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Post-crisis precarity: Understanding attitudes to work and industrial relations among young people in the UK

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Abstract

The 2008 crisis crystallised the trend towards ‘precarious’ labour market conditions which disproportionately affect young people. Few studies since the crisis, however, examine how young people understand and engage with their economic circumstances and industrial relations. This article draws upon rich and original data from focus groups and an online community exercise to examine the attitudes of young people in relation to the apparent ‘normalisation’ of precarity in the post-crisis economy. It argues that although young people have internalised precarious labour market conditions, they recognise the abnormality of this situation. It shows that their view of these conditions as immutable, however, means they often fail to see value in conventional forms of trade union organisation. The article concludes by outlining a future research agenda around economic crisis, generational identities and the future of industrial relations.

Keywords

Economic crisis, labour markets, precarity, trade unions, young people

Introduction

Whilst the UK is currently experiencing record levels of employment, this headline figure masks the fact that, ‘two-thirds of the growth in employment since 2008 has been in “atypical” roles such as self-employment, zero-hours contracts or agency work’ (Clarke and Cominetti, 2019: 6–7). Moreover, young people have experienced ‘above-average increases in the rate of atypical employment’ during this time (Clarke and Cominetti, 2019: 42). The implications for industrial relations of the rise of insecure and precarious employment in many sectors is significant and has become central to academic and policy debate in the UK (and elsewhere) in recent years (e.g. Taylor, 2017).

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Precarity can be understood broadly as a deviation from the standard employment relationship, with features including low pay, short-term contracts, faux self-employment, few or no guaranteed working hours and few employment rights and protections (see European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2017; Grimshaw et al., 2016).¹ Insecure employment is not new, especially in lower-skilled occupations, although it may have reached a new peak since the 2008 crisis (Prosser, 2016; see also Bessant et al., 2017; France, 2016). Indeed, two decades ago, Richard Sennett warned of 'flexible capitalism', wherein 'uncertainty' and 'instability' were becoming 'woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism' (Sennett, 1998: 31; see also Beck, 2002). However, today's young people are perhaps the first cohort to have experienced the shift towards precarity on a large scale, across occupational groups. In a landmark 2018 book, the late Andy Furlong and colleagues refer to the spread of precarious labour market conditions in recent decades in the UK as 'a new normality', which has built up over decades and accelerated in the context of the crisis from 2008. This is an issue because, despite the fact that young people are increasingly likely to be employed in low paid and precarious positions, or suffer from underemployment (Berry, 2016; Booth, 2016; Gardiner and Gregg, 2017; Heyes et al., 2016; Hodder and Kretsos, 2015), they are also less likely to confront such problems through traditional forms of trade unionism (Tailby and Pollert, 2011).

This article seeks to develop our understanding of this 'new normal' of precarity by enquiring how it has been internalised into the attitudes of today's young workers. As Furlong et al. (2018: 92–96) point out, young people would have to acknowledge precarity as a largely immutable reality in order for it to have been fully 'normalised'. We thus define the 'normalisation' of precarity in terms of whether and how young people come to view the conditions of labour market precarity outlined above as fixed features of their economic existence, rather than an aberration they expect to pass. As such, drawing a link between wider labour market processes and young people's attitudes to trade unions, we interrogate the notion of 'normalisation' by considering if, how and why young people seek to operate and succeed (or simply survive) within this economic environment, rather than resist it (through, for example, forms of collective action).

Our specific contribution to scholarship is to qualitatively examine young people's understandings of the economy, work and industrial relations in order to develop our own understanding of how the material conditions of this 'new normal' are being experienced. The research is thus underpinned by two key research questions. Firstly, *what is the attitude of young people towards work, their economic circumstances and economic futures more broadly?* Secondly, *how are traditional industrial relations, including the role of trade unions, seen by today's young people?* These questions will be relevant across many economies, though we focus here on young people in the UK. The article explores these issues through the presentation of original, qualitative data emerging from a series of focus groups and an online community exercise with young people aged between 18 and 25, conducted in October 2017.

The existing literature on young people's attitudes to work and industrial relations is divided between more attitudinal approaches, which highlight a lack of 'demand' for unions amongst young workers (see Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Cogin, 2012; Ng et al., 2010), and more structural approaches which highlight the way in which changing

labour market composition restricts demand for unions (see Freeman and Diamond, 2003; Vandaele, 2012). Transcending this dichotomy, however, our approach here is to exploit the economic crisis as a key event and assess how significant labour market changes may be altering attitudes towards work and industrial relations amongst young people in the UK.

There are surprisingly few such studies focusing on the post-crisis period, and certainly very few focused on the UK. Frustratingly, studies rarely make links between work-related attitudes and understandings of the wider economic context. There have also been none focused on 18- to 25-year-olds; whilst most research on young workers studies the 'millennial' age range, our research is focused solely on those who, as adults, have never known anything but the post-crisis economy. Moreover, trade unions (or their absence) are clearly an important part of the labour market landscape for workers, and as such there has been a growing scholarly interest in their renewal in conditions of precarity in recent years (Croucher and Wood, 2017; James and Karmowska, 2016; Kretsos, 2011; Marino et al., 2018; Upchurch et al., 2012). As such, analysing attitudes to trade unions serves our wider objective of understanding the normalisation of precarity, given that such attitudes may indicate the extent to which young people are prepared to challenge prevailing labour market conditions. Do young people see precarity as impeding their exercise of control over their working lives, and are they looking to trade unions to reassert control?

The article contends that young people's experience of the 'new normal' of precarious labour market conditions has been internalised and thus normalised within their attitudes to a significant degree. This does not mean, however, that labour market changes have been accepted passively or unknowingly (cf. Furlong et al., 2018). Rather, there is a recognition amongst these young people of the novelty of their socio-economic circumstances, and thus frustration and anger at the nature of these circumstances. Nevertheless, we also find, as others have (see Worth, 2019), that young people feel that insecure labour market conditions are simply 'part and parcel' of the economic order, and that this attitude means these young people focus on how they can succeed within this inherited structure rather than on pursuing structural change. Our research shows that antipathy towards trade unions, even if trade unionism is conceived in fairly positive terms, can be associated with this perspective, insofar as trade union membership is not deemed particularly helpful to young people plotting their career while navigating precarious labour market conditions.

The article first briefly surveys the existing literature on the attitudes of young people to work and industrial relations (including trade unions), and then details the research methodology in the third section. The fourth section presents evidence from the focus groups and online participants, organised thematically according to an inductive analysis of our empirical material, in the following subsections: 'the economic context', 'the labour market, good work and economic security' and 'industrial relations and trade unions'. The subsequent section pulls together our analysis of the 'attitudes to precarity' and 'ambivalence to trade unions', before we conclude in the final section. The article poses a challenge to the notion that conventional forms of trade union activity will succeed in mobilising workers to challenge precarity and marks out a new research agenda around how generational identities transform in the wake of economic crises. Ultimately,

however, while in a material sense precarity may have been normalised for today's young people, further research is required to establish the attitudinal implications of this across the lifecourse.

The existing literature on attitudes to work and trade unions

The existing research has reported a substantial cohort effect on union density, demonstrating that a decline in union membership can be explained by the replacement of older, more unionised workers, by younger cohorts who tend to be less unionised (see Bockerman and Uusitalo, 2006; Bryson and Gomez, 2005). That is, opposed to factors such as, for example, cohort preference changes towards unions, a significant aspect of the decline in trade union membership over the past three decades or so can be explained by an increase in what Bryson and Gomez (2005) describe as 'never-membership' amongst younger workers. The reasons for this cohort effect are contested, however. The literature is divided between more attitudinal approaches, which highlight a lack of 'demand' for unions, and more structural approaches, which highlight either the way in which changing labour market composition restricts union activity or 'supply-side' issues around the capacity of trade unions themselves to organise workers.

On the demand-side of this debate, a significant amount of academic work supports the popular notion that 'millennial' or 'Generation Y' workers (born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s) are individualistic, uncommitted to their jobs, and have unrealistically high expectations from their employers (and, relatedly, also reject the collectivist underpinnings of trade unionism) (Oliver, 2006). A large part of this literature finds that younger generations of workers place a greater emphasis on both extrinsic values (such as a higher salary) and work freedoms (such as working time flexibility) than previous generations (see Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Cogin, 2012; Ng et al., 2010). Eddy Ng and colleagues utilise data from a Canadian survey of undergraduate students, for instance, to suggest that millennials place 'the greatest importance on individualistic aspects of a job'. Half of the respondents surveyed, they argue, were uncommitted to their workplace in the long-term, signifying a 'significant shift away from the career norms of the past' (Ng et al., 2010: 289; see also Cogin, 2012: 2287).

We can recognise that in some senses these attitudinal differences are transitory, rather than defining of a whole cohort over time. For instance, the macro data show us that the 'probability of being unionized follows an inverted U-shaped pattern in age, maximizing in the mid-to late 40s' (Blanchflower, 2007: 1; see also Hodder, 2015: 315). That is, even if attitudinal differences lead younger workers to be less sympathetic towards unions at an early stage of their career, as they grow older they tend to become increasingly receptive to unionisation. Yet we do also know, for instance, that workers aged 16–24 make up an increasingly small percentage of unionised British workers in comparison to two decades ago (see BEIS, 2018: 15). Does this reflect a significant shift in the attitudes of young people towards trade unions or are there more structural factors at play?

The above literature, which views the heightened labour market precarity of young people and subsequent lack of demand for unionisation as a natural product of their 'essential youthfulness' (Yates, 2017), has been challenged robustly within the literature.

Brenda Kowske and colleagues draw upon repeated opinion surveys over an 18-year period, with data collected from a diverse sample of over 115,000 employees in the US to examine changing work attitudes. Though noting some small attitudinal shifts across generations, on balance the authors argue it is more useful to think in terms of ‘generational similarities’ (Kowske et al., 2010; see also the Finnish study reported in Pyöriä et al., 2017). Methodological differences may explain some of these contrasting findings, with time-lag studies, where attitudes among different generations at the same age are assessed over time, more likely to dispute the notion that today’s young people are radically different to older cohorts. A review of the evidence by Jennifer Deal and colleagues shows that most of this research ‘finds a few small statistical differences, but the differences are few and modest at best’ and that there is no evidence ‘of the types of sweeping differences in attitudes, orientations, and work ethic that populate the popular press’ (Deal et al., 2010).

As Vandaele (2012: 203) notes, ‘the discrepancy between young workers’ positive attitudes towards unions and their low unionization rate’ can best be explained with reference to labour market structure. That is, youth employment rates are lower than the working population as a whole, while those in work are ‘disadvantaged by their crowding at the lower end, or “poor” quality jobs, in certain sectors’, making trade unions less accessible (Tailby and Pollert, 2011: 503; see also Hodder and Kretsos, 2015: 4). Young workers ‘tend to work in sectors that are less covered by union membership, union representation and collective bargaining’ (Vandaele, 2012: 204; see also Freeman and Diamond, 2003). As a result, ‘the union density differential between young and adult workers’ is due to issues within labour markets which pose supply-side constraints, such as a lack of information within the workplace on how or why to join a union, rather than a lack of demand for union representation *per se* (Bryson et al., 2005: 155; see also Tailby and Pollert, 2011: 518–520).

By and large, structural accounts of the significance of changing labour market conditions, alongside large-scale time-lag attitudinal studies, strongly rebut claims that young people are today somehow distinctly more anti-trade union than past cohorts. Yet, whilst structural arguments highlight the relative weakness of attitudinal approaches, from a theoretical perspective it is important to maintain an understanding of the relationship between the two. The attitudinal-structural dichotomy within the literature should not prohibit a discussion of the relationship between changing labour market structures and the way in which young workers understand the labour market and industrial relations. This is particularly relevant in a context marked by significant labour market and wider economic upheaval, such as that which followed the 2008 economic crisis. This article’s analysis, therefore, remains alive to how structural economic changes may have important knock-on effects for the attitudes of young workers in the post-crisis labour market. So far, there is relatively little work in this area and even less which helps us to understand the attitudes of young workers towards trade unions in the context of the ‘new normal’ of labour market precarity post-crisis (see Furlong et al., 2018).

Research on young workers in the US by Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson and her colleagues (2012) utilises data from the longitudinal Youth Development Study and finds that extrinsic values (for example, desiring a higher salary) have weakened since the crisis, with the young faced with higher unemployment and reduced job security, incomes

and advancement opportunities. In the UK, there is some limited non-academic literature on this issue which points to growing anxieties among young people regarding post-crisis economic conditions, which seem to lead to a more pragmatic set of expectations regarding the workplace (obviously, establishing whether such anxiety would have been present anyway, had the ‘great moderation’ era of stable growth continued, is impossible) (Cabinet Office, 2014; IpsosMORI, 2017).

These survey-based data are valuable for highlighting large-scale shifts in attitudes in the post-crisis period. However, this strictly quantitative approach to studying attitudes can be liable to miss the subtleties of shifting attitudes or fail to notice important contradictory tendencies or ‘gap[s] in explanatory language’ in the way young workers make sense of the world around them (see Worth, 2019: 441). Once we dive into this issue, we see that there is a more complicated story at play. Franceschelli and Keating (2018: 2S), drawing upon interviews with young British workers, highlight a contradiction that exists between the actual labour market conditions facing young workers and their own apparent optimism concerning their own economic circumstances as a result of their ‘faith in the ability of hard work to improve future life opportunities’. Similarly, Leccardi (2017: 348) utilises cross-national survey and case study data to show that despite high levels of uncertainty, young people across Europe appear to be ‘interpreting uncertainty as a window for new possibilities and the unexpected, a potentially risky but positive experience’.

Furlong et al. (2018: 92) set out one way of interpreting this, depicting today’s young workers as ‘boiled frogs’: as precarious labour market conditions have intensified – or normalised – over recent decades, each subsequent cohort has little reason to question the peculiarity of the economic conditions they have inherited, and insecurity is rendered ‘common sense’. The ‘boiled frogs’ thesis thus presents young workers as passive receivers of structural change, rejecting the idea of young workers being part of an angry, anxious and alienated new class of precariat (see Standing, 2011). Rather, utilising Understanding Society data, Furlong et al. suggest that young workers’ experience is more fragmented across the labour market, but is generally characterised by a more passive acceptance of the ‘new normal’ of precarity, with young people gradually building these trends into their expectations and understanding of the economic order (see Furlong et al., 2018: 92–96). As a result, they suggest, ‘there is now a widespread belief that the ability to manage life projects through the development of effective navigation skills places an increased emphasis on the importance of agency in determining outcomes’ (Furlong et al., 2018: 96). Such literature poses the question of whether young people have *passively* accepted long-term structural changes to labour markets or not. Our study seeks to examine this idea further.

The above literature, moreover, does not directly assess the impact of these changes for industrial relations. In the wider literature, post-crisis research from psychology, based upon evidence from the United States and Europe, suggests that while the crisis may have sharpened some individualistic tendencies amongst young workers, a new form of ‘cooperative individualism’ is more prevalent than a ‘me-first’ sentiment (Schoon and Mortimer, 2017: 5). Utilising survey data from Australia, the US and the UK, Vromen et al. (2015) provide further evidence of this. They highlight the way in which, despite a rise in materialist concerns post-crisis, young workers have come to frame their concerns

differently to older generations, with concepts around ‘opportunity’ and ‘choice’ dominating their understandings of the labour market, rather than notions such as ‘class’ (Vromen et al., 2015). That is, as a result of structural changes to labour market conditions, young people appear to be internalising notions of choice and their own entrepreneurial abilities when considering their own successes and failures (Worth, 2019: 442). This issue is even reflected in the way trade unions in the UK have sought to develop their appeal to young workers, moving away from a focus on collective identity towards developing a sense of how unions might be a ‘vehicle’ to help young workers ‘succeed’ (TUC, 2016: 32–33).

Building on the existing literature, then, this study seeks to examine how the attitudes of young adults in the UK are being shaped in the contemporary post-crisis economic environment, particularly in the context of growing labour market precarity, and what implications this has for their view of industrial relations. It does so on the basis of needing to appreciate the link between structural economic changes and how young workers come to make sense of their own position within the labour market and, in particular, the role of trade unions. Recognising that such structural shifts can lead to the development of new attitudes which may be subtle, complex and even contradictory in nature, we approach the study through an agent-centred methodological approach.

Research methods

In order to achieve this form of analysis, we utilise a series of focus groups, plus an online ‘community’ exercise, which works like an online focus group conducted over a longer period of time. Focus groups are an increasingly popular methodological tool for understanding the views and experiences of labour market actors (see Hurrell et al., 2012; Korkmaz, 2018; Roche et al., 2014) and were deemed highly appropriate for our study for two principal reasons. Firstly, our interest in the ‘normalisation’ of novel forms of work and industrial relations represents a rather embryonic empirical agenda, and focus groups were deemed to be an efficient mechanism for developing our understanding of attitudes to precarity among a particular age cohort. Secondly, and relatedly, we were explicitly interested in capturing the interaction of participants, or more precisely, in capturing the ideas and narratives articulated in a semi-public, interactive environment. That is, we wished to study the process through which ‘key sub-groups collectively contest and justify the actions of elite political actors via shared values’ (Stanley, 2016: 236). This benefit of the focus group method is clearly aligned to our interest in shared understandings of precarity’s implications. While we include many individual comments from group discussions in the presentation below, the shared sentiments expressed in discussion (including agreement indicated non-verbally) are also key data. In this sense, focus groups are ‘more than the sum of separate interviews’ because of the way in which participants ‘both query each other and explain themselves to each other’ (Morgan, 1996: 139).

Following the methodological literature’s finding that four to six focus groups are appropriate before an information ‘saturation’ point is reached (Morgan, 1996: 144; Stanley, 2014: 900), our study consisted of four 90-minute focus groups, conducted in three different locations: one in Manchester, one in Grantham and two in London. These

locations were selected because of their geographical spread across England's regions, and their different populations and economic size: Manchester is a medium-sized city (< 1m population) in the North West of England, Grantham is a town (< 50,000 population) in the Midlands, whilst London is a large city (> 5m population) in the South East. All participants were aged 18–25 (median age: 23), and there were 32 participants in total (between seven and nine in each group, with men and women equally represented). Participants were recruited locally and randomly, via personal approaches in leisure and commercial centres, and were incentivised to participate with a £40 reward, as practised and recommended in the existing focus group literature (Stanley, 2014: 900–901).² A single participant was in full-time education, but the vast majority were young people in work, with some currently seeking employment. Graduate and non-graduate participants were equally represented in three of the groups, however, in order to interrogate potential differences between graduates and non-graduates, one of the sessions held in London contained only graduate workers.

Naturally, focus group methodology has its limitations; the group nature of the discussion limits opportunities to interrogate individual subjects' views and can have a slight 'polarising' effect if the group dynamic is dominated by particular individuals (Morgan, 1996: 140). Nevertheless, these considerations did not outweigh the potentially significant gains in rich qualitative data that focus groups can generate. Moreover, the small data pool from which focus groups studies derive their analysis (this study: $N = 32$) does not lend itself to claims or findings with precise or measurable external validity. It is difficult, furthermore, to compare across different social groupings (class, age, ethnicity, etc.) with this type of data in the way that quantitative data allow for. The purpose of this research, however, was to develop a study that can contribute to our knowledge of young people's attitudes towards labour market precarity and industrial relations through an in-depth analysis of the ideas of those young people and their interactions with each other (see Stanley, 2016: 240). Unique to focus groups, this type of analysis gains its value from its ability to help to generate important insights or ways of understanding particular phenomena that might otherwise be invisible to other (particularly quantitative) methodological approaches. This approach should be seen as a complement to other forms of scientific investigation, not as an alternative to them.

The online 'community' exercise ran for three days in October 2017 and functioned like a social networking website. It was conducted principally to increase the geographical scope of the qualitative research and verify the focus group findings. The exercise gathered real-time qualitative insights into topics identical to those in the focus group. It consisted of eight female and nine male participants (recruited via social media), aged 18–25 (median age 24) and based throughout England, in a closed online network responding to a total of 17 tasks, such as forum discussions, image/video sharing and short polls. An online environment was, moreover, utilised to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their views.

The research underpinning this article emerges from a wider research project conducted by the authors on the issue of young workers and industrial relations. Although the research programme was developed and managed by the authors, given the nature of the funding arrangements of the wider research project, the focus groups and online community were conducted by private research companies with the experience and

resources to organise and host the events at short notice.³ Our overall research questions animated the drafting of specific questions and prompts. The first set of questions sought to engage participants in a discussion of the wider political and economic context. Following this broader conversation, a second set of questions asked about participants' views of current labour market circumstances, particularly the rise of employment insecurity and how they understood the term 'good work'. Finally, a third set of questions asked specifically about industrial relations, in terms of both knowledge of trade unions and views on their activities and services. Our reporting of the empirical data below is set out according to this construction of our questions and is based upon inductive enquiry into the most critical aspects of what both the focus group and online participants told us. In order to conduct this inductive enquiry, all data from the focus groups and online community exercise were transcribed, and then coded and analysed in NVivo. Full focus group transcripts and other documentation of the data are kept on file by the authors.

Focus group evidence

The economic context

Overall, the research revealed a broadly negative outlook amongst young workers on the wider economic context around them, the result of immediate concerns, such as Brexit, but importantly also the financial crisis of 2008. Discussion of the crisis legacy typically revolved around the increasing costs of living, the challenging housing market, stagnant wages and cuts to public spending. This was a theme which cropped up across the different focus groups and the online community. Morosely, one participant in Manchester stated: 'as a young person it's all doom and gloom really, not much hope at the moment' [Male, FG Manchester]. Another in the same group agreed, suggesting that: 'it doesn't feel like it's getting any better and it doesn't feel like there's any light at the end of the tunnel' [Female, FG Manchester]. Equally, in one of the London groups, another participant said: 'since the crash in 2008, I think people at the top have actually done quite well . . . [whilst] the cost of living has gone up for most people, but the wages have stagnated, so it's gotten harder for most' [Male, FG London 1].

This post-crisis sentiment intermingled with concerns about present economic circumstances, particularly the uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote. Brexit was particularly significant; it was mentioned by participants across all of the focus groups and in the online communities as an event that has thrown up greater uncertainty and put added strain on the cost of living as a result of the weakened pound. One participant said: 'I tend not to think about my job future too much as it seems bleak, particularly with Brexit looming . . . my main aim is to make enough to pay rent and bills' [Male, OC]. Specifically, several participants noted the added strain on the cost of living as a result of the weakened pound caused by the Brexit vote. One female participant in London suggested that the economy had 'got worse since Brexit, Brexit is a huge part of it, I don't think it's ever been great, but I think particularly the pound has gone down so much since Brexit and jobs, job security has completely changed' [Female, FG London 2]. Another in Grantham argued, 'everything has just crashed since Brexit really . . . the pound has

dropped, security, there is no real certainty at the minute in the country especially as negotiations are still going on' [Female, FG Grantham].

The labour market, good work and economic security

Competition to find work. As a result of this post-crisis environment, including the perceived fallout from Brexit, participants were largely negative and pessimistic when discussing the state of the current labour market. There was a clear feeling amongst focus group participants that the crisis had impacted upon the nature of available jobs today. Young workers in London were in agreement that that the crisis had led to 'a lot less permanent contracts' and 'a lot less security' even when in a job [Male and Female, FG London 2]. While recognising that unemployment levels were low, participants commented upon the sheer number of applicants going for the same job. One participant noted that for some roles, websites such as LinkedIn allow you to view how many people are applying: 'you can see you're up against 400 people, which is just mental' [Female, FG London 1]. Several graduate participants commented that employers had unrealistic expectations around prior work experience, even for entry-level jobs. Some reported undertaking several internships (including unpaid roles) in order to gain experience – but even these did not guarantee a 'proper' job. Another participant in London reflected on the demoralising nature of the job hunt: 'even though I'm very qualified I can never get through to an interview. And for someone who just got a first in their degree and done so much extracurricular [activity], had two, three jobs, to then not get a really rubbishly paid low-level job' [Female, FG London 2].

The graduate-only group participants in London felt that the crisis had transformed the nature of the opportunities available to them. Typical of this perspective, one female participant said of her entry into the labour market:

I was basically doing the equivalent of an assistant's role but then not getting paid for it. I would say that that's an example of because of the financial crisis that they probably were just like, 'oh, we'll just get people in on a yearly thing, we'll train them up, which takes a couple of weeks, and then they'll do it for a year and class it as a placement and then get to pay them less'. [Female, FG London 1]

This type of issue was reflected in the online community. For example:

Unemployment may be at a low but the jobs on offer aren't sufficient for many to progress in life due to factors such as low wages. [Female, OC]

Since I finished school, I have noticed a shift in the labour market to a higher level of 'flexible-working', particularly zero-hours contracts. [Male, OC]

Perceived competition for jobs is also a good example of how graduates and non-graduates experienced the same phenomenon, but from different perspectives. For instance, a number of non-graduate participants commented upon creeping professionalisation and the growing pressure to obtain a degree. As a female participant in Grantham commented, 'it is harder to get your foot in the door if you haven't got a qualification'

[Female, FG Grantham]. There was also a feeling, particularly among participants in Manchester and Grantham, that mass immigration was adding to a rise in competition for work, especially for lower-skilled jobs. Among graduates, there was an equally strong sense that competition for work was fierce. In London, for instance, one participant commented that ‘there are so many people going into uni[versity] and they’re just coming out all very similar because they’ve just got a degree’ [Male, FG London 1]. Graduate online community participants similarly reported feeling that employers now ‘look for far more than just a degree’ [Male, OC] and unfairly expect graduates ‘to have several years of experience in one field upon leaving university’ [Female, OC].

Heightened precarity at work. This increase in competition for work was seen to have had a direct impact on the nature of work and, in particular, the embedding of precarious employment practices into the everyday fabric of young people’s labour market experiences. Specific concerns included low pay, poor job quality (particularly in the retail sector), unreasonable employer expectations, insecurity and, to some extent, the prospect of automation. One female participant in Manchester remarked: ‘My boyfriend will always work until midnight and it’s absolutely ridiculous. [I think] Why don’t you just say, “I’m only paid to work till 5:00, 5:30”? He’s like, “No, because there’s a hundred other people that would happily take my job”, so you feel you have to put up with the working conditions’ [Female, FG Manchester, emphasis added]. The second part of this quote is telling: whilst the participant and her boyfriend are aware of the adverse nature of the conditions in which he is working, there is an acceptance that this is somehow the ‘norm’ and must, therefore, be ‘put up with’.

There was, moreover, a strong sense that precarity was a problem relatively unique to young people and that their experiences contrasted with those of previous cohorts. As one participant in Grantham remarked: ‘I feel like with parents and even grandparents, a generation [ago], you could stay in one job and do it forever ’til the end of time and I don’t feel like it’s the same now. I don’t think there’s as much certainty’ [Female, FG Grantham]. There was a clear feeling among graduate-only focus group participants that the specific conditions confronting young people today – most importantly, the nature of available jobs, with fewer permanent contracts on offer and lower job security generally – were more restrictive than in the recent past. The prevalence of zero-hours contracts and the potential instability that these contracts cause was, for instance, identified in every focus group.

The discussions around precarity also generated some interesting data on the extent to which today’s young people prioritise pay over other benefits of employment, as suggested by parts of the existing literature. A large number of participants argued that pay was the most important element of a ‘good’ job. This was, however, almost always put alongside job security. As one participant in London put it, in a job he simply wanted ‘longevity – just the confidence that you won’t be made redundant tomorrow’ [Male, FG London 1]. Similarly, the online community exercise revealed that participants mostly associated the term ‘good work’ with the following words: meaningful; making a difference; satisfying; interesting; inspiring; challenging; and happening in a positive atmosphere/environment. Interestingly, however, when the online community were asked to describe their current jobs by selecting keywords, the option ‘poor money’ was amongst

the most commonly selected. This suggests that today's young people are not necessarily motivated by pay above all else, yet are acutely aware that their pay, conditions and job security are not good enough. For instance, one participant noted that employer perks (like a 'gin trolley' on Fridays) were being used to disguise poor actual pay and conditions [Female, FG Manchester], whilst amongst all focus group participants there was a clear desire for employers to invest more in training and better-quality apprenticeships. One participant in London lamented the way in which many employers were reducing pay and conditions as a result of squeezed profit margins:

I think towards the bottom end of the [labour] market . . . the margins have been pushed quite a lot. If you were to go into a retail job, it doesn't really matter what kind of grade, it could even be managerial, the terms and conditions tend to be a lot worse than they were, say, ten years ago, and lots of companies now are doing reorganisations and all sorts, possibly because their profit margin has been squeezed. [Male, FG London 1]

Navigating a precarious labour market. Despite the problems they were currently experiencing, it is illuminating that many participants expressed optimism about their own careers, particularly those in London. Some, especially graduates, expressed the view that the current labour market actually worked well for those equipped with the correct skills and qualifications, or the right attitude. A number of participants suggested that young people today need to make sure that they continue to learn new skills in order to stay relevant for changing labour market requirements. Several also expressed their desire to become self-employed, while others spoke of the benefits of having a 'portfolio' career, wherein one changes roles frequently and constantly learns new skills.

I'm confident that I could get a better job, and I hope to get a better job, if I put effort into it. I have the education, I have the ability to do it. Eventually, in five or ten years, I'd be interested in setting up my own business and working for myself. [Female, FG London 1]

I work in finance at the moment, but it is not really the thing that I want to carry on with . . . I take my job in finance as it is a good place to learn about how to structure a company, the tax system and everything else. I just take it as this is one long lesson; I will take everything I've learnt into the next field. [Male, London FG 1]

We can see such views in relation to the apparent 'normalisation' of precarity among young adults. Clearly, these participants recognise they are employed in jobs which they are not happy with, for different reasons. Yet, while these jobs would not necessarily all be defined as precarious, the individuals implicitly accept the demise of 'jobs for life' by articulating how they can, over the long term, take advantage of the freedom to switch industries, or become self-employed. The new normality is therefore not immutable – but its connotations are overcome primarily by accepting the individualist logic which underpins precarity.

The danger, of course, is that these apparent benefits of contemporary labour market conditions serve to mask some of its less desirable elements. If participants are more willing to take responsibility for their own economic fate, rather than recognising the

structural determinants of their present difficulties, they may also come to see more exploitative features of those conditions, associated with precarity, as normal or legitimate. For example, the discussion reflected participants' lack of a critical perception of the 'the gig economy'. Whilst, as discussed above, most recognised that the rise of zero-hours contracts and digital platforms for very short-term recruitment were constitutive of their problems, the vast majority did not, when pressed, express concern about gig economy practices in general. Indeed, many again commented that the gig economy could be a good thing for certain groups, such as students or carers who did not want to commit to a job:

I think as a secondary job maybe [gig jobs could be positive] . . . if you want to do your normal job and then do two hours in the evening, it's quite a good solution. [Female, London FG 1]

[The gig economy] is removing barriers for just earning some extra money . . . for people who just want a job on the side, I think it's obviously beneficial. [Male, London FG 2]

Of course, some of the difficulties inherent in gig employment and zero-hours contracts will have yet to be encountered by those aged 18–25 (e.g. the constraints on entering the housing market or managing family life), so their views may well evolve. Nevertheless, it is striking that participants see this relatively novel and often insecure way of making a living as a largely welcome development.

Industrial relations and trade unions

Overall, participants' familiarity with trade unions was very low. In Grantham, for instance, the conversation displayed a widespread lack of understanding, with a number of participants admitting that they knew very little about unions. One respondent suggested that a company's human resources department fulfilled the functions of a union [Female, FG Grantham], whilst another in the same session said that 'you shouldn't need [to pay] a fee' for what trade unions do [Male, FG Grantham]. One male graduate participant in London similarly failed to distinguish between the societies of their students' union and a trade union. In the online community exercise, most participants also admitted that they were not fully aware of the services offered by unions. Those who appeared more knowledgeable of trade unions typically came from public service backgrounds or had worked in blue collar occupations with traditionally high levels of unionisation (e.g. former factory workers).

Among those not already in a union, there was fairly strong interest, in principle, for the kind of services trade unions offer. Indeed, when prompted to reflect on what an ideal trade union should look like, most suggested that they would like it to help them negotiate better pay and permanent contracts and facilitate access to training and legal advice; in other words, activities that trade unions already routinely carry out. On the other hand, several participants reported that they felt no immediate need to join a union, either because they did not have problems requiring union support or were not yet settled in their career. A participant in London commented: 'I feel, first of all, that things are pretty much okay, and, second of all, that maybe I won't be in this particular job long enough

for it to make a big difference' [Female, FG London 1]. Another in the same group stated he had not joined a union yet because 'nothing bad's happened to me yet' [Male, FG London 1]. Interestingly, some of the participants even suggested that trade unions were forms of representation better suited to older workers. A female participant in London said: 'There are lots of people who work at the gallery who've been there for donkeys' years and they're big into the union, but that's not me, I'm a newer member of staff' [Female, FG London 1].

Despite their often-precarious circumstances, there was little sense that participants considered their interests to be opposed to their employers'. Indeed, there were several negative aspects of union activity noted by participants, including an association, seen in negative terms, between trade unions and strike action – something which was mentioned in both the focus groups and the online community exercise. One participant, for instance, described union activity as 'quite aggressive' and suggested that it wrong to 'hand over your problem to somebody else to deal with' [Female, FG London 2]. Attendant to this was a feeling, expressed by a number of participants, that unions should not play an active role in party politics. There was an evident mistrust of union officials amongst some, insofar as their role was perceived as often a 'stepping stone' into politics. As one online community participant argued: 'Trade unions should not get involved in politics . . . by joining a trade union, you are effectively showing support to the Labour Party and that is not what trade unions are for. They are supposed to support their members first and foremost' [Male, OC].

While many suggested that they could imagine joining a trade union at some point, and recognised the value of doing so, they clearly felt very little compulsion to join a union due to collectivist sentiment or solidarity with their colleagues, or even as a form of workplace protection. Rather, they suggested unions should focus on the more immediate positive benefits of union membership and how this might help their career advance. As one participant in London said: 'I think that picture needs to be strong because I need to know why I'm joining this union and what they're going to offer me' [Female, FG London 2]. Some participants spoke of the benefit of having 'flexible' monthly contracts, rather than annual fees, and others suggested a 'tailored service' which would allow them to pay only for the union activities they deemed worthwhile.

Analysis

Attitudes to precarity

The preceding evidence leads to this article's principal finding, that precarious labour market conditions have been largely accepted by young adults in the UK (see Furlong et al., 2018; Worth, 2019). However, this does not mean precarity has been welcomed, or that young people are entirely passive about this circumstance. The 'new normal' is in fact recognised as abnormal. There was clear anger expressed at the way in which current economic conditions of the post-crisis environment, including the legacy of the economic crisis and phenomena such as Brexit, negatively impact upon their position within the labour market, there was little sense that it is possible to bring about change within the labour market.

At the same time, however, our analysis highlights a resignation to a situation wherein precarity is largely immutable. In general, the young adults engaged by this research view their current difficulties in the workplace, or in finding work, as a product of heightened labour market competition – too many people for too few jobs. Notwithstanding the accuracy of this sentiment, it overlooks the structural context within which competitive relations are shaped. Accordingly, it seems many young people understand the prospect of improving labour market outcomes in terms of *personal* development and their ability to successfully navigate this more competitive environment (also identified by Furlong et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2010). The evidence presented noted some attitudinal differences between graduates and non-graduates, with the former more concerned about unmet expectations, for instance, and the latter more concerned by general degradation of economic conditions. Yet these are differences of *degree* rather than being fundamental in nature.

It would be wrong to assume a purely passive process of acceptance regarding labour market conditions, as the ‘boiled frog’ thesis implies (see Furlong et al., 2018): today’s young people are very much conscious of the (relative) novelty of the economic conditions they are confronted with and concerned about this new regime. Our research suggests that while young people’s attitudes to work reflect, to a large extent, enduring, cross-generational ambitions for decent pay, security and opportunities to develop, today’s young are convinced that they are significantly less likely than previous cohorts to achieve these ambitions. They recognise the specific economic conditions of the post-crisis period, and how these affect young people. Paradoxically, however, it is the perceived immutability of the extant (post-crisis and post-Brexit) economic environment that renders young workers willing to accept these inherited conditions, encouraging them to focus more on succeeding (or simply surviving) within the status quo than on resisting precarity. Our analysis thus finesses the ‘boiled frog’ argument. Young workers are conscious of the novelty of the intensification and spread of precarity, but predominantly respond in an individualistic rather than collectivist manner (arguably, this is a more meaningful normalisation of precarity, since it suggests that the underpinning norms have been internalised, but adjudicating on the precise meaning of normalisation is beyond the scope of this contribution).

Our findings in this regard are consistent with an emerging literature on post-crisis economic anxiety among young people, associated with a ‘revising down’ of career ambitions (Johnson et al., 2012). As noted above, some of the literature views the heightened labour market precarity of young people as a natural product of their youth, wherein young people are somehow more ‘comfortable’ with such arrangements (Yates, 2017). The more appropriate inference is that young people’s attitudes are being shaped by the material realities of their economic environment – an environment, marked by a post-Fordist accumulation regime based on low-productivity services industries, which pushes young people towards a willingness to accept low pay, greater precarity and fewer opportunities for progression (Yates and Clark, 2018). However, contra an emerging non-academic literature on ‘intergenerational justice’ (Cribb et al., 2013; Gardiner, 2017; Malik and Howker, 2010), we find little sense that today’s young people feel they have been unfairly treated by older cohorts, even though they are alert to the distinctiveness of contemporary labour market conditions.

We could argue that today's young people are merely *coping* with precarity – they do not necessarily accept its *legitimacy*. To some extent, this is true. Young people do indeed recognise the problems inherent in the post-crisis period. However, importantly, they do not seek help from elsewhere to resist, or simply cope with, these problems – they accept the responsibility to deal with this situation for themselves, despite recognising the economic crisis as the chief explanatory factor in the enhanced precarity they were experiencing.

Ambivalence to trade unions

The implications of this article's research for (scholarship on) trade unions can be stated quite straightforwardly. We find strong support for the notion that young people in the UK lack knowledge of trade unions and the support they offer (Tailby and Pollert, 2011). Yet does this explain the apparent ambivalence evident in our data? It seems clear that many young people do not consider extant forms of industrial relations to be well-suited to their lives, expectations and labour market experiences (perhaps in contrast to those of older cohorts). Instead, they appear to place more faith in their capacity to improve their economic circumstances (if this is indeed considered possible) under their own steam rather than through collective bargaining. In contrast, while disappointed by many employer practices, there is little sense of antipathy towards individual employers.

The *principle* of trade unionism did attract some support among participants, which supports the notion that demand for workplace representation has not declined (Bryson et al., 2005; D'Art and Turner, 2008), but it is clear that most wanted trade unions to craft an offer more resonant to their individual ambitions for their careers. They were not particularly interested in being *represented* by trade unions in the workplace – with some young people particularly critical of unions seeking to represent members' interests via political engagement, reflective of a wider 'anti-politics' sentiment. Of course, if young people lack knowledge of trade unions, it is perhaps because the information they are presented with is not deemed salient to their experience of industrial relations. We detected few differences between graduates and non-graduates regarding specific views on trade unions; interestingly, there were few, if any, explicit suggestions by participants that there might exist social class-based divisions *within* age cohorts.

Does this mean that it is correct to characterise today's young people as more 'individualistic' in the workplace than preceding cohorts? This is an important theme within the existing literature, especially that related to trade unions (including that published by trade union organisations in the UK). Our data suggest that it is difficult to make a straightforward claim either way. On the one hand, the focus group discussions reported here lend weight to the notion that there are more continuities than differences in workplace attitudes across recent cohorts (Deal et al., 2010; Kowske et al., 2010). The data suggest consistency between today's young people and the existing literature on the meaning of 'good work', and the balance of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. On the other hand, however, it is clear from the discussions of trade unions that the young people engaged by this research were interested primarily in what trade unions could do for them, rather than the more solidaristic dimensions of trade unionism. For the most part, however, it is not clear that it is preferences or attitudes that have changed,

but rather the material reality of the wider structural environment within which they are articulated: young people believe they have no choice but to seek to navigate precarity, and it may be that an aversion to trade unions arises not from an aversion to solidarity, but rather a perceived lack of relevance of traditional trade union activity to modern labour market precarity.

Conclusion

This article has reported on a new set of qualitative data on the attitudes to work, industrial relations and the economic environment more generally, with a relatively novel focus on *post-crisis* attitudes, and young people attaining adulthood after the 2008 crisis. That young people in the UK are experiencing precarity in the labour market as they transition from adolescence to adulthood is widely accepted, with Furlong et al. (2018) referring to ‘a new normality’ as insecurity spreads from marginal workers to those within seemingly conventional employment conditions. Will this persist as today’s young people progress through the lifecourse? For ‘generational’ research, such questions are inherently ‘known unknowns’. However, the focus of the research presented in this article on attitudes to precarity suggests that young people largely *expect* precarity to persist, in part because they are not focused on challenging the demise (or hollowing out) of the standard employment relationship.

Whilst the young people engaged expressed anger and frustration with the economic conditions they face in the post-crisis environment, there was a resignation that these wider economic trends were ‘part and parcel’ of the economic structure and needed to be successfully navigated through, rather than overturned. This is reflected, furthermore, in relation to trade unions. Young people appear to be more focused on their own career rather than challenging precarious conditions through collective action. Of course, this may be because their perceptions of material reality compel them to choose a more individualistic and less solidaristic path. The condition of precarity is not accepted because it is deemed *acceptable*, but rather because it is seen as immutable; the key challenge, from the perspective of these young people, is to most effectively navigate this economic environment as an individual worker.

The research presented here has enabled a novel engagement with the existing literature on age-related attitudes to work and industrial relations. While the findings are consistent with the recognition by some scholars of a more individualistic sentiment among today’s young people in countries such as the UK, we recognise also that longitudinal, quantitative studies tend to identify lifecourse effects whereby attitudes to labour market insecurity evolve as people grow older. Indeed, we find that what today’s young people understand as ‘good work’ is consistent with that reported for older cohorts. It is reasonable to assume therefore that today’s young workers will become less accepting of precarity as they age – and perhaps less individualistic in their attitudes towards overcoming precarity if they do not succeed in navigating their own path to a secure and rewarding livelihood. It is not our intention to suggest that traditional approaches to industrial relations are in terminal decline.

Nevertheless, our analysis starts from the premise that there is a new normality, in terms of the spread and intensity of precarious labour market conditions – in a material

sense, precarity has become more entrenched, and it is useful therefore to study attitudes towards this apparent normalisation. We object to Furlong et al.'s depiction of today's young people as 'boiled frogs', but it is of course necessary to recognise the rising temperature, and interrogate the attitudes this process has inspired. Much of the existing literature which captures the evolution of attitudes across the lifecourse utilises data from only the pre-crisis period. Ideally, the research underpinning this article would be supplemented by both large-*n* quantitative studies *and* small-*n* qualitative studies, both capturing the attitudes of more young people, and exploring these views in more depth. Longitudinal research on today's young people would be extremely valuable, as would studies which segment precarious labour market conditions by industry. Any future research should further explore generational identities, and how they relate to other demographic characteristics. More granular research on young people and new forms of trade unionism (or work-based cooperation more generally) would also be welcome.

Future research could also usefully focus on the attitudinal effect of economic crises; it is clear that the young people engaged by this research recognised the specific characteristics of post-crisis labour market conditions, but whether the experience of the 2008 crisis has had a *direct* impact on attitudes (and indeed a variable impact across age groups) is less clear. One of our most important findings is that today's young people in the UK are conscious of precarity – and we tentatively suggest the experience of economic crisis, and the subsequent turbulence, is a factor in this attitudinal shift. If there is a new normality, it ironically manifests in young workers' attitudes as a belief in the *abnormality* of their experiences. The related belief identified here in the immutability of precarity – whether warranted or otherwise – helps to explain some of the attitudinal tendencies identified elsewhere in the post-crisis literature on industrial relations.

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Notes

1. Precarity can, however, also be a feature of standard employment, in industries which are volatile and very low paid (meaning that a permanent contract is no guarantee of economic

- security). Arguably, however, this ‘hollowing out’ of standard employment is less common in the UK, where limited employment regulation has allowed atypical employment relations to spread more quickly (European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2017; Grimshaw et al., 2016).
2. Participant selection consisted of specialist recruiters approaching young people in public places, primarily commercial centres. This approach ensured a high degree of randomness. Recruiters were asked to recruit anybody within the target age range who was in work or seeking work, but to ensure approximately equal numbers of men and women. Recruiters excluded any potential participants who worked in marketing, had participated in any similar exercises in the past six months, or were not fluent in English. Given that focus group meetings were generally held several days after participants had been recruited, the £40 payment acted as an incentive to ensure attendance. As such, there is no reason to believe the payment distorted the representativeness of participants’ views to any extent.
 3. There were two main reasons for subcontracting this element of the research. Firstly, the funding model required us to recruit participants relatively quickly (based on screening criteria approved by the authors). Secondly, the research companies utilised had specialist experience in organising and delivering focus groups and online community exercises. Populus has significant experience in focus group research with young people, and the focus group convenor, Claudia Chwalisz, has a background in studying young people as a political scientist. On the other hand, Incling is a specialist provider of the services required to operate the online community exercise. The authors managed these research companies and directed how the research events were conducted.

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