Poverty traps not stepping stones: young adults’ long-term experiences of precarious work

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Aims

- To explore apparent contradiction between
  - social theoretical assumptions about the *proliferation of precarious work* (a.k.a ‘contingent’, ‘insecure’, ‘non-standard’)
  - (some) survey-based, empirical evidence that deny this

- To report findings of long-term, longitudinal research with marginalised young adults in NE England

- To consider the significance of precarious work in processes of youth marginalisation

- ‘The boundaries between work and non-work are becoming more fluid. Flexible, pluralized forms of underemployment are spreading’.
- Rising precarious employment affects all sorts of work & worker, replacing regular jobs
- Is leitmotif of risk society & indicative of late modern capitalism
- The social theoretical wisdom (Beck, Sennett, Castells, Giddens) - influential in youth studies
BUT, Fevre’s (2007) review of UK, US, Europe labour force data shows, e.g.:

- average job tenure has *not* declined
- workers’ feelings of insecurity *have* declined
- (some evidence) that rates of long-term employment are *growing*
- the proportion of UK non-permanent employees was *lower* in 2006 (5.8%) than in 1997 (8%)
- a *downward* trend in ‘contingent’ employment in the US between 1995 & 2001
- *long-term* employment relationships remain the norm for most European workers (International Labour Office/Auer and Cazes, 2003)
Fevre (2007) ‘the idea of a new age of employment insecurity is a myth’

‘it has not been employment that has become insecure and flexible but social theory’ that makes claims ‘without undertaking empirical research’.
But, most insecure work = amongst younger & less educated workers

- Fenton and Dermott (2006: 205) survey in SW England:
  ‘a sizeable majority, mostly of low paid workers whose working lives can be described as discontinuous and fragmented...employment fragmentation is concentrated among young adults with less education and in lower status, lower paid occupations’.

- Furlong and Cartmel (2004: 27) labour market careers of disadvantaged young men in Scotland:
  ‘...their main problem was not finding work, but keeping it. This employment insecurity tended not to reflect negative attitudes...or necessarily a lack of skills; it was almost entirely a consequence of the “flexible” nature of low skilled employment in modern Britain’.
‘whether young people have to “queue” in temporary jobs while waiting for a permanent job or whether they are “trapped” in insecure, secondary jobs with no bridge to stable employment’? (Auer and Cazes, 2003).

‘Unsurprisingly, youth represent a high proportion of new hires and job changers [and job quits]...this is just part of the natural dynamics of settling into the world of work’.

(Quintini et al, 2007, summarising youth transitions in OECD countries)
Or precarious work as a poverty trap?

- Is young people’s rapid movement between jobs an expression of late modern, ‘choice biographies’/‘emergent adulthood’?
- Or evidence of new forms of marginalisation for working-class young adults?
- Middle-class students ‘paying their way’ through university may choose to do lower quality jobs temporarily - to finance study and leisure.
- For working-class young adults precarious employment can define their labour market transitions and be the outcome.
4 long-term studies of youth transitions & social exclusion (fieldwork 1998-2003 – and then 2008/9): ESRC & JRF

- Most recent study, Tracy Shildrick et al November 2010, JRF Low-pay, No-pay: Understanding Recurrent Poverty

- In some of poorest neighbourhoods in England (Teeside)

- 186 white, working-class ‘hard to reach’ young adults

- Qualitative, in-depth, wide-ranging interviews
  - education & labour market ‘careers’
  - housing & family ‘careers’
  - leisure, criminal, drug using ‘careers’

- (Quasi)/longitudinal, following (some) same individuals teens to 30s
Post-school transitions

- Unemployment = common & recurrent for all...
- ...but so was employment
- Long-term post-school transitions, into 30s = insecure & non-progressive
  - **age 16-18**: School-youth training-unemployment-job...
  - **age 18-26**: job unemployment-FE -unemployment-New Deal...
  - **age 26-36+**: unemployment-job-unemployment-New Deal-unemployment...

- Not labour market exclusion (or idle *underclass*) - but long-term churning underemployment & economic marginality
Insecure, economically marginal transitions

- Low paid, low quality, low/ no skilled & insecure
e.g. factory workers, bar/ fast food staff, care assistants, security guards, labourers, shop assistants

- Easily *hired* into, & *fired* from, the abundant ‘poor work’ at the bottom of the labour market
Why did they leave/ lose jobs?

- Typically involuntary:
  - Short-term contracts (particularly via employment agencies)
  - Redundancy
  - Dismissals (often apparently unfair, sometimes illegal)

- Sometimes chosen (quitting), but choices often ‘forced’
  - Physical ill-health (e.g. via work related injuries)
  - Mental ill-health (e.g. depression, anxiety – sometimes job related)
  - Care responsibilities (extended family)
  - Financial reasons (e.g. rising costs of childcare, travel)

- Overall, demand-side insecurity of employment = prime driver of ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ (conclusion of wider JRF programme too)
Longer-term poor transitions

- Precarious work trapped interviewees in lasting poverty & economic marginality
- Doing the same ‘poor work’ at age 17 & 27 years
- Most recent study (Shildrick et al, 2010) shows pattern of ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’ continued for these young adults into 30s
- **Not stepping stones to something better**
- Similar findings in other studies that focus on disadvantaged places & people (contra general labour force surveys)
- ‘the precarious nature of many low-paid jobs’ means that getting ‘a job may only represent a turn in the cycle of poverty’ (McKnight, 2002: 98)
‘Low-pay, no-pay’ insecurity, one example: Richard, 30, currently unemployed

- **‘Just jumping from job to job it’s no way to go.** It’s a nightmare! Jack of all trades, master of none (laughs). I just want something with a bit of job security - where maybe I can buy me own house in the future rather than just where you’ve got to be on a wing and a prayer type thing... **just a job that I can call me own**, you know what I mean? Rather than just looking for one all the time or just jumping from job to job’.

Since age 16:
- 15 episodes of unemployment
- 5 training schemes
- 9 jobs (longest 18 months), now via emp. agencies
- highest pay £7.50 ph, usually £5.50 ph.
- **poor & deeply in debt** – accrued whilst ‘signed off’ doing short-term agency jobs (loss of benefits)
- **general finding:** people often financially better off on benefits...but do risk increased poverty by working!
How do we explain this?
The marginal transitions equation

old, class-based, normative aspirations for ‘real work’ (cf. Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 1977)
+ massive, socio-spatially concentrated de-industrialisation
+ continued abundance of precarious ‘poor work’
+ UK policy to move young & poor from ‘welfare to work’ & poor quality post-16 quality training/educ. programmes
  = Long-term low-pay, no-pay cycle
  = Lasting poverty/ economic marginality (that signal intergenerational downward social mobility)
In other words...biography & social structure

- De-industrialisation shifted *social structural crises onto individual life histories*
- Downward social mobility - but young people of this stable, white working-class cling to *old values & practices* (e.g. ‘not being a dole wallah’)
- ‘Getting by’ via precarious *poor work & churning economic marginality*
Conclusion

- Social theory may overestimate extent of precarious work as general phenomena
- Young/ less educated = most likely precarious workers
- Policy orthodoxy sees this as ‘natural’ & ‘passing’: normal stepping stones
- Yet qualitative/ ethnographic studies can show it as widespread & lasting (difference explained by…)
  - Social & geographic concentration of precarious poor work
  - Contractually permanent work experienced as temporary
  - Wider, ‘every day’ definitions of precarious work as ‘poor work’
    – low paid, low skill, poor quality, not just temporary
Conclusion

- Despite policy pronouncements about a high skill, high tech economy, jobs requiring no qualifications will remain at around 7.4 million in 2020 (IPPR, 2009)
- Low skilled/ paid work will remain abundant in UK: who will do this poor work?
- Precarious, poor work entraps disadvantaged, working-class young adults in economic marginality, ensuring lasting poverty
- ‘Poor work’ a new signal of youth marginalisation & downward social mobility, for WC young adults in Teesside
- More widely – ‘underemployment is the 21st century global normality for youth in the labour market’, with precarious work a facet of this underemployment (Roberts, 2009: 4).


