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How Youth Become Workers: Identity, Inequality and the Post-Fordist Self

Abstract

Post-Fordism describes a situation in which precarity and un/underemployment becomes normalised while the requirement for young people to seek subjectivity through work is intensified. In this context, this paper draws on interviews with youth living in regions of high youth unemployment to examine how young people create identities as workers. The paper shows that young people approach the cultivation of a working self in terms of how the capacity for productive labour contributes to projects of 'self-realisation'. In this context, classed subjectivities are formed through the different ethics through which young people approach the formation of the self as a worker. This demonstrates how the disciplinary requirements of work contribute to the contemporary experience of class amongst youth. The paper concludes by suggesting that generational shifts in the experience of youth currently associated with employment insecurity can be usefully understood in terms of the dynamics of post-Fordist labouring subjectivities.

Keywords: youth; class; identity; post-fordism; work

Words: 7862

Introduction

This paper addresses how young people respond to the requirement to become workers, and explores how differently positioned young people form themselves and their identities in line with the demands of the contemporary labour force. With this focus, the paper contributes a new perspective to the study of youth and work. As recognised by the publication of this special issue, new and pressing questions are emerging about the relationship between young people and work. Precarious employment is widespread (Furlong and Kelly, 2005; Furlong et al, 2017) and the relationship between education and employment has been thrown into question (Chesters et al, 2018). Claims have emerged about generational shifts in the nature of youth as a result of these new structural conditions (Woodman and Wyn, 2015), and have included a focus on the 'reflexive' and individualised strategies that young people use to manage uncertainty (Farrugia, 2013). However, changes to the relationship between young people and work go beyond debates about reflexivity and relate to what theories of 'post-Fordism' have described as a transformation in the relationship between labour, value and the self in contemporary capitalism. Post-Fordism is a term describing a shift in social and economic conditions taking place from the 1980s. In this shift, labour market precarity increases whilst the subjectivity of a worker becomes increasingly critical to the value of labour, and workers are encouraged to approach work as critical to the realisation of the self (Adkins, 2005; Weeks, 2011). Notions of self-realisation that have become so critical to the culture of late-modern societies are therefore being intertwined with work and value in new ways (Potter, 2015), and interventions into the youth labour force require young people to view work as a realm of passionate personal commitment (Kelly and Harrison, 2009).

In this context, this paper examines the identity practices through which young people engage with and experience work, and the new inequalities that emerge from young people's efforts to cultivate valued working selves. In general, the paper aims to situate the formation of young *labouring subjects* as critical to sociological discussions of precarity and generational change.

Empirically, the paper draws on qualitative research conducted between 2016 and 2018 examining the meaning of work in young people's lives, the role of work in the formation of youth identity, and the personal identifications and investments that young people make in the cultivation of themselves as workers. The data collected through this project shows that young people approach work as a project of self-realisation, align the value of the self with their capacity to create value at work, and consider it both necessary and desirable to invest themselves fully in work. This analysis both resonates with and goes beyond critiques of 'employability' to suggest that the capacity for economic *productivity* has become an ethical imperative in the formation of the young self, contributing to projects of self-realisation through the cultivation of the self as a worker. Whilst this may be a surprising finding given the increasing precarity of the labour market, the data suggests that self-realisation has in fact become an ethic through which to navigate labour market uncertainty itself, in which young people invest themselves more fully in work amidst the increasing uncertainty of its outcome. However, the paper also describes classed differences in the way that young people imagine the value of themselves in relation to the labour market, and in the practices young people use to cultivate themselves as workers. These differences demonstrate new ways in which class, distinction and labour are intertwined in the formation of youth subjectivities. The paper concludes by suggesting that theoretical developments in the sociology of youth (such as discussions of generational shifts in young people's relationship with work, or discussions of the impact of labour market precarity) may be usefully situated within the broader terrain of post-Fordism. This would draw attention to new ways in which youth subjectivities are aligned with the dynamics of labour, value and subjectivity currently at play in contemporary capitalism.

Youth and Work in the New Economy

In recent years, increasing sociological attention has been paid to young people's subjectivities as a way of understanding the consequences of changes in the organisation of employment. Young people's relationship with work has long been foundational to the sociology of youth (eg Roberts, 1968), concerned primarily with mapping the structural inequalities manifested in pathways through employment (Willis, 1977; Furlong, 1992). Whilst contemporary public attention has focused on the impacts of the global financial crisis or the precarity of a 'gig' economy organised through apps, employment precarity for young people is more longstanding and is recognised in the sociology of youth through an increased focus on changing employment conditions as critical drivers of theoretical development in the field from around the 1990s (Roberts, 1996). These changes include elevated levels of youth unemployment as a structural feature of the labour market, the expansion and normalisation of precarious employment conditions, and the dissolution of the taken for granted relationship between education

(especially tertiary education) and employment despite rising levels of post-compulsory educational attainment (see eg Wyn and White, 1997; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Furlong et al, 2017). As a result, a focus on youth subjectivities has become a way of understanding the impact of these shifts on how young people manage their lives. These conditions have made insecurity and uncertainty into key themes in the sociology of youth, and have resulted in an increased emphasis on ‘reflexivity’, a term drawn from theories of late modernity (especially Beck, 1992) to describe the biographical practices or projects of the self through which young people manage uncertainty (Woodman, 2011). Debates about reflexivity have also become a way of understanding how class inequalities are manifested in the individualised mobilisation of resources (Threadgold and Nilan, 2009; Farrugia, 2013). These changes in employment conditions and subjectivities have been usefully described in terms of a generational shift in the nature of youth (Andres and Wyn, 2010; Woodman and Wyn, 2015), in which precarious employment and reflexive biographies have become the norm. These shifts are of course also related to changes in the social policy frameworks governing the labour market, in which young people are imagined to be entrepreneurial and active in their navigation of risk (Kelly, 2006).

While the concept of reflexivity has offered a way to understand how young people manage changing employment conditions, the dominance of the individualisation thesis has marginalised another important aspect of work, which is the formation of young people as labouring subjects. In other words, young people must not only get jobs, but must *become workers* (Weeks, 2011), and thereby form identities in line with the requirements of economic productivity and value generation (Farrugia, 2018). This is a shift from a focus on employment conditions to the practices through which young people are formed as workers. There is a substantial sociological history of analysing work and labour in terms of identity construction. Debates in this area have for instance focused on work as a realm for the articulation of classed and gendered identities, and as a realm in which such identities are produced and performed in ways that are specific to particular labour processes (Adkins, 2000). Much of this discussion has focused on service employment in which self-presentation, embodiment and emotional expression is critical to labour (Hochschild, 1983), and therefore in which identity itself formed through labour in its classed, raced and gendered dimensions (see eg McDowell (2009) for an extended discussion of this literature). For theories of post-Fordism, this form of labour has become increasingly economically central and emblematic of labour in general. However, more than merely a quantitative increase in the prevalence of service employment, the concept of post-Fordist goes further to theorise an intensification of the requirement to construct the self in relation to the requirements of the labour force, precisely as the structural conditions underpinning employment are becoming more precarious.

In theories of post-Fordism, ‘immaterial’ forms of production (Lazzarato, 1996) – in which cultural symbols, interactions and social relationships constitute the key product of the work – are described as increasingly critical due to the growth and economic centrality of the service

economy, and notions of the ‘knowledge economy’ have become definitive of discourses about economic change (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Authors such as Hardt and Negri (2004) describe this as an outcome of the feminisation of work, a term that describes the generalisation of forms of labour that in earlier periods were associated with femininity, as well as changes in labour force composition that include the entry of women into employment. First, the feminisation of labour describes an ongoing economisation of personal attributes formerly relegated to the ‘private’ and hence ‘feminine’ sphere, resonating with longstanding discussions in Marxist feminism as reviewed in detail by Jarrett (2015). In the process, theories of post-Fordism suggest that the creation of value no longer depends on the possession of discrete skills or qualifications on the part of a worker, but rather dissolves the boundaries between the inside and outside of work to incorporate subjectivity itself into the process of capitalist valorisation. With this process, workers’ personal identities, relational styles, and affective experiences are being drawn into the practice of labour across the economy. Workers are required to mobilise new and intimate dimensions of their subjectivities in their engagement with work (Adkins, 2005), creating value from their capacity to express themselves and communicate with others. The classed and gendered dimensions of this are complex and in some ways contradictory. On the one hand, this process has enrolled men into forms of labour that were previously feminised. On the other, the process has situated labour – historically a source of masculine identity as reflected in a number of historical and recent studies (Willis, 1977; Lamont, 2009) – into a critical source of identity for contemporary young women, whose economic participation is increasingly celebrated as a ‘success story’ of economic restructuring despite ongoing gendered inequalities across all aspects employment (Harris, 2004). In the process, the boundaries between the productive and ‘unproductive’ dimensions of the self, - or the dimensions of the self that are and are not relevant to value creation at work – are becoming more difficult to discern and in need of further exploration.

There are good reasons to believe that young people are at the forefront of these developments. Kelly and Harrison (2009) have described social policy regimes and welfare interventions into disadvantaged young people’s lives that mandate a passionate and affectively intense commitment to work as a sign of ‘employability’, and which regulate young people’s labour on the basis of this passionate expression. In this context, a passionate investment in work becomes a disciplinary requirement for the formation of a labouring self that may be attributed with value, and that holds the potential for the creation of value in the marketplace. Welfare interventions now instruct young people on comportment, expressive style and aesthetics (Nickson et al, 2003), and require unemployed participants to create positive and pleasing interactions and affective experiences for others in order to successfully perform their value as a worker (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Moving beyond contexts of disadvantage, Angela McRobbie suggests that work has expanded in significance for middle-class young people, reinvented as realm of fulfillment and self-realisation as a replacement for traditional social attachments and collective identities (McRobbie, 2016, p 39). In an argument that speaks to the increasingly contingent relationship between educational qualifications and employment, McRobbie argues that

neoliberal employment regimes have replaced notions of skill or expertise with a ‘portfolio...of wildly different capacities’ (p 107), all of which are mobilised in a personal identification with work as a realm of self-expression. In general, these arguments suggest that young people are critical to what Kathi Weeks (2011) has described as the ‘post-Fordist work ethic’, in which work promises the ‘ontological reward’ of self-realisation and a valued, socially intelligible self.

Situating young people’s engagement with work in this context raises also new questions about how inequalities related to gender and class are manifested in young people’s identities and relationship with work. In this paper I focus in particular on class, and on the argument from Skeggs (2011) on neoliberalism and classed subjectivities which foregrounds the imperative to accrue and perform value as a critical dimension of the experience and performance of class. However, and as I have argued previously (AUTHOR) the role of work and labour in this process has attracted less attention than the broader cultural politics of inequality as it is manifested in the representation and performance of classed and gendered subjectivities (Skeggs, 1997; 2011; 2005; Threadgold, 2018). In this context, if young people are now expected to invest their whole selves in work, and to view work as a realm of self-realisation, then what practices do they mobilise in the cultivation of themselves as workers? How do these practices express class distinctions? The aim of this paper is to address these questions and, in doing so, to suggest new ways in which the sociology of youth can approach the relationship between youth and work in contemporary capitalism.

Method

The data analysed in the remainder of this article is drawn from a project funded by the Australian Research Council examining the formation of young people as workers. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 74 young people aged between 17 and 29 (44 young women and 33 young men) living in Newcastle and its surrounds, and Mildura – with youth unemployment rates of 13% and 14.5% respectively at the time of the study (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014). As Newcastle is a regional city whereas Mildura is rural and at a further distance from a capital city, these two localities have different economic histories. While both localities have significant service economies (both consumer and professional), Newcastle has a history of manufacturing employment and is now de-industrialising, whereas Mildura is known for its horticulture industry. I discuss the impact of these histories and identities in detail in another publication that focuses in particular on local class cultures and relationships with place (AUTHOR). Participants were recruited through local community organisations, educational institutions and welfare providers, as well as snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted in public places or at participants’ houses in each locality. This sample includes young people still in education and training as well as those with varying degrees of experience in work. Interviews discussed aspirations for work, strategies for engaging with work, experiences of education and work, and the overall role of work in the lives of participants. For the purposes of this project, ‘work’ refers to paid employment. Other activities such as volunteering were discussed by participants as relevant to employment, but were not defined as ‘work’ in the same way as paid employment

was. Different definitions about the relationships between what is and what is not relevant to a working identity are discussed at times in this paper.

The analysis that follows presents patterns in young people's relationship with work that emerged inductively from the data. My approach to class is based on categories that emerged through the coding process that articulated classed experiences, rather than being based on a priori categories such as those connected with socioeconomic status. This data is therefore analysed in terms of the formation of classes and classed identities, rather than the articulation of pre-existing classed categories. In this sense, class is approached as a form of subjectivity that emerges through labour market engagement rather than an a priori variable. However, in the analysis of these narratives, significant distinctions were identified between participants with a family history of tertiary education and professional employment, and those with a family history of trades and clerical employment and without tertiary education. Whilst this category does not capture the diversity of possible class positions in contemporary Australian society or the diversity of theoretical positions on class itself within Sociology (France, Roberts and Wood, 2018), it is employed here as a critical distinction that was present in the narratives collected throughout this project.

The narratives analysed here were remarkably consistent across ages, particular educational experiences, and industries or sectors of work. Data was analysed through established techniques in qualitative research, including thematic analysis to identify themes across participants, and narrative analysis in order to analyse narratives biographically (Reissman, 1993). In this sense, the analysis described how the working self is mobilised and articulated across a range of contexts, and how different kinds of education and employment are made meaningful as part of identity practices and biographies that are classed. The analysis is organised into three categories – 'the cultivation of the self' (describing how identity is constructed in relation to work), 'success and failure' (definitions of self-realisation and their alignment with notions of failure and success), and 'the erosion of the working self' (describing how participants' investments in work changed with experiences of unemployment).

The Making of the Productive Self

For participants in this project, work was invested with enormous significance, described as a realm of self-realisation and positioned as the basis for a meaningful existence now and in the future. Whilst Andres and Wyn (2010) have suggested that young people's personal priorities shift away from work after experiences of family formation occurring in their early or mid-thirties, in the age range of this sample work was described as the single most important thing determining future happiness. In this context, it was critical for young people that work was not 'just a job' or, in the words of one participant in his final year of secondary education '*just based on the fact of me living*'. For young people in this project, a meaningful life depended on work that mobilised and actualised valued elements of the self. For this reason, the cultivation of the self as a worker was a task of critical significance in young people's lives, and incorporated

aspects of themselves and their identities in ways that are unrecognised in the literature. The practices, self-definitions and experiences that were enacted in this process also produced new social divisions, especially in the relationship between social class and work that was manifested in the formation of young labouring subjects. In what follows I examine how young people cultivated working selves, defined value and self-realisation through work, and defined and experienced failure and success. This is analysed in terms of the significance of labour, value, precarity and generational change amongst contemporary youth.

The Cultivation of the Self

Young people's preparation and engagement with work is typically understood in terms of the accumulation of qualifications, skills and resources that can be exchanged on the labour market. However, a focus on the cultivation of the self as a worker reveals new and more expansive dynamics through which young people approach work. I have focused exclusively on this process of self-cultivation in a previous paper (AUTHOR), but return to this here to situate these practices and self-definitions relate to economic precarity. This is particularly significant because of the significant classed differences in the forms of identity cultivated by young people in relation to the labour market. For middle class participants who came from families with histories of higher education and who aspired to or had successfully secured professional employment, talk of qualifications and skills were marginal to the value that they felt they brought to their work. In particular, there are classed differences in the way that young people cultivate the value of themselves as workers which therefore impact on how. Indeed, these participants did not identify a particular realm of competence or qualification that they felt contributed to their value as workers, and stated that there was no distinction between the value they brought to their work, and their subjectivities in the most general sense. Instead, for middle class participants the key term underpinning their capacity to produce value was *passion*. Middle class participants described themselves as passionate subjects whose passion for work – and for life in general – meant that they would be valued workers and would experience success in the labour market. Passion was a kind of affective energy that originated within young people themselves and was realised in the value of their labour and in the success of their careers. As one young female junior accountant stated:

I don't really see work as a separate part of my life. I just want to have one whole life and I want to be able to do the things I want to do. But I absolutely know that I have to be passionate about everything I do.

This quote is typical of young people from middle class backgrounds with professional aspirations or experiences, and situates work not as a specific realm of competency or qualification, but rather as an expression of a passionate self. For these participants, passion was not seen as specific to work, and so the cultivation of a passionate self was described in expansive terms, including a range of practices not usually regarded as relevant to labour. These included sport and other leisure activities, yoga, popular cultural interests, and 'networking' all

of which were described as ways of cultivating and expressing passion. In one narrative, a young man working in a junior position in a finance company described his success in securing this role in terms of his own '*quest for personal development*', manifested in his involvement in local sport and charity activities which reflected an overall passionate approach to life that was recognised as valuable by his employers. Moreover, if this passion is successfully maintained, it will carry the passionate worker through labour market contingency, as this young woman in her final year of high school suggests:

If you try really hard to succeed [then] you'll succeed in other areas of your life. So that passion and that drive that you take in one job will follow with you through to another.

For these participants, labour market success is seen as both requiring and reflecting intrinsic passion maintained across the whole of life. In this sense, these young people described work as a realm of life which developed and mobilised their entire subjectivities, and in which they looked forward to committing their energies and personal identifications now and in the future. Passion may therefore be seen as both a mode of self-realisation, and an ethic of labour market engagement in which the experience of the self is aligned with the requirements of the labour market. The ethic of passion going beyond the cultivation of employability through skills and qualifications to encompass a wide range of activities and practices not usually regarded as productive, and regards work as a realm of total affective commitment that both expresses and reproduces the passion of the working subject.

Work was also described (or idealised) as a realm of self-realisation by young people from families with a history of trades and clerical work and without a history of higher education, although the ethos through which this takes place was entirely different. Unlike the passionate subjects just discussed, for these working-class young people engaging with the labour market involved a kind of biographical reflexivity in which a young person reflects on themselves to identify *competencies*, or areas of things that they may be *good at* and that may – perhaps through education and training – be developed into the capacity for productive labour. For this reason, these participants' narratives of themselves at work focused on particular *personal attributes* which would be developed and realised at work. For example, three young women – two recruited from a TAFE and one in her final year of high school – described themselves as good at organising others and at being 'bossy', and so had chosen training courses in hospitality and event management in order to capitalise on this trait, which they expected would facilitate a higher level of competence and success. One young man described himself as '*good with people...it's always sort of come natural to me*' and, having identified this about himself, had recently moved out of a job as a casual scaffolding labourer to a job with an estate agency going door to door inviting dwellers to sell their houses.

This emphasis on competence also shaped the practices through which working-class youth cultivated an identity as a worker, in particular their approach to education and their engagement with other activities designed to increase their value on the labour market. Whilst higher

education was of course critical to the identities and pathways of middle-class participants, it was not foregrounded in their narratives, which took education for granted and focused on their wider social, leisure and community lives. However, no working-class participants mentioned leisure activities or other similar ‘unproductive’ practices in their narratives about how they approach work. For these young people, the education system was the key mechanism for moving through the labour market, and their educational choices were discussed at length in relation to their personal traits and anticipated future competencies. Moreover, when young people described activities outside of formal education that may contribute to their employment prospects, these tended to be explicitly connected to the skills they would gain, rather than to the value of their subjectivities in a broader sense as was the case with middle class youth. For example, one young woman who was unemployed at the time of the interview and was applying for clerical roles also performed volunteer work at a police station working with marginalised young people, saying that constituted experience that strengthened her customer service skills:

It's tailoring programs to suit each client's needs, and that's where I thrive... Anything is experience, and the more experience you've got across the board, the better.

In this sense, working-class young people's approach to education, training and other relevant experience is best understood in terms of the ethic of self-realisation through which they approach the formation of themselves as workers. Since their value as workers is understood in terms of competence, the education system is approached as a mechanism for the realisation of personal attributes through their development and conversion into skills. Whilst in one sense working-class youth must exercise more biographical reflexivity in the identification of valued personal attributes that can be mobilised in this way, this difference also means that the distinction between the self at work and the self outside of work – or the productive and unproductive dimensions of the self – has more clarity than that of middle-class participants, focusing on areas of competence that reflect valued attributes of the self. In what follows I want to expand this analysis with an exploration of what is at stake for these young people in the cultivation of the self as a worker by focusing on definitions and experiences of failure and success in the cultivation of a working self and in the navigation of a precarious labour market.

Success and Failure

If work is a realm of self-realisation, then it is an unpredictable realm in which the possibility for a meaningful self is at stake. In this project, the meaning of self-realisation and the experiences of failure and success varied according to young people's class background and according to the actual experiences they had had in the labour market. These experiences were negotiated according to the ethic through which differently positioned participants engaged with work. For middle class participants, the ultimate end goal of work – and the key signifier of success at work – was described as the ongoing experience of passion and personal development. Middle-class participants were hesitant to talk about material rewards at all, and did not immediately raise any concrete goals that they would like to achieve or that would signify success. Indeed, these

participants were often reluctant to discuss issues such as financial remuneration or professional status. Instead, for these participants the realisation of their own passionate investments and their own personal development were ends in themselves without necessary reference to a material signifier of success. The following from a male recent engineering graduate and a female junior accountant are typical examples of these kinds of statements:

Any form of success would be just to be able to grow.

Personally my goals were just around being the most vibrant version of myself. You know, without getting specific, I was focussing on my energy levels and I guess being my best self.

A useful way that these statements can be understood is in terms of Bourdieu's (1990) argument that class distinction is based on 'distance from necessity', or a deliberate positioning of the self away from the prosaic necessities of life and towards more 'elevated' pursuits that offer an intrinsic (socially ascribed) value. With this in mind, the reluctance to discuss the material rewards of professional employment can be understood as a way that class distinction is cultivated in the formation of the self as a worker. This takes place by positioning work beyond the realms of brute necessity, and into a kind of quasi-artistic pursuit that (through passionate commitment) realises an intrinsic value that is also the value of the self. However, whilst this is a form of class distinction, it is also a mode of subjectivity in which the value of the self is realised entirely through work. The distinction achieved through the cultivation of this middle-class labouring subject therefore takes place through a subsumption of a young person's entire subjectivity into the disciplinary requirements of the labour force.

For working class young people, the stakes are higher and the definitions of success and of successful self-realisation differed in ways that reflect the ethic of competence described above. Narratives about the meaning of work for working-class youth intertwine aspirations for material comfort, social mobility, and self-realisation, in which the failure to achieve satisfaction at work amounts to a failure to achieve a meaningful subjectivity at all. The following young woman studying at a technical college articulates this imperative well:

I don't want to be nothing. I don't want to be miserable, get up and do whatever I have to do just to pay the rent. I want to actually enjoy my life

Narratives of this kind were common amongst working-class young people, for whom the formation of a working self was a task that was fought with substantial anxiety. For these participants, failure meant the threat of a miserable and meaningless existence – of being 'nothing'. Working-class participants also described efforts to avoid 'doing whatever' and hence abandoning the promise of fulfillment that work was seen to offer. Whilst middle class participants took for granted that success would follow from following their passions, working-class participants were anxious about the possibility that they may find themselves without work, or in menial jobs that were meaningless and that did not allow them to exercise the competencies

they had identified within themselves and that they valued as the basis for their identities as workers.

A personal investment in work and a desire for self-realisation through labour is therefore expressed differently by working-class participants. Working-class participants described their personal investment in work in terms of the achievement of concrete milestones or achievements that could signify success. Narratives about work that was intrinsically motivating and that offered the opportunities to avoid ‘being nothing’ typically described jobs with clear institutional milestones that participants could aspire to. Participants also often had timeframes according to which they wished to achieve career milestones or goals. The young man quoted above who secured work at an estate agency stated that he wished to become a listing agent for this agency within twelve months – a clear signifier of progression and success in his eyes. In setting goals, work was described by the following young woman as a pathway to social mobility:

I just always set goals for myself and am always striving for more. I like things that are accomplishable as well... [So] I've accomplished something and not just been one of those people that have left school, done whatever, because they could get that and then that's done.

The intermingling of personal investment in work with desires for social mobility and a sense of accomplishment is definitive of success and of the successful realization of the labouring self for working-class participants. In this sense, while they placed an equal emphasis on self-realisation through work in general to middle-class young people, for these participants this process was more directly connected to material outcomes and achievements, and more contingent on the success of these outcomes. This is not to say that middle-class young people’s working identities are unconnected to material outcomes, but rather that participants’ class background shapes what is at stake in participants’ narratives. Whilst middle-class participants positioned work as unconnected with material concerns, for working-class participants the realization of the working self was connected with social mobility through work, creating anxieties about failure and the possibility of a satisfying and meaningful existence.

To summarise the data so far I want to suggest that for the young people discussed above, ethics of self-realisation in the formation of a working self provide a sense of narrative coherence in the unpredictable environment of the contemporary labour market. For contemporary young people, the capacity for labour realises passions or personal attributes that are intrinsic and intimate to the self of the worker. In this way, the story about work becomes the story of the self, and the story of the realisation of these attributes over time through work. In other words, this project suggests that rather than the ‘corrosion’ of the self (Sennett, 1998), the formation of the working self has taken on a new significance in conditions of uncertainty, becoming a site of enormous investment as young people are placed under increasing pressure to form a personal relationship to work. In this context, work has become even more significant in the formation of the self in general, aligning notions of self-realisation so critical to the culture of late modern societies with

definitions of value stemming from work. This is especially the case for middle-class youth, whose ethic of passionate commitment means that the entire self is aligned with value creation at work. However, despite the idealisation of work in this way, youth unemployment rates remain high, and this project interviewed a substantial number of young people who had experienced substantial periods of unemployment and employment precarity. In the next and final section of this paper before the conclusion I describe the experiences of those who were unable to actualize the working self in the way idealized by participants discussed thus far, including a changed relationship with work created through experiences of precarity and unemployment.

Unemployment, Precarity and the Erosion of the Working Self

While young people began with substantial aspirations for the role that work would play in their lives, experiencing substantial periods of unemployment or employment insecurity slowly eroded young people's investments in work. Those who were searching for work whilst still in education or training drew on their ongoing engagement with these institutions to maintain the kind of personal investments in labour described so far, and so for them work remained a realm of aspiration and investment. However, this section focuses on participants who had experienced substantial periods of unemployment without an ongoing connection with education or training to maintain their sense of a future in work. These participants were recruited through welfare services, and none had family histories of professional employment or tertiary education, they did not necessarily come from backgrounds of unusual deprivation in comparison to the working class participants described above. The welfare services they were recruited through offered job training programs that included psychological assessments of unemployed young people in order to offer advice about the kinds of work that may suit their temperament, personality and relational style. However, these programs – which aimed to capitalize on the subjectivity of unemployed young people in order to encourage labour force engagement – were remote to the actual experiences of those who had experienced substantial unemployment. For these young people, aspirations for self-realisation through work became increasingly remote from their concerns, which for the following young man included mounting personal debt and the constant management of state and non-governmental employment agencies in order to search for work and maintain access to unemployment benefits:

I was in that mindset of I want something I can develop. Then, as the weeks and months went on and I'm desperate, I'll take anything at the moment and develop on something later.

Participants recruited in this way described searching for 'anything', applying for multiple jobs every week only to be rejected or receive no response at all. This process was also mandated by welfare policies which require young people to apply for a mandated number of jobs each week. The process of applying for work was deeply demoralizing, and created feelings of inadequacy, depression and shame despite (or perhaps because of) the impersonal nature of the application process and participants' knowledge of high levels of youth unemployment. If work is a key

realm for the realization of the self, then an abstract understanding of labour market conditions does nothing to prevent the internalization of feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness for those who are unemployed. After applying for dozens of jobs every week and being rejected after multiple job interviews, the following young woman started to reflect on the possibility that there was something wrong with her as an individual:

It was getting to the point where I just felt like it was me; I was getting rejected. It was just me. I just got to that low point where it was, like, I don't want to look for jobs anymore because there's something wrong with me.

This participant described increasing levels of anxiety at the prospect of applying for work, attending interviews, or attending meetings with job service providers. As time went on, she started suffering panic attacks in public, which she attributed to the anxiety connected to her unemployment. Other participants recruited through welfare agencies described having worked in multiple precarious, poorly paid and sometimes 'off the books' styles of employment, moving from one to the next interspersed with periods of unemployment. One participant described a history of casual labouring jobs obtained through social networks which were often terminated without warning when a particular job was completed, sometimes without wages being paid as promised. For participants like this young man, work was a precarious and hostile environment with little personal significance beyond meeting the daily necessities of life. For this reason, when asked about his aspirations he stated that he was searching for '*whatever gets me through life*', aligning work with bare material existence. In this way, unemployment creates the kind of purely pragmatic approach to work that was regarded with anxiety or even horror by participants quoted at the beginning of this article, for whom work without self-realisation was unthinkable.

Conclusion

In youth studies, precarity features as an aspect of social and generational change. It is currently recognised through its impact on young people's biographies, including uncertainty, desynchronicity, and the requirement of reflexive life management (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). However, in this paper I want to suggest that precarity has become the background condition for transformations in the nature of young labouring subjectivities that has been unrecognized within frameworks that focus primarily on managing employment conditions. For contemporary young people, work is now approached in terms of the realization of the self, which is aligned with the capacity for productive labour. This means that contemporary youth subjectivities are intertwined with the disciplinary requirements of work in new and unprecedented ways, with every aspect of a young person's sense of self connected with notions of value and economic productivity. Generational changes cannot be understood in isolation from these broader shifts in the relationship between work and the self. Indeed, an intensification of the alignment between personal identity and work is both emblematic of shifts in the nature of labour and the dynamics of labour force formation described in theories of post-Fordism, and operates as the main way in which young people are able to respond to labour market insecurity. By identifying and

developing the aspects of themselves that could prove valuable to employers, young people produce resources to deploy in the labour market as well as a coherent personal narrative of the self across shifting and uncertain social conditions. One of the key implications of this paper therefore is that the sociology of youth would benefit enormously from increased attention to these broader post-Fordist transformations, of which employment precarity is only one important dimension.

Attention to the formation of young people as workers also creates a new perspective on how classed subjectivities amongst young people are produced – ie, through the disciplinary requirements of work. Middle class young people define their value as workers in terms of their passionate commitment to work and to life in general, whereas working-class young people define their value as workers in terms of personal attributes or competencies that can be realized through labour. This difference in the way that labouring subjectivities are formed is connected both to Bourdieusian notions of distance from necessity and to the broader pressure on contemporary young people to form identities as workers. In both instances, class inequalities are manifested in definitions of productivity and personal value, and are mobilized in the projects of self-realisation that define the cultivation of the working self. Moreover, in both instances notions of economic value are aligned with the formation of the self. For this reason, when young people experience unemployment the capacity to realise the self as a subject of value is eroded, creating feelings of anxiety and worthlessness. In this context, young people's attitude to work becomes one of managing a risky and hostile social environment in whatever way allows them to get through life. Experiencing unemployment therefore positions young people within precisely the kinds of working subjectivities that are denigrated as meaningless in discourses of aspiration and self-realisation in the formation of the young working self. In all instances, the production of youth identities and the classed subjectivities formed through employment and unemployment take place through the intertwining of labour, value and identity in the projects of self-realisation that produce the young working self.

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