both young-adults...
with under-qualified jobs and also, albeit in different ways, young highly-educated workers involved in so-called knowledge-based activities, their working and life perspectives.

**Higher Education and Employment in Italy: An Overview**

One of the main Europe 2020 targets is to raise to at least 40 per cent the share of the population aged 30 to 34 that has completed tertiary or equivalent education. However, the proportion of graduates in this age group varies considerably across Europe. According to the Eurostat (Eurostat 2014), in 2013 Northern and Central Europe had the highest percentage of tertiary graduates with 16 countries exceeding the overall EU target of 40%, while the lowest levels of below 25% were recorded in Italy and Romania. In Italy, in particular, the share of the population aged between 30 and 34 with a university degree was no more than 22.4%, which is the lowest level in the EU-28.

It is important to stress in regard to the Italian case that, at the height of the economic crisis, graduates lost their competitive advantage over those with lower-level qualifications. In 2009, in fact, university graduates were most affected by the increase in unemployment among young people: the number of unemployed with lower educational qualifications grew less (9.2%) than that of individuals with high-school diplomas and university degrees (over 20% in both cases) (ISTAT 2010). In subsequent years, instead, there has been a trend reversal: the reduction in the employment rate has affected all qualifications, but the decline has been smaller for graduates. This means that education as a protective factor has regained its role also in the Italian context, following the European trends. However, if one considers the specific category of young people aged between 15 and 34, the gap between Italy and the rest of Europe remains wide. In general, the employment rate for young people in Italy is 16 percentage points below the European average of 39.1%; in particular, it is equal to 46.1% for high-school diploma holders and 56.7% for graduates or postgraduates – respectively 14.3 and 21.1 percentage points below the EU average (ISTAT 2015).

Moreover, most of the indicators of job quality point to a worrying deterioration in the conditions of workers. The instability of employment remains widespread, and the incidence of long-term temporary workers is associated with an increasing reluctance to stabilise temporary employment contracts, especially for young people. Also on the increase is the mismatch between labour demand and supply, that is, the proportion of workers with educational qualifications superior to those required by the job (22.1% of the employed in 2013) (ISTAT 2014).

It seems that not even a PhD ensures a stable job consistent with the qualification obtained. According to a survey on PhD graduates conducted by the National Statistics Institute (ISTAT 2015), four years after graduation 91.5% of the PhD graduates of 2010 were in employment. However, only 32% had stable jobs, 15.4% had fixed-term contracts, 10.5% had project work or occasional work, 14.9% were self-employed, and 27.2% had post-doctoral grants. Moreover, PhD graduates in 2010 earned an average monthly income of around €1,600 (the average monthly income in Italy was €1,300 in 2014), and the proportion of those who said that their job is partly or mainly consistent with their PhD stopped at 73.9%. Instead, the situation improved for those who had decided to change countries: 91.2% of those with PhDs obtained in Italy who were residents abroad had a job which matched their training. Moreover, they were much more likely to find a post with a fixed-term or an open-ended contract in an academic institution (47.8% compared with 29% of the residents in Italy).

In light of these findings, several calls have been made for further investigation, in order to understand how young highly-educated people deal with their professional trajectories in Italy; how they experience working with unstable employment; what risks are faced by people who have jobs consistent with their qualifications, and by those who are trapped in a skill mismatch and, above all, what are the future prospects for the younger generation of higher-educated people in Italy. This article addresses these issues by discussing the main results of two research projects recently conducted in Italy on young-adult workers with tertiary education.

**Research Design and Methodological Approach**

The discussion that follows is based on the two different research projects noted above. They were conducted in northern Italy between 2011 and 2013, and both centred on in-depth interviews. The first was carried out in the cities of Milan, Bologna and Trento. During 2011, 30 interviews were conducted with precariously employed highly-educated young people of both sexes aged between 25 and 34 years old. All the interviewees had had at least five years of work experience and high educational qualifications (master or doctorate) (Murgia and Poggio 2014). The second research project focused specifically on PhD holders aged between 30 and 40 years old. In 2012-2013, a comparative analysis was conducted on the basis of 60 interviews – 30 in Italy and 30 in Belgium (Del Rio Carral et al. 2014). The interviewees were all employed on temporary contracts, some in jobs consistent with their educational qualification and others markedly distant from them. This article proposes a transversal analysis of the interviews conducted in Italy. It adopts two different temporal dimensions: the first concerns the
everyday life of young precarious workers; the second one relates to their perceptions of their future life and career prospects.

**Young Highly-educated Workers: Experiencing Precarity Between Passions and Skill Mismatch**

As already noted, in Italy the period of transition from university to work is particularly problematic for graduates, in terms of employment stability, working conditions and job content (Blasutig 2012). Consequently, although there are relatively few young graduates in Italy, the national labour market cannot offer them sufficient opportunities to benefit from their investment in training.

Before analysis begins of the interviews with ‘young workers’ with tertiary education, it is advisable to specify the definition of the term ‘young’ in the Italian context. It is today well established in the social sciences and other scientific disciplines that age and life-course stages should be considered as socially constructed categories rather than independent variables. In 1987, Pierre Bourdieu argued that ‘la jeunesse n’est qu’un mot’ [youth is only a word], underlining that this generational category refers more to a sociological concept than to the definition of an age class. The Italian case is emblematic of this understanding ‘youth’ as a socially constructed category. The national Italian statistics on the young population have, in fact, extended the reference age group for ‘youth’. They now focus beyond 15-24 year olds to also include those aged 25 to 34. Moreover, in the case of tertiary education, it is customary in Italy to label those with post-doctoral qualifications as ‘young’ even when close to 40 years old and working in universities as adjunct professors or post-doctoral fellows (note that in 2013 one third of post-doctoral fellows were older than 36) (Bozzon et al. 2015).

Given this context, it is interesting to determine how, in the experience of those who have obtained a tertiary qualification, the label ‘young’ is intertwined with precariousness. The contemporary shift in what has been labelled post-Fordism, ‘reflexive modernisation’, liquid modernity or the knowledge economy (Beck et al. 1994; Bauman 2000; Sennett 1998) seems to have eroded individual and collective certainties. On the one hand, young people can choose from a wider range of socially legitimised trajectories in which the sequence of biographical events follows a path no longer taken for granted, both in terms of events perceived as transitions to a different life stage, and in terms of the different ages at which such events happen (for instance, being employed, living in a self-owned accommodation, having a partner, having a child). This pluralisation of potential life trajectories and the multiplicity of possible combinations in the sequence of biographical events can be characterised as a project for emancipation. On the other hand, it also can force people into a state of ‘eternal youth’, arising from discontinuities in income and the difficulty of achieving full economic independence. Another contributing factor is the situation of constant instability in which they struggle to acquire the capacities for risk management, to hold together the many fragments, scattered and confused, of their biographical trajectories. As noted by Lorey (2015), precariousness as a new form of insecurity is not only characterised by the erosion of workers’ rights and social protections and the loss of wages, but is also a product of, and compounded by, the neoliberal project of individualised self-government and self-responsibility, which is embedded in a process of individualisation of precariousness.

In this article, the discussion focuses on the narratives of young-adult people who seek to build both coherent trajectories in terms of the life-course and narratives predictive of what will happen to them in the future. In what follows, I shall describe the heterogeneity and variety of situations experienced by interviewees – highly-educated precarious young workers – as well as some common and recurrent features.

**The precariousness of young highly educated workers: between passions and skill mismatch**

The first group of young adults interviewed were those who had jobs that despite being precarious were consistent with their training, and can be considered to belong to the complex category of ‘knowledge workers’ (Drucker 1994). Knowledge workers are at the centre of what has been called the ‘new culture of capitalism’ (Sennett 2006), which requires all workers to be the work that they do and to be able to deploy creative and relational competences. Thus value is placed not only on specific skills and abilities but, more profoundly, also on subjectivities and lives in general. In particular, the theorists of Italian Post-Workerism have developed – drawing on Foucault’s concept of biopolitics (Foucault 2008) – the fruitful concept of bio-capitalism (Fumagalli and Morini 2010; Marazzi 2010) in order to provide interpretative tools with which to analyse how the totality of workers’ lives are put to work. More recently, the central importance of emotions, feelings, and passions in contemporary work has been highlighted by the debate on ‘affective capitalism’ (Karpf et al. [forthcoming]), which investigates how, in the current model of capitalism, the passions of people actually fuel production cycles (Ballatore et al. 2014).

During the research analysed here, passion for their work was undoubtedly the feature that emerged most strongly among those interviewees with jobs that matched their previous educational and professional pathways. In the interview excerpts that follow, despite contractual
precariousness, low pay, and long and frenetic workdays, the interviewees in fact speak of professional activities that make sense, that they like, and in which they believe.

My days at school ... The alarm clock went off at half past six ... drove off at seven fifteen, lessons from eight to one o’clock, quick stop-off at home ... at three o’clock at the very latest I had to catch the train to be in time for the lesson, which began at half past four. At six or quarter past, the end of lessons ... home by half past seven, supper and then after supper, preparing lessons or correcting exercises or looking up something for the school or writing an article ... it was like this from Monday to Friday. And then ... silly me ... I’d become head of the school/work alternation project at my school, so I had to organise all the visits by the students ... the work experience placements, contacts with companies, etc. etc ... And not paid ... quite rightly because we lacked for nothing! I was wrong, wasn’t I? I was certainly wrong. But it seemed a really sensible thing to do ... I believed in that project ... Teacher, 31, Masters.

I like doing research. I’m managing to do a job that I like, which is research outside the university, because I’m doing it for a big third-sector organisation in Milan working with the Roma community. It’s a job that makes sense because its part of the first big research project carried out in Italy... So I’m perhaps simply looking for sense in the things that I do, and at present it seems to me that this one makes sense. Although it’s difficult too because I have to hustle everybody ... to coordinate the work ... but I’m happy now. This type of work satisfies me. Because I’ve also entered a happy and deliberate downshifting phase, especially this year but also during the doctorate ... so I don’t spend very much. It’s not that I want to get rich ... but look, three jobs like this in one year, with €5000 each, and I’d be happy. [Researcher, 31, PhD]

These accounts demonstrate the demise of the Fordist-Taylorist separation between work and worker, and between work and time for oneself (Virno 2004; Marazzi 2008). In a sense, this particular category of young workers is caught in what we may call a ‘passion trap’ (Murgia 2012). On the one hand, their work is both a source of income and often especially, a source of pleasure – an activity full of meaning and replete with satisfaction. However, on the other hand, these young people suffer ‘passion’ in the most literal sense of the term because of the suffering and fatigue caused by insecurity, the instability of contracts, and poor working conditions.

By contrast, the second group of young people interviewed in the course of the two research projects had, at the time of the interview, jobs inconsistent with their training. In these accounts, work is described as an experience to be endured, because job insecurity is accompanied by strong dissatisfaction and a lack of recognition and relevance of the professional training and competencies. The high incidence of young people working in temporary jobs that are also inconsistent with their qualifications is contributing to various forms of distress beyond economic and career precarity, including low job satisfaction and a fractured identity.

You can’t afford to have any period of unemployment. I’d love to have lots of days without working, because it would mean that I’d be living on a private income. But I don’t have a private income. So the fact that I’ve accepted a job for two years in a call centre obviously depends on purely economic reasons. Like the year I spent in a bookshop. They were jobs that I found through a temporary employment agency because I needed to work. [Call Centre Operator, 33, PhD]

An electrical technician would be much better at my job than I am, and I also believe that he’d be much more interested, more motivated, and find it much more enjoyable. I did materials physics ... honestly, there’s nothing about machines that interests me ... yes, I’m interested in knowing how they work ... but when after six months I’ve understood how things work, once I’ve understood everything, it doesn’t interest me anymore. Yes, it’s a job and I should do it as best I can … but intellectually it really doesn’t interest me. [Employee in a company, 30, PhD]

Being a graduate and qualified, and having a curriculum with five hundred courses on it ... is an aggravating circumstance. You’re worse off. You are worse off than anyone else. Because any job that they can offer you is anyway a lower-grade one. [Secretary, 34, Masters]

In Italy, those who enter the labour market with a university education are more likely to find themselves in temporary jobs, and also to have repeated spells of unstable employment (Muehlberger and Pasqua 2006). Moreover, the above interview excerpts indicate that employers contribute to this situation by their frequent use of temporary contracts, mainly in order to hire young and qualified personnel at low cost. These dynamics depict a widespread and persistent quantitative and qualitative mismatch between the demand for, and the supply of, the labour of young highly-educated people (Blasutig 2012). In this sense, what can be called an
The founding principles of the Italian welfare state are fixed-term contracts, temp-agency work and freelancing. These are part of a variety of temporary employment relationships that are not covered by labour law and barely, if at all, protect workers subject to self-employment. Shared by highly-qualified precarious young workers, both the self-employed and freelancers, who have jobs consistent with their qualifications and skills, are also down-skilled and distant from their training and professional expectations.

What’s in common? Narrow citizenships and future denied

At the time of the research, almost all of the young people interviewed were self-employed without employees, also called ‘own-account workers’ or ‘solo self-employed’. These are commonly referred to as ‘freelancers’ (Eichhorst et al. 2013). This contractual arrangement encompasses highly skilled independent professionals as well as ‘fake self-employed’ workers hired on a self-employed contract only as this was the cheapest option for the employer (Pedersini 2002; Muehlerberger and Bertolini 2008; Gherardi and Murgia 2013). As already noted, some of the interviewees were employed in jobs consistent with their training; others in jobs very distant from their qualifications. However, the interviewees were generally aware of the importance of their work to their qualifications, one of the main problems for solo self-employed workers in Italy concerns their exclusion from social rights such as pension rights, paid maternity and sick leave, and unemployment benefits. Solo self-employed workers comprised 15% of the entire employed population in Italy, growing by 59% between 2000 and 2011 (Eichhorst et al. 2013: 23-25), and can be employed across a variety of sectors in both high-skilled and low-skilled jobs, such as civil engineering, journalism, ICT, to care homes, agriculture and construction. Nevertheless, what they all have in common beyond self-employment is that they are not covered by labour law and barely, if at all, socially protected (Rapelli 2012). Despite the increasing variety of temporary employment relationships – such as fixed-term contracts, temp-agency work and freelancing – the founding principles of the Italian welfare state are still almost unchanged, characterised by a deficit of social policies and a persistent reliance on family support to manage social risks (Ferrera 1996). The provision of full exercise of citizenship is available only to dependent and permanent employees and not guaranteed for those with a temporary job, especially freelancers, who consequently occupy a precarious position in the Italian labour market (Berton et al. 2009; Ranci 2012; Samek Lodovici and Semenza 2012). Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the features shared by the two groups of young interviewees was a problem of social protection, in terms of a lack of pension rights, sickness benefits, paid maternity leave and unemployment benefits.

I mean, you can’t think that simply because a worker is ill and has to stay at home they shouldn’t be paid. Because you don’t get ill of your own free will, so it’s not that I want to party or go around town expecting you to pay me. But if I put in a medical certificate ... it’s fine with me if I’m paid by the hour, but if I put in a medical certificate for those days, it should be taken into account. [Call Centre Operator, 30, Masters]

The three things that I can cite are certainly social security, because at the moment I’m not paying supplementary contributions, so I’m not really building a pension, although it’s not that I have ... I’ve started thinking about it. Maternity, because even if I don’t have a partner, if I had one, I know that wanting to have children would be a problem ... And then, a problem that I’ve already had several times, income ... in the sense that what I need is income support. For example, these months I’ve been earning only intermittently ... it’s not fair that I’m not eligible for unemployment benefits like an employee ... [Freelance Journalist, 34, PhD]

Regardless of how the young interviewees working on freelance contracts identified with or were satisfied by their jobs, one of their main worries was the possibility of falling ill: firstly because sickness leave is unpaid, and secondly, in the case of prolonged absence and thus of incapacity to meet the deadlines, illness may lead to non-renewal of the contract or even dismissal. The second issue emerging from the stories collected, and which ranks among the principal risks faced by young workers with a freelance contract, was parenthood. Parenthood was often represented by both women and men as an object of desire that was out of the question, especially for female freelancers. Moreover, in all the interviews and in all geographical areas in which the research was conducted, mention was made of the almost complete lack of protection in terms of pension contributions and income support. The interviewees were well aware of...
the difficulties linked to the impossibility of building an adequate future pension, as well as of the possibility of their contracts not being renewed and, in that case, not having access to any form of unemployment benefit (which is limited to dependent employees).

Finally, there is a further feature besides the shortcomings of the welfare system shared by the two groups of interviewees. It concerns how they represented their expectations about the future, which they envisaged as insecure and unbound by past biographical events and their previous experiences. The scenario in which the precarious young workers moved, in fact, was a kind of continuous present in which this temporal dimension overwhelmed both past experience – a criterion difficult to use to take decisions – and the future, a remote and uncertain dimension that resisted any attempt to predict. The space of experience and the horizon of expectations were therefore uncoupled from each other until they lost any reciprocal reference. Hence, if experience means knowing how things will turn out (Benjamin 1962), young precarious workers pay the price of liberation from Fordist routines with the difficulty of translating events into experience, and the difficulty of having repeatedly to take decisions about their lives (for instance, being eligible for a mortgage, having a first or second child, travelling overseas, time out for further study), thus constantly having to reconfigure their expectations. Indeed, for the great majority on both interviewees who identified with their work and those who experienced a professional mismatch, career instability seemed to act as an impediment to the development of life prospects in terms of both their work and more generally their lives. Living and working in precarious conditions accordingly does not just mean having a precarious employment: it also includes being exposed to the unforeseeable, to insecurity, to being unable to make long-term plans, and to being exploitable specifically for this reason.

To be realistic, I honestly don’t know, because it doesn’t depend on me. In the end, you’re not the direct administrator of your future. You can do your work well or badly, but in the end the conditions on which they’ll renew the contract ... I at least have had the good fortune of working on three-year contracts, I took them, even though I didn’t like the job. But all the same there’s no basis to stabilise people. But here we’re at the level of dreams, not the reality ... [Company Technician, 31, PhD]

As the interview excerpts show, life projects were perceived as being denied not only in the professional sphere but also in a rather generalised way in regard to private/family projects. Also striking is the sense of helplessness with respect to the future, both among interviewees with jobs that corresponded to their expectations in terms of professional content as well as those who had jobs that did not match their qualifications. For the young precarious workers that were interviewed, it seems that even if they had recognition and ‘empirical evidence’ in relation to their work, this could not be regarded as a signal that their careers were consolidating. As one of the interviewees aptly put it: ‘You’re always put to the test, and even if you achieve satisfaction, you never know if you will have to do something completely different in your life.’

As the interview excerpts show, life projects were perceived as being denied not only in the professional sphere but also in a rather generalised way in regard to private/family projects. Also striking is the sense of helplessness with respect to the future, both among interviewees with jobs that corresponded to their expectations in terms of professional content as well as those who had jobs that did not match their qualifications. For the young precarious workers that were interviewed, it seems that even if they had recognition and ‘empirical evidence’ in relation to their work, this could not be regarded as a signal that their careers were consolidating. As one of the interviewees aptly put it: ‘You’re always put to the test, and even if you achieve satisfaction, you never know if you will have to do something completely different in your life.’

In a context of this kind, where the continuity of time breaks down into a plurality of disconnected fragments and into a myriad of presents (Leccardi 1991), the future becomes a sort of ‘lottery’, or at any rate a pathway in which the protagonists of the stories have no influence on whether or not they will be able to achieve the professional and economic security which makes it possible to harmonise the sphere of work with the other spheres of life.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed how precarious processes differently influence the experiences of highly-qualified young precarious workers. In particular, it has analysed the stories of two differing groups, both of whom have tertiary educations and are employed with freelance contracts; but in one case passionate about the work that they do, and in the other forced to accept under-skilled jobs for purely economic reasons. These two groups, however, could be regarded as the two extremes of the same phenomenon, as there are many continuities between them in terms of precarity. Moreover, both extremes are likely to be experienced simultaneously in the life of a young highly-qualified precarious worker.

The growing number of highly-qualified young precarious workers, and the not even so young with respect to chronological age, prompts reflection on the labour policies and social protection system currently operating in Italy. A policy which seeks to affect the quality of work, and more generally investment in knowledge, should pay attention not so much to the workers, their age, and type...
of employment contract, but rather to the citizenship rights that they should be granted as autonomous subjects, both within and externally to the labour market. Consequently, what is to be stressed is the importance of establishing minimum rules, at national and European level, in terms of governance of the labour market and welfare systems, in order to accompany transitions from one form of employment to another, guaranteeing the portability of rights in those transitions, a good quality of work, and equal treatment among workers, both employees and self-employed. In this regard, biographical and narrative approaches can play an important role in redefining the traditional boundaries constructed around the concept of work, so that policies can be based on analysis of the experiences of workers, regardless of the type of employment contract. This would generate new reflexivity on the part of the institutions, with the principal objective to construct a set of new citizenship protections that ensure free and independent choice in the workplace and overall enhancement of the social potential.

References
Blasutig, G. 2012 ‘La condizione occupazionale dei laureati e le nuove sfide per le politiche del lavoro’ DISPES Working Paper, Edizioni Università, Trieste.
Marazzi, C. 2008 Capital and Language, Semiotext(e), London.
Marazzi, C. 2010 The Violence of Financial Capitalism, Semiotext(e), London.


Virno P. 2004 A Grammar of the Multitude For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life, Semiotext(e), New York.


Author
The author of several books, Annalisa Murgia is a research fellow at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento. Her interests include work trajectories, with a particular focus on precariously, safety and occupational health, HR management, scientific careers and the social construction of gender at work. In 2012, she obtained a post-doctoral fellowship at the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), to work on the biographical and professional trajectories of postdoctoral researchers in Italy and Belgium.

R. D. WOOC, PERTH, WA

of course flatness, doubt: a suite of brunswick east poems

i.

fist river throat iron

protest; trace

somnambulant foreclosure

high coal cut fire

ii.

mouse moon saint marrow

and watt,

east w and two devil

knot illuminated

iii.

heart opal, iridescence

moss league of rest

bare bolt audible

was lockness
No Guarantees: Preparing for long-term precarious employment in the Australian film and television industry

Pariece Nelligan

The creative industries are places of precarious employment. Marked by competitive labour markets and sporadic work patterns, this paper seeks to explore the role networking plays in the lives of those aspiring to work in the creative industries. It explores the concept of networking and the degree to which it is embodied and performed by aspirants who are actively seeking employment within precarious, creative labour markets. It presents the vocational narratives of three aspiring filmmakers – all men – who despite lacking valuable resources continue to strive for careers as filmmakers. It argues that one’s ability to network effectively is guided by one’s ability to access and accumulate social, cultural and economic capital.

Introduction

Once linked to romantic ideas of art and the ‘artistic genius’, creativity has become synonymous with entrepreneurial courage, implying ‘... a particular kind of inventiveness ... innovative, rule-breaking/bending ... non-linear even non “rational” ways of thinking and working’ (O’Connor et al. 2011: 84). In Australia, creativity has become central to politics and economic discourse. In 1994, the Labor Government introduced the ‘Creative Nation’ policy. Its purpose was to strengthen Australia’s cultural institutions with increased funding and to reinforce the role culture played in the lives of Australian people. Credited for their growth and generative capacity, it was argued that ‘culture’, ‘ideas’ and ‘creativity’ had economic value:

This cultural policy is also an economic policy. Culture creates wealth. Broadly defined, our cultural industries generate 13 billion dollars a year. Culture employs. Around 336,000 Australians are employed in culture-related industries. Culture adds value, it makes an essential contribution to innovation, marketing and design. It is a badge of our industry. The level of our creativity substantially determines our ability to adapt to new economic imperatives. It is a valuable export in itself and an essential accompaniment to the export of other commodities. It attracts tourists and students. It is essential to our economic success (Department of Communications and the Arts 1994).

Such policies encourage young people to believe that cultural and sub-cultural activities can provide a basis for career. The complexities that arise from such a choice – precarity and low pay – are concealed, however, by the apparent rewards of self-expression and the promise of social mobility. The shortage of work means that young people with creative ambitions are forced to take day jobs – often casual work in hospitality or retail – to support themselves; jobs that are not, on the surface, related to their creative vocational goals.

Previous studies of work in film and television (Hesmondalgh 2007; Hesmondalgh and Baker 2008, 2011; Blair 2001, 2003) have discussed the experiences of professionals or those who, despite precarity, have managed to construct viable careers. This paper, however, focuses on aspirants and in particular on the plight of three men who aspire to work in film and television but who lack the social, cultural or economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that might enhance their prospects in highly oversupplied labour markets. Joe aspires to a technical career and Jack to a career in directing, yet neither has access to the types of social capital that can help them. Adam also aspires to a film career and, unlike Joe and Jack, is rich in social capital but poor in economic capital. This interferes with his ability to develop his own projects and to be an autonomous filmmaker. The stories of all three men highlight to various degrees the ways that precarity is experienced in a social and cultural context. The paper therefore argues three points: firstly, that precarity within the creative industries has become a normative condition that young people have learnt to accept; secondly, that this precarity disrupts the sense of agency young people can assert over their working lives; and thirdly, that the types of resources needed to overcome precarity and to
regain agency are limited by people’s social, cultural and economic backgrounds.

**Film and Television: A Brief Economic History**

Early film was dominated by artisanal techniques and arrangements, but the introduction of the ‘studio system’ – bureaucratically managed and hierarchically structured with worker protection provided by unions/guilds – eventually brought Fordist methods to film production (Storper 1989; Storper and Christopherson 1985; Cunningham and Jacka 1996). Large US corporations such as Universal, Paramount, Fox and MGM dominated film markets internationally (Blair 2001: 151; Storper 1989) but in Australia, independent film producers such as Chauvel and studios such as Cinesound, National Studios and Efftee Productions took the lead from the US and became major film investors and distributors (Screen Australia 2005). These companies owned large studio spaces and had partnership deals with exhibition companies, which meant they oversaw the financing, development, production and distribution of Australian films (Blair 2001: 151).

Tax incentives introduced in the 1980s encouraged industry growth but these were eroded in the nineties undermining investment in film and diminishing employment in the industry (Screen Australia 2005). This hastened the introduction of flexible specialisation or ‘post-Fordism’ in film and television whereby more and more work was outsourced. Vertical disintegration meant that films were produced and distributed by specialised firms rather than by, or within, a single large firm such as a major studio. These specialised production firms then minimised their risks by hiring people on short-term contracts (Piore and Sabel 1984; Askoy and Robbins, 1992; Christopherson and Storper 1986, 1989; Cunningham and Jacka 1996).

As film and television industries vertically disintegrated, labour markets became segmented (Blair 2001, 2003). Film workers, mainly technical staff but also actors, directors and producers, became more dispersed and individualised (Christopherson and Storper 1986). Former full time employees found themselves working on a contract-to-contract film-to-film basis (Christopherson and Storper 1989; Storper 1989; Blair 2001). Freelance employment and project-based labour became the norm, but so too did the insecurity that accompanies intermittent, short-term work (Blair 2001: 151). Workers became ‘Arbeitskraftunternehmer’ or ‘self-employed employees’ scurrying for contracts in unregulated, project-based job markets (Haunschild and Eikof 2009: 20).

Production outsourcing has made it more difficult for aspirants and marginal workers to break into the industry. Workplace information and skills once initiated and reproduced within communities of practice are now circulated and shared through looser and more transient networks, making it more difficult for aspirants to acquire resources and knowledge (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2009). There are no clear pathways, methods of logical or linear progression or frameworks in place to guide people trying to enter core networks. Those with friends or family members already working in film and television are better equipped to deal with the structures of a networked labour market but those without these resources must strive to build the contacts who are essential to occupational survival.

**Case Studies**

Joe is 27 years old and an aspiring technical worker – editor, cameraman, sound and lighting technician. Despite having completed various courses, he continues to experience long-term unemployment. He lives with his parents in Sydney’s western suburbs. His mother works in retail, his father is a storeman, and Joe accepts his marginal ability to support him while he pursues filmmaking. He went to his local high school, and after leaving school he spent some time unemployed. In an effort to circumvent this, and as a means of placating his parents and satisfying a creative urge, he committed to a film and television course at a local technical college. At its completion, he sought out work experience and opportunities to expand his occupational networks:

> … and even volunteering, a real struggle, a dead end, they’re not interested, you know, and it got to the stage where I was just ringin’ up production houses and seeing if I could hang around or do odd jobs for a week or a couple of days or something like that. And I think they’re sort of trying to keep, what’s the word, someone [from] comin’ in to undermine their opportunities or something like that, or if they were going to let me in, they’d want me to bring more to the table, I guess, more experience and other contacts, just more to the table. It was never said explicitly, but that’s sort of what I think and if I’d had more to offer I think more would’ve come from it…

Joe did not possess the types of resources that enabled network inclusion, and despite his willingness to work for free, he was judged according to his social and cultural merits. His skills, credentials or eagerness to be trained did not guarantee his inclusion into networks and occupational communities. As Bourdieu (1986) says, people like Joe need to possess, at a minimum, a reservoir of objective resources similar to those already belonging to established network members. This is what guarantees the growth or reproduction of capital and therefore entry to a network. In Joe’s words, he needed to ‘bring more
to provide resources not only similar to, but more potent than those he wished to network with. The resources required of him, the social capital expected of new members, is the social capital that exists by virtue of familial connections and friendship groups.

His reference to ‘comin’ in to undermine their opportunities’ points directly to industry competitiveness and suggests how even an inexperienced aspirant is seen as a threat to both job and network security. Jobs are precious and require protecting, and even a graduate looking for work experience can be a threat. Wittel argues that networks are created both to circulate and protect proprietary information, and to connect people to opportunities that materialise as a result of being exposed to this information, which suggests that the information and opportunities that circulate in networks are the property of the network and thus need to be protected (2001: 51). This frustrates Joe’s ability to obtain work experience and to learn at the elbow of a crafts person. He was prepared to relinquish specific on-the-job training in favour of ‘hang[ing] around or do[ing] odd jobs’, but even this sacrifice did not deem him as worthy in the eyes of those he tried to impress.

Like Joe, Jack is also removed from the social and cultural networks that enhance prospects and enable careers in film and television. Rather than volunteering, Jack tries to encourage networking opportunities whilst earning an income as a waiter. Jack is 33 and also grew up in Sydney’s western suburbs. He was raised poor, the youngest of eight, and his mother was a single mother on a pension. He attended his local high school and partook in very few extra-curricular activities. Although he had friends (‘geeks’), he was a misfit and high school was hard – ‘have three high schools on my history, had my nose broken, called gay every day’ – so he found a refuge in film: ‘[I] didn’t pass [school] because I spent all my time going to the cinema’. His enthusiasm grew and at fourteen he started to ‘study’ filmmaking by reading magazines.

In his senior years of high school, his drama teacher suggested that he contact a local youth centre that was running a film course one night a week. It was not intensive enough though to teach him all the technical aspects of filmmaking so he went on to complete a number of other film courses as well. Such study has occurred over a period of ten years, interspersed with periods of strict commitment to work usually in the form of hospitality and waiting on tables. He has not yet participated in filmmaking on a professional level and only performed his practice in a film school context.

For Jack, a way to merge his creative ambitions with the need to support himself financially was to work a ‘day job’ that provided potential network opportunities. He encouraged this by working at a cafe located in Sydney’s arts and cultural precinct. By taking his film script to work, he anticipated there would be a chance to show it to someone who might give him a break:

I ended up ... working at Theatre Cafe and I met John Brown who was doing a play and I cracked and said, ‘What’s it like working with [famous Hollywood director]?’ – because he was in [cult classic film] – and he went on for about half an hour about how wonderful it was and he said, ‘Oh, you’re a filmmaker, are you?’ And I said I was working on a short film. I showed him the script and he said, ‘Can I be in it?’ And I said, ‘Yeah alright, you’re in’. And the girl who instigated the whole thing [the film project] wanted a meeting with him and she was nervous about meeting him, you know he’s just a guy and we walked away from the meeting ... it turns out that he texted me a week before shooting saying he couldn’t do it and they wanted him a week early [for another project] so I was yeah, no worries, so we got a different actor and [the girl] got stressed and it was never made because she [abandoned] the film.

This narrative exemplifies the inherent inequality that exists at the heart of film industry networks. John Brown (JB), a professional Australian actor, accepted Jack’s offer to appear in his film because he was looking to fill the gaps in his work schedule. Film and television careers require momentum, and it is important to be always seen as working and therefore desired and able to generate work, even on student projects. JB’s incentive was to ‘stack’, or to overcommit, so that he would have a number of projects in the pipeline that would provide a fail-safe alternative to jobs that might fall through.

While JB might have been genuinely interested in the student film, agreeing to work on it served another purpose; it connected him and put him in front of new and potentially useful possibilities with emerging filmmakers, teachers and their networks. In these kinds of environments, he gets to maintain his star status and thus his power because he does not have to audition and is guaranteed a lead role. Because he is a drawcard, he is pivotal in his networks and said, ‘What’s it like working with [famous Hollywood director]’ – because he was in [cult classic film] – and he went on for about half an hour about how wonderful it was and he said, ‘Oh, you’re a filmmaker, are you?’ And I said I was working on a short film. I showed him the script and he said, ‘Can I be in it?’ And I said, ‘Yeah alright, you’re in’. And the girl who instigated the whole thing [the film project] wanted a meeting with him and she was nervous about meeting him, you know he’s just a guy and we walked away from the meeting … it turns out that he texted me a week before shooting saying he couldn’t do it and they wanted him a week early [for another project] so I was yeah, no worries, so we got a different actor and [the girl] got stressed and it was never made because she [abandoned] the film.

While JB might have been genuinely interested in the student film, agreeing to work on it served another purpose; it connected him and put him in front of new and potentially useful possibilities with emerging filmmakers, teachers and their networks. In these kinds of environments, he gets to maintain his star status and thus his power because he does not have to audition and is guaranteed a lead role. Because he is a drawcard, there is very little chance he will lose the job to somebody else or risk his reputation if he underperforms.

Jack and his filmmaking partner bore the brunt of the risks and thus suffered the consequences when JB withdrew. The unpaid, amateur production will usually yield to the offer of professional, paid work, despite the existence of new potential networks or promises made. Reneging on his promise cost JB very little because these students
had very little professional or industry sway. Alternatively it cost the students greatly because the disappointment and embarrassment felt by Jack’s writing partner caused her to abandon the film, which affected the opportunities of all those committed to the film project. This illustrates the power precarious labour has over creative labour aspirants; short-term project-based labour, oversupplied labour markets and a lack of work opportunities incites an opportunism in people that is rationalised as necessity. JB had to abandon the student film or risk jeopardising his financial future.

To combat vocational insecurity, Joe, JB and Jack endeavour to extend their networks and enhance their reputations. The ability to do this is a supposed benefit of being a freelancer and ‘free agent’, yet JB is hardly in control of his working life, Joe is compelled to work for free, and Jack tries to encourage opportunities and seize serendipitous moments within work contexts that are not at all related to film-making. In this sense, and like JB, he too must be opportunistic and morally at ease with it. Joe learns that knowledge and skills are only part of what is required of those entering into film and television labour markets. JB realised that being attached to the student film may have filled gaps in his schedule, and there is even kudos for those who practise their craft pro bono, however, he did not really have the financial luxury to do unpaid work.

Adam, my final case study, has frequently heard warnings of such consequences but it is a lack of financial backing that hinders his ability to practice filmmaking. A 22 year old when I interviewed him, Adam grew up in an artistic family. His mother is a known local actor, although works in a call centre with lots of other out-of-work actors, and his stepfather, a former actor and sound and lighting technician, now runs his own media consulting business. His uncle is also a known actor who in addition directs and produces feature films. Adam grew up in Sydney’s inner western suburbs, went to a selective, musical high school and has gone on to study arts at university. He works casually on the weekends at a growers’ market selling apples. Despite being determined to write and produce feature films, he does not want to enter the industry from the bottom, ‘I could get work as a sound assistant or editor, but I’d just get bored and I don’t want to end up hating the industry’, so he chooses to sell apples instead:

Although reasonably well endowed with social capital, neither he, nor his mother or father, have enough to make a living from their creative work. He witnessed financial hardship growing up, ‘very much uncertain, it wasn’t unstable, it’s just that some times were easier than others’. He circumvents the effects of this when he says, ‘remember, this was my parents’ lifestyle as well’. His parents’ lives, and the cultural capital he possesses, provide the rationale he needs to persevere in the face of uncertainty and without financial assurance: Don’t mind working a normal job. What I like about working at the market is that it’s so far removed from what I want to do … I worked in a video shop and it was nice and it was across the road from my house, but it’s close enough to what I want to do that it was painful watching movies all day, so I’d rather have something that I’m completely removed from … Living with them [mother and stepfather] it was very much sort of an uncertain sort of lifestyle. I mean it wasn’t that it was unstable it wasn’t a bad environment to grow up in, it was just sometimes it was easier than others … I have so many countless relatives and friends of my relatives and friends of my parents come up to me and say ‘don’t be an actor’ you know, but I think the whole experience sort of rubbed off on me anyway … and that was what it was like living with mum and my stepdad at the time …

Adam does not need his day job to provide social networking opportunities, but it is difficult for him to suppress his creative aspirations and to sustain the outward countenance needed to work in a video shop. Working there makes him feel like a failure and it reminds him on a daily basis of his marginal position, despite coming from a family of film industry workers. In Adam’s case, precarious is the norm, but its full effect is to some extent countered by the social capital that he has at his disposal. To succeed in film and television, however, you need a good measure of both.

Conclusion
People aspiring to careers in film and television can be organised into groups. Christopherson (2008, 2009) has identified an inner, small group of film and television workers which she calls the ‘core’, and an outer larger more diverse group which she calls the ‘periphery’. The core consists of workers, mainly actors, writers and producers, who, in spite of short-term contracts, are regularly employed. The periphery consists of diverse workers, namely technical staff and craftspeople who work less frequently and for fewer hours than the core. They often work outside of union standards, and are perceived by managers as more disposable than members of the
core (Blair 2001: 153). This paper, however, identifies a third more expansive and more densely populated group of aspirants who, as ‘outcasts’, construct working lives in and around the necessity to network. Their main ambition is to gain entry into the core by way of the periphery, but are so far removed from both, that acceptance into either is rare. They have so little access to paid employment opportunities and the social networks that create them, that their working lives become contingent upon serendipity, luck and their ability to network in complex and hostile labour markets.

The level of commitment required of those who aspire to careers in film and television must provide aspirants with the motivation required to create their own opportunities, to overlook occupational orthodoxy, to utilise social relations in a quest for recognition and success, and to disguise their desperation in the face of financial hardship and perpetual uncertainty. Despite the ideologies that underpin cultural policy, a majority of young, creative workers spend much of their lives working in marginal jobs whilst trying to ‘break-in’ to the creative industries. For all of the inflated political rhetoric surrounding the promise of the creative economy, aspirants struggle to penetrate exclusionary networks, and many work for free in a desperate search for the ‘big break’.

The idea of creativity has become synonymous with neo-liberalism. In career discourse it is used to justify increased labour market competition, short-term employment, a lack of union representation and workers’ rights, a shift in employer/employee relations and the demise of institutional support (Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondalgh 2007; Oakely 2006). It suggests the prospect of emancipatory work, yet fails to deliver jobs. Those interviewed for this paper provide clear examples of how young people internalise the precarity and the risks associated with the creative career. Joe’s preparedness to volunteer undermined his ability to network and to participate in work; he was viewed as a newcomer and a threat, not only to people’s jobs, but also to the labour market as a whole; people willing to work for free undermine the earning capacity of the labour force as a whole. They destabilise wage systems and weaken union power. Jack found himself vulnerable to the cascading effect of networking, whereby those with limited contacts are reliant on the patronage of and connection to more powerful players. JB’s withdrawal from the film project illustrates the vulnerability of those on the creative fringes. Adam internalises precarity treating it almost as an unavoidable consequence of his social and cultural upbringing. Even those in his family who might be able to assist his film ambitions warn him against the dangers of living precariously, which suggests their limited ability to help him. The fact his mother works in a call-centre with other out-of-work actors suggests that unemployment is common, and that there is a need to remain connected to others even when not engaged in creative employment. This is indicative of how the creative career and precarity pervade the daily lives of both professionals and aspirants, and how they govern the life chances of those who are highly susceptible to them – young people forming ambitions to work in the creative industries.

References
Oakely, K. 2006 ‘Include us out – economic development and social policy in the creative industries’, Cultural...
O’Connor, J. Cunningham, S. and Jaaniste, L. 2011 ‘Arts and Creative Industries: A Historical Overview; and an Australian Conversation’, Australian Council for the Arts, Canberra, ACT.

Author
Dr Pariece Nelligan recently completed her doctorate at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. Her research interests include precarious employment in the creative industries, labour relations, networking and social relations, communities of practice in the new economy and contemporary social class identities. She has co-written papers for The Sociological Review, Economic and Labour Relations Review, and has co-written a chapter with Dr George Morgan entitled ‘Taking the Bait: minority youth in Australia, creative skills and precarious work’. Email: pariecenelligan@gmail.com

End Notes
1. These are drawn from a larger sample of film industry aspirants. Their gender is incidental to this paper.
2. ‘… aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group... The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilise and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected’ (Bourdieu 1986: 248–249).

working alone
when you work alone you can swear at yourself fart freely and spit where you want to wipe your nose on your sleeve the trees don’t care there is no etiquette and it all comes out in the laundry

you can swear at the job to be done and the tools you use argue with wood and wire steel and dirt maybe the mosquitoes that mob you the bracken fern and grass in a tangle the bushes and brambles that bite

all the work of farm and garden of carpentry and shed repairs all the long hours of fencing up along the stony barren ridge or down in the willows by the creek the digging and pulling and mulching of weeds that won’t go away

the come and go of the seasons the ins and outs of a day the back and forth with buckets and hammer and pliers and rakes among bull-ants that hang on with pincers or fantails that flutter and dance or flies that swarm round your face

with blockbuster and chainsaw and axe with a hip-load of cheap wooden droppers and a couple of expensive steel stakes with or without those worn-out gloves and occasional glances for snakes with whatever it takes to finally get there and do it

to walk there and do it alone in hot sun so the sweat stings your eyes or in rain that soaks to the bone and while hands and muscles are busy doing what has to be done your thoughts fly the coop like raptors and roam the world before they come home

EDITH SPEERS,
DOVER, TASMANIA
Stability and Precarity in the Lives and Narratives of Working-class Men in Putin’s Russia

CHARLIE WALKER

The need for employers to adapt to global neoliberal capitalism has led to growing flexibility in employment relations, with more peripheral workers experiencing insecurity. In post-Soviet Russia, adaptation to the global marketplace created insecurity on a massive scale, coinciding as it did with the collapse of state socialism. Enterprises cut workers’ hours and wages in order to survive, and workers were forced to develop their own ‘survival strategies’ through secondary, informal employment. Although the legitimacy of the Putin presidencies has been built on the promise of greater economic stability, recent news reports point to the emergence of significant pay arrears. This article uses employment and income data to establish current trends in income insecurity, and a recent ethnographic study of working-class men to explore experiences of precarity amongst this group. Both data sources indicate ongoing instability, as many workers continue to rely on secondary incomes to make ends meet.

Introduction

A recent article in The Guardian newspaper (Luhn 2015) explored a number of forms of exploitation experienced by labourers working on one of Russia’s venues for the 2018 World Cup. Despite becoming one of the world’s most expensive sports venues, the article reported, the money was not trickling down to construction workers, with many saying that they had not been paid for up to three months. In addition, poor working conditions and inconsistent safety standards were claimed to have been responsible for the deaths of at least five men at the site since 2011. The sheer number of subcontractors involved, however, made it difficult to point the finger at any particular party; general contractor Transstroi said that all of its workers were paid on time and safety regulations were followed.

Pieces of investigative journalism such as this play a crucial role in exposing exploitative employment practices across the world, and make them comprehensible by presenting them in familiar terms – workers have not been paid, safety standards have not been met, no one can be held to account. However in different parts of the world, forms of worker exploitation have their own specific histories and contexts in different parts of the world that shape both the objective conditions of the insecurity workers are exposed to and the subjective experience of that insecurity in very different ways. In Russia’s case, the experience of the labourers at the stadium is the tip of a very deep iceberg that has formed over the past two and a half decades in the context of a massive economic transformation – or ‘transition’ – that has yet to reach a stable end point and is unlikely ever to do so. Instances of labour exploitation such as these are all the more significant for the fact that they run directly counter to the official rhetoric of the Putin administrations of recent years, which have consistently claimed that they will deliver the economic stability and social security that was so lacking during the early transition period (Makarkin and Oppenheimer 2011: 1459).

This article undertakes a broader exploration of the changing shape and experience of insecurity amongst labourers in contemporary Russia, and attempts to locate their experiences both historically and in a wider international perspective. As well as drawing on employment and income data to shed light on patterns of wage non-payment and other forms of income insecurity, it draws upon recent ethnographic research with working-class men between the ages of 25 and 40 employed in a range of manual occupations predominantly in the manufacturing and construction sectors. Although male manual labourers are not the only workers to suffer forms of precariousness or insecurity in the Russian labour market, social expectations of men to be providers for their families, and the concentration of income insecurity in ‘blue-collar’ sectors of the economy, make them an important case. The ethnographic data, gathered in the cities of Moscow and Ul’yanovsk between 2012 and 2013, thus allows the article to shed light on the ways in which the insecurities described in The Guardian report...
impact upon the lives of ordinary working men, and the extent to which they are able to buy into the rhetoric of ‘stability’.

Labour Flexibility in Post-Soviet Russia

A number of commentators have pointed to the growing flexibility of employment relations in recent decades, as the globalised nature of neoliberal capitalism requires employers to be able to constantly adjust to the volatility of world markets. In most Western economies, flexible forms of employment have increasingly allowed for the transfer of adjustment costs and the risks of operating in the global economy onto employees (Beck 2000), and in doing so, have contributed to the emergence of a variety of forms of precariousness and insecurity (Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011; Castells 2000). Although, as Standing (2011) argues, such insecurities may characterise the employment of workers across the breadth of the labour market, they are nevertheless concentrated amongst those employed in areas where non-standard contracts and the casualisation of employment are most common. As such, in countries with high levels of labour market deregulation such as the USA, ‘peripheral’ workers such as women, young and older cohorts, migrants and the low-skilled, appear to be far more at risk of being in precarious employment than others (Standing 2011; Grint and Nixon 2015: 350). Reflecting this, Kalleberg (2011: 17) points to the rise of ‘polarised and precarious employment’ in the USA as resulting directly from employers’ responses to the pressure for greater flexibility.

Russia’s movement towards labour flexibility and insecurity has taken a somewhat different form, as the exposure of Russian firms to the world market coincided with the total collapse of its state-led economic system. At the beginning of the 1990s, a series of economic reforms in post-Soviet countries such as Russia was intended to ‘shock’ the supply-driven command economies that had been built around state socialism into responding to market forces, which would in turn involve a reallocation of labour resources. The deregulation of prices and wages, alongside rapid privatisation, would lead to a shedding of labour from the least competitive parts of the command economy, which would then be absorbed into new firms, self-employment and the more profitable surviving enterprises (Grogan 2003: 402). Contrary to expectations, however, many enterprises responded to economic collapse not by shedding labour, but through the adjustment of wage payment and working hours, which allowed them to continue to survive by transferring the costs of adaptation to a market economy disproportionately onto workers themselves. Thus, in contrast to employers in many Western countries, where non-standard contracts have allowed for a high degree of external numerical flexibility or to those in developing countries where the workforce is more heavily casualised, Russian firms illegally used a massive degree of internal numerical flexibility and wage flexibility in order to keep workers on, despite often having no work for them. In this context, real wages declined by over 50% between 1992 and 1997 (Schwartz 2003: 54), workers faced widespread wage non-payment and arrears (Kapel’iushnikov 2001), and the demonetisation of the economy in the early 1990s led wage payment often to be made in the form of in-kind substitutes. In regards to working hours, the practice of placing workers on administrative leave or on short-time working at nominal pay was endemic, such that behind low official unemployment figures as many as 40% of workers were experiencing significant periods of economic inactivity (Standing 1997: 179).

The fact that such large numbers experienced and endured delayed wage payments and wage reductions at this time shows that income insecurity was a mass phenomenon, not confined to individual companies, branches, or sectors, and as such, many workers simply felt that they had nowhere else to go (Clarke 1999a: 38). In this situation, taking on informal, secondary employment became widespread, as did a wide range of ‘survival strategies’, as people were forced to diversify their incomes in order to get by (Pickup and White 2003). Domestic food production, the use of assets such as cars and property for additional income, and any task to which one’s skills could be applied for money – sewing, decorating, teaching, repairing – became important means of filling the gap left by declining and missing wages. As well as the massive growth of informal employment, mass insecurity told on the health of the Russian population, with psycho-social stress being identified as the root cause of abnormally high mortality and morbidity rates (Pridemore 2002; Pietila and Rytkonen 2008). Working-class, working-age men were especially badly affected by their inability to fulfil cultural expectations of them to act as breadwinners, with life expectancy for this demographic group reaching as low as the mid-fifties by the late 1990s (Bobak et al. 1998).

Russia’s financial crisis and currency devaluation in 1998 are widely regarded as having been a turning point in its economic fortunes, after which domestic production was boosted by the country’s limited capacity to import goods. More significantly, unprecedented growth in the price of oil and gas from the year 2000, which coincided with the presidency of Vladimir Putin, brought a degree of stability not enjoyed for years. As wages recovered, Russia saw a consumer boom of the type experienced in many Western countries during the post-war period, with massive sales of white goods, the growing popularity of holidays abroad, and finance making the purchase of property and foreign cars a possibility not just for the rich. The legitimacy both of Putin and Medvedev’s presidencies has to a large extent been built on the relative material security established during this period.
However, the fragile nature of the Putin-era prosperity was revealed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, when short-time working and wage arrears all rose sharply, despite having been made illegal in 2001. According to official data from Rosstat (2008), the volume of unpaid wages rose from 3.7 to 7.7 billion roubles in the month of November 2008 alone, with employees in industrial production, transport, construction and agriculture worst affected (Walker 2008). Pay cuts were similarly widespread, although, due to the common practice of paying workers a nominal official wage while topping this up unofficially (the ‘envelope wage’), this barely appeared in official statistics. Similarly underreported in official publications were mass layoffs, which were the subject of websites such as sokratili.ru and krizis.ru, set up by members of the public to draw attention to what was happening (Walker 2008).

The effects of the crisis of 2008 were much less severe and more short-lived than the economic dislocations of the 1990s, but served as a reminder to workers that genuine stability – *stabil’nost’* – was hard to come by, and that the prosperity of the early Putin years was a shallow phenomenon. Russia’s current economic problems, resulting both from a dramatic fall in the price of oil and gas, and its international isolation following its actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, point to the same conclusion. Indeed, recent data indicate a dramatically worsening situation with regard to wage arrears, as enterprises struggle to cope with the devalued rouble and rising inflation, with workers in manufacturing and construction owed a total of 1.25 and 1.23 billion roubles respectively (Rosstat 2015a). Correspondingly, the number of people living in poverty has increased significantly, rising from a low of 15.4 million people in 2012 (Rosstat 2015b) to 21.7 million by September 2015, or 15.1% of the population (RiaNovosti 2015).

This article puts flesh on this picture of fragile stability under Putin by exploring the experiences of young manual workers employed in a range of sectors in the cities of Moscow and Ul’yanovsk, drawing on ongoing ethnographic research carried out since 2012. It is not intended to go any further in measuring the current scale of the forms of precarity already outlined, but rather, to explore the ways in which they are reflected in the livelihood strategies and subjectivities of a small group of working-class men.

**Methods and Data**

As mentioned above, working-class, working-age men, although not the most vulnerable demographic group, were nevertheless the primary sufferers of the health and mortality crises of the 1990s due to high levels of psycho-social stress and related health behaviours (Bobak et al. 1998). The root causes of this lay both in the economic dislocations of that decade, which were felt especially strongly in sectors such as manufacturing and heavy industry where blue-collar workers predominate, and in the social construction of masculinity in Russia, which places particular emphasis on men’s responsibility to provide for their families (Walker 2016). In an earlier study, in which I explored transitions to adulthood amongst young people studying in vocational training colleges attached to manufacturing enterprises, it was therefore not surprising that the young men in the study, aged 18-25, were highly ambivalent about the prospect of taking jobs in sectors that were known to be characterised by low pay and income insecurity (Walker 2007, 2009, 2011; 2015). Nevertheless, as that study found, social mobility in Russia is very low and few of those young men will have found attractive employment opportunities outside of the sectors of the economy they were training for.

Given the ambivalence of young working-class men to enter forms of manual labour and the experiences of this demographic group during the 1990s, I wanted to explore the experiences of older working-class men during what appeared to be a period of relative ‘stability’. Thus, the project reported on here set out to examine the experiences of working-class men from the age of 25 to 40, with the aim of shedding light on sources of and barriers to their subjective, physical and material wellbeing. As such, the project aimed to explore the men’s experiences across a range of life domains, addressing not only their working lives, but also the ways in which their employment shaped wider components of their biographies such as housing, family transitions and leisure. In total, sixty men participated in the research, all of whom worked in blue-collar forms of employment predominantly in the manufacturing and construction industries and had taken forms of vocational training rather than higher education when they were younger. The research consisted of in-depth, biographical interviews in and around the men’s workplaces and homes, as well as participant observation amongst some key informants during leisure activities such as fishing. The respondents were split equally between Ul’yanovsk – a mature but decaying industrial city in the Volga region – and the capital city of Moscow, an increasingly cosmopolitan metropolis that nevertheless still has a sizeable number of factories and offers plentiful employment opportunities in construction and other forms of manual labour.

**From Precarity to Stability**

Both in Ul’yanovsk and in Moscow the decade of the 1990s appeared as a *leitmotif* of instability in the men’s narratives. The nineties were referred to as a chaotic period in which men, and the country at large, had been at a loss as to what to do to move forwards and
had felt forced to experiment with a range of livelihood strategies that ranged from the insecure to the hazardous. The experiences of Erik, a 39-year-old window factory worker in Ul'yanovsk, are illustrative of those of many respondents. Erik had started work at the Ul'yanovsk Automotive Factory in the mid-1990s upon returning from military service at the age of 19, just before wage arrears at the factory became chronic. While older workers had been in a better position to be able to bear the long-term income insecurity this brought, having already acquired life possessions and places to live, younger men like Erik had to look elsewhere if they were to build a life for themselves. Having done ‘literally anything’ for a few years, including setting up a shuttle-trading business with his cousin that ended in a serious car accident on Russia’s dangerous roads, Erik moved to Moscow, rented ‘a corner’ in a room, and worked on a series of building sites, always sending cash home to his parents. Periods of homelessness in Moscow led Erik to develop permanent back injuries that forced him to come home, and prevented him from doing any heavy work. However, his current job at the window factory was ideal as it allowed him to work while sitting down, and, earning just enough to provide for his family, he reflected on the economic situation of the day positively and on the future with guarded optimism:

I’m not really very knowledgeable about politics, but, like, Putin, I like the way he’s leading things at the moment … there is [still] instability, and difficulties … but it’s mostly financial. And gradually, gradually … you want to hope. You know, that, even like it is at the moment in Russia, that it’ll be like this. I really want that, for it not to change. I mean, at least it’s better than it was in the ’90s (Erik, 39).

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of the apparent stability of the Putin period was the experience of several respondents returning to the same factories that they had left a decade or so earlier. Mikhail, for example, had left the Moskvich car factory in Moscow in the late 1990s once orders for the Soviet era car had completely dried up and wage non-payment had set in. After a few years working in a range of jobs such as security guard and driver’s mate, he was pleased to go back to his former employer, which had been bought out by Ford:

It wasn’t closed, but there were no wages, they weren’t paying anything. Everything was delayed, so, it was practically bankrupt … But now, yes, everything is developing, like, the economy, like, everything in Russia … It’s a stable situation now. Wages are always paid on time, there’s no delays, it’s all been re-established. There’s stability (stability) … The way I understand it … stability has begun to appear everywhere in the country … many enterprises are reopening. (Mikhail, 38).

This narrative of ‘stability’ was used by respondents not only in relation to the regularity of work and wages and the reemergence of previously unviable factories. It was also apparent in descriptions of relations with employers, which were regarded in some cases as becoming more paternalistic and even akin to those prevalent in the Soviet period, when the provision of healthcare, leisure facilities and even housing led workers to see their enterprise as a ‘second home’ (Clarke 1999b: 1). Sergey, for instance, describes some of the leisure activities laid on for staff at the service centre where he worked as a mechanic:

The management, every year, or even a few times a year, the company’s birthday for example, holidays like that, pays for us all to go off somewhere, to a holiday camp, the whole company, to the countryside somewhere … (Sergey, 28).

A growing feeling of stability was also underpinned by a sense that, again in contrast to the 1990s, there was more ‘order’ (poryadok) in the country. Sergey, for example, was disconcerted by the litter he came across on fishing trips in the countryside and in public areas near his flat, which seemed to symbolise ongoing problems in his country, but the fact that his employer paid him his entire salary formally, listing tax deductions and pension contributions on his payslip, gave him confidence that those in charge might actually know what they were doing. Such examples mirrored the state’s attempts to deal with some of the most visible symbols of the chaos of the early post-Soviet period, such as the decaying roads and public buildings and the kiosks that had emerged on every street corner selling cigarettes and vodka through the night. As such, the growing sense of stability in some of the men’s personal lives was echoed in the wider public arena.

Stability in the Context of the Housing Question

While the themes of stability and order ran through many of the young men’s narratives, very few of the men felt that they had truly achieved a position of stability in their own lives and many were very far from this. Although most of the men had been receiving stable incomes from their primary employers for the past few years, income insecurity can also take the form of low pay which is inadequate to cover one’s primary expenses (Standing 2011: 10), and in this respect, practically all of the men remained in a position of precariousness. This was most obvious in relation to the ‘housing question’ (kvartirnii vopros) – establishing an independent home – which has been a highly problematic life-stage transition throughout Russia’s modern history and has arguably become even more difficult in the market context (Zavisca 2012). Although mortgage finance has been widely available in Russia for some time, inflated interest rates make mortgage payments prohibitively expensive, especially for ordinary workers. Thus, not
surprisingly, the most optimistic accounts of Russia’s new found stability came from those respondents who had experienced the good fortune to inherit or marry into either an apartment or land on which to build, usually passed down from grandparents. Indeed, of the forms of welfare previously provided by enterprises, unsurprisingly it was accommodation that was highlighted by many respondents as the most important and the most sorely missed. Egor, a 38-year-old foreman at a railway depot in Moscow, for example, argued that:

So much stems from the uncertainty surrounding the housing question ... the government pays so much attention to the army, so that when a soldier retires they’re given a flat. If there was something similar ... some privileges for getting a flat, connected with the fact that you work at such-and-such factory ... Earlier we had this, it was a very positive system. (Egor, 38).

Given the unlikelihood of a reversion to the Soviet welfare system, those who were not provided for (obespechennie) by their families had to tackle the housing question in other ways. One notable strategy was to deal with the risk and uncertainties of taking on a mortgage at the level of the extended family, with not only married couples, but also their siblings and parents often on both sides of the family, being responsible for the repayments. This strategy was reminiscent of the ways in which people were able to cope with the chronic social and economic dislocations of the 1990s, which forced people to embed themselves in dense, horizontal networks of family, friends and kinship in order to get by (Pickup and White 2003; Walker 2010). Anton, for example, lived in his father’s flat with his wife and child, while his brother lived with his in-laws in a family that also had siblings, so both families were preparing for the future:

It’s the most difficult thing. Everything else in our country is probably basically okay, you can live, but the housing question, it’s just a dead end, a total dead end … We’re saving gradually, slowly ... and as long as nothing happens like in the 1990s, a default, as long as nothing like that happens, then we have the chance of slowly saving up, and not just me, I mean, my brother, all the parents. Gradually, sometime, we’ll get the deposit together. (Anton, 36).

While some respondents dealt with the housing question at the family level, more often than not they approached it individually. However, as Anton’s example suggests, repaying a mortgage on the salary earned at one’s primary employer was hopelessly unrealistic – none of the respondents were able to do this – and instead required the men to work additional jobs in the evenings and weekends to generate the necessary income. This was commonly referred to through the term krutit’sya, to spin around, constantly looking for new sources of informal, secondary employment (shabashki, podrabotki, khaltury), which again were reminiscent of the ‘survival strategies’ that predominated in the 1990s: using one’s car as a taxi; fixing up a neighbour’s flat; shuttling goods over borders. Men in certain professions were well placed to obtain regular secondary employment. Artem, for example, was a 26-year-old welder who regularly had three or four week breaks from working on building sites in Moscow and St. Petersburg and was able to top up his salary by taxi-driving on his stints back home in Ul’yanovsk. Similarly, those who were employed to perform maintenance work on housing blocks were in a position to offer a wide range of cash-in-hand repair services to the residents in their buildings. Indeed, in such cases, a job with a low official salary might be taken precisely because of the secondary employment opportunities it provided access to. At the same, so widespread were informal employment opportunities that even those who were not well placed or well connected could find them easily – one-off (razovie), cash-in-hand jobs were even advertised in the newspapers:

R: I do taxi-ing. Obviously without a licence …
I: Often? In the evenings?
R: Well, Friday, Saturday, Sunday of course. When people are going out, relaxing, on days off... and on the internet, there are loads of sites where you find jobs, carrying things around, getting rid of building waste ...

Although many of the men were thus resourceful enough to overcome the problems posed by the housing question and insufficient primary wages, this strategy was not without risk. There was a tendency amongst the men to see their youth and their health as resources with exchange value, working sometimes ten or twenty additional hours per week on evenings and weekends in physically demanding and sometimes clearly harmful activities. Vlad, for example, sustained a serious back injury while doing some heavy lifting work out-of-hours at his primary workplace, citing the forthcoming arrival of his first child as the reason for doing so. Despite having undergone a serious operation, he stated that since his main job only ran from eight until five and he was still prepared to work in an evening job from six until twelve, thus making a fourteen-hour day. Similarly, Egor worked a sixty-hour week (thus twelve-hour days) on the railways and regularly worked the entire weekend in secondary employment, but was disinclined to consider the effect of this on his physical wellbeing:

32 Social Alternatives Vol. 34 No. 4, 2015
I: So how many hours do you work a week?
R: 70, 80?
I: That seems a lot to me. Does it seem a lot to you?
R: I open my wallet, if I’ve worked well, it’s full. I open my wallet and there’s nothing there, I haven’t worked well. That’s how I measure it.

Clearly this way of working is unsustainable, as Valera’s case shows. As a 27-year-old foreman at the Ul’yanovsk Automotive Factory, Valera had worked sixteen hours a day, six days a week, for two years, before he had been able to buy a flat on credit for himself, his wife and their new-born baby. However, shortly before I interviewed him he had quit his second job – selling insurance policies to his colleagues at the factory – and subsequently split from his wife. He said he was physically incapable of carrying on with it, but that his wife had become used to the money:

When a person gets used to eating, they develop a strong appetite right? (Valera, 27).

For many, then, the contradiction between the unaffordable cost of living and low-paid work was resolved at the individual level through resorting to the same informal employment strategies that were widespread in the 1990s, but as the demographic data from that decade show, men’s minds and bodies have their limits. It was cognisance of this that underpinned a final strategy of meeting the impossible demand to provide for young families on workers’ salaries, which was to ignore it. A number of respondents were critical of the practice of krutitsya, and made a virtue of not recognising the market’s demands for them to commit to unpayable mortgages, or indeed the wider consumerism that had emerged in recent years. Needless to say, given the expectation of men to act as providers, these respondents were not positioning themselves as attractive marital partners. The sample contained a number of men in their late thirties who had never married, were living with parents or siblings, and had given up on the idea of ever having a family, largely because they did not have the right conditions in which to do so. The following group of younger men appeared to be heading for the same fate, their genuine scepticism about the notion of stability paralysing them from making any future plans:

I: What about taking a mortgage?
R3: Mortgage? No way, it’s unrealistic.
I: Why is it unrealistic?
R3: Because you’ll never pay it off.
R1: Today you work, tomorrow you don’t work ...
R2: There still isn’t any stability at factories like ours. So you might not be working, they could make you redundant. Like at our place now, they’ve just started at the factory. They’re making redundancies (sokrashenie idet).

R1: If you’re taking a mortgage, you need to do it with 100% certainty that you’ll be working, that you can pay it.
R2: But they could close the factory tomorrow, and you’ll have nothing to pay your mortgage with.
I: So probably they wouldn’t even give you the credit then?
R: No, why? Course they’ll give it!
R2: They’ll give it, just not everyone can pay it back.
I: So, are you planning to get married sometime?
R1: No. Well, not at the moment.
R2: We’re waiting for stability! [laughs]
R3: You should wait for your pension! [laughs].
(Sasha, 26; Dima, 28; Oleg, 39).

As this last group indicates in their comments on the situation emerging in their factory, by the time the field research was ending in 2013, the insecurity described in the employment data cited above was already being felt. In 2015, shortly before the time of writing, one of these three men contacted me by email about the pay cuts being inflicted at the factory, stating simply:

It’s like the 1990s … soon we’ll be in poverty. (Oleg, 39).

Conclusion

Drawing on Polanyi’s notion of the ‘double movement’, Kalleberg (2009: 15) reminds us that all industrial nations are faced with the same basic problem of balancing flexibility – the need to be competitive – and security – the need to establish protections against the precarity that results from flexibility. Although different countries have adopted a wide range of different institutional arrangements in attempting to find an acceptable solution to this problem, an emerging pattern in many Western countries has been to deal with the risks of the global marketplace by passing them onto employees, with more ‘peripheral’ workers most often on the receiving end of non-standard contracts and other forms of labour flexibility, and in turn, of the insecurities accompanying them.

Russia’s experience follows a similar pattern of risk being transferred downwards, although there, the forms of insecurity experienced at the periphery of Western labour markets took on a mass character in the 1990s. This was
due not to the wholesale adoption of new forms of labour contract, but to the informal strategies of wage reduction and short-time working that enterprises developed in order to survive. As Kapeliushnikov (2001) argues, this approach allowed a form of ‘adaptation without restructuring’ across large swathes of the industrial sector. In this way, the costs of adaptation were transferred onto workers themselves, who looked to the informal sector for their own survival.

The period of economic prosperity enjoyed by Russia for much of the period after the year 2000 has often been used by Putin’s administrations as a source of legitimacy (Makarkin and Oppenheimer 2011), and could potentially have provided the basis for a long-lasting form of stability that made the 1990s a distant memory. However, as both the employment data and ethnographic evidence in this article show, the stability established under Putin has been shallow and short-lived. Workers continue disproportionately to bear the costs of adjustment – literally, on their bodies and their minds – as they are forced back to the same strategies they had used during the chaotic years of the early post-Soviet period. That they do so is an indictment of the country’s ability to reform its economy, enforce labour legislation, and distribute the benefits of its short-lived stability more equitably.¹

References


Clarke, S. 1999b New Forms of Employment and Household Survival Strategies in Russia, Institute for Comparative Labour Relations Research/Centre for Comparative Labour Studies, Warwick.


Kapeliushnikov, R. I. 2001 Rossiiskii Rynok Truda – Adaptatsiia Bez Restrukturizatsii, State University Higher School of Economics, Moscow.


End Notes

1 Western sanctions may also be exacerbating the economic situation for ordinary Russians, while providing a convenient shield for the government. See, for example, Birnbaum 2015.

Author

Charlie Walker is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Southampton. His research has explored the production of class, gender and spatial inequalities in Russia and the former Soviet Union, particularly through young people’s transitions to adulthood. He is author of Learning to Labour in Post-Soviet Russia: Vocational youth in transition (Routledge, 2011) and co-edited Innovations in Youth Research (Palgrave, 2012) and Youth and Social Change in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Routledge, 2012).
Embodied, Emotional and Ethical Entanglements: Place, class and participation in higher education

ALEXANDRA COLEMAN

This paper examines the generative dimensions of the working-class habitus to consider decision-making processes associated with university participation as embodied, emotional, and/or ethical responses to the physicality or insecurity of labour. It draws on research conversations with first-generation university graduates from Cranebrook, Western Sydney, to suggest that emotional attachments to things we care about can influence actions and critically reshape the habitus. Specifically, I demonstrate how shame and ethical commitments of care and concern can prompt habitus transformation. I will also use a series of contrasting vignettes – one is concerned with Social Housing and the other with migration – to show how class, infused with an ensemble of inter-subjective categories, continues to frame ‘choice’, but how this ‘choice’ can involve both the reproduction of inequality and the transformation of social conditions. It sits alongside scholarly discussion of emotion, habitus and work associated with the ‘cultural turn’ in class analysis.

‘He saw himself slicing open boxes and stacking supermarket shelves, smelled how sour and tart his sweat was at the end of an all-night shift; saw his father driving back and forth across the Nullarbor; saw his mother cutting hair. Someone's got to cut hair. He thought of Mr Celikoglu's long years at the Ford plant in Campbellfield, and Mrs Celikoglu's lifetime as a seamstress and his granddad Bill's skill as a bricklayer and his nan being a typist: all that labour and exertion and sweat, how the body was moulded and transformed by that work.’

Christos Tsiolkas, Barracuda.

Beginnings

Mum and Dad always wanted my sisters and me to go to university. And as a teenager, I often pictured myself as a school teacher, though I thought little about what a university education entailed and why my parents wanted my sisters and me to have a life different from their own. I do, however, remember the moment I realised why it was so important for my parents, even if I didn’t quite understand what university was. It was summer in the outskirts of Sydney. I was on school holidays and had just finished a 10-hour shift at the local fruit and vegetable shop. There was no fan, no air-conditioning, but plenty of customers to serve, plenty of cleaning to be done, and plenty of fruit and vegetables to unpack and repack. The work was dirty and sweaty, the money not so good, and the shifts precarious. I was exhausted, though not as fatigued as the men who made the early morning – or late night as we used to joke – trip to the markets in Sydney. I waited for my dad in the pick up and drop off zone outside the centre. It stank. Discarded meat from the nearby butcher was festering in a metal bin. Dad arrived, shattered. He'd been working on 'break-downs' (broken down garbage trucks) all day, hopping in and out of the compactors, lying on the hot asphalt under the trucks. I didn’t dare whinge about my day – Dad's was far worse. And he did it everyday. I understood. University was important. How, then, can we understand decisions to attend university as more than instrumental? How can psychosomatic and ethical responses work to refashion and rupture the habitus and so produce another way of being in the world?

This paper attends to these types of experiences to map the emotional dimensions of the habitus, specifically how decisions to attend university may be embodied, emotional, and/or ethical responses to the physicality of labour or job insecurity. I hope to show, through a series of two quite different vignettes, how class, infused with an ensemble of inter-subjective categories, continues to frame ‘choice’, but how this choice can involve both the reproduction of inequality and the transformation of social conditions. Drawing on Probyn’s (2005) work on shame in the habitus, I explore how shame prompts a critical rethinking and reevaluation of one’s self and circumstances, and how these internal conversations can allow for another way of being in the world – of habitus transformation. Shame is dependent on negative evaluation, of imagining how others ‘feel’ about us, and so I draw on Ahmed’s (2004) work on ‘affective economies’ to disentangle the emotions that ‘stick’ to particular types of working-class bodies, specifically tenants of Social Housing, also known as Housing Commission. Using Sayer’s (2005) work on ethical...
being, a term he uses to describe moral sentiments, virtues, norms, and ethical reflection, I also consider the ways our emotional attachments to those we care about can influence our actions and work to provide a critical reshaping of the habitus. Indeed, our ‘choices’ in the world involve emotional responses to our cares, concerns and commitments – they are not simply individualistic and competitive actions.

The research material used is drawn from interviews conducted as part of my doctoral project on the experiences of first-generation university students and graduates from Cranebrook in Western Sydney. As part of the study, 25 people aged 18-36 were interviewed, with interviews lasting approximately 60 to 120-minutes each. Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, and participants were asked to discuss their backgrounds, as well as respond to questions concerning neighbourhood, secondary school, university participation and the graduate experience. The interviews were transcribed and coded for patterns of meaning, structures of feeling, emotions, keywords, repetitions, marginalia, metaphors, metonyms, silences, and unexpected remarks. Cranebrook, the site of the study, is located on the outer urban fringe of Western Sydney and is an area perceived to be a working-class geography in the popular imagination. It is the most economically diverse suburb in the Penrith Local Government Area (LGA) and comprises suburban homes, a new-release housing development, acreage, and a social housing estate. In this way, it functions as a microcosm of Western Sydney, an area described as a ‘variegated social landscape, a patchwork of poor and prosperous places’ (Morgan 2006). In terms of education, just under a quarter of Cranebrook’s population has a trade qualification, which is more than the greater Sydney average of 24.1 per cent (Atlas.id 2011). Cranebrook is an area dominated by people who come from English-speaking backgrounds and Anglo-Christian culture. There is also a large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who represent 4.2 per cent of Cranebrook’s total population (Atlas.id 2011).

### Embodied Dis/Orientations

French sociologist, Bourdieu, developed the concept of habitus to demonstrate the ways the body and the social world congeal and coalesce – the ways we are corporeally formed and haunted by our experiences, histories, and environments. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus sought to circumvent socio-cultural theory that positioned the biological in opposition to the cultural, the social in opposition to the economic, and the individual in opposition to society (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For Bourdieu (1998: 81), habitus is a concept used to describe the way a body absorbs the social structures of a particular space:

A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of the world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.

Noble and Watkins (2003: 522), translating Bourdieu’s rather dense prose, explain that habitus is, ‘more simply understood as the dispositions that internalize our social location and which orient our actions’. Because habitus internalises our social location, our class, gender, ethnicity and so forth are expressed through our bodies in the ways we talk, gesture, and move. Habitus not only dictates how we move but where we move. In some social spaces – what Bourdieu terms ‘fields’ – we feel ‘at home’ and ‘like a fish in water’ because our bodies know the implicit rules and expectations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98-100, 127-128). Fields work to resist outsiders, and so in other spaces our bodies tend to feel uneasy and anxious because the rules of a space are unknown, and we don’t have a ‘feel for the game’. Habitus, then, curbs movement in the world.

Habitus, however, is not deterministic – there is some room for refashioning and reshaping. Bourdieu (2002: 29) explained, ‘Dispositions are long-lasting: they tend to perpetuate, to reproduce themselves, but they are not eternal’. Bourdieu himself was the son of a postal worker from a remote village in southern France, and the first in his family to finish secondary school (Noble and Watkins 2003). How, then, did Bourdieu come to be one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth-century? Bourdieu (2002: 29) argued that habitus may shift and rupture under particular circumstances. Transformation may occur through a change of fields, conscious effort and/or pedagogic action. For example, Bourdieu (2002: 29) talked about how an accent can be corrected through awareness and pedagogic attention – but only partially because the linguistic dimensions of the habitus are a product of primary education and so are ‘difficult to change’. Bourdieu’s theorisation of ‘reflexivity’ is, nonetheless, limited. Probyn (2005) argues that because Bourdieu was most interested in the ways social class is reproduced in everyday ways, he paid little attention to the ways habitus can change. In particular, Bourdieu tended to overlook the inter-subjective dimensions of everyday reflexivity despite his call to ‘think relationally’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96; also see Noble and Watkins 2003; Probyn 2005; Sayer 2005). Noble and Watkins (2003: 534) contend, ‘The potential space of human capacitation is not just created by the mind-body relation within the individual’, but with, ‘the mind-bodies of others’.
some circumstances prompt a critical reflection and a rethinking of circumstances. Over the following pages, making use of these theoretical insights, I will detail the ways shame in the habitus prompted Jacklyn to change her circumstances, and how Adriana’s ethical commitments of care to, and concern for, her parents also prompted habitus transformation.

Shame in the Habitus: Jacklyn

Jacklyn’s family story is one of precariousness, struggle and resilience. Her grandfather moved from America to Australia to start ‘a new life’ after he ‘blew all his money’, and after meeting her grandmother they settled in a Housing Commission home in Mount Druitt, Sydney. Her grandfather was a tile and, after years of labouring, developed arthritis in his knees. Her grandmother looked after their six children, and had odd jobs on the side cleaning, working in factories and in kitchens. Life wasn’t easy for her grandmother: Jacklyn’s grandfather was an abusive alcoholic, and all her children – including Jacklyn’s mother – became involved with drugs, with one son dying from a drug overdose. Life was equally as difficult for Jacklyn’s mother – she left school early and completed a trade as a printer, but after having children, and developing health problems, has struggled to find employment. Her mother recently found a job through Centrelink picking mushrooms but the company let her go because they didn’t have enough work. Jacklyn’s stepfather was a diesel mechanic but had a serious workplace injury when she was a child and has not been able to work in the industry since. He dabbled in a number of computer courses, and has only recently secured a job at a local fast food restaurant. Work, for her stepfather, is difficult as, ‘he really struggles…Just to get through the day’. His employment. Her mother recently found a job through Centrelink picking mushrooms but the company let her go because they didn’t have enough work. Jacklyn’s stepfather was a diesel mechanic but had a serious workplace injury when she was a child and has not been able to work in the industry since. He dabbled in a number of computer courses, and has only recently secured a job at a local fast food restaurant. Work, for her stepfather, is difficult as, ‘he really struggles…Just to get through the pain’. Her story is a deeply emotional and embodied one – class injuries are corporealised through narratives of bodily struggle. Social class is a ‘felt’ injury.

Feminist scholars, whose work is associated with the ‘cultural turn’ in British class analysis, such as Steedman (1986), Walkerdine (1984), Mahony and Zmroczek (1997), Lawler (2000), Munt (2000), Skeggs (1997, 2004) Reay (2005) and Reay et al. (2009, 2010), have also carved out a space for the emotional dimensions of class. Most of this work is autobiographical, or at least informed by personal histories, experiences, and border-crossings from the working class into the middle-class milieu of academia. Medhurst (2000: 21) explains, ‘for me there is no other way in’. This is, she argues, because ‘class is an emotional business. Class privilege and class prejudice are not reducible to dispassionate debate or the algebras of abstraction. Class is felt, class wounds, class hurts’. These academics, most of whom are theoretically indebted to Bourdieusian conceptualisations of class and work produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, argue for a greater understanding of the ways class is felt – what Reay (2005) calls the ‘psychic economy of class’. We need to consider the role of emotion in the mediation of social class if we want to understand why
her family home was situated on the ‘better’ side of the Housing Commission estate – ‘better’ because it was located on the margins of the estate, and thus proximate to private housing and further from the ‘harder’ parts. These distinctions of ‘us’ (the respectable) and ‘them’ (the rough) were pervasive, for example: ‘Like there were a couple of good families/And then there was just ((pause)) ((flowers voice)) your Housing Commission people’, who ‘didn’t respect having jobs’. As the interview progressed, Jacklyn opened up about the difficulties of life in the estate. She explained, ‘We were like ((pause)) the really bad people/[…]Everybody hated us and they’d call the police on my family all the time’. One of the rawer moments of our conversation was when Jacklyn talked about being evicted from her home: ‘So we were homeless for a little while ((pause))/And that was embarrassing/An it was hard/An everybody seen our shit on the front lawn’.

‘Housing Commission’, as evidenced by the lowering of Jacklyn’s voice in one of the above quotations, is a ‘dirty name’ – one that is loaded with affective value. Ahmed (2004), in her work on affective economies, explores how objects – and in this case the ‘Housing Commission’ – become invective through their association with other words, forms of derision, and histories. She uses the word ‘sticky sign’ to theorise how particular objects accumulate affective value through their very ‘stickiness’: ‘To use a sticky sign is to evoke other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association’ (Ahmed 2004: 92). Housing Commission evokes histories of ‘rough’ working-class culture, precarious employment, unemployment, social problems, and so forth. The word ‘housos’, a derogatory word used to describe the residents, slides into ‘Housing Commission’, and becomes an insult through its association with other real or imaginary words or objects of derision, such as bogans and dole bludgers (see Rossiter’s 2013 study on the ways ‘bogan’ works as a sticky sign). Jacklyn, herself, uses the word ‘scum’ to describe the ways others perceived her, ‘Oh ya ((pause))/You’re scum/You’re not working class’ (working class, here, is equated with the ‘respectable’ working class). Scum, with its association with dirt, ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 2001: 36), marks particular bodies as disgusting. Disgust is fundamental to power relations, and disgust reactions work to classify spaces and/or bodies that are seen to be ‘lower’, beneath the subject that feels threatened (Ahmed 2004: 89). ‘Lower’ is associated with the lower regions of the body, areas of defecation and sexuality, areas ‘deemed disgusting and contemptible’ (Miller 1997: xiv). Jacklyn talks about how her stepfather would say that they were low: ‘Like we were when we were in Housing Commission/Like the low people[…]That didn’t have any jobs’. Disgust, then, mediates social class and marks difference (Tyler 2008).

For Jacklyn, being positioned as ‘low’, ‘scum’, ‘homeless’, ‘your Housing Commission people’; ‘jobless’, as disgusting, as matter out of place, produced a powerfully visceral experience of shame. Or as Jacklyn says, embarrassment. Shame, Probyn (2005) writes, is produced by a sense of being out of place – of being a ‘fish out of water’ – when one has a longing to fit in. Shame works with disgust – disgust works to wrench bodies away from that which is felt to be disgusting. Ahmed (2004: 84) explains, ‘disgust pulls us away from an object, a pulling that feels almost involuntary, as if our bodies were thinking for us, on behalf of us’. The object of disgust can then experience shame through disconnection when one is interested in being connected. This disgust-shame relation was evident when Jacklyn talked about how the ‘private’ residents of Cranebrook are no longer sending their children to Braddock Public School because it’s the feeder school for the residents of the Housing Commission estate. She describes the ‘private’ residents as ‘very to themselves’, and there is certainly a sense of disconnect, ‘You look at them the wrong way, they’ll say something/They kind of have their groups’. Jacklyn talks about how Braddock used to be a ‘great’ and ‘very diverse’ school. Finally, Jacklyn inverses her position to describe why the ‘private’ residents have withdrawn from the school: ‘And now it’s pretty much the Housing Commission scum people that go there/And the majority of all the good kids have moved out’. Being positioned as ‘Housing Commission scum’, as that which is repellant, is difficult to talk about. It’s shameful. It involves negative evaluation – of imagining how others see us, of feelings of rejection and exposure. It’s much easy to talk about it from the position of the shamer.

Shame in the habitus does not always produce feelings of acceptance, fatalism and compliance – though it’s easy to see how it does. Sayer (2005: 35) explains:

Our relationship to the world is not simply one of accommodation or becoming skilled in its games, but, at least in some ways, one of wanting to be different and wanting the world and its games to be different.

Shame can prompt a critical rethinking and reevaluation of one’s self and circumstances, and these internal conversations can allow for another way of being in the world, of habitus transformation. Probyn writes:

shame undoubtedly makes us feel temporarily more fragile in ourselves. And that acknowledgement of fragility may serve as a basis from which to reevaluate one’s existence. […] The viscerality of the feeling body shakes up our habitus, causing us to question at various levels its seemingly static nature (2005: 64).
This reevaluation may lead to a productive form of resistance, a ‘longing for what is denied’ (Sayer 2005: 35). For Jacklyn, this was a freedom from social stigma and economic hardship. She said, ‘Like living in Housing Commission it was a big goal to get out of it and achieve something’. And so, Jacklyn enrolled in a nursing degree – university was seen to be a ticket to a job. It was an experience she described as ‘physically and emotionally exhausting’; she had difficulties using academic English, and in between class worked three jobs: two to pay for petrol, textbooks and board, and the other to get experience in the field so that she had better chances of securing a graduate job. Jacklyn now works as a nurse, and describes herself as ‘lucky’ to have scored a graduate position in what she explains is a competitive labour market. Jacklyn has since moved into a privately-owned property on the other side of Cranebrook (which is predominately a working-class area), and her step-dad says to her, ‘Oh you’ve moved now into the middle class’.

Habitus haunts, and although Jacklyn has completed a university degree and landed a professional position in a hospital, she still feels the classing gaze of others. Jacklyn talked about her neighbour who, ‘Doesn’t say hello to me/She just looks at me ((pause))/Very snobby, very competitive’. On one occasion, this neighbour implied Jacklyn was a thief when she collected her mail (the neighbour was at work and the courier asked Jacklyn to sign for the package). Jacklyn explains, ‘Like I was only trying to be nice y’know’. The affective intensities attached to Jacklyn’s body remain fixed, difficult to shift, and continue to mark her body in particular ways and in this case as pathological. And so, when I asked Jacklyn, ‘Do you think people treat you differently now that you’ve been to uni?’, she replied, ‘I don’t feel it’. Thus, there are limits to habitus transformation. Tyler (2008:32) says that class disgust not only marks difference but blocks social mobility: it ‘sustains the “lower ranking” of peoples’. Jacklyn also talked about how she has to continuously negotiate judgment directed towards residents of Housing Commission as ‘jobless’, as hopeless, by colleagues and patients at the hospital where she works, ‘A lot of people put down Housing Commission/And I got quite a few of my friends come from Housing Commission areas/And we’ve grew up and got out of it and we’ve got jobs’. She also spoke about how the SBS television programme ‘Housos’ increased the accumulation and intensity of emotions that ‘stick’ to residents of Housing Commission. Indeed, Tyler (2008) argues that classed figures, particularly the ‘chav’ in the UK (a term used to describe Britain’s white working-class), accrue negative affective value – specifically disgust – through their very repetition across different forms of media. Jacklyn said, ‘I noticed a lot of people’s like opinions will now reflect that Housing Commission show/[…]I think it gave it a very negative ((pause pause pause)) feeling’.

Happy Objects: Adrijana

Adrijana’s family is from Serbia: her parents and older brother migrated to Australia in the 1980s, moved back once, and settled for good in the early 1990s. Adrijana describes her background as ‘very working class’, ‘generations on farms’, and ‘Year 8 education at the most’. Her father worked on the land even as a child, and in his teen years completed trades as a maintenance fitter, turner, welder and boilermaker. Adrijana’s mother was a beauty therapist in Serbia, and as a young woman dreamed of completing a degree in physiotherapy. Her family relocated to Australia because her father wasn’t happy with the Communist Party, and she describes him saying, ‘“Everything is corrupt but we’re supposed to be equal and we’re supposed to be, y’know?”’((pause pause))’ ‘But it’s not equal, there’s still class divisions’’. Her father did not return to Serbia for almost twenty years – he was ‘heartbroken’ with the promise of communism. They originally settled in Merrylands (in Sydney’s west), before buying a house in Cranebrook. Adrijana describes the move as a ‘bit of a shock’ because Merrylands was multicultural, and Cranebrook, on the other hand, was overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic and she was the only one at her primary school who couldn’t speak English. Her father found work in a local factory as a machinist, and her mother, whose beauty qualification was not recognised in Australia, also found work at a local factory. Both jobs were physically taxing, insecure and poorly paid. Adrijana’s father is employed on a casual basis and often works overtime to make ends meet, and her mother recently left work after developing carpal tunnel syndrome from years on the factory floor.

Adrijana’s parents always encouraged her to go to university. They believed a university qualification would emancipate her from insecure work and physical labour, and so would guarantee her a ‘better life’. Adrijana describes them saying, ‘“Go to university”’/’“Get a good job”’/’“Don’t get a um ((pause)) I guess a blue collared job”’/’“Don’t get a um ((pause)), y’know, an odd job where you have to work really hard for a little bit of money”’. Adrijana describes going clothes shopping with her mother, and her mother pointing to blazers saying, ‘“Everything is corrupt but we’re supposed to be happy with the Communist Party, and she describes him saying, ‘“Everything is corrupt but we’re supposed to be happy with the Communist Party, and she describes him saying, “You’re going to wear one of those”’’. That’s the kind of job you need to get so you can live a nice life and you can look after me when I’m old’’. Adrijana also describes feeling a sense of obligation to go to university: ‘I guess the sacrifice of them leaving their family was always a big ((pause)) big influence for me like/[…]They left, y’know, their parents/They weren’t able to be there for their parents’ funerals/Like, “Oh I’d better do something really good”’/’“University seems to be ((laughs)) a good option”’. Though Adrijana was encouraged to go to university, her parents had very little knowledge about course selection, university life and so forth – the only university graduates they knew were school teachers and their local doctor. Adrijana
mentioned that she is still ‘pleasantly surprised’ when she meets people whose parents are university graduates – everyone she knows is ‘blue-collar’. She also said that if her parents had not ‘pushed’ her to attend university she probably would not have thought about going, and that she would ‘have been happy to plod along wherever’.

How, then, do commitments to loved ones influence our actions? How might these commitments work to provide a critical reshaping of the habitus? Sayer (2005, 2010) has attended to the role of emotions in the habitus to understand how peoples' ethical being, specifically their cares, concerns and commitments in the world, can shake up and reorder the habitus. He argues that we should move beyond the idea that the social field is an arena where agents compete for power and advantage, and instead consider the ways our relationship to the world is inter-subjective, emotional and ethical. How often have we made a decision based on the wellbeing of a significant other regardless of any self-benefit? Sayer (2010: 97) explains:

> Our attachments and commitments to particular people, practices and things figure prominently among our concerns and our emotional state depends heavily on their condition; while we can generally give reasons for valuing them, our investment in them is also emotional.

As is clear, I hope, Adrijana’s decision to attend university was based on an ethical commitment of care and concern for her parents (for reasons detailed in the paragraph above). It was an emotional and ethical commitment based on the promise of happiness – her parents’ happiness and her future happiness. Indeed, Adrijana also spoke about her mother being ‘emotionally invested’ in her university journey. University was seen as a necessary ingredient of the good life, and functioned as a ‘happy object’ to which they were all oriented. According to Ahmed (2008: 12), ‘Happiness means here living a certain kind of life, one that reaches certain points, and which on reaching these points, generates happiness for others’.

Adrijana’s parents viewed university as a vocational pathway, and so were happy when she enrolled in a psychology degree at a local university. For them, psychology was tangible and career-orientated. They weren’t happy, however, when Adrijana switched degree programmes and enrolled in an Art History major, and then again when she enrolled in a Master of Art Curatorship at an elite university – the creative industries were seen as a sure-fire path to unemployment. She spoke about her parents saying, “What are you going to work in a gallery for?” “There’s too many art galleries” “Nobody pays for art until the artist is dead”. Adrijana, at this point in time, did not share the same orientation towards university as that of her parents, and so became what Ahmed (2008: 12-13) calls an ‘affect alien’: ‘the affect alien is the one who converts good feelings into bad; who “kills” the joy of the family’. Over time, however, Adrijana became disillusioned with the art world. She spoke of a habitus disjuncture – of feeling ‘out of place’ both in the Masters course and in the workforce. Both were spaces where people came from money, private schools and the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney – a seemingly impenetrable social world. Like the participants in Morgan and Idriss’s (2012) study on Arabic-speaking youth in Western Sydney, Adrijana described work in the creative industries as insecure, hard to find, and as a niche where only the wealthy can survive. During this time, Adrijana began to reflect on how much she enjoyed being with children and how she wanted to work closer to home, and so decided to retrain as a secondary school teacher in Western Sydney. She said, ‘I felt like I was making the decision to go back into the real world’ – a world for her that was ‘homely’, what Hage (1997) describes as a ‘well-fitted habitus’, and ‘comfortable’, what Noble (2005) describes as ‘ontological security’.

And so, Adrijana’s decision to become a teacher reoriented her towards the ‘happy object’. She described how her graduation for teaching was a ‘big deal’ for her family, and explained, ‘Yeah, they cried[…]Yeah, of course they cried ((laughs)). ‘Happy objects’, according to Ahmed (2008), involve the comfort of repetition, and Adrijana spoke about pushing her niece and nephew to go to university. But rather than encouraging them to be teachers, she encourages them to think about becoming doctors, ‘Cause I don’t want them to sort of like ((pause)) not ((pause)) think about ((pause)) I don’t know ((pause))/ […] I think that for a lot of the time I was like, “Oh I think I’m pretty limited to what I can be” ((laughs))/Like I thought I always thought like, “Oh being a doctor or something is completely ((pause)) out of reach”. For Adrijana, the experiences she had at university were transformative, ‘Yeah it’s definitely changed me as a person[…]Or made me a different person to who I could have been’. Since graduating, Adrijana has worked as a casual teacher in Western Sydney. She does not, however, see her position as precarious. Rather than comparing herself to other teachers who have permanent contracts, Adrijana turns her gaze towards her parents, and acknowledges her comparatively advantageous position. The comparison is not about job insecurity, but rather the physicality of labour and wages. She says, ‘I definitely don’t feel like I need to work as hard as my parents’ do’, and ‘Like I might be on a lower step at the moment cause I’m four years in but ((pause))[…]I’m still earning very good money compared to ((pause))/Like I’m earning what my dad is after decades’.
Conclusion

In the introduction, I used Tsiolkas’s writing from Barracuda, as well as my own experiences, to draw attention to the ways class is expressed through the body, through labour, through perspiration, through exertion. Class is, indeed, felt. Both Jacklyn and Adrijana’s decisions to go to university were also strongly embedded in narratives of bodily struggle, the physicality of labour, and precarity. Going to university, then, was not just about the accumulation of credentials. Their responses to these struggles were deeply emotional – emotions do, after all, mediate class relations. Their emotional responses did not, however, produce feelings of resignation, of hopelessness, of accommodation, but rather feelings of resistance and desire, of care and commitment, of wanting things to be different. We need to attend to the psychosomatic if we want to understand why encounters with others and our environments can prompt critical reflection and a rethinking of self and circumstance – of habitus transformation. There are, however, limits to transformation. Networks of sociality and embodied histories continue to haunt the habitus. As the two narratives have shown, social mobility is complex and contradictory, and class, infused with an ensemble of inter-subjective categories, continues to mark bodies in particular ways and orient movements in the social space. But as Adrijana’s story has revealed, while going to university can create feelings of pain and ambivalence – of habitus disjunction in a middle-class milieu – it can also involve a reaffirmation of a working-class identity and feelings of happiness and joy. The promise of higher education for working-class students, then, does not necessarily involve the accumulation of being that includes transcending one’s position, of leaving the working-class behind. We need to develop more nuanced and imaginative ways of exploring these classed orientations and different ways of being in the world. In particular, we need to attend to the ways class produces different orientations to what/who matters through a consideration of the diverse ways people accumulate meaningful and satisfactory lives.

References

Tyler, I. 2008 ‘“CHAV MUM/CHAV SCUM”: Class disgust in contemporary Britain’, Feminist Media Studies, 8, 1.
Author
Alexandra is a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. Her research is exploring the experiences of first-generation university students from Western Sydney (a topic that is both near and dear).

1: 17-34.
Walkerdine, V 1984. 'Dreams from an ordinary childhood', in L. Heron (ed) Truth, Dare or Promise, Virago, London.

---

the land of milk and honey

seek no further
than your own backyard
for paradise
milk does not need
vast tracts of land
wrested from others by warfare
honey need not be sought
by driving to a supermarket
or climbing a tall tree
all you need is
just one obliging goat
and a box of bees
this is the miracle
this is the promised land
this is the land of milk and honey
when you think small
when you work for yourself
when you take only what you need

Edith Speers,
Dover, Tasmania

Blue Suede Shoes

That slap too much a take-down
of me, an important No 5 religious rank. How dare? They forget my importance story obviously.

Too late that hillfolk farmer
explain me how to keep shoes (blue suede) clean as,
bent over to tie, them in single file approach, pants unzipped.

Accommodate confusion
in brethren? – May the dead sit up
& take notice! Umbrage! Revenge even!

And by proxy may the minarets
keep talking: out there somewhere somebody
got to mumble that prayer! Bottom dollar
say so.

Thief, empty your pockets, every
last egg: intellectual berserkers barracking
for harvest, a cut from a rut
they have no clue,

Dr Tulip’s dissection
of the hanged criminal Aris Kindt in the Maurits-
huis Waageborn as relevant now
as it was in 1654.

And you (Aris) with whom
I share my blood. Please to inform that the man
who owns a crow may not own a fox if
the fox dies first.

This last
for nonsense interlude, keep
‘em guessing, blessing
in disguise, etc.

For in my death
I have not perished – up from that slap
like greased lightning, this shout of love-song
being the proof thereof.

Philip Hammial,
Blue Mountains, NSW
Untangling The Narratives of Precarious Work: An auto-ethnography

FRANCESCA SIDOTI

Actors wait tables, musicians drive taxis and artists stack the shelves at Coles. The narrative of the welder-makes-dancer or waiter-makes-movie star is a popular one in contemporary society. The precarious work within this narrative is constituted as a rite-of-passage. Meanwhile, young people entering the workforce for the first time are accustomed to the narrative of precarious work as reality, entertaining few expectations of work-based security or benefits for the early stages of their working lives. These narratives are significant entry points into understanding precarious work for young people. Couched in terms of mobility, flexibility and choice, they reflect the individualistic framework of late modernity and obscure the implications of precarious work. Employing a critical autoethnography, this article offers a narrative perspective, charting shifts of narrative in the author’s own biography and the consequent effect of these shifts on perceptions of precarious work.

Introduction

If technologically advanced capitalism threatens, in the end, any and all jobs, and labour markets reflect this precarity, what will adult biographies lived in fragments feel like? What stories about education, training, transition and adulthood will engage young people whose first experiences of labour markets are characterised by casualisation?

All sorrows may be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.

It begins and ends with stories, how I now understand precariousness. For most of my life, precariousness went unseen. I had always worked in casualised labour, without entitlements. I worked two or three jobs at a time, with irregular hours and no protection. But this was not the precarity that happened to others. This was just how things were, normalised and therefore invisible.

The normalisation of precarious work is well documented in the literature (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015; Burrows 2013; Furlong and Kelly 2005; Morgan et al. 2013) and has significant implications for how we understand and address precarity in everyday life. This is particularly true if we understand precarious work to have objective and subjective dimensions, where the normalisation of precarious work could have significant effect on the subjective experience of the worker. Fudge and Owens draw on the work of Rodgers and Rodgers in developing a definition of the objective dimensions of precarious work:

(1) the degree of certainty of continuing employment;
(2) control over the labour process, which is linked to the presence or absence of trade unions and professional associations and related to control over working conditions, wages and the pace of work; (3) the degree of regulatory protection; and (4) income level (2006: 11).

Theorists such as Kalleberg incorporate a subjective dimension into their definition of precarious work. His definition rests in the idea that precarious work is ‘employment that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view of the worker’ (in Wilson and Ebert 2013: 265, italics added). Wilson and Ebert refine that definition to one that involves an ‘industrial relations model of precarity that anchors insecurity in the labour contract and labour market conditions’ but also agree that precarity is ‘a “state of being” understood by workers themselves’ (2013: 266).

My enquiry here is on one particular aspect of the subjective experience as discussed by Kalleberg and Wilson and Ebert; is precarious work always perceived as such by the worker? If not, how are the conditions of precarious work obscured, and what are the implications for how these conditions are to be addressed? Through
critical auto-ethnography, I chart a consistently objective experience of precarious work, but with an evolving subjective understanding of it. I argue that while precariousness is a state of being, the perspective of the worker is complex and subject to changing narratives that influence the subjective dimension of precarious work.

The narrative perspective of this autoethnography provides an opportunity to illuminate how precarious work is entered into and how precarious work conditions can remain relatively unchallenged. As suggested by Barcelos and Gubrium, ‘narrative inquiry that analyses how stories are produced and utilised can enable a more nuanced approach to complex social problems’ (2014: 466). The definitions of Kalleberg and Wilson and Ebert suggest a relatively straightforward subjective experience of precarious work. The narratives depicted within this auto-ethnography suggest otherwise and aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of the point of view of the worker.

Narratives are ‘short or extended stories that link temporally ordered events regarding significant aspects of one’s life’ (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015: 141). These stories are of significance as they are also the means by which social theories or conditions are maintained; a ‘dialogic and evolutionary process which takes place not only in the world “out there”, but in the forms of interpersonal and inter-institutional narrative construction we are all, wittingly or not, engaged in’ (Cameron and Palen 2004). Although the narratives here are discussed from an individual point of view, it is important to note they are not individual constructions but complex interpersonal and interinstitutional processes. Narratives are ‘often present in the “ruling regimes” of schools, welfare offices, workplaces, hospitals and governments’ (Riessman, in Barcelos and Gubrium 2014: 467), as well as being co-constructed through peer and familial interaction.

The narratives described here are underpinned by the individualistic framework of late modernity. The individualistic framework, famously discussed by Bauman (2001) and Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) among others, suggests a form of social organisation in late modernity where individuals are given ‘greater responsibility for their own social positioning and activity’ (Dawson 2013: 19). Within this framework, the individual must find ‘biographical solutions to systemic contradictions’ (Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002: 137).

Precarious work is surrounded by narratives that incorporate the ideology of the individualistic framework, three of which will be explored here. The first, ‘Schoolgirl’, explores precarious work as normalised reality, and often the first experience of the labour market for young people (Morgan et al. 2013; Burrows 2013). This is a narrative co-constructed with ‘enforcement agents’ (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015: 142) such as parents or employers. Superseding that narrative within this auto-ethnography is ‘Musician’, a narrative of precarious work as a rite-of-passage, an initiation rite to a career. This is a particularly dominant narrative in popular culture. Finally, narratives surrounding adulthood, discussed here in ‘Grown Up’, bring together the subjective and objective experience of precarious work, illuminating an incompatibility between conceptions of adulthood and precarity. Demonstrably, the point of view of the worker is not static, but fluid and evolving.

My experience has been as a casual worker, employed by the same business long-term. In Australia, benefits such as sick leave or holiday pay are not included for casual workers. The recompense for this is casual leave loading, whereby casual workers receive a higher hourly rate to compensate for the absence of benefits. Often, however, casual leave loading is minimal or not included.

Some distinctions are important here. While my focus is on long-term casual employment, it is important to note that casual employment does not, in and of itself, create precarity. The term ‘casual’ can be problematic as it encompasses a variety of work situations and has different meanings in different countries (Standing 2008; Furlong and Kelly 2005; Campbell 2004). Similarly, permanent part-time status does not, in itself, ensure security. As Campbell and Chalmers state, ‘a focus on casual status is insufficient. Crucial problems for part-time workers in retail, such as underemployment, variation in hours and schedules, and a lack of employee control over hours and schedules, can be detected among both casual and permanent part-time workers’ (2008: 487).

The problems detailed by Campbell and Chalmers above are typical experiences of the labour force for workers under 30 years (Furlong and Kelly 2005: 219), which is my focus here. This is not solely due to my own experience as a young person in precarious work. Young people are disproportionately affected by precarious work conditions in Australia. As Furlong and Kelly state:

young people are over-represented in less secure forms of employment. They are more likely to hold temporary contracts, work in the casual sectors of the labour market, in areas where their education or skills are not fully utilised or obtain fewer hours of employment than they would ideally like (2005: 222).

And while these issues may always have existed, they are increasingly prevalent. Wyn and Andres found that the
I would never have regarded my work as precarious. In a job waiting tables for seven dollars an hour, I was thrilled. The average (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011), when I got national youth unemployment well above the national hospitality comprising most of the employment. With My hometown is driven by tourism, with retail and up my first job interview.

My teenage eagerness to start working completely bemuses my adult self. After fifteen years in hospitality, I look back and wish I had taken it a bit easier. Perhaps I should have kept the weekends free or listened to one of the many adults reciting a script on the ‘best days of your life’. But I was a bull at a gate. I had barely reached the statutory minimum age for employment when I lined up my first job interview.

My hometown is driven by tourism, with retail and hospitality comprising most of the employment. With national youth unemployment well above the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011), when I got a job waiting tables for seven dollars an hour, I was thrilled.

I would never have regarded my work as precarious. In fact, I loved it. The changing roster, split shifts, lack of entitlements; none of these things resonated with me as unfair or precarious. Living at home, with my wage as pocket money, those conditions did not have immediate implications for my wellbeing. Everyone I knew was in a similar situation. Those doing apprenticeships still worked a couple of nights a week at a restaurant to make ends meet. Those working for major corporations seemed no better off than those of us working for small businesses.

This experience shaped my perception of work. Casualised labour was the norm, the status quo. I did not consider my work precarious, I considered myself employed. Precarious work is often the first experience young people have of the workforce. Morgan et al. suggest that young people entering the workforce in the 2000s ‘arguably encounter working life with lower expectations of job security, especially early in their working lives’ (2013: 403). Burrows, in his study of young people and precarious work in Illawarra, found that:

Young people in the Illawarra region seek and accept precarious work as a matter of course. Yet, the notion of precariousness remains elusive to them: this type of employment is accepted as a normal condition of life, preferable to unemployment. The ideology of individual choice and responsibility disguises the poor quality of employment for young people (2013: 393).

These findings reflect my experience. The notion of precariousness was elusive to me. The narrative of precarious work as reality for young people, the ‘normal condition of life’ (Burrows 2013: 393) obscured the conditions I worked under.

Hence, the evidence suggests a more complex and nuanced subjective experience of precarious work than that suggested by Wilson and Ebert (2013) and Kalleberg (in Wilson and Ebert 2013). Evidence would instead suggest that young people do not necessarily view their work as precarious but as inevitable, at least in the early stages of a working life. As discussed by Wyn and White, ‘the education and employment realities [young people] face are all they have actually known in their own lives’ (2000: 170). So while young people might be experiencing the conditions of precarious work, they do not necessarily view them as such.

This normalisation clearly perpetuates precarious work conditions for young people, as it did for me. I never questioned the conditions, nor the idea that it was my own responsibility to improve them by finding something more secure. It was, as Burrows suggests, hard to ‘imagine any alternative but the ongoing individual search for the better
job or stepping stone to greater security' (2013: 393). I absorbed the individualistic undertones of the narratives surrounding precarious work. I went to university and fell in love with one of the most precarious industries of them all, music. My narrative shifted. Precarious work was no longer inevitable but something I chose. The narrative of precarious work as reality evolved into precarious work as a rite-of-passage.

**Narrative #2: Musician**

I came home after five years in the city and swore I’d never leave again. Home to make my first album and tour it. I chose precarious work, partially because it was what I could get and partially because I viewed it as flexible. I could work long days mid-week and tour over the weekends. The lack of breaks in a ten or eleven hour day, the phone calls early on a Saturday morning to cover a shift, the constantly changing staff, where those who fell into disfavour were gradually removed from the roster and never fired; none of this resonated with me. My eye was on a different ball. If someone had offered me sick leave and annual leave, I would gladly have accepted it. But it was not prominent in my world. I needed money, I wanted to play music, and I was grateful to find something that allowed me to do it.

My self-perception within this narrative is important. I was not a cook and shop assistant in a cafe, but a musician who happened to work in a cafe during the day. The distinction is crucial and not unusual among creative workers (Morelli 2013: 39). As Boylorn et al. suggest in their analysis of narrative theory, ‘individuals make life decisions based on good reasons that emerge from life stories. Because of this, a powerful story provides an effective means of persuasion’ (2013: 17). My story was powerful. I was a musician, earning my stripes, on the way to a creative career. The music industry was inherently precarious, and this necessitated another form of income. Once again, the individualistic framework underpinned the narrative. I was exercising choice. I was in control. Precarious work was a stepping stone.

In Burrows’s work, most of his respondents suggested precarious work was a stepping stone; ‘like several other young people, this participant found the job bearable because of a belief that the prospects of better pay and leave entitlement were achievable’ (2013: 392). The narrative I experienced not only suggested precarious work was a stepping stone, it was an inevitable and important step, part of the process of ‘earning’ a career. Precarious work was necessary, not just a launch pad but also an essential rite-of-passage.

This is the ‘greater sacrifice’ that Morgan et al. refer to, where creative workers show a willingness to ‘subsidise creative ambition by working in (what are widely perceived as) mundane service sector jobs’ (2013: 403). This expected sacrifice fits with one of the central narratives of the creative industries; the obscure artist that becomes a superstar, the open-mic singer who sells out Carnegie Hall, the waiter who finally cracks the big time at forty. It is not only the eventual success that is important in this narrative, but also the obscurity from which the success was drawn. The success is to be earned and, within this narrative, precarious work is one of the prominent means to do so.

Just as the narrative of precarious work as reality taps into the individualistic notions of choice and agency (Bauman 2001; Furlong and Cartmel 2006), the narrative of precarious work as a rite-of-passage conflates notions of flexibility with precarity. As Furlong and Kelly state, flexibility and precarity ‘can look the same in terms of patterns of labour market movement and therefore can lead up to assume a non-existent commonality of experience’ (2005: 209). However similar flexibility and precarious may look in terms of patterns, they could not be more different in terms of the effect on everyday life (Furlong and Kelly 2005; Burgess et al. 2008). I was to learn this the hard way.

The business I worked for shut down. It was the beginning of a series of jobs, none of which had any security, regularity or entitlements. I couldn’t organise a doctor’s appointment, let alone a music career. I began working two, then three jobs. As found by Standing, the precariat are ‘working more because the returns to any job are low and risky’ (2011: 120). The narrative of precarious work as a rite-of-passage began to lose its coherence in the face of what I was experiencing. A similar narrative shift is portrayed in Reiter and Schlimbach’s case, where the narrative of precarious work turns from ‘a convenient interim solution to the onset of what he perceives to be his personal defeat’ (2015: 139). This parallels my own experience. A shift in biographical orientation upsets the balance of rhetoric and experience, as it did in my case.

I had experienced the ‘stepping stone’ narrative in precarious work as a myth. This is consistent with the literature. As Watson states:

> it is clear that the characteristics of casual jobs in themselves are a major factor in perpetuating this kind of work. It seems reasonable to conclude that casual jobs do indeed operate as labour market traps, and they are actually crafted to do so (2013: 23).

I had conceived of my employment as flexible, and chosen it as such. Yet I found myself caught between a need
for income and the difficulty in finding a secure way of garnering it.

**Narrative #3: Grown Up**

*Christmas is here and everyone is at home. Tired carols are playing. Panforte, vanilla kipferl and chocolate almonds and sultanas are placed in the best crockery on the table. My father tries to convince everyone to watch it's a Wonderful Life (1946), which no one does – the same as last year and the year before that. And I go to work.*

The control of time, or lack thereof, is a concern for social theorists (Bergman 1992; Standing 2011; Woodman 2012). Time for people in precarious work is not only outside of their own control, but inverse to societal norms. Particularly in hospitality or retail, your working life is predicated on other people’s pleasure. No 7pm news and dinner, but a dinner rush for customers. Weekends are the centre of the working week. School holidays, Easter and Christmas are off-limits for holidays as all hands must be on deck. Sick days are not an option, unless you can convince a co-worker to fill your place.

*My brother is getting married. Despite all preparation and prior notice, work is busier than usual so my partner has to go to work beforehand, a fact he finds out with less than 12 hours notice. I pick him up after he has finished and we frantically drive down the mountain, arriving breathless.*

Woodman suggests ‘control over time and the availability of free time have long been identified as resources that are unequally available and inculcated in the reproduction of inequality’ (2012: 1087). Precarious work contains very little control over time. You are yoked to the ebbs and flows of people through the door. A slow week might mean one or two hundred dollars less in your pay check, while a busy week can mean everyone is called in. Work being precarious and unprotected, any refusal has implications.

*What I had once accepted without question now rankled. Having my wages docked for lunch hours I was never allowed to take. Working every public holiday and never seeing any penalty rates. My life wasn’t my own, but subject to the whims of employers who knew there were plenty more bodies to fill the gaps should I decide I didn’t like the conditions. I wanted things – security, meaningful employment, children – and my employment compromised these. I knew myself, finally, to be precarious.*

In this new narrative, precarious work could not sustain what I wanted from my adult life. Moreover, it didn’t fit with what I conceived of adulthood. The literature suggests that dimensions of adulthood in late modernity are different to previous eras. Wyn and White argued that young people place a high value on personal relationships and non-work life:

*Young people are developing different, alternative criteria by which to judge success and value as this pertains to their perception of desirable qualities and lifestyle choices. This, in turn, seems to be very much driven by the structural constraints they are experiencing in attaining other forms of socially desired outcomes – such as well-paid, meaningful, and satisfying jobs (2000: 170).*

This development of alternative criteria for success may partially account for a paradox discussed in the literature. In Thomson et al.’s study in the United Kingdom, they found ‘British young people do appear to be optimistic about their chances in life, creating a mismatch with the restrictions they may face’ (2003: 34) This finding is consistent with the literature (Wyn and White 1998; Furlong and Cartmel 2006). Beyond the development of alternative criteria of success, the normalisation of precarious work in young people’s lives and the narrative power of the individualistic framework has rendered the structural conditions and implications of precarious work invisible. This supports Blatterer’s conclusion that the ‘standard’ adulthood of the 1950s no longer has resonance for contemporary adulthood. Hence, ‘the promises contained in the ideal, while retaining an orienting role, are in tension with social reality’ (2007: 778). There is a ‘normative lag’ between what we expect of adulthood and what we experience.

The question is how precarious work fits with new meanings surrounding adulthood. Does it fulfil the conception of contemporary adulthood of Blatterer, or the development of alternative means of measuring success as suggested by Wyn and White? In my experience, the answer is conclusively no. The absence of a well-paid, meaningful job was not met with a greater amount of time to spend with family, or enjoying non-work activities. In fact, the opposite was true. My adulthood has been characterised by work-related insecurity and uncertainty – a reality that affects other aspects of life. Precarious work has meant compromising on things that mattered – time for those who are important to me and the opportunity to plan for a future with some certainty. Although there is not a unified conception of adulthood, and nor should there be, financial independence and starting a family are important steps for many, however precarious work can make these goals difficult to achieve. It is hard to see what place precarious work has in a conception of contemporary, fulfilling adulthood. In my experience, precarious work does not allow for the achievement of ‘different, alternative criteria’ (Wyn and White 2000: 170), but actively undermines it.
A New Narrative: The End of the Precarious Individual?

The Australian Youth Research Centre found that young people’s ‘understanding of their situation was limited to the individualistic framework, which ultimately would not offer a basis for comprehending their situation within the larger picture’ (in Wyn and White 1998: 32). This was supported by Burrows’s work, which found it was hard ‘for young people to imagine any alternative but the ongoing individual search for the better job or stepping stone to greater security’ (2013: 393). There was a general sense that ‘their own job is different from others and will somehow provide a stepping stone’ (Burrows 2013: 392).

Yet my experience, and I would hazard the experience of many, shows that individual solutions to precarious work conditions are not always possible.

The narrative power of the individualistic framework is demonstrated by Morgan et al., where ‘many young workers have internalised the injunction to vocational restlessness that is central to the discourses of “new capitalism”’ (2013: 398). Mobility, restlessness, movement, these are essentials of the individualistic framework of late modernity. As Blatterer suggests, these aspects of late modernity are reflected in contemporary adulthood where ‘a desire for stability in the long run often conflicts with proxvicities for openness and mobility in the present’ (2007: 785). In the ‘connexionist world’ analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello, the promotion of mobility has a normative tenor where ‘successful people are incessantly on the move, while the unsuccessful who have squandered their talents are characterised by their fixity’ (in Turner 2007: 413).

These ideas of mobility and movement bear little resemblance to the lives of those in precarious work. As we have seen, precarious work shifts the locus of control from the employee and acts as a labour market trap. Neither of these dimensions allow for mobility or movement. Yet this doesn’t diminish the narrative power of these ideas. Consequently, the responsibility for successfully achieving mobility and movement rests with the individual, supposedly free of structural constraints.

Mobility, flexibility, choice. These core values of the individualistic framework find expression in the narratives of precarious work. And they are powerful. I see that I, too, am the hero of all my stories. I am subject to the individualistic framework, constructing ‘individual victories out of collective defeats’ (Cohen, cited in Wyn and White 2000: 172). This is, to my mind, the way of the world. I know no other.

Conceiving of precarious work thus silences conversations about challenging the status quo, as the individualistic framework only allows for personal success and failure and refuses to acknowledge structural considerations. It precludes the possibility of beginning to tackle the validity of narratives around precarious work as reality for youth and as a rite-of-passage to secure employment or a ‘real’ job. These narratives endure. Experiences to the contrary are understood as an individual failure, rather than a logical result of unsuitable work conditions.

The question begs: was I precarious while working under precarious conditions in my youth? Or did I only become precarious when I conceived of myself as such, as the definitions of Kalleberg (in Wilson and Ebert 2013) and Wilson and Ebert (2013) would imply? Perhaps the answer lies in Standing’s discussion of precariousness as a process. In Standing’s discussion of the way people become ‘subject to the pressures and experiences that lead to a precarious experience’ (2011: 18), I can see a parallel in my own life. I only knew myself to be ‘precariatised’ when there was no longer a narrative into which precarious work could fit. The process, on the other hand, had begun long before that, facilitated and obscured by narratives of precarious work as reality and as a rite-of-passage.

This suggests that the point of view of the worker is complex, nuanced and subject to different narratives. Therefore, in order to find the necessary stories to ‘engage’ young people in education, training, transition and adulthood (Furlong and Kelly 2005: 223), we will have to begin by untangling precarious work from the narratives that surround it. We must begin with the point of view of the worker, as suggested by Kalleberg (in Wilson and Ebert 2013: 265), but in all its nuance. This may be a small step in finding once more the social and political within the personal, a connection perhaps invisible to those experiencing precarious work conditions. In illuminating the collective within the individual trajectory, in rediscovering the collective resonance of these stories, we may begin to improve the conditions of precarious work and start challenging a framework that suggests individual responsibility and individual solutions to all of life’s issues.

References


Author

Francesca Sidoti is a writer and musician, currently studying at Western Sydney University (WSU). Her research focuses on contemporary discourses surrounding young people and notions of choice, with a particular interest in the interpersonal level of discourse maintenance and the role of place in young people’s decision-making processes. Her first album *Bright City Light Fool* was released in 2010, and her follow-up *Houses* is due to be released in 2016.

**Choke**

I wasn’t well. My throat had swelled.
I asked for help. My husband woke.
It wasn’t him; the other one.
My words were choked. His shameful tongue —
Round and round and round we go
(why is it still a shock?)
A petite mort inside each time
but not the death you want.

*Michele Seminara,
Manly Vale, NSW*
Folk Devils Rise Again

BARRY HINDESS

The concept of moral panic was developed in Britain in the 1970s by a group of critical criminologists and sociologists concerned to make sense of the way small numbers of deviant individuals had been demonised – treated, in effect, as Folk Devils – by the media, police and even some of their colleagues. I use the concepts of Moral Panic and Folk Devil to throw light on the demonisation of young ‘radicalised’ Muslims in contemporary Australia and, more generally, to criticise the treatment of radicalisation as a serious threat.

My title takes the term ‘Folk Devils’ from Stan Cohen’s Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers (1972), part of an influential push by a group of British sociologists and criminologists (Cohen 1972, 1980, 2002, Hall et al. 1978, Young 1971) who reacted against the tendency of public debate and far too many of their colleagues to treat deviance as a matter of readily observable characteristics of behaviours and/or individuals rather than as an ascribed social category. Consequently, public debate around ‘deviant’ behaviour or persons sometimes escalated into panics about perceived threats to social order. The Moral Panic push argued that the media, police and socially credentialed experts played prominent roles in the labelling of certain individuals and behaviours as deviant and further that ‘the societal reaction may in fact increase rather than decrease or keep in check the amount of deviance’ (Cohen 2002: 8).

Cohen (2002: 1) describes moral panic as:

a condition, episode, a person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

It is described more concisely in Charles Krinsky’s Introduction to The Ashgate Research Companion to Moral Panics, a useful survey of the Moral Panic literature and its critics. He tells us (2013: 1) that a moral panic may be understood ‘as an episode, often triggered by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy, of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order’. While the roles of the media, law and public policy are indicated here, it would be remiss in the Australian context not to bring into the mix State and Commonwealth Governments, professional politicians and academics only too willing to market themselves as specialists on the latest generation of folk devils.

Cohen’s term ‘Folk Devils’ points to the ways in which media organisations, police and other authorities focus on deviant individuals or groups seen as embodying a new or extraordinary social threat. The image of folk ‘devils’ is a powerful one but the concept appears designed to resist clear definition (Hayle 2013). The term ‘Devil’ evokes demonic, almost super-human capacities for evil but these capacities are attributed to particular human individuals or groups. ‘Folk’ refers to popular perceptions of these beings, and such perceptions are notoriously difficult to pin down. Partly for this reason, moral panic studies have focused on media representations and statements by public authorities, read as if they feed directly into popular perceptions. In effect, ‘folk devils’ are popular perceptions, inferred from public representations of all too human individuals who conduct themselves in ways that can be represented as deviant. The role of public representation and ascription suggests that the threat posed by Folk Devils is socially constructed, while the term itself suggests that the threat arises from demons, who are largely imaginary but somehow associated with real persons.

The moral panic concept is not without its difficulties, some of which I register in this discussion (Thompson 1998; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Hall 2012). I use it here, in spite of its limitations, to throw light on the recent proliferation of Australian talk about radicalisation and of policies designed to counter or at least contain it. Moral panics have been familiar features of Australian...
public life, focusing variously in the years since WWII on the threats posed by communism, immigrants first from Eastern Europe and later from Asia, bikie gangs, who were accused of trafficking drugs, guns, sex workers and refugees. At another level, ‘political correctness’ and ‘postmodernism’, have been presented as fads that effectively undermine academic integrity. At other levels again, we might think of the, only partly successful, political panics around indigenous land rights and the threats of economic rationalism, neoliberalism, the return of Work Choices and Labor’s carbon tax. While some of these panics, especially the fears of communism and Eastern Europeans, have died off, others continue to bubble away in the background.

But, does it help to describe recent talk about radicalisation and the policies with which it is associated as yet another moral panic? Malcolm Turnbull, the Australian Prime Minister at the time, described the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris as ‘the work of the devil’ (Sydney Morning Herald 2015) – an official, but not yet a ‘folk’, devil! If the attacks were the work of the devil, one wonders what this implies about Western incursions in the Middle East to which the attackers profess to have been responding: were they the work of the other guy? Leaving supernatural intervention to one side, the first difficulty we face in dealing with radicalisation, both in policy and speech, is that those who use the key term ‘radicalisation’ rarely bother to define it, preferring rather to identify the process by what is said to be its pernicious consequences, that is, the emergence of radicals, extremists and possibly even terrorists. Consequently, both here and in North America where the concept of radicalisation seems to have originated (see Kundnani 2012), it is little more than a reflection of the political concerns of those who use it. Partly for this reason, it is often less than clear what precisely the talk and policies are concerned with, although casual observation suggests that radicalisation is seen as a dangerous and destructive process closely linked to Islam.

If we consider the term outside the politically charged context of its contemporary usage, it might seem that radicalisation, the process of becoming radical, is something that could happen to anyone whatever their initial political allegiance – anarchist, conservative, environmental, liberal, socialist or social democrat – or religious affiliation – Buddhist, Calvinist, Catholic, Hindu, Lutheran, Muslim, Sikh, Agnostic or Atheist. Yet, whenever ‘radicalisation’ and ‘radicalised’ are used today without qualification, they almost invariably target Islam without discriminating between its different varieties. Thus, one striking feature of the radicalisation panic is the damage it does to our language, most clearly to the usage of ‘radical’, ‘extreme’ and terms derived from them. ‘Radicalisation’ is used to refer to a process that turns young people into ‘radicals’, ‘extremists’ and possibly even ‘terrorists’ but these terms are all also used as if they are more or less equivalent and all connected to Islam.

Outside the current politically charged context, ‘extreme’ meant deviating far from the social norm and ‘radical’ meant getting at the root of an issue or problem. Both extremism and radical were often used in contexts far removed from Islam. The American sociologist/political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset argued in Political Man (1960) that political extremism – which he understood, not as leading to violence, but rather as a matter of using democratic means for anti-democratic ends – could be of the Left, Right or Centre. In other words, it reflected no particular political allegiance. Although Lipset himself does not make the connection with religion, the same point could be made about religious extremism – that it could reflect any religious affiliation, even atheism or agnosticism. Lipset later published an important study of American right-wing extremism (Lipset and Raab 1970), focusing on the social conditions in which it was able to flourish. In contrast, extremism is treated today, within the radicalisation framework, as a function, not of social conditions, but rather of individual development.

‘Radical’, in the political sense, referred to one who believed that fundamental social change was needed to properly address social problems and, particularly in the USA, it was often associated with the Left and, consequently, seen as dangerous. The term is still sometimes used, in contexts that are neither political nor religious, with the non-pejorative sense of getting to the root of some issue. For example, a recent headline on the cover of New Scientist reads ‘100 Years Ago, This Radical Idea Transformed How We See Reality’ (Goldberg 2015). Readers expecting to find a discussion of Einstein’s general theory of relativity, first presented in an address to the Prussian Academy of Science in November 1915, would have been surprised to find that the article discusses the work of the German mathematician Amelie ‘Emmy’ Noether on the relation between conservation laws in physics and temporal or spatial symmetries. Noether’s work was no less pioneering, or radical, but was perceived as less of a challenge to received ideas than Einstein’s. Radical, in her case, is understood in a positive sense. Noether must have worked on her radical ideas for some time before they were ready to publish. Her thinking about symmetry must, in other words, have gone through a process of radicalisation, as, indeed, must have Einstein’s on gravity. Naturally, this discussion of Noether’s ‘radicalism’ sees no problem in her radicalisation.

Such rare exceptions aside, whenever ‘extreme’, ‘radical’ and derivative terms are used today without qualification or in a context that does not effectively qualify them, as the example of Noether’s ‘radical’ discovery clearly does, they are used to target Islam. The Australian Attorney General’s Department (AGD) has a web-page Countering Violent Extremism that outlines the Government’s objective of minimising ‘the use or support of violence to achieve
ideological, religious or political goals'. *Countering Violent Extremism* ties the ideas of extremism and radicalisation together, asserting that '[t]he best way to counter violent extremism is to prevent radicalisation emerging as an issue'. This page also refers to the Australian Government's efforts to prevent Australians travelling abroad to join in conflict or simply to visit a conflict zone, perhaps to see family or old friends or to work with the Red Cross or its Muslim equivalent, the Red Crescent. While the AGD web-page does not mention Islam or Muslims, Australian residents will have no difficulty recognising that the restriction on foreign travel is intended to target members of Australia's Muslim community. A few members of the Australian Jewish community still travel to the Middle East for their military service in the Israeli Defence Forces, yet there is no evidence of Australian Governments making any attempts to stop them.

Yet it is not difficult to find cases of extremism that have nothing to do with Islam. A recent report in the *New York Times* ‘Church’s Path from Bible Group to Lethal Sect’ (October 2015) recounts the case of an American Christian couple who had beaten their two sons, only one of whom survived the experience, in a Word of Life church in New York. The report describes this incident without resort to ‘radical’, ‘extreme’ or other terms derived from either. The closest NYT gets to a pejorative description is the reference to ‘Lethal Sect’ in the title. In another context this ‘path’ could have been described as one of ‘radicalisation’. If the parents of the murdered son had been described as ‘radical’, we would have to say also that they had been radicalised. In America, and probably in Australia too, it seems that Christians can do weird and incomprehensible things without risk of being labelled radical or extremist.

Leaving religion to one side, there are many examples of what might be called radicalism and extremism in political life. At one time, political radicalism was expected of young people – at least, among those of a certain class, a class that allowed its members the luxury of experimenting with political allegiances. Today, we tend to assume that young people and more than a few of their elders, finding themselves alienated from the societies in which they live, will sometimes seek support elsewhere and we should not be surprised if this happens within the Muslim community. Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France (1906 - 09 and 1917 - 20) is reputed to have said ‘My son is 22 years old. If he had not become a Communist at 22, I would have disowned him. If he is still a Communist at 30, I will do it then’. Clemenceau’s attributed comment suggests a complacency about radicalisation among the young, seeing it as something they will get over.

More recent examples of political extremism are neoliberalism and the anti-refugee practices promoted by our largest political parties. The former is a doctrine that promotes radical economic change throughout the world – the privatisation of public assets and deregulation and marketisation of anything that moves. Margaret Thatcher was one of the earliest political leaders in the West to embrace this doctrine. She did not come into the world as a neoliberal extremist but grew into it during her years as a politician. In other words, she became radicalised. This is also the case for the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) benighted publicists and the EU leaders and international bankers who drove Greece into austerity. Neoliberal extremism poses a real threat to most people in the West, and in the rest of the world. It is alive and kicking in the Coalition and, despite Kevin Rudd’s essays in *The Monthly*, still has disturbing levels of support within the Labor Party.

Australia’s refugee regime, whose brutality has been well documented, presents a serious threat to the wellbeing of anyone who falls into its clutches. It is a clear case of irreligious Western extremism, suggesting that both those who run the regime’s camps and those who chose to establish them must have been radicalised, if only by the thought that being seen to be tough on refugees would lead to career advancement and/or political success. It is tempting to treat Western military intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, ostensibly to counter the threat of terrorism at its source, as yet another striking example of irreligious extremism. The manifest failure of these interventions and their counter-productive effects have led, with the partial exception of Afghanistan, not to serious withdrawal from the interventions themselves but rather to their intensification (or radicalisation).

I noted earlier that few of those who go on about ‘radicalisation’ bother to pin the term down and that, without explicitly making the connection, most simply take its Muslim character as given. One of the rare exceptions is a report prepared for the New York City Police Department (NYPD) by analysts in its Intelligence Division that explicitly ties radicalisation to Islam. The executive summary begins:

The NYPD’s understanding of the threat from Islamic-based terrorism to New York City has evolved since September 11, 2001. While the threat from overseas remains, terrorist attacks ... since 2001 fit a different paradigm ... we have now shifted our focus to ... a point where we believe the potential terrorist or group of terrorists begin and progress through a process of radicalization (NYPD 2007: 5).

Further, this ‘point of origin for individuals before they begin [the process of radicalization] is their life situation
before they were exposed to and adopted jihadi-Salafi Islam as their own ideology' (NYPD 2007: 6). As the report is not an academic document, it does not refer to the originator (Kepel 2004) of the term ‘jihadi-Salafi’ nor, apart from describing it as a ‘militant interpretation of the Salafi school of thought’ (NYPD 2007: 86), does it explain the term.

The preface by the Police Commissioner for New York City gives a good sense of the report’s starting point, the assertion that ‘most of the attacks and attempted attacks [in Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States since 9/11] have shown [it] to be an anomaly rather than the standard pattern for terrorism in the homeland’ (2007: 2). Notice here that 9/11 is judged to be anomalous against the norm (of terrorist attacks by Muslims) which, ignoring the history of terrorism in the twentieth century, was established in the post-9/11 period – that is in the years between late 2001 and 2007 when the report was published. This is a limited temporal base against which to establish the anomalous character of 9/11 but extending this period to late 2015 would leave us with the same norm and with 9/11 still anomalous – but only if we do not count as terrorist attacks the many shootings in American schools and colleges and burning down the occasional church. The report is about terrorist attacks by Muslims living in the West.

Apart from a few short comments in its final pages, the report does not consider routes, other than radicalisation, to becoming a terrorist. The first of these comments (2007: 82) dismisses a range of other possible causes without discussion:

The transformation of a Western-based individual to a terrorist is not triggered by oppression, suffering, revenge, or desperation. Rather, it is a phenomenon that occurs because the individual is looking for an identity and a cause.

A few lines later, the report picks on a failure of integration as a cause of the alienation of young people:

Europe’s failure to integrate the 2nd and 3rd generation of its immigrants into society, both economically and socially, has left many young Muslims torn between the secular West and their religious heritage. This inner conflict makes them especially vulnerable to extremism ... [And] Despite the economic opportunities in the United States, the powerful gravitational pull of individuals’ religious roots and identity sometimes supersedes the assimilating nature of American society ...

The report offers no evidence of failure to integrate apart, perhaps, from the alienation of young people that the lack of integration is supposed to explain. Nor does it consider what factors might have contributed to this alleged failure, for example, heavy-handed surveillance of young Muslims by public authorities and police, perhaps even by the NYPD itself, teachers unsympathetic to Islam or parents and schools preaching anodyne, politically acceptable versions of Islam, Western military incursions into Muslim states and America’s one-sided policy stance towards the dispute between Israel and Palestine. In the passage quoted above such factors are discounted as potential triggers for the transformation of otherwise ‘unremarkable’ individuals into terrorists, presumably on the grounds that these factors affect many people who do not become terrorists. The term ‘unremarkable’ is used throughout the report to designate Muslims with ‘little, if any criminal history’ (NYPD 2007: 2) and who are not terrorists but who could easily fall into a process of radicalisation. Yet, if ‘oppression, suffering, revenge, or desperation’ are not the last straws that push people over the edge and into terrorism, this is not to say that they may not be influential in other ways (Kundnani 2012). Overall, the report leaves no room for doubt that local Muslims, even if they have not yet been radicalised, are likely to be at the ‘point where we believe the potential terrorist or group of terrorists begin and progress through a process of radicalization’ (NYPD 2007: 5).

While the NYPD report makes a valiant effort to identify, and then to clarify, the process of radicalisation, assuring us (2007: 16) that ‘terrorism is [its] ultimate consequence’, it nevertheless leaves careful readers with a sense of uncertainty. After describing radicalisation as a process composed of four distinct phases of Radicalisation, Self-Identification, Indoctrination and Jihadisation (2007:19), the Report admits that:

individuals who begin this process do not necessarily pass through all the stages and many, in fact, stop or abandon this process at different points ... However, individuals who do pass through this entire process are quite likely to be involved in a terrorist act.

Radicalisation, in other words, is a pernicious process that can turn people into real or potential terrorists but it does not always work. Sometimes it produces radicals or extremists and sometimes it does not.

Because the NYPD Report does not consider earlier terrorist campaigns – the early twentieth-century anarchists, the Weather Underground in the US, Baader-Meinhof and the Red Brigades in Europe, it can draw no lessons from them. Further, since it dismisses other
routes that might lead people living in Europe or America towards terrorism, readers are left with the impression that the radicalisation of local Muslims is the main danger we face. Otherwise, the conclusions we draw from the report depend on the weight we place on the delightfully imprecise term ‘quite likely’.

While there have been many critiques of counter-radicalisation policies in Australian print media, and internet journals (notably in *Crikey.com, Eureka Street, Inside Story and The Conversation*) few of them have questioned the idea of radicalisation itself. Some of these critiques, often written by Muslims, argue that counter-radicalisation policies are likely to further alienate Muslim youth and thus prove counter-productive – precisely the response that the moral panic literature suggests. Many more, mostly by non-Muslim academics, read like draft applications for research funding. Yet, as we might expect during moral panics, these criticisms appear to have little impact on mainstream print and broadcast media or policy.

This last point brings us finally to the concepts of Folk Devil and Moral Panic. Devils are conventionally thought to be immortal and therefore hard to kill at the best of times but ‘Folk Devils’, since they inhabit the popular imagination, might seem to be rather different. Yet, to the extent that they are artefacts of a circular relationship between Devils and the Moral Panics that feed off them, they are virtually indestructible. Hayle (2013) argues persuasively that there may be Folk Devils with no corresponding Moral Panic but what is at issue in the present discussion is the survival of Folk Devils that by definition feed off Moral Panics. We could make the point about the difficulty of eradicating Folk Devils without invoking the supernatural, for example, by starting from Krinsky’s claim that Moral Panics involve an ‘exaggerated and misplaced’ focus on their principal targets and the closely related claim of Hall and his co-authors that the official reaction is ‘out of all proportion to the actual threat’ (1978: 6). Where the concerns of governments, police and security agencies are irrational, reasoned critique and appeals for calm are unlikely to prove effective.

One further issue, not mentioned so far, concerns the rhetorical theme that radical(ised) Muslims want to destroy our freedoms. This theme was floated by US President George W. Bush in a broadcast address to a joint session of Congress shortly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001: ‘[T]hey hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other’ (*Washington Post* 2001). Many years later, following the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, the theme was recycled by the then Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott: ‘they hate our freedom, they hate our pluralism, they hate the welcome we extend to people of all faiths, all cultures, all sexualities – they hate that’ (*The Australian* 2015).

Leaving to one side the embarrassing observation that many Christians, in America and elsewhere, also seek to take away some of our freedoms, for example, by imposing their restrictive views regarding marriage, sexuality, abortion and euthanasia on the rest of us, it is worth noting that the claim that our enemies are seeking to destroy our freedoms has a powerful resonance, out of all proportion to its accuracy, in the English-speaking West. The resonance of this theme has nothing to do with Islam. It occupies an important place in the histories taught in English and American schools, dating from as far back as the English *Magna Carta Libertatum* (*its Latin title means ‘the Great Charter of the Liberties’) of 1215, now generally known as the Magna Carta, which protected baronial freedoms from the King (but not peasants from barons) (Lyall 2015). The same theme resurfaces in accounts of the English Civil War and, particularly in Britain, continues through histories of the Napoleonic wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the World Wars of the twentieth century.

Likewise, the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 accuses the English King of trying to impose ‘an absolute Tyranny over these States’ and of creating ‘a multitude of New Offices, and [sending] hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.’ The King was trying to take away their freedoms. Sixty years later, American settlers in the Tejas region of the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas declared independence from Mexico proclaiming that the Mexican Government had ‘ceased to protect the lives, liberty, and property of the people, from whom its legitimate powers are derived’ and complained about ‘arbitrary acts of oppression and tyranny’ and being ruled by people using a language (Spanish) other than their own. The property they were so concerned to protect included their slaves, and their liberty included the right to own slaves, a right that had been abolished in Mexico by a Decree of 1824, but which remained in place throughout most of the USA and had only recently (1833) been abolished in the British Empire. This fight for liberty is discussed in schools and historical museums throughout Texas and other parts of the USA, usually without reference to slavery.

Does the idea of Moral Panic as ‘an episode, often triggered by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy, of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order’ help us to make sense of contemporary talk and public policy focused on radicalisation? First, a matter of terminology: our exposure to inflammatory talk and policy focused on radicalisation
has persisted long enough to be no longer considered an ‘episode’. Perhaps future historians, if there are any, will be able to see it this way but, from the perspective of late 2015, ‘episode’ feels like an understatement. It might be better to think of what we are still going through as a ‘period’ that has already lasted far too long.

Second, are we now in a period ‘of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order’, and is this concern promoted ‘by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy’? The answer in both cases is surely ‘Yes’. Yet, it may be misleading to think of our situation in terms of exaggeration and misdirection. To suggest that public concerns are ‘exaggerated or misdirected’ is also to suggest that there is a level of concern that would be reasonable and a correspondingly reasonable focus. Hall et al.’s (1978) rather different formulation ‘out of all proportion’ carries a similar implication – that there could be a response that was not disproportionate. Yet, if the object of concern is, as the term Folk Devils suggests, one or more largely imagined demons, albeit ones attached to real people (radicalised Muslim youths) there can be no level of concern that is reasonable. Instead of ‘exaggerated’, ‘misplaced’ or ‘out of proportion’, it might be better to describe our public concerns and policy responses simply as ‘unreasonable’.

It would be hard to deny that these public concerns are promoted ‘by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy’ but, as noted earlier, we should acknowledge that they are promoted also by State and Commonwealth Governments, professional politicians and academics only too willing to market themselves as experts in exorcising the latest generation of folk devils.

The claim that concerns about folk devils, understood as artefacts of moral panic that are ‘exaggerated or misdirected’ or simply ‘out of proportion’, may be poorly formulated but talk of exaggeration and misdirection does suggest that there is more substance to public concerns than imagined folk devils. The mods and rockers of Cohen’s (1972: 80 and 2002) discussion, who met to fight each other in British seaside resorts during the 1960s, were real people, not simply figments of police and media speculation and, while their interactions sometimes resulted in real harm to innocent bystanders and damage to public property, the threat their battles posed to most of the British population was almost certainly exaggerated by police and media reportage. Like contemporary fears of radicalised Muslims, the ‘Folk Devils’ Cohen examines were fabricated out of a poisonous mix of solid evidence and fevered imagination. There are alienated Muslims in Australia, some of whom almost certainly disapprove of the Australian version of Western civilisation, as indeed do a few evangelical Christians. It would be foolish to imagine that anodyne, state-sponsored versions of Islam to counter radicalisation will not lead to further alienation. Yet, in spite of the November 2015 attacks in Paris, alarming media stories and radically over-the-top reactive laws in Australia, most Australians are more at risk of death or serious injury from domestic violence – Australia’s very own ‘home-grown’ terrorism – and road accidents than they are from attacks by radicalised Muslims.

Cohen (2002) reassures us that moral panics sometimes disappear but offers little advice about what we might do to speed up their departure. Mainstream politicians, security agencies, media organisations and self-styled counter-radicalisation specialists all have an interest in keeping panic on the boil. For those of us who are neither in the business of promoting the panic nor caught up in it, simply telling it as it is – calling an unreasonable panic precisely that – will not be sufficient to clear it away. Justin Glyn (2015) argues, for example:

We did not demand all Catholics stand up and denounce every IRA attack, nor that all Christians apologise for Anders Breivik. Similarly, why should we expect all members of a religion with over a billion adherents with multiple ancient variants to actively disown every horror claimed to have been committed in its name?

Quite so. Yet, while this entirely reasonable point may do something to reassure those readers who struggled to keep their heads while all about them were losing theirs and might give pause for thought to anyone still at risk of giving way to panic – or should I say ‘in the first stage of panicisation’? – we should not expect it to have a serious impact on the panic itself. The best we can hope for is that our political leaders will refrain from further provocations in the Middle East and that some of them, along with a few socially accredited experts, may find the courage to finally say ‘enough’.

References
Goldberg, D. 2015 ‘100 years ago, this radical idea transformed how we see reality’, New Scientist, 226, 3018: 33-35.


New York Times 2015 ‘Church’s Path from Bible Group to Lethal Sect’, 22 October.


The Australian 2015, 24 January.


Author
After spending much of his academic life as a sociologist in Britain, Barry Hindess moved in 1987 to the Australian National University where he is now an emeritus professor of politics. He is the author of The Decline of Working Class Politics, Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production (with Paul Hirst), Discourses of Power: from Hobbes to Foucault, Corruption and Democracy in Australia and papers on liberalism, imperialism and corruption.

My Mob

The Belconnen crows are caw-caw-cawwwwwwing, mournful this September morning though it’s sunlit cheerful casting long shadows and the air is warming.

One fixes a wary eye on me as I approach, wind lifting shiny black feathers.

There’s calculation in its gaze: it stands its ground. I nod my head and swing around giving it a wide berth: there’s room enough for both of us and no need to prevail.

Amid dashes of red bottlebrush, a collage of yellow wattle, hanging splashes of blossom announce it’s spring and all around birds on the wing.

Descending into Brisbane from Dallas a man two rows back leans across, says to the man two chairs away, I guess it’s back to the griiiiiiiiiiiind and there it is, in wry intonation, in the gruff self-deprecating voice with a lift of humour, my homecoming, all that I’ve missed in a seven word capsule, and I’m a tuning fork, vibrating, something irrepressible and absent returning to me, my face and its joyous grin.

Swans glide silently on Lake Gininderra, a brace of geese fly low above it in a mini-v.

I watch a wattlebird busily hop-hop-hopping from branch to branch, head cocking, beady eye swivelling, and a pair of rosellas chittering, their bodies bright daubs of paint against the ground.

Five larrikin magpies, plump and energetic, play wing-tag between the gums, swooping and diving in raucous conference, stitching the sky with warble and flight, with boisterous irreverence, welcoming me home.
Norm-based Advocacy and Social Change: An analysis of advocacy efforts to end child marriage

NOHA SHAWKI

Child, early, and forced marriage has been a persistent social problem in different parts of the world. Its impacts on the affected children, especially girls, and on their families and communities are far reaching. Momentum is now building around ending child marriage. Civil society groups working to end child marriage have secured a number of successes at different levels. How have civil society groups been able to bring about changes in policy and practice at the global, national, and local levels? And considering that child marriage is often rooted in social norms, how can civil society groups work to bring about normative change that can in turn effect social change? To address these questions, this article draws on theoretical formulations pertaining to norm-based strategies for change, and uses child marriage as an illustrative example, to show how these strategies can leverage the power of norms to generate change.

Introduction

Child, early, and forced marriage (hereafter child marriage) is an issue that has attracted much attention in recent years because of the far-reaching negative impacts it can have on individuals, families, and communities. Even though there are a number of international treaties that address the minimum age of marriage, the rates of child marriage remain high in many countries and communities around the world. Much momentum has been building around efforts to end child marriage, which mostly affects girls. During the years 2014 and 2015, the international community took a number of steps to address child marriage. These include a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as well as a panel discussion at the UNGA that addressed child marriage; a panel discussion at the Human Rights Council (HRC) on the issue as well as a statement by a large number of states declaring their intention to introduce an HRC resolution on the issue in 2015; the adoption of an HRC resolution on child marriage in July of 2015; and the inclusion of the elimination of child marriage in one of the targets of the gender empowerment goal in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, there have been a growing number of commitments made to end child marriage. Moreover, at the national and regional levels there have been important gains in 2014 and 2015, including a new African Union campaign to end child marriage and a new law in Malawi that raises the minimum legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 years (Teitsworth 2015). These developments are significant as efforts to end child marriage taking place at different levels can interact and create synergies, which can produce the outcomes that the international community seeks.

This article uses the example of child marriage and the progress made in responding to it to illustrate the ways in which civil society groups (CSGs) use social norm-based strategies to advance their agenda of ending the practice of child marriage. The article probes the ways in which CSGs have been generating momentum around ending child marriage and using that momentum to bring about changes in policy and practice at the global, national, and local levels. In discussing these questions, recent theoretical formulations (Raymond et al. 2014) are applied to help in understanding how CSGs can leverage the power of norms to bring about change in formal institutions (i.e. official rules, laws, and policies) and in informal institutions (i.e. social rules that are not put in place officially by a government or other entity). Since norms are a key part of formal and informal institutions, intentional efforts to change norms can be a conduit to institutional reform (Raymond et al. 2014) and to addressing intractable social and policy problems (Raymond and Weldon 2013). This theoretically informed study therefore draws conclusions that are applicable to other areas of civil society advocacy. The case of child marriage is not intended to provide a comprehensive discussion of this social problem and of ways it can be addressed. Rather, it is designed to be illustrative of the norm-based strategies of change through the application of recent theoretical formulations to child marriage.

The article is organised in several sections. The first section introduces the analytical framework that informs this study. The second section provides an overview of child marriage as a social problem. The third and fourth sections use examples of norm-based strategies of
change that have been used as tools of advocacy by CSGs at the global, national and local levels respectively. The article concludes with a brief summary of the key points.

Analytical Framework

Recent research has shown that CSGs can use norm-based approaches to bring about institutional change. A norm is ‘a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity’ (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 891). Individuals and groups who seek to introduce new norms or to change an existing norm are norm entrepreneurs (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 400). Norm entrepreneurs that oppose child marriage include NGOs and CSGs such as Girls Not Brides, Plan International, and CARE International. These norm entrepreneurs effect norm change when they ‘foreground’ a norm and challenge its relevance in a particular context or its content more generally. This can weaken an existing norm by making clear how and why ‘the norm is unreasonable, harmful, inconsistent with other norms, or inappropriately applied to this issue’ (Raymond et al. 2014: 200; see also Raymond et al. 2014: 198). When the norm is weakened norm entrepreneurs can use one of two different approaches to offer alternatives to the weakened norm: normative reframing and normative innovation (Raymond et al. 2014).

Normative reframing entails thinking about an issue in terms of an alternative norm that is presented as more applicable to the issue in question. This approach is particularly effective when the alternative norm provides a good fit with the issue and is strong, ‘that is, … widely and deeply held’ and for this reason difficult to violate (Raymond et al. 2014: 200). For example, reframing hunger as a human rights issue can allow norm entrepreneurs to use the moral power of human rights norms to advance their policy agenda (Raymond and Weldon 2013: 3; Raymond et al. 2014: 208). Similarly, those working to combat violence against women may invoke human rights and gender equality as relevant norms that bear on the issue of violence against women (Weldon and Raymond 2013: 3).

Normative innovation entails challenging and rejecting a norm altogether, not simply arguing that it is a poor fit to the issue at hand (Raymond et al. 2014). This entails creating a new norm to replace the rejected norm (Weldon and Raymond 2013: 3-4).

These two approaches can be effective in bringing about institutional change when powerful interests are opposed to change or when seemingly entrenched and unbending cultural norms are perceived to hinder change (Raymond et al. 2014). This is true when informal institutions, which are ‘sets of informal rules that exist outside and alongside “formal” structures of government’ (Raymond and Weldon 2013: 4), hinder the implementation of formal rules (Raymond and Weldon 2013: 2; Weldon and Raymond 2013: 2-3). This is the case for child marriage as there is sometimes a significant disconnect between international law and national, customary, and/or religious law and practices (interview # 2; for an example from Malawi, see Let Girls Lead 2014).

Child Marriage

Child marriage, which mainly affects girls, especially poor, rural girls, is still prevalent in many developing countries. While child marriage also affects boys, the impact on girls is often stronger and much of the research and advocacy efforts focus on girls (Davis et al. briefly address boys in the context of child marriage – see Davis et al. 2013: 15).

Child marriage is a social problem that has a number of different dimensions and implications for the affected girls, but also more broadly for the communities and societies in which they live. Driven by a number of socio-economic and cultural conditions, including poverty, cultural practices and culturally-rooted norms relating to gender roles, the low social status of women in many countries, and low levels of education, child marriage affects significant numbers of girls. To illustrate, projections based on current trends suggest that 142 million girls will be married before reaching the age of 18 during this decade (Council on Foreign Relations 2013). In times of conflict or humanitarian or economic crises the incidence of child marriage is higher (Council on Foreign Relations 2013; Davis et al. 2013: 2-3). This is the case for child marriage as there is often a significant disconnect between international law and national, customary, and/or religious law and practices (interview # 2; for an example from Malawi, see Let Girls Lead 2014).

The consequences of child marriage are many. Early marriage often entails early pregnancy and childbirth, which can cause significant health problems for adolescent mothers and their children, putting mothers at a greater risk of complications and death in childbirth and children at a greater risk of newborn and infant death, malnutrition, and other health problems. Moreover, adolescent wives face higher risks of physical abuse and emotional distress. In addition, while girls with few educational opportunities are more likely to marry very early in life, early marriage also curtails girls’ education, negatively impacting their income potential, increasing their vulnerability and reinforcing their poverty, and reducing their communities’ prospects for economic development (Council on Foreign Relations 2013; Davis et al. 2013). All of these effects of...
child marriage also entail significant violations of a number of human rights, such as the right to education or the right to health, and in some cases are considered a form of slavery (Davis et al. 2013). In addition, international human rights instruments also explicitly define freedom to choose a spouse and to marry as well as the full and free consent to marriage as human rights (Davis et al. 2013).

A number of approaches and policy recommendations have been developed to curb the incidence of child marriage, of which a few are presented here. Since girls are less likely to marry if and when they have access to education and can stay in school, education is a key part of any effort to prevent child marriage. In addition to improving access to education, it is critical to create a safe learning environment for girls, to provide girls with a quality education that empowers them with the knowledge and life skills they need to thrive, and to foster equality between boys and girls in schools and curricula, as unsafe schools, poor instruction, and gender discrimination can be among the main reasons girls drop out of the education system (Davis et al. 2013). Creating more opportunities for girls and families to secure their livelihoods is also essential. Moreover, raising awareness and educating family and community members, both male and female, about the impacts of child marriage can help change social and cultural norms pertaining to child marriage. Including boys and men in these efforts is also very important. Furthermore, the enactment of laws that prohibit child marriage and establish a minimum legal age of marriage that meets international human rights standards is also vital, as is building the capacity of public agencies to implement these laws effectively. It is also crucial to improve access to sexual and reproductive health education, information, and services. Also, supporting boys and girls who are already married and ensuring that they will have access to education and to reproductive health and other support services is central. Finally, developing responses to child marriage requires policy processes that are inclusive of children and allow for their participation (Davis et al. 2013).

Norm-based Strategies for Change: The Global Level

At the international level, CSGs, such as the NGOs mentioned above, have combined normative reframing and normative innovation in their advocacy to end child marriage. These groups have called for action at the United Nations to curb child marriage. Such action can include a UNGA resolution that addresses child marriage (which was adopted in 2014 – see above), addressing child marriage as a human rights issue at UN human rights bodies (which occurred in different ways in 2014 and 2015 – see above), and providing capacity building and technical assistance programs to countries working to end child marriage. Other international-level action that can help end child marriage includes support for research and data collection activities on child marriage, its causes, and its consequences. It also includes support for efforts to protect children in situations of emergency and for efforts to guarantee that girls will be able to complete a secondary education. Finally, CSGs also called for the inclusion of ending child marriage in the post-2015 development agenda when it was under negotiation (Davis et al. 2013; for a summary of these approaches to respond to child marriage and examples of programs designed to address child marriage see also Warner et al. 2013). The norms surrounding the centrality of free and full consent to marriage and the minimum age of marriage included in human rights instruments clearly bear on the issue of child marriage, but so do other norms, such as norms surrounding violence against women and the status of women, as well as the right to education.

In making the case for a renewed global commitment and effort to end child marriage, many of the publications reviewed above also stress the connections between child marriage and education and health outcomes, as well as poverty and violence against women (see also CARE International 2014). They emphasise the different human rights dimensions of child marriage, which can be seen as an effort to highlight the human rights framing of the issue. In that sense, CSGs are trying to define child marriage in terms of well established and widely held human rights norms whose strength can generate more momentum around ending child marriage.

Similarly, norm entrepreneurs also point to promising ways to address child marriage that integrate efforts to end it with efforts towards other goals. At a practical level, efforts to end child marriage will not occur in isolation from efforts to achieve desired education outcomes or health outcomes (interview # 5). Similarly, since child marriage is a symptom of other underlying issues, such as gender norms and lack of access to education, any response to child marriage needs to consider other issues affecting girls as part of a broader girls’ rights agenda (interview # 6). This article argues that CSGs use normative reframing to link child marriage to other issues that have become important global goals and policy priorities.

There is also evidence pointing to efforts of normative innovation, as the effort to have child marriage included in the SDGs demonstrates. CSGs called for the inclusion of the issue of child marriage in the SDGs, making the process of negotiating the SDGs an opportunity to include child marriage in the commitments that states make. One girls’ rights advocate described the process focused on the SDGs as a ‘once in a lifetime chance to protect the world’s girls’ in a blog post discussing the SDGs and child marriage (Thompson 2014). Arguing that the plight of girls
has not received enough attention, this blog post makes the case for a more explicit focus on the rights of girls in the post-2015 development agenda. It also notes that this issue is controversial and that some governments and conservative groups have been resisting the agenda centered on empowering girls (Thompson 2014; see also Murphy 2013 and Ito 2014, two pieces to which Thompson refers in her blog post).

In making this case, CSGs called for the inclusion of girls’ rights explicitly and comprehensively in the SDGs. An overview of their proposals for including girls’ rights in the post-2015 development framework is available in a document that was endorsed by a number of NGOs and other CSGs (see OMG 2015, THIS IS THE MOMENT). In addition (and even though not all NGOs agree with this approach (see interview # 6), they called for including child marriage as a stand-alone target under the goal of achieving gender equality, that is goal five in the SDGs, which calls on the international community to ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ (the text of the SDGs is included in Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) (United Nations 2015), as opposed to subsuming it under a target addressing violence against women (CARE International 2014).

The final text of the SDGs does not mention child marriage in the target that addresses violence against women (target 5.2), which is in line with the recommendations of CSGs working to end child marriage who believe that subsuming child marriage under another issue (e.g. its proposed inclusion under a target on violence against women) is not adequate because the violence against women frame is too narrow for a complex issue like child marriage (interview # 1; interview # 2; interview # 3). However, child marriage is not addressed in a separate target as recommended by norm entrepreneurs. It is addressed in target 5.3, which calls on the international community to ‘Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation’ (the text of the SDGs is included in Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). One of CSGs’ preferred ways to word this target would have been ‘By 2030 eliminate all harmful practices, especially child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation’ (see THIS IS THE MOMENT). However, even though the wording of this target was disappointing to CSGs working to end child marriage, one of the interviewees indicates that addressing child marriage in this target along with female genital mutilation became necessary given the large number of targets in the SDGs and the desire of each advocacy community to have a separate target focusing on its specific cause (interview # 3). She also indicates that the inclusion of the issue in target 5.3 ‘allowed for a more holistic approach than a narrower or siloed framing of the issue such as including it only under a target on violence against women or education’ (interview # 3).

In short, CSGs do stress the importance of thinking about child marriage as a ‘cross-cutting’ (interview # 3) or ‘multisectoral’ (interview # 5) issue that should be integrated with other global goals, such as goals pertaining to education and health (see also interview # 6). One interviewee also explains that it is helpful to ‘leverage’ (interview # 3) existing norms (i.e. reframe the issue in terms of established norms), but that child marriage should also be recognised as a stand-alone human rights issue that is ultimately addressed through a ban on child marriage as jus cogens under international law (interview # 3). There is a sense among some CSGs that if child marriage is viewed as a stand-alone issue and addressed explicitly and directly, it can become an end in itself, and not simply a means to an end; that is, a means to achieve desired education or health outcomes (interview #5). Putting child marriage in the forefront as a stand-alone target would create an explicit mandate around it (interview # 5), attach indicators to it to monitor and track progress (interview # 5), and create commitments and direct resources towards efforts to end it (interview # 2). Finally, viewing it as a stand-alone issue and not simply as an issue of poverty, education, or violence against women can help the international community address the root causes of child marriage. For example, while poverty certainly exacerbates the problem, it is important to note that more girls than boys from poor families marry early, which shows that this problem is essentially about the value families and communities assign to girls (interview # 3).

This normative innovation is reflected in efforts by CSGs to address girls as a social group that is separate from, and whose needs cannot be subsumed under the needs of, children and women more generally (see discussion above; see also interview # 3, interview # 4, and interview # 6) because of their special vulnerability and marginalisation. The very effort to view girls as a group that needs special human rights protections can be seen as an example of normative innovation not completely unlike efforts to define and protect the human rights of other specific groups because of ‘the irreducibility of the experience of certain group members in terms of their human rights’ (Mégret 2008: 496).

Norm-based Strategies for Change: The National and Community Levels

CSGs have worked in local communities and at the national level in different countries to respond to high rates of child marriage. Their experience is documented and their successful strategies also combine normative
reframing and normative innovation. Much of the advocacy by and on behalf of (adolescent) girls focuses on raising awareness of the impacts of child marriage on girls. Education and raising awareness are important parts of advocacy on the issue of child marriage (interview # 4). Efforts to raise awareness can often highlight the impact of child marriage on education and health outcomes, vulnerability to violence and abuse, and other issues mentioned above. In highlighting these different dimensions of this social problem in their publications, discussed in the overview of child marriage above, CSGs have framed child marriage as a development and human rights issue. Framing child marriage as an obvious violation of human rights is a good example of how normative reframing of an issue in terms of well established and widely held norms can be effective in bringing about change as case studies have shown.

Beyond this normative reframing, normative innovation has also been very important. For example, the Population Council’s *Ishraq* (Arabic for ‘sunrise’) program in Egypt ‘has mobilized communities to change traditional or restrictive gender norms among parents and community members’. In another program in Ethiopia, CSGs are working at the community level to change social norms on female genital mutilation, child marriage, and other practices (interview # 6), helping women question and challenge these practices. As demonstrated in a case study on some communities in Malawi where advocacy on child marriage has taken place, engaging communities and working with girls to empower them and provide them with the leadership skills that they need to advocate on their own behalf can shift social norms pertaining to the role and social status of girls in a community (interview # 4). The case study explains that developing the leadership skills of girls and engaging local communities has ‘transformed community attitudes in Malawi’ and that:

The external evaluation demonstrates that the community now views child marriage as shameful, rather than a desirable arrangement generating social and material gain. This broader societal shift is reflected in the creation of community-led Girls’ Education Funds in some participating villages, which use local resources to promote girls’ education and help child marriage victims return to school (Let Girls Lead 2014: 3).

Beyond the specific case of Malawi, a review of 23 programs designed to end child marriage has shown that among the most common strategies these programs employ are those that focus on empowering girls with knowledge, skills, and support systems and on engaging and mobilising parents and communities (Malhotra et al. 2011). Efforts focused on empowerment seek to foster leadership skills, knowledge, and aspirations that can help girls advocate against child marriage, which can help shift community norms and attitudes pertaining to child marriage (Malhotra et al. 2011: 11). Parent and community engagement and mobilisation efforts ‘attempt to change social norms and forge a more supportive, less punitive environment for girls and families who are willing and ready to change the custom of early marriage’ (Malhotra et al. 2011: 13). This is all indicative of intentional efforts to combine normative reframing and normative innovation to end child marriage.

**Conclusion**

Efforts by CSGs to end child marriage have utilised both of the norm-based strategies reviewed above: normative reframing and normative innovation. There is some evidence suggesting that these strategies are effective and can reduce the prevalence of child marriage by shifting the norms that underpin formal and informal institutions that allow for child marriage to occur. This case study adds another example showing how norm-based strategies of change can be effective in addressing persistent and intractable problems. By providing additional analyses of critical global problems that CSGs are addressing by utilising norm-based strategies, it helps deepen understanding of the different ways in which these actors help address global challenges. The case study also points to some of the ways in which both of these strategies can be combined effectively to bring about change. It shows that civil society can leverage the influence of existing norms through normative reframing while at the same time working to introduce new norms.

**Appendix – List of Interviews**

Interview # 1: Phone interview with Marguerite Lauter, CARE USA, 17 December 2014


Interview # 3: Phone interview with Zara Rapoport, Plan International, 26 February 2015

Interview # 4: Phone interview with Emily Teitsworth, Let Girls Lead, 12 March 2015

Interview # 5: Phone interview with Carol Boender and Milkah Kihunah, CARE USA, 18 March 2015

Interview # 6: Phone interview with NGO staff member, 8 April 2015

**References**


Council on Foreign Relations 2013 *Child Marriage – A
Bonnet Surfing

Jane Downing

Sometimes the sky hung too low to the ground and it squeezed the breath out of Julian. On days like that – on days like this – he felt like he was in one of those vices on the metalwork bench at school. And he wanted to escape. Going back to school after the endless summer would be no help; it’d just be another pressure, another turn of the screw. He wished for a vaulting blue sky and a limitless horizon. And time alone with Candy; life was all about Candy.

On this last weekend of the summer holiday, Gary picked Julian up. Spike rode shotgun so he squeezed into the back of the Corolla with Rob and Candy. He could smell her skin though Rob, sitting between them, had the whiff of dog about him. Chassis low to the road, they passed the roadkill by the gate and fled to the lake. Or, as his dad’s old record blared on Saturday nights, they went down to the river, but the river was dry.

The creek met the river, the river met the lake, the car’s wheels spurted up dust where a couple of years previously they’d water-skied off Rob’s dad’s boat. The lake was now a shimmer in the distance, like a mirage on an over-heated road. Before Christmas they’d dragged the bonnet off a rusted heap abandoned at the lake and adapted to their environment. They secured the bonnet to Gary’s back bumper bar, around the Collingwood footy sticker and the XXXX sticker, tied another couple of ropes for fail-safe, then rode the bonnet through the waves of dust coming off the back of the accelerating car. This was the type of surfing that worked in their landscape. Evolution: not progress, just keeping up with the environment which kept changing even as they did.

More ropes were in the boot that day: the tattered ends of the first ropes they’d used in the holidays, frayed out from the ox-blood red bonnet. New knots were joined around the hinge brackets – Scout camps had left their own residue, but the boys deferred to Candy’s knotting power because somehow the Girl Guide leader had been a better teacher. Her fingers moved like a magician’s.

Then it was time for lots to be argued. Me first, was not only the cry of kindergarten kids.

Another car appeared on the lake bed when who was to get the first ride on the bonnet was still undecided. Talk wavered. They took up positions, Julian and his mates, Gary, Rob and Spike, and his girlfriend Candy. Julian swung his arms around Candy’s waist and leaned against the Corolla, all casual, at least in appearance. Her bum nestled against him. He stared beyond the intruders to the hillside, bald where it’d been logged, sporting a five o’clock shadow where reforestation sprouted in its early stages.

‘Wag school with me on Friday?’ he whispered in Candy’s ear as the new Nissan 4x4 approached. He slipped the unsayable in quickly, unobtrusively: the idea that they meet alone without his mates in tow; so she could ignore it and still leave his hopes and ego intact. His mates were a little apart, standing in the dirt, shadows making giants of them. He didn’t hear Candy’s reply, if any – the intruders were on them.

Julian recognised the driver of the four-wheel drive. Richard came from the big property out past Bullocky Gully, he’d gone to boarding school in Melbourne, now drove a big car, boasted of a young woman from Toorak. He had his own fan club following – trails of dust plumed from the road. Richard pulled up. His girlfriend stayed in the air-conditioning as he stamped across the packed earth. He walked around the bonnet, gave it an evaluating kick.

‘Not bad.’ He cocked his Akubra back a degree.

Julian relaxed.

‘Want a go?’ offered Gary generously. He’d worked the summer on the property that would one day be Richard’s, figured he owed something, for the future.

Two more cars had now pulled up, like the lake bed had become one of those drive-in theatres of old that Julian’s dad banged on about. Richard waited for his audience to converge before he answered.

‘Na, wouldn’t dream of interrupting your fun,’ he drawled. Now his entourage was there, his tone was nasty. The insinuation in the fun was unmistakable: dirt.
The private school boys were all tanned below the collar from real surfing. They could go back to Lorne anytime they wanted, or up the coast to Surfer’s Paradise. Richard had boasted about Hawaii more than once down the footy club.

‘You should do something about that hair,’ he whipped at Candy as he turned back to his over-large vehicle. His pack guffawed. In the country it was a word you can only read in books; Julian and his mates recognized the sound anyway.

‘Get a shower,’ cackled one of Richard’s gang.

‘Nose job too.’ The last of the jackal bray echoed.

Then, with ease, they were gone. A blast of ill-wind blowing on.

The friends stood their ground unmoving. Turned to stone by the face of malice. Spike shuffled his holey sneakers slightly, breaking the spell.

‘Not worth worrying about.’ It was Gary voicing the lie.

The bonnet secured by long ropes behind Gary’s car now looked like a heap of junk.

Julian was still holding Candy. He couldn’t see her face as the magpie racket advanced back into the space left by the human silence. He willed sympathy and strength through his pores into hers. Past the tank-top and freckled back and into her flesh. She moved away and ran her fingers through her sun-bleached hair. The perm had been a sixteenth birthday present. It was growing out, it was a mess, but she wanted a second-hand laptop for her seventeenth. She’d seen one in the Trading Post website on the library’s computer, relatively new; a campaign on her parents had begun.

Julian knew all this. He struggled for something to say out loud, beyond the mute sympathy. He knew at a pinch he could have been part of Richard’s gang: his sister had even dated the mongrel – just the once. Her dumping him perhaps went some way to explain the spite directed at Candy. Julian wanted to tell her this; that these blokes were just dickheads for all their wealth and ease.

‘You know the difference between dickheads and dorks don’t you?’ he asked. None of them knew, his mates or Candy. ‘The dork can’t help it.’

Candy turned, a half-smile forming. Acknowledging they were dorks, and perhaps that was okay. But it was a sad knowledge.

A fresh breeze hushed some of the mood away. Gary, the optimist, with a summer job and a shit-box car, reminded them, ‘come on, we’re the lucky ones to have this.’

This: the car, the second bonnet, the dry lake bed, the day ahead.

And, ‘no sharks,’ observed Julian drily, ‘well not now those plonkers have pissed off.’

The laughter sounded more natural.

‘Why are we waiting? You go first,’ Julian told Gary.

Only now, from the cries of me first, it was all you first.

‘Go ahead. All aboard, Jules,’ all his mates insisted. If turn taking was decided by need, Candy would be on the bonnet, only they know she wouldn’t take a turn. She was there to court her man not danger; though he was hardly a man, with his dark Harry Potter looks and praying mantis limbs. She thinks they’re barmy with their bonnet riding in the dust. She has other plans, long-term plans that don’t involve dust.

And so Julian is first that Saturday. Sometimes the short straw comes in disguise.

The lake bed is already marked, like an Aboriginal painting. Metal has dug into the sun-cemented clay, etching a rainbow serpent trail, with a rusting bonnet tail, weaving courses north and south. In days long gone, young rakes – their other ancestors – would have raced wagons in unicorn: three horses, a pair and a leader. Cutting a dash through the bush. It’s more than three horsepower now.

Candy finds her favourite feral fig tree over on the lake’s former shoreline – for shelter and gathering of fruit – and Gary, Rob and Spike climb in the Corolla. Julian boards the bonnet, belly down, and grasps the makeshift rope bridle. Julian pushes himself hard against the metal, gathering dirt into his jeans and this rare t-shirt devoid of sponsorship; traces for his mother to wonder at. But what do mothers know about the thrill of danger?

Julian does not need to banish thoughts; they are blown from him as the Corolla reaches fifty-six-seventy kilometres an hour. The hills are a blur, the trees are strokes from a thick paint brush. He is flying.
For months they have been invincible bonnet surfers. Through the long dry summer. This has been their summer. They’d hardly noticed the rain in the last week, just a little, a few feeble showers. They have not seen that the rain their parents prayed for, has left a film of mud at the centre of their dry-packed circuit.

Unpredicted and unpredictable changes. Everything is chance. A skid leads the bonnet rider in an arc, and then a pendulum sway back again. Gary’s correcting tug at the steering wheel snaps a tethering rope.

Candy is on her feet, a half-eaten fig spilled red at her feet. ‘Yes, this Friday, just us,’ she whispers.

Julian is flying. He will soon land.

The sky is so low it’s like a lid on the basin of the lake.

A Fo’c’sle Tale

Do you get the drift? – that I set sail when the sea was only three years old. Spool music, that juke box makes me mad. I won’t have both mothers gone. When I need to weep I’ll let you know. Was it you who scamped my bed? If you want love like the James Gang gave I can give it now (comes at a price). You can take me for a loyal, two parts king, one queen. Weighed & found wanting, I’m dressed in neuter. A one-time only jelly-belly shaker did I win or lose? If it wasn’t for Molly Polly would shut the jive on Cuss Row. It’s there that I told that Persian a thing or two. His was an all-day habit impossible to tolerate – past jolly, almost holy. One of those high talls you meet in markets, he was sure he’d bade me a goodnight once. Not so, ‘twas something he’d read in the literature of insolence. It was sometime between night & day that I used a sword to cut a swath through smokestack drift. No holds barred, she (the Captain’s wife) insisted that I trade that swath for an anecdote that featured her in love with Espionage. It’s a deal, I said, but only if you tell me what you did with Citizen Bob, his dog chained to a post, left to starve. Carve an effigy, it’s me, add nails, a salutation from the joker, Baron Lance. Hog-tied, how can I trance. Don’t nobody dance like I do: back-foot double-bind. Mind how you speak to Maybellene she’s got a shotgun as long as she is tall. Which brings us to the fall, the tumble from grace, the grand finale: Both mothers gone, let the weeping commence.

Private Property

A legless man
Guards slippers
Of ideologues outside
The communist party headquarters.

Chandracharman.S,
There were two couples. Harvey, who was middle-aged, and his thirty-year-old wife, short, plump Christabel; and Kees and Chloe who were about Christabel's age. Harvey was a writer, still physically fit for his age, but doggedly cynical about anything non-intellectual. Kees, tall and strong, operated a gardening service, and although he could afford to take it easy he liked tackling the hard manual work. His partner, tall, willowy Chloe, always wore black and often referred to people's bodies, her own included, weaving these references into whatever conversation was current. Christabel had a soaring I.Q., ran her own travel agency, and had been studying part-time for years. Harvey liked to joke that his wife collected degrees and diplomas like other women collected recipes. Christabel knew some people resented her capabilities, but she also realised that Harvey, simply because he was a writer, was the one they found more interesting. This was both convenient, because fewer demands were made on her attention, and she saw how the pressure of this demand sometimes debilitated Harvey when his opinion was constantly sought then argued with, and, at the same time, irritating, because she was only human, despite her soaring I.Q.

The couples had met after Chloe, who was a social worker feeling harassed because the only job she could get was in child protection although she fancied herself as a poet, had attended a reading when Harvey read a rambling piece of fiction-in-progress which she had laughed at in the right places. Christabel had been at the reading, but Kees would never attend anything like that. Kees had few opinions about anything. He said little, and was easygoing and agreeable. Christabel liked him as much as she could like someone who bored her. So did Harvey who pretended to be more ordinary than he really was whenever he was with Kees. Chloe, who could make Kees do anything she wanted, was the most volatile of the four of them. Sometimes she stayed at Kees's house, and sometimes she lived alone at her rented house in the bush not far from a small town.

The whole time they were collecting towels and fruit and drinks, and then when they walked in single file along the bush track, Harvey sensed Christabel worrying about undressing. She told him later that she had intended stripping to her pants when she had capitulated before she thought she might make a fool of herself by protesting any longer, but then she realised that not only would this look silly, but her pants would become transparent as soon as they were wet. She had never had any trouble undressing in front of boyfriends.

‘The creek's not far,’ Chloe said. ‘Just up that rise and down the other side at the end of a lovely bush track. I've even got my own small beach.’

Christabel shot Harvey a look that said trust you and your big mouth, a look with a suggestion also of the knowledge of what was coming next. But it was not a look of blame, more one of inevitability.

‘You don't need swimmers,’ Chloe enthused. ‘I always swim nude.’

‘I don't care if I don't swim,’ said Christabel. ‘You go. I've never been keen on swimming.’

‘Oh, come on! It's gorgeous there. It'll cool us down beautifully. Harvey looks so hot!’

‘Poor Harve,’ muttered Christabel, cracking a wry smile. ‘I'm really quite cool here. There's a lovely breeze.’

Kees looked around as if he might see this phantom breeze.

‘I'm glad you can feel it,’ he said, but in a gentle tone. Then to Chloe: ‘Lend her your old togs. They'd probably fit.’

Harvey knew Christabel didn't care for Chloe's quick, straight-faced glance which seemed to take in her entire body and find it below standard.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let's have this swim. It is bloody hot enough, although I feel a bit of a buffoon skinnydipping at my age.’

‘All right,’ Christabel said, standing. ‘And I won't need your swimmers.’

The first time Harvey and Christabel had visited them at Chloe's house, before the two couples had hardly got to know each other, Chloe played her harp. She could only play two pieces, and after she had repeated these several times she had suggested a swim. Harvey had been mopping his face and joking about the heat.
in the past, and she sometimes worked herself up to an excited state by flaunting herself in expensive lingerie for Harvey if she thought he had been too preoccupied with his work. They had been together long enough for him to realise that her anxiety annoyed her because it didn't stand to reason, and then her annoyance increased the anxiety. He guessed she would rather be at home studying instead of trudging along the track through the bush which Chloe described as 'lyrical,' the track which ended at a beach sure enough. Whitish sand. Yes, even idyllic in a way, as Chloe had insisted.

‘Here we are,’ said Chloe as Kees turned his back to the others and pulled his T-shirt off. He was naked in seconds.

They all watched his brown back as he jogged towards the water. His small buttocks were a lighter shade of brown. Not one of the other three had started to undress. Then Harvey got rid of his clothes quickly. Christabel noticed that Chloe turned away as Kees had done, to shed her black clothes. Christabel only hesitated a moment before taking her pants off. Nobody looked at her, not even Harvey. They were looking up at a cloud the colour of charcoal which had covered the sun as she sauntered into the water as if she did this all the time. Then they all splashed each other. The creek was only about a metre deep and most of the time they kept their bodies underwater.

***

Harvey wrote a story at a time when he was struggling for ideas. This was after the two couples had got to know each other well. To get started he used some obvious concrete details from Chloe's and Kees's life — their type of employment, the way they lived — to build believable characters. He also included other information, more personal incidents involving a harp, a private beach, and some sexual specifics from his own life, but no secrets. Some of these details he had gleaned from what they had told him, and the rest he had sensed or guessed. Like most of his stories, this one also contained other remembered scenes, both from his life, and from the lives of different people he knew. Some of it was made up. Unlike most of his stories, this one seemed to work without much re-drafting, so he left the original details he had plucked from his friends' lives as they were. He assured himself that there was nothing derogatory or humiliating in this harmless record, and he even thought his friends might be flattered.

He entered the story in a literary competition where it won first prize -- a small sum of money and toned down publication in a newspaper. Over the telephone Chloe exclaimed to Christabel about Harvey's success. She had just read about it in the paper. She had the story, with its unflattering photograph of Harvey that Christabel had given the editor along with the potted details of his career, right in front of her. Then she put Kees on.

‘I reckon I should get the royalties.’

‘That would come to about five cents, Kees,’ Christabel responded, matching his jokey tone. ‘Going by the amount of money most writers earn.’

‘Yeah, I know. Chloe's said.’

Then they went on to other matters. Kees handed the telephone back to Chloe who invited Harvey and Christabel to a party. By coincidence, Christabel was planning to invite some friends around not long after Chloe's party so she accepted and then immediately invited them to hers. Acceptances and offers of help all round.

Both of these social gatherings went off hitchless until about two hours into the return engagement, a warm day with guests sitting in Harvey's and Christabel's garden. It was an afternoon affair and they had all eaten too much lunch. The wine had been opened and people were spread too far apart in order to sit in the shade. From several metres away Chloe, who had come without Kees who was working, caught Harvey's attention and asked him what he was writing now. The other guests were already talking so they hardly noticed this new conversation beginning. Harvey, straining to hear Chloe who would never raise her voice, tried to explain about something he had been working on, an essay in which he happened to refer to an incident involving friendship, with Chloe and Kees in mind.

‘Now, these are not characters. It's non-fiction, so I'm actually writing about you and Kees,’ he said, making conversation by deliberately alluding to the prizewinning story.

‘Do you think that's ethical?’

Harvey had always refused to flatter Chloe, or even take her seriously, and he often had trouble understanding exactly what she meant. He realised that her vagueness increasingly irritated and bored him, and that he had been subtly avoiding her. Because his reference to friendship in the essay had been a kind one, and also because she hadn't seen it, her question struck him as typically odd, but he was quick to recognise her peevish tone. He did his best to explain, taking care to make good sense, where he stood regarding whether or not a writer is justified in mentioning people he knows or not a writer is justified in mentioning people he knows — leaving no secrets. Some of these details he had included other information, more personal incidents involving a harp, a private beach, and some sexual specifics from his own life, but no secrets. Some of these details he had gleaned from what they had told him, and the rest he had sensed or guessed. Like most of his stories, this one also contained other remembered scenes, both from his life, and from the lives of different people he knew. Some of it was made up. Unlike most of his stories, this one seemed to work without much re-drafting, so he left the original details he had plucked from his friends' lives as they were. He assured himself that there was nothing derogatory or humiliating in this harmless record, and he even thought his friends might be flattered.

He entered the story in a literary competition where it won first prize -- a small sum of money and toned down publication in a newspaper. Over the telephone Chloe exclaimed to Christabel about Harvey's success. She had just read about it in the paper. She had the story, with its unflattering photograph of Harvey that Christabel had given the editor along with the potted details of his career, right in front of her. Then she put Kees on.

‘So you reckon it's all right to use your friends like that?’

‘Yes. Provided you're not saying anything obviously unkind, or divulging confidential information.’

‘Don't you think you should have asked our
permission before you wrote that story?’

‘What? Are you talking about the fiction now?’

‘Yes. That story that was in the paper. You know what I’m talking about.’

‘No, I don’t believe I should ask anyone’s permission when I write fiction. What’s wrong with that story, anyway? There’s nothing offensive in it, surely. It’s meant to be uplifting... I think, with reasonably attractive characters. The judges liked it.’

‘It was wooden. What about the passion? You left that out. You know it was about us. Other people think so, too. My father told Kees he should get the royalties, and my sister said she wouldn’t want anything to do with you. She reckons you’re sick.’

‘Even though I obviously used some details from your life, it wasn’t about you. It certainly didn’t end up about you. It’s fiction, for Christ’s sake. What do you want me to say? I’m astounded that you quote the opinions of your family as if they’re literary critics.’

Just then one of the several children present fell and let out a loud shriek of pain which interrupted this conversation and all the other conversations that had been going on around Chloe and Harvey. He was glad of the interruption. His bladder pressed him, and Chloe’s sudden attack had, by its utter surprise, unnerved him. Some guests who had to leave early started saying goodbye to people and Chloe left at the same time. She shared these goodbyes as if nothing upsetting had occurred, and years later, long after he had heard that she had left Kees (and the next two men in her life) and long after he had grown weary of Christabel and her soaring I.Q., and had drifted away from her to search, fruitlessly, for a more exciting partner, he would remember as he sometimes sat alone gazing into the window of the past, that he had believed at the time that Chloe, who had been dressed in black, as usual, had slipped away from that garden party like a successful assassin.

******


In *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), Georges Bataille identifies a key feature of the erotic: that it exists in the realm of the deeply subjective. According to Bataille, engagement in the erotic is destabilising in that the subject undergoes a deliberate and conscious loss of self. As such, Bataille foregrounds a challenge of writing eroticism: that the erotic exists outside the capacity of language and deeply inside the subject whose self is delightfully unified with the object of desire.

Krissy Kneen’s, *The Adventures of Holly White and the Incredible Sex Machine*, like all erotic fiction, is a failed project before it begins. As Bataille points out, language falters at the prospect of articulating eroticism. However, this is Kneen’s third book of sex writing and her skill allows her to overcome the challenge represented by the inexpressible. The result is sex fiction with a plot (a rare beast in the genre) that also contributes to knowledge about human sexuality.

Kneen employs allusions to classic works of eroticism as a pretext for the plot. The allusions demonstrate Kneen’s extensive research, and also act as shorthand for the articulation of the erotic. *Holly* is a coming-of-age novel that follows the protagonist, Holly White, from sexual abstinence to knowing. Holly grows through reading the books she encounters in an erotic bookclub. Once Holly’s erotic imagination is activated she meets Nick, curator of the ‘orgone machine’ that accumulates the energy of orgasms. Through Nick, Holly discovers she is a sexual ‘chosen one’ – an erotic superhero who can channel ‘orgone’ or sexual power. She is ‘Orgone Woman’ with a vagina that grows phosphorescent when she’s aroused and attracts zombie-like lovers. Echoing Sade, Kneen’s sex scenes are at once grotesque and comical, which is a source of disorientation for readers. This disorientation is an accurate emotional echo of sex – and indeed other intimate acts of the body – in its capacity to evoke both disgust and laughter.

The least sophisticated aspect of *Holly* is the commitment to the virgin/whore binary, as represented by Holly’s abstinence, followed by her sexual excesses, and then her reversion to abstinence. When she breaks her abstinence vow for the second time, Holly annihilates her lover; he becomes “incorporeal” (p.267) as he ejaculates. A sexual woman is dangerous: unfortunately, a message heard

---

too many times in sex fiction. But there is another aspect to the abstinence/excess binary in this novel that turns danger into celebration and banality into meaningful play.

The irresistibility of Holly’s sexuality is a preoccupation of this book. Overwhelmed by her sexual energy, Holly returns home and recommits to abstinence. But now she “knows” the erotic, she cannot resist having sex. Bataille sees eroticism as a present pleasure that diverts energy from work; a more future-oriented human motivation. Desire disturbs the balance between these competing motivations, reducing productivity, hence, the prohibitions on sex. However, Holly does not work. Her parents fund her trip to Paris, where she reads sex fiction and fornicates. It is fitting therefore that the book ends in an orgy apocalypse where, rather than drool, zombies drip obscene words.

This final scene is beautiful. Kneen’s integration of genres transcends the difficulties of writing sex. In co-opting horror and sci-fi tropes, Kneen uses the spectral fantasy to represent the anxiety of sex: that it will overtake us, deter us from our work and ultimately steal us from ourselves. Simultaneously, the scene represents our compliance in this manipulation by the erotic, “I know”, said Holly calmly, “This is how it supposed to end.” (p.275)

The final impression is an erotic site where desire is celebrated. All selves are abolished. Language becomes a force, an echo and finally a silence. We give ourselves over to the erotic force, are complicit in the pleasure of it – and, ultimately, the nothingness this produces. Thus, Kneen renders an authentic account of the human erotic.

References
Charity

A tall black man stands in the pre-winter cold. He stands on the sidewalk on Murray or Forbes, sometimes outside the post office, sometimes by the traffic lights, today near the bank.

A tall black man with a soft and kind voice makes himself visible when he would rather be invisible, extends a hand, says 'I'm hungry. Can you spare a quarter?' Sometimes I stop and give him a dollar, chiding myself silently for the quick glance, the reflex thought that he doesn't look hungry, the assumption that hunger should be self-evident, writ large upon his face, the bones of his hands.

Sometimes I pass him and say 'Not now. On my way back' knowing he will still be standing there. On my way back I stop and give him a dollar, a tall black man whose name I have never asked, whose story I do not know, whose features are vague because I have not raised my eyes, takes my offering, and without fail, blesses me. I don't know how to thank him for his charity.

DAVID ADES,
PITTSBURGH, USA

Turkey

This thirty dirty turkey – Put to some matrimonial use. OK, but it's got to be full-frontal or nothing. Listen to them dead, that cackle? Better find yourself a choker (joker) if you want them silenced. When you skin in a no-skin place there are consequences. A gross sex blot, madam, don't do again or we spank. Have we already lost track of the subject? What is the subject? – The stuff of stealth? The roger (jolly, line 5) who's a dead ringer for the Bobbin' boy who ransacked Prof Jerry's wardrobe? And found therein: 27 chop sticks, four pairs of buckle-up galoshes & the words (27) for a prayer. What should we ask for? Not for a choker in our already messed-up life that's for sure: got to get free of them roaring (with laughter?) dead, maybe introduce (as an antidote) some party ponies to easy ride, Vivienne moaning No but we can deal with that. Trying hard with that heavy breathing, Viv, to elicit our sympathy. OK, we sympathise, now move on. Walk that walk (her daddy must be dirt poor). Where to? Have we, again, lost track of the subject? It's hurdy-gurdy turkey, fool, & to your matrimonial it's already been put; maybe in a day or two you'll notice how dire.

PHILIP HAMMIAL
BLUE MOUNTAINS, NSW
SUBSCRIPTION FORM

☐ I would like to subscribe to Social Alternatives Journal

☐ I would like to purchase a gift subscription

NAME ..............................................................................................................................................

ADDRESS ........................................................................................................................................

COUNTRY................................................................................................................................. POST CODE .............

EMAIL ADDRESS ............................................................................................................................

GIFT RECIPIENT ............................................................................................................................

ADDRESS ........................................................................................................................................

COUNTRY................................................................................................................................. POST CODE .............

Tick the subscription package you would like to purchase:

☐ 1 Year 4 issues

☐ 2 Years 8 issues

INDIVIDUALS

☐ $40

☐ $70

INSTITUTIONS AND LIBRARIES

☐ $60

☐ $110

CONCESSIONS

☐ $30

☐ $50

Plus overseas postage if applicable

$40.00 per year.

I would like to give a donation of $ ............

OPTIONS FOR PAYING:

Post this form with a cheque or Postal Order in Australian Dollars to SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES, University of the Sunshine Coast, Faculty of Arts and Business, Maroochydore DC QLD 4556

Or

Email Lee-anne Bye, Lee-anne@socialalternatives.com for details on how to make EFT payments in Australian Dollars to our Bank Account together with your subscription request and address details. Please note that Social Alternatives is not obliged to charge or pay GST.
An extensive catalogue of back issues is available spanning over 30 years of publishing. BELOW is the list of issues.

- V21.1 Peace Education for a New Century
- V21.2 Nonviolence in Principle and Action
- V21.3 Unthemed edition
- V21.4 Control or Compassion? The Future of Asylum Seekers and Refugees
- V22.1 Bioethics: Cloning and Stem Cell Research
- V22.2 War, Gender & Sexuality
- V22.3 Indigenous Knowledge
- V22.4 Ideas at the Powerhouse
- V23.1 Is There a Left Left?
- V23.2 Terrorism
- V23.3 Big Lies
- V23.4 Globalisation, The Environment & Social Justice
- V24.1 Media, Mania & Government
- V24.2 Australian & International Feminisims
- V24.3 Humanitarian Intervention
- V24.4 Education for what?
- V25.1 Humiliation & History in Global Perspectives
- V25.2 Governance
- V25.3 Democracy in Danger
- V25.4 World Education
- V26.1 Counter Alternatives
- V26.2 The Nuclear Debate Revisited
- V26.3 Global Ethics
- V26.4 30th Anniversary Edition
- V27.1 Civil Society
- V27.2 Election '07
- V27.3 Justice & Governance in Water
- V27.4 Mental Health
- V28.1 The New Right Were Wrong
- V28.2 Global Governance
- V28.3 Australia and The Pacific
- V28.4 Utopias, Dystopias
- V29.1 Peacebuilding from below in Asia Pacific
- V29.2 Population Health in the 21st Century
- V29.3 Biodiversity in the 21st Century
- V29.4 The Visual Narrative: Alternative photographic exposures
- V30.1 The Value of Techniques
- V30.2 Shifting Cultures
- V30.3 Challenging Contemporary 'Democracy' and Identifying Problems
- V30.4 Pass Fail: Assessing contemporary educational reform
- V31.1 Community climate Action
- V31.2 Politics and Ethics in New Media
- V31.3 Disaster Dialogues: Representations of catastrophe in word and image
- V31.4 The Sustainability Prism: Explorations in Sustainability and Language
- V32.1 The Politics of Poverty
- V32.2 Beyond Y: The experience of youth in the 21st century
- V32.3 Refugee Policy: A highly charged issue
- V32.4 Animals, Fiction, Alternative
- V33.1 Music Politics and Environment
- V33.2 Social Alternatives Open Theme
- V33.3 The Wicked Problem of Violences in Mad Places/Spaces and People
- V33.4 A Year of Peace
- V34.1 Cosmopolitanism
- V34.2 Random Callings: Discerning the University Mission
- V34.3 Election and Aftermath
- V34.4 Youth and Precarious Work