We must be precarious; the system demands it: hidden injuries and subjectivities of precarious work

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This thesis draws from the lived experience of precarious work, to present and explore the journey of precarity and all its nuances. Contextually, this study comes at a significant period in the UK, a time of extreme economic uncertainty (for most), where many of the issues associated with precarious work, have been intensified and perhaps highlighted more than ever before, certainly more so than previous decades. During the lifespan of this research, the world has been in the grips of an ongoing pandemic, with notable impacts on health and wellbeing. In the UK, the economic aftershock of COVID-19 has combined with the self-inflicted fiscal destabilisation and 'bonfire of rights' accompanying the chaos of Brexit (Walker, 2022). This comes at a time when many have already struggled to make ends meet, following over a decade of ideology driven cuts to living and working standards (Meadway, 2022). From, stagnant wages, rising living costs, and relentless attacks on education, health and welfare, the UK is now in a position in which there is 'nothing left to cut' (Davies, 2022). Yet the solution proposed by the regime of the day, has been to the meet the many crises from decades of Thatcherite neoliberalism, with more of the same. We are left with an environment of fear, uncertainty, disbelief, and a potential powder keg of mass strike action and civil unrest (Yorke et al., 2022). Among those most exposed and most vulnerable to the impacts of such an environment, are precarious workers.

The research draws on autoethnographic research - seeking, applying for, and carrying out assignments as a temp (temporary agency worker) in the East midlands, UK. This is combined with 15 in-depth interviews with precarious workers of multiple backgrounds, across different regions of the UK. One of the key contributions to the literature which this

thesis has provided, is in capturing and shedding much needed light on the nuances of the precarious worker experience. It presents a living tapestry of the experience of precarity, with the aim of making visible what is currently occluded by divisions within current theory. Furthermore, it provides new insights into the 'ambitions, desires, and strategies of precarious workers' (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012, p304), along with considerations for the highly neglected area of the work of getting work. It is hoped that, by doing so, it can help answer longstanding calls to better understand "the nature of the new employment relations that are being created and their implications for individual and societal well-being" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.22). More specifically, it shall shed light on the 'individual sense-making, motivations, expectations and relationship-building' of precarious workers, as an increasingly broad demographic (Manolchev et al., 2018).

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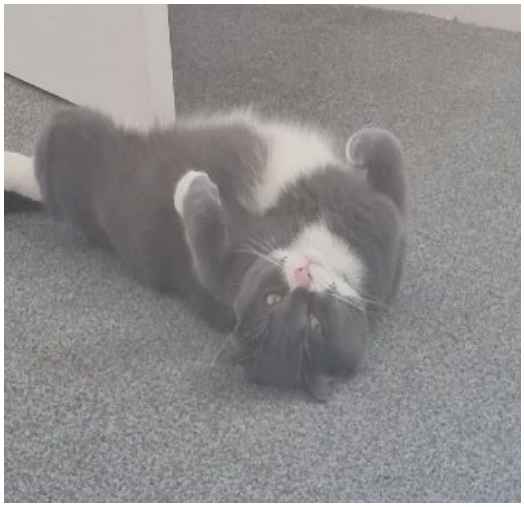
To April, grá go deo, is ceol mo chroí thú – eternal love and gratitude for being with me through every struggle. To our next chapter Xx

Big love also goes out to my family and friends, especially Johnny, whose chats, general support and IT fixes kept this thing going. Additional cheers to my co-worker Grayson, for forcing me to step away from the desk occasionally:



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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Introduction & Rationale

Precarious work is all around us. Even in the face of a pandemic, those on precarious contracts across the UK have continued to deliver food to doorsteps, provide care to the vulnerable, staff department stores, universities, hospitals, and more. Despite its ubiquity, precarious work continues to maintain dimensions that are hidden, overlooked, or perhaps just ignored. Indeed, it is important to remember that 'precarious work' is far from a new concept. Casualised working contracts have long proven popular with business leaders, particularly those keen to 'maximise flexibility' and transfer certain risks onto workers (including sickness/ill health/injuries and fluctuations in production demands), not to mention limiting impact on financial costs (ILO, 2011; Wiengarten et al., 2021). However, as will be explored, considerations of worker precarity stretch back into the late 1800's, and can also be found throughout the early works of prominent theorists such as Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu (see Jonna & Foster, 2016, for illustration). As such, there is a degree of 'pessimism' to what some may be consider a dated concept, in that, precarious work should in fact be considered the 'norm' of capitalism, rather than an exception (Betti, 2016; Mosoetsa et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, it has been suggested that there has been a rapid and expansive acceleration of precarious work in the neoliberal era (Lambert & Herod, 2016). This is especially true in comparison to the brief post-Fordist paradigms which characterised the labour markets of the 1960's onwards (Sitkin, 2014). Most poignantly, it is acknowledged that 'something is happening to workers', which is only "partially captured by the idea that work has become more precarious and that employers treat workers more casually" (White, 2018, P2).

This thesis certainly began with a similar sentiment. I have always remained aware of the insecure and demanding nature of the work I had previously undertaken; together with the 'rubbish' and 'unliveable' pay involved, not to mention exposure to instances of exploitation (such as wage theft, bullying, and harassment). However, an acute articulation of these conditions, at least one which could fully connect all the strands of my experiences, had proven elusive. Certainly, for most of my adult life, precarity has been a common feature. This stretches from a brief (and extremely dodgy) 'cash in hand' telesales job whilst at school, to working in warehouses, temping in offices, and balancing various shifts in multiple kitchens and bars, in order to support myself through higher education. As I write this thesis, I am a 'casual' research associate, and an hourly paid lecturer (HPL). In fact, on reflection, I have probably had more precarious jobs than those that might be considered stable, at this point.

Yet, I must admit, I did not actually become familiar with the term 'precarious work' until around 2016, while studying for my Masters in Sociology (many moons since my career as a possibly underage telesales op, had fizzled out). This is perhaps unsurprising given the ambiguous nature of the term in public and political discourse. Together with its many associated synonyms and variants (such as precariousness, precarity, flexibility, flexibilisation, gig work, side hustles, temping, and so on), there are a broad range of working conditions and job types associated with discussions of precarious work. Additionally, thanks in part to media/film/popular culture there appears to be an increased public awareness of the negative connotations, and many critiques which surround this subject.

In his recent retelling of the classic Italian neorealist film *The Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948), Matt Chambers (2020) transposes the unravelling fragility of precarious existence in post-world war Italy, into the modern context of contemporary London. The main plot revolves around a migrant delivery driver (whose name we aptly never learn), as he completes his 'gigs' around the city on a motorbike. When his bike is stolen, the theft itself becomes an event which reveals how almost every aspect of life, for him and his family, has been constantly hanging by a small thread. As he is told by his boss, 'no bike, no work; no work, no money; no money, no flat'. The original neorealist cinematic incarnation of this story (written by Cesare Zavattini *see Stubbs 1975*), is based in post-war Italy. This tells the story, of a man trying to provide for his family (Antonio and Maria Ricci, plus their two children), in the remains of a country ravaged by war and poverty. In order to purchase a bicycle and allow Antonio to undertake a new job that he has been offered (putting up advertisements throughout the city); Maria sells some of their most treasured 'luxury' linen. When his bicycle is stolen, a storyline unfolds which takes us through the anguish and fragility of existence for Antonio and his family.

It is fascinating to consider, that one of these plot lines takes place in a post war country, many decades in the past. The other demonstrates how this can so easily slide into the contemporary neoliberal landscape of the UK; not a land ravaged by war, but one of the so-called 'richest countries in the world' (Tandon, 2022). However, as the accounts from participants in this study serve to illustrate, the all-consuming 'violence' of neoliberalism (Springer et al., 2016) is far more insidious than any cinematic representation. In the UK, more than four decades of an economic model intent on repeatedly attacking the working and living standards of the majority of its citizens, has succeeded in widening inequalities in many areas (Garnham, 2017). The volatility of the situation has become such, that police

have warned of surging crime and civil unrest, as a consequence of prolonged and 'painful economic pressure' (Yorke et al., 2022).

We are, it seems, in the maniacal throws of a perpetual state of exceptionalism, in which necessities such as food, housing, and energy, have seemingly become luxuries, via some neoliberal inversion of Maslow's hierarchal pyramid (McLeod, 2007). This means that, for many of the Antonio's, the key workers, for others like me, the delicate threads which hold together our precarious existence, are likely to be torn away. Yet, unlike the setting to *The Bicycle Thieves*, this is not due to the ravages of war, but the same ideology that has replaced any notions of living, with a desperate scramble to simply exist.

As the work of Trebor Scholz (2016) has outlined, we are perhaps already living on the cusp of one possible endgame under neoliberalism. The conservative economist Tyler Cowen (2013) presents a picture of the inevitability of precarious work, and moreover, vast inequality, as something to be embraced as the norm. Somewhat like Ulrich Beck's (1996) conceptualisation of the 'Brazilianization' of work, and the race to the bottom in terms of working conditions, Cowen (utilising Mexico as an example) introduces us to the replacement of secure employment contracts for the majority. Instead, people are bonded to casualised, precarious work. Cowen suggests there is nothing we can do to avert a very near future, in which a small 'hyper-meritocracy' of executives earning absurd salaries, will live 'fantastic lives' at the top, while the majority of others are thrown to the wolves of capitalism, and live out an existence of toil and servitude (Cowen, 2013). In 'Cowen's world' Scholz explains, workers would stitch together a precarious existence, in a landscape where organisations like amazon and Uber "would be celebrated for honouring schoolteachers who drive for UberX after hours to put food on the table." (Scholz, 2016, p10)

Throughout this study, the conversations with persons in precarious employment offer a living patchwork, which demonstrates how the lived experience of precarity is far more than just a scramble to piece together enough work to pay the bills. There are many contextual considerations, backgrounds, and rationalities which manifest throughout these narratives. This includes the varied ways in which we are encouraged to not only accept precarity as the norm, but to 'embrace the suck', as we are asked to do things 'humans aren't meant to do' and conduct ourselves as living machines in the service of work.

Within the review of literature which has informed this study (see chapter 2), it became apparent that there remains a sense of discord between theoretical conceptualisations, and the lived experience of precarious workers. Certainly, as others have noted, there is a 'limited understanding' of how precariousness manifests, is understood by, and affects workers within and beyond their working lives (Helbling & Kanji, 2017). Such observations are perhaps supported by continued calls for researchers to "better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers" (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012, p304); and to improve comprehension of "the nature of the new employment relations that are being created and their implications for individual and societal well-being" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.22). As Manolchev et al (2018), have observed, there are 'multiple contextual' characteristics of precarious work, which are perhaps unable to provide any 'seed-bed of shared experiences'. Thus, in order to improve current understanding, we should give due focus to the nuances of precarious worker experiences and, more specifically, the "individual sense-making, motivations, expectations and relationship-building carried out by those in precarious work" (Manolchev et al., 2018, p.847). Against this background, this thesis seeks to explore the lived experiences of precarious workers

precisely in order to make visible what is currently occluded by divisions within theory to date.

1.2 Aims

Whilst the current literature may help frame important conceptualisations on the subject of precarious work, it does not yet comprehensively enable us to fully appreciate or explain it. This study set out with a theoretical framework which triangulates between an appreciation of Marxist tradition on the nature of capitalism (Braverman, 1974; Choonara, 2019), the extraction of labour value, and the alienation of workers (Marx, 1976); whilst also recognising the relevance of Foucauldian observations of power, and the value of concepts such as governmentality and subjectivity (Burchell et al., 1991; Foucault, 2017). All of which have played a critical role in the development of theoretical analysis on the phenomenon of precarious work, such as those which view precarity as both an all-consuming process, and reconfiguration of power, capable of producing precarious subjects (Moisander, et al., 2018; Oksala, 2015). However, it is important to acknowledge that the ideas which have been developed throughout the research, have stemmed from the rich detail uncovered from exploring the precarious worker experience. With this in mind, and in order to help bridge the gaps in current knowledge thus highlighted, the research set out to explore the ways in which precarity may act upon individuals, and shape their experiences, subjectivities, and relations both inside and outside of work. Moreover, I began by asking how those in precarious work make sense of and react to their precariousness (both within and beyond their working lives). Further considerations explored throughout the chapters of this thesis include:

- The provocations and influences on the motivations and decision-making processes of precarious workers (including reflection/indication of strategies and mechanisms).
- The emergence of vulnerability within and beyond the working environment.
- Disciplinary power which may condition precarious workers – for example, the ways in which one may be able (or not) to access information about basic rights and entitlements and exercise these rights without repercussion (perceived or otherwise).

More broadly however, this thesis aims to create an improved awareness of the many trajectories and nuances so often overlooked as part of the lived experience of precarity. The point here is to not only expand current understanding, but increase appreciation of the many gradations of precariousness, and unravel the currently underappreciated details they reveal.

1.3 Brief Methods Overview

As a study concerned with gathering experiential data to address issues of an exploratory nature, a qualitative methodological approach was deemed best fit best (see Punch, 2013). The research was split into two phases. Phase 1 consisted of an auto-ethnographic exploration of Temporary Agency Work in the East Midlands, whilst phase 2 involved 15 semi-structured interviews with precarious workers from a multitude of sectors and a wide range of backgrounds. Ethical standards were set by Nottingham Trent University and aligned with the Research Councils' UK Policy and Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct (2013), as well as those set by the BSA's guidelines for ethical practice (BSA, 2017). An overview of each phase of the research is described in chapter 3.

1.4 Thesis structure:

The key theme within the thesis, is that of taking the reader through the many layers experienced by those in precarious work. In chapter 2, we look at the existing literature and how this currently frames and orients us towards conceptual considerations of precarious work. Along with providing appropriate theoretical underpinnings, this will include due attention on the effects precarity has on individuals, their families and more broadly, society as a whole. In Chapter 3, we discuss the methodological approach for this study. It outlines the autoethnography undertaken for phase 1 of the research, and how this informed the interviews which followed (phase 2). It is here that we discuss the ethical aspects and justifications for the methods employed.

Chapter 4 is the first of three empirical chapters. Here we will look at the heavily neglected topic of 'the work of getting work'. Drawing on the data from the autoethnography and the phase 2 interviews, we are introduced to accounts of applying for and trying to secure work. We also explore the subject of how those in precarious work, speak of and understand their own precarity. In doing so, we unravel the many layers involved in the effort needed to secure work. In Chapter 5, we delve into the subject of in-work experiences. Drawing on vignettes from across the interviews and autoethnography, we consider what is taking place for those in precarious work once a paid assignment has been secured. There is additional probing of the provocations and influences on the motivations and decision-making processes of precarious workers, offering some important reflections/indications of strategies and mechanisms this may encompass (including the emergence of vulnerabilities within and beyond the working environment).

Chapter 6 is the final empirical chapter. Here we consider the topic of self-care and wellbeing for those in precarious work. We discuss numerous instances throughout the research, where individuals described feeling unable to reject poor working conditions and make decisions for their own personal health and safety (physical and psychological), both within and beyond their work environment. This includes accounts of overworking to a point of complete burnout, working whilst electronics failed in a flooded office, plus accounts of being verbally and physically assaulted by the public as a regular part of their job. Whilst sadly, there are many accounts like this that exist within the literature, the links between wellbeing and decision making regarding safety within and beyond the workplace is considerably less developed. Finally, the thesis concludes with chapter 7, beginning with an overview of the research aims, together with a summary and discussion of the findings. This includes reflections on the observations and conceptualisations throughout the empirical chapters, and further discussion on the potential impact of precarious work, at individual and societal level.

1.5 Summary

The research aims to create an improved awareness of the many trajectories and nuances so often overlooked as part of the lived experience of precarity. The point is to not only expand current understanding, but increase appreciation of the many gradations of precariousness, and unravel the currently underappreciated details they reveal. In doing so, it will help shed light on neglected topics including how individuals make sense of and react to their precarity, together with improved understanding of areas such as motivations and decision making within and beyond the working environment. The thesis provides original

contribution to knowledge via new insights regarding the 'ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers' (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012). There are also considerations for the highly neglected area of seeking work, together with answering calls to better understand "the nature of the new employment relations that are being created and their implications for individual and societal well-being" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.22). The research also offers important contributions by way of approach, where it seeks to embrace the many contextual subtleties of the precarious worker experience. More specifically, it helps shed light on the 'individual sense-making, motivations, expectations and relationship-building' of precarious workers, as an increasingly broad demographic (Manolchev et al., 2018).

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1: Introduction

This chapter explores the literature on the topic of precarious work, with due focus on works relevant to this study and its aims. It begins with a brief overview of precarious work, including historical and modern contexts, along with considerations around structural and contextual factors (including the spatial organization of the labour process), to explore how social, political, and cultural processes may have both shaped and legitimated the rise of precarious employment.

2.2: What is precarious work?

The topic of precarious work has been extensively 'debated and refined' in recent years, particularly in the context of the contemporary neoliberal landscape (Lightman, Mitchell, & Herd, 2008; Herod & Lambert, 2016; Langford, 2020). The 'destructive', 'pervasive' and 'debilitating' nature of neoliberalism is heavily outlined throughout the literature (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005; Springer, 2011; Gledhill, 2018), with scholars often combining observations in terms of both the political economy and the history of 'free market' capitalism, together with the development of 'insidious' techniques of governance and subjectification (Lemke, 2001; Gooptu, 2009; Gao, 2020). Some even refer to a 'processes of precarisation' and overlooked connotations of the existential and social dimensions of precarious work (Lorey, 2015). It is also suggested that precarity should be seen as a 'phenomenon' capable of embracing 'the whole of existence' appropriating the 'commons of the life world' and granting capital 'new modes of subjectification' (Bobek, Pembroke & Wickham, 2017; Mignot and Gee, 2021).

Whilst there is no universally agreed definition of precarious work, we are often referred to deviations from the 'standard', full time, and permanent contracts which dominated the 'golden age' of capitalism following the close of World War II (Muntaner, 2016). Moreover, investigators tend to speak of working conditions which are "uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.1). However, there remains ambiguity surrounding the term itself, which has proven problematic, hindering the accuracy for the scale of precarious work in current research, and having implications on current understanding of the impact on individuals;

with the current knowledge base described as being 'hesitant and often confused' (Campbell and Price, 2016). In order to provide an overview of the subject of precarious work, we shall begin by exploring the historical and modern context of the term, together with a number of current definitions and conceptualisations.

2.2.1 A brief history of precarious work

It is important to remember that precarious work is far from a new concept. A brief look at the history of capital-labour relations reveals considerations of worker precarity throughout the early works of prominent theorists such as Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu (*see* Jonna & Foster, 2016). In his work on the 'pre-invention' of precarious employment, Michael Quinlan (2012) provides a detailed reflection on the history of precarious work. This includes its application throughout public and political discourse, as well as it's more recent rise in popularity as academic subject. Upon reviewing the archives of the UK's House of Commons debates, Quinlan notes that the term 'precarious employment', together with phrases such as 'employment that is precarious', has been in 'fairly regular' use throughout the late 1800's up until the 1930s. Interestingly, it was noted that these references almost entirely related to workers in Britain and Ireland. Furthermore, although the body of printed material examined during his research could not confirm whether these terms 'formed part of everyday use', Quinlan stresses that they have featured on a basis that is 'regular, calculated and not-accidental' (Quinlan, 2012, p6). In the following extract, we are granted a look at one of the earliest uses of such terms, in application to agricultural labourers in Ireland. As a consequence, we are also afforded some brief insight into descriptions of the plight of precarious workers throughout these respective periods:

> In 1846, Daniel O'Connell, citing the findings of the 1845 Commission headed by the Earl of Devon, stated: the agricultural labourers of Ireland suffer the greatest privations and hardships; that they depend upon precarious and casual employment for subsistence; that they are badly housed, badly fed, badly clothed, and badly paid for their labour; that it would be impossible to describe adequately the sufferings and privations which the cottiers and labourers and their families in most parts of the country endure. Two years later, another member (Sharman Crawford) stated that the report of the Landlord and Tenant Commission made it 'evident that the people of Ireland were badly fed, badly clothed, badly housed, dependent upon precarious employment, and uncertain supplies of food'. Thirty years later, speaking to a call for a royal commission into the depressed conditions of agricultural labour, another member pointed to the acute situation in Ireland 'where our population is thin, abundant food will come in aid of miserable wages and precarious employment' (Quinlan, 2012, p.7)

It seems that even in their earliest use in public and political discourse, we are often referred to "types of work which were casual, temporary or seasonal in nature, where pay was low and where hours of work were irregular" (Quinlan, 2012, p.6). This draws strong parallels with many contemporary conceptualisations pertaining to precarious work, which refer to equally broad and identical characteristics 'uncertain, unstable, and insecure' in nature (Standing, 2011; Kalleberg, 2012). Furthermore, many of the types of roles associated with these conditions - agricultural labourers, dockworkers, navvies (those who worked in construction, and even 'temporary' government labourers) remain commonly associated with modern conceptualisations of precarious work today. Perhaps somewhat predictively, the demographics most vulnerable to precarious work remain undeviating –

including women, migrant workers, those from a lower socioeconomic status and other marginalised groups (Vosko, 2000; MacDonald, 2009; Milkman, 2020). The observation that 'food will come in aid of miserable wages and precarious employment' (Quinlan, 2012, p7.) has also continued to be worryingly relevant. In particular, accounts of the rise of foodbanks in correlation with precarious work, and in work poverty as perpetuating a "system that exists, in large part, to service a workforce that can only plan their lives as far as their next, unpredictable pay-check" (Hickson, 2020, p.8).

Nonetheless, the long history of precarious work and its persistence as a dominant force throughout capitalism's history, has led many scholars to argue that, rather than an exception within capitalism, it should in fact be seen as the norm (Moody, 2015). This does not necessarily mean that what is taking place in the modern neoliberal era is not distinctive. As Timothy Whitton (2003) has noted, precarious work could be considered an inevitable part of the 'Thatcher legacy', and the crisis of unemployment throughout seventies. Moreover, throughout the intensified periods of neoliberalisation which followed, the UK has increasingly lent heavily on precarious forms of work and their extension to wider sections of society, often boasting an economy 'near full employment' (Whitton, 2003; McCaffrey, 2013). As others have argued, this seems to be a regular part of the dynamics of the early 21st century labour market in the UK, and many other countries (Vickers, 2019). This is a perspective shared by Eloisa Betti (2018), who suggests that, conceptually at least, notions of 'waves of precarization' are more appropriate, especially when comparing forms of precarity throughout different periods and geographical contexts. An appreciation for these distinctions may also aid in "mapping the existence of precarious workers and their features in different economic sectors over time" (Betti, 2018, p300).

As discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, such claims are not without contention, particularly around the pessimism of assumptions regarding the negative aspects of precarious work. Some have suggested that the impact on the capacity of workers to challenge the negative conditions of employment under neoliberalism has been exaggerated, and that when compared historically, precarious work has actually been seen to 'statistically stabilise' (Choonara, 2019). Others speak of an 'inevitability' of precarious work as a permanent reaction to the labour market contraction of the 2008/9 financial crisis (Rothman, 2013). Moreover, it is sometimes stated that the nature of work itself has fundamentally changed as a consequence of the digital era, giving way to notions of an emerging 'hyper-meritocracy' (Cowen, 2013). In this bleak depiction of the future of work, inequality is not only here to stay, but it will widen considerably, as neoliberalism progresses. For those unable to adapt and learn to manage/interpret computer systems, augmenting and extending its abilities, there is only a future in which they are left behind to toil away, from one precarious, low waged contract to another (Rothman, 2013; Cowen, 2013, Scholz, 2016).

Nonetheless, setting aside the insidious and truculent elitism of such claims, along with the debatable accuracy of government employment data (Partington, 2019), it is difficult to contest a general consensus, that there has been a fundamental shift in working conditions throughout recent years (Siegmann & Schiphorst, 2016; Campbell and Burgess, 2018; Posch, et al., 2020). Furthermore, although there is a long and documented history of precarious work in the UK, it is suggested that what is happening to workers is only 'partially captured' by current understandings and conceptualisations of this phenomenon (White, 2018).

For example, although the negative impact throughout the history of precarious work continues to attract a great deal of scholarly focus, not least those concerned with worker health and wellbeing (see Keizer et al., 2023); there remains 'limited understanding' of how precariousness manifests, is understood by, and affects workers within and beyond their working lives (Helbling & Kanji, 2017). An observation perhaps supported by continued calls for researchers to address the "need to better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers" (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012, p.304); and to improve comprehension of "the nature of the new employment relations that are being created and their implications for individual and societal well-being" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.22).

2.2.2 Definitions and Conceptualisations

The ambiguous nature of the term 'precarious work', and its increasingly broad application across many topics, has proven to be an area which can create confusion, particularly in how the term is understood and applied. For example, Gunn et al., (2022) refer to precarious employment (PE), as a construct of 'several multifaceted elements' pertaining to employment conditions. This includes (but is not limited to) characteristics such as job insecurity, and 'inadequate levels of financial compensation or income volatility' (Gunn et al., 2022, p.2). Non-standard-employment (NSE) as defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), may also be referred to as 'diverse forms of work' - umbrella terms for different employment arrangements that deviate from standard employment (ILO, 2022). According to the ILO definition, NSE's can encompass the following:

- Temporary employment - This is when a worker is employed on a finite basis. According to the ILO, temporary work does include contracts such as fixed-term,

project, or task-based/assessed work. It also includes seasonal and casual work, including day labour (ILO, 2017).

- Part time employment – this includes any work in which working hours are shorter than full-time standard hours. This can include Zero Hour Contract's (ZHC's), where employers are not obliged to offer any minimum hours of work to the employee (ILO, 2017; Pennycook et al., 2013)

- Multi-party employment – refers to instances where a worker is paid by a single company (for example, this can again be a staffing agency, but may also be a specialist subcontractor) and performing work for another company. The ILO state that, under this category, there is 'usually no employment relationship between the worker and the company' to which their services are being provided (ILO, 2017).

- Disguised employment – denotes a kind of employment where workers are taken on as 'independent contractors' but then find that work is monitored or supervised as if they were employees; thus 'the real nature of the work relationship is hidden to bypass labour regulations' (ILO, 2017).

NSE is also a prominent feature of increasingly equivocal discussions on platform capitalism, the gig economy, and conversations on the digitisation of labour. Whilst it is acknowledged that the proliferation of precarious work has long been underway prior to the 'digital revolution' (Vallas, & Kovalainen, 2019), the deep structural deficiencies of platform

capitalism have come to be seen to continually undermine regulators and strip back working rights (Scholz 2016; Flemming 2017; Woodcock, 2021). As a result, it has been argued that certain aspects of the 'gig economy', together with the implementation of new technologies and digitalisation of work, has subsequently created a form of 'algorithmic subjectification' and control over workers, whereby new forms of discipline, punishment, and reward have begun to emerge (Moore, 2017; Kellogg et al., 2020).

In their observations on characterising and defining the gig economy, Zheng and Yang (2020), suggest that workers face their own unique challenges, as a consequence of the 'new mechanisms' within the gig economy. The rise of platforms such as Uber (ridesharing), Airbnb (space letting), Deliveroo (food delivery), and Amazon (e-commerce) among others, has given way to new characteristics and defining features, including new modes of working. This includes "the decomposition of jobs, skillization and capitalization of workers, integration of internal and external human capital, and decentralization of corporate management" (Zheng & Yang, 2020, p6.). Other commentators contest this notion, stating that such conceptualisations fail to adequately acknowledge the existing correlation between the gig economy, and the 'well-established phenomena of precarious work' (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2020). Furthermore, it is suggested that the current understanding of 'gig workers' as separate to precarious workers means:

> Failing to explicitly connect the experience of work in the 'gig economy' with precarious work in other sectors risks obscuring the supply chains of the platforms that are at the centre of these new technological changes. Moreover, given the connectedness of these supply chains we present early indications of how organised solidarity between workers who cut across the definitions of "gig economy" and

> "precarious work" represents a growing understanding among workers and trade unions of the connections inherent within these supply chains and the insecure and often low paid work that it is predicated upon. (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2020, p.1015)

Indeed, it has even been argued that, as features of gig work correspond directly with aspects of the broader phenomena of precarious work, it therefore should not be seen as a 'separate silo of the economy' (Stefano, 2016). This perhaps strengthens calls for improved clarity around current conceptualisations, and specifically to better 'locate' them in the 'broader body of research on precarious work' (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2020). However, such problems are common throughout the many conceptualisations of, and including the term 'precarious work' itself. Certainly, there are valid questions around the usefulness of current theoretical notions which struggle to travel within and across multiple audiences, not least precarious workers themselves (Mosoetsa et al., 2016). Researchers have also queried the value of applying new meaning to old concepts (as highlighted in Breman & Van der Linden, 2014, and also Betti, 2018).

In his analogy of the 'precariat', Guy Standing (2011) describes a group which is made up of all who engage in precarious forms of work. In his conceptualisation of this 'new and emerging class', Standing informs us of the 'flip side' to what the author deems 'functional flexibility', and connections with the 're-regulation of occupations'. Standing argues that this has allowed workers to be sifted along class-lines, where regardless of their education and skill levels, they are sifted and sorted into 'a precariat channel' (Standing 2014, p40). Nonetheless, whilst Standings work is important, not least in terms of reinvigorating critical discussions on class in the neoliberal era, the application of concepts such as 'the precariat'

have also been accused of 'inhibiting' current analysis (Suliman & Weber, 2019). Some have even suggested that such abstract conceptualisations, rely on restrictive and confined notions of the proletariat - being dismissive of workers experiences and descriptions which they may apply to their own accounts, merely to create 'neologisms' (Breman, 2013; Allen, 2014).

Interestingly, Gunn et al (2022) note how, in some instances, the constructs of precarious employment and non-standard employment are used synonymously. However, this is, according to the authors 'despite the many distinctions between them'. They go on to explain:

> Aspects of NSE such as short-term or casual employment, part-time or on-call work, and self-employment are commonly linked to increases in employment and income insecurity. Yet, they could also offer viable options and positive outcomes for workers in search of flexible work arrangements. In many cases, however, NSE is not a preferred option for workers but a necessity due to a lack of standard forms of employment. More, self-employment could conceal the existence of an employment relationship between those who pay for the work contracted and the alleged independent contractors, who in reality have only limited control over the conduct of the work. While typically NSE is most often associated with insecurities, PE conditions could exist in both standard and NSE. Similarly, PE conditions could exist in both formal and informal employment. In low- or middle-income countries, the debates on employment arrangements and job quality are often framed around the informal or formal character of the work. (Gunn, et al., 2022, p.2)

Throughout the literature, it is apparent that the concept of precarious work has acquired and evolved many definitions and conceptualisations throughout a long and rich history. As a consequence, there are inevitably areas in which concepts blur, and at times completely merge with each other. As such, concepts often struggle to travel (contextually, culturally, sectorally, etc.) in meaningful ways, and there remains ambiguity, particularly in application for how 'precarious work' is defined or understood at any universal level.

2.2.5 The scale of precarious work in the UK

While it is accepted that there has been a growth in work which can be considered 'precarious' throughout the UK and the rest of the world (Hewison, 2015; UK Gov, 2020), current understanding is said to be 'hampered' by a 'lack of internationally meaningful measures' (Padrosa et al., 2020). A report for the European Commission in 2012, examined the state of precarious work and social rights across the 12 member states - Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and (at the time) the UK. The research suggested that three 'dominant' employment types inform understanding of 'precarious work' (McKay et al., 2012), including part time, fixed term, and temporary contracts. A breakdown of these employment types and their scale in the context of the UK is as follows:

- *Part-time work* could be representative of a workers only paid employment, or it can also form part of different types of employment undertaken in order to acquire full time earnings. This type of work has long been found to be strongly disproportionate between men and women, with nearly a third of all women employed across Europe are on part time contracts (European Commission, 2016). According to 2021

statistics compiled by the UK Government, 23% of the UK's 'working age' workforce is employed on a part time basis (UK Government, 2022). Women made up the majority of those employed on a part time basis (38%, compared to 13% of men [Buchanan et al., 2023]). It has also been recently highlighted that around 881,000 workers across the UK on part time contracts do so involuntarily – for example, those who would prefer full time work but are unable to find such employment (ONS, 2019).

- *Fixed-term* can be defined as contracts with an employer which spans a defined or finite lifespan; i.e. it ends on a specific date, or following the completion of a defined task or project (UK Government, 2013). Previous UK estimates revealed that there were between 1.1 and 1.3 million people on fixed term contracts across the UK (Farina et al., 2020; Wilson & McDaid, 2022). Alongside the potential for long term precarious employment, those on fixed term contracts have reported experiencing frequent periods of involuntary employment, and tend to report feeling more unsettled regarding job security than permanent counterparts (Morgenroth et al., 2021; Jost, 2022)

- *Temporary contracts* recent statistics provided by the Citizens Advice found an increase of temporary agency work between 2006 and 2016 of 29% across England and Wales, from 230,000 to 297,000. The UK's temporary staffing industry is considered the largest of any European country in terms of sales, and generated £28.2 billion from temporary placements in 2016/2017 alone (Staffing Industry Analysis, 2017). Yet it is also one of the least regulated, with the activity of

> Temporary Staffing Agencies (TSAs) regularly called into question by organisations and action groups such as The Trades Union Congress (2017), The Shiva Foundation (Jethwa & Armstrong, 2017), and 'the staff wanted initiative' (2016). TAW's are often said to experience "insecurity rather than flexibility" (Institute for Policy Research, 2015, p2), with many stating that they only undertake such work "because they cannot find a permanent job" (Ball et al., 2017, P32).

In their recent report on the 'scale and nature of precarious work in the UK', Pósch et al., (2020) define a precarious worker as someone who encapsulates some/or all of the following criteria:

- They are on a low income and are in non-traditional work;
- An 'immigrant/member of an ethnic minority' who is working at a small business/organisation *and* receives a low income;
- Someone who is an immigrant/member of an ethnic minority working at a small firm and are in non-traditional work. (Pósch et al., 2020, pII)

Despite this being a somewhat limited conceptualisation of precarity, the report found that between 2009-2018, precarious workers made up between 8.5 - 9.5% of the UK workforce; an approximate figure that remained 'steady' throughout that period. The findings also contrast with other studies which suggest that precarity (usually measured by a growth in precarious work) has been rising throughout advanced economies, including the UK (Posch et al., 2020; Hammer & Ness, 2021; Haile, 2023).

2.3: Flexibilization, subjectivity construction and social control: the 'process of precaritisation'

> "There was, it appeared, a mysterious rite of initiation through which, in one way or another, almost every member of the team passed. The term the old hands used for this rite...was "signing up." By signing up for a project you agreed to do whatever was necessary for success. You agreed to forsake, if necessary, family, hobbies, friends—if you had any of these left (and you might not if you had signed up too many times before). From a manager's point of view, the practical virtues of the ritual were manifold. Labor was no longer coerced. Labor volunteered. When you signed up you in effect declared, "I want to do this job and I'll give it my heart and soul." Tracy Kidder, The Soul of a New Machine (1981, p. 63)

In her paper 'project time in Silicon Valley', Johanna Shih (2004) describes how a 'culture of flexibility' began to surround and harnesses the subjectivities of workers in Silicon Valley during the turn of the millennium, whereby 'objective work schedules' were replaced by 'subjective demands for commitment'. As such, notions of greater 'flexibility and variability' became mechanisms by which worker control over their own time, becomes 'subordinated to the ebb and flow' of the demands of their work and never-ending projects (Shih 2004). Frederick Pitts (2013) would later use this example to grant us further insight into the 'flexible subjectivity in the digital workplace', in which working environments may harbour 'the veneer of fun-loving flexibility', that is often underpinned by multiple strands of exploitation - including unrecognised and unpaid overtime, together with an erosion of the boundaries between work and personal spaces (Pitts, 2013).

The culture of flexibility and its presence across contemporary western labour markets is well noted within current text. Indeed, the 'flexible' nature of precarious work is often

expressed as a key benefit, a mutually beneficial arrangement, which can balance both fluctuating needs of business and industry, with the individual needs of workers; who may 'take advantage' of the casual contracts and balance paid employment with changeable life events (Lewis, 2005; Adonis, 2011; Williams et al., 2018). In particular, much focus placed on the 'promise' of flexibilization, which continues to be 'widely debated' throughout policy and public discourse (Fu, 2013; Wood, 2017). Some see flexible approaches to as a means to provide 'mutual benefits' for both employers and employees, with employers able to reduce staffing costs and at the same time improve work life balance for individuals (Leckie et al., 2021). Others have gone further and suggested that casual and flexible working arrangements should be seen by decision makers as the 'future' for the UK workforce, providing 'choice' and 'freedom' for many, and acting as a bridge into permanent employment for others (REC, 2019; Hollinrake, 2023).

Yet, the notion of flexible work, in practice, is also considered 'ill-defined, and 'ambiguous' (McCollum & Findlay, 2015), often allowing employers to assert greater influence and control over workers. In many cases it has been seen to 'exacerbate work pressures' and 'create further uncertainty' for workers, which has ultimately 'intensified conditions of precariousness', even leading to a detrimental rise of physical and psychological health impacts for those in precarious employment (Benach et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2020). This is however not a new observation, Emily Martin (1994) famously utilised the 'notion of flexibilization' in application to multiple contexts (from medicine to labour), and forewarned of an emerging 'social Darwinism' which would develop around the concept of flexibilization, becoming applicable to multiple aspects of work and life.

Some Foucauldian scholars have suggested that the rise in flexible working may be seen as an enabler to precarious work, as a means to surrounding and harnessing the subjectivities of workers (Eticca-Harris et al., 2018; Sato, 2021). In her work on subjectivity construction and social control, Isabell Lorey (2015) refers to the 'processes of precarization', and an 'often neglected' consideration of the social and existential connotations of precarious work; whereby it "means more than insecure jobs, more than the lack of security…it embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation…living with the unforeseeable, with contingency" (Lorey, 2015, P88). In their observations, Mignot and Gee (2021), have further argued that precarity should be considered an 'existential phenomenon' and that, when understood as a state of existence, precarity has granted Capital "a mechanism to appropriate the commons of the life-world; that personhood is progressively given up to Capital through the extensification and intensification of economic labour" (Mignot & Gee, 2021, p10).

Marxist analysis offers further important considerations in this context. Specifically, that the casualisation of work is not an anomaly of capitalism, but a logical outcome of a system based on profit (Choonara, 2019; Klein, 2020). Indeed, as noted in Carter (2021), Marxist economist Harry Braverman (1974), had also observed that "processes of production are constantly transformed by the driving force of capital accumulation" (Carter, 2021, para 1). Furthermore, via the process of alienation, capital may be seen to intentionally distance workers from an essential part of themselves, each other, and much of their basic human needs:

> [The work] is external to the worker, that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling

> of misery, not of well-being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.... His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labor.... Finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person (Marx, 1976, p398).

As such, an inevitable consequence of capitalism is to make the lives of workers a 'misery', through a servient existence, always controlled by the needs and desires of capital (Petrovic, 1963; Guy-Evans, 2023).

In order to go beyond the more abstract conceptualisations of precarity (such as those provided by Standing, 2011, *see p27*), a triangulated theoretical framework has underpinned this thesis. This moves between an appreciation of Marxist tradition on the nature of capitalism (Braverman, 1974; Choonara, 2019), the extraction of labour value, and the alienation of workers (Marx, 1976); whilst also recognising the relevance of Foucauldian observations of power, and the value of concepts such as governmentality and subjectivity (Burchell et al., 1991; Foucault, 2017). All of which have played a critical role in the development of theoretical analysis on the phenomenon of precarious work, in the heavily digitised and flexibilization obsessed neoliberal era. In particular, there is great sympathy with scholars who suggest that precarity moves beyond discussions of employment insecurity, and should be seen as both a process by which subjectivities are constructed, and as an existential phenomena, which has allowed capital to appropriate and assert further power over workers and their lives (Lorey, 2015; Oksala, 2015; Mignot & Gee, 2021).

2.4: Gaps in the research

Despite continuing to attract a great deal of scholarly focus, particularly from those concerned with worker health and wellbeing (Gunn et al., 2021; Keizer et al., 2023; Van der Weijden & Teelken, 2023); there remains 'limited understanding' of how precariousness manifests, is understood by, and affects workers within and beyond their working lives (Helbling & Kanji, 2017). Indeed, the current evidence base has been said to:

> "struggle with the implications of precarious work (or poor job quality) for individual workers…The impact of precarious work is not uniform; instead, it is contingent. At the same time, differences in experiences of precarious work cannot be reduced to hypothetical differences in subjective attributes. The impact of precarious work demands careful conceptualisation and empirical research, to analyse both the particular form of precarious work and the differences among individual workers that stem from social location and contextual conditions." (Campbell & Price, 2016, p326)

Such observations sit alongside continued calls for sociologists to address the "need to better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers" (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012, p304); and to improve comprehension of "the nature of the new employment relations that are being created and their implications for individual and societal well-being" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, P22). This perhaps correlates with critique regarding current text lacking in an ability to 'highlight a specific set of bad jobs or precarious work', which can be defined in terms of 'common job characteristics, and the

differing experiences of workers in those jobs' – and therefore able to 'better invite discussion of sources of differentiation outside the workplace' (see Vosko 2000).

This is fitting with suggestions such as those made by Manolchev et al (2018), who stress the need to explore and embrace the 'multiple contextual' characteristics, even in instances which are perhaps unable to provide any 'seed-bed of shared experiences'. Here, it is proposed that researchers focus on the precariousness of worker experiences, and more specifically the "individual sense-making, motivations, expectations and relationship-building carried out by those in precarious work" (Manolchev et al., 2018, p847).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1: Introduction

This chapter presents the approach and methodology for the research undertaken in this thesis, which was split into two phases - Phase I (an autoethnographic exploration of temporary agency work in the UK) and phase II (semi structured interviews with those willing to share their experiences of precarious work). The following sections will provide an outline for each phase undertaken, including data collection and analysis, along with discussions of elements such as ethical considerations.

3.2: Approach and methodology

As discussed in chapter 1, the research explores the ways in which precarity may act upon individuals, and seeks to understand how those in precarious work make sense of and react to their precariousness (both within and beyond their working lives). Further considerations have included:

- The provocations and influences on the motivations and decision-making processes of precarious workers (including reflection/indication of strategies and mechanisms);
- The emergence of vulnerability within and beyond the working environment;
- Disciplinary power which may condition precarious workers; such as the ways in which they are able (or not) to access information about basic rights and entitlements, and exercise these rights without repercussion (perceived or otherwise).

As such, the study was concerned with gathering experiential data to address issues of an exploratory nature; therefore, a qualitative methodological approach was deemed best (see Punch, 2013). The methods consisted of both an auto-ethnographic exploration of 'temping' – taking up temporary agency work assignments in the UK (phase 1); along with 15 semi-structured interviews with participants willing to share their experiences of precarious work (Phase 2), to allow for a broader and comparative element of the research. Ethical standards were set by Nottingham Trent University and aligned with the Research Councils' UK Policy and Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct (2013), as well as those set by the BSA's guidelines for ethical practice (BSA, 2017). The study was split into two phases which are described in the proceeding sections.

3.3 Phase 1 - An autoethnography of temporary agency work in the UK

Autoethnography materialised as a research method around the 1970's, offering researchers greater focus on rich narrative evocations of the lived experience (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017; Poulos, 2021). As an extension of the ethnographic tradition, it has granted the utilisation of first-hand accounts, with emphasis placed on the researchers own

experience of a phenomenon, to reveal facets of the social world (Hokkanen, 2017). However, autoethnographic methods are not without criticism. Notably, one key area of concern arises from the validity of data generated, where some have questioned whether the 'self-interested' researcher accounts are representative of 'real' events which have occurred, or they are merely 'inventions' of the authors (Walford, 2004; Méndez, 2014; Freeman, 2011). Others such as Conquergood (1991;1992; 2018), consider ethnographers 'trickster performers', who are executing a certain dance or act, whilst at the same time observing their actions from the 'balcony'. When they return from these 'foreign worlds' with their 'other knowledge' there is a tendency to disconnect from a 'reality at home' (Conquergood, 2018, p21).

Whilst such critique is not uncommon, particularly around debates of younger and emerging methodologies, they also perhaps presume much about the researcher, their background, and intentions. Indeed, autoethnography has also been celebrated as a method which generates rich data, and is valuable when 'identifying mechanisms' and providing answers to the 'how' and 'why' questions of a phenomenon (see Venkatesh, 2013, P5). In her paper on developing a 'heartful autoethnography', Carolyn Ellis (1999) discusses how this method exposes the emotional and personal vulnerabilities of the researcher in order to reveal the 'human experience' (a key aim of the this research). The author argues that:

> "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographies gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural

> interpretations…As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. Usually written in first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories impacted by history and social structure, which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts, and language" (Ellis, 1999, p673)

Employing an autoethnographic element to the research for this thesis, has certainly granted the ability to move beyond theoretical understanding; with empirical observations providing deeper comprehension of the precarious worker experience. This includes first-hand accounts of its many dimensions and gradations. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that, ontologically, this does not mean purely focussing on the mechanisms which may manifest, but understanding interactions from certain positions (including multiple experiences). Indeed, the framework for this thesis (as discussed in chapter 2), suggests that precarious work should be considered an existential phenomenon, capable of reaching far beyond the working environment and engulfing all aspects of the lives of individuals (Lorey, 2015; Oksala, 2015; Mignot & Gee, 2021). Epistemologically, this study argues that an enhanced articulation of the complexities of this phenomenon, comes not only via the philosophical fusion of Foucauldian observation and Marxist tradition (again covered in chapter 2), but through an improved appreciation for the nuances and complexities of precarious work. Thus, it is not necessarily focussing on any formal procedural knowledge, but on that which is offered through understanding which is

developed through the lived experience of precarity. Such experience has been accessible precisely via the utilisation of the methodological approach of this study.

It's also worth noting that, this aspect of the data gathering process was always intended to help make the leap from what is known/occluded in the literature, to that which can only be understood by examining the human experience. Applying autoethnography has therefore allowed for these experiences to play a 'valid role', "as the ethnographic exploration of the 'self'…[using]…self-observation and reflexive investigation for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (Zempi & Awan, 2017, p1).

During this phase of the research, I registered with 11 Temporary staffing agencies (TSA's) throughout the east midlands as a temp, on the basis of seeking full time work and carry out assignments. Detailed accounts of my observations and experiences were recorded via a research log and field notes. Throughout paid assignments with the agency, in order to maintain organisational confidentiality, accounts of observations and experiences were recorded via audio diary, with recordings taking place before and after each assignment. This together with field notes (including artefacts) were deemed more than suitable to help capture the emotions and experiences as a temp.

Ethical considerations which often accompany research of this nature were also duly considered, not least those pertaining to concerns regarding the 'covert' elements of the method (such as Warwick, 1982). Indeed, despite being honest about who I was (my name, a PhD student looking for work), I did not disclose my role as a researcher. This is because it was felt that this might risk garnering preferential treatment or hiding undesirable aspects of the job from either the recruitment agency representatives or the end clients (see Taylor,

DeVault, & Bogdan, 2015). It was also felt this would allow the research to reveal important aspects which may sometimes be hidden, to give a more favourable opinion of what is taking place following any full disclosure of the study and its objectives (see Roulet et al., 2017, for example). There are several existing works which further offered precedent in this area (Hopman, 2021; Marzano, 2021), with David Calvey's covert study of bouncers in the Manchester night-time economy (Calvey, 2017) a case in point.

Whilst the research has met stringent guidelines, and was discussed at length with the supervision team, it should be stressed that the research was concerned with gathering experiential data, not investigating specific TSAs. Therefore, no organisation, or any end client had been specifically studied, and appropriate precautions were taken to ensure that identities of organisations were not compromised (Taylor & Land, 2014). All data were anonymised, including that of any actors with whom the study engaged with details changed to preserve anonymity. Additionally, whilst this phase of the study provided important ethnographic data, it was not used as a recruitment tool for interview participants, and instead operated as an important subjective element in its own right, also helping to inform the interview schedule for the phase 2 research.

3.3.1 Why temporary agency work?

The UK's temporary staffing industry is considered the largest of any European country in terms of sales, and generated £28.2 billion from temporary placements in 2016/2017 alone (Staffing Industry Analysis, 2017). Yet it is also one of the least regulated, with the activity of Temporary Staffing Agencies (TSAs) regularly called into question by organisations and action groups such as The Trades Union Congress (2017), The Shiva Foundation (Jethwa &

Armstrong, 2017), and 'the staff wanted initiative' (2016). From one perspective, TSA's are said to offer 'transitional mobility' for workers, filling industrial demand for temporary labour creating a variety of 'flexible' roles according to specific business needs. However, in practice it is an industry often accused of creating conditions which 'reinforces precariousness' and 'systematically exploits' workers through structural labour market vulnerability (Elcioglu, 2010). TAW's are often said to experience "insecurity rather than flexibility" (Institute for Policy Research, 2015, p2), with many stating that they only undertake such work "because they cannot find a permanent job" (Ball et al., 2017, P32).

3.4 Phase 2 - Semi-structured interviews

This phase of the research was undertaken in the final four months of 2021. Engaging with purposeful sampling technique (Suri, 2011), I was able to utilise existing networks (both in my capacity as a long time precarious worker, and as a researcher) to reach out to various contacts, including some within local and national organisations. This helped with initial recruitment during this phase of the research, with snowball sampling and some additional outreach through social media also providing some help in this area. The interviews allowed for further exploration of precarity as a process which transcends different roles and backgrounds. Originally there were 20 participants who had agreed to take part in the study, however, only 15 would fully participate (see table below).

Name	Age	Gender	Circumstances at time of interview
James	45 - 54	Male	James is a qualified and experienced health and safety professional. He had recently moved back to the UK after living abroad, in order to be closer to family. He had recently been finding work through a temporary staffing agency, before securing a more permanent position in warehousing and production management. He lives with his partner, and has one child.

Sabrina	25 - 34	Female	Sabrina has a PhD and works multiple casualised contracts for several institutions within the UK Higher education sector. She lives with her partner, has no dependents, and is seeking a full time long term contract within the sector.
Uri	25 - 34	Non Binary	Uri is qualified to Masters level and is studying for their PhD. They work several roles alongside their study in order to make ends meet. This includes a zero hour contract customer services roles, short term seasonal contracts with an entertainment company, as well as voluntary and paid positions in the charity sector. They have also previously worked as a delivery rider for a platform organisation, and as a bar person. Uri is single, has no children, and lives in a house share with their friends. They are seeking more stable and long term work within the arts and entertainment sector.
Alex	18 - 24	Not specified	Alex is qualified to degree level and has very recently secured a fixed term contract in administration, after leaving their previous rolling contract in customer support. They have previously worked for agencies, plus some occasional bar work, but are looking for a more long term and secure position. Alex currently lives alone but is hoping to find suitable accommodation for themselves and their partner in the very near future.
Claudio	25 - 34	Male	Claudio has a degree, and held multiple precarious positions - this includes zero hours contracts in retail, and temporary agency work (office/administration, warehousing, and door to door sales), before becoming self-employed. Claudio has a partner with a young child.
Amélie	25 - 34	Female	Amélie is educated to PhD level. She has been working as an hourly paid lecturer and casual researcher, across several institutions. Amélie has recently secured a longer full time fixed term position, which she describes as 'a holiday from precarity' and is currently in the process of trying to find suitable accommodation for herself and her partner.
Donny	25 - 34	Male	Donny is qualified to A level and above standard, with experience in the armed forces and engineering. After moving to the UK, he worked as a temporary agency worker, until recently being taken on with a full time contract. Donny lives in a house share with friends and has no partner or dependents.
Katie	18 - 24	Female	Katie is educated to degree level, and works in a 'long term temp to perm role' in food production industry. She is single and lives with her parents currently, but is seeking full time employment which is closer to her degree subject.

John	25 - 34	Male	John is a qualified carer who works for a staffing agency as a mobile on call carer. Although his contract is zero hours, he receives regular patterns each week. He lives with his partner and child, and is looking for more secure and manageable work (and would ideally like to transition to nursing).
Roberto	35 - 44	Male	Roberto has a PhD and is currently working on a fixed term basis at a UK higher education institution. He had previously worked in catering to support his studies after moving to the UK from mainland Europe, having secured employment through an agency. He currently lives alone, with no dependents.
Bailey	35 - 44	Male	Bailey has a masters degree and lives with his partner and child. He had previously been working for a catering agency whilst taking on casual contracts to build experience in a sector related to his studies. Bailey has since landed a full time permanent contract in his chosen field, which he describes as 'life changing'.
Ed	25- - 34	Male	Ed is educated to A-Level standard and has been working for agencies since he lost his position in a bar several years ago. This has mostly centred on call centre work where he has several years experience, but also involved some warehousing work. Ed lives with his partner, and has no other dependents. He one day wishes to establish his own business.
Farah	25 - 34	Female	Farah has a PhD and has been working as a HPL and casual researcher across several institutions for the past few years. Following a post-doc fellowship, she has recently landed a full time permanent contract, but is looking for something closer to home as this currently means a lot of travel/precarious living arrangements. She lives with her partner and has no children.
Sarah	25 - 34	Female	Sarah is a professionally qualified and self-employed executive consultant. She had previously been working and living in the UK for an internationally reputable insights company, but is now living between multiple countries with her partner. They have no dependents.
Nick	18 - 24	Male	Nick is a recent university graduate who had been working multiple positions, including fixed term, zero hours contracts, and a recent temp to perm position. Due to the instability of his work, he has recently moved back in with his parents, but hopes to secure a suitable long term position which can allow him to live independently

Maddy	35 - 44	Female	Maddy has been working in part-time and zero hours retail roles for over 20 years. During the last few years she has also been trying to set up her own business, in order to leave a job she 'hates'. Maddy lives with her partner and they have no dependents.

(Table of participant profiles)

Each interview lasted between 1-2 hours, with the majority of interviews undertaken via video call, or telephone conversations due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. An audio-recording device was used on the rare occasion's participants wished to meet face to face, or conduct their interview via telephone.

Copy of Interview Schedule

1. Icebreaker: General background, outlook and thoughts on the working landscape

Q: Could you tell me a little about yourself and how things are generally; what you do for work currently/previously and how things have been for you/your family since lockdown and so on?

Prompts: What is your understanding of precarious work – is it the same as others who you have spoken to about this kind of work; Were you furloughed during the pandemic or did you work through lockdown etc.; What do you think about the job market currently; How do you described the work you do/or did to others (what are their perceptions of what you do);

2. **Securing work: expectations & motivations**

Q: What prompted you to seek these types of contracts/work and what was the application process before securing paid work/gigs?

Prompts: First impressions of the work to now; main reasons for applying for this type of work (was it a case of needing something quickly, a stepping stone to secure/fulltime work or temporary fix etc.); Did you have any preferences for the type of work/hours/etc. that you were looking for?

3. **Experiences in work/during gigs/on assignment**

Q: Thinking now about your experiences , what was it like for you, for example, are there any jobs/memories that stand out? If so, what were they and why?

Prompts: Do you recall how you felt during your first job/gig/assignment (i.e. were you nervous, excited, worried, relieved, disappointed, ambivalent etc.); *Conditions/environment* - Did you feel you were treated/valued the same as other workers or at any point did you feel things would be different/change if you were on a permanent contract – please explain; Were you well prepared/received training/guidance, provided with safety equipment when

needed, made aware of/felt able to access your worker's rights (and who provided any guidance in that area) and so on; Did you feel worker safety and wellbeing was important and were you able to make decisions/express concerns if you felt your own safety and wellbeing were at risk (please elaborate). *Working Relationships* - Did you feel you had to the chance to connect with colleagues, develop rapports/any friendships; Did any fellow workers offer tips/guidance for how to get on in the job;

4. **Impact of working conditions on other aspects of life**

Q: Do you feel that the nature of the working conditions (as you've described and experienced them), can have/has had impact on life outside of work for you?

Probes: Were you able to balance commitments in your life/set boundaries accordingly, or did you find yourself facing additional or unforeseen demands which meant balancing some aspects of your life around work (please elaborate); Where you able to take holidays/make plans or was this difficult (if so why); Were you ever too ill to work or did you ever require any emergency time off, were work and the agency supportive, or was it difficult (please explain); What supports in your life did you feel helped most or kept you motivated when facing challenges at work;

5. **Changes over time**

Q: How is your current situation compared to how it was when you first began your journey as a temp agency worker, has anything changed?

Prompts: Are you in a more secure position/on a better contract (has this made a difference to your life, please elaborate); Do you feel differently about work now as a result of your time in these types of roles - has anything you've experienced/learned stayed with you; what do you feel could improve conditions for those who are working on similar precarious contracts; What are your thoughts about the future of work for you, what are you hoping for/would be ideal

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The focus of this research evolved around the personal stories and experiences of precarious work. It is also concerned with capturing the meaningful and rich compositions which could be drawn from the nuances of those experiences**.** Therefore it was not only important to consider how these stories were structured**,** but at times their functional aspects, how and why things were seen and shared in certain ways. As such, data were analysed by focussing on the personal stories and awareness of the many contextual elements which may inform them (Ellis et al., 2011; Nowell et al., 2017; Adams et al., 2021). It was also important to consider the demands from the comparative element of the research, with due consideration for how the data in phase I, compared across that of the phase II interviews. Therefore due diligence was paid in regard to any 'points of resonance' and what they might be telling us about the phenomenon of precarious work (Mueller, 2019; Pitard, 2019). Phase 1 developed a more inductive approach, allowing the data to determine many of the themes. Phase 2 on the other hand, naturally became more

deductive, as this phase of the research had been informed through preconceived themes which had materialised during the early analysis of the phase I data (O'Reilly, 2009; Azungah, 2018). Nonetheless, the richness of the accounts from the interviews, produced their own important themes which were carefully considered. As is common with ethnographic data sets, it often meant that it was necessary for the process to become a constant 'messy' and 'chaotic' re-immersive examination the data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Khan, 2020). This was particularly useful, for example, in developing the ideas around dual/multiple subjective understandings of precariousness which could occur simultaneously (as explored in the empirical chapters).

With research of this nature, it was not possible to offer full confidentiality to the participants. All interviewees were however, given anonymity, with appropriate measures put in place to minimise any risk to the participants which were part of this study, prior to, during and after the gathering and analysis of data. Though this study does not disclose any identifiers in order to preserve anonymity, it can be noted that the sample consisted of multiple gender types, ethnic backgrounds, and a broad age group. Participants came from a wide range of sectors, this included self-employed artists, warehouse operatives, telemarketers, academics, executive consultants, health professionals and more. Each interviewee stated that they were either already in precarious employment or had recently (in the last 18 months) been employed on precarious contracts.

Chapter 4: The work of getting work

4.1: Introduction

As outlined in chapter 2, the topic of precarious work has been extensively debated and refined in recent times. In particular, precarity is often discussed in the context of the destructive nature of the contemporary neoliberal landscape, and the development of insidious techniques of governance and subjectification (Lemke, 2001; Gooptu, 2009; Gao, 2020). Here, it is also argued that precarity should now be viewed as an all-encompassing 'process', capable of embracing 'the whole of existence' (Lorey, 2015; Bobek, Pembroke & Wickham, 2017; Mignot and Gee, 2021). As such, this chapter introduces a neglected and overlooked phase of 'precarity', that begins before paid assignments or 'gigs', and in many ways should be considered a precursor to precarious work itself.

The following sections are intended to mark the beginning of a journey through precarity, one that is mapped onto that which is experienced by precarious workers. In doing so, we also meet one of the key aims of this study, by exploring how precarious workers themselves, make sense of, and react to their precariousness. Here, we make further considerations of the subtleties within the accounts which have been shared with this study, and discuss how this may inform theoretical reconfigurations and understanding. Additionally, there will be further considerations made for how the term 'precarious work' travels (contextually, culturally, sectorally, and so on), within and beyond an increasingly complex and multifaceted dynamic.

4.2: ‘Well, it’s really weird’ - perceptions and understanding of precarious work

During the interviews and informal conversations which took place throughout the field research, it certainly seemed that many were generally aware of the term ‘precarious work’. Each of the interviewees for example, spoke of their situated understanding for what the term represented, and/or the types of jobs they felt it may be used to describe. However, this does not by any means imply that there was a consensus, just that, most had expressed some degree of familiarity with the term. For example, some interviewees referred to what they described as 'stereotypical' kinds of precarious work. These often came in the form of blanket references associated with popular platforms and roles (such as Deliveroo rider, Uber driver, and amazon worker). Perhaps unsurprisingly (given the increased exposure throughout public discourse etc.) the ‘gig economy’ also emerged as a common reference point, despite this being an extremely wide-ranging term itself. Several interviewees further stated, that their understanding of the types of work which could be classed as precarious had developed over time.

4.2.1 ‘We all have these prejudgments of what it is’: stigma, ambiguity, and hidden precarity

The wide-ranging examples provided during the interviews, were perhaps not surprising given that there is still no universally agreed definition of precarious work. However, almost none of those with whom this study has engaged, could recall applying the term ‘precarious work’ when describing their own employment conditions. This included those with an ‘academic appreciation’ of the various concepts associated with the subject. In my interview with Sabrina for instance, she explained that, in her experience, there were ‘pre-judgments’

which surrounded the term. Furthermore, although the topic of precarious work had become more prevalent in public and political discourse, it still remained a vague concept.

Sabrina had previously been teaching in South America and had recently completed a doctoral qualification in the UK. At the time of the interview for this research, she had been working on a number of casual contracts throughout several academic institutions, as well as undertaking voluntary work with a local charity. Her circumstances were described as someone very much in the midst of a number of precarious jobs, and she even mentioned several other zero-hour contract roles which she would sometimes undertake 'when needed', in order to help maintain income. As Sabrina explained, this usually occurred in-between dry spells of her 'core' roles (such as when teaching had ended and there wasn't enough research). There were a number of different factors which Sabrina reflected upon, when discussing what she felt 'precarious work' meant, what it involved, and how this had developed over time:

> *"I suppose that my view of precarious work has changed a lot. Based on, you know, my own research that, I also did a bit of research about people in precarious and stable work. But also, on my own, of my own experience. So, I guess maybe if you'd asked me a couple of years ago, I would have thought of the obvious ones that you think about, which is, you know, Uber driver, delivery drivers, and I suppose care workers. It's always been jobs that are stereotypically quite precarious. But you know, for myself, I never really think of academia as a precarious industry. And then I think not only that, based on my own experience, I've seen that it doesn't have to just be low wage work, that's precarious, it can sometimes be higher paid work" (Sabrina)*

Despite Sabrina's familiarity of precarious work, based on her research and personal experience, here she describes how her situated knowledge of precarious work was previously anchored to what she calls 'stereotypical' and 'obvious' roles and industries. This mostly centred on low wage, entry level positions, across platforms such as Uber, and industries such as logistics/delivery and courier services. Academia, she explained, was not something she considered as a 'precarious industry', despite the fact that she is, herself, a precarious worker in this sector. Sabrina continued:

> "*…you can still find yourself in these precarious contracts, that you can't really escape from them, but also from my own experience of research and people who are in precarious work and it's not just, you know, low skills work, you know. I've spoken to, teaching assistants, nurses, you know all kind of different spectrum of jobs. So, I think what I'm trying to say is precarious work, I think a lot of people don't really know anything about it and we all have these prejudgments of what it is, but actually, I think the depth and sort of breadth of it, especially here in the UK is a lot more than we really know about. I think actually we know more about it now, thanks to films and, you know, the media as well, I'm thinking about the Ken Loach film, the 'sorry, we missed you' one. But we've started to think more about the precarity of, you know delivery drivers, and I think, especially with the pandemic as well, with thought more about people who are in these kind of unstable work situations." (Sabrina)*

Sabrina appeared to be touching on the notion that there are perceived characteristics which have become associated with precarious work, certainly one's that she had previously applied to her own situated understanding. This potentially confers a form of stigma, whereby these preconceptions of precarious work, become attached to certain roles (and

industries/sectors), in an almost exclusive way, and in which they are seen as being distinguished from others. Sabrina explains that, despite some light recently shone on the topic in public discourse, notably with recent portrayals of precarious work in media and film, it still remains a somewhat ambiguous concept, which is not yet fully understood or clear. As she elaborates, 'we all have these prejudgements', but overall, the full span and scope of precarious work in the UK, is not yet fully known.

This perspective is not dissimilar to those who deem certain conceptualisations of precarious work as problematic. For instance, some have suggested that the 'gig economy', has not only become an acceptable description for precarious and exploitative jobs, but has to an extent even been 'glorified', which only serves to legitimise the 'further flexibilisation of labour' (Tolentino, 2017; Shibata, 2019). Furthermore, it is surmised that this could potentially, in turn, grant perceptions of those in precarious employment as an "objectively different class of worker which implies that they merit their poorer conditions" (Tweedie, 2013, p311). As such, it is important to question the potential stigmatization of precarious work. Why might certain roles be considered stereotypically precarious, yet others seemingly have to be experienced before that precarity reveals itself? Does stigma play a role here, and to what extent? Do these 'pre-judgements' equate to a selective understanding and use of the term precarious work?

4.2.2 'They get it the worst'

When asked to define what they felt 'precarious work' means, most interviewees tended to offer descriptions which ranged from the negative (boring, dull, low wage) to extremely negative (exploitation, wage theft, bullying etc.) Such characteristics usually stemmed from

a mix of experience (including personal observations and through conversations with other workers), and reflections on representations of precarious work in public and political discourse (media/social media, films, documentaries, and so on). However, several interviewees explained that their understanding of precarious work had been predominantly based on experience. For example, James described how he'd worked numerous 'temp' jobs throughout his 28 years of work. This included as a teenager, living in the southeast of England where he worked on docks and shipyards. More recently, he'd also travelled to Scandinavia, to visit family, while working on a short-term contract for a fishing company. When he returned to England, following the initial lockdown stages of the pandemic, he told me that, although he had already secured a position as a manager (prior to his return to the UK), the start date had been delayed due to the pandemic. As such, he wanted to find something to keep the money coming in while he waited, so he 'signed up' for some temp agency work.

James informed me that he had 'been on both sides' of temping, meaning he had been an agency worker, and had also been in a position where he hired and managed agency workers. He explained that, although he didn't exactly have a full comprehension of what the term precarious work may involve, based on his experience with agency work, his opinion was 'not very high'. He'd previously considered these types of jobs a 'means to an end'. To him, initially at least, they were not exactly desirable, but neither was this work something overly bad. 'Temping', he explained, was what you might look for if you needed something quick, or a route into work, so something 'to do to get you started'. In James' experience, such jobs were not widespread when he was younger, and usually led to a full-time contract 'pretty quick'. However, more recently he had noted that things were not the same as he had come to understand them. Particularly in his new role as a factory manager,

James had witnessed things which had led to a dramatic reappraisal of his understanding of precarious work:

> "When I was younger and working for agencies, I just always, I was young and I just had the belief that well, there where agencies, but they were only 10% of the workforce, and most companies recruited through the agency. So, if you've got an agency job in a factory, you get a full-time job pretty quick. Nowadays, right, I've just taken a person on in the company, who was from the agency. She's been here two years! You know, two years with the agency, and I was told when I called the HR department, 'oh, don't take her on, she's not very good'! So, I said, 'listen, she's been here two years! At what point are you gonna tell her we're not going to give her a job!'" (James)

James describes an extreme case in which he observed a temporary worker who had been excessively maintained on a precarious basis, certainly beyond any reasonable timescale which should be deemed temporary. Furthermore, when challenging this, James was simply advised that this person was not considered 'good enough' for the role they had been undertaking for the last two years. This example may suggest not only that a permanent contract is used as a reward, but that precarious contracts may also serve as a sort of penalty, when performances are not deemed good enough. This also raises important questions regarding regulations, and fundamentally how long should a 'temporary' and precarious working arrangement last before it becomes something else? James explained that he had previously understood precarious work as something which, by its very nature, was temporary, never something which would last beyond a few weeks or months, and certainly not something that would continue for years at a time.

Such instances as the one which James describes, are not unique or isolated. As far back as 1992, a number of 'temporary workers' in the United States, successfully sued Microsoft, for retaining them as 'temporary' workers for years at a time (Greenhouse, 1998). The workers themselves coined the name 'permatemps', which they used to describe their status as employees hired on a temporary basis, yet maintained as full time employees without any of the benefits (including basic job security, pensions, bouses and healthcare). Nonetheless, James had been dismayed by the response he'd received from the Human Resource team when challenging them over what was taking place. Indeed, why was this person undeserving of a contract, for the very role they'd been working in for two years? James explained that, in his experience, he now considered precarious work as something far darker than a lack of security, that there are elements of exploitation which also take place for some, he continued:

> "It's never been great, you know, they give you the jobs that nobody wants to do. Not necessarily the easiest, but not the ones that people want, that's for sure. They [agency workers] are branded as having the lowest skill, the most unpleasant work. That's what the agency people will be for. And for that, they get the worst money, and you know, if you complain you will lose your job instantly the next day…They get it the worst. They get the worst work on the worst terms and conditions, treated the worst by everybody at the worst rate of pay." (James)

James, in his account of what it meant by 'precarious work', on one hand, began by presenting an image of a dull work, and unpleasant conditions, with poor pay. However, he caveated this with the notion that it was also something temporary, a situation which workers may find themselves in, but will move on from. The temporary nature of the work

made it somehow more acceptable, or perhaps 'bearable' to James. Once he discovered that this was not the case, this image of precarious work then became something much darker. We are moved to a ceaseless, drudge-like work scenario, in which workers face not only unpleasant tasks, but an ongoing inability to challenge their poor conditions, for an unspecified time - 'I feel sorry for them' he said.

The concept of 'permanently precarious workers' is both plausible and daunting in equal measure, not least in terms of questions around wellbeing of workers (which we will discuss further in chapter 6). The long-term precarity in instances of such as those from James's account, and the 'permatemps' at Microsoft, are buoyed by further examples of long-term temping, forced self-employment, and more throughout the literature (see chapter 2). It also leaves us with an oxymoronic dimension to precarious work, that is not easy to explain or understand on any rational level. How do we rationalise long term precarity, especially for years at a time? How long are these conditions considered temporary or precarious, especially in cases where the supposed end-goal is to 'earn' a full time, stable position, an increasingly illusive 'normal' contract?

4.2.3 These jobs are precarious, but my other jobs 'temporary'

Throughout the autoethnographic field diaries, references to multiple strands of my own sense of precarity would emerge. This encompassed not only the work undertaken in the context of the research itself, but that of my own situated understanding of precarious work. For example, there came a point in the study, where there were concerns expressed by my supervision team, that I had begun to 'go native'. This seemed an odd comment, as it

implied that there were somehow boundaries between the precarious work in which I was involved as part of this study, and some 'other' version of myself; as a researcher, as an hourly paid lecturer, in my other precarious academic roles, which was somehow less precarious. When reflecting on this further, I realised that my own understanding of 'precarious work', as well as that of the supervision team, could be quite selective. To elaborate, I'd long understood my own circumstances as being that of a 'precarious worker'. Yet, on reflection, it was clear that I had only used this term (or perhaps even 'believed' it appropriate to apply it) during conversation to express that I was not in a 'good' position (for example when describing finances or in a sense that my 'future' or 'career' remained uncertain). This seemed to be a logical and easy way of describing my working conditions. At the same time, it was something that I had possibly not quite appreciated in terms of the full extent or implication of its meaning, and the way I was applying it. As such, when asked to 'untangle' from one form of precariousness and 'remember' that I was a researcher, a doctoral student 'only researching precarious work', it presented a kind of dual rationality, or selective interpretation of my own sense of precarity. It was at this stage that I realised, I had in fact managed to completely overlook certain elements in my understanding of precarious work, and had essentially, 'othered' certain roles, including those I which I was undertaking. The following is part of an entry from the field diaries, and illustrates this sense of confusion, and trying to make sense of what was happening:

> *"Sometimes I have to really remind myself of what my actual job is supposed to be…and why I'm doing this… I tell myself 'I'm just doing the research', but there is emotional attachment… it's quite a stressful way to kind of think… [in these layered ways], and even though I've been used to it before…I think, one of the key differences… feeling like an academic that's precarious… [whilst simultaneously]… a*

> *temporary agency worker and experiencing precarity, is that there's, with the academic precarity, still this mass illusion that it's only finite, that I finish being an agency worker and I'm going to be, at some point, in a position which I love and that is something that I consider to be a full time job, in a kind of working environment, and career that I want. I think when you're doing temporary agency work, you just feel like you are proving yourself just to be stuck in that bottom tier"* (Research field notes, 20.01.2020)

At the time of this entry, I'd become fully invested in my role as an agency worker, not just for the purpose of the autoethnography, but because that had now essentially become my main income, my main 'gig'. It was not possible to do more than the bare minimum hours on my 'other jobs' alongside this and my PhD, there literally were not enough hours in the day. I also knew for a fact that this 'main gig' would be finite, it was destined to end within a set period. However, I was also maintaining my other academic roles, which essentially, had to become 'side hustles', and be viewed as such, which, although they were also precarious, I'd rationalised in a completely different way. To me, they were a more acceptable kind of precarious, because they were part of the academic journey, part of an imagined career goal, they were leading somewhere. Yet, on reflection I'd been working in this way for years, and I had no idea if or when these conditions would change. When learning about permatemps, or the example James provided of being kept as a temp worker for 2 years, my initial reaction was shock. How could someone possibly rationalise being in temp work this long, with no end goal manifesting? Yet here I was, making sense of 4 years of precarious academic work, by calling it a 'journey'.

Could this perhaps be some sort of coping mechanism, I wondered? This leaning on both the perceived 'temporary' nature of precarious conditions, was another common theme throughout the interviews, as well as the apparent othering of the negative connotations associated with precarity. So, the notion of being aware of precarious work, and having some understanding for its meaning, yet completely rejecting it as something which describes our own situation, even when it does so in a very simple way, would perhaps make sense.

This interestingly, to a degree, provides a parallel to topics found within mental health care. Studies of service user experiences, describe how some of those seeking or accessing mental health services may express a keen awareness of their own mental health conditions, but also feel they are 'better off' than others, who are suffering from what they perceive as 'much worse' conditions (Pinfold et al, 2005). It is also worth noting the negative impact of stigma and fear, in accounts of mental health care service user experiences. Reported issues have included feelings of 'diminished credibility' and the avoidance of help seeking, along with a sense of overall disempowerment, particularly in reference to 'communication problems' together with avoidance of social support (Sweeney et al., 2015). The mental health impacts of precarious work are well noted (see chapter 2) and will be discussed more in depth in chapter 6. However, it is worth mentioning these parallels, not only because of their disruptive and isolative potential, but certainly for the ways in which we may communicate and connect with others, regarding our precarity.

4.2.4 Am I in precarious work? It depends on the audience

Farah described how her understanding of precarious work had been influenced by a sense of community, having recently joined a union. She explained that, although she had a 'loose understanding' of what was meant by precarious work, she felt that while it was a big topic in terms of research, it was not something which people in academia spoke about that much in relation to themselves, or their own working contracts and living situations.

> *"So I think I started to get a full understanding of precarious work when I joined the Union, because then I realized that there is this specific community of people who are also struggling with the nature of precarious work…I also started to understand the dark side of it in a sense, because it not only comes with uncertainty, lack of financial stability and kind of, it can also impact your identity"* (Farah)

In this example, Farah describes how she had found 'a community' of those who, like her, were struggling with the impacts of precarity. These interactions revealed a 'dark side' to her understanding of precarious work, in that it was something which stretched beyond economic repercussions, to having the potential to impact your identity. This may seem odd, especially at a time when there is an increased casualization and flexibilization of labour across multiple sectors and industries, which is fast becoming difficult to ignore. Indeed, as touched on in chapter 2, scholars have long made the case that precarious work should no longer be considered a topic limited to conversations around jobs described as 'low skilled' and 'entry level', but an increasingly highly educated, yet underemployed demographic (Standing, 2011; Zaniello, 2020; Goodall & Cook, 2021). However, going back to Sabrina's example at the beginning of this section, she too never considered certain jobs or sectors (such as nursing, and higher education) as ones which may foster precarity.

As Farah had previously explained, the ability to have conversations around precarity were, to a degree, dependent upon the 'audience' one was speaking with. She elaborated that, traditionally, this was not a subject which she had found easy to converse with her colleagues in any personal capacity. However, as explained, she found that in a more communal setting, there were more people across different job roles, whose circumstances and 'struggles' with precarity had made this a little easier. It is then, prudent to ask, is it considered embarrassing or perhaps a *professional faux pa*, to be attached to and speak of one's precarity in certain roles and sectors? If so, why would precarious work and it's connotations, be acceptable to apply in discussions around some professions and not others? Does this perhaps illuminate the potential existence (or at least an emerging form) of tier system, within the precarious workforce?

4.2.5 I really didn't see myself as precarious, if anything, I saw myself as lucky

Several interviewees spoke about how they saw their own situation as being fortuitous, in that, unlike others, they at least had been able to secure work. When speaking to Amelie for example, she explained how she had never considered the work she was doing as precarious, far from it, she described feeling 'lucky and privileged' to have secured additional work.

> *"Well, it's really weird. I think at the beginning, I really didn't see myself as precarious, if anything, I saw myself as lucky, because I was a PhD student getting paid and on top of that I had managed to earn that part time job. For which I had to apply for it, and for which other people didn't get the job. So, you know, I really saw*

myself as having a stipend, plus extra money. Yeah, really saw myself as lucky and privileged, which is really weird, right? (Amelie)

Amelie, much like Sabrina, had expressed that she had a good understanding for what precarious work was. Which is perhaps why she found her situated understanding of precarity to be 'weird'. On one hand, she explains how she was 'lucky' and 'privileged', having 'earned' this additional work (alongside the task of completing a PhD), and the chance for 'extra money' to top up a small stipend. Amelie also mentions that 'other people didn't get the job'. When probed further on this, she explained that, after a while of being an hourly paid lecturer, fellow PhD students had asked her how she 'got the job', and if she knew of any similar 'opportunities'. As such, in comparison to those who were 'struggling' to find extra work, she had felt 'lucky'. The need to secure extra money, and the competition this fosters between post-graduates seeking extra opportunities to be exploited, is well documented (Spina et al., 2020).

Amelie's account was not unique to this study either, in the sense that, several other interviewees also mentioned a comparative element of fortune, when describing their situated understanding of precarity. For example, Donny had been working as an agency worker in a food processing factory, which was his first experience of this kind of work since coming to the UK. He explained that he was fully aware of the nature of the work he was doing, and that his story could have been much different. As such he felt fortunate to have 'landed' with the company with which he was placed, and so, he just 'stuck there':

"I was very, very lucky in the company I landed. I haven't worked in really any other factory. I just stuck there because I was so happy with the place." (Donny)

Maddie had been working as a retail worker for over a decade with the same company. Her contract was always part time (5 hours), but more often than not she was able to secure around 30 hours per week, or at least 15. Maddie explained how, she had 'left' her job several times in order to try and find something more stable in terms of set days and hours. Unfortunately, this had not gone well, as she has 'found out first hand that the grass isn't always greener'.

> *"I'm pretty lucky really. I do love my job, and I like the people I work with, it's just the hours…but, I know for a fact it could be a lot, lot worse!" (Maddie)*

Here Maddie describes that she feels 'lucky' to have her job, and that she loves both the work that she does, and likes the people that she works with. These are all elements which, at times, may perhaps help cushion the experience of precarity. However, they may also be used as a mechanism to further exploit people like Maddie. Certainly, some scholars have written about the notion of emotional investment, which is capitalised upon by employers to exploit workers in a growing number of occupations. This may be particularly relevant to those which provide a direct service or are seen as 'noble causes' (from retail to charity work, education, health care and so on). In Maddie's case, the dualities of fear from a previous experience, and being reminded of the positive 'love' she had for her profession, worked to illicit a sense of loyalty to her position (this is discussed further in chapter 5).

4.2.6 'It's just not a term that I would use'

A well noted challenge faced by many conceptualisations of precarious work, is the perceived 'usefulness' and currency, of a terminology which some see as putting new labels

on an old concept (as discussed in chapter 2). In particular, considerations of 'new structuralist' examples which, although rigorous have been described as limiting the 'subjective experience of work' to that of 'merely dependent variables' (Vallas & Prener, 2012). The accounts presented and the themes covered in this section, perhaps evidence the multifaceted ways in which the term precarious work can have a plethora of interpretation and applied meaning, often influenced by a wide range of factors and contexts. In his interview for this study, Ed told me how he'd 'done all sorts of jobs' throughout his life, none of which he'd considered as being 'stable'. This included a brief period working in his parents' restaurant, numerous attempts at establishing his own business, and working through agencies in a variety of offices and occasionally, in warehouses. When we spoke about his understanding of the term 'precarious work', he explained that he had never applied this term, to any of the jobs he had undertaken. For Ed, the term precarious work meant little in terms of how he spoke about or considered the work he'd undertaken. He explained that he was 'sort of' aware of what it implied, but he felt that there are some forms of work which are already universally 'understood' and didn't require further explanation:

> *"Yeah, I say doing agency work. That's how I would describe it. I'm just doing agency work 'cause everyone knows what you mean by that. They know you're doing some temp shitty job, or probably a three-month period contract. I think it's, I think it's just consensus, that it's known now, like it's been this way for a few years. I don't really know why, I'm not really sure, maybe cos it's more to the point?" (Ed)*

In their work on defining and problematising precarity, Mosoetsa et al. (2016) reflect on some of the challenges which some might face when formulating definitions of precarious

work; particularly those who favour ‘conceptually preferable’ but limited (i.e., too broad, or at times, exclusive) interpretations (Rodgers, 1989; Standing, 2011; Kalleburg & Vallas, 2018). However, it is argued that this can become increasingly questionable when those ‘standards’ are seen to be ‘absent’, or even completely non-existent. This, of course, raises concerns in terms of ‘usefulness’, when applying the term to a cumulative and varied demographic, who may not necessarily grant the concept itself much currency in application to their own situation. It may simply be a case that, in some instances (as in Ed’s case, and in his network at least) it is felt that there may not be a need to re-articulate the situation, because ‘everyone knows what you mean’.

4.2.7 Summary

This section has provided some compelling considerations for our (lack of) understanding of precarious work, what it can involve, and how it is applied and rationalised by precarious workers themselves. Indeed, as highlighted through the several examples we have explored, there are multiple contexts and constraints which inform how we might apply meaning to the term precarious work and make sense of our own precarity. Precarious work can be characterised as having a fluctuating shift pattern, with varying demands on time and availability. It is generally considered low paid, and can be found at various points and ends of the labour market; this includes entry level, and manual labour where workers are branded as low skilled and may face multiple forms of extreme exploitation.

However, there are forms of precarious work which it seems remain hidden, or at least are not yet as visible as others. These stretch across the majority of organisations and sectors, including roles which were perhaps previously considered well paid, and highly skilled (such

as nurses, social workers, lecturers, and researchers etc.) Some still hold the perception that precarious work has an impermanence to it. That, by its very nature, it is unstable, and so it is only logical that there would be a general association with finiteness attached to the jobs themselves. Others, through their experience, know that this is not the case, that precarious work can have a shocking longevity.

4.3: The work of getting work

The previous section looked at how the terminology around precarious work is understood by workers themselves, and how they speak of, and communicate on the subject of precarity. This includes considerations around the many factors which they consider important. Such understanding significant, and helps to inform topics such as perceptions and 'prejudgments' of precarious work, and may also aid in exploring what could be deemed acceptable or 'normal', when securing and undertaking the work itself. With this in mind, the following section unpacks the often-overlooked demands and processes involved in the work of getting work. It should be re-acknowledged here, that the sample came from a broad range of occupations and roles (from agency workers, to those in arts and performance, hospitality, academia, professional contractors and self-employed – see chapter 3). As such, there are different challenges and processes, experienced in both unique and similar ways. Nonetheless, the point of this section, and indeed the overarching aim of the thesis, is to better appreciate these nuances, and the multi-dimensional ways in which precarity is experienced.

In this section we will delve into reflections of an under-appreciated area of concern, and ask what is taking place for precarious workers when seeking work in the contemporary age.

This is a theme which is especially important at a time when recruitment practices have become increasingly digitised, and the widespread use of platform interfaces, mobile applications, and websites, has granted a reconfiguration of the ways in which workers are now expected to search and apply for work (see Williams et al., 2021 and Spilda et al., 2022). However, it is not intended that we intensely grapple or wrestle empirically with current theoretical framing of digitisation and automation; or the multiple ramifications for the future of working practices (as discussed in chapter 2). Instead, we will explore the motivations and decision making around precarious work; and make considerations around new and emerging employment relations, and the resulting implications which may manifest (another important aim of this research).

4.3.1 Luck, social capital and a 'quite easy' process

Throughout the interviews undertaken for this study, when asked how they had come to apply for their positions, participants expressed that the reason for seeking work of a precarious nature often fell into the following brackets:

- Speed (they needed something with an immediate/quick start)
- Limited options/alternatives
- Access/only route to a specific job (Company not hiring directly/necessary to secure full-time work - common with entry level/agency work).

- To gain experience (seen as part of career path/Conscious choice/changing career, setting up own business etc.)

Generally, interviewees expressed that the process of securing work could be quite difficult, with a wide variety of demands. This was true no matter what the occupation or role being applied for. Nonetheless, several interviewees explained that their experiences of the application process had actually been relatively positive, and 'hassle free' (i.e. they experienced a quick turnaround; they had only applied to one or two agencies/job ads, or only had to create one or two a CV's, and so on). For example, Roberto had moved to the UK from the Mediterranean, he was very well educated, and had worked in executive positions for the most part of his life. He'd decided to come to the UK to study and needed to find work. One of the other students told him to contact an agency, which he did, and was quickly offered an informal interview.

> "So, let's say that I had some capital, if I can call it like that? Cultural capital that helped me. It was just a question of putting myself on the other side of the thing. So, basically it was quite simple actually. In the process of registering or for applying it was simple. I went there and the next day they were calling me to work… it was quite easy the process." (Roberto)

In Roberto's account, he describes a very simple, quick, and easy process, with a fast turnaround, in terms of securing work. He explains that he feels that this may be somewhat due to his 'capital'. He elaborated that, by capital, he acknowledged advantages which perhaps granted a better experience. Roberto speaks multiple languages, and is a white male, from an upper middle-class background. These were all things, which, although he

couldn't be sure, he felt helped him secure his hospitality assignments, even though he hadn't any previous experience. This perhaps draws parallels to other interviewees who described their ability to secure work as being down to elements of chance, with some stating that they felt 'lucky' or 'fortunate' to get work, especially compared to others. Another interviewee told me that it was just 'good timing' for their applications. For example, demand for workers can be high during certain times of the winter or summer periods, which can result in applications being 'processed' very quickly. Some also stated that they had secured work in their first roles through a friend/family member etc. and that this could also mean that the process for them had been less convoluted.

4.3.2 Networking, 'hobnobbing and schmoozing': The constant need to perform 'above and beyond' to secure paid work

A small number of interviewees described how their positions were on a short-term contract, and/or freelance basis. Several would describe how securing work became viewed as more of a task than a process, and promoting themselves or their services was assimilated as 'just another part of the job'. For them, it meant continually ensuring their schedule included enough time for additional tasks, such as getting in touch with existing contacts, as well as networking with others. Uri for example, worked numerous roles across the arts, entertainment, and events industry. Their multiple contracts would run anywhere between a few days, to weeks or even months at a time. They explained that this required a great deal of 'hobnobbing and schmoozing' (networking), as well as a high level of

organising in order to secure positions, and be able to ensure that they had enough work flowing each year. Uri explained:

> *"there are people who actually want to do the work full time…and that was me…you have to come, like really push yourself, and you have to really, kind of, be able to make those connections, and do all the hobnobbing and the schmoozing and that… it was kind of like, you know, the fact that I was going kind of above and beyond what was expected from me, was reciprocating. People were like, very happy with that, and there was kind of like uh, you know, there was like some sort of reward, I guess for that one, because during that one, there was promotion… like I said, currently, it breeds more of a culture of kind of people sticking with it, and therefore needing to stand out."* (Uri)

In this example, Uri tells us that, in order to 'do the work full time', they must invest more of themselves and make effort to self-promote to others. Moreover, they must do so to a level which can make them stand out above others. Uri states that, having gone 'above and beyond' they have been rewarded, not just with more work, but with a promotion as a manager. This perhaps corresponds with Foucauldian observations of neoliberal subjectification (see chapter 2). Certainly, the description Uri provides resonates with observations of the necessity for self-interest, self-investment, and the promotion of self as human capital (as highlighted in Read, 2009, for example). Yet, moreover, as Uri elaborated further, the sense of competition which this fosters, meant that, for them at least, they felt an internalised constant need to perform 'at a high level' in order to 'get the next gig, and the next gig' and so on.

This acknowledges a requirement to not only seek work, but to then constantly demonstrate a willingness to 'perform' at a nonspecific 'exceptional level' (rationalised here as 'above and beyond' expectation) in order to continue to secure work, which was a common theme throughout this study. For those in certain roles and industries such as Uri (i.e. self-employed, in a consultancy or contracting position, and those working in arts and entertainment for example), the need to do so appeared to be intensified. This is perhaps evidenced with accounts of needing to continually 'compete', by regularly promoting their 'brand' (themselves), even when work had been secured, which they were able to process as being an important part of the job. Indeed, not doing so, would inevitably result in work 'drying up'.

When I spoke to Sarah, she explained that she'd been working as a freelance consultant, since leaving a London based company, where she'd previously been with for some time, due to moving to a completely new location. She told me how she'd experienced a correlation between 'neglecting this aspect' (of work seeking and promoting her services etc.), and the repercussions on the offers for work which she received. Describing her journey, Sarah explained how she first started out as a consultant, and had made considerable effort to promote herself and her services, which had 'paid off', granting her a promising beginning to a new career:

> "I got off to such a good start with several new projects, sort of following one after another, and it didn't mean that I wasn't nervous, just that there was like, a false sense of security in it. But at some point, I knew the work was getting come to an end and I'd have a long a long spell of no work…so I suppose it meant I was really driven to push hard with my networking…it's hard work and you can easily neglect

> that…you know, you think it doesn't matter… then it also ground to a halt…. it was very clear that there was a correlation between, you know, I haven't done any other sales and marketing because I'd been focused on the projects and then, you know, opportunities would sort of run out. And then I was faced with not much work. So that was a big learning curve." (Sarah)

What Sarah's account perhaps helps to enforce is that there appears to be an ongoing expectation that workers need to 'go the extra mile', as part of the condition of securing work. In her case, and also that or Uri's, this is sometimes coupled with a pressure to 'mold' themselves, as part of the application process. This could manifest in different ways, including through networking, and marketing of services. This may be unique to their given conditions, however it has also been observable in other interviewee accounts. This includes a 'lowering of expectations' when seeking work, or even actively seeking positions which they felt overqualified for (which meant altering their CV's and profiles). Indeed, it is certainly not uncommon for applicants to enhance or omit aspects of their work experience on CV's, when applying for work (as highlighted in Liu, 2020). As several interviewees remarked they would sometimes need to 'fake it, to make it' or 'blag' certain soft skills where necessary. However, it was clear that, this was also rationalised as just another pervasive aspect of 'the hustle'. Certainly, for those who continually and successfully had managed to secure work (whether this was in the form of recurrent flow, or prolonged/ongoing assignments), this was considered a rewarding, positive outcome. It was also viewed as recognition of/reward for the extra work and effort, which had been put in or had made them 'stand out' from other workers.

This may, to a degree, aid further considerations in instances such as permatemps. If this additional toil and free labour, may be internally rationalised as an 'ability' to 'secure' work, which itself is reasoned as reward and recognition for effort, perhaps this also manifests a kind of gratitude from workers. Or, to put it another way, are these mechanisms able to create a reward system via the mirage of work security, even where it is overtly absent?

4.3.3 It just makes you wonder how anyone even gets a job nowadays: seeking work is a full-time activity

Experiences of the application process when securing work, had varied in the accounts shared with this study. As discussed in the previous sections, some would refer to having a 'fortunate' experience, ode to elements such as 'reward' for their effort, plus dashes of 'chance', or 'luck'. However, for those who were not so fortunate, the journey could be very different, particularly if there were no other means of support (financial, or otherwise). The erosion of the welfare state, together with attacks on collective bargaining in neoliberal states, and its impact on precarious workers, is well documented in current text (see chapter 2). Several interviewees shared first-hand accounts, of how the bleak reality of this landscape had played out for them, along with the role of fear in governing their decision-making processes.

When I spoke to Claudio, he told me how he had been forced to 'sign up' for universal credit, after he had been unable to secure any further work, and had simply run out of money. This, he explained, became quite a 'low point' for him. Indeed, Claudio's experience had prompted him to not just lower his expectations or hopes for the type of work he wished to undertake, but almost completely remove them altogether. He told me that, no

matter how bad some of the jobs had been, he would rather have done them than claim welfare. As he elaborated:

> "[some of these] jobs are very demoralizing for the people that have to do it. But you think, at least I'm not under too much pressure to get another job…like someone on the dole, straight out to the job centre, and like, you need to apply for these even shitter jobs, or we'll strip your money" (Claudio)

In this instance, Claudio was explaining that, for him, claiming universal credit had exacerbated an already traumatic experience. He elaborated that, along with the stigma which was attached to 'being on the dole', the process itself was both nonsensical and in many instances coercive, as it forced him to apply for positions which he would never have considered. The role of fear (from being sanctioned), becoming almost the sole motivator, for someone who was already actively seeking work. He explained how, in the relatively rural area where he lived with his parents, there were few full or part time job prospects. This was reduced further, as he was unable to drive (he could not afford the lessons) and was limited by experience (having worked in either retail or warehousing). As a case in point, he told me that his previous position (in the stock room of a department store which closed), was a two hour journey each way, sometimes more depending on the time and traffic. He had maintained this job for 4 years since returning from university.

As such, when Claudio 'signed on' he explained his situation to the advisor, also informing them that he had already applied for everything that he was eligible for, and stating that he had only taken this step out of desperation for food and necessities. It also seemed as if Claudio had literally run his finances down to the last penny before taking this step. As such,

even if he were to secure an interview or a job at that stage, he had no means to pay for travel. Nonetheless, the advisor explained that the process at the job centre was such that, claimants were expected to demonstrate they had spent up to 35 hours a week looking for work. This included activities such as job applications, tailoring CV's, and physically walking into town centres and into shops etc. Furthermore, claimants are expected to be willing to travel anywhere up to three hours for work, or they will lose their benefits. Although Claudio only claimed universal credit for a few months, he described it as 'soul destroying' periods of 'relentlessly' applying for 'anything and everything' he could find, or he would risk losing what little money that gave him. He explained that, at one stage, he had applied for hundreds of jobs, even ones which he knew he had absolutely no chance of getting:

> "It just makes you wonder how anyone even gets a job nowadays…it got ridiculous…I applied to 400 places, and like, less than ten of them bothered to even get back to me, and only the ones that were giving me an interview" (Claudio)

Claudio's account represents a sadly not uncommon instance of multiple failures of the labour market and the state. Anti-welfare discourse and its legitimisation of increased control over the decision-making processes of citizens in neoliberal societies, has long been noted in current text (Peck, 2001; Grover, 2018; Power et al., 2022). This includes those who argue that the alignment of 'discourse and practices' should be seen as a process constructed to produce 'docile bodies' (Hartman, 2005). Applying such a notion, and taking Claudio's example, a slight reconfiguration may be seen, in how the process of securing the work has not only developed the potential to become a full-time job in itself, but there are also 'self-governing' dimensions which might be considered. In the case of the UK welfare

system at least, it seems that, essentially, the job application process has become an exercise which universal credit claimants are forced to go through in order to survive. In Claudio's account, we can already see this is something which has become an increasingly elaborate, laborious, emotionally provocative, and consuming exercise. As he explained to me, he felt that the whole experience had simply worn him down and conditioned him to accept increasingly worse conditions. As will be discussed later in the thesis, in Claudio's case it was effective, and often haunted his decision making, even in the worst instances of abuse and exploitation (see chapter 6).

Claudio, however, was not alone in experiencing the application process as a 'full time job' within itself. Across the interviews and certainly within the autoethnographic account, the tasks involved when applying for work could range from constructing multiple CV's, building profiles across numerous platforms, attending/completing time consuming assessments, and multi-layered applications which took hours to complete. One participant in particular was taken aback, when asked to 'write an essay' as to why they would be an 'ideal candidate' for a shelf stacking job at a supermarket. It was also not uncommon to hear of multiple interviews for the same position. For example, being interviewed by a recruitment agency, and then again having a separate/further interview with the end employer, for a temp role. This is something I'd also experienced when applying for a nightshift position in a warehouse, during my Masters. The job was predominantly through the agency, but the employer wished to interview candidates themselves. I thought at the time this was quite extravagant for minimum waged temporary, none-contract position, with no guaranteed hours. However, the application process, as I experienced it during the autoethnographic research for this study, had become far more elaborate and demanding than I recalled, or had the misfortune to previously experience at least.

4.4 ‘There’s no quick fix anymore’: Autoethnographic observations of the application process when seeking ‘temp’ work

This section draws predominantly from the filed diaries of the autoethnography undertaken as part of this research (see chapter 3). It describes my experiences as someone seeking temporary agency work, unpacking the many subtle details from the different stages I went through in order to secure work. Things certainly did not unfold as had been hoped, with aspects of the planning (I now realise) perhaps being over reliant on a widely held misconception, that temporary agency work is very accessible, and securing assignments is a relatively ‘quick and easy’ process. However, being a temporary agency worker has also featured quite prominently throughout my early adult life, and certainly throughout a large proportion of my higher education. In my previous experience, this notion of temp agency work being easy to access appeared justified (as long as you don’t mind what kind of work you do).

4.4.1 A false start

In the case of the research for this thesis, as I had done previously when seeking work of this nature, I set out with the mindset of being willing to take any job. The only real preference I had was for nightshifts. This was because I’d had to reduce my work as a HPL and researcher at my institution, but didn’t want to ‘lose’ those positions altogether. As such, in order to

maintain them, I still had some teaching and research commitments alongside the temp work. Having a nightshift, although tiring, would make this more straightforward (more about this can be found in chapters 3, and 5). For some additional context, I am the main source of income for my family, and so have been used to balancing multiple precarious roles, in order to maintain commitments alongside completing various stages of my studies. At the time of the research, although I had been in receipt of a fee waiver, I very much was relying on the income from securing the work, as part of the budget for the project. Rather, to put this more accurately, 'we' were relying on it as a family. With familiarity of this kind of work however, the strategy felt both pragmatic and, it was anticipated, would not be any more demanding or risky (financially, mentally/physically) than anything I'd previously encountered.

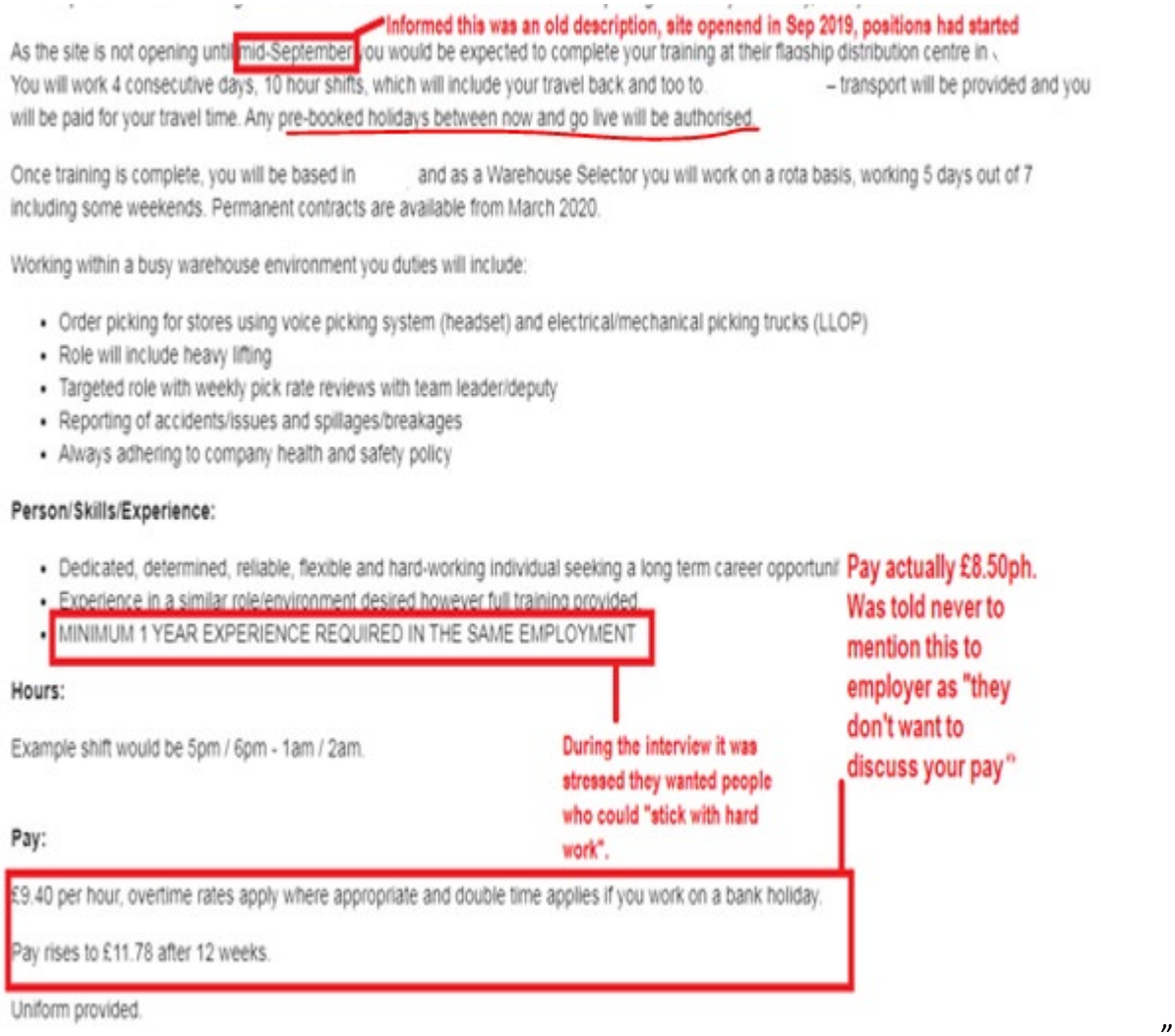
As such, between 11/11/2019 and 10/01/2020, applications were submitted for various online temp positions (roughly 20 – 30 per week, often the same positions I'd already applied for). During this period, I had also registered with 5 recruitment agencies in the East Midlands; this included 1 online, and 2 face-to-face registrations, along with 2 which were part of an interview process. From this, I initially received two offers for employment. The first 'offer' for work came relatively early in the job applications phase. This would have probably given me the impression that I too had been 'lucky'. However, this failed to materialise into any 'actual work'.

The following account describes a position which failed to manifest any paid work opportunity. It was an 'immediate start' position at a brand-new warehouse which had opened 'nearby' to where I was living (just a short 30 min bus journey away, to be exact). The position had been advertised across numerous platforms and seemed to have been

replicated a few times (i.e., I had noted the same job description from the same agency in various separate live ads). Along with the ad content (see below), this gave the impression that there was a sizable recruitment drive, with lots of positions to fill and a variety of shifts available. From previous experience, I knew that this would mean a lot of applications would be received. As such, I made sure to apply for each ad across the multiple platforms, in order to make myself 'visible' for the position. This perhaps backfired to an extent, as in the end, I received more than one call back, with numerous agents responding to my application. Nonetheless, after clearing up the confusion I was extremely happy to be informed I had secured an interview:

> So, I applied for this job on Monday (11.11.2019), they actually called me on the Wednesday (13/11/2019), and I'll interview today (Friday 15/11/2019), so that's quite a fast turnaround. Admittedly, I have experienced situations where I have registered with an agency and been given work the same day, but this was in 2008, and I wasn't expecting it to be this quick. Nonetheless, from the language that was being used throughout (including the ad, and the way they spoke to me on the phone), I am under the impression that the positions are underway and if successful, the job will start soon after induction and training.

The ad:



"

(Field Diary notes, November 2019)

As this entry describes, it appeared that I had been one of the 'lucky' ones. My application had seemingly been processed extremely quickly, and this was coming at a time when the roles had already been finalised, and workers were being taken on. After receiving two confirmation phone calls from the agency, it became clear that there were a few discrepancies with the job ad (see highlighted in red). Notably regarding the fact that the site, I was told, was already operational, with 'waves of workers' having had their training, and were now working on site. The wage, as it transpired, would not strictly be as advertised, because there was a 'probation period' I would have to complete with the

agency, but this would be clarified at the interview. As highlighted, this meant pay was around minimum wage. From what I could later tell (when speaking to a former recruiter), the agency basically held back the night premium. As will be discussed later, this could explain why I was told not to mention my pay to the end employer.

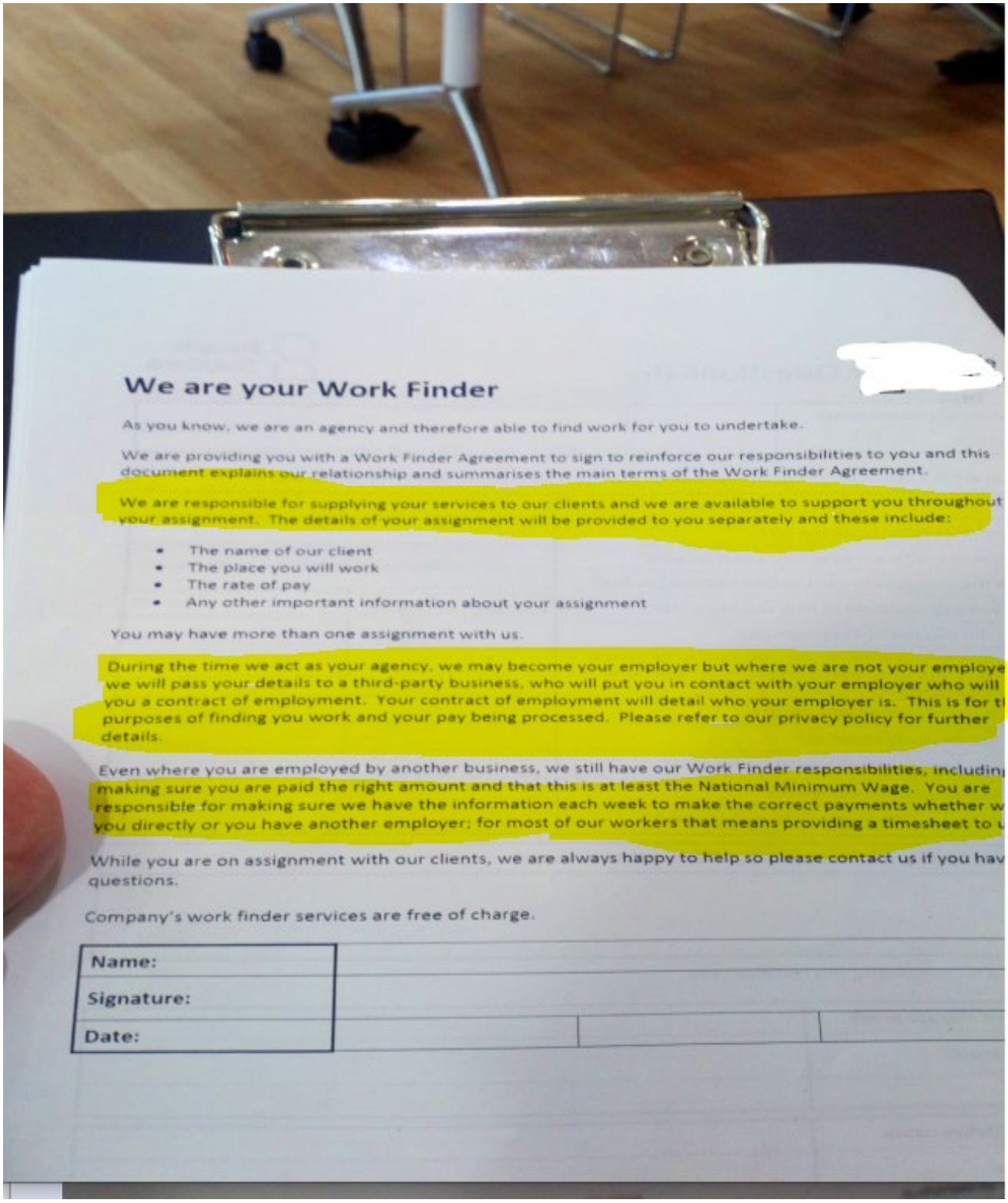
Despite some red flags, my mood remained quite optimistic. It seemed that, in terms of being able to secure a temp agency assignment quite quickly (and not putting too much financial pressure on our household), things were going according to plan. However, my confidence was relatively short lived, and began taking a hit during the interview with the agency. Firstly, I was instructed that the interviews were taking place inside one of the local jobcentres (which was confusing, why that venue, why not the agency, or even onsite at the warehouse if necessary?) I was a little apprehensive for some reason. The hostile environment which successive neoliberal regimes have fostered as they strip back the welfare state in the UK, is well documented and widely discussed in public and political discourse (Jordan, 2014; Patrick, 2017; MacGregor, & O'Gorman, 2020). This perhaps played on my mind. Also, despite growing up on a council estate, where unemployment was rampant, my working-class family had attached a ridiculous stigma to the idea of claiming welfare. As such, I had not really had much experience of job centres, but was keenly aware of the problems which had grown around the ongoing and intensified demonisation of welfare claimants. Indeed, beyond occasionally going in to use the computers in the centre to look for bar work when I was in college (pre-austerity), and going in with mates who were looking for work, I'd no real idea of what to expect.

As I arrived early for the interview (before 9am), I knocked on a locked door at a side entrance, and was abruptly told to wait until they were open. I didn't get a chance to explain that I was there for an interview. Instead, I waited outside, in the rain, but wasn't alone for long, as there seemed to be a steady flow of people emerging from the car parks and avenues around the centre. I wondered how many others were being interviewed, and if this was a group interview maybe. Nonetheless, I recall being taken aback by how cold the building looked (very old and run down), if it were not for the sign, it would look completely abandoned. The atmosphere also felt quite intimidating, perhaps exacerbated by the awkward reception I received from the security (G4S a private security firm, are now an ever-present feature in job centres, I am told). When we were finally allowed to go in, I tried to explain that I was there for an interview, not to make a claim, and didn't have a name for the person I was supposed to be meeting, just the company. One of the guards luckily knew what I was talking about and told me to take a seat. A person in a suit came over, and frantically handed me some forms, and a small pen 'fill this out and I'll find you in 15 mins' they said. As I sat in the office reception, I began manually completing a form, which I'd already completed and sent over prior to attending the interview, which itself was a varied replication of the information already contained in my CV.

This was frustrating. How much time have I wasted completing these sorts of ridiculous exercises in my lifetime, I wondered? My initial thought was that I was simply being asked to continually hand over the same information, due to a poorly constructed system, which although clearly non-functional, was not seen as pressing to be fixed (after all, it is only the applicants free time being wasted here). Nonetheless, I began to notice all the effort I'd been making before I'd even got a job. It was less a concern of how things had become this way, as why they were still this dysfunctional. There must be a point to this constant

obsession with not only collecting data, but replicating the need for us to be constantly doing so. In the context of work, there are platforms and training courses dedicated to helping you build the right CV (O´Dowd, 2023), videos and advice blogs on how to do job searches and what to put on application forms (Share, 2021; Hays, 2023). This obsession with elaborate application processes, seemed to highlight some bizarre power flex in employer-employee dynamics, whereby it is no longer enough for workers to be qualified, and willing to do a job. They must now constantly jump through continuous hoops and loops, providing countless amounts of free labour, to secure work, as some sort of ongoing ritual of proving they are worthy of even the most basic precarious role.

When reading through my 'work finder agreement' (see below), I also noted some strange wording and phrasing, together with what appeared to be confusion around data protection, most notably around sharing my information with 'third parties'. But what perhaps stood out the most, was how workers were 'responsible' for ensuring the agency has the right information to pay them on time. In my previous experience working in warehousing, this meant that after each shift you would complete the hours worked for the night on a sheet of paper, and get a supervisor (from the end client) to sign this off. You would then hand this in to the on-sight recruitment rep (or post it into a box, in their absence).



We are your Work Finder

As you know, we are an agency and therefore able to find work for you to undertake.

We are providing you with a Work Finder Agreement to sign to reinforce our responsibilities to you and this document explains our relationship and summarises the main terms of the Work Finder Agreement.

We are responsible for supplying your services to our clients and we are available to support you throughout your assignment. The details of your assignment will be provided to you separately and these include:

- The name of our client
- The place you will work
- The rate of pay
- Any other important information about your assignment

You may have more than one assignment with us.

During the time we act as your agency, we may become your employer but where we are not your employe we will pass your details to a third-party business, who will put you in contact with your employer who will you a contract of employment. Your contract of employment will detail who your employer is. This is for t purposes of finding you work and your pay being processed. Please refer to our privacy policy for further details.

Even where you are employed by another business, we still have our Work Finder responsibilities, includin making sure you are paid the right amount and that this is at least the National Minimum Wage. You are responsible for making sure we have the information each week to make the correct payments whether w you directly or you have another employer; for most of our workers that means providing a timesheet to u

While you are on assignment with our clients, we are always happy to help so please contact us if you hav questions.

Company's work finder services are free of charge.

Name:	
Signature:	
Date:	

('Finder's agreement', Field artifacts, November 2019)

There was also very little time to complete all of the information required on the forms, let alone actually fully process what you were reading. At the time, I noted that this, in itself, 'should be considered a giant red flag' in terms of communicating and understanding workers' rights. I remember thinking afterwards, how can anyone read this information and the fully process it? How can they know exactly what they are agreeing to, or ever feel able to challenge it?

Interestingly, during the interview it was noted that I had missed a form. I had in fact not missed it, the form was an 'optional' opt out from the working time directive. The agency rep stated that, I didn't need to sign the form, not if I didn't want to, but that the end client was looking for people that 'wanted to work hard', and this would sometimes mean working 'lots of hours'. I basically got the impression that this wasn't much of an option. It annoyed me, I felt like I wasn't able to reject something, even though it was my right to do so. But again, I needed the work, and I once again considered that, in reality, if things became hazardous, I would leave. For additional context, my need to secure work was very real. Whilst I'd received a fee-waiver for my PhD studies, this was later removed, and I was not in receipt of any stipend (as this never materialised through alternative avenues). As such, I had no other means of financial support other than to work. I had reduced other forms of paid work (aside from a small amount of teaching etc.) in order to undertake the research for the autoethnography. So I very much 'needed' this job. During the interviews, others also mentioned how they rationalised certain elements which seemed 'conflicting', 'difficult', and 'irrational', in order to 'just get on'. Interestingly, some described that this was their 'mentality for coping', when working under precarious conditions for several years. To an extent, this perhaps plays an important part of 'self-preservation', and 'maintaining hope' when reflecting on many of my own struggles. Nonetheless, in this

instance, the perception that what was happening would only ever be temporary did a lot of the heavy lifting, as I accepted that, frankly, I was willing to sign anything, so long as I got some work.

This desperate approach appeared to have paid off, when the next day I received a job offer. I was extremely happy and began trying to plan out the logistics (how I would travel to work, what I would need, how I would fit everything else around it). However, I didn't ever receive a start date. After chasing up for several weeks, I was just continually told that someone would get back to me, but they never did. Annoyingly, I continued to receive emails inviting me for an interview for the same job (despite replying several times that I had already interviewed, and was awaiting a start date). Essentially, I'd been put to the back of the queue, and I had to start the application process all over again.

This was extremely disappointing, and (due to pausing the job hunt, having assumed I'd found work) perhaps demonstrated how much had changed since my last 'drift' into agency work. Nothing that was happening felt 'quick' or 'easy'. It appeared that, far from being a reliable source of instant work, much more could be demanded. In some similarity to Claudio's account, I now felt desperately trapped in a situation where it became a case of applying for anything and everything - creating CV's for multiple roles, much of which didn't respond, and when they did, I was informed that positions were either 'not yet ready to start' or that they were 'no longer available' (despite still being advertised regularly). Again, I couldn't help but question why this was happening. It was painfully clear that the job market was not great in my area, but why was I constantly having to apply for things especially if they don't seem to actually exist. On the one hand, I tried to be pragmatic, and consider the organisational logistics, or problems with outsourced processes. But, as

discussed previously, this still felt like it had more to do with a change in power dynamics. I simply didn't feel that my time was worth anything, unless the agency needed me to fill a space, or to commodify me as another body on their system to sell me as a product. In times where they are inundated with people seeking work, why would they worry if I had wasted my time on an application or had a difficult experience?

4.4.2 The cycle begins again

After the assignment failed to materialise, I found myself back to the beginning of the job search. As a temp seeking work without prior connections (which may provide an easier 'way in'), the very process of applying for positions became an arduous daily and nightly grind, scanning anywhere from 10 -50 pages of job ads, via multiple online platforms. When you are viewing ads at this volume, online job hunting very quickly becomes a monotonous task, and it's easy to go into 'auto-pilot' relatively early on. This can be a draining experience. However, I still maintained some enthusiasm (or perhaps desperation), and it felt almost hypnotic (quite addictive even), as there is seemingly a lot of work on offer, granting an impression of a great deal of 'choice' especially at the 'entry level/low skilled' end of the market. Initially at least, the amount of time you spend performing this task can perhaps go unnoticed. This included not only connotations of hyper-connectivity involved in the search for work, but also this need to secure paid assignments meant the whole scenario felt like it became strangely addictive. For example, one night in particular, I'd 'gone at it' for at least three hours, but it felt much shorter (perhaps because I was so focussed on finding a job, and let's not forget, this was the easy part right?) My partner

even remarked that she'd tried speaking to me a number of times but got no response, because I'd apparently been just staring at the screen like 'a facebook zombie' (a term she often uses to describe those who sit with vacant stares, scrolling through social media on their mobile phones). Although I couldn't stop altogether (because I needed to find work), it was clear that my current strategy wasn't healthy, and that I needed to be more organised to both structure the time I was spending on searches, and rein in these toxic habits.

Essentially, it seemed that I tackled this by breaking up the daunting and time-consuming nature of the big task (of securing work) into smaller chunks, setting them as micro-goals. For example, if I'd set up a job alert (a function most job search platforms provide), this would usually have wide ranging parameters, as I wanted to ensure the nets being cast were as wide as possible. This meant that the yield of ads per alert could be quite sizable. As such, rather than going through every job alert in one go, I would set myself the task of filtering through the pages of each one at a time. Once each had been scanned for appropriate positions, I'd mark it as complete and move to the next step (selecting or creating a tailored CV if needed), and so on. Organising things in this way not only felt more thorough and organised (compared to the erratic 'apply for anything and everything' approach), but perhaps also helped create a series of minor achievements, or what some deem 'micro-accomplishments' (Mathis, 2020), after each smaller task had been completed. This may seem a little odd, and it should, this is a lot of effort to try and secure some temp work. However, this approach to securing work corresponded with those shared by several interviewees. Not least those who were self-employed, such as Sarah, who went even further, essentially adding an evaluation mechanism to their self-marketing efforts. Sarah

especially had described how she would not only set herself micro-targets, but would follow this up regularly with mini performance reviews to see how each part of her overall strategy was performing.

Whilst I had not yet reached this level of detail in my efforts to secure work, I did consciously keep track of the positions applied for, as part of my research function. I must admit that I am unsure whether I would have the mind to do so, when applying for each and every job role generally, as a temp. I most certainly have not kept track of any temp or part time applications in my life previously. It should be noted that many jobsites, as part of the account function, now keep a tally of how many positions you have applied for. As handy as this may seem, it can also be troubling for many reasons, not least, I felt, that when you have applied for lots of jobs at once, you start to feel concerned that you are presenting yourself as desperate. This may not be a 'good look' for your 'brand'. It can also be confusing, should you get a call back from an agency about a position, as most seem to be under the impression you are applying for one job at a time and waiting for a response before moving on to the next. As such, recruitment agents rarely speak with due comprehension of the sheer volume of jobs workers are often applying for. Indeed, conversations can be a bit of a guessing game, unless they give away a reminder of the exact role.

The digitisation of insecure work is well recognised for its 'new demands' placed upon those seeking work in the 'new economy' (Sholz, 2017). I certainly hit a point where all of the advertised positions across multiple platforms appeared quite uniformed, and questioned how many may be duplicates spread across these multiple sites. I found this process may 'push' you to (in a somewhat cliché way) think of yourself as a 'brand', focussed on selling

yourself. It is easy to overlook the language and tone often used within many of the job ads created by agencies. On reflection, analysing them would be an interesting and valuable project in its own right, with some rich observational data on offer. For example, when searching for nightshifts in warehouses, for every 10 – 20 jobs on a page, I would likely find 3 or 4 which would perhaps be a suitable fit. This set a tone that my choices (the field) are limited, despite my already being relatively flexible (at the time, I had only 2 periods per week with commitments, plus willing to travel up to two hours from a very central location, on a major 24-hour bus route).

Flexibility, rather than a 'mutual benefit', often appears to be a requirement. In some cases, it became difficult to envision exactly which 'hours' you would be working. There were several instances where roles advertised for (somewhat paradoxically) 'regular shifts', with a need to be fully flexible around multiple patterns (days/nights/weekends). Others leave you wondering if there was any kind of solid rota on offer to begin with. In figure 1 (below), we can see this need for the applicant to 'have a flexible approach', this literally, as we read on, means they must be able to work evenings, weekends, and take 'call outs'. The wage is minimum to basic, and doesn't mention overtime:

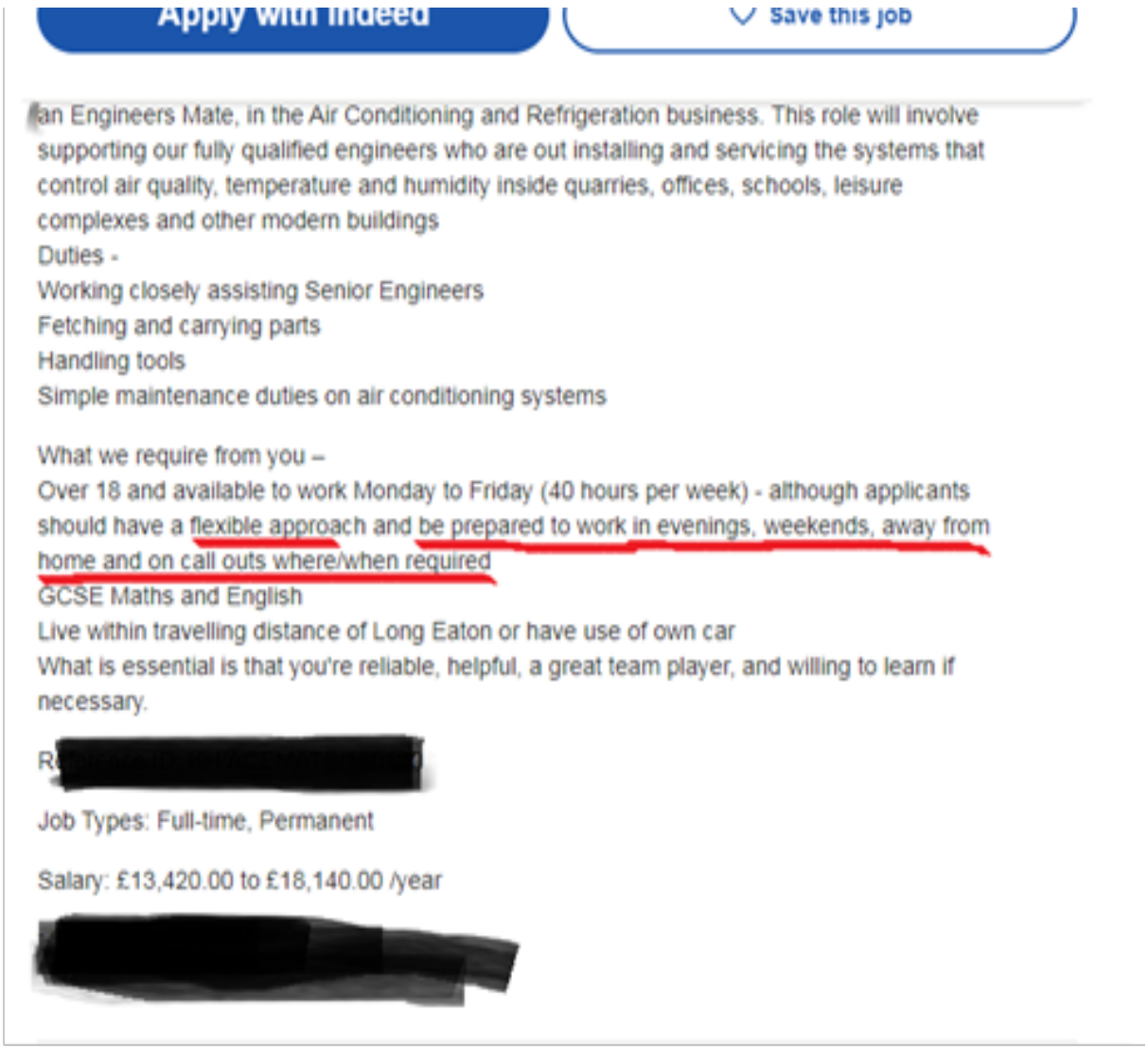

Apply with Indeed
Save this job
an Engineers Mate, in the Air Conditioning and Refrigeration business. This role will involve supporting our fully qualified engineers who are out installing and servicing the systems that control air quality, temperature and humidity inside quarries, offices, schools, leisure complexes and other modern buildings
Duties -
Working closely assisting Senior Engineers
Fetching and carrying parts
Handling tools
Simple maintenance duties on air conditioning systems
What we require from you –
Over 18 and available to work Monday to Friday (40 hours per week) - although applicants should have a flexible approach and be prepared to work in evenings, weekends, away from home and on call outs where/when required
GCSE Maths and English
Live within travelling distance of Long Eaton or have use of own car
What is essential is that you're reliable, helpful, a great team player, and willing to learn if necessary.
Job Types: Full-time, Permanent
Salary: £13,420.00 to £18,140.00 /year

Figure 1

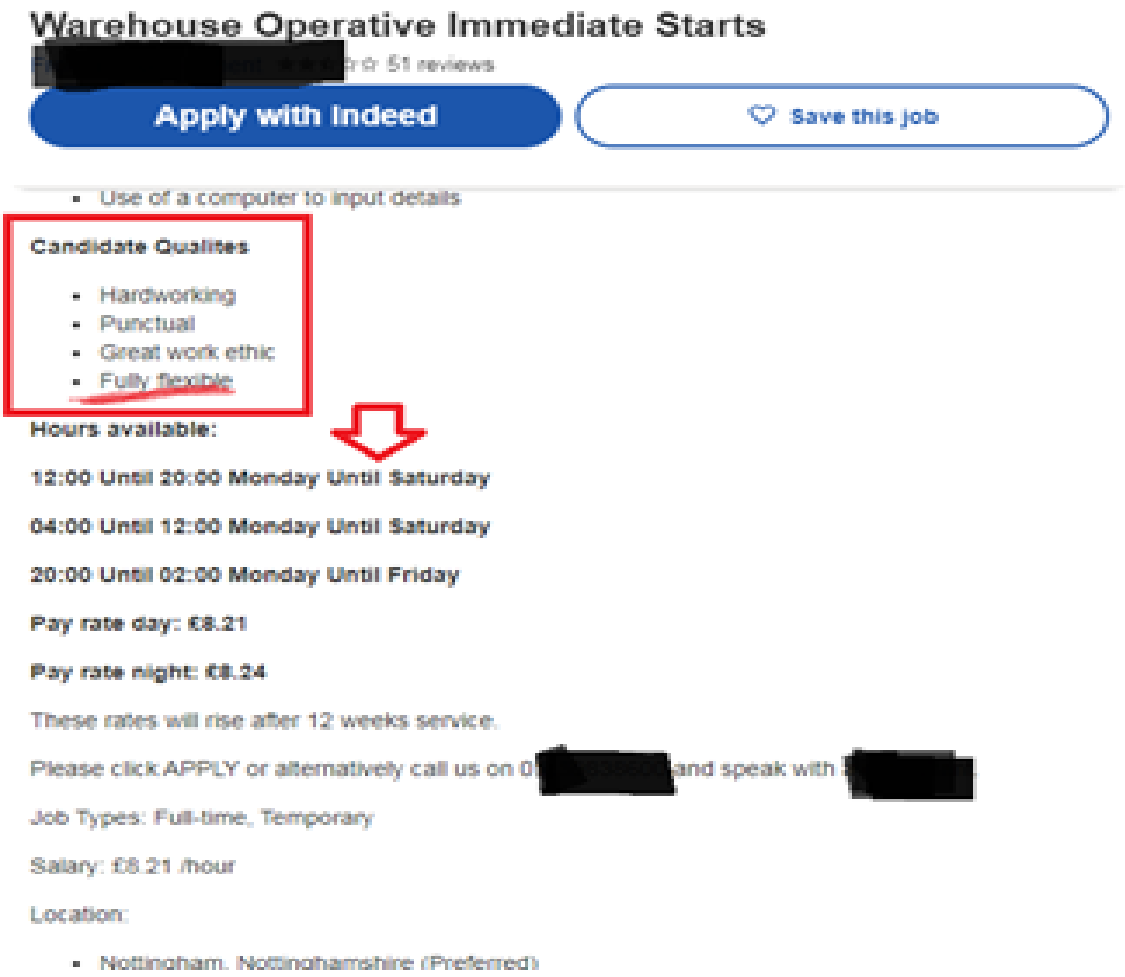


Figure 2

In figure 2 (above), this requirement to be 'fully flexible' is also presented, alongside the need to be 'hard working' and have a 'great work ethic' - buzzwords for 'going above and beyond' to demonstrate how you meet these none-specific criterium. Just below this, are some shift patterns which you may work around, but of course, flexibility is a key requirement. The compensation rate is £8.21 per hour (2019 rates) or 3p per hour more after midnight (presuming this is a nightshift premium). The wages will 'rise after 12 weeks of service' which is a very interesting way of framing a puzzling probation period, for a temp job.

The topic of excessive demands, low rewards, have long been staples of conversations around 'precaritisation' and 'flexibilization' of work and life (see chapter 2). Emily Martin (1994) developed the notion of 'flexibilization' in application to multiple contexts (from medicine to labour) forewarning of an emerging 'social Darwinism'. This presents further consideration for the ways in which the conditioning of workers (and its impact) may have seen a reconfiguration of sorts. For instance, the very act of seeking work, exposes how the dull, low paid, drudge work, described earlier in the chapter by James, has been reconfigured, to positions we must work demonstrably hard for. Employers demand your flexibility and willingness to work to unspecified levels, but you will be rewarded with low pay, and insecurity.

During my time in the field, it became apparent that some positions may become an 'only option', or perhaps it was more of a realisation that choices were actually very limited. Indeed, I refer to it as a sort of conditioning process, because any optimism I had regarding outlook in securing something that was relatively decent, at this stage, was evaporating. It became apparent that these demands were commonplace, and moreover, they were becoming appealing compared to having nothing. As Claudio aptly outlined in his account, they were 'better than the dole' (which wasn't even an option in my case, as I wouldn't qualify due to other roles and my partner being in work). Strangely though, I felt so desperate to secure work, that it really did feel as if I just needed a foot in the door, and so would overlook the horrific exploitative demands (whereas, ordinarily, I would never even consider them). It was also noted how overtime, was near enough constantly presented as a bonus, even a reward, for working beyond expectation. In some cases, it sits alongside the need to be flexible, which gives the impression that 'overtime' will likely not be optional

(you are expected to want, or perhaps given the wage, need it). Figure 3 below is a case in point:

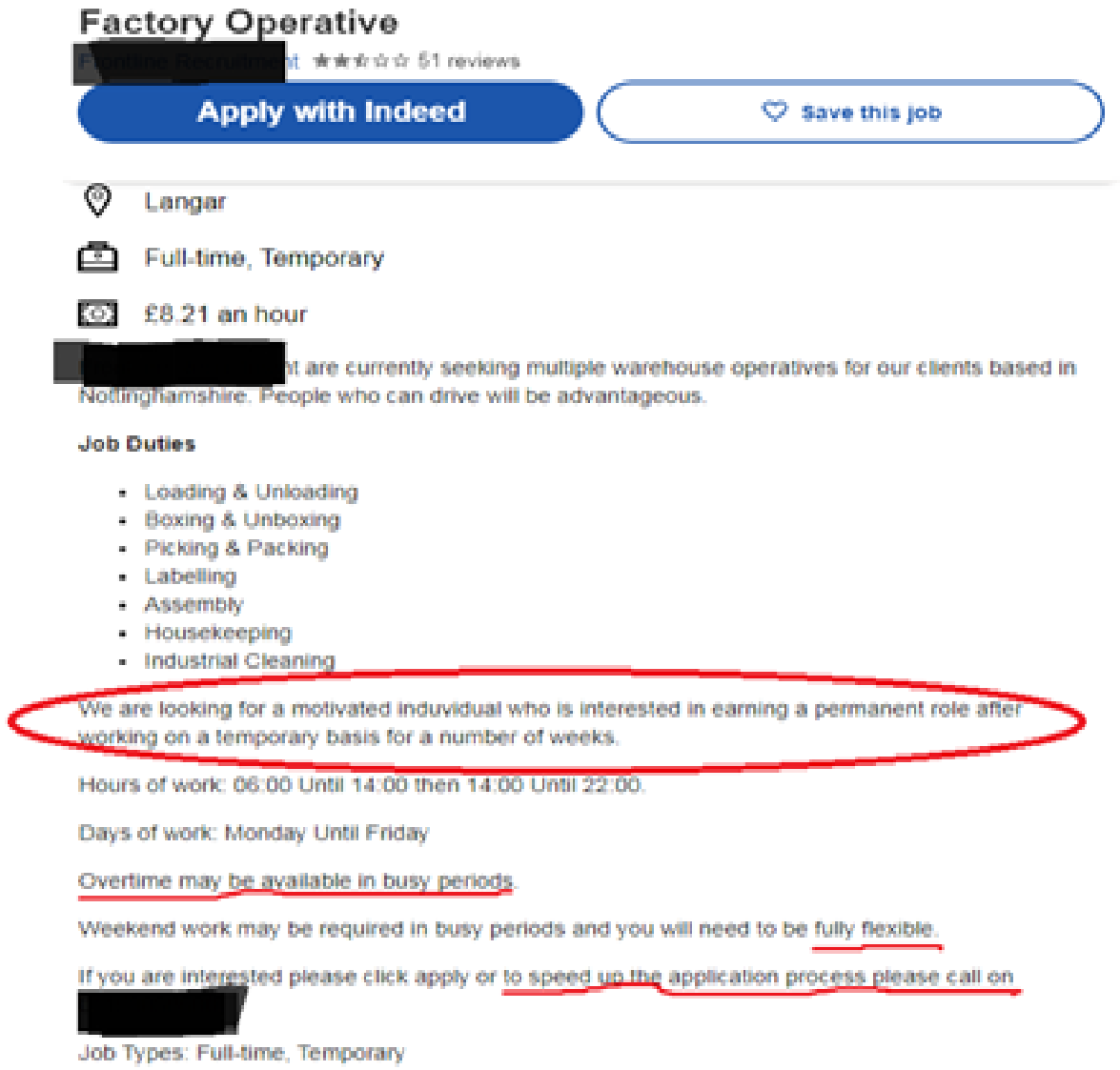


Figure 3

In this example, the applicant should again be 'fully flexible' but more than this, should be interested in 'earning' a permanent role, after an unspecified number of weeks. In figure 4, the position states, categorically, that you will be working unsociable hours. This demands

great commitment from the candidate, and again is rewarded with minimum wage (meaning that it doesn't even offer an unsociable hours premium). Workers must also:

Cooperate if needed to travel across different regions during shifts

Communicate efficiently and respond to instructions from different levels of management

Demonstrate a commitment to the job.

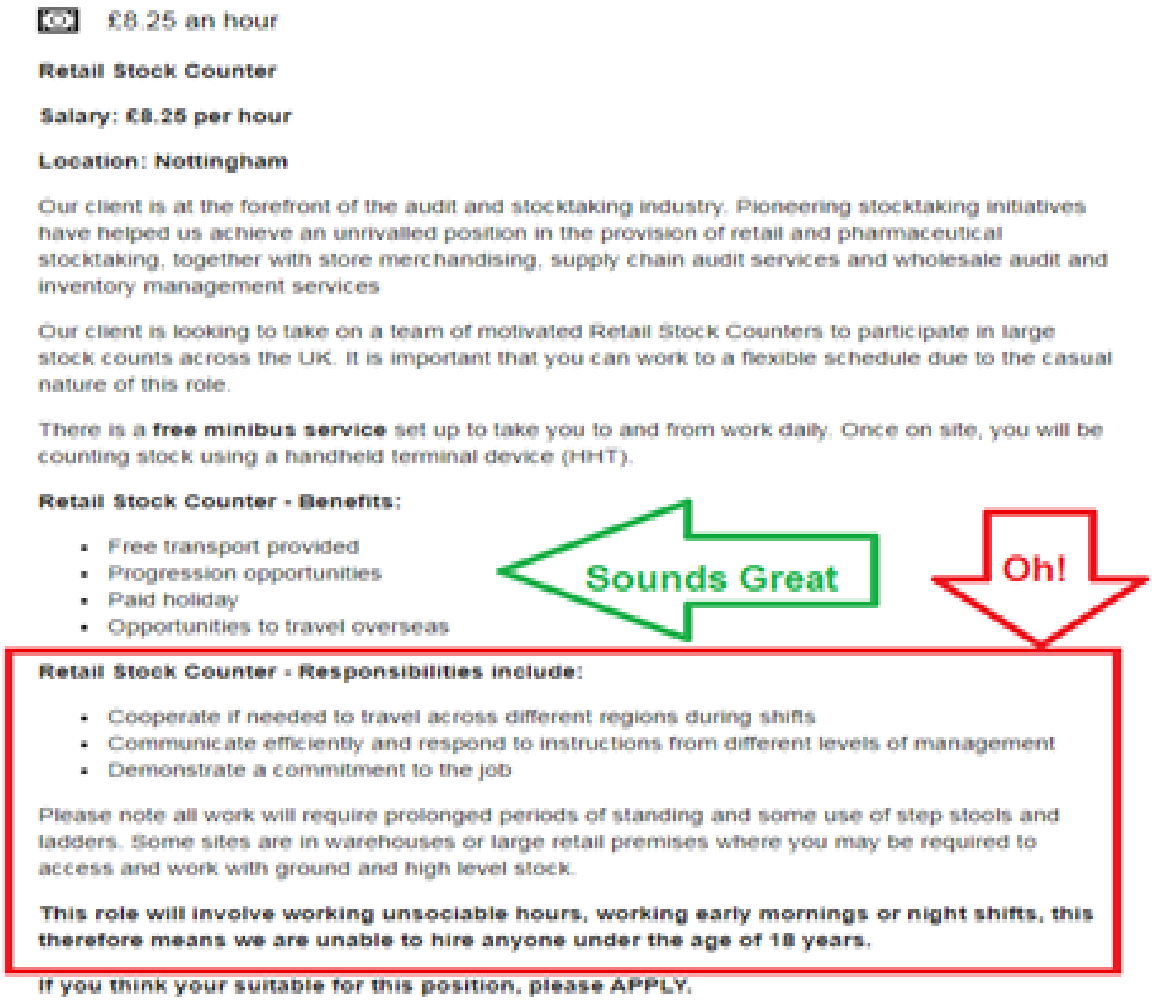


Figure 4

Despite the desperate need for money, and the desire to just get started in a paid assignment, there was no way to rationalise what was happening as anything other than absurd levels of dressing up exploitative jobs. Perhaps, much like the interviewees had expressed earlier in this section, I told myself (as a coping mechanism) that any 'really bad' positions would only be a 'very last resort', and of course, even then 'it's only temporary'. Nonetheless, when looking for this kind of work, I began to consider what it would be like when all of this begins to factor into your only options. Certainly in my case, I realised how subdued and willing I was to self-exploit (however temporary this may be). It is frankly terrifying, no matter how short or long you might experience this. You really do question what your time, and indeed your life, as a worker and a human being is worth. It seems that part of the condition of precarity, understands that you will be in a perpetual state of multiple vulnerabilities, and exposed to this level of exploitation, which is seemingly now the norm. The need to prove that you are a hardworking, dedicated employee (what does this mean, specifically?); especially if you want to receive the reward of a fulltime role, being just one aspect of that state of existence. Under neoliberalism and its fetish with the destruction of the welfare state, there are little mechanisms of support which allow workers to reject poor working conditions, even at their most toxic and hazardous (as highlighted in Hewison, 2015; Manolchev et al., 2018; Allan et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, this continued travelling of the application process lasted for what felt like an eternity. At best, I occasioned a call back, and was asked to come in and see someone at the agency, or actively encouraged to 'get in touch', to 'chase up' with them and see what they had 'coming up'. Sometimes, I would be encouraged to look directly at agency sites, or pointed to well-known job websites and told to look at the agency's profile. At one point,

following an ‘interview’ (or rather, when I physically took in a CV and managed to speak to a recruitment agent), I was bizarrely asked if I would leave a positive review for their agency, on platforms such as google and glass-door. This was a request made all that much ‘weirder’ by the fact that, I hadn't undertaken any work through the agency at that stage, it was just a promise of ‘guaranteed work’, because they had ‘so many roles coming up’.

To a certain extent, I couldn’t help noting how this constant commodification of, not only myself as a worker, but my actions around seeking work, was gravitating toward the generation of data. I was being asked to continually check on the agency webpage (no doubt providing hits), and look for them on job hunting platforms such as indeed, and Totaljobs (same again). This felt like it wasn’t enough to be rounded up and sold as products, but that the very desire for work was also being used to help promote, and tick boxes for the agency themselves. In this instance maximising hits (page views), and actions (such as application numbers) on the agency’s ads. What was this for, why would I be asked to do this, what were these increasingly elaborate processes for? During this experience, it not only seemed to be part of just a box ticking exercise, but more a form of algorithmic governance (as described in Danaher et al., 2017; Yeung, 2017; and Andrews, 2019). It felt as if it were a digitised way of ordering workers, another layer to face, a set of extra hoops through which one may jump to increase the chance of securing work. This was further evidenced when I was also told ‘it might be best not to go with any other agencies’, as I would need to be available immediately if called for work, that it would likely be a same day start (as in, the very night of the call). This was a common theme with agencies, I would often be asked when ‘signing up’ with them, ‘have you registered with anyone else?’ Why would it matter if I were to register with multiple agencies? Why this need to brand the cattle? The system

they perpetuate demands that I maximise my chances of securing work, so why would I disadvantage myself in this way? This would basically make 'chasing' the agency pretty much a daily exercise, until I secured work. Perhaps this was the point, and to make this more absurd, most of these agencies never got in back in touch with any work at all.

On reflection, and to be clear, these were not necessarily 'explicit demands' as a precursor to the work, but it felt as if not 'playing ball', might influence whether or not I would be prioritised, or overlooked for work. Again, it essentially felt as if I'd been asked to not only commodify my labour, but express how pleased I was to do so, and how helpful the agency had been in helping to do this. Of course, I will be loyal to only one 'job finder', and work hard to ensure you can secure work for me. This was perhaps another aspect of what Kidder (1981) described as showing a willingness to give 'heart and soul' to the company, and the job (see chapter 2). Only here, we might view this with a slight reconfiguration, to be seen as more of a foretaste of what is to come, a buttering up of the middleman, which now takes place prior to the potential of a 'sign on' to the full project.

As previously stated, my experience of temporary staffing agencies (TSA's) understood that 'getting on the books' seemed a pretty straight forward process. This usually stemmed from either sending over a simple CV (usually followed by an informal chat or invitation to come in and register) or as I would previously do, walk in, and sign up with the agency, who would then provide the function of finding work on my behalf. It was a relatively undemanding and brief process; at most a short discussion/interview with the recruitment agent, pleasantries exchanged, explain your working background and what you were looking for etc. You would then be told what positions they had which they think would interest you. In short, that they

would provide the function of seeking work on your behalf. This perception was now fully blown out of the water, and it was surprising to witness how much things had changed in a relatively short period. You must now seemingly also 'self-manage' your precarious job search, even as an agency worker with multiple 'job finders'. As such, one would suggest that it is difficult to see the function of the agency for the temp anymore, beyond that of a possible holder of positions. In my experience, it certainly appeared to be less involved on the provision side, than has previously been the case. This is despite the fact that, when you do actually 'sign up' with an agency, it is still a function they claim to provide on your behalf (admittedly, at the time of writing, it appears the responsibility of finding work now rests on the 'candidate' – *see Hays, 2022 for example*).

Whilst experiencing longer periods of sustained and intense job searching, upon not hearing anything back, it felt like a very lonely and isolating experience. The longer it went on, the more I felt that I needed a 'win', an actual assignment, a job or at least just something promising, so that I could report back to my partner and my family (who were also on this journey with me). In my experience, well-meaning friends and family members would often ask 'how's the job hunt going', but I just felt defeated, even ashamed when reminded that there was nothing to feed back. I internalised the 'failure' to secure work, which resurfaces as perhaps a form of paranoia, where you can feel as if you are being judged on whether you are working, and whether you have been 'looking hard enough'. When questioned, however, I often just smiled and replied honestly, that 'no, I've not heard anything yet, but I'm still applying'. Nonetheless, this felt (even with the research and teaching roles I still had) inadequate, because I hadn't secured a 'proper job' that would 'pay the bills'. This worsened as the end of the year approached, and I still hadn't secured anything else.

However, friends would remark ‘don’t worry, there will be loads of places taking on at Christmas, you’ll get something then!’

I felt for sure that I would land something full time around the peak season, in the build up to December. This confidence was largely based on the alleged abundance of seasonal work out there during this period. I’d anticipated this, and again made a round of calls to make it known to the agencies with whom I’d registered, that I would accept ‘any kind of work’ including seasonal vacancies. Yet, during this time in the field, despite getting call backs, and agreeing to certain roles, nothing actually materialised. I began to harvest a deal of resentment toward the agencies and industry in general. I could not stop asking myself, ‘why have they declared themselves as my job finder, when I am the one constantly searching and chasing? They commodify me along with other workers as a ‘flexible’ contingent workforce, a product which they sell, and it’s not enough. Am I now doing their job for them?’ This was compounded by the social impact my inability to secure work was causing, especially when expectations for having a position during this period were not met. It essentially left us with little to no money for Christmas, and thus any of the plans we’d had as a family unit were not affordable. Because of my function as a researcher and HPL, I at least had ‘some money coming in’, and certainly something to break up the monotonous isolation I had felt, from constantly chasing what seemed like an endless promise of work. For this I was ‘grateful’, but at the same time, as a researcher, I had to begin considering the risks I’d exposed my family to for this study. Fine lines were being reached on many aspects of how I’d begun to feel about personal risk.

During these particularly desperate times, I would often resolve my anxieties with the classic self-consoling meditation on 'how things could be worse'. I wondered about those who had maybe sought Universal credit, or hadn't had anything at all. I recall reading on social media, about some of the turmoil caused by its roll out. Do moments like this (I thought), when you may be staring at having nothing at all, help to encourage people to accept any kind of work? Because, it goes without saying that the lack of finance is crippling on many levels, existentially and socially, with a number of negative impacts on health and wellbeing. I've come to realise that poverty also causes a great deal of tension. In this instance, during the research, friends were annoyed that we'd cancelled things we'd planned for a long time. One actually, stopped speaking to us, because we'd missed their first wedding anniversary.

4.4.3 Internalising blame

For the most part however, I was annoyed with myself for 'letting this happen'. I repeatedly questioned my choices, especially because I saw how disappointed my partner was that we couldn't go and visit family, something very important to her. I also wondered 'what I was doing wrong'. I kept revisiting CV's, looking as to whether they were suitable, and so on. This can be frustrating, as you reflect (or perhaps dwell) on what could be termed 'bearing sole responsibility' for the risks and 'choices' being made (Sofritti et al., 2019). In short, despite knowing differently, the feeling of failure creeps inward. This was interesting to note, especially as it created an internal struggle; as a sociologist I know that it is a systematic failure, yet as a temp, here I am allowing the entire stigma attached to not finding a job, to just 'work on me'. As the entry below highlights, I felt at a loss. I had viewed temp work,

perhaps as other interviewees had, as something of a last resort, or something which would at least provide a quick, easy route into work whenever needed, and this simply was not the case in my experience:

> *"There was no quick fix. This dictates emotions which… aren't experiences you wish to repeat…[you] don't feel stronger for having had them, they are to be avoided at all cost." (Research diary, December, 2019)*

As this example demonstrates, there was a sense of being emotionally drained. This was not something which was sustainable. The emotive cycle began with the frustration I had first experienced, to desperation, and now simply defeat. This felt like a process of being 'worn down' when seeking work; something also reflected in the interview data. Claudio, had also described his own 'soul destroying' periods of 'relentlessly' applying for 'anything and everything' he could find, and questioned '*how anyone even gets a job nowadays'* (see section 4.3.3). Several interviewees, including Claudio, had described how the welfare system, had caused them to internalise an inability to secure any work as personal failure. Another interviewee, described how their experience with job centres, had made them scared to even seek any help:

> *"I hated it. I hated every single day I was on… [universal credit]… man. They make you feel like shit, make out that if you don't want this job, you're lazy…eventually you feel shit enough that you'll do anything"* (Ed)

Ed explained that he had only needed to seek assistance on two occasions, but the last, which he describes in this example, had left an impression which meant that he would rather take ‘any job’ than seek welfare support again. This is another important and intricate aspect of the emotive cycle one might experience. The role of fear can manifest often to haunt our decision making, and perhaps emerges most when the line between having ‘just enough to get by ‘and becoming trapped in extreme poverty is at its thinnest, because, this ‘fear’ can be experienced in multiple roles, and any in which economic ‘buffers’ do not exist. In many ways, and with this in mind, my precariousness as a PGR, or as a HPL and that of my being a ‘temp’ were not overly dissimilar at all. The fact that work had not materialised had a profound impact on my expectations more broadly outside of the research; after all, when would I ever not be a precarious worker?

4.4.4 Securing the assignment

However, in early January, I finally secured a gig/assignment, which this time (thankfully) presented me with ‘actual’ work, the full journey of this will be explored chapter 5. However, it is worth noting that despite being a much more pleasant experience, during the interview, it was again not difficult to spot the ways in which workers are commodified and 'worked on' or at least encouraged to indulge in self-exploitative behaviour, before even setting foot in the workplace. As the following extract from the field diaries indicates, I was again asked to forgo the right to no work more than 48 hours (already excessive), and as highlighted, questioning this expected wavering of our workers rights is already seen as an oddity (if current experience is anything to go by):

> "So, on the form there was this bit where it asked you to sign, and basically say you're happy to work above a certain number of hours. Basically, are you happy to waver your rights regarding working hours regulations, again. So, I [again] questioned this in the interview, just casually like, 'what's this about' kind of thing, as if I didn't understand. I was told that 'most people want to work as many hours as possible, those are the type of people we need for [this employer], dedicated workers. I instantly got the impression [the agent] was uncomfortable at my questioning, as if it were just standard to accept that you may have to work more than the contracted hours. I didn't want to mess things up… I needed the job, so I just nodded and smiled, and after all, at this stage, I figured it really didn't make a difference if I'd signed or not, they just want to know you are willing to play ball" (Field notes, December 2020)

In this example, it felt as if I had no choice but to simply not question this request to opt out of my workers' rights (which protected me from being forced to work more than 48 hours). The agent clearly expected this as the norm, and my experience of going without work, was not one I wished to prolong. In addition to this, the position also demanded flexibility, so perhaps this was a part of demonstrating a willingness to do this. What this may serve to demonstrate is one possible example of how 'techniques of governance' can be seen to 'operate insidiously', encompassing the 'interests, desires, and aspirations' of workers rather than through 'curtailing' of actions (Read, 2009). Indeed, in this experience, I certainly felt as if I were performing an act of self-governing behavior in order to force rather than align my 'personal goals' through my need rather than desire to work, with the objective 'economic goals' and requirements of the end organization (see also Moisander,

Groß, & Eräranta, 2018, p392.) Of course, all 'technologies of the self' may involve some form of objectification (Foucault, 1982). This will be discussed further in the chapters 5 and 6, however, at this point, it is worth noting, as it presented the early onset of the ways in which I began to question whether it was possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' objectifications (and to what extent any contextual appreciation of precarity was important when seeking to determine this).

Such thoughts had perhaps already instigated a 'mini existential crisis'; because, on one hand, I was once again, not only expected to commodify myself, and further demonstrate my gratitude for the opportunity to carry out paid assignments (for which the agency would also receive a fee), but also see extra work as a reward. In short display gratitude, for the chance to 'earn' overtime, because this is what the end client was expecting, this is the kind of worker they want. If I can keep showing how willing I am to love the work and please the client, eventually the 'opportunity' to secure a full-time contract with them might materialise, where I can continue this but with the added bonus of not being called a 'temp'. Zizek, in my experience, had been quite correct, in saying that "the chance to be exploited in a long-term job is now experienced as a privilege" (Zizek, 2012, p9.) Interestingly, during this second interview I was also asked about my absence record. Here it was suggested not to call in absent or take holidays for *at least* the three-month probation period. This was something repeated during my undertaking of the assignment, when I was 'granted' chances to further 'prove my commitment' to the role (see chapter 6). Whilst I had 'secured' my first paid assignment, the 'real work' at least in a paid capacity, was about to begin, and I would need to perform well, if I wanted to keep this work coming in.

4.5: Summary

With few exceptions, the process of securing work has seemingly become increasingly demanding, heavily digitised and in many cases more elaborate rather than streamlined and simplified. Self-commodifying and self-conditioning behaviours could be identified even at this very early stage of the process (before ever setting foot into the workplace). However, it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty why these processes have become so elaborate and what purpose it serves to keep them this way (whether intentional or not). Are they exercises in data collection? Intended to generate hits on web pages? Are they simply a broken process indicative of the desire to push responsibility for certain aspects of job recruitment onto the candidate? Is it something darker, as Claudio suggests, a system designed to wear down the subject? What can be said is that these processes are experienced as increasingly laborious, emotionally provocative and can consume time and energy, and even proving financially costly (with some platforms now charging 'premium' membership fees). Some felt the process of seeking work itself had 'worn them down' and that they were ready to accept work they would ordinarily reject. Along with many social and existential impacts, there are also political dimensions. The job application process has seemingly been turned into a full-time exercise, whereby welfare claimants are now expected to spend 35 hours per week searching and applying for work (DWP, 2022).

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, it appears the term precarious work is not a something which participants apply to their own situation, at least not in discussion with others. There are several possible reasons for this, including language, and those which center around the stigma of precarity. There are justified concerns regarding the extremely

negative connotations which have become associated with the terminology, and how this may prompt some to distance themselves from acknowledging or discussing their precarity. This in turn may also potentially aid in further exploring why other forms of precarity remain hidden. However, this is not to say that these negative characteristics are undeservedly applied. In fact, when considering some of the darker aspects of the lived experiences of precarious work which have been shared with this thesis alone, if anything, they seem somewhat downplayed. Nonetheless, providing clarity and improving awareness of what precarious work is and can involve, may take a great deal of unravelling. This includes considerations regarding a multi-tier view of the precarious workforce and unpicking the notion that only when conditions become 'the worst of the worst' should they be given due consideration when making sense of our own precarity and its impact. Certainly, it seems that the terminology which is already 'out there' could benefit from some further reconfiguration, and clarification. One would suggest that problematizing any conceptualisations which have been hijacked to aid the spread of poor working conditions should be a priority.

This chapter set out to explore how those in precarious work experience, understand and react to their precariousness. It was important to note that almost none of those with whom this study engaged used the term 'precarious work' to describe their positions. Only upon reflection were they able to think of the 'first time' that they 'realised' their position was precarious and they felt 'different to others'. Many also saw their working conditions as 'just part of the process' or 'something you have to do' in order to secure 'a proper job', and/or as part of a career path. Some participants even stated that they felt 'lucky', when compared to others who they deemed being in far less favourable positions. In such

instances, they didn't necessarily even view themselves or their working situation as 'precarious'.

The inability for many conceptualisations of precarious work to travel (contextually, culturally, socially), is a noted and well recognised issue in current text (see chapter 2). Upon reflecting on my own perceptions of precarious work, it has been useful to consider the terms contribution and influence on my own situated understanding, both within the autoethnographic account, and more broadly. Why, for example, beyond the borders of this study, has my experience as a temp working in a factory, been viewed as more precarious than my experience as an academic despite so many similarities? The pay scales were actually similar due to nightshift premiums, and if anything, the former felt more stable in terms of working patterns. One would suggest that, in the case of the latter, the rationalisation of my precarity as part of a journey has done a considerable amount of heavy lifting. Similar to the accounts shared within the interviews, there has been a continued sense that my roles as a casualised academic have been latched onto my journey as a PhD student. It should be noted that there is one slight difference, in that unlike some of the interviewee accounts, securing this kind of work was not a bonus. For me this has always been a necessity to secure enough, near full-time hours, in order to support myself and my family. As such, my transition, once this PhD journey ends, may be experienced differently.

Nonetheless, aware that conditions could be unfavourable, several participants observed or understood their precariousness as something which was not uncommon. This adds weight to the notion that the 'process of the normalisation of precarity' should be understood not only as the increased commonality for certain types of employment relations, but, more fundamentally, that there has perhaps been a been a reshaping of perceptions which

impacts understanding of employment relations more generally (Schwaller, 2019). Along with the importance of language it is important that we consider how those in precarious work reflect on their experiences, especially when 'constructing the banal regime of precarious labour'. We might for instance, wish to further probe whether a sense of having more (comparatively) favourable conditions, may lessen perceptions and expectations of precariousness (perhaps even manifesting some social capital via internal rhetoric/self persuasion); and apply this in our understanding of why many may not see themselves as 'precarious worker's', or why some have even been found to self-report that they are in secure, or permanent full-time employment (Guest 2004; Lewchuk, 2017; Pichault & McKeown, 2019; Padrosa & Julià, 2020). However, as was also argued, the role of fear played a heavy part in 'motivating' workers to accept positions they might otherwise ordinarily reject. Most notably the idea of claiming welfare stood out for some.

This chapter has also presented multiple experiences of the work and other investments which many put into the process of securing work. When experiences were considered positive, interviewees generally spoke of elements such as 'chance', 'luck', 'timing' and 'knowing someone' or having/being able to establish a network. Yet for those, like myself, who were not so 'lucky', securing work became a very demanding 'a full-time job'. Beyond constructing multiple CV's, tasks could include building profiles across numerous platforms, attending/completing time consuming assessments (some describing applications which took hours to complete, and another involving writing an essay), and multiple interviews, right through to chasing recruiters in order to 'apply' for additional positions etc. Here it was noted that the emotive elements of securing work (frustration, fear, isolation) can have a haunting cyclical effect for some, whereas others gave the impression the topic was banal, pointing to the widespread commonality of giving up additional time and effort to securing

work. Three of the participants even saw the experience as affirming, that they were rewarded with 'opportunities' as they were 'working harder' than others. Nonetheless, it was also introduced that how we rationalise and make sense of conflicting, difficult and irrational or paradoxical situations can be an important part of 'self-preservation', or 'maintaining hope'. Throughout the autoethnography, and the interview data there emerged a reliance on the perception that what is happening is temporary: 'it's not going to be like this forever', 'this isn't my permanent job' etc. Interestingly, some described that this was their 'mentality for coping' with even when working under precarious conditions for several years. It turns out, this has also been my coping strategy, I just didn't realise it. However, it is important to remember that this is only the process of securing work, all of what has taken place has emerged before what some deem the 'actual work' begins.

Chapter 5: Surviving not thriving

5.1: Introduction:

This chapter explores what is taking place for those in precarious work once a paid position or assignment has been secured. In section 5.2 we look at 3 vignettes drawn from the interview data, to explore the how themes such as flexibility, risk, and personal investment manifest across three distinct narratives. Section 5.3 draws on extracts from the autoethnography of temporary agency work undertaken as part of the initial stage of research for this study. Here we make further considerations for the emotive unravelling of the precarious workers experience, including how aspects such as fear, desire, manifest

throughout precarious worker experiences, when undertaking paid assignments. Although emphasis will not necessarily be on the wider socio-political scope of precarity, we will focus on the different nuances and interactions that take place within and beyond the workplace, in order to meet some of the key aims of the research. This will include further probing the provocations and influences on the motivations and decision-making processes of precarious workers, as well as reflections on the disciplinary power which may condition workers and colonise their experiences. For instance, the ways in which precarious workers are able (or not) to access and exercise basic rights and entitlements, without repercussion (perceived or otherwise). We will also explore important considerations of the strategies, mechanisms, and vulnerabilities emergent within those experiences.

We explore how, regardless of the type of work/employment or role (whether a temp agency warehouse workers, deliveroo rider, teacher or executive consultant and so on), there are important shared themes which span across the many nuances of these precarious worker experiences. For example, we look at considerations for how the topic of flexibility can be experienced as a constant negotiation; where life/demands outside of work would often have to fit around the responsibility/needs of one's role. This is true across various contract types and roles, including those in 'unskilled' work. As the accounts shared throughout this chapter demonstrate, many also experience a constant pressure to 'perform' to high levels, in order to meet often ill-defined expectations. This can also result in an internalised/self-setting of unreasonable standards and behaviours, which are ultimately both toxic and unrealistic to maintain. For instance, how this can sometimes give rise to destructive and detrimental levels of exertion and risk taking.

We also look at what these experiences suggest about the many mechanisms which benefit employers, not least in enabling them to extract the 'most value' from workers. These aggressive and abusive techniques may often be hidden under the veneer of team-work, opportunity and other mechanisms which can appeal to the desires of workers. For those in precarious positions, there are a number of additional vulnerabilities which emerge. This includes, feeling unable to leave their 'investment' after long periods of chasing these opportunities, even where it is evident that they are unlikely to emerge. Moreover, as part of their conditions, they may feel unable to reject requests for additional demands, as this can result in simply no longer being required.

5.2: In work experiences

In this section, we look at two vignettes, to examine a multitude of complex but important themes which cut across the different experiences captured by the interview data. This section is intended to act as a precursor to the autoethnographic exploration of in work experiences which follows in section in 5.3:

After recently migrating to the UK, Donny shares his 'lucky' experiences as a temp agency worker in a warehouse in England, where he was still working at the time of his interview. In his account, Donny helps us understand 'the gamble' of precarious work, and how although he feels that his journey has been relatively unique, that his willingness to work harder than others, helped him 'earn' his positive experiences.

Farah, came to the UK in order to complete her PhD. She explains how precarious work also began as something she saw as relatively positive. Her positions as an hourly paid lecturer,

and casual researcher, provided some extra money and was reasonably flexible. However, upon completing her doctorate, her 'side hustles' suddenly became something to be relied upon. The struggle to piece together enough work, changed how she understood precarious work. She tells us about how precarious contracts can be loaded with additional responsibility, and how she has been encouraged to 'embrace the suck' of precarious work.

5.2.1: Donny and the 'gamble' of precarious work

Donny had recently migrated to the UK in 2017 from Western Europe. He had previously come from a military background, and had also worked in construction, which in his experience were 'incredibly demanding' roles, which did not provide much in terms of pay or reward in his home country. But finances were not his reason for coming to the UK, Donny told me that he had mostly come here 'out of boredom'. Indeed, much against the negative connotations often associated with precarious worker experiences, Donny conveyed a very positive experience as a temporary agency worker. He suggested that, although he didn't feel he was an exception, it was perhaps his background which meant that he was 'really used to really hard work, strange hours, and terrible working conditions', and so comparatively at least, this meant that he found that the wages in the UK were higher than he had experienced previously for 'easy work', with conditions much more favourable. At the same time, Donny clarified, his experience was perhaps somewhat unique, he appreciated and was aware through conversations with others, plus what he had witnessed, that not all experiences can be positive. However, he also felt there were certain things which he did, which improved his 'luck' and made his experience what it was.

'Easy Money': Donny's positive experience

'My family thought I was mad to come here', Donny explained. He told me that his decision to move to the UK was quite spontaneous, and that along with seeking work, it was also driven by 'boredom'. Having very few contacts in England when he first arrived, and little in terms of finances to support himself, he described his motivations when seeking work as 'very simple', that he needed something which was easily accessible, but legitimate, and could help him start generating an income. Donny was advised by his friends that the 'quickest and safest' way to secure work was through an agency. As such, he said that he didn't really know what to 'assume', and was very open minded, with little expectations. He really didn't mind what kind of work he did, so long as he could get to and from where he needed to be. As he outlines in the following example, Donny felt settled, but realised he had financial responsibilities and commitments, with little in savings. So, his priority was seeking work straight away. He quickly found himself working with an agency, working long shifts on a full-time basis. To him this was 'easy money':

> "Well, I've moved here completely clueless, clueless on what I would expect. I was only thinking about 'OK, I have rent now, I have responsibilities I need to feed myself I need to find a job'. I didn't have that much money on me on savings, so the quicker I've started working, the better it would be, and the more I got, also the better. So, I could start thinking 'OK, I'm here, I'm settled, what do we actually want to do now?' So, I end up going those [first] three months with agency. I worked maybe five days a week, 12-hour shifts… I worked loads and loads because I couldn't say no when they asked. If I wanted to work tomorrow like, it will be like, they would ask 'OK, you're

coming tomorrow?' and the day after I just say yes, if you want me, I'll come. It was so easy money I couldn't turn it down." (Donny)

In this example Donny describes not only how transitions between applying for work, and gaining full time shifts were relatively simple, but that his working arrangement seemed to be on a day-to-day basis. In this case the agency will followed up with him each day to see if he would like to work a shift. This is not uncommon, while positions can be advertised for week- or month-long periods, some arrangements will be on a day-to-day basis, sometimes with different employers or sites. This is something I have experienced previously in my previous experience as a temp, where I would sometimes work a morning - afternoon shift in one factory and be offered to cover a nightshift at another. Donny explained that he didn't necessarily find this too troubling at first, if anything, he added, this kind of working arrangement may also offer the chance to try out different things. As he explained 'if I didn't like something, I could just quit'.

'I was always looking for more work to do': Getting in the 'good books'

When he began working with the agency, he felt that his experience had been 'nothing but positive', yet also stated that this may be highly individualised "if that's the standard everywhere, I cannot tell you that" he added. Nonetheless, he cheerfully reiterated that, upon 'landing' in a position where the kind of work he was doing 'was very, very easy' in comparison to other jobs he had done in the past; "I couldn't believe how easy it was, actually, I was like, wow, they are paying me for this" he added. Overall, Donny felt that his

positive attitude, and general desire to always work hard, helped him 'stand out', and that the employer 'appreciated' his hard work:

> "I was always looking for more work to do so that's sort of mentality to work. Was what got me so well in the factories. In the [good] books per se. So, all my good experiences that I have, they come from that amount of work and effort that I put into the time that I spent actually working. So that fact we would want me there all the time." (Donny)

In this example, Donny describes how he is always able to show that he is a hard worker, and as a result of his visible 'hard-work' ethic, managed to grant him favour with employers at the factories where he worked. As such, although he had previously mentioned that he felt that his experience was perhaps 'uniquely positive', in comparison to the experience of others, it was also due to the 'amount of work and effort' he put in. What this perhaps acknowledges, is the Donny recognised a need to demonstrate a 'hard-work' ethic, by performing in a way which may be considered 'stand-out' compared to others and win favour with employers. Echoes of Donny's sentiments can be found across the literature (see chapter 4). For example, the temporality and insecurity experienced by precarious workers in academia has seen some report the need to be 'competitive' and demonstrate that they are 'always on' and 'hard-working' (see Allmer, 2018). Indeed, this is not necessarily new, as it is also worth considering that the ideal precarious subject has also been theorised as a demonstrably entrepreneurial and competitive creature (Read, 2009).

It is a gamble

Nonetheless, when asked whether or not he had found it easy to plan his life around work or take time off from his assignment if/when he needed to do so, Donny suggested, in his experience, that such 'freedoms' were something which workers may have to 'earn'. In the example below, Donny articulated that, in his experience, agency work may be seen as a 'gamble', in so far as nothing was ever 'guaranteed'. As such, whilst the ideal situation 'for everyone' would be a 'full time, secure job, with regular work and pay', in his experience this was 'not going to be the reality for everyone', and that he and other agency workers were aware of this, as he puts it, 'they know what they are signing up for':

> "I think the most comparable term would be gambling, really. You're signing up for the edges. I mean, it is a last resort thing. Ideally, you would always want to have a contract for the safety in this world, of having reliable work, although the agency does say they have regular work, in practice it's not guaranteed. That's the thing that's always on peoples mind you're here today, but you might not be tomorrow. Or you could not be the next week or next two weeks. It is a gamble at the end of the day. It might in reality turn out OK, because the company might always need a lot of agency…but something can always happen. Something always happens and the agency will be the first ones to be discarded, because we have all these staff, they need to take care of first, and then they have agency. That's, they know what they're signing up for, they know it's not reliable and it is a gamble." (Donny)

In his account, Donny makes a contrast between the security of having a permanent contract, and the uncertain nature of temporary agency work. He uses the analogy of gambling, in a sense that, there are certain odds (certain 'things' can happen), whereby

work is never guaranteed. Furthermore, some of the odds may seem favourable (if a factory is at its peak time, and they are looking for lots of agency workers), however, some factors are volatile, and may be subject to change. As such, the workers relationship with the agency, in particular, has no guarantees. As Donny explains, although the worker has invested time, effort and even money (in terms of signing up, accepting the work, and travelling to the client's base, ready to work), but this does not guarantee work. This workers in this sense are putting their coins in the slots or chips on the table and making a bet. They may 'win', and be given some work, or they 'lose' meaning they have just wasted their time and may not even be needed in the end. In some instances, Donny went on to explain, workers are told they are needed, but are then sent home. This can happen on the first day, in the first week, after several months. Thus, working in this way, Danny suggests, is a constant gamble.

'All my good experiences…come from the amount of work and effort I put in': Earning flexibility

Indeed, there are further examples across precarious work research, where it has been similarly noted that some precarious workers 'make sense of their situation' through the idea of 'personal investment' (Toms, 2012). Whilst there may be numerous motivations behind these personal investments, they are made mostly in the hope of securing further and/or more permanent work. Such an analogy was also reflected across other interviewee accounts for this study. For example, Uri, who was introduced in Chapter 4, described how they had been carrying out various seasonal and nonseasonal contracts in the entertainment industry. Uri explained how they felt that it was only by putting in the 'extra effort' and 'going above and beyond', they were able to 'stand out', which resulted in them

earning a position, where they could secure work more easily than others. Although they were still precarious, they felt as if they were given preference, and as a result that they had gained some sort of capital, which granted preferential treatment over other workers. As Donny also went on to explain, that he felt that his 'good experiences' were because of his hard work. Moreover, that his 'good experience' was justified, and deserved because of the amount of work he had put in:

> "So, all my good experiences, all my good experience that I have, they come from the amount of work and effort that I put into it, all the time that I spent actually working. So that fact we would want me there all the time was not surprise"
>
> (Donny)

Here, Donny perhaps provides us with an example of how even a very basic sense of security, of feeling wanted and appreciated as a hard worker, is harnessed as a motivation mechanism. Although he was 'not surprised' that the employer wanted him 'there all the time', it was also clear he felt that he had worked hard, and that his hard work had been appreciated. In short that this was a just reward for all of his 'effort'. Perhaps to Donny, the gamble of investing in this way had paid off. As such, his 'good experience' his sense of feeling wanted, this tiny sense of a little security, perhaps felt like a 'win'.

Indeed, because of this 'extra effort', Donny told me he was invited to meetings, where the company listened to his ideas, and 'made sure' he knew that they wanted him to be made permanent. When probed further on how he had come to this conclusion, he told me of a situation in which the agency made an error, and as a result he took another person's shift, by turning up when he wasn't needed:

"Donny: I think if the company knows you individually, I think that happened to me once that I showed up and I wasn't. Registered even to be there, but because they knew me. They said, oh yeah, we all want him, and some other lady had to go home because I think I took her place.

Interviewer: Oh no. How did you feel about?

Donny: A mix of emotions. I mean, of course I feel bad about the bad about the woman, but on the other hand they like me, well they want me, even though I shouldn't be here, so it was a little bit of mix of emotions."

(Donny)

In this example, Donny describes a feature of agency work that had not been uncommon in his experience and indeed, was a noted feature across other research on agency workers more broadly (Bosmans et al., 2016; Ball et al., 2017), whereby workers will turn up for a shift, and the company would send some home if they 'weren't needed'. Whilst Donny describes 'mixed emotions' (feeling bad for the person who's shift he took, but also feeling it was a positive, because he knew that the management must 'like' him) he also said that this meant that he already felt that he felt that the company 'knows' him 'individually, at this stage. As such, being 'in' with the management, he felt, meant that he was he was treated differently, more preferably than others. For example, he also described being able to 'take or leave' overtime, without feeling anxious that this would be seen as not willing to

work hard. This is noteworthy in itself as it further suggests that overtime, operates as this multifaceted aspect of the precarious worker experience. It may sometimes be presented as a 'bonus', others as some sort of reward (good boy, here is more work), and as an expectation, where you will be expected to want to work any hours that the company needs you to work. Nonetheless, as Donny explained, as someone who had been able to stand out, his reward was to be granted preferential treatment, which allowed him, to a degree, to do things which a 'permanent employee' would do, but that other agency workers would not wish to risk.

Donny provided a further example, when asked about holidays and being able to plan his life around his work. He explained that the flexibility he experienced was something he had earned, although in parts was still a risk. He described a situation whereby he was able to go home for Christmas to visit family, but that he had to 'tell them' (the agency) that he was going, not 'ask permission'. He explained that he accepted that there was a risk that there may not be a job when he got back, as the agency had reiterated this to him, because despite the end employer being informed and being 'okay with it', the agency did not want workers taking time off at peak periods such as Christmas. However, he explained that he felt confident that this would not be the case, as he knew the employer 'liked him' and that he felt confident they would want him to 'keep going'. As such, for him the risk was 'small', and that he already felt like a permanent employee! This perhaps highlights a breakdown in the need to please dual bosses (both the agency and the end employer). Although when probed about this, Donny stated he felt obligations to neither the agency or the company per se, it does seem as though, once Donny felt 'in' with the end employer 'the company', he felt more able to express his rights as a worker, without fear of repercussions. His

example, may also add strength to our earlier suggestion, that in some instances, certain reward mechanisms may grant the illusion of security, even where there is none.

Donny's casino

Nonetheless, through Donny's account, and especially his analogy of precarious work as a gamble, it is easy to imagine the landscape of precarious work as some sort of casino. Workers, like punters, invest their time, their effort, and in many cases their money, which may be seen as chips and cups of coins, wondering around the casino floor, taking a chance to try and get a win. The many agencies, job sites, and platforms grant the illusion that there is plenty of choice, and that everyone can be a winner. In the context of work of course, as in a casino, individuals' choices are limited by their ability to meet the stakes of the table. To indulge this conceptualisation a little further, let's take the example provided in chapter 4, when applying for multiple jobs, creating numerous CV's, building online profiles across various platforms etc. This may indeed feel as if you are putting lots of coins (your time and effort) into the slots and pulling the arm of as many bandits as possible. The flashing promising lights of each ad offering the chance and hope of winning the 'prize' of work, as with each gamble, each application, each 'performance' during the assignment, may win you more work.

Through such a conceptualisation, it is not difficult to consider those who do not win, or at least do not win big, and how they may appear to be relegated to the lower stake tables, with increasingly high odds, and low rewards. There are also those for whom it is a continued cycle of investment with no reward, the house always wins (as will later be discussed in chapter 6). However, before leaving Donny's casino, it is perhaps worth further

consideration for how there appears to be a reconfiguration of the working landscape taking place. What were perhaps once seen as 'normal' features of standard employment contracts, have seemingly become rewards, things to be 'earned' through extra effort, which we undertake with no guarantees of 'winning' recognition, paid or otherwise, it is simply demanded. It is also important to consider the ways in which these increasingly elaborate and arduous processes, stress the continued need for workers to intensely demonstrate how much they 'really want' a position. This effort must carry on into each assignment, if they are to prove they are worthy of the full-time contract, and as we have seen, could last months, even years. Such ambiguous demands are not limited by profession or industry, with shared commonalities now evident, even for those in positions often considered low/unskilled, poorly paid, and mostly temporary roles. In such instances, one could argue, that some forms of precarious work may be better thought of as a never-ending cyclical aspect of the application process, or ongoing work-trial.

Donny's example, though perhaps considered 'unique' by some in its allusion to the positive (rather than negative connotations often associated with precarious worker experiences), has also provided some valuable insight into how such narratives are constructed and rationalised. There are some clear motivators which materialised, including the role of competitiveness, and the relational framing of his current situation to that of his previous pay and working conditions. This includes further considerations more broadly around precarious work, not least how flexibility can be seen as reward for hard work. However, Donny perceived his work as being something in which he had landed by chance. This wasn't something he considered himself as 'competing' for, and certainly wasn't any part of a career plan at that stage. As such, it is worth considering whether this is Donny's way of

managing perceived competitiveness. In short, does the denial of intentionality help alleviate perceptions of being explicitly in competition with others?

5.2.3 When the side hustle becomes the main hustle: Farah's story

When I first spoke to Farah, her account began by explaining how she had moved to the UK in order to study, and had managed to secure a PhD position together with a stipend. She told me how there were conflicts which she had experienced, between her perceptions, or perhaps expectations of time in certain roles, and how it played out for her in practice. Much like Sabrina in chapter 3, throughout her time as a PhD student, Farah had undertaken a variety of ZHC (Zero-hour Contract) roles, and temporary assignments in teaching and research. Yet Farah had also never really considered herself a 'precarious worker', as her 'journey' had mainly been anchored by her role as a PhD student. Therefore, Farah viewed this 'extra work' as more of a 'bonus', and really just part of securing additional experience, simply 'temp jobs' to top up her income.

Precarious work is great when you aren't relying on it

Farah explained that her perceptions of these working arrangements were actually quite positive, initially at least, but that this perspective had been underpinned or was perhaps provisional based on certain buffers (financial security from a job, or support from family for example). Specifically, in Farah's case, that she was not reliant upon these positions as a main source of income. As she explained, it really didn't matter that much if she wasn't needed at certain points throughout the year, as she could use it as a break or as extra time for her studies.

> “So, it didn't really matter the nature of it. For example, when I was a student like, especially when I started doing teaching on a casual basis, it was actually working well for me, because first of all, it was very flexible, and the payment was alright. Like it wasn't that much, but it is just helping me, something to supplement my funding… it was alright at the time, because it was temporary, and I didn't have that responsibility. But after I graduated, then the nature of things started to change a bit.” (Farah)

In this example, Farah outlines how the casualised roles she had undertaken previously, granted a positive experience. She describes a sense of some ‘flexibility’, most notably in terms of teaching, where schedules were in place, and any additional work could be undertaken around her current commitments. It is important that we recognise that these roles were not something which Farah relied upon to sustain herself, they were not integral at one stage. Furthermore, in her example, we can note that the term ‘temporary’ provides some help with the lifting of the experience, in Farah’s situated understanding of precarious work. Indeed, as she goes on to explain, this started to change as she transitioned from being a doctoral student, to seeking full time work. Experiences during such transitions, in the context of precarious work, are worth exploring more than is currently the case. However, as has already been highlighted in chapter 2, some researchers have suggested that the ways in which precarious workers experience ‘flexibility’, may alter based on a number of different contexts. This perceived banality of precarious work may, therefore, also be situated as not only being ‘commonplace in the labour market’, but a ‘way of life’ in neoliberal society (Kesisoglou et al., 2016).

When the side hustle becomes the main hustle

However, since finishing her PhD, Farah explained how she found that her perceptions and relationships with such working arrangements shifted, as they became less of a side hustle, and needed to become something which she could do in order to help support herself financially. This included emotive responses to perceptions of the 'choice' to engage in this work seemingly evaporating, as these kinds of roles became only options. As Farah went on to tell me, she had received a similar job offer for hourly paid teaching, which she tried to then supplement with additional temporary roles. As she explained, this very quickly became extremely difficult to manage, and she began looking for other work which may be more sustainable. She described feeling 'extremely frustrated' by the lack of options. In her view, in the Higher Education sector at least, there appeared to be little to no permanent options that she could find, even with a PhD:

> "So, this role as a member of the teaching team was suggestion by my colleague, but at the same time I was actively looking for a temporary contract type job, to do as well as my teaching. But when I was looking for the research jobs, and fellow positions, you basically have no other choice. All the positions are temporary, so it wasn't something that I specifically chose, actively. It was just the situation I was in, and I had to go with it." (Farah)

In Farah's account, we see how the precarious nature of work may not be fully appreciated until it becomes something which is relied upon, especially as a sole means of income. That is to say, we may be introduced to the idea of precarious work as something that is only a 'side hustle', something that is perceived as commonplace, or perhaps even a pedestrian

part of the core journey (in Farah's example, as a PhD student). Such contracts may even be seen as a welcome aspect, re-framed as an important experience building exercise as part of achieving long-term career goals. Indeed, it is also interesting to note that the extension of the casual roles had been a suggestion made by a colleague. This certainly resonates with my own account of precarious work as an academic, in that well-meaning colleagues will often point out short term work 'opportunities', not only to help secure income, but also frame this as 'good experience'. This could be understood as being caught in a position, whereby responsibility may be loaded onto precarious contracts, under the guise of enabling career progression. In this instance, Farah describes how she found herself undertaking casual, hourly paid positions, in order to both gain experience, and ensure some additional pay. Once her PhD had finished however, the precariousness and demanding nature of these casual positions became clearer, as this became her main source of income. Farah found, that rather than something she had control over (she could take or leave), there suddenly became a 'vacuum of responsibility' which left little feeling of control.

Embracing the suck

Such experiences are not necessarily uncommon in precarious work research. In particular there have been accounts which describe the exploitation of 'highly skilled' candidates on precarious employment contracts, being loaded with excessive responsibility under the promise of career enhancement, for which they are never recognised or rewarded (Spina et al., 2020). In Farah's case however, the practicality of managing multiple 'side hustles' was simply just not realistic, or reliable. Nonetheless, she did realise that there might be some slight reprieve if she were able to find longer term contracts. Although these positions were

not permanent, they would last slightly longer, and would grant more time to apply for permanent positions which may last longer. This part of Farah's account draws parallels with another interviewee, Amelie, who had recently secured such a contract (an 18-month fixed term role). Amelie explained that, as happy as she was to secure such a role, in her opinion, it was important to view this as more of a 'holiday' or an extended break from the constant need to search, and 'be ready' to apply for work on a near constant basis:

> "I think that's the difference that in one year, to one year and a half, I'll be back on the job market trying to sell myself and they won't be, so I'm seeing this job as a nice break from stepping away from the job market, you know, and you know, having always your CV ready, etc. But see as just a break, because I know in one-years time I'll be back on it." (Amelie)

Amelie's account is relevant here, because it substantiates Farah's perception of fixed term contracts as a reprieve from the daily grind and struggle of precarious work, in particular the constant need to balance the pressures of multiple positions and work commitments, with those of increasingly demanding application processes for full time work. For Farah, there seemed to be little recognition of the demands which workers are facing in this context, let alone further pressures in other strands of their lives. Farah further explained that her need for securing long term/permanent work, also ensured that she would be able to meet her visa conditions. As she elaborated:

> "Even when you are in a [fixed term contract], and your contract is going to be extended. For example, right now they say that it is going to be done, but nothing is formal yet. So, you just need to deal with this uncertainty and embrace it. And you just kind of realize that that's just how things are…It's just very uncertain and you

> know, especially for me, my visa situation relies on my work, and I need to be able to pay tax to so I can get a like a leave to remain, like indefinite leave to remain. So they are interrelated and work is a very important aspect of it." (Farah)

In this example, Farah highlights that she is in a serious situation in regards to the need for more stable employment. The gravity of which has begun to stretch across multiple layers of precarity (not only economic uncertainty, but her ability to remain in what has become her home). This appeared to hinge upon informal promises of contract extensions, which she was supposed to take in good faith. As Farah poignantly notes, she is not only expected to 'deal' with her precariousness, but 'embrace it'. This connects with some aspects of the literature in chapter 2, particularly that which looks at the 'promise' of the entrepreneurial subject as an autonomous, flexible, and adaptable creature (see also Read, 2009, and Leung & Cossu, 2019). More worryingly perhaps, are the obvious parallels between the analogy of 'embracing precarity' and a US military term which is referred to as 'the suck'. More accurately, in what has been conceptualised across some industries, including aspects of 'life coaching' and 'self-help' literature, as 'embracing the suck' (see Gleeson, 2020 and Mathers, 2020). Said to have been coined during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, 'embracing the suck' has been described as:

> "An implied order… [that]… denotes the horrifying realities of being in a war and the fact that soldiers will have to face it head-on or die. It's one of those military phrases that's entered common usage to describe a shitty situation that one has to confront in order to solve." (MentorCruise, 2022, para 4.)

This is a concern, not least because a military term coined during conflict, which denotes the 'horrifying realities of being at war', may be appropriated for the context of every day working activities. But also, as Lang (2022) has recently observed, even in military contexts, this culture of 'toughen up' has created attitudes of internalisation which exacerbate issues around mental health, including feelings of stress and isolation.

In Farah's case, as has been noted throughout the previous chapter, and will be discussed further in chapter 6, she stated that she simply didn't know how long her time in precarious contracts would last, 'I hope it is not like this forever', she told me. Again, this indicates that there doesn't seem to be any definitive answer regarding how long one must tread the line between being temporary, and being 'permanently precarious'. As such, how long should one be expected to 'embrace the suck'? The idea of individuals simply absorbing and internalising the problems which manifest through toxic working cultures, conditions, and environments, may suggest that we are reaching the limits of precarious working conditions. There are many aspects of precarious work which, without adequate levels of support, mean that planning our lives, and doing 'normal' things can become extremely difficult if not impossible. As Farah herself described, there are limits to what can be withstood, before our mental and physical health begin to suffer:

> "It can show its impact on every aspect of your life. First of all, the uncertainty brings anxiety. So, on daily basis you need to experience these sorts of different types of mental problems. It can be depression. It can be anxiety. Basically, constantly being worried about what's going to happen next. It means that you cannot really plan for your life." (Farah)

While we will be exploring the subject of wellbeing and the care of the self in more depth throughout chapter 6, Farah makes an important observation here. Not least regarding her own mental health, and a resurfacing of what other interviewees referred to as a 'process' of being 'worn down' (see Claudios account in chapter 4). This perhaps reveals how the impacts of precarious work can be both overlooked, or completely normalised, which also has broader mental health repercussions. One would suggest that 'embracing precarity' for an unspecified amount of time requires an almost robotic detachment from thoughts and aspirations to almost dystopian levels.

5.3 Disposable bodies: Autoethnographic reflections of temp agency work

As outlined in chapter 4, during the early phases of my time in the field, the 'plentiful opportunities' commonly associated with the UK's recruitment and staffing industry (SIA, 2020; Pizzinelli & Shibata, 2022) did not present themselves as swiftly as had been hoped. Indeed, despite great effort taken in order to secure work, and attending multiple interviews, overall, securing 'actual paid work' had taken much longer to materialise than had been budgeted for. This became a very real concern on multiple strands of my life, not least as to whether or not I would be able to afford to continue this research altogether. The 'inability' to secure temp work had caused numerous frustrations, and anxieties regarding the ongoing situation, much of which was internalised via multiple perceived failures. I began to blame myself, asking what was I doing wrong as an applicant? Was this a bad idea,

had I not planned this properly? Should I even be doing a PhD right now if it's going to affect us so badly as a family, and so on**.** But whether or not I'd just been 'unlucky' up until this point, it did mean that when an offer for an assignment did finally translate into paid work, there was a tremendous sense of relief, and even excitement. The 'gamble', it seemed, had finally paid off.

My partner, who had also been feeling very anxious and concerned with the ongoing situation, was very eager to hear about start dates, and what would be involved etc. So, I gleefully relayed what I had originally been told by the agency back to her. The position would start within the next week or so, and it would be night shifts (9pm – 8am) on a 'continental shift pattern' (working 4 consecutive shifts, followed by 4 days off), in a small team of around 5 or 6 people. The place of work would be a 'call centre environment' for a small to medium sized national business, with 'big ambitions for growth'. My main tasks would be 'customer and support orientation' in a shared service environment, dealing with enquiries and trying to find solutions based on accidents and emergency type scenarios. The company who, to protect anonymity, I will refer to as Grayson Home and Motor Insurance (or GI for short), had thousands of clients all over the UK, and were experiencing further growth (hence the need for more people). Nonetheless, the agency also informed me that, as the night shift was 'notoriously quiet' after a certain time, it would also involve a fair amount of unspecified admin tasks and even 'a lot of waiting around', as such I was advised to 'bring a book'. These 'quiet periods' were described as a challenge, because 'some candidates may find it slow and boring'. Well, to me being 'bored' is a luxury, I thought, but obviously this was perfect, especially as it would be helpful, in terms of making up for the time I would need to spend on studying and preparing for workshops etc. It seemed, in many ways, that I had hit the jackpot.

I was also informed quite early on, that there would be a short delay in the actual start date. Whilst this did raise some concerns at the time (mostly due to the ongoing delay for starting paid assignments, but also my previous experience of being told I had a job, when in fact no work materialised), the agency was very quick to reassure me of what was happening, and why. Indeed, the company had recently moved to a new office, which fortuitously placed them within walking distance (around 25-30 mins each way) from where myself and my partner were living. This not only meant that the money we had put to one side for travel could now be used for essentials, but also meant less time and expense in terms of my overall commuting between jobs, which only made the assignment more appealing. Certainly, this position had already began ticking so many boxes, not least in terms of practicality, that it almost didn't matter what the demands were, I just wanted to start work.

5.3.1 Flexibility for who?

As part of the conditions of the assignment, during the interview I had been asked to make myself available for two weeks of training. This would have to be undertaken during the daytime, despite being told originally that I would be training with someone on the nightshift (which was the shift I had applied for). As such, this required me to swap some things around in order to do so, having originally planned everything around evenings (for example, supervision meetings, teaching duties and so on, although luckily my university colleagues were supportive and willing to help). I rationalised these additional responsibilities as being something similar that which others would experience (particularly those who perhaps had various care duties, or second or third jobs also).

During this time, although I felt relieved to finally have something that represented paid work, when the job actually started, it appeared as though there were a series of micro changes to the terms and requirements which began to manifest. This could be from a disconnect between what the understanding of the role was, or that company needs were changing. However, it did seem that the assignment which the agency had described, and what the company demanded, were becoming two completely different things. As the entry below describes, the work I'd put into planning around my existing commitments had already needed some re-adjustment, and these 'minor changes' kept rolling in, the further my journey progressed:

> "There was obviously, there's some confusion already, because well, I told the agency that I couldn't work in the daytime on Wednesdays or Thursdays because of prior commitments. I was open about it, and honest, but they seem to have scheduled me in as available for this week of training, which is has now turned into two weeks of training, or I'm told maybe more. But, on my first day, today when I spoke to the actual manager, aka the end client…[Grayson Home and motor Insurance]...they told me it might actually only be for one week! Then next week I might be straight onto the nightshift, but again they don't know yet! So basically, I'm just going to have to be flexible about it, which is kind of, one of the things they 'demand' from anyone that wants to secure a 'job' with them. Which is kind of fine and normal from their perspective, but I mean, what if I can't just move things around all the time for them?" (Audio diary, January 2020)

In this example, the changes to my shifts were originally rationalised as some initial 'confusion' or communication error. Although inconvenient, I was able to balance things around the weeks of training, which had required me to move from night shift patterns to days, and possibly extend this for an unspecified period. Despite applying for a night shift pattern to fit around my current commitments (enjoy the benefits of some mutual flexibility one might say), on my first day, I was basically informed that I would need to be 'fully flexible' around the company needs. This was what they as a company required, if I were to secure full time work there. Originally, I'd been told this was a job which could be a filler, a starting point, or just something for a few months. But for the company, it seems they expect all agency workers to apply themselves as if they want to earn a full-time position. This job had swiftly gone from being one which could fit around my commitments, with a stable nightshift pattern (but obviously came with no guarantees of full-time positions); to demanding full commitment and flexibility on my part. All temps of course, in this example, are now presumed to be looking for such contracts.

This resonates somewhat with Maddy's account, in that work which she had thought would fit around current commitments, was suddenly no longer as described. In her case, a part time role, came with full time demands and the only flexibility was on her part. As such, was the idea of mutually beneficial work arrangements a myth? In my case, it was plain to see that I would need to be flexible. Did this mean that I should account for more time and work for planning my week, or to not plan anything else at all. For the sake of the training, it took time and effort to do (getting cover for other work commitments etc.), yet it was not even acknowledged, let alone compensated. To 'balance things out', and make things work, I had to send emails, make calls, juggle budgets (all of my jobs are precarious, if I don't work, I can't claim), and so on. Essentially, it seemed, we are commodified, and sold as a product,

an on-demand precarious workforce, to whom no guarantees of work or salary can ever be made, unless 'business' requires that labour, which we must provide to a high level. We must earn the job, we must perform as and when needed. As such, even at the very bottom of the labour market, we must be willing to give what Tracey Kidder (1981) referred to as a 'life and soul' commitment, wherever our labor is 'volunteered'. Indeed, I had to remind myself, that these are not executive positions (not that this lessens experiences of exploitation in any way), like those found in Shih's study of silicon valley employees (2004). This fully flexible commitment and dedication is for an 'entry level position', paying minimum wage, and classifying itself as 'low' or 'basic skills' temp work. A job where if the demand for your labour drops, or you don't perform to the companies liking, you will be dismissed instantly.

Despite the many red flags, after what felt like a very long and stressful period without securing any paid work, I still wanted to try and maintain some positivity in my outlook. This felt important for my own wellbeing, as the bleak reality of returning to the beginning of the application process (see chapter 4), felt an even more daunting prospect. I was, after all, extremely happy to have found a position, even if this meant some compromises initially. As such, at the time, I perhaps (due to my enthusiasm and eagerness to work) overlooked many vulnerabilities. On reflection, this was perhaps both part of the 'gamble' and equally a coping mechanism. Indeed, putting my family through further hardship and disappointment played an important part in my decision making, at this stage. The emotive cycles and haunting experiences will be discussed further in chapters 5 & 6, but it is important to note them here. Because, after such a negative experience, I had decided that I would rather

have bad work and poor conditions, than nothing at all, even if it knowingly made me susceptible to certain forms of exploitation.

Before the first week of training had even been completed, I was informed of further expectations I would need to meet. In what I noted in my diary as 'a series of arrogant assumptions', I was informed by the management of the company, that this was not a job where you 'down tools just because it's the end of your shift', they wanted to ensure that 'customers came first' and that meant that you tidy up any tasks you need to complete, or make sure you properly hand it on to someone else, but do not leave the clock ticking on urgent issues. We were also expected to be 'ready to work' when our shift starts, meaning that we had to come in at least 20 mins early, to ensure we were 'logged on and ready to go!' As such, we should be willing to stay longer or come in earlier (sometimes by 3 – 5 hours if a shift needed cover, and where periods were busy), and must be available to cover holidays for other workers. This is because, that is what 'good team players' do, we were informed.

5.3.2 Loneliness and isolation: emerging emotive mechanisms and the construction of precarious flexiblised subjectivities

In many ways, it felt as if I were being encouraged to demonstrate readiness to make myself available for multiple shifts, but to also appear glad to do so. As such, I had difficulty rationalising this need to be grateful for the opportunity of a job which required this level of commitment, but offered so little in return. As recorded in the following field diary entry, some frustrations began to surface not long into my assignment:

> "I'd stated… [to the agency]…that I have commitments, as the main reason why I applied for a nightshift. I'm glad to have work, don't get me wrong, but I think there are assumptions that I can simply drop everything, and it's not a problem, and this makes it worse. The notion of 'living to work', seems quite apt when I feel like I'm just fitting life around multiple precarious roles, all of which are basically temp jobs, with no guarantees, and pay quite low. It is really irritating that I have to spend more time moving things around again for this. Then... [the manager]… asked me why I wanted to know what shifts I was working that week! Then they asked me what my commitments were, so I just said I have some studying I need to do, which is true, but what does it even matter? That's my time, I should be able to spend it however I like, I shouldn't have to justify it, I might have caring responsibilities for an ill loved one, or need child care. I could be sat playing Nintendo, none of it matters, really, that's supposed to be my free time isn't it? It's really fucking rude to be honest, like you're instantly having to justify your personal time and space around work. Like I've got nothing better to do? But if you saying anything, it's like, it feels like your value as worker is being gauged on how little of a life outside work you have, or how much you are making your life about work. So, are they saying you can't have a life then, if you want this job, or a full-time job here?" (Research Diary, January 2020)

This example captures the frustrations which had begun to surface around having to constantly adjust my planning and other commitments, for what was supposed to be a short-term temporary night job. It seemed, at the time, I felt that there was an assumption

by the end employer, that temp workers should be grateful for the opportunity to work and should be willing to fit their lives around whatever needs they had. After all, they were willing to pay us overtime (which was the same as the hourly rate). Moreover, there seemed to be a general presumption that workers should be willing to give their lives over, almost completely, to the needs of the company and work. It feels bizarre, and incredibly intrusive to be asked by a manager why I wanted to know what shifts I would be working, as if I should always be ready to come in, no matter what time or day it may be. As the supervisor explained during the induction, if there was anything that we didn't like, 'you don't have to be here', because 'there are plenty of people looking for work'. This may be interpreted as a form of what some have referred to as emboldened acts of emotional abuse by employers, often committed under the guise of economic imperative, with little regard for the consequences in terms of cultural practice and intersubjective relations (see Lloyd, 2019 for example). In this instance, the management demonstrated that they were not only aware of a challenging labor market, but that this was to their advantage. As such, it is our responsibility to meet the fluctuating demands which they dictate, or we will easily be replaced.

It was also relatively evident, even at this early stage, that the company (like most) were not willing to fund adequate staffing levels, and instead placed the pressure of meeting service demands on employees. In essence, what this translated to, in terms of how I felt I needed to perform, was that they wanted workers to be in a state of 'always on'. This meant that we were always ready to come in, that your life revolves around the company, and the work. Again, this is something that appears to be a common demand across both temp and perm staff, however, as a precarious worker, a temp, there is no luxury for any slip ups. If you do something which they don't like, you can be dismissed in an instant. As I noted in my

diary, this was difficult to come to terms with in any logical sense, and had perhaps been exacerbated by a sense of feeling isolated and trapped. I felt unable to converse openly with other work colleagues, as this would likely mark us out as being trouble causers. I also sensed that raising concerns with my partner may cause them some stress, as they might think that I was going to quit the job, and things would return to the way they had been the last few months. As I captured in the diary:

> "I can't even explain this to [my partner], as she'll just think I'm causing trouble or 'picking fault already', but this is another dimension isn't it? Because it's been so hard finding a job, I've got to feel grateful for having work. That you must instantly fit your life around a job, which cannot even tell you what times it will and won't need you…the whole process really turns people into like, just saying yes, I'm willing to do this because I need work... I am happy to have something which can bring some money in, and the thought of starting again is really grim." (Audio diary, January 2020).

The entry outlined those feelings of isolation which began to manifest, exacerbated by, what felt like, an inability to communicate what I viewed as very unreasonable aspects of the assignment. This example explains how the negative experience of the application process, had interacted with other factors (economic and social pressures, etc.) to ensure compliance with these fluctuating demands, and shift pattern amendments. Again, perhaps as a coping strategy, I had tried to overlook the negative, and rationalise this, overall, as a chance to get my foot in the door. Perhaps, once I'd 'proven myself', things may settle

down. Besides, I needed to maximize the income, especially considering losses and struggles from not securing a job for a long period, so why not try and work as much as possible. The motivations were to not be in hardship, and to comply in order to perhaps build capital and gain some better treatment.

5.3.3 'One of us': Part of the team

There were many instances where I was granted chances to prove my commitment to the role, but none more so than via the 'opportunity' of overtime (especially bounteous during periods of sickness, and self-induced staff shortages). Around midway into my third week, after just a few early starts, and a later finishes, the supervisor had asked for my personal mobile number, so that I could be added to the 'overtime messaging group'. This invitation would seem to be a positive thing. It meant, as I was told, that they were 'not likely to get rid' of me anytime soon, as there was a very busy period coming up, so plenty more opportunities for even more overtime. It also felt like a small token of acceptance, people seemed happy that I was able to pick things up, and that I'd 'survived' the first two weeks. A number of temps had been 'let go' at this stage, and at least two had left of their own accord. In the case of the latter, one particular worker stood up in the middle of a shift, and declared that they'd had enough of how they were being spoken to and treated. I wanted to make sure they were okay, as they seemed notably upset. After asking another temp, they explained that this person was okay, that they'd signed up with another agency and were starting a new job the following week. So basically, they didn't need to see the week out.

Overall, though, it was difficult to know exactly what had been said which had pushed them to get up and leave, as the noise in between calls was quite loud. It did make me wonder whether I really wanted to be part of this atmosphere. Unfortunately, I'd not had anything else come my way, so far, it was this or nothing.

As such, I downloaded the app to my phone. I noted at the time, that although this seemed like a logical thing to do, I sensed there would be more insidious dimensions to having this constant connection to work, beyond the thought that they might call through the agency on my days off. While this is probably even more commonplace in the post-lockdown period (especially with the advent of teams and other platforms), it still wasn't uncommon to have people add you on social media, or on messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. Nonetheless, as the flowing extract shows, I had many reservations regarding the true purpose of this exercise:

> "So, they want you to register on this like system, with your temp log in, and download an app for your mobile… it's kind of like, their version of WhatsApp, but it's purely for their staff group…even the agency staff. I get what they are saying, and I suppose it's nice to feel involved rather than pushed to the side, but I also suspect it's in case anybody is let go suddenly or if they are ill? So, they can just kind of message the whole group and try and get someone to come in. So, essentially, like most places, they don't want to hire enough staff. They'd rather have 'team players' who can live there, and make up the shortfall, because they don't want to hire enough permanent people basically, unless they absolutely have to. Of course, I

agreed to it. If you don't, you're lazy, or not a 'team player' so they'll get rid of you, which is, that's nice, it's nice to have a choice" (Field diary, Jan 2020)

In this extract, I noted, there appeared to be a sense that downloading this app, and being a part of this group, should be seen as positive. I was after all seemingly becoming part of the team, despite being a temp agency worker. As other accounts for this research have shown, temp workers can often be treated differently, or even completely isolated. Some of these power dynamics were captured in interviewee accounts, where several described noticing creeping differences between how they were treated as temporary workers compared to permanent colleagues. This included Amelie (introduced in chapter 4), who explained that she was part of a union, and was due to be part of some strike action with her colleagues. However, those on casualised contracts, as she was, were later informed that due to the nature and conditions of their roles, that they were unable to participate and had to continue working. For several others, the differences were less subtle. As another participant, Katie, told me she had also witnessed differences in how agency staff and full time workers were treated at the factory where she worked. This included visual marking, where agency workers made to wear different coloured high vis jackets, so that they could be more closely monitored. James (Chapter 4), had also suggested that employers purposefully fostered some 'very awkward power dynamics'. As he explained, there were "these divisions between permanent staff, temporary staff, English stuff, non-English stuff. All of this was very clear." This also corresponds to some of my previous experiences. One specific example would be a warehouse where I was working during the Christmas period, and a permanent worker was disciplined for lending a temp one of his company fleeces while carrying out some work outdoors.

Nonetheless, in this instance, I was being asked to join the company staff group. Despite the positive overtones in how this was presented, as a way of communicating news, and 'opportunities' for overtime, etc. I felt more like this was a next level extension of monitoring our commitment. In short, that they were actually not only ensuring that there were enough staff to cover shifts, but maybe also checking to see who is always reliable, always willing to come in. Suspicions aside, the company had experienced growth, and it was clear that they had taken on more customers than they didn't have the staff capacity to deal with. Which seems logical, that's why me and the other temps were taken on. However, almost instantly, as soon as I had registered, had the app, and had been accepted onto the group, I was encouraged to continually check the chat for messages. This was also dressed under a guise of 'having a laugh', and bonding with team members, who would also share meme's or ask if anyone wanted a drink or food on their way to their shift. At the time, it felt endearing, I felt closer toward the team in general. I must admit, compared to previous experiences, and even some more recent, you don't often, as a precarious worker, feel as you are 'one of the team'.

However, I also noted that this played a part in my decisions, and overall willingness to stay later, and help others who were struggling with workloads. This perhaps, to a degree, corresponds with aspects of Frederick Pitts (2013) account of 'flexible subjectivity in the digital workplace' (see also chapter 2), in which working environments have long been seen to harbour 'the veneer of fun-loving flexibility' and a real 'people centred' ethos, yet often are also underpinned by an erosion of the boundaries between work and personal spaces. This breakdown of boundaries often reveals multiple strands of exploitation; including the

desire for employees to be constantly connected to their work, and provide further unrecognised and unpaid overtime, together with making up for short falls resulting from inadequate staff planning and numbers. Although not perhaps as explicit or extreme as the example provided in Maddy's account, in this instance, it seemed as though the barriers (which were already small and often blurred) between my private space and work, had been further eroded. I felt compelled to constantly check my phone, and to be aware of messages. This was not through any personal desire to take up the 'opportunity' of overtime, but to make up for shortfalls in staffing numbers, to support team members who had also done the same for me. A cycle had clearly been fostered at this stage, which intensified, or perhaps became most essential during busy periods, and especially if members of staff had the audacity to be ill.

5.3.4 'Don't Call in sick': Enforced presenteeism

The topic of presenteeism seems especially apt in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the post-lockdown era, and this is a subject which will be discussed in more depth throughout chapter 6. However, during the autoethnography, there were a number of instances where we as workers (temps and perm staff alike) were encouraged to come to work, even when sick. Indeed, it were as if doing so, yet again, proved your commitment to the company. However, it is important to note that this is a common feature across the working landscape (see chapter 2), and in particular research which has focussed on concerns with regard to presenteeism, absenteeism, and worker health and wellbeing (Hemp, 2004; Miraglia & Johns, 2016; Jensen et al., 2017). A few weeks into the first assignment, a virus had started going around the office, which had caused some staff to be

unable to come into work. Instead, they worked from home, as much as they could. We were told, by a sniffling, and coughing manager that we should not call in sick, this was not a subtle instruction, as was noted at the time:

> "there's loads of people in the office coughing and sneezing all over the desks, and basically …[the manager] … stood up and told us all, 'don't call in sick, just because you have a cold. I'm here and I'm full of flu!', I almost laughed, but I could tell that…[they]… were actually serious. Like, it's mental, if you're sick, you're sick, it's not a choice!" (Research diary, February 2020).

For some added context to this extract, I had walked into an office which was now running on skeleton staff, because some had become too ill to work. This particular manager had decided that, rather than telling people to work from home, which was entirely possible, they wanted people in the office. Moreover, as noted here, they were now being told to come in even if they were knowingly ill, meaning that the rest of us were exposed. At first, I thought it may have been a joke, and almost laughed, but this was a serious instruction, based on the fact that there simply were not enough staff as it was. This seemed absolutely absurd, how could I 'decide' not to be ill?

The topic of presenteeism has become increasingly prominent, particularly in the ongoing context of COVID-19. So, it's worth noting here, how something as important as worker health, prior to the pandemic, could be so easily dismissed, with health and wellbeing seemingly (in this instance) consumed within an atmosphere of desperation, suspicion, resentment, and fear among workers. When considering organisational processes, there are

written instructions regarding rights and guidelines to follow when a worker is ill (see ACAS, 2022, for example). However, even for those who can access and interpret this information, it can often seem paradoxical and difficult to enforce, particularly as someone who can be dismissed at any moment, without any real need for explanation, beyond 'sorry, we don't need you anymore'. Moreover, this was the third time, from a number of different sources (including the recruitment agents), that I was told you must always turn up for work, especially as a temp!

While there are many drivers of presenteeism, which are likely to impact those in precarious work in particular (lack of paid sick leave, job insecurity etc.) this felt more of an explicit instruction. As such, it moved beyond the 'a-typical' understanding of toxic work-culture, notably those I'd experienced before, and felt more like the emergence of an 'enforced' presenteeism. Despite the fact that almost every workplace in which I have worked having similarly fostered a culture of working while ill, it has always been something that has infuriated me. Especially when it appeared to be celebrated as something to be commended. It seems absolutely irrational on every conceivable level to encourage illness, to push workers to come and do their shift while sick, and risk spreading it to others. This wasn't an emergency; this wasn't a life-or-death situation. It wasn't even necessary, because, as stated, the facilities were such that staff could work from home. It didn't even seem necessarily be an issue of trust, or even some sort of power flex, as management were always keen to remind the nightshift (which ran without any management) that there were security cameras in the office. As such, there seemed to be multiple things happening at once.

Following some intense weeks of nearly constantly working around the clock, and somehow miraculously avoiding getting ill. As a side note, 2019 was the first year in quite a long time, where I didn't seem to catch any colds, or flu. This was despite teaching a class full of coughing students, travelling on buses and trains, and workplace which was hit hard by a flu virus. However, as will be explored in chapter 6, as I reflected on this 'miracle', I also noted, in the diaries that there had at one point been a short entry where I had questioned whether or not I was ill or just 'running on fumes'. It was difficult to differentiate between the feelings which I'd been experiencing, and I had noted that my mental state as well as physical had been worn down. I feel that this was common for most of the workforce, especially those of us who were able to work through this period. However, as some staff began returning to the office, something happened which triggered another wave of people calling in sick. As the following abstract explains, I began to have genuine concerns not only for the frontline staff, but that of the management, in particular their mental health. This peaked when I came into the office to see colleagues visibly upset by an email they'd received from the same manager who had delivered the motivational 'don't call in sick speech' a few weeks prior. As I read the emails, I could see why staff were so upset:

> "I came in today to quite a lot of work and and some really nasty emails from the manager to just the entire staff. At first, it was like, it started with a 'thank you all for your efforts throughout these difficult times' then basically thanked everyone for coming in, even when they were sick and doing this and doing that. But then it said something about the administration side of things is not very tidy! Which I thought was a bit ridiculous considering the first sentence. Then…[the email]… says

> ‘I'm gonna have to put you all on performance measurement if needs be, and if you can't just do the simple things!’ and then it said something about putting more CCTV cameras in because…the manager]… thinks that people are breaking chairs. It's very, it's quite, I don't know whether it’s sign of…[the manager]…having a breakdown? It seems very odd. These very, very odd, and nasty emails aren't going to do much for staff morale, especially not after a really heavy period, where people have worked while sick, and done split shifts, and broken themselves. So maybe it's coincidence, but there's also a huge number of permanent staff which have gone off ill now…and I'm really confused as to whether they're trying to motivate people, because if they are, then it's not working.” (Field diary, Feb, 2020)

In this entry, it seems clear that there are multiple factors being considered. Firstly there is the strange nature of the email itself, which although it began complimentary, as a thank you, then clumsily and somewhat destructively, attacked staff for not tidying up the admin aspects of the additional work they had done. This seemed like a trivial point, especially as staff numbers were not back to any level of (already low) normal. However, I thought, perhaps this is just clumsy application of tried techniques, and poor attempts to remind workers that these small, but necessary tasks would still need to be done. However, the frankly bizarre accusation that workers were ‘breaking chairs’ had me stumped. As I discussed this with a co-worker, it transpired, that the backs of the chairs, had ‘flimsy’ covers on the bolt mechanisms. As such, some had begun to drop off (and by some, I mean most). This was clearly an equipment issue, though not a huge one, and it was being blown out of proportion for seemingly no reason. Furthermore, staff were then being told that

more CCTV would be added, to survey them, if this perceived destructive behaviour didn't cease, and standards were not raised.

Although the impact of poor leadership on staff wellbeing is well noted in the literature, I had also some genuine concern for the mental health of this person, as well as those whom their behaviour had begun to impact. Before I could really speak to anyone regarding this, in the window of opportunity I had between nightshift and day shift, staff levels again began to drop. It is recognised that presenteeism can have these counterproductive effects (see Jensen et al., 2017), and will often result in longer bouts of absence in staff numbers, for those who work while ill. Indeed, perhaps this was what had taken place here. However, it felt more as if some staff had simply hit their limit, and were simply not willing to continue to force themselves to work in this way. Interestingly, at least two further members of staff never returned to work.

5.3.5 Surveillance and control: The watchful eye, the listening ear

After finally being able to start on the night shifts, and following what had transpired recently following the emails from management, I couldn't help wonder if our team being somewhat isolated from face to face interactions with supervisors (who only ever worked days), had somehow insulated us a little from the frictions which had taken place. It was certainly concerning, to be copied into these emails, and to witness the toxicity of the situation as it unfolded. Yet, I had so far flown somewhat under the radar, especially in terms of direct conflict with any fellow temps, perm staff, or supervisors. Even management

had mostly left people on my nightshift alone, aside from the odd request, after the first two or three weeks. As such, I wondered if avoiding most people (the shift covering the transitions between days and nights was relatively small, compared to dayshift), had cushioned our 'team' to a certain level. Perhaps it was because our team had mostly managed to cope with most of the emergency tasks we were faced with. I wasn't sure, but neither was I the only one to notice it. As I noted in my field diary, another colleague began to question why this was the case. For them, they felt that we were simply more effective at disciplining ourselves in the absence of management:

> "[my colleague] said something tonight which got me thinking. After a few minutes of rare silence, he pipes up and goes 'why are we doing all this? Why are we sat doing all our work in silence, when there's just us, there's no one else here? There are no cameras, nothing. Like I get it, we need to finish our work and be here for calls. But this ain't days, so I don't get why we don't just do it how we want. We're the managers!' (Field notes, Feb 2020)

In this example, one of my colleagues, Carl, had astutely observed that the security cameras had never been operational for night shift. This seemed odd, but I must admit, I'd not really paid that much attention to the security cameras. It was certainly not something I'd considered as being used to monitor our 'performance' until the recent email, where management had explicitly threatened to increase surveillance as a mode of scrutinization and control over worker behaviour. As it transpired, the cameras were not the only way in which we might be monitored. Carl explained that the headsets also recorded between calls, in other words that the audio from individuals would be captured, which is why everyone removed the headset after each call. I would have thought this nonsense,

however when I thought back to training, this was confirmed by someone else on dayshift. They framed it as more of a mechanism by which training could be monitored, and so I'd not really given this much more thought until now.

Notions of surveillance as a mechanism of control and a form of disciplinary power in the workplace, have long been present in organisational theory. However, Sewell's work in the late 90's conceptualised the combination of surveillance technology and intersubjective relations (specifically, teamwork) as a model of chimerical control. The success of the utilisation of these technologies as potentially 'darker' tools of control within the workplace, were said to be reliant a number of elements. This included their ability to blend undetected (or perhaps normalised) as part of the working environment, the mergence with other strands of labour process control, including 'the gaze of peers' (Sewell, 1998). This seemed quite ironic when placed in modern context, as it was a 'peer' who had begun to point out to me the many ways in which we were being surveyed under the guise of 'performance monitoring'. However, as previously mentioned, the emotive attachments which came with being made to feel part of a team may also be relevant here. As a temp invited to be part of 'the team', and constantly reminded of the need to be 'team players'. This had also been effective in encouraging my 'performance' as a 'team member'. Of course, I didn't want anyone to struggle, I am human, I have empathy for others.

As I explained to Carl, tragically, my performance was also, it seemed, enforced by a number of self-disciplinary methods. Not least, due to constantly balancing out multiple roles, and commitments which spanned through both paid (often precarious) forms of work, and full-time education. I have gotten into the toxic habit of constantly chasing a fictional space where I had 'nothing to do', all tasks were complete, and I could simply rest and enjoy some

leisure time or simply not worry about having something to do. The impact of this, in the context of wellbeing, will be explored more in chapter 6. However, it is important to note here, because, it had also become an effective way of disciplining myself in the work environment. I'd not actually been intentionally or consciously trying to 'perform' as a hard worker, but this, apparently had been something which was coming across from the way I conducted myself. When I was told that some of my colleagues thought I wanted to go for a management position, I really couldn't understand how me trying to fly under the radar had turned into this assumption. I joked at the time 'what have I become' and 'this is a new low'.

5.3.6 'I don't want your job Carl': Competing for positions that 'probably don't exist'

Carl and Tom had been extremely friendly faces since first meeting them on the nightshift. I'd occasionally worked with several different colleagues and supervisors covering from the alternative shift pattern. But our trio formed the 'main crew', and it seemed to work well, we covered the calls, the admin side of things, additional 'projects' from management, and worked efficiently most of the time. It was, however, very much noticeable, how fragile this ecosystem was. For example, during a short period when calls were diverted from other service centres due to technical issues, or when someone from this small team was on holiday, as we were kind of responsible for picking up the slack, rather than getting an extra person in to help us. Nonetheless, the point I am making, is that the majority of the time, it was only myself and either Carl and/or Tom in the building after 9pm. As such, we did have a good bond, and nearer the end of my time in the field, Carl confessed that he thought I was 'gunning for the night manager position' which is why, at the beginning, he'd been

asking so many ‘work’ questions. At the time, I actually must admit, I didn’t notice, as most people ask things like ‘what kind of work have you’ve done before’, or ‘what you are doing now’ etc. It wasn’t really anything unusual, just small chat. Nonetheless, Carl explained that he was basically ‘sizing me up’, because, as it turns out, he thought we were in competition (though I’d told him on many occasions, that it was not my intention to compete for any jobs).

Through our discussions, it became clear that, whilst there was no ‘official’ opening, ‘rumours’ of supervisory roles becoming available had been fed to just about everyone in the company; including days, nights, temps and perms. This observably, according to Carl, had intensified the desire for some to be seen as authority figures. We discussed how a number of staff had also increased their availability to work extra shifts. This included Tom, who’s shift patterns had become erratic of late (which had triggered these conversations). As the discussion moved to why we’d not seen him for a while, Carl suggested that he thought Tom had been working multiple split shifts. He knew that Tom had been working some cover on the alternative night pattern (after two people had left) but had also been ‘picking up’ some cover on days for our shift pattern. From what he was describing, it appeared that carl had been sizing up the wrong guy. ‘Those working patterns surely can’t be legal?’ he asked.

As such, I thought I’d message Tom myself. It turned out, that yes, he definitely did want the senior position, that may or may not exist, and had essentially ‘worked just about every day’ for an entire month, in a bid to ‘standout’ as a candidate. As the following extract illustrates, this seemed an extremely well-timed move by the management (at a period where most had lost motivation to work), but I had serious concerns about the behaviour this was

encouraging. However, Carl, who had probably been there the longest (though was still himself on a temp agency contract), stated that this was nothing new:

> "One minute, everyone was thinking about quitting, now I'm caught in a weird competition for some supervision or management jobs, that I didn't know I was in the running for. [Carl]… really wants that night manager job. [Tom]… has now actually told me about it and made no secret of the fact he'd been told that management, who were really impressed with his commitment, told him he's 'practically already got it', that the job was his. So, I asked… [Carl]… how he would feel if this is true and… [Tom]… got the nightshift managers job. Would he like, would he go for the supervision positions instead? At this point…[Carl]… said he thinks the positions 'might not even exist', as the rumour had actually been 'going on for weeks' in dayshift, and even before I'd arrived. He then said that he had been 'promised' a management position when he first started, as he was one of the first people to work on the nightshift and that previously rotas were drawn for people to work on call from home. So, the whole thing was meant to be a virtual management thing. But now it's not" (Field diary, Feb 2020)

As this entry outlines how, from our collective conversations, it appeared that management were coaxing us into a deliberately constructed competition for positions which were seemingly even 'better' than the full-time contract. This was something which as temps, many of us were already assumed to be chasing anyway, so we couldn't really understand why we would need any extra incentive before we'd even been able to secure a full-time contract. However, I felt that perhaps, given the recent turbulence, this was something management had pulled out to re-invigorate the staff. Even the temp workers had started

to question the fact that some had been there a few weeks now, having survived the initial few 'culls.' Some had been there even longer (8 months in one case) and had begun to notice that the 'full time jobs, and contracts' which they'd been promised, were 'yet to be signed off at head office'. But the strength of the fear of losing your job, as a temp, still had a lot of legs in it. More so, because for those who had been there a while, this was seen as an investment. They didn't want to have to go somewhere else and start again! As such, it seemed odd that suddenly there were talks of even more recruitment, and most of all, these management positions, had been dug out for people to aim for. Whatever the reasons, it had been worryingly effective in fostering competition between workers.

However, during any and all interactions with management, as previously explained, I was encouraged to feel a 'part of the team'. This was reassuring, and furthermore, I was told that any 'opportunities' which may materialise, I should consider myself a 'candidate' for, 'even as a temp'. As the management stressed, 'anyone can get the job' if they can prove they are deserving of it. Experiencing this strategy in action, certainly underlines how the highly effective 'mechanisms of competition' (Foucault, 2001) can be cultivated and engineered to capture our desires as workers, and motivate us based on the notion of some prize at the end of it all (even in the presence of broken promises, as I had witnessed here). Furthermore, it could suggest that a technique of governance was loosely being exercised, with the effects and logic of 'autonomy' and 'freedom' (which would, for example, be even greater with the management position), therefore encouraging further our 'desire' to the align or give up more of ourselves to organisational needs.

5.4 : Summary

Experiences of feeling valued or treated differently varied depending on context. A small number of interviewees felt 'appreciated', mainly those referring to a contracted role (project work/fixed term role). Some described noticing creeping differences as their role went on (in one case, as part of a union, and when it came time to strike, due to the nature of their contract they were unable to participate). For others, the differences were less subtle. As another participant noted, they had witnessed differences which were both visual (made to wear different coloured high vis, so that they could be marked), and another how the management had fostered:

> "a very competitive environment and some very awkward power dynamics. You know, these division between permanent staff, temporary staff, English stuff, non-English stuff. All of this was very clear." (James)

There have also been numerous instances throughout the research, where not only did individuals feel unable to reject poor working conditions, but also make decisions for their own personal safety. In one instance considering working whilst electronics failed in a flooded office, and another describing being verbally and physically assaulted by the public. This is not uncommon, as many accounts like this exist within the literature, however, the links between wellbeing and decision making, in regard to safety and personal risk, are less developed (all of which will be discussed in the next chapter).

However, it is interesting to note, when probed further, how the 'temporary' nature of precarious work, does a lot of heavy lifting (which can be maintained for periods lasting years) when it comes to accepting poor conditions/work environments, particularly in

extreme circumstances (risk to personal safety, feelings of hopelessness, or being trapped, and vulnerable to extreme forms of exploitation and abuse).

Chapter 6: Precarious work, precarious wellbeing

6.1: Introduction

In chapters 4 and 5, we have looked at examples of the ways in which precarious work may be considered both ambiguous, yet also ubiquitous. It is something which can be used by employers as a reward (well done for working hard, here is more work), yet also a punishment (you are not good enough for a full-time contract, but we will keep you on as a temp). Precarious work can be experienced as a temporary situation (as part of a career journey for example) but is a condition which can also last for years and may even give rise to the notion of being permanently precarious. Throughout this chapter, we will move to consider how those experiencing precarity speak of the impact of precarious work on their individual sense of health, wellbeing and safety.

6.2: A phenomenology of exhaustion

In this section we introduce reflections on the physical and psychological demands of precarity from the perspective of precarious workers. . Nearly all participants who engaged with the research spoke of juggling multiple competing demands, and how this had impacted them within and beyond the working environment. This included instances of feeling constantly run down, completely drained/exhausted, and unable to take any meaningful recovery breaks including holidays. In some instances, including parts of the autoethnography, competing work patterns lead to worrying impacts on individual health. This includes accounts of disturbances to sleep, which were eventually self-medicated. Additionally, even for those able to 'afford' such time off, there were clear manifestations of 'guilt', and reports of an inability to detach from their work. Over the next few sub sections these themes will be explored in more depth, including considerations of coping strategies and rationalities which may emerge from the precarious worker experience in the context of wellbeing.

6.2.1 'You just like, want to get it all out of your head, but you can't': precarious work-life balance

Throughout the many rich accounts provided by those who have engaged with this study, those in precarious work have described the exhaustive aspects of their precarity. There were several instances where participants described a mental fatigue, though were hesitant to acknowledge these dimensions or perhaps found it difficult to articulate and convey the experience. For example, when speaking to Sabrina (who we were introduced to in chapter 5), she explained to me how she had gone long periods without any breaks or holidays. This

was especially noticeable at times when colleagues on full- or longer-term contracts where away (such as the summer holidays).

In the following extract, Sarah describes how she had very much become conscious of the mental toll of feeling the need to always be attached to her work. As she explained, there were many aspects of being on multiple precarious roles, which not only meant that she felt unable to take time off (even when it was affordable), but how this also led to instances of feeling completely unable to switch off:

> "I wouldn't say that I've been physically ill, but I don't, I don't wanna, I don't wanna say mentally ill, as that sounds extreme, but definitely exhausted and just, I think, mentally exhausted. It's that wanting to switch off. It's that wanting to just take, you know, close your computer and just leave it. But again feeling that guilt over, like, what if I get an email? What if I need to do something because? You know it's not like you can just take holidays, so it's not like you can just block out your calendar and say 'right, I'm gonna hold it', I mean you just can't, because you're working on so many different things. You know, it's not necessarily relevant to even tell each of these different, you know, managers or superiors, or whoever you're working with 'OK, I'm having this week off'. So then, 'cause you don't feel like that's really appropriate, you then still feel like you need to be a little bit sort of, on call or ready to answer any emails or help out; or you know whatever needs doing. So, I definitely feel like just that, just tired and just kind of sick of looking at my computer. And so, I think definitely, exhaustion is one way to describe it" (Sabrina)

In this example, it is notable how Sabrina has some difficulty in distinguishing between the physical and psychological dimensions when reflecting on her experiences. For some

additional context, Sabrina had been reflecting on whether she had needed to take some time off for being ill in recent years. This came up during a point in the conversation where she mentioned she had been fortunate enough not to contract COVID. However, she then explained that despite this, she had previously worked through colds and flu. However, Sabrina didn't really class these things as physical illnesses 'at least not in the before times' pre-COVID.

This is not at all uncommon, and sadly fits with a growing pile of evidence gathered in the context of sickness and presenteeism (see chapter 5), where it is noted that common cold and flu are regularly ignored as illnesses (Biron, et al., 2006; Liyan, 2017). Nonetheless, Sabrina then stated that she had experienced feeling 'mentally exhausted', but that she also felt unable or unwilling to class this as being 'unwell', or that perhaps describing it as mentally ill health 'sounds extreme'. This is again not uncommon, indeed it is fitting within findings on the importance of language and understanding of mental health in relation to psychological wellbeing across different work contexts (Brown et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2022). However, it is still important (and concerning) to note, in this instance, as it provides some insight of how concerns regarding mental health and wellbeing may be downplayed, or even completely overlooked. Worryingly, Sabrina described the onset of burnout, and certainly referred to some of the major components throughout her account, including; exhaustion, disengagement, and depersonalisation (Bhugra & Molodynski, 2022).

Sabrina then also focuses on how it is difficult to 'block' time out in her calendar, as the nature of her multiple precarious contracts makes doing so a daunting task. She tells me that, even just thinking about taking time off, means contacting multiple people, due to the number of projects she is part of and roles she holds. Also, she feels that this isn't even

necessary (as she isn't a regular employee), and they might not really want to know. It is almost as if Sabrina is describing a spider's web in which, even if she is able to muster the energy to navigate the complex logistics of securing and taking time off; as she continues to describe many of the emotive strands which keep her stuck to her work. She tells us how she would feel 'guilty' taking time away from her work, perhaps even fearful from detaching from the need to be readily available. This is notably driven by a perceived sense of duty, to be ready to answer emails, and enquiries, which ultimately takes precedence over her personal basic wellbeing needs.

This perhaps resonates with aspects of research on discourses surrounding the topic of work–life balance, particularly those examining how this is experienced in the context of precarious work. For example, in their research on work-life balances among early career researchers across six European countries, Krilić et al. (2018), found that most participants, regardless of their type of employment contract, described how work duties could never be accomplished in 'usual working time'. This heightened their feelings of guilt, which they often attributed to the perceived inability to manage workloads. As such, general flexibility could be experienced as a 'pervasiveness of work', which in turn, extends into the private life, and is generally viewed as detrimental to wellbeing and health. In Sabrina's example, this is driven by a sense of guilt. In that, if she does not make herself available 'on demand', she feels as if she is letting 'the projects' or her 'students' down. This results in a blurring of boundaries or perhaps a complete lack of any being established at all. It also demonstrates a complete breakdown of the ability to 'switch off' and recover, as Sabrina continues:

> "I mean, Speaking of time off. I mean I haven't really had a holiday in such a long time. I mean it's been pending, especially because of this pandemic, so obviously you

> can't. But you just constantly, just like constantly, feel like you need to be there constantly on call, and just like looking at your emails and just seeing if anything needs doing…and it's, you know, you get to the end of the week and you're just so tired and you're just sick of thinking about it. You just like want to get it all out of your head, but you can't." (Sabrina)

Here Sabrina expresses her frustrations around not being able to have any time to recover from intense periods of work. She acknowledges how this is unlikely to be any traditional period away, due to the ongoing pandemic, which at the time still meant uncertainties and restricted travel. This again is similar to critiques of the 'double edged sword' of workplace digitalization (Wanigasinghe, 2020), something which has become an important area of concern in the wake of the pandemic, especially in research relating to the potential 'deleterious impacts' of home working on worker health and well-being (Serralta et al., 2020). However, Sabrina also explained that she has always worked from home, even prior to the pandemic. As such, she felt that this represented more of a continuation, rather than an intensification, which can be isolated to the context of COVID-19. Nonetheless, she stated that she has been left so exhausted, it was becoming incredibly difficult to remove herself from work.

Sabrina's description certainly draws parallels to similar narratives of guilt across other interviewee accounts. In particular, Sarah, who had explained how the precarious nature of her self-employment meant that there was a continual need, as part of her role, to be constantly ensuring that she had enough work for the coming months/year. In the following extract, Sarah explains how this relentless demand, led to feelings of 'anxiety' and 'guilt', if she took any time away from work. This meant that, although she felt in a privileged

position, and able to enjoy some of those freedoms which came with ‘being your own boss’, these positive aspects became tainted:

“I sort of always say how much I'm enjoying a current project I'm working on, and people will go ‘that's great, it's amazing you managed to secure that for yourself’ and then I always say, ‘yeah, but you know, next month I might not have any work, so I'm kind of, there's just this constant anxiety I suppose, and constant feeling like I need to be pushing hard, or doing a bit more to make sure that this is going to last, longer term” (Sarah)

In this example Sarah describes the fluctuating nature of her work, and that this knowledge, in effect, creates its own kind of anxiety. This is because she always feels a need to be ‘pushing hard’ in the projects she is working on, to ensure that they last their full length, and that she makes a good enough impression to be considered for future work, in the longer term. This pressure and anxiety, as she continues, then extends into her free time:

> “I also battle with the appreciation I have for the freedom and flexibility and in you know not having a permanent employer but at the same time feeling guilty about having a lot of spare time sometimes. So, I just had almost three months…[where I was travelling, whilst also doing some small project roles]...But apart from that I didn't have any other work going on. Which had been a choice because I was traveling, but I did get a lot of guilt and a lot of the erm, angst about not kind of being productive, or not like advancing my myself in my career. So, it's a constant juggling act, I think. Where you think, ‘yeah, that this is so great, I'm so lucky to have

> as much flexibility', but at the same time, am I really stretching myself and am I doing enough to make sure I've got work in the future?" (Sarah)

Both Sarah and Sabrina's accounts perhaps exemplify how a fragmentation of work expectations facilitates a subjugation of personal space, to the unspecified demands of precarious work. Whereby, rather than a blurring of these two separate spaces, dedication to the service of labour simply supersedes the ability to take steps towards maintaining wellbeing. In Sabrina's account, even the thought of taking time off is crushed by the anxiety and demanding nature of doing so before she is also hit with the trauma of guilt and fear for being away from her work. In Sarah's case however, we perhaps see how this manifests into the reality, when finally taking time off, she is unable to detach properly from her work.

In their paper on precarious employment and worker health, Clarke et al. (2007), similarly found that many 'on-a-path-workers' (those who feel they are undertaking precarious work as part of a career path or training) knowingly compromise their health, 'postponing' multiple aspects of their wellbeing. Moreover, their findings suggested precarious workers who fall into the 'on-a-path' category respond to their precarity in different ways to their counterparts who were experiencing higher levels of employment precarity (i.e. those for whom there was a diminished sense of permanent work on the horizon). According to their analysis, on-a-path workers, those who had 'more expectation' that their current situation would eventually 'lead to something better' would work "extremely hard – even compromising their health." (Clarke, et al., 2007, p325). Those who were resigned to unsustainable levels of precarity however, responded to their situation with discouragement and resignation, and therefore did not experience the same need for effort.

What is interesting i in this study is that these demands can be said to be no longer unique. Whether it is a temporary agency position, or early career researcher, there appears to be a uniform assumption that all precarious work is 'on-a-path', and therefore makes the same demands. What may be suggested here, is that the nature of precarious work has evolved to maximise the 'effort' from all who labour precariously, by creating the notion that all precarious work is part of a career journey (whether the workers themselves want this and believe it or not).

6.2.2 'What use is money, if my mind is broken'': dehumanising experiences of precarious workers

There are also several accounts where participants described feeling completely worn down and dehumanised from their working experiences. Having gone several weeks over the Christmas period, and not been called back to his 'regular gig', Ed was desperate for work, and had contacted his agency to ask if they had anything else they could give him. Unfortunately, the only positions they had were over an hour away and involved catching two buses. But it wasn't the journey which got to Ed. As he explained, from his first day, he (and the other workers) had been given strict instructions 'not to talk to each other' when working, as they needed to concentrate fully on the tasks. He described how the work was neither physically demanding nor mentally stimulating but involved mostly 'quickly moving a box from one conveyor belt to another, that's it'. As Ed explained, it was just this task, for 9-10 hours per day, with two fifteen-minute breaks, and a half an hour lunch, for 5 days a week. He explained:

> “At the time you can't really understand or appreciate what is happening, but I just thought, they must have machines for this…I couldn’t take it any more in the end, I just left… Humans aren’t meant to do that…why do they put us through it?” (Ed).

In Ed’s example, he told me how he felt like he was being punished for something, and as much as he needed the money, the repetitive and absurd nature of the task, one which he felt was made worse as it had to be carried out in silence, was too much. He noted how other workers were seemingly allowed to speak to each other, but that agency staff were isolated and heavily watched. It did eventually ‘break’ him and he had to leave. He couldn’t quite believe the task workers were being asked to undertake. Moreover, Ed’s account of what he experienced aptly describes how he felt this was work humans are not meant to do, and aptly asks why they were being made to do this kind of work.

Ed’s dehumanising experience is far from unique, and indeed adds to even darker accounts of the creeping despotism faced by workers in companies around the world. For example, recent protests by those working in amazon fulfilment centres have hit out at the inhuman rhythms imposed by machines, which have led to high injury rates and some workers feeling they are ‘at the mercy of God’ (Sainato, 2020). In Delfanti’s analogy of mechanic dispossession of workers in Amazon warehouses, he is told by an Amazon manager that “technology codifies, understands and manages. But the real machine is the human: everything is done manually” (Delfanti, 2021, p1). It is important to acknowledge how Ed’s account does demonstrate, even for a precarious worker, desperate for work, that there are limits and breaking points. As he further explained, his decision was simply because he felt that, if he didn’t leave, he was going to ‘break’, and as Ed hauntingly rationalised ‘what use is money, if my mind is broken’?

There were sadly also several other examples of further extremities and dehumanising experiences. For example, Claudio (introduced in Chapter 5) also recalled a number of positions which he felt had impacted his mental health and left him feeling 'completely destroyed'. Interestingly, similarly to Ed, he also felt like this was a purposeful act, that certain forms aspects of precarious work are intended to 'see how far they can push you' and ultimately, create people who really 'just don't really care anymore'. In Claudio's account below, he outlines a particular position he had taken, which he was already aware would not provide a good experience. He explained that ordinarily he would never even consider doing this kind of work, but that ultimately, he wasn't given a choice, as someone who was claiming universal credit, as he was forced to apply for this position, and accept an offer as part of his conditions.

In Claudio's example below, he talks to me about a 'door to door sales job' he was forced to take, which was part of fundraising outreach for various charities. As Claudio explains, this aspect is leaned upon by the company, in some sort of moral tenet for the difficult nature of the job, as well as leaning on strategies such as career path and teamwork. Ultimately though, Claudio's experience was of a practice which became far more troubling, and involved high levels of staff turnover, wage theft, and poor treatment:

> "There's like a job attachment they force on you, like oh, hey, see yourself progress in this lovely friendly work environment. We want people to do well and all those, you know, more emphasis on like, 'the more you work, the more you learn', and all this stuff. But in reality, it's kind of, within a couple of days, then you notice the staff turnovers were incredibly high and they're just, especially with the charity one, that was quite a strange one. This…company…about every two weeks, they sacked

everyone, and then just brought a whole new bunch of people… they did that every two weeks…you could kind of tell it was because they were set up to be like this really wholesome, good job, that was good not just financially, but good for the community. But after two weeks you realise, you're just being treated like crap, because sometimes they don't pay you for the shifts that you did."

Claudio here explains how the company tried to evoke a friendly work environment which supported workers and wanted to offer a place in which they could develop and 'learn'. However, very quickly, Caludio realised that there were high levels of staff turnover, instances of poor treatment in a bid to drive people out of the job, and even instances of wage theft (which he suggests was an intentional strategy). This strategy, as he continued to explain, meant people were being driven to reach 'impossible' targets, and led to exposure to cases of extreme levels of abuse:

"And all the time we just, you get treated not very nice, on a personal level, so it was like pushing you to do things that were impossible. I think almost mechanically we got into a routine of any of the first sort of week or two, people would perform the best they could, and if it dipped, they would get rid of everyone, getting new people in to keep that kind of KPI high for him. So, I didn't know if that was more about turn over or more about the figures on the spreadsheet…After two weeks everyone was so just emotionally and physically drained, 'cause the shift was walking door to door six hours a day, on average, so 12 to 15 miles per shift, and just most people wouldn't open a door, or you got physically, mentally, verbally abused and stuff like that. One of the times, we got chased off the street by a gang of adults with dogs

and baseball bats. The manager asked me why, for that hour, we would not knock on any doors." (Claudio)

Here Claudio gives an account of how workers were forced to perform at extremely high levels, in absurdly dangerous circumstances for the sake of unsustainable targets. The high turn-over for the position now becomes clearer, especially in light of the threats to their health and wellbeing which workers were facing. The idea of being threatened by 'gangs' with baseball bats and dogs, is both horrifying and one would hope quite exceptional. Sadly, as wider research, particular that which focuses on the dehumanisation of gig economy workers, reveals it is not uncommon. In their recent work on what they call 'necro capitalism' in the gig economy, Orr et al., (2022), explain how workers face dehumanising conditions in a number of different ways. This includes corporal dimensions, such as inability to access sanitary products, as well as regulated or completely restricted toilet breaks. This can also manifest in 'necropolitical dimensions', including violent attacks which serves to 'reinforce their social subordination', leading to 'emotional consequences' including 'fear and anxiety' when carrying out their work (Orr et al., 2022, p8). As Claudio explains, the reaction from the management was not that of concern for the worker, but for that of reaching targets. The implications of both blatant and slightly less obtrusive dimensions of dehumanisation of work are both harmful and transformative. As Claudio explained, this was an incredible low point for him and the others who he was working with as they were trapped between a work in which their lives had no value, and a welfare system that demonises them as a burden on the state. However, as Claudio would later explain, this was not actually the job which 'broke' him. Instead, this came in a subsequent, sustained period of bullying, and enforced presenteeism during a period of ill health, which will be discussed later in this chapter (see section 6.3).

6.2.3 Beyond burnout: 'The Colin Robinson effect'

As the preceding sections have illustrated, participants have described a number of factors which consumed their time and energy. This can often lead to impacts on their health, such as fatigue, sleep disturbances, potential burnout, and general feelings of being physically and psychologically 'worn down', and 'exhausted'. Throughout both the interview data and the autoethnographic field diary, descriptions of being drained were commonplace; emotionally, physically, and psychologically. As has been acknowledged earlier in this chapter, this certainly correlates to the onset of burnout, fatigue, and exhaustion, with a number of common stressors also identified (unmanageable workloads, lack of control within and beyond the working environment, bullying, coercion and so on). However, as we've also begun to highlight, in the context of precarious work, the conditions sometimes appear to provoke, illicit and perhaps even intentionally foster these emotive reactions, in order to benefit from certain behaviours. For example, in Claudio's account, he explains how the organisation would 'use up' the initial momentum of temp workers coming into the position, to hit key performance indicators, notably subscription targets, but then dismiss entire teams once exhaustion set in. In other accounts, including that of Sabrina and Sarah, emotive cycles of guilt and fear, would ensure that they were constantly attached to and feeding the perceived unending 'needs' of work.

This goes hand in hand with other instances where much of the pressure from the work environment is carried over, and internalised. Throughout many of the accounts shared with this study many, this has meant navigating fine lines, and riding on the cusp of 'breaking down', but perhaps doing just enough to 'survive' the 'suck' rather than embracing it (see

Farah's account in chapter 5). This could sometimes mean sacrificing social desires and responsibilities, which itself, actually implies any notions of self-care are relegated further, as such responsibilities become the next main focus, when personal time is permitted.

The following diary entry records a period which became particularly demanding, when we were forced to move home, after the building we were living in had been sold to developers. Luckily, we had been able to secure somewhere else to live with the same estate agency - somewhat fortuitously we were offered the chance to move closer to my institution, and my partner's work. However, this required a great deal of coordination, and energy around regular working, as neither of us were able to take time off in order to make the move. Indeed, the following example explains, it was becoming difficult to manage a full-time position, a 'side hustle' and the task of moving home. It is acknowledged that moving home is not exactly a pedestrian task, especially when you don't have access to a van, and cannot afford to pay for a moving service etc. However, the point here is that it becomes even more difficult to common home projects and 'day to day' activities, when all of your energy is being sucked into multiple demands of work:

> "We've got to move out soon, and… we've got things to still sort out and box up…So there is quite a lot going on quite a lot going on and I just don't have the time really, I don't have any time when I'm at work. I have an hour in the morning, sorry…half an hour in the morning which I can dedicate to doing some sort of work towards it or doing something, some sort of organizing within my life. Then I have, probably after a full shift of work, have about two to three hours where I can just kind of go at it, after you know I've done other things that need doing like around

> the home and everything else. But I can go at it, before I'm too exhausted to string anything together." (Field Diary, February 2021)

In this entry, there was an acknowledgement of the breaking down of any ability to organise my time. The competing demands of various roles made any disruptions outside of work seem like complete impossibilities. As such, the gravity of needing to organise and physically move home around my roles as a worker was taking a considerable toll. Troublingly, in my transition between working 5-6 days on shifts, and 11-hour night shifts, I had also begun to feel constantly fatigued, and as I'd allured to earlier, beyond a state of exhaustion, into a state of simply existing to meet various demands. In order to cope, I rationalised this as simply needing to get through this period, and that somehow, the next month would be different, or that there would be some period in the not-too-distant future where I could adequately rest and recover. As I continued in my entry, I felt it acceptable, in the meantime, to explore further options in order to cope in the absence of this imagined period of recovery.

During a conversation with one of my colleague on nights, I made an observation regarding how little time we have to get to get 'proper sleep'. As I explained to them, on a personal level, this seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that 'we aren't machines' and that 'I can't just flick a switch and be asleep'. Indeed, part of the process of adequate rest is winding down. They explained how they had also had this problem and explained they had recently come across some herbal remedies that facilitated sleep. These were essentially over the counter sleeping pills from the pharmacy. I had actually previously tried something similar when working night shifts, in order to help cope with the transition back onto days. But, as I explained, this never worked for me. Instead, I just worked out until I passed out essentially,

from physical exhaustion. Nonetheless, after speaking with the pharmacist, these pills were basically herbal remedies, and 'essentially' I was told, was 'just like having a couple of drinks before bed'. I felt that at worst, I would lose £7.50, and at best, I might be able to maximise sleep in order to avoid any complications as a result of balancing multiple shift patterns. In this entry I explain more about how this was rationalised at the time:

> "This is a case in point. Yeah, I mean, today I've had to go and teach [in the day] … I've got some evening work now, and I'm knackered… I've still got other work to do for today after this diary entry… I know this is probably sounding like waffle, but you know, it's worth thinking about how little time you get to do anything these days, and you have to really make an effort to the point where you just, it's becoming really bad and unmanageable. There's no time off. Worst thing is with shifts. I've bought some sleeping pills… so that I can get some solid sleep. Yeah, and then it all starts again the next day and the next day" (Field Diary, 2021)

Reflecting this period of time in the field, I recall trying articulate to my partner, how I felt that I was 'beyond exhausted', and that everything was becoming 'quite ethereal'. This was notably having an impact when trying to organise important aspects of our personal lives, as I wasn't always able to be present at home, and when I was, I mostly just wanted to finish my research work and go to sleep. I began referring to this state I was experiencing as 'the Colin Robinson effect'. For reference, and especially for those unfamiliar with the television extravaganza that is 'what we do in the shadows' (IMDB, 2019), I will try to explain this analogy as simply as possible.

Colin Robinson is referred to as an 'energy vampire', whose origin is unclear, even to him. According to one of his roommates, Colin 'came with the house' which they reside in

(Hogan, 2020). As an energy vampire, Colin sustains himself by demanding the attention of his human victims in order to illicit and provoke strong emotions from which he feeds. This can come in the form of a small snack - such as a conversation or doing something that 'wastes people's time' or causing 'boredom or irritation' (Fandom.com, n.d.). He often positions himself in offices and workplaces, blending into the background, even though nobody actually hired him. As Colin explains, "I wish people would understand that I don't live to drain, I drain to live" (Hogan, 2020, para 1.) The trick seemingly is to encourage victims to give up enough energy and emotion to allow him to feed but leave enough for his victims to stay alive. He has, however, been known to overfeed, and on at least one occasion wiped out an entire workplace.

This state which I referred to in the autoethnographic reflections, corresponds to the condition energy vampires often leave their 'victims'. Not least the 'ethereal' feeling of being completely drained, on every level, yet somehow still having just energy to go through the motions. In this instance, the analogy of a Colin Robinson effect, was adequately representative of the 'vampiric' demands of precarious work. The constant need to feed it focus and energy, the inability to disengage or break from its hypnosis perhaps also, more broadly, could be applied to the intensively demanding social milieu which the neoliberal landscape nurtures. Nonetheless, this small conceptualisation of the 'Colin Robinson effect', may also inadvertently be a modern reconfiguration of Marx's analogy of the vampire metaphor, in relation to the workings of capitalism (Marx, 2012). As Marx aptly noted in relation to the limits of the working day, 'Capital is dead Labour which, vampire like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks'…and that 'the prolongation of the working day quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour' (Marx, 2012; O'Brien, 2020).

6.3: Decisions and sensemaking: personal safety and risk within and beyond the work environment

There have been numerous instances throughout the research where not only did individuals stress that they felt unable to reject poor working conditions, but also make decisions regarding personal health, wellbeing, and safety (both physiological and psychological dimensions). This existed both within and beyond their work environment, including accounts of overworking to a point of complete exhaustion and burnout, working in overtly unsafe environments, with instances of abuse and violent attacks. Such accounts are sadly not necessarily uncommon throughout the literature (see chapter 2). The following sections explore such instances, and how they were experienced throughout the interviews and autoethnographic observations.

6.3.1 Autoethnographic reflections on investment, risk assessment and personal safety in precarious work

There were times during the field research in which concerns regarding safety of workers had been noted throughout the diaries. In particular how workers often saw themselves (and indeed each other) as secondary to the needs of the job. An attitude which, somewhat inevitably, led to my experiencing and observing many issues relating to risk of negative ramifications on physical wellbeing, as well as mental health impacts. The following event is a good example of these heavy concerns for the safety of my temp colleagues, as well as some being voiced for my wellbeing as a researcher, from members of my supervision team.

Indeed, along with the needs of data collection already being met, it perhaps also prompted conversations around wellbeing during the debriefing function of my supervision team meetings (see chapter 3), and may have been a factor in the eventual withdrawal from the field. In this section we will also consider how some workers seemingly perceived their time spent chasing the promise of a full-time position as an investment, and how this may also be a factor in the decision making of long-term precarious workers.

As highlighted in the previous sections, our 'need' to 'prove our commitment to the job' and be effective 'team players' often meant putting 'the needs of work'. This was certainly true in terms of planning our lives and orienting ourselves around dedication to work, including being explicitly told to work whilst ill. As such, in many ways, it became increasingly difficult to manage personal health and wellbeing as a priority over that of work. After all, everything in the environment pointed to ourselves as surplus, but the work as reward and value. Most seemed willing to accept such a notion based on a variety of reasons, but largely driven and rationalised against the desire to secure a full-time, and secure working contract. This in itself also galvanised often completely irrational approaches and attitudes in terms of health and safety. However, although I wanted to ensure that I was able to competently carry out the assignment for as long as possible, this was not, in reality, something I was willing to do, not in a capacity for research, nor even if it were a job I had been 'gunning for'. Much like Ed (chapter 5), my attitude was that I couldn't support my family if I were broken, or worse. However, admittedly, the need to continually remind myself of this fact was becoming more frequent. The management positions and salary after all, did sound pretty sweet.

Cracking the whip

For my colleagues Carl and Tom (introduced in chapter 5), things were much different. This had become far more than a temp position for them. I noted how frequently they spoke of this 'opportunity' as something they were really counting on and had really invested in as a career step. To use the analogy of Donny's Casino of precarious work (see chapter 4), they were gambling everything on this one bet. Of course, this is not to downplay anyone else's experience. It was obvious most temps had gone to incredible lengths to try and secure full time positions, which actually made it all the more heart wrenching to observe when people were let go. Especially those who were well liked within the team.

This included an incident where I came into work to find Anne, someone who I'd previously assumed was a permanent employee, crying at the top of the stairs. As she had been away for a few days, I assumed Anne had been sick, or that she perhaps had a family bereavement, maybe some other bad news. Unbeknown to me at the time, she had been unceremoniously 'let go'. It's worth mentioning this example for two reasons. Firstly, Anne, up until this point, I believed to be a permanent member of staff, perhaps even a supervisor. She was often coordinating things, and was spoken of highly by co-workers, and also just generally was very helpful, always willing to do as much as possible. However, it turned out that Anne was another long-term temp, who had been with the company for six months. Secondly, what happened to her had an incredible disciplinary effect on the rest of the staff. As the following extract reveals, this manifested through a fear of even conversing about what had happened, and certainly inspired a 'heads down' attitude for the next few days which followed:

> "…[Anne]… has been 'let go' after six months… I tried to basically ask a little more about that situation, so I mean indeed these are just a couple of observations on

> it. At first, people were reluctant to talk about it, they just kind of smiled and kind of did that 'looking away' kind of thing, like they didn't want to talk about it. But you know, then they said like, it could be that she really wasn't that good a job or whatever, but either way, I think we all know what that means. So, I think whether intentional or not, it does seem to have that 'cracking the whip' effect...but especially, I still don't know whether she came in yesterday…[when I saw her]… and like begged for her job or whether she was just coming in just getting her stuff. or whether she was coming in and just having her say, her pennies worth or whatever." (field diary, January)

As I outline in this example, Anne being fired had ensured that, particularly those who were still temps, were noticeably conducting themselves differently following Annes dismissal. To be clear, this wasn't exactly a laid-back environment anyway. Paradoxically, the company had seemed t, on the surface be one which encouraged a 'family' spirit, built on 'teamwork'. Yet ultimately, they also demanded that workers were almost constantly demonstrating how dedicated and hardworking they were, part of which meant competing for full time positions and promotions. This had often resulted in some bizarre dynamics, not least in my own interpretations of how we were expected to conduct ourselves.

For example, it seemed permissible to have a very brief chat and even 'laugh' with co-workers, in between some calls, but not for too long, or this would make you stand out as someone who wasn't serious about their work, and a 'timewaster'. You must always ensure you are showing that you are working. Any failings on the side of work, were quickly placed onto the shoulders of temps. When equipment wouldn't work, and we were unable to log on in time, we were told that we should come in even earlier we were told 'if you know

there's problems with the computers, it's your job to be here on time'. What this meant was that we should now be coming in 30 mins prior to our shift, instead of 15 mins (for which we were not paid), in order to be 'ready to work', because as management reminded us, 'that means being logged in'. Despite the absurdity of some of the requests, most of us were still able to do the work, but cheer each other up, and try to lift spirits through conversations, and bringing each other coffee, some even brought in cakes and biscuits for lunch breaks etc. It was perhaps these human connections which, alongside rationalizing the often-irrational needs of work, which also helped mask the more insufferable elements of the job. Some members of the team that had been there the longest had also begun to show more of their personality. On some occasions they dared to be happy, many of them also expecting to be handed a contract after being there for a while. As such, I'd observed in my notes that perhaps management felt some of the long-term temps had somehow become a little too comfortable with the promise of a full-time contract. Perhaps Anne, who was well liked, was made an example of, or used as a mechanism with which to 'crack the whip' and bring them back to earth.

Even if this were not the case it certainly had that effect. For some reason, as I continued in my entry, this drew comparisons of worker fragilities of the 'lean years' of 1920's America (*see some of the accounts in Bernstein, 2010 for example*). In particular, when reflecting on this experience, it conjured images of industrial workers, cap in hand, begging for work, from employers who were all too ready to make the most of a labour market which ensured a willing and plentiful supply of bodies:

> "It feels like a climate which is pretty much like, the 1920s. There is not really a welfare state, there's no kind of easy support, when someone loses their job like

> this, they know what they're in for, and it's not going to be anything that's very good'. So, I would imagine that it's probably had quite an impact on people, because when you think about it, somebody's been there for six months. I mean, that's kind of, it feels like a quick reminder that really it doesn't matter how long you are there, if you're a temporary agency worker, you can be shut out and cut off just like that. One of the guys. He's been there a long time. He's been there for about a year and he's also apparently still an agency worker, and he was really upset… [about Anne]… like today and he wasn't himself at all. In fact, I barely heard a peep out of him. I think it's like, that kind of yeah, impacted on people there" (field diary, January 2020)

Here I outline how this incident had, whether intentional or not, served as a disciplinary example to the rest of the staff, with the atmosphere noticeably more silent in between influxes of calls. This, it should be noted, included those on permanent contracts, and I wondered how many may have been on probationary period, and also thought that Anne was a permanent member of staff. Nonetheless, temps, especially those who perhaps felt that their position was going to be secure, or that a contract was in the pipeline, seemed a little more nervous. Reflecting in my notes at the time, I compared it to a class full of school children who had been shouted at for misbehaving. Although this is not to say that some of those close to Anne, weren't genuinely upset on her behalf, and perhaps didn't know how to react. However, overall, from what little interactions I did have with fellow workers, it appeared that most were now reflecting on their own situations.

It makes no sense safety-wise to still be here, are we waiting for an accident to happen first?'

This was not an illogical response, particularly for those in precarious positions, the temps who had a great deal of energy and emotional 'investment' riding on 'the promise' of securing work at this company. Furthermore, it was apparent that the longer they had been there, the more they were willing to make these 'investments', perhaps as a way to orient and interpret their precarity. For example, some disclosed how they had often taken on more responsibility, cancelling personal commitments in order to work. Others openly discussed how they never made plans; in case they were needed for covering staff shortages. Several staff also outlined how they had made financial investments, to give them a better chance of securing a full-time contract with the company. For example, Tom, one of my co-workers on nights, had actually moved to a flat nearer the workplace, even though this was more expensive for him to do. While the company, in this instance, had clearly been able to capitalise and benefit. Not least by stretching a thin workforce well beyond its capacity to meet new demands from business growth. However, it was clearly detrimental for the workers who were overstretched, working while ill, and often exhausted.

For those on precarious contracts, there seemed a renewed intensification of the encouragement (or instruction) for staff to consider themselves secondary to the needs of the business. This seemingly contributed to instances of further concerns in decision making on matters of personal wellbeing and safety. The following extract provides case-in-point reflections, from an incident where safety of workers was explicitly put second to the requirement of service provision and business needs.

To grant some additional context; we had experienced an incredibly stormy period across the country, where weather warnings had been issued, and the met office had urged the

public not to travel unless this was absolutely necessary. The offices for the company were housed in some very old buildings, and although it had received some recent cosmetic renovation, it was still visibly in poor condition. For instance, many of the windows for the main office area were single pain, had flimsy metal frames, and appeared to be sealed shut. Others would not close and were a frequent cause of complaint for anyone sat near them. The need for repairs, perhaps lent some legitimacy and logic as to why the company never liked having an empty office, and seemingly always wanted at least two members of staff on the premises. Ironically, the need for two people on sight was stressed as being for health and safety reasons. However, it was something of a running joke on nightshift that always having staff on site was probably seen as much cheaper option to the many needed repairs, and actually hiring security for the building.

Nonetheless, the torrential downpour and high winds meant that areas on the roof which had already been flooded, were no longer able to contain the overflow. As water had begun seeping through the walls, this caused an entire section of the building to lose electricity, including the secure front entrance. This is turn also mean that the automatic door which was locked and opened by key fob, and a digital code, was no longer functioning. As the following entry describes, the extreme weather and the problems which came with it, had been going on for a few days. As such, this was something which, I strongly felt, could have been planned around, especially for the small numbers on night shifts and early mornings (periods when conditions appeared to be at their worst). However, this was not to be the case, and the situation deteriorated further with each passing day:

> "Last night, it was once again really heavy rain and high winds. I mean it was like a monsoon! The roof, as per the last few nights had been leaking all the way through…

> this time we decided to move desks because it had started running down the walls and into the plug sockets. Neither I nor…[Carl]… were electricians, and despite efforts to find some circuit breakers, we had no idea how to turn off the individual sections. So, we just decided to move across to the next desk space, where the water seemingly wasn't leaking quite so dangerously into the wiring. At this stage, we had discussed how 'mad' it was that we were actually still working when this was all happening. Like, just walking to work was horrendous, there were road and broken shop signs blown up and down the roads, plus tons of general debris flying around, you could tell it was serious. So that, in itself, is a warning. But now we're sat staring at water running down the walls into plug sockets." (Field notes, Feb 2020)

This example captures how the very act of walking to work had granted concerns regarding risks to personal safety. Not just for myself, but for anyone travelling to and from work. Winds were extremely high, and as I walked down the road, it was difficult to manoeuvre, and at times even breathe. There were also large pieces of debris flying through the air, this included general waste, shop signs, bits of barriers from nearby roadworks, and foliage. It seemed absurd to be outside. It is again worth pointing out that, at the time, the public were warned not to travel unless completely necessary. Yet nothing I was doing, by any stretch of the imagination, constituted an emergency, just satisfying a desire by management to have staff in the offices. It was perhaps understandably frustrating to note that this obsession was all the more bizarre, because we had the capacity to work from home. Indeed, such irrational, archaic, change adverse attitudes have continued to be evidenced by many political and industrial decision makers throughout the pandemic (Yeung, 2021).

Nonetheless, it is also worth noting that the roles of 'guilt' and lack of autonomy, even with regard to personal safety, played a huge role in my decision making. I did not want to leave Carl alone to deal with everything (Tom had not been there, and there was no other support at the time for us). The role of teamwork and bonding as a mechanism of control (see chapter 5) is perhaps also relevant here, as on reflection, the emphasis of being made to feel part of a team was quite effective across the workforce. In instances such as these not wanting to 'let the team down' is significant. It potentially contributed to ensuring commitment which went above and beyond, often to extremes. As well as encouraging workers (myself included) to give longer periods of time to their working day (coming in earlier to help with issues, staying longer to keep workloads down), especially when they could see colleagues struggling. Nonetheless, as the next part of the entry shows, there were limits which would soon be reached, especially once the internal parts of the building literally began to fall apart all around us. As I continued to ask:

> "Why weren't we told to get equipment and work from home? It makes no sense safety-wise to still be here, are we waiting for an accident to happen first? Even then, can we leave, what would we do, shut down the service? Because there is no cover, and no management picks up the phone after midnight… So, it got to about two or three in the morning, something like that. I left my desk to go to the toilet. I'd probably been gone under a minute, when my co-worker came running in screaming 'oh my fucking God, dude, you've got to come and see this!'. And basically, I was kind of taken aback 'what's the matter?' I asked, thinking 'I hope it's not a massive spider or something'. As I finished washing my hands and walked back into the office he

> pointed to my chair at the desk where I'd been sitting. It was now under a collapsed piece of the ceiling. He said 'that literally happened as you'd walked off, it's everywhere man, if you hadn't gone to the toilet, that would have hit you!'" (Field Notes, Feb 2020)

This extract perhaps grants an example of how problems of the working environment can be internalized. In this instance, this manifested as an inner conflict between my desire to meet, what I considered, logical steps toward safety and self-preservation, and bizarre demands from management to be present in the office during a storm. In recording these resulting frustrations, I also outline how, despite moving to an area of the office we thought might be less hazardous, myself and my co-worker still did not feel that the environment was structurally sound, or that our safety was assured. As the entry describes, I was still trying to make some sense of why we hadn't been told to work from home. An adequate rationality to apply in this situation proved elusive. It seemed that the most rational action would be to reject the idea of working in this environment outright. Yet, to a degree, I realized I was being governed by the same forces as my co-worker, Carl and that we were perhaps both playing a part of objects which were legitimizing these forces. This was perhaps best evidenced, when upon realizing the danger the situation posed to our lives, I decided to simply act in our best interest.

I recall at the time of the entry, how Carl refused even at this point to leave the building, despite flooding now coming through various parts of the building and the ceiling literally falling through in the office. Carl appeared trapped between multiple layers of fear and concern. On one hand, he also had expressed sincere concerns for personal safety, and the fact that conditions had become unworkable. On the other hand, he was genuinely scared

that there may be repercussions if we left the building 'without permission' and without cover for the most important thing, telephone service cover. Once again, I was taken back by the madness of it all, that the conditions of work could illicit such control over our personhood, that we lose the ability to make a perfectly rational decisions regarding our wellbeing.

Nonetheless, we needed to vacate the situation. I assured Carl that I would take the blame, and told him to get a laptop, drive home and set up, then give me a call and I would lock down (as best I could). The task of convincing him was made easier when I reminded him of the no lone working policy. As I explained to him 'I am not staying here, so neither can you'. Carl reluctantly agreed and picked up a laptop to go and work from home, in order to cover me whilst I got back home and logged in. I even promised him that I would go back afterwards, when our shift had finished, so that whoever was due to come in at 7am wasn't alone and that things could be explained thoroughly. Again, although the state of the building was pretty self-explanatory, I had to come to the office, because I knew that someone would be coming in, despite the weather still being horrific at that point. I voiced my opinion again that next day, as we still couldn't understand the logic of a service which could be run at home, not being done so, at a time when weather warnings were being given out and it was clear it would benefit workers to not have to make those journeys.

My concluding thoughts were that the situation signified how unviable such a model appeared to be long term. It seemed to be some twisted and broken ideology powered by the energy which it was sucking from the workers, who had been conditioned to give up themselves completely to its needs. For the workers themselves, it simply wasn't sustainable and had huge impact even in the short term. This was perhaps further

evidenced during a conversation with Carl, who, upon learning that I wasn't actually 'competition', confided that he simply didn't have 'anything left in the tank'. As such, he felt there was 'no way' he could do this again elsewhere. To refer to the conceptualisation of Donny's' casino in chapter 4, Carl was spent up, he was essentially betting everything he had on this spin of the wheel, and the promise of either the full-time contract or the bonus of the management job (which may or may not have existed). As per the case of Anne, I imagine many of the others who I'd met during my training and overtime were also in this position.

6.4 Summary

Throughout this chapter we have considered how constructing a whole subjectivity founded on anxiety, fear, exhaustion, and hopelessness presents dark considerations to our notions of wellbeing and safety. In many instances, participants saw themselves as secondary (or even lesser) to the need to secure work, and the need to perform. This was stoked by other commitments and priorities which also consumed time and energy, meaning that little time was left for anything else. Some have shared how they felt unable to have social interactions, neglecting personal relationships with partners.

Even for those who were able to experience free time, this came with feelings of 'guilt' for having done so. This outlines deleterious impact of precarious work in terms of both psychological and physiological aspects of wellbeing, and its perceptions. The accounts from this chapter perhaps also support Foucauldian notions of the neoliberal landscape requiring

a significant amount of 'self-care' (Casalini, 2019) that, while not inevitably excluding care of others, necessitates an instrumental approach to care, which renders genuine self-care and care of others virtually impossible, at least for most. This perhaps also makes some interesting observations for the ways in which current discourse on wellbeing for precarious workers, may often seem to come from a privileged place. The ability to maintain wellbeing is important, but it requires time, space, and energy/emotional capacity to even begin making positive steps. The fact that many are deprived of the ability to do this, needs to be better considered than is currently the case.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis we have been presented with examples which demonstrate how precarious work can act as a powerful mechanism, through which the lives of individuals are orientated toward an existence dedicated almost entirely to work and production. As the accounts from this study have illustrated, the 'process of precarity' can be understood as one which makes multiple draining demands (time, finance, emotions, energy), positioning the focus of the individual unrelentingly to that of work and securing work. Furthermore, the conditions highlighted by the experiences shared within this study suggest that precarious work is not only the norm of neoliberalism, but a supremely effective technology

by which to shape ideal neoliberal subjects; ones who are forced to give up their own subjective needs and desires to the demands of labour and production, some of which is financially compensated, but a growing proportion is not.

As someone for whom precarious work has been (and remains) a dominant feature of adult life, my interest in this topic perhaps originally began as something of a selfish endeavour – to better understand and articulate what was happening to me and my fellow workers. During many points in my life, particularly during early adulthood, I'd been very much aware of the insecure nature of the different types of work I often undertook to sustain myself (from a dodgy telesales position when in school, to factory work, pubs, clubs and kitchens, and numerous office positions). Coming from a council estate in the east midlands, it was drilled into me that you just had to have a job, it didn't really matter what it was, but you 'have to work'. However, it didn't take long to recognised that this was in fact still not enough. Wages for example, particularly at the entry level end of the scale, were never enough to 'live' on or at times just exist. As such, many others who may have shared such experiences may question, as I have, when was there not a 'cost of living' crisis? These struggles were an ever present, however, as I reflected upon those early working experiences, it became apparent that some things had also changed dramatically. The application process for example, has, in the digital age, managed to become (somewhat paradoxically) both simplified and streamlined, yet even more demanding. What was once a case of simply filling out a manual form at an agency, and starting work the next day (or on one occasion, just walking into a factory and asking if they had any work for the next few weeks), has transitioned to a maze of digital profiles, multiple CV's, cover letters, and more. It seems that, as demands of securing and keeping work have grown, the compensation has remained stagnant or even deteriorated.

The work itself has also changed, though I couldn't quite put my finger on how. The jobs I had during my teens and early twenties were often, I felt, uninspiring, tedious, and perhaps akin to the 'bullshit jobs' which the late David Graeber (2019) articulated so fantastically in his essay a few years later. Yet when I began an 'agency job' just before the start of my MA, the dynamics felt different. Suddenly it seemed I had to really 'stand out' and 'show' how much I wanted this, very basic, manual labour job in a logistics warehouse. This position was very similar to another job I'd done in my teens as a seasonal worker, but now it was an 'opportunity', which I had to compete with others for, and commit myself fully to. So much so, that fellow workers had been told to quit their other positions (even though there was no guarantee of regular hours), and focus fully on this 'opportunity' in order to secure a full-time permanent job. It was during conversations with other precarious workers, that I began to notice both similarities, and subtle differences in what we were experiencing, which were dependent upon a variety of contexts, and impacted how we were understanding and dealing with our situation. Why were other workers willing to physically pay, to gamble, to risk all these things they did, trying to secure a position, while others saw it as a bad risk from the start? Why despite realising this, did so many remain nonetheless committed, as they felt they had no choice, while others drew a line or cut their losses? Moreover, why, and how had we come to see this as 'normal'?

This thesis has explored the many ways in which precarity may be seen to act upon individuals and shape their experiences, subjectivities, and relations, both inside and outside of work. In doing so, it has analysed and reflected upon:

- The provocations and influences on the motivations and decision-making processes of precarious workers (including reflection/indication of strategies and mechanisms);

- The emergence of vulnerability within and beyond the working environment;
- Disciplinary power which may condition precarious workers; such as the ways in which they are able (or not) to access information about basic rights and entitlements, and exercise these rights without repercussion (perceived or otherwise).

One of the key contributions to the literature has been to capture and better understand the nuances of the precarious worker experience. It has achieved this by presenting a living tapestry of the experience of precarity, with the aim of making visible what is occluded by divisions within current theory. The research also builds on the small body of literature which seeks to improve understanding of the ways in which precariousness manifests, is understood by, and affects workers within and beyond their working lives (Helbling & Kanji, 2017; Manolchev et al., 2018). It has also provided some attempt to answer calls for research which can help address "need to better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers" (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012, p.304) and to improve comprehension of "the nature of the new employment relations that are being created and their implications for individual and societal well-being" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018, p.22). Throughout the final sections of this chapter, we will discuss and summarise the key findings.

7.1 The stigma of precarious work

While there is a growing body of work around the intensification of certain forms of stigma within the context of precarious work (for example stigmatization and hostility toward migrants in precarious employment – *see Milkman, 2020* for example), there is little which

focusses on the notion of stigma and stereotypes of precarious work itself. Throughout the research, there has emerged a sense of othering which was taking place in terms of the way participants had rationalised precarity. This included referring to negative connotations and, more explicitly, pre-conceptions and perceived 'a-typical' precarious worker characteristics, which have become associated with the concept precarious work. This potentially attracts a form of stigma, whereby these preconceptions of precarious work become attached to certain roles (and industries/sectors), in an almost exclusive way, and in which they are seen as being distinguished from others.

Examples from both the interviews and the autoethnographic account illustrate complex and, at times, paradoxical relationships with the concept of precarious work. Overall, I found that there can often appear to be a disconnect between the ways in which participants spoke about their situated understanding of precarious work, and how they rationalised their own precarity. For example, describing the characteristics of precarious work (unstable/unpredictable hours, lower rates of pay), and applying this to roles being carried out by others (uber drivers, temp workers), but describing their own role (which features all of these characteristics) as something completely different. This could perhaps be explained as applying a coping mechanism, or a slight readjustment of what has been referred to as self-defence through sensemaking (Manolchev, 2019). In the context of this research, it seems that precarious workers may, at times, perhaps compare their situation to worst case scenarios, to orient themselves away from the negative aspects of their own experience. More research in this area would help us understand the nature of these disconnects, and perhaps offer contributions to further discussions throughout the literature; such as those seeking to understand why migrant workers present positive experiences of precarity. In some instances, it could be suggested that, as a coping mechanism perhaps, we may

sometimes make sense of precarious work as an external phenomenon, something which applies to 'stereotypical' roles, and stigmatized scenarios, things which couldn't possibly apply to our own situation. This is perhaps another key aspect to consider, when making sense of our own precarity.

7.2 The work of getting work

One of the key contributions of this thesis has been to add to the literature which has grown around the topic of securing work in the contemporary era. This includes notable reflections on topics such as the growth of job search aids (Cotten et al., 2001), search algorithms, hidden labour and information control (Bilić, 2016), and the gamification of e-recruitment and job search processes (Woźniak, 2015). However, this thesis has been distinct in offering emphasis on the overlooked dimensions and intensification of the process of securing work, within the context of precarity (see chapter 4). It also offers significant counter assumptions of 'weak commitments' by precarious workers to one employer or agency, as an act of resistance to their employment insecurity (Lewchuk & Dassinger, 2016).

To this end, the research has also been able to shed light on the motivations and decision-making processes of those in precarious work. Reasons for seeking work of this nature varied, however broadly fell into the following brackets:

- Speed (needed something w/immediate start)

- Limited alternative employment options or only route to a specific job (Company not hiring directly/necessary to secure full-time work [common with entry level/agency workers]).
- To gain experience (seen as part of career path)
- Conscious choice (changing career, setting up own business etc.)

The erosion of the welfare state and collective bargaining in neoliberal states and its deepening effect on precarity was also noted (Cammalleri, 2019; Kalleberg et al., 2021), yet the bleak reality of the role of fear in governing the decision-making processes of precarious workers, appears to be unappreciated in current text.

When discussing applying for/securing work, participants for this study shared both positive and negative experiences of the process. However, they generally spoke of (and would refer to) elements such as 'chance', 'luck', 'timing' and 'knowing someone', or having/being able to access work through connections they'd been able to establish. For example, if demand for workers was high (Christmas/seasonal), you may be 'processed' very quickly. In certain instances, some had been able to secure occasional work without even having to apply or go through an interview, thanks to networks they'd previously established, or contacts made when 'doing the circuit'.

Those who were not so 'lucky', described how securing work became 'a full-time job'. Beyond constructing multiple CV's, tasks could include building profiles across numerous platforms, attending/completing time consuming assessments (some describing applications which took hours to complete, and another involving writing an essay), and multiple interviews, to chasing recruiters in order to 'apply' for additional positions etc. Indeed, as one interviewee described the 'soul destroying' periods of 'relentlessly' applying for

‘anything and everything’ they could find, and how that process impacted them:

“It just makes you wonder how anyone even gets a job nowadays…it got ridiculous…I applied to 400 places, and like, less than ten of them bothered to even get me back to me, and only the ones that were giving me an interview” (Claudio)

The emotive elements of securing work (frustration, fear, isolation) can have a haunting cyclical effect for some, whereas others gave the impression the topic was banal, pointing to the widespread commonality of giving up additional time and effort to the demands of securing work. Three of the participants even saw the experience as affirming, that they were rewarded with ‘opportunities’ as they were ‘performing’ to a higher standard or ‘working harder’ than others.

Rationalising and making sense of conflicting, difficult and irrational or paradoxical situations can be an important part of ‘self-preservation’, or ‘maintaining hope’. There is a reliance on the perception that what is happening is temporary: ‘it’s not going to be like this forever’, ‘this isn’t my permanent job’ etc. Interestingly, some described that this was their ‘mentality for coping’ when working under precarious conditions for several years.

With some exceptions, the process of securing work has seemingly become increasingly demanding, heavily digitised, and in many cases more elaborate, rather than streamlined and simplified. Self-commodifying and self-conditioning behaviour was identified, even at the very early stages of the process of attempting to secure work. Whilst one can only speculate what these elaborate processes are for (whether deliberate or not), in the case of this study:

- They are described as increasingly laborious, emotionally provocative, consuming time and energy, and even financially costly.
- Some felt that the process had 'worn them down' and conditioned them to accept conditions they would ordinarily reject
- Along with many social and existential impacts, there are also political dimensions – one could argue that the job application process has seemingly been turned into an exercise by which universal credit claimants must perform and show they have applied for everything (paradoxically not quite everything)

7.3 Precarious work and wellbeing

One of the key themes to emerge from the research has been the impact of precarious work on the wellbeing of individuals. There have been numerous instances throughout the research, where not only did individuals feel unable to reject poor working conditions, but also make decisions for their own personal safety. In one instance considering working whilst electronics failed in a flooded office, and another describing being verbally and physically assaulted by the public. This is not uncommon, as many accounts like this exist within the literature, however, the links between wellbeing and making decisions in regard to safety are less developed. Indeed, it was interesting to note, when probed further, how the 'temporary' nature of precarious work, does a lot of heavy lifting (which can be maintained for periods lasting years) when it comes to accepting poor conditions/work environments, particularly in extreme circumstances (risk to personal safety, feelings of

hopelessness, or being trapped, and vulnerable to extreme forms of exploitation and abuse).

The majority of participants saw themselves as secondary (or even lesser) to the need to secure work, and the need to perform. This was stoked by other commitments and priorities which also consumed time and energy but left many feeling that these needs consumed so much, that little time was left for anything else. Many felt unable to have social interactions, neglecting personal relationships with partners, and so on. Several also described feeling excluded from many 'normal areas of life: from things such as access to housing, credit cards, right through to sick leave, and ability to plan holidays. Whilst it is acknowledged that the proliferation of precarious work has long been underway prior to the 'digital revolution' (Vallas & Kovalainen, 2019), the deep structural deficiencies of platform capitalism have been seen to continually undermine regulators and strip back working rights (Scholz 2016; Woodcock, 2021). As a result, it has been argued that certain aspects of the 'gig economy', together with the implementation of new technologies and digitalisation of work, has created a form of 'algorithmic subjectification' and control over workers, whereby new forms of 'discipline, punishment, and reward' have begun to emerge (Moore, 2017; Kellogg et al., 2020). This reconfiguration of structures sits alongside important contentions that the contemporary neoliberal era, has simultaneously rendered 'genuine self-care' and considerations for wellbeing 'virtually impossible', for many at both micro and macro levels (Casalini, 2019). It has also argued how this is a theme which is especially important at a time when recruitment practices have become increasingly digitised, and the widespread use of platform interfaces, mobile applications, and websites, have granted a reconfiguration of the ways in which workers are expected to search, apply for, and undertake assignments (Williams et al., 2021; Spilda et al., 2022).

Moreover, this thesis has also offered some important reflections for how these increasingly common (but often underappreciated) processes impact multiple life strands, including how various forms of poverty (time, economic, emotional) engage with workers considerations for their own wellbeing and that of others. In doing so, it has highlighted multiple concerns which have arisen as a consequence of these emergent working relations, in terms of immediate, mid and long-term impact for individual and societal wellbeing (both psychological and physiological), along with any notions and considerations of 'recovery'. Indeed, it is possible to argue that such experiences can often be cyclic and may even have a 'haunting' impact on the decision-making processes, often to a level which may have further potentially detrimental consequences within and beyond the work environment. The evidence from this study also outlines deleterious impact of precarious work in terms of both psychological and physiological aspects of wellbeing, and its perceptions. Current discourse on wellbeing for precarious workers often seems to be accused of coming from a privileged place. The ability to maintain wellbeing is important, but it requires time, space, and energy/emotional capacity to even begin making positive steps. The fact that many are deprived of the ability to do this, needs to be better considered than is currently the case.

7.4 Final thoughts, implications and moving forward

In addition to the above, the findings from this study have also explored existing and emerging issues around conceptualisations of precarious work. This includes the ways in which some descriptive elements have become problematic in their application throughout public and political discourse. In agreement with Smith and McBride (2022), the notion that workers are 'choosing' their precarious conditions, or even prefer them, sits in stark

contrast to the reality of the lived experience. Indeed, the accounts from this study demonstrate that there are a number of factors which influence the ways in which workers experience and make sense of their conditions. For example, those who feel they have little choice but to accept positions which they may otherwise reject, as a consequence of welfare reforms, and regulatory and market failures (see chapters 4 to 6). As such, it is important that this is better acknowledged by decision makers (including those in policy and business leadership), particularly when perpetuating the increased flexibilization and casualisation of the labour market (Smith & McBride, 2022).

Additionally, there are several instances highlighted throughout this study, and indeed numerous other reports (i.e. Jethwa and Armstrong, 2017; Keizer et al., 2023) which are highly concerning, regarding regulation and practice. This includes instances of bullying, wage theft, and direct violations of working time directives, not to mention the extreme lengths of time that some workers remain trapped in 'temporary' contracts. Although workers may be able to access some advice through organisations such as the REC (recruitment agency federation), the employment agency standards inspectorate, ACAS and more (see ACAS, 2023; CAB, 2020), many incidents continue without consequence; from everyday violations to extreme cases (Forsyth et al., 2013; Quirk et al., 2020; Hadjisolomou et al., 2021). The instances from the accounts shared with this study, demonstrate that, not only are many workers unaware of their rights, but they also feel unable to enforce them, in some cases they are actively coerced to surrender them entirely. It is the responsibility of governments and their regulators to ensure that working environments do not encourage and support conditions which are harmful to workers. Yet, even in the most extreme cases, as the work of Virginia Mantouvalou has found, there remains a:

> heavy reliance on criminal law for the regulation of severe labour exploitation…[which is]… insufficient, because the broader political and legislative context suggests that there is no political will to address structural factors, including legal structures, that create vulnerability to exploitation
>
> (Mantouvalou, 2018, p.1017)

Certainly, the findings from this study correspond with others who have expressed concerns for the ongoing detrimental impact for those trapped in precarious work, particularly on their health and wellbeing (Vives et al., 2016; Moscone et al., 2016; Kalleberg, 2018). This includes longstanding calls for policy makers and business leaders to address the 'unsustainable' working conditions which have emerged as a consequence of 'increased labour market flexibilization' (Clarke et al., 2007; Julià et al., 2017).

From a research perspective, it is also noteworthy that there are surprisingly few wellbeing interventions focussing on precarious workers as a demographic (Gunn et al., 2021). Of those that do exist, most are considered 'new', small scale, and relatively hidden/unknown, along with being difficult to access (Mandl, 2021). However, this is perhaps unsurprising, given some of the unique challenges faced by an increasingly broad demographic of workers which fall under this category (Zheng and Yang, 2020;Woodcock, 2021). Additionally, wellbeing interventions are generally considered most impactful when implemented at the core structure of business practice (Milczarek & Xabier, 2012), and when applying sustained, holistic approaches (Brown et al., 2020). Precarious employment contracts, however, have continued to illicit mechanisms which seek to shift risk from employer to employee, promoting 'a wide array of insecurities' that are likely to "translate into life course stressors that undermine health" (Macmillan & Shanahan, 2021, p822). In sum, wellbeing for

precarious workers remains a vastly under-appreciated area of research, with interventions which can tackle this issue, facing numerous obstacles. This is certainly an urgent and important subject, particularly given the continued rise of platforms such as Uber and Amazon (among others), and the relentless growth of platform-mediated gig work, with a seemingly endless reliance on casualised workforces manifesting across many industries and sectors worldwide. Indeed, the number of gig workers globally is said to be somewhere in the region of 1.1 billion (Şen, 2022), and is only intended to increase alongside living costs and stagnant wages, with seemingly no political will to address the latest 'crisis of neoliberalism' (Saad-Filho, 2020; Meadway, 2022).

As discussed in chapter 5, the idea of individuals simply 'embracing the suck', and being expected to absorb and internalise the problems which manifest through toxic working cultures, conditions, and environments, may suggest that we are reaching the limits of an economic model which continues to be so reliant on such conditions. As a final note, perhaps some lessons and inspiration can be drawn from the positive outcomes of the Scandinavian reforms from the 1970's onwards. Arguably, as neoliberal ideology took countries such as the UK and the US in one direction, work environment reforms became a focal point across most Scandinavian economies, with a drive to address issues around alienation, stress, and dissatisfaction (Gustavsen, 1988). Put simply, poor work environments became recognised not only as problematic for the individual, but for the negative impact this had on families, communities, and society as a whole. The organisation of work, therefore, rightly became a legislative priority, with the will to strive for measures which ensure not only a healthy and productive workforce, but the wellbeing of the entire population. Such measures, when implemented long-term, have demonstrated an improvement in the quality of working life for the respective populous, with notable positive

societal effects across countries such as Sweden and Denmark, for example (see Gallie, 2003). This is certainly food for thought, as we head toward the dystopian vision of a helplessly disproportionate and sick society presented by those such as Cowen (2013), and others warning of an inevitable collapse (Hall & Lamont, 2013; Cooper, 2020; Springer, 2021).

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